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ERNESTO GONZALEZ

Recent commissions for her large-scale fiber-based installations have given artist Rachel Mica Weiss the freedom to do art full time.

VISUAL ART

CHALLENGING PERCEPTIONS

ARTIST RACHEL MICA WEISS, IN RESIDENCE AT LUX, PLAYS WITH TENSION BETWEEN APPEARANCE AND REALITY

BY ANGELA ASHMAN

On a recent afternoon, artist Rachel Mica Weiss, who has tattooed arms, long dark hair and Edith Piaf bangs, stands in the middle of the gallery at Lux Art Institute, soaking up the sun pouring in through a massive open window. All is quiet except for birds chirping among the trees and chaparral. Weiss, who came from rainy, cold Brooklyn to be Lux's new artist-in-residence, gives a giddy laugh as though

she still can't believe her luck.

"All I've been doing is work, work, work," she says. "So this is a nice moment to slow down and relax — and percolate with ideas."

A graduate of the MFA program at the San Francisco Art Institute, Weiss has been crisscrossing the country thanks to a steady flow of commissions for her large-scale fiber-based installations. These involve her creating gauzy walls made of yarn or suspending lengths of rope that appear to float in mid-air.

The commissions, mostly from corporate clients, have given Weiss the freedom to do art full time, allowing her to focus on some of the smaller sculptural projects she loves. In a corner of Lux's gallery, she shows off her latest obsession:

three long rectangular slabs, drenched in color, that curve, bend and fold. Are they made of rubber? Foam? A quick touch reveals Weiss' secret: rock-hard concrete.

To give each 180-pound sculpture a soft, pliable appearance, Weiss mixes paint and concrete together, packs it into a urethane rubber mold, then folds it over a box or shoves blankets underneath to shape it before it dries.

"I'm very interested in questioning people's assumptions about the materials," she says. "How they behave, what they can do, what they are even."

In another part of Lux's gallery, spools of embroidery thread are spread out on a work table, where Weiss is finishing the last of seven woven screens on display. Each

RACHEL MICA WEISS

When: Artist talk 6 p.m. today; in studio through Dec. 15; on exhibit through Jan. 12.

Where: Lux Art Institute, 1550 S. El Camino Real, Encinitas

Tickets: \$5; free for those 18 and under and bicycle riders; artist talk today free for members, \$10 for nonmembers

Phone: (760) 436-6611

Online: luxartinstitute.org

framed screen consists of horizontal blocks of color that resemble wide-open horizons.

"I really want them to feel portal-esque so that you feel like you could step into it." However, she says, "It's clearly impassable. So I'm interested in that tension. It invites this portal experience, but it's also blocking you off."

Weiss grew up just outside of Washington, D.C. Her father, who was a dentist, and her mother, who studied art in college before working in information technology, divorced when she was 6 — an event that she says plays out in her pieces.

"I think the division of the households into two separate camps really governed my life pretty significantly — my schedule, everything about my daily life," she says. "From a young age, I felt the walls were controlling the way I live."

Now it is Weiss who is clearly in control of her environment, fashioning the walls out of entirely new materials, making them light as air, and bending the concrete to her will. During her monthlong residency, Weiss will suspend aluminum rods from a grid to create a rendering of the hilly topography outside Lux's window. Powder-coated in shiny chrome, the rods, she says, will be "a reflection and a distortion of everything around it." She adds, "As a whole, it will look more like a cloud, where you're seeing the topography from below and above."

Unlike past installations that have required a team to complete them, this one will be done by Weiss alone — which, she says, isn't such a bad thing.

"I can't tell you the number of times I've been talking to a 'man in charge,' and they will turn to the art handler and start talking shop with him," she says about the frustrations she has faced as a female artist. "It's like, actually, I'm the one running this show."

And at Lux, there's no doubt she is.

Ashman is a freelance writer.