

GRAVITY’S THREAD

Layering gesture, care, and the environment in Martha Tuttle’s handmade forms

Words
Mariana Fernández



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Martha Tuttle’s works reflect a material sensitivity to nature’s mix of irregular geometry, chance formations, and the natural rhythm of organic structures. Hand-dyed and stitched fabrics conjure horizon lines, mountain ranges, and vast desert expanses heavy with the weight of bodily marks and sedimented memory. When we speak via Zoom this June, Tuttle is in residence in Somerset, UK, working on new pieces that originate as garments. These are not wearable works in their final form but rather canvases for mark-making. After the artist walks and runs in the silk clothing, the sweat and minerals from her body create nuanced impressions and points of erosion when the fabric is later dyed and transformed into stretched wall works. The results, which will be shown at Timothy Taylor in London this November, are delicate panels with ever-so-subtle splotches and stains on translucent fabric that record movement via physical contact between body and material. The weightless fields of silk are interrupted by polygons of thick wool that cling to the edge of the stretchers unevenly, drawing attention to the work’s likeness to skin—a word Tuttle has used before, in a 2020 *Brooklyn Rail* interview with Susan Harris, to describe the stitched planes.

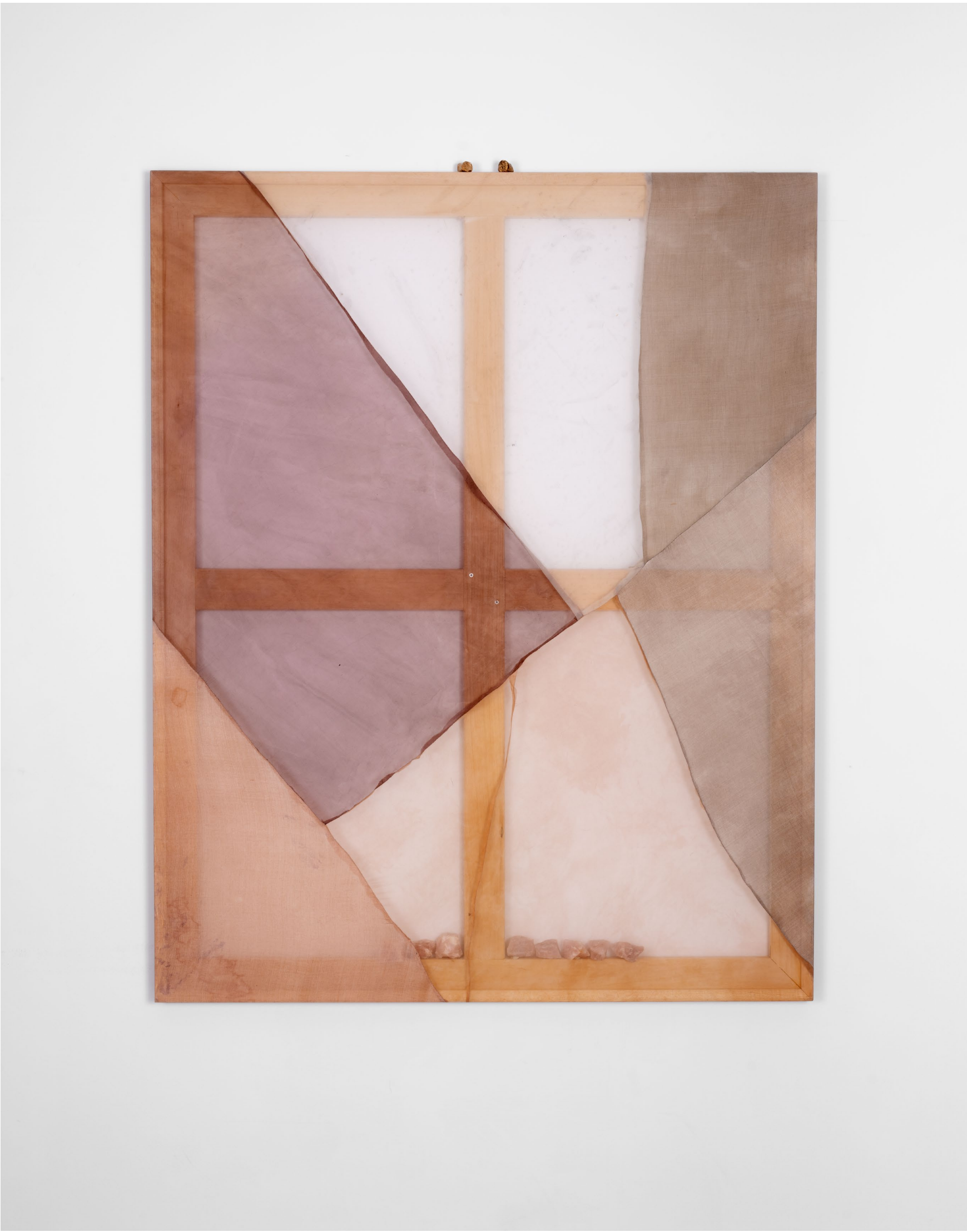
“I’m interested in how my epithelial cells infuse the material to create a collaboration with the nonhuman,” she tells me. “How my touch of the animal body, the mineral body, and the landscape creates a unique material.”

This is Tuttle’s first time working with the output of her body in such a direct way, though she maintains a very intimate relation to the materiality of all her work. She starts with raw wool (unwashed, preferably), which she spins, weaves, and then combines with sewn silk fragments. She dyes the fabrics using a mix of mostly hand-ground pigment solutions made from rocks, minerals, and plant matter. This use of unstable, organic materials—rather than their mere representation—is part of her oft-stated ecological intention to communicate our entwinement with the physical world: “our earth, our galaxy, and what we can see—a tree, a river, a pipeline—and what we can’t see—the atoms and microbes that make up our world,” as she put it to Harris.

I think of something Anicka Yi told *ArtReview* recently: “If you look microbiologically, you know that there is no individual and that the self is comprised of a multitude. And so what that means is that the self is—we are—vessels for interdependence.” Tuttle’s work, like Yi’s, attempts to mirror the entanglements of this co-constitutive life, the symbiotic relationships of living organisms. If there is no autonomous self—and Tuttle’s work suggests there isn’t—then what she creates evinces an interdependence between body and environment, between fabric and the Earth. Her dyed and worn fabrics are material outcomes of interaction with the microbial, the elemental, and the atmospheric through the artist’s own slow, embodied participation in the rhythms of the world (walking, sweating, weaving, and stitching).

Strictly speaking, Tuttle makes paintings—liquid pigment applied to stretched or draped fabric. In dialogue with a longer lineage of abstraction, there are tinges of Agnes Martin’s tender geometries, echoes of Robert Rauschenberg’s material experiments, and an embedded awareness of the stakes and structures of minimalism and postminimalism. They also resonate with the work of her father, Richard, whose own materially inventive, anti-monumental abstractions helped redefine the boundaries of drawing, sculpture, and painting in the 1970s. Her work similarly embraces fragility, tactility, and a distrust

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“Tuttle’s camera lingers on wind-brushed grasses, mineral surfaces, shadows moving across stone, registering the landscape as quiet testament to environmental fragility.”



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of permanence—but she brings to it a distinct bodily intimacy and ecological grounding. Her paintings are objects: haptic, permeable, performative, and more closely aligned with sculpture and the body than with pictorial space.

While art-historical references are present, they are often secondary to the physicality of process that most concerns Tuttle most, the responsive relationship between maker and material. Much of that sensibility harkens back to the landscape of her childhood. Tuttle grew up an only child in a rural area outside of Santa Fe, often alone in open terrain. “At its core,” she says, “my brain always goes back to the desert.” The colors, textures, and exposures of New Mexico shape her compositional language: translucent whites, stony pinks and grays, and expanses of fabric that echo the spatial vastness of the high desert. Her paintings are not landscapes per se, but they are inflected by place—air and dust embedded into the cloth itself. Often, as with the series of works she will present at this year’s Armory Show, they incorporate rocks, crystals, or sculptural elements derived from the natural world, such as bronze casts of the interstices of cow vertebrae.

“One cannot help but be affected by the immediacy of labor that response to and care for the desert climate requires. What it means to make an image feels heightened when performed with an awareness of the limits of natural resources,” Tuttle wrote recently in *The Brooklyn Rail*. In *Milestone* (2019), two horizontal panels and one vertical panel interact to divide the wall into a composition of intersecting planes and open intervals. Cream-colored patches of wool are stitched between pieces of pink- and gray-dyed silk, their surfaces marked with patterns that evoke shifting water formations, the visual intricacy of microscopic life, tidal shallows, and cellular activity observed up close.

Part of the immediacy evoked by Tuttle’s translucent compositions stems from the delicacy of their materials. “The works are one-shot pieces,” she notes, since silk can’t be reworked, unstretched, or resewn without damage. This frailty comes through in works like *Portrait of a loved one getting older* (2024), where sheer and opaque

segments of dyed silk are stitched into a fractured visual field, revealing the wooden and aluminum armature—what Tuttle refers to as the work’s “skeleton”—beneath. The subdued palette of weathered grays, lilacs, and taupes reads like a bruise, especially where the fabric sags slightly. At the center, a serpentine seam, tucked like a French fold, winds and shifts in response to the work’s internal tensions, bisecting the visual field and offering a soft but insistent arc that suggests aging as a movement both slow and directional. It moves the way bodies do under pressure, less directed than adaptive. A smaller stretcher dyed in a deeper gradient juts from the composition’s top right edge, like a memory node or emotional appendage.

This way of working with fabric allows “the body to fully integrate into the painting surface,” she says. “The way my hand touches every part of the surface with spinning and weaving—to me, that becomes a kind of line drawing.” The stitched lines that extend vertically from so many of her works have a formal function (as drawing, marker of gravity, or the limits of control) as well as a host of associations. Each of the two panels that make up *seeing water through thin ice in early springtime* (2024) is segmented by curving seams evocative of tectonic drift. The lines here feel less like boundaries and more like records of slow ruptures and slight misalignments, charting the meeting points between opacity and translucency, wool and silk, in a vaguely geometric language.

The new works from Somerset appear looser, more attuned to the unpredictable rhythms of a body moving through the landscape. In one of these still-untitled paintings, soft-edged geometries are less regular, their seams more pronounced. And the palette has dusted over: grays, mauves, and pale blues marked by the faint splotches, streaks, and discolorations left by Tuttle’s bodily chemistry. If earlier works suggested vast terrain, this series is closer in scale and more intimate in register—fabrics that have weathered exposure. The works move away from pure abstraction and toward something more tactile and forensic, showing what happens when a surface becomes a site for bodily inscription.

“It intoxicates me,” Tuttle writes in that same essay, “to think about the impact different entities in our universe—tangible and intangible—make upon each other. For me, this is wondering about whether a landscape absorbs and is changed by the light of a particularly bright moon, as much as it is being fascinated that people who live together strongly influence the microbial communities on each other’s skin.”

Skin feels like the right word—bodies, too, and containers, and coverings: things that wrap and protect, that filter and absorb and hold something else together. The fleshy texture of the silk in Tuttle’s works evokes a body, with skin as the wrapping, the dressing of a core. I think again about clothing, which is always a sculptural, three-dimensional form made out of two-dimensional fabric, with an inside and an outside. Clothing is something you climb into, something that covers and protects, or something like a vessel that shelters and shapes a body, even as it responds to its shifting contours. When Tuttle describes her paintings as “a surface the body can integrate into,” she refers to the entire ecology of contact between skin and fiber. The works are not fixed compositions, but sites of accumulation, records of exchange.

Tuttle’s understanding of relationality—of bodies, materials, and environments in constant, co-constitutive interaction—is inherited from her mother, the poet Mei-mei Berssenbrugge. In Berssenbrugge’s writing, long, spooling lines and loosened syntax give way to nonhuman and invisible forms of relation. “I radiate desert fragrance spontaneously,” she writes in “Star Beings” (2020), collapsing inner experience with atmospheric and ecological conditions. In poems like “Chaco and Olivia” (2020) distinctions between entities dissolve entirely: “Any soul may distribute itself into a human, a toy poodle, bacteria, an etheric, or quartz crystal.” The same cosmology underpins Tuttle’s openness to arbitrary events like sweat, pressure, and environmental exposure.

Drought (2019–21), a video collaboration between Berssenbrugge and Tuttle, pairs imagery from the deserts of western Texas and Abiquiú, New Mexico, with Berssenbrugge’s spoken reflections on five decades of drought in the Southwest.



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Rather than offering a conventional narrative or documentary, the work unfolds as a slow meditation on the shocking perceptibility of environmental change within a single lifetime. It compresses geologic time into lived memory, translating ecological shifts into the emotional registers of grief and helplessness that define the present crisis. Tuttle’s camera lingers on wind-brushed grasses, mineral surfaces, shadows moving across stone, and other fragments of desert life that echo the surfaces of her paintings, which in this light register as quiet testaments to environmental fragility.

Her process insists that human touch is never singular, that every mark or seam is a site of co-authorship between the artist, the elements, and the materials themselves. Such flattening of relations suggests a model for care grounded in empathetic embodiment and reciprocity. As in Berssenbrugge’s poem “Consciousness Self-Learns” (2020), where “plants and rocks lay under night sky; ground is a subject of sky; the relation’s a force,” Tuttle’s paintings vibrate with quiet signals between entities.

“Look inside when you are struggling,” Berssenbrugge writes. “Every cell in your body emits light.” If Tuttle’s work offers a vision for environmental ethics, it is one built on the subtle, accumulative practice of noticing—and letting everything, from cilia to clouds, signal back.

Figures

- 1 *Some birds are still flying south, some are singing in the branches*, 2025. Courtesy: the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York; photo: Jason Wyche
- 2 *Reliquary*, 2025. Courtesy: the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York; photo: Jason Wyche
- 3–8 Stills from *Drought*, 2019–21. Courtesy: the artist