

***“A circle of fine card board and a chance to see a tassel.” Gertrude Stein, Tender Buttons, 1914.***

In 1914, Gertrude Stein published *Tender Buttons*, a book of absurdist modernist prose. The short blurbs disorient. Each word makes sense individually, alluding to and referencing common objects. However, as a whole, meaning is just outside of grasp—not unlike Joy Walker’s latest exhibition at MKG127, *A Line Becomes a Thread*.

The exhibition is comprised of fabric: fabric scraps, deconstructed fabric, fabric hanging on thin metal rods, and fabric propped up as a sculpture. Buttons hold up strips of fabric, and buttons trace down the sleeve of a striped dress shirt. There are pleats, folds, and secret signatures if you know where to look: Yohji Yamamoto is on the side of one piece, and the iconic Margiela stitches (penciled in) on another. Joy Walker’s signature is subtly stamped on everything—an inventiveness of geometric restraint that the artist is known for.

We’re not used to seeing clothing cut up and made into something else; we’re used to wearing it. Fabric lies directly against our bodies, possessing an intimate place in our lives. In the gallery, no touching is allowed. Instead, we start to see clothes as something else: architectural, sculptural barriers. Walker expands the possibility of what clothing, fashion, and fabric are with her deconstruction and abstractions.

Just like *Tender Buttons*, Walker is making a study of objects

***“Light blue and the same red with purple makes a change.” Gertrude Stein, Tender Buttons, 1914.***

The pieces in *A Line Becomes a Thread* are in discussion with one another. The deconstruction of one piece sheds light on the construction of another. One way Walker does this is through colour—specifically, how colour is formed. This knowledge can then be transferred to the various textile pieces in the exhibition, providing a deeper understanding of the process and mechanics of printing and pattern creation.

Throughout the gallery, riso prints in various stages of pattern are displayed. In the series *Untitled (Stripes and Plaids)*, Walker uses a restricted colour palette of red and black to mimic a minimalist plaid. One gets the sense of movement through repetition. The visual compositions in the *Untitled (Recalibration)* series could be colour studies or print tests; there’s a distinct sense of experimentation and process. Through her work on paper, Walker alerts the viewer to the similarities between paper and fabric and the process behind cloth-making.

Colour is a central theme in *A Line Becomes a Thread*, alongside structure and form. Colourful bits and bobs of fabric float on the wall. Saturated colours of neon yellow hover next to translucent reds and patterned blues. Nearby, two pieces stand out due to their distinct lack of colour. The stiff material gives enough form to the pieces as if someone were habituating them. Made from gessoed canvas, a common tool of painters, *Untitled* (Issey Miyake pants pattern) and *Untitled* (Margiela Apron Skirt 1999), become sculptures, bringing attention to the armour that clothing is.

***“The one way to see cotton is to have a design concentrating the illusion and the illustration.”  
Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons*, 1914.***

A rule of Walker’s for this exhibition is to use only material at hand, introducing no new materials into the cycle. This act of sustainability makes visible the often invisible aspect of clothing: What happens when it’s not worn anymore? In *A Line Becomes a Thread*, it finds a permanent place within Walker’s works.

Walker shows us a side to clothes we don’t usually see—a thin line between art and appreciation forms. For those who love clothes, as Walker and I do, it’s not unusual to turn something inside out and comment on a flat-felled seam. Walker takes this fascination further—what if that seam was an abstract line? What if a thread was a line?

For many years, Walker’s practice has encompassed this study of line—mostly done by Walker’s hand. In this exhibition, the viewer gets to see Walker’s hand, but also her eye—how she sees the world and projects her unique ability to see patterns and abstraction. *A Line Becomes a Thread* feels generous in this way. Walker gifts the ability to see the everyday in a new way.

Tatum Dooley, May 2024