

HESSE FLATOW

Ortiz Monasterio, Carlota. "A quest for opacity: Emma Safir's sculptural digital collages." *Poltern*, March 24, 2022. Online.

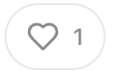
## Poltern's Newsletter

### Poltern Newsletter 015

24 March 2022



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Welcome to the fifteenth Poltern Newsletter 

This month's issue includes a piece on assemblage and symbolism prompted by the haunting work of **Arturo Kameya**, written by *Darcy Lannen Olmstead*; a hybrid exhibition/book review on the joint power of visual and textual histories represented in **Hilton Als's** exhibition, *Toni Morrison's Black Book*, by *Victoria Horrocks*; a reflection on opacity as seen in recent Yale MFA **Emma Safir's** sculptural digital collages by *Carlota Ortiz Monasterio*.

If you have any questions or comments, please reach out to us by responding to this email or writing us at [polternmag@gmail.com](mailto:polternmag@gmail.com).

Thank you for being here.

The Poltern Team

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**A quest for opacity: Emma Safir's sculptural digital collages**

by *Carlota Ortiz Monasterio*

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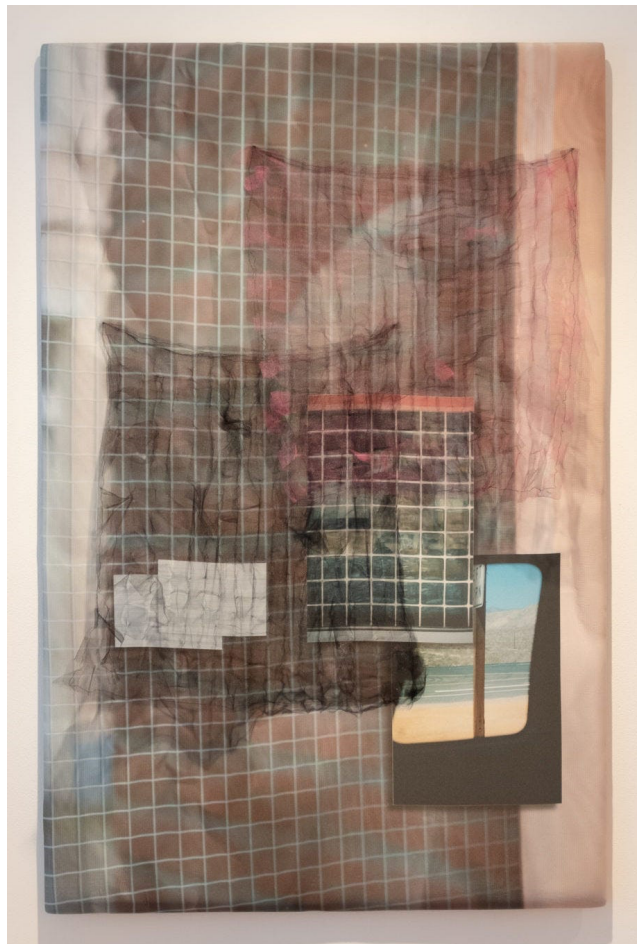
Installation view, *Emma Safir: Veils & Glitches*, Baxter Street at Camera Club New York. Image: Baxter Street Center.

Upon entering Emma Safir's solo exhibition with Baxter Street at the Camera Club New York, one is surrounded by the looming presences of eight densely composed panels inhabiting the intimate gallery space. Hung on the walls or reclined against them, the photographic collages, printed onto fabric, stand out for their ambiguity: they simultaneously fall within the mediums of photography, painting, textile work, digital collage, and sculpture. A recent Yale graduate from the MFA in Painting and Printmaking (2021) known for her multi-media practice, Safir explores the tension between transparency and opacity in images and their role in influencing how we inhabit both physical and virtual spaces. Created through various digital and manual manipulations, the pieces in the exhibition—all made in the last two years—reveal the artist's quest to unveil images' inherent opacity.

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Her process starts with selecting images from a vast personal archive of spontaneous photographs, which include views of domestic interiors, nature, landscapes, textile patterns, and windows. The images are then scanned and superimposed into digital collages printed on fabric. The compositions are further abstracted through the addition of veils, patches, and pockets in tulle, spandex, and appliqués created through the traditional textile techniques of weaving, smocking, and upholstery. Finally, they are attached to a layer of foam and a wooden base acquiring a convex sculptural appearance. Rooted in a consistent layering, veiling, and glitching of images, Safir's practice challenges the straightforward reading of images.



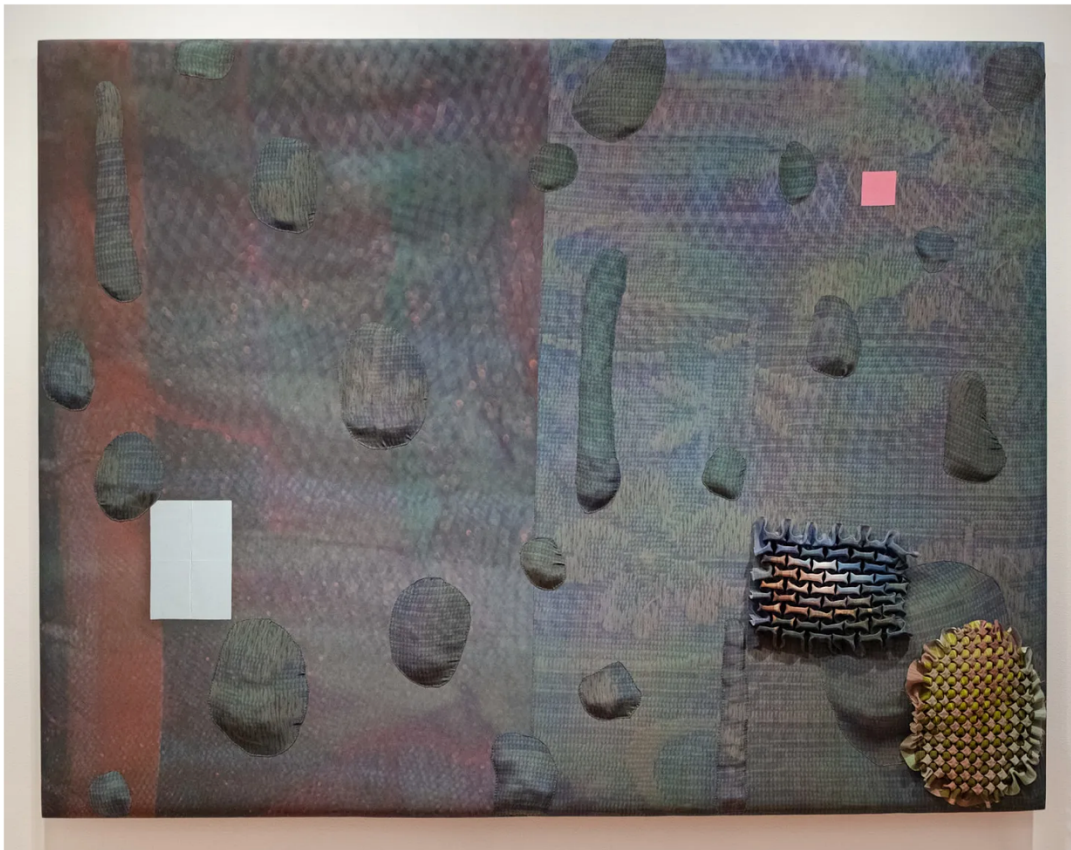
Emma Safir, *Veil III*, 2020, digital collage printed on silk and spandex, woven tulle, foamcore, upholstery foam, silk thread, 57 x 37 x 1.5 inches (144.8 x 94 x 3.8 cm).

Image: Baxter Street Center.

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A vital aspect of the works at Baxter Street is their muted palette. In obscure tones of purple, pink, brown, blue, and gray, Safir's compositions seem to not only favor but strive for dimness and opacity. For example, *Veil III* (2020) superimposes a white grid over a dark pattern of brown and blue streaks and indistinguishable faint white shapes. An unaltered photograph of a highway road, seen from a bus's dark interior, emerges from the bottom right corner, interrupted by a rectangular painted multicolor chromatic grid. At the same time, two white rectangles hang nearby—finally, two intricate veils composed of pink and black tulle fall over half of the composition. The frequent reference to optical devices—windows, fences, and veils—highlights the tension between what images reveal and what they may hide, a concept that animates the artist's practice.



Emma Safir, *Rewound Glitch II*, 2022, digital collage printed on silk, spandex, smocking, appliqué, MDF, upholstery foam, silk thread, house paint, and flash paint, 57 x 74 x 1.5 inches (144.8 x 188 x 3.8 cm). Image: Baxter Street Center.

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One of the largest and most intricate compositions, *Rewound Glitch II* (2022), bulges out of a white wall. From a distance, the base surface looks like an intricate brocade of floral patterns. Yet, as one gets closer, the illusion of texture is broken by a staunch flatness. The dense interweaving of color "threads" into rich patterns results from a deft digital manipulation through rasterization, a computer graphics process that converts images into more reduced sets of pixels or dots. Creating these confusions between digital and manual work is at the core of Safir's brilliance. Small protruding pockets cover the surface like raindrops trickling down a car window to add to its complexity. At the same time, two intricately worked pieces of fabric—using a smocking technique that allows for the material to hold its form—are attached to the bottom corner. The manual weaving process of these added layers and the process of digital manipulation employed to create the backdrop image mirror each other and problematize the perceived differences between these forms of labor.

Indeed, a critical investigation into feminine and digital labor is the conceptual backdrop to much of Safir's practice. In a recent workshop with designer Luzia Dale, Safir gave an insightful lecture on the connection between textile labor and the development of computational systems, emphasizing the essential role women have played throughout. She traces this history from the early forms of computing, like the abacus and the Andean *kipus*, to the Jacquard punch cards and the Analytical Engine developed by Ada Lovelace in the 19th century, to the semiconductors developed for space travel using the skilled labor of Navajo weavers and women, to the MIT core rope memory chips also known as "little old lady" for the women that created them, through to the numerous female "human computers" at NASA and the so-called "computer girls" IBM programmers in the 1960s. In doing so, Safir illuminates the profound entanglement of gender in technological development. With this historical perspective, her work critically questions the demotion of feminized and manual labor in the present capitalist and digital era. In their recurring use of veils, patches, and pockets, Safir's works make visible, in fastidious embroidery, a form of labor that has historically been dismissed, undervalued, and made invisible.

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Installation view, *Emma Safir: Veils & Glitches*, Baxter Street at Camera Club New York. Image: Baxter Street Center.

Safir's research in the relation between gender and technology is also concerned with new forms of unpaid technological labor. In particular, the control logic behind services, such as Google's reCaptcha (the ubiquitous visual puzzles), are marketed to protect websites from bots yet crucially help train the platform's artificial intelligence. The interest in these new forms of invisible labor elucidates why Safir's practice is equally committed to the manual and digital manipulation of images. While the manual manipulations of the fabric turn the traditionally visual relation to images into a physical encounter, the digital manipulations problematize the legibility and immediacy of the photographs.

Positioning her works in staunch opposition to the flatness, transparency, and immediacy of digital interfaces, Safir's contestatory spirit echoes artists like Louise Bourgeois and Eva Hesse who opted to create soft, manually produced sculptures

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at a time where the dominance of Minimalism preached for hard industrially-produced works. Set at Baxter Street at Camera Club New York, the storied artist-run nonprofit space founded in 1884 and historically worked with figures such as Alfred Stieglitz, Paul Strand, and Berenice Abbot, Safir's works are set in dialogue with the history of photography. They are also a testimony to the breadth and reach of lens-based practices today. Emphasizing the materiality and presence of images in space, their contested relation to labor and gender, and their inherent opacity, Safir's striking panels, reveal how opacity may be mobilized to unveil the dark undertones that normally remain hidden.

***Emma Safir: Glitches & Veils* continues at Baxter St at Camera Club New York until March 26. The exhibition was curated by Sally Eaves Hughes.**

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