



ETHAN MEYER

**THE
INVISIBLE
LANDSCAPE**

THE MEYER AESTHETIC &
THE ABSTRACT SUBLIME

TEXT BY R. FREEMAN



**Ethan Meyer:
The Invisible Landscape**

October 18, 2020 - January 3, 2021

MITCHELL MUSEUM
Beal Grand Corridor Gallery

Cedarhurst Center for the Arts
Mt. Vernon, Illinois

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INSIDE FRONT COVER: Detail, Meyer, *The Invisible Landscape*, 2018.

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The Meyer Aesthetic and the Abstract Sublime

by Rusty Freeman, Director of Visual Arts
Cedarhurst Center for the Arts

Plotinus asked in the third-century: how can we know the Infinite? Not by reason, was his answer.

The art of Ethan Meyer poses an interesting challenge in the early twenty-first century: Can abstract art still speak meaningfully of metaphysical concerns?

The aesthetic and social values within Meyer's art resonate with History. Meyer's art links to the long heritage of artists who have dared to explore the metaphysical through the material means of visual art.

Meyer stakes out his cogent goals. "The themes in my work concern themselves with universal questions, such as: what is the nature of consciousness, what is the nature of reality, and the inherent problem that comes from being both sentient and mortal."



Ethan Meyer, *The Invisible Landscape*, 2018, acrylic, collage, yarn, 44x44" Photo: E. Meyer. Throughout his oeuvre, Meyer pursues an aesthetic that "overwhelms". In this way, the textual definition of an overwhelming or boundless sublime is felt physically by the viewer, and thereby experienced.



Guillaume Apollinaire, (1880-1918), *La Colombe poignardée et le Jet d'eau (Stabbed Dove and Fountain)* from *Calligrammes: Poems of Peace and War, 1913-1916*. Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

Meyer's touchstones of consciousness, reality, and the nature of Being connect to the work of others. Their quest is aesthetically daring: to show how visual form may be the embodiment of metaphysical thought.

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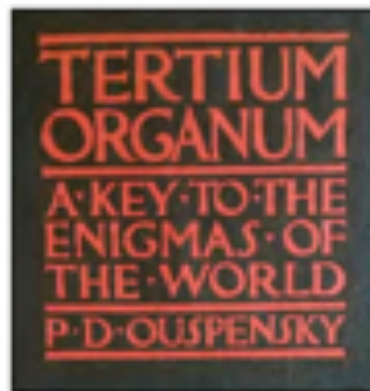
nineteenth century, the related term "fourth dimension" began to be used by artists and philosophers to denote intuitions felt, but not observed with the eye.

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Henderson traced the written and visual development of the fourth dimension through three men: the painter Max Weber, the poet Apollinaire, and the philosopher P. D. Ouspensky (1878-1947). Meyer has read Ouspensky's magnum opus *Tertium Organum* (1911).

Henderson identified three themes defining the fourth dimension: infinity, monism, and the evolution of consciousness.

The poet Apollinaire was the champion of Cubism and his writings theorized the new art as the "anticipation of a sublime art." Apollinaire considered contemporary art to have the indirect characteristics of a religious art.



Book cover logotype, printed in 1911. Image courtesy of Abe Books, Canada



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Ouspensky's philosophy was based on monism where the spiritual and physical come together as one. Ouspensky showed how material forms of art can express the metaphysical: "Matter is a section of something; a nonexistent, imaginary section." "Art is a path to cosmic consciousness." Ouspensky offered physical matter as evidence.

In 1910, Max Weber published "The Fourth Dimension from a Plastic Point of View" in Alfred Stieglitz's journal *Camera Work*. Weber lived for a time in Paris and had gotten to know Apollinaire and Picasso and had joined their discussions on the metaphysical in art.

For Meyer's viewers, Max Weber is a critical, historical link to past artists' physical representations of the metaphysical dimensions of life. Weber's 1910 statement sees the immaterial in the material. "In plastic art, I believe, there is a fourth dimension which may be described as the consciousness of a great and overwhelming sense of space-magnitude in all directions at one time, and is brought into existence through the three known measurements." Emphasis added.

Ouspensky's matter as evidence and Weber's declaration—"brought into existence"—are profoundly different from saying art objects merely symbolize the fourth dimension.

The importance of Cubism in all of this cannot be overestimated. Cubism in a sense ripped



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Max Weber (1881-1961), *Interior of the Fourth Dimension*, 1913, oil, 29x40", Gift of Natalie David Spingarn in memory of Linda R. Miller and in Honor of the 50th Anniversary of the National Gallery of Art, Photo courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

open a space-time continuum between the modern art world leading all the way back to the Renaissance. Cubism stepped around the use of perspective. Picasso and Braque deliberately represented all sides of a 3D object thus giving a presence to the fourth dimension. Visually and intellectually, Cubism opened a portal into a new way of seeing.

Apollinaire linked Cubism's explorations with "the Romantic sublime in an infinity equated

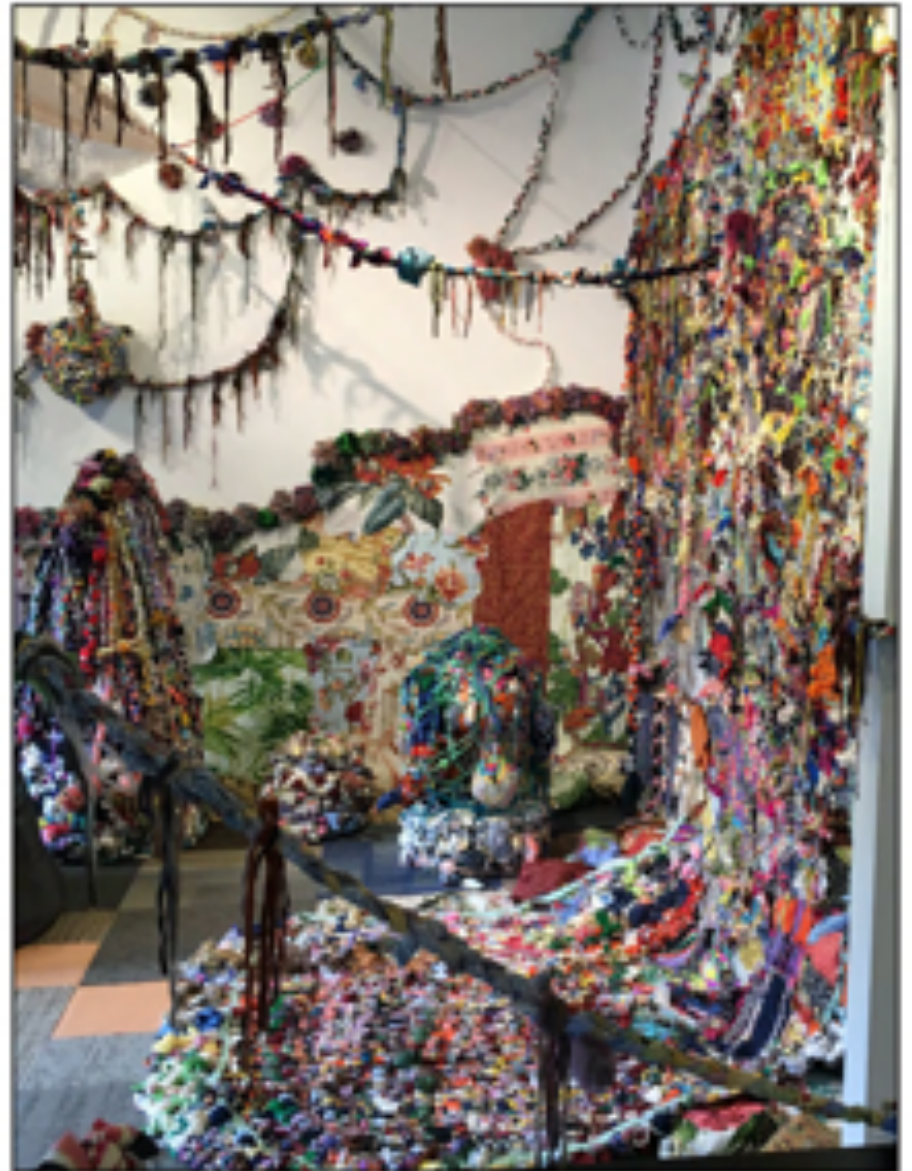
with four-dimensionality." Earlier, in the eighteenth century, Edmund Burke linked the Romantic Sublime to Nature and Infinity. From the root of Romanticism grew Modern Art.

Americans took up the mantle of the Romantic Sublime in the 1940s. Artists were searching for the right expression of the nuclear age and the contradiction of the individual living in this modern, technological, apocalyptic world.



LEFT: *The God Who Devours*, 2019, acrylic, 48x36", Both images, E. Meyer
RIGHT: *(((((()))*), 2020, acrylic, yarn, wool, beads, 40x30". An evocative title Apollinaire would appreciate for its spatial use of text.





Meyer makes strong use of color and the three dimensional and voluminous possibilities in textiles and fabrics. Exuberance and joy are evident in the making and analogous to an emotional intensity associated with the sublime. 2019 installation at Duane Reed Gallery, St. Louis, both photos R. Freeman.



Ethan Meyer, 3265, 2017, acrylic, 42x32",
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The Abstract Expressionists wrestled with world issues and the role of the individual. Above all, they saw the act of painting itself to hold the key to their questions.

They lifted painting as the heroic path to putting on view the human struggle. The act of painting linked to the sublime.

Art historian Robert Rosenblum showed in 1961 that the aspirations of the Abstract Expressionists aligned very well with the history of artists pursuing the aesthetic expression of the sublime, and in particular the artists of the 19th-century Romantic movement.

Where the Romantics expressed the sublime with Nature, the Americans chose abstraction. It was a brilliant moment. Rosenblum singled

out Clifford Still, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman for their original paintings. Awe, terror, boundlessness, and divinity were again expressed in paint.

Gigantic canvases, reaching several feet in both directions, reaching well beyond life size, a painting process analogous to the human condition, techniques that referenced nothing in nature directly, colors and brush strokes that filled the eye, all led to a satisfying expression that articulated the mid-century moment and brought the sublime into modern relevance.

Artists today continue the drive to express the inexpressible. Meyer understands the aesthetic and philosophic issues that any art practice of the sublime today must face.

Meyer foregrounds process as instrumental to the understanding of his art of the sublime.

For Meyer, the process is more important than the end. His *Making* could be termed *Meditation*. Each individual action in the making of every work of art—every movement of the hand with brush delivering wet paint to the surface, every twist of thread, every choice of color—are the moments where the invisible world comes into view.

"My process relies on a sort of abstract problem solving, as nothing is planned. I am engaged in a process of responding to what I just did in a way that can only be described as controlled chaos. There is a freedom this allows me that is unparalleled in any other facet of my life, which I feel is reflective of my underlying assumption that creativity, in its truest form, communicates with a level of being that is more similar to the gestalt than the individual."

Barnett Newman put it simply, the sublime is now. As in "right now," occurring this moment. This now moment is what Meyer refers to "I am engaged..."

The moment becomes the journey and recognition of the awe, terror, joy, and sublimity in which we all exist.

Meyer paints and weaves his works with a palpable intensity that can hit his self-imposed mark of being "overwhelming." The point of any definition of the sublime is its overwhelming boundlessness, its breathtaking, voluminous scale which almost extinguishes the mind's ability to even grasp anything about it. We sense it's presence and it overwhelms.

"The overwhelming nature of the work is handled intentionally as a means of disrupting the viewers cognitive awareness and suspending them in a space that is both familiar and bizarre."



Ethan Meyer, I Am the Moon, 2017, acrylic,
resin, 14x14", Photo: E. Meyer

Tides Rolling in from the Abyss is a prime work both in execution and its title. Its painted surface teems with movement and energy. I remind you, this is a static surface. Color energizes and differentiates each Meyer structure which are layered structure upon structure. Each structure unique. Each structure a microcosm analogous to the macro. Each structure an abstraction which leaves it open for interpretation. Line plays a key structuring role— here defining; there referencing movement. I find the point of Meyer's oeuvre to be in the microcosms' relationships with all the other structures. Everything big and small is related. Lucretius wrote *On the Nature of Things*, a book-length poem about macro-micro relationships in 50 BCE. Compositionally, *Tides Rolling*'s two translucent, yellow beams create vistas in and out of the painting/abyss.

The title *Tides Rolling in from the Abyss* is a statement unto itself. "Tides" bring to mind everything from beach waves to waves of light working in relationship with particles of light. Or waves that simply say hello or goodbye. "Rolling in" conjures notions of endless movements of energy coming in from some unimaginable horizon/abyss. Here, abyss may be shorthand for infinity, God's infinity. Meyer's six-word title has much packed into it.

As does Meyer's oeuvre and his engaged practice, conversant in the languages of the sublime, grounded in History. ■

1 Linda D. Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art*, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014), p. 92.

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Ethan Meyer, *Tides Rolling in from the Abyss*, 2017, acrylic, 30x30", Photo: E. Meyer



Ethan Meyer, *The Magician's Laughter*, 2018, mixed media on canvas, 43x48", Photo: E. Meyer



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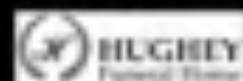


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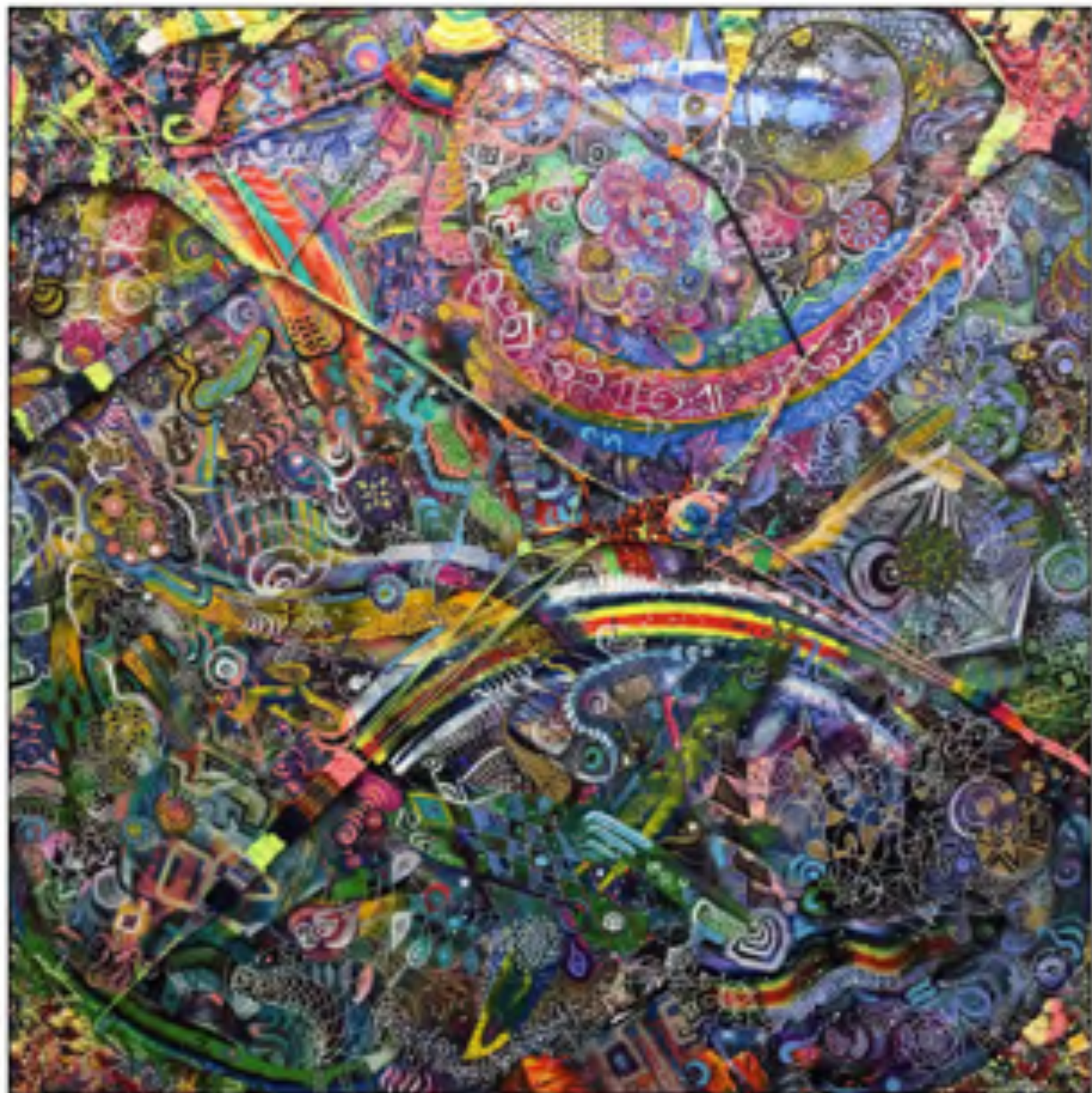
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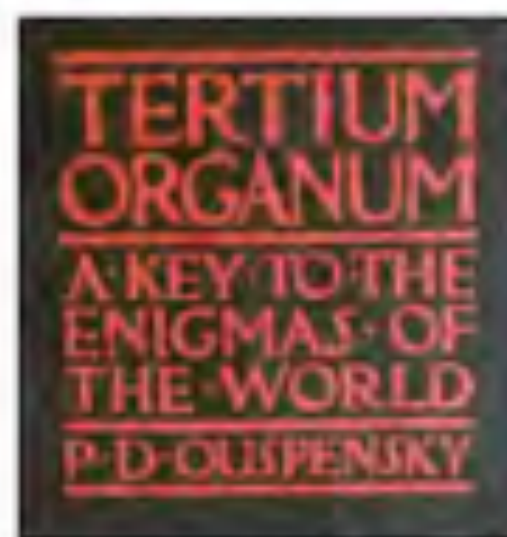
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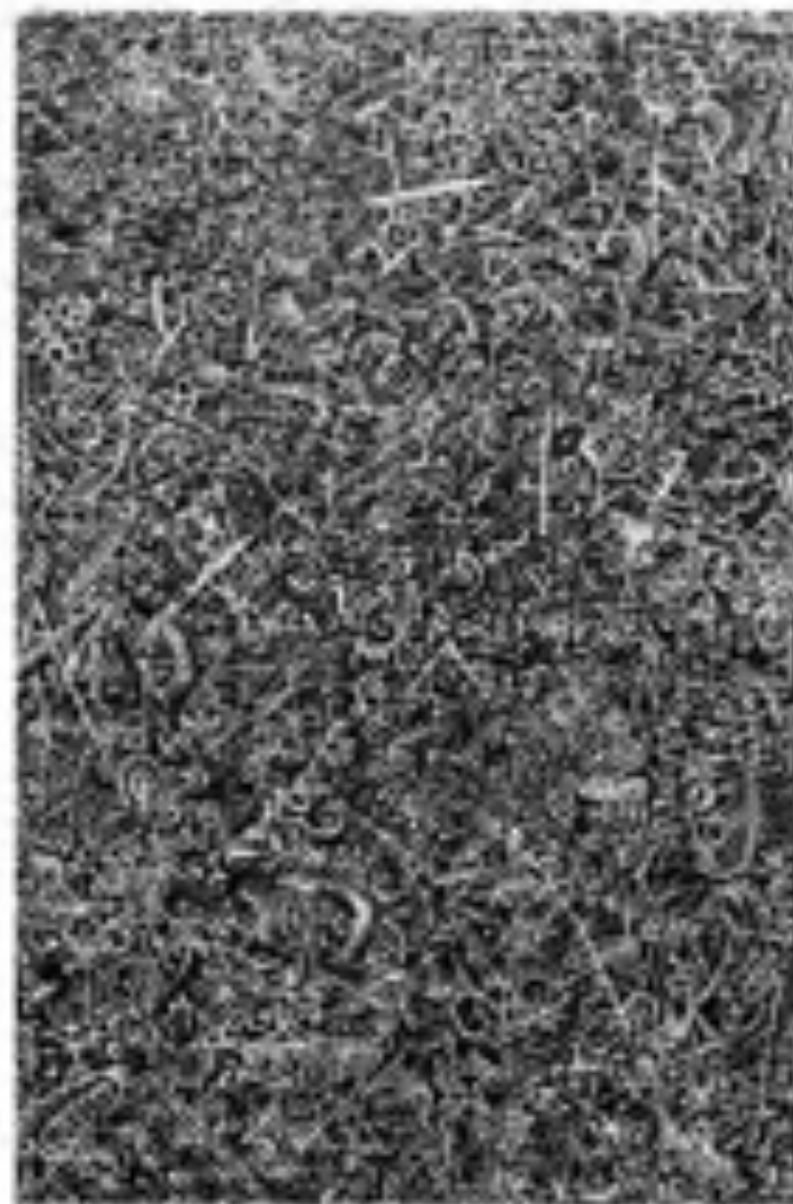
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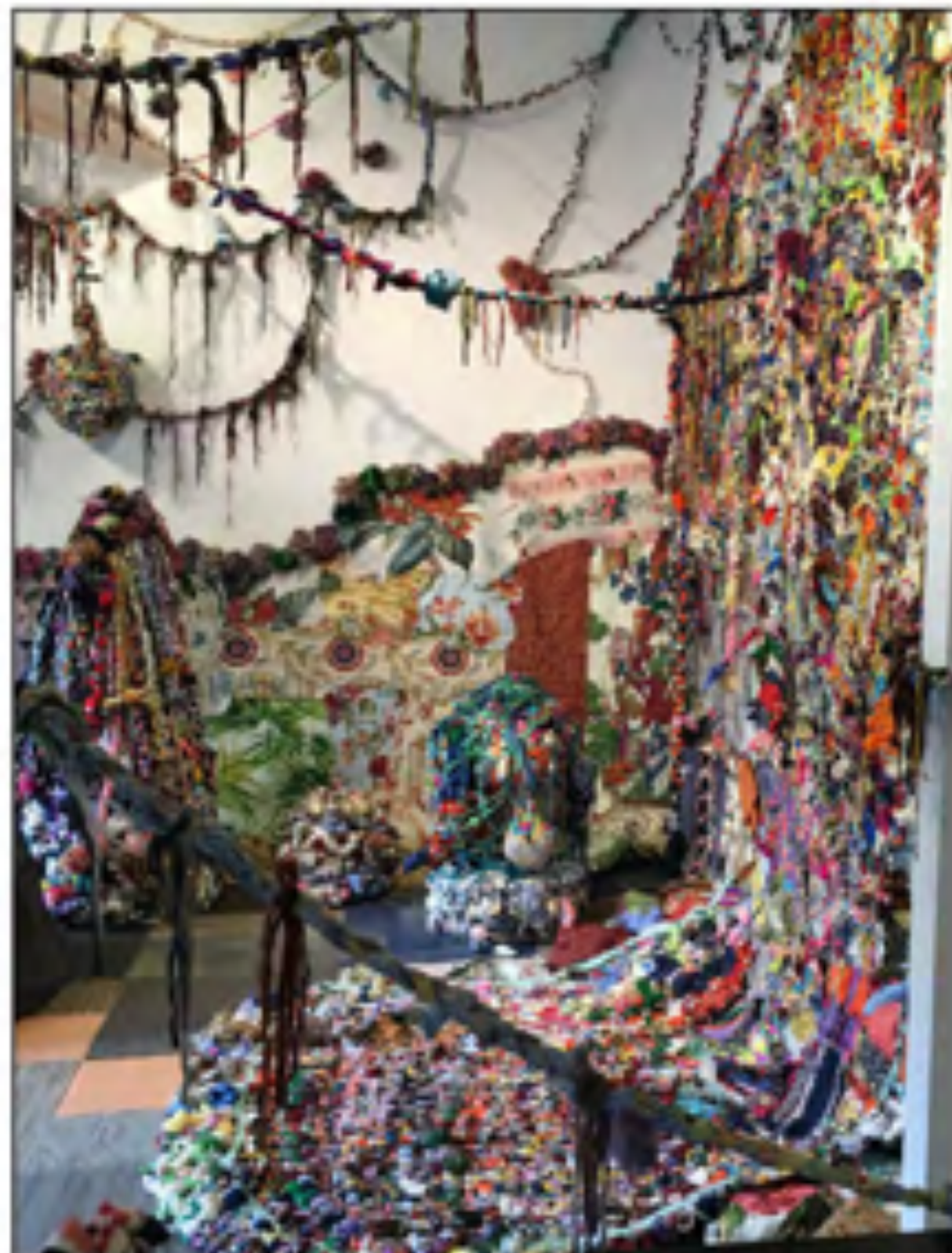
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