

# Accumulate Presence

Amanda McCavour is a Toronto-based artist who creates large-scale installations through a mixture of embroidery, installation, and 3D thread pieces. Her work defies every preconceived notion of sewing, embroidery, and even sculpture. She is interested in redefining the assumption that thread is a delicate medium and exploring the 2- and 3D possibilities of line in her artworks. Her pieces present the formal properties of line and how the accumulation of embroidered thread can form installations, whose positive-negative composition have a ghostly yet definite presence in 3D space.

## *Poppies and Living Room*

In *Poppies* (this page), dangling red blooms are networks of solidly embroidered thread in parallel lines. These veiny flower petals represent McCavour's interest in the networks of the human body and how visually compelling they can be in embroidered form. In *Living Room* (see centerspread), the artist's installation explores the possibilities of the "accumulated presence" of thread. She meticulously creates frameworks of thread that form the contours of everyday household objects and furniture. Such settings often represent personal memories of places long past. The idea of the transience of a memory morphs with the traditional perception of thread as a transient medium, confounded by the surprising durability of her embroidered contour lines on her objects.

## A Unique Approach to Embroidering

McCavour constantly explores how far she can push the boundaries of embroidery. She has developed a technique of using a sewing machine to embroider into a water-soluble fabric. Calling her work "thread drawings," she painstakingly embroiders knotty veins of thread into the material, which, when dissolved in water, leaves just the embroidery, creating positive/negative space in her pieces. The process is time-consuming, but McCavour values the "history" of making her pieces as much as the finished work.

## Art History: Fiber Arts

McCavour's work is a part of the fiber arts movement that began during the Arts and Crafts Movement in the late 1800s in the West. Fiber arts received its biggest boon during the Feminist Art Movement of the 1970s, which reexamined the validity of art forms such as embroidery, once considered "women's work." McCavour's embroidered installations have far transcended and yet are in the same spirit as the installations of such stellar fiber artists as Claire Zeisler and Sheila Hicks. In the exploration of the visual and physical durability of embroidered thread in creating 3D forms, McCavour's work is totally in synch with fellow Canadian installation artist Jannick Deslauriers.



Top: Artist Amanda McCavour in her studio. Photo by Christine Lim. Bottom: Amanda McCavour, *Poppies*, 2018–ongoing. Thread and machine embroidery, 12' x 40' x 30" (366 x 101.5 x 76 cm). Gallery Stratford, Ontario. Photo by Cheryl Rondeau. Images courtesy of the artist.









Amanda McCavour, Living Room, 2010–2011. Thread and machine embroidery, 10 x 10 x 10' (3 x 3 x 3 m).  
Produced with the support of the Ontario Arts Council. Photo by Agata Piskunowicz. Image courtesy of the artist.



### About the Artist

McCavour holds a BFA from York University in drawing and installation, and an MFA in fibers and material studies at Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia. The artist shows her work in galleries nationally and internationally, with recent solo exhibitions in Gatineau (QC), Williamsport (PA), and Vancouver (BC). She has received awards and scholarships from the Ontario Crafts Council, the Handweavers and Spinners Guild of America, the Ontario Crafts Council, the Ontario Society of Artists, the Surface Design Association, and the Embroiderers Guild of America.

### ARTIST Q&A

#### When did you first begin working with embroidery and thread?

**Amanda McCavour:** I came to using sewn lines through an interest in drawn line. In 2006, I took a drawing course at York University with Professor Michael Davey, where drawing was defined simply as line. I thought that threaded line would be interesting to use because it was similar to drawing on a paper, but had more of a presence. Finding links between the fibers of the body and fibers of cloth sparked my first series of work with embroidery. This shift in materials, from lines made on paper to embroidery, marked a turning point in my practice.

#### What are some of the biggest influences on your work, including other artists or things outside of the arts?

**AM:** Here are some artists whose work inspires me:

Meredith Woolnough is an Australian artist who does incredible work with stitching and water-soluble fabric. Her work is bold and organic and her use of color is incredible.

Anna Torma is a Canadian artist who creates intricate embroideries that are full of texture and character, often mixing different styles to create dense areas of stitch. Her work is playful and intense.

Kate Jackson creates embroideries onto ephemeral materials like paper towel and tissue. Her work speaks to me about memory and meditation.

Anouk Desloges creates embroideries into plexiglass and creates pieces that often look like tangles or knots. I like the combination of hard and soft materials she uses to create her pieces, and I think about strength and structure when I look at them.

#### Do you have specific strategies, rituals, or routines that help you work and/or generate ideas?

**AM:** Play is an important part of my practice and I often work through testing in smaller-sized pieces. This is a time to improvise and follow my instinct. I often create these smaller works or samples to brainstorm ideas for projects or to create examples for when I teach. This summer I worked on a series of black-and-white samples to explore mark-making and density. I think this is something I will expand on in the future.

#### What unique challenges are presented when working with thread and/or textiles? How do you overcome them?

**AM:** Time: The time it takes to embroider a piece that takes over a gallery is huge. I often spend years making a work. Each piece is made from multiple pieces and I save these pieces and arrange them in different ways each time they are installed.

It also takes a lot of time to install work. I usually need a team of people to help speed up the process. Each space is different and each gallery and museum has its own challenges. Installing often takes over a week and it's really physical work with standing for hours with hands above my head tying small knots.


Fragility: Thread is something that can get tangled easily. Often the installations exist with hundreds of hanging threads.

### DISCUSSION

Begin by showing students McCavour's *Poppies* (p. 23). Ask them to guess the materials, and allow for some discussion before revealing that they were made with embroidery thread. Next, show students some photos or real-life examples of more traditional embroidery. Ask them to identify similarities and differences with McCavour's installations. Finally, show them *Living Room* (centerspread). Ask them to list all of the objects that have been rendered in the piece. Ask:

- How does the use of thread as a material change these objects?
- What unique qualities does thread have as an art material?
- What other "crafts" can be used to make contemporary art?

### STUDIO EXPERIENCES

- Create a 2- or 3D interpretation of an everyday object using thread.
- Form a group of three to four artists and create a collaborative installation using, fabric, thread, felt, or other soft materials.
- Create a work of art using materials that are traditionally or stereotypically considered "feminine."
- Create an installation using an everyday material that challenges viewer's expectations or understandings of that material. How can you use the material in an unexpected way? 

Written by Karl Cole, Art Historian and Curator of Images at Davis Publications, and Robb Sandagata, Digital Curriculum Director and Editor at Davis Publications. [kcole@davisart.com](mailto:kcole@davisart.com), [rsandagata@davisart.com](mailto:rsandagata@davisart.com)

### RESOURCES

**Artist Website:** [amandamccavour.com](http://amandamccavour.com)

**Facebook:** [@amandamccavourart](https://www.facebook.com/amandamccavourart)

**Instagram:** [@amandamccavour](https://www.instagram.com/amandamccavour)