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## **Interview with Antonietta Grassi**



*Installation view of Zip Stack Flow at Patrick Mikhail Gallery.*

Antonietta Grassi: *Zip Stack Flow*

Patrick Mikhail Gallery

Montreal, Canada

October 8 through November 12, 2022

**By RICHARD PASQUARELLI, December 2022**

I first met Antonietta Grassi back in 2019 when we were both artists in residence at the Studios at MASS MoCA. After engaging in many thought-provoking conversations on the subject of painting, our practices, inspirations and processes, we became fast friends.

This autumn I visited Montreal, Canada, Antonietta's home town, and had the fortunate opportunity to see her solo exhibition *Zip Stack Flow* at Patrick Mikhail Gallery. We had the chance to discuss the works in her show.

**Richard Pasquarelli: At first glance, a viewer might think the works that you've created are done with the use of thread or weaving. Upon closer inspection we see that they are painstakingly painted by hand. When did you first become interested in the subject of textiles and their relationship to contemporary art and today's technology?**

**Antonietta Grassi:** I have a background in textiles and a few years ago I became interested in the historical link between the Jacquard loom and computer programming. The Jacquard loom, a machine invented in the 1800s that weaves complex patterns using punch cards, was an important development in the history of computer hardware thanks to Ada Lovelace and Charles Babbage. It became their inspiration for the "analytic engine" which provided the template for what we now consider to be the first computer. I found this link to be fascinating and

it made a lot of sense intuitively to integrate these themes into my work since I had been interested in both textiles and analog technology for a while. It also felt necessary to highlight the forgotten contribution of women scientists and mathematicians such as Lovelace and the many others who came after her as pioneers of early computer programming and how their contribution to the field of coding had largely been forgotten. Some of the titles of my paintings refer to the names of women scientists or the programs they developed, and this has been a helpful access point to start that conversation.

I am interested in the connections and contrasts between technology and the handmade. So, yes, at first glance the works are often mistaken for weavings or embroideries, even when viewed in person, until the viewer gets close up. On the other hand, when viewers see the images of my paintings on a screen, they are often mistaken for digital works. I like that there is an ambiguous perception of how the work is made. I am drawn to works that play with our perceptions, especially when handmade and the digital merge. Technology has a very physical component despite the increasing focus on the immaterial and the “cloud”. Whether it’s the vast network of undersea cables and fiber optics buried underground that connect the web or the textile loom that became the original inspiration for the first computer, I like that the material component is always present. The hand painted lines in my work can simultaneously reference the warp and weft of textiles, the data embedded in a barcode, a DNA sample or other forms of data visualization. Whether the lines are threads or cables and wires, their function is one of connection.



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**RP: Who are some of the artists that have inspired you most?**

**AG:** There are so many, and each one has been pivotal at different points in my life. My first introduction to abstraction was in middle school when I studied the history of Quebecois abstraction which drew from both the New York school of abstract expressionism and European abstraction. I was immediately blown away by abstract painting even though I had no reference for it. When I first saw Rothko's paintings at MOMA a few years later, I was incredibly moved by the work and how the colors interacted with each other, hovering and suspended in space. At the time I had no words to describe why I

loved these paintings but recognized that they had a power to make me feel a connection to something otherworldly. I have been consistently drawn to artists that are wonderful colorists such as Matisse, Josef Albers, Cy Twombly, Giorgio Morandi and Joan Mitchell. The work of Agnes Martin, Anni Albers and Eva Hesse have also inspired me greatly, as have Canadian artists Betty Goodwin and Yves Gaucher, my painting professor who became an important mentor during and after art school and who was considered an important figure in Canadian abstraction.

Because I was immersed in textiles and fashion, it undoubtedly had an influence on my work as well. It is always inspiring to discover new artists that are doing or did interesting things with abstraction, both contemporary and historical, many who were underrepresented and whose work we are only now discovering and celebrating. I really love work that sits right on the edge of maximalism and minimalism, artists such as Mark Bradford, Sheila Hicks, Rosemarie Trockel, Pat Steir, Jack Whitten and Alma Thomas come to mind.

**RP: Tell me a bit about your process. Do you use references and if so, what type of reference do you use, and what's your process for "compressing" this material? How true to the original source material are these final images?**

**AG:** My process is very intuitive. I work out my initial ideas with a series of works on paper that are mid-sized, about 20 x 30 inches. I will have about ten of them hanging in my studio at once. They are my "sketches" in a way, yet closer to paintings than drawings. My references are loosely based on objects and spaces from my memory, including objects that can be found in my studio or that I come across on my way to the studio. This can range from multi colored cargo

containers and fluorescent building insulation to signposts, electrical units, frames, boxes, doors or other thresholds that catch my eye. My studio is located in what was once an abandoned industrial area which developed drastically over the years, so the view from my studio for several years has been of construction sites and buildings in progress. There is always an intuitive absorption of my surroundings which makes its way into the painting, the specifics of which become more evident for me once the work is complete. I start with minimally painted shapes, using thin layers of paint and slowly building up the composition (this part is very intuitive and unplanned based on a vague reference from memory). I “draw out” the shapes with tape. Once the overall composition is set, I begin to paint the lines using inks and acrylic paint. The process then becomes meditative and repetitive. I oscillate between the repetitive process of drawing and painting the lines with either ink or paint and layering the shapes with thin layers of oil paint. I paint several works at the same time, so they are all in communication with each other. The paintings are like puzzles I am trying to solve, when I get stuck on one painting, I move over to another in progress. Often the new painting provides the solution for the previous one. It is not uncommon for me to put a painting away for months or years and return to it to solve the puzzle. A curator referred to this part of my process of returning to previous works as an excavation. I thought that was the perfect word for it!

I do not use photographs as sources, it’s really just dipping into my memory bank, which is the accumulation of many memories of objects and spaces surrounding me. The “compressions” in my work refer to the layers of memory superimposed and stacked on to one another; that is how I imagine these memories to dwell in my mind. That was especially the case with the new work for my show “Zip Stack Flow”.

For a few years I had been thinking about how to reference these memory compressions aesthetically, thereby also referencing the bank of images in my previous work. I started to compress my past paintings digitally with my very crude photoshop skills. These were really interesting images because they looked like quilts and salvaged pieces of textile sewn together. I kept thinking about these digital compressions for a while, not wanting to use them as direct sources to paint from but as inspiration for new work. They eventually led me to the Zip Stack Flow paintings.

**RP: I'd also like to learn more about your use of raw canvas and raw linen. The unpainted material seems to add to the illusion that the works have been woven. What is it that informs your choice of material, and why do you choose to leave it raw?**

**AG:** I began my career in textiles, therefore I cannot ignore the fabric I am painting on, in this case the linen or canvas. I want to make it part of the work. I use different types of linen which are sourced from various countries, with Belgian linen perhaps being the most widely known for painting. Each type of linen or canvas has its own unique properties and color. I like how the paint or ink appears more like a stain when I apply the initial layer. Much of this gets covered up when I apply subsequent layers of paint over the stain, but it does affect the way that the final colors come through. The neutral color of the linen also helps to temper the bright colors I tend to use.



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**RP: In this exhibition, you've also introduced a sculptural piece. Can you tell me more about that piece and where you think this direction might take your work in the future?**

**AG:** I had been thinking about doing a sculptural piece for a while and investigated different materials such as wood and aluminum but felt that neither would retain the qualities that were present in the paintings. I used a technique called Marouflage, where the raw canvas is adhered to a wood surface, this way it retains the tactile quality of the paintings. I would like to make more of these totem-like sculptures in varying heights and widths to create an installation with a cluster of totems filling up the space so that the viewer can meander around them. But, as with all the plans I have for my work, I may end up taking it

somewhere else completely. I do want to continue exploring more 3d work in general.

**RP: I find your paintings to be contemplative and calming, a sharp contrast to our high paced, high striving lifestyles. In this age of information overload, how do you feel that your paintings engage with aspects of our day-to-day lives like the multitudes of streaming media choices, digital advertising, promotional emails, and social media?**

**AG:** I try to distill and temper all the noise and data we absorb on a daily basis through this meditative work process. It's my 20<sup>th</sup> century brain trying to deal with the constant onslaught of sensory overload. I came of age with the generation of artists that experienced the transition from analog to digital. I recall the first clunky computers and fax machines, they were very physical objects that one could have a sense of control over; flip a switch, turn a knob, take it apart and reassemble it. Yet, increasingly, our technology has become more dematerialized; the cloud, the swipe and the flatness leaves us with much less control. We cannot see the inner workings of the technology and we are physically disconnected by what is supposed to connect us. So, my paintings are an attempt to connect to the overly saturated digital world in a way that brings back some of that lost control and tactility, so in essence trying to connect it to the roots of that technology, the textile loom. **WM**



## RICHARD PASQUARELLI

Richard Pasquarelli is an artist living and working in New York whose work studies the connections between mind and matter and its observable presence in the world around us. He has exhibited his work in solo and group exhibitions in museums, galleries, and art fairs throughout the U.S. and Europe. His work is represented globally in many public and private collections. Learn more about his work at [www.richardpasquarelli.com](http://www.richardpasquarelli.com).