

HESSE FLATOW

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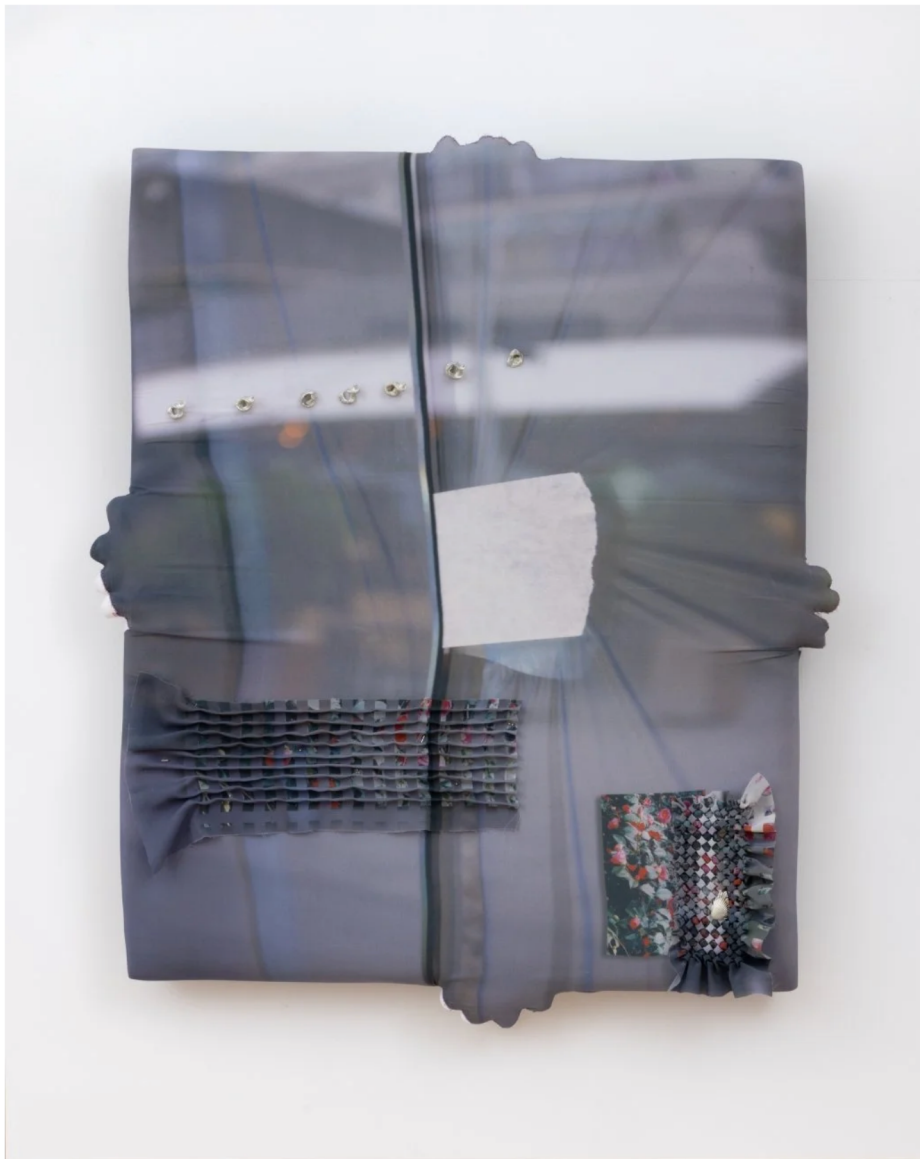
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ARTICLES
EVENTS
ABOUT

SEARCH

INTERVIEW SEP 4 - WRITTEN BY PARKER EWEN

Privacy, Labor, and the Myth of the Copy with Emma Safir



Pushing materials beyond their conventional manipulations, [Emma Safir](#) creates works that balance digital and physical labor, often acting as “portals” to transport viewers.

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Her practice explores themes of labor, intimacy, and domestic privacy by layering historical and conceptual information in unexpected ways. In this conversation, we discuss the tensions at play in her work—control and freedom, clarity and ambiguity—along with the histories that inform them. Safir's upcoming solo exhibition, *Uyt Den Gheest*, will be on view at HESSE FLATOW from September 5 through October 4, 2025. She will also be presented at their booth in The Armory Show.

Parker Ewen: Congratulations on your upcoming solo show *Uyt Den Gheest*. Can you walk me through how your career has progressed up to this point?

Emma Safir: I was born in the city but grew up in New Jersey and went to RISD for printmaking. After RISD, I moved to Los Angeles, did some jewelry design, and even had a handbag company for a few years. I realized I didn't care about functionality, which tipped the scales back towards making art. I moved back to the East Coast, did a series of residencies, worked at a couple of print shops, and then went to Yale for graduate school in 2019 for painting and printmaking.

When I came back, I worked with curator Sally Eaves Hughes on the solo exhibition *Glitches & Veils* at Baxter St., featuring my photographic collages printed on textiles. That set me up in a really wonderful way.

PE: That show looked amazing. How was it having the photographic nature of your work so highlighted?

ES: It was interesting because my work often resists qualification or description—is it painting, textile, or photography? Being in a photo context had never occurred to me. Even though I take and use photos, I don't think of myself as a photographer, but being in that context was incredible and changed how the work was being perceived. It clarified my relationship to digital work, and after that came the show *peripeteia* at Blade Study, curated by Andrew Gardner. I did NADA last year with HESSE FLATOW and Blade Study, ended up working with HESSE FLATOW, and here we are.

I also co-curated this past HESSE FLATOW summer show *Veronica, Veronica* with Andrew Gardner, based on an obsession with the Veil of Veronica. It was exciting to bring in artists with whom I feel in conversation in terms of materiality, copies, and image disintegration.

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PE: I love hearing about your curatorial work because your pieces in and of themselves are so carefully curated. Multiple materials and images are being layered. How do you find a good image?

ES: I'm always looking for photographs that combine multiple planes of space that can't exist unless they're captured together. I'm drawn to so-called "privacy solutions," or how people block space, like privacy glass, which is transparent yet shielded. In taking photos, I'm looking for different patterns of that glass, stickers that act in its place, or references to stained glass.

Texture is another focus. All of my photos are catalogued on a hard drive by when and where they were taken. Images get reused over and over but masked differently, becoming combinations of several photographs smashed on top of each other. It's an insistence on flattening the space and compiling something that is representational of a memory that interests me.

I spent time in Holland, where there's a fundamental Protestant culture of leaving your windows open to show that you're a good person. When they're covered, it raises questions about what's going on inside. That started my exploration of domestic privacy and the tension between public and private, often just teetering on a pane of glass. There's a sort of gentleman's agreement we all have that we live behind glass and we're not gonna break it.

PE: There's a strong sense of resistance in your work. You seem to do the opposite of what the materials want, whether in pewter, fabric, or the balance between digitization and handiwork. Can you talk more about that tension?

ES: The work often explores whether a hard thing can be soft and a soft thing hard. It's about pushing a material to do something it doesn't necessarily want to do. There's an interest in pressing through space digitally and then manipulating it past the point where it feels like it was ever a digital image. The digital collaging is as tedious as the embroidery itself. Especially for the smocked pieces, templates are made by taking apart a photo, square by square, so that, when sewn, it becomes semi-continuous again.

Maybe it's a printmaking impulse to plan and map things out, but I'm finally giving myself more leeway to mess with precious materials. Every stage has its appeal, but there's a real reverence at the end: starting with something so precious and then having the freedom to make it less so.

Something evident in both the metal and fabric is that it can always be brought back to the beginning. Stitches can be taken out, and then it's just a piece of fabric again, or pewter can be melted down and poured again.

PE: That tension between control and freedom reminds me of the tension between revealing and withholding from the viewer. There's so much layering of information—how do you know what to keep hidden?

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ES: I want to be very withholding but give enough for viewers to understand the level of labor involved. People often want me to show the backs of the embroideries, because that shows the process, but I don't want to show that to people. It's my business! I don't need everybody to see my underwear.

PE: That's your privacy glass!

ES: Exactly. I often feel protective of the work and its information—it feels personal because of how much I touch it. But it's also meant to be seductive, inviting viewers to touch but not allowing it.

Given the soft material, texture, and scale—sometimes acting as proxies for bodies—people are sometimes confused by them, but it's intentional. Revealing or withholding information slows down the reading and makes people look longer. These images are meant to be affective and evocative so that they can transport whoever's looking at them somewhere else.



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PE: The intention in your techniques really comes through. How did smocking enter your work?

ES: In graduate school, I took a history of fashion class within the school of drama, so it was for people making costumes. That's where I first learned about smocking. It was invented to create stretch, before elastic or fabric bias was understood. Today, it's usually reserved for baby dresses. I eventually discovered this specific type of smocking called North American or false smocking, because it doesn't have any structural utility; it's only decorative. I'm fixated on anything derided for being decorative; I want to spend time looking at it and giving it the reverence that it deserves.

Smocking became a way to combine images and create volume out of a single piece of fabric without stuffing it. The goal was to incorporate smocking as a technique, just like painting with impasto.

PE: Returning to the Veil of Veronica—the miraculous transfer as the truest image—there seems to be a connection to Wendy Hui Kyong Chun's concept of direct manipulation. With the false sense of control in the digital space, where an image on a phone isn't actually the object, are you finding humor in how images fail to be accurate?

ES: That's part of why I manipulate molds so that my pewter casts are always different. It relates to being a printmaker, where the goal is to make identical copies over and over again. I just fundamentally disagreed with it. It's not possible. There's an interest in the human desire for sameness, the copy of something, or a feeling that it's more than a copy—that it could be imbued with this sort of mystical, beyond-reality magic.

My mom is an art historian, so I spent a lot of time in museums. There were always paintings with a woman holding a veil with Jesus's face on it. I asked my mom about it, and then for years I'd think about it on and off. In graduate school, I spent more time actually researching it.

The legend is very evocative: bodily fluids transposed onto fabric create an image not made by human hands. It's the truest image. The humanity in the legend is humorous to me: the desire to have a copy of someone or something feels libidinal, and that's under-acknowledged in our culture of copying.

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PE: Is your work pushing back against that idea that an image must be true or identifiable?

ES: Yes. This idea of an image not made of human hands is fascinating, because there *is* no image not made of human hands, even photographically. The want to have the image requires the humanity to make the image. There's no way around it.

PE: That connection between human hands and image-making brings textiles back to mind. Textile work is often seen as gendered labor, historically and socially. When we're working digitally, the digital world can be seen as this great equalizer, but then in the same vein, it's also this great eraser. How does digital work play into that lens of gender and labor?

ES: The history of computing is inextricable from the history of textiles. The Jacquard loom led to the first computers; there is no digital without textiles. It's similar to how I manipulate metal and fabric: they are the same thing because they have shared origins.

Early motherboard makers were women, many of them Navajo weavers. Women working in offices to manually compute math and data were literally called "computers." Skills required for textile work are undermined in a way that a lot of digital labor is undermined and, as you said, erased. Digital labor is completely invisible, and so people don't really respect it.

Even when talking about creating digital collages, people are quick to brush it off as simple work, but it's not. Even though we know the labor that it takes to do something digitally, because we all use computers, we have some societal agreement that it isn't work. That's also how we treat mending and "women's work." These things that become so personal to us and so domestic lose their value. None of it garners the same respect you get if you put paint on a canvas.

PE: There are a lot of connections being drawn between history and the present moment. What are you looking at in the world right now? How do you refill the well of inspiration?

ES: Lately, I've been exploring the history of Christianity and Abrahamic religions in general, including ancient European history. Studying tragedy helps me move past nihilism and gives context to humanity's longevity and violence.

The interest in religion is less about spirituality and more about cultural and political control, like the ways it's been used to justify desires and control others. I'm always drawn to the idea of control: the ways humans have controlled each other for so long using frameworks with no real foundation. It keeps working, and it's worth questioning why. It's not necessarily clear what this means for my work right now, but it's been a focus of my thinking and learning.

This interview was edited for clarity and length.

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Parker Ewen

Parker Ewen is an artist and writer based in New York. His writing includes interviews with fine artists, exhibition reviews, and contemporary museum theory.