

# BU Today

News, Opinion, Community

## Stone Gallery Exhibition *STUFFED* Highlights the Subversive Side of Fiber Arts

Features works by 13 female artists who are using pliable materials in new ways

Sophie Yarin | August 23, 2023



Maria A. Guzmán Capron, *Piedra De Mar*, 2022. Fabric, Thread, Batting, Stuffing, Acrylic Paint and Spray Paint. 50 1/2 X 42 X 4 In. Courtesy of the Artist and Shulamit Nazarian, Los Angeles.

The new exhibition at the Faye G., Jo, and James Stone Gallery might make you feel like curling up with a good book and a cup of hot cocoa. That would be a mistake.

*STUFFED* seeks to disassociate soft, plush objects from the realm of the familiar and comfortable and recast them as sophisticated, rebellious—even sexy.

The group show, on view through September 15, is a collection of three-dimensional fiber artworks—or soft sculptures—organized by Boston-based curators Mallory Ruymann and [Leah Triplett-Harrington](#), a writer, editor and frequent College of Fine Arts [collaborator](#).

“I hope this exhibition helps people consider how textiles and fabrics influence our everyday lives,” says Triplett-Harrington. She and Ruymann have collaborated on previous shows.



Installation Photograph, *STUFFED*, Stone Gallery, Boston University Art Galleries, Jun 15 – Sept 15, 2023, Photo Mel Taing

The aesthetic choices the show’s 13 artists—all women—have made leave viewers no choice but to think beyond teddy bears and down comforters. Consider the challenging, seductive gazes on view in Maria A. Guzmán Capron’s *Piedra de Mar*, a quilted sculpture featuring two women literally sewn from the same cloth, sharing an intimate embrace while their eyes confront the viewer. Or how Rose Nestler’s *Affordable Facelift*, a wall display featuring metallic-colored tufted seat sections, resembles a grimacing, drooping face.



Maria A. Guzmán Capron, *Piedra De Mar* (detail), 2022. Fabric, Thread, Batting, Stuffing, Acrylic Paint and Spray Paint. 50 1/2 X 42 X 4 In. Courtesy of the Artist and Shulamit Nazarian, Los Angeles.

Comfort is *not* the name of the game here.

Beyond the individual aesthetics, the boldness of this exhibition, named a *Boston Globe* staff pick, can be seen in its broader mission: to take media often dismissed as domestic crafts—sewing, quilting, and felting—and show how they can be used to create art that defies categorization.

“Our curatorial partnership foregrounds femme, women-identifying, and gender queer artists,” Triplett-Harrington says. “*STUFFED* is part of a larger project to recast and recontextualize feminist artists and art-making.”

“There is a grain of identity politics within the curatorial theme that provides a platform for discussion about gender,” Ruymann adds, “and many of the artists in the show make work explicitly about the experience of being a woman’s body.” Case in point: Courtney Stock, whose works are explicitly rooted in the context of her body. Two of her mixed-media sculptures in the exhibition—humanoid figures called *mother* and *child*—hang side by side in the gallery. Headless forms stuffed with polyester and bedecked with scraps of silk, beads, and semiprecious stones, they are inspired in part by ultrasound imagery, Stock says.

“I had a baby in the summer of 2022, and I decided, especially with the strangeness and raw-around-the-edges-ness of my work, that it was okay to lean into an autobiographical narrative,” she explains. “It references how much I’ve learned about my body through pregnancy, and also this shift in perspective when you’re seeing your insides on a screen.”



Maria A. Guzmán Capron, *Doble*, 2022. Fabric, Thread, Batting, Stuffing, Spray Paint, Latex Paint. 70 ¼ X 68 In. Courtesy Oof the Artist and Shulamit Nazarian, Los Angeles.

Taking a more meta approach, Boston-based artist Jai Hart sought to subvert the constraints imposed by traditional 2D art. While her works, comprising acrylic on canvas and filled with polyester, are meant to hang on gallery walls the way a painting would, the way they slope toward the floor or defy their own borders speaks to her vision.



Maria A. Guzmán Capron, *Doble* (detail), 2022. Fabric, Thread, Batting, Stuffing, Spray Paint, Latex Paint. 70 ¼ X 68 In. Courtesy Oof the Artist and Shulamit Nazarian, Los Angeles.

“How do we see frames or borders around paintings? How can preestablished boundaries be manipulated for progress?” she asks. “I hope to give my audience a different experience and have them question the way they may see traditional framing.”

Amid all the subversion happening in *STUFFED*, the show even occasionally subverts itself.

“We’ve snuck in a few artworks that are not actually stuffed, but carry the suggestion of fill,” Ruymann says. The works of L’Merchie Frazier, a multi-hyphenate artist and activist, are one example. Though known for her quilts, Frazier chose to contribute two 2D works that she says are “stuffed with meaning” and incorporate weaving and machine-quilting techniques with mixed-media elements like fiber and plastic caution tape. With an eye on local and national history, her work contends with anti-Black racism and structural inequality. The idea of working with traditional handicrafts was something that appealed to her naturally.

“My grandfather was a tailor and upholsterer, and my mother told me stories about how he used to take cloth fragments and put them together to make quilts to keep his children warm at night,” Frazier says. “That was a part of the legacy that she passed on to me, and my take on it has to do with the preservation of art, culture, innovation, and history.”

Perhaps the most subversive thing about *STUFFED* is the material itself. Pliant and easily able to conform to an artist’s vision, it requires none of the conforming creators must make to rigid materials like canvas or stone. It can truly be anything.

“The flexibility of fiber-based art is what makes it special,” Ruymann says. “Painting, sculpture, installation—the possibilities of the medium seem endless.”