



CF0025

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# MATERIAL EXPLORATION AWARD

Ruth Tabancay

Berkeley, California, US

**M**icroscopy and magnification are the concepts underlying my work. Years spent studying bacteriology in college, working in a hospital laboratory, and studying human cells and tissues in medical school led me to appreciate the aesthetics of a world invisible to the naked eye. At the time, I could not have imagined that I would eventually become an artist, let alone use these ideas on which to build my main body of artwork.

I spent a significant part of my education and early employment years looking through a light microscope. I would spend

much more time than necessary exploring slides of bacteria, blood smears, urine sediment, other body fluids, and every category of human cells and tissues. It was no surprise that when I started art school, I began to see microscopic imagery in my work. Stitched tea bags resembled fields of squamous epithelium; ikat weaving, striated muscle; random weave basket reed, collagen fibers. With the computerized Jacquard loom, I wove images from old text books and atlases of bacteria, fungi, and human tissues. Though I was thrilled to work with that imagery again, it made me eager to create my own source material for Jacquard weaving.



Once I conceived the idea of magnified textile images, I looked for a laboratory that would allow me to use their equipment. I was fortunate to receive training to use the scanning electron microscope at the **University of California, Berkeley**. I've made dozens of micrographs of commercial fabrics that became my image sources for my computerized Jacquard weavings. My first efforts were the exact images I photographed. As a concept, a weaving of a magnified weave structure was satisfying but for me, the spirit of artistry was missing. Except for hand weaving on the computerized Jacquard loom, they were created entirely using manufacturing and computerized processes—commercial fabric, computer software, computerized loom. As an artist, I felt my hand was not in the work.

Making things by hand has always been part of my life. Since the first apron I hand-stitched in second grade, I have worked in a variety of textile techniques—crochet, needle point, knitting, sewing clothing, and quilting. I thrived on the making, but before art school everything I made was from a pattern with traditional techniques. In theory, anyone could make one. The urge to create something original, something only I could do, was the main drive that led me to study art.

**Ruth Tabancay *Nylon Knee Highs 156X*** 2018, watercolor paper, embroidery floss, scanned electron micrograph digital print, hand embroidered, 13" x 16". Left page: detail.



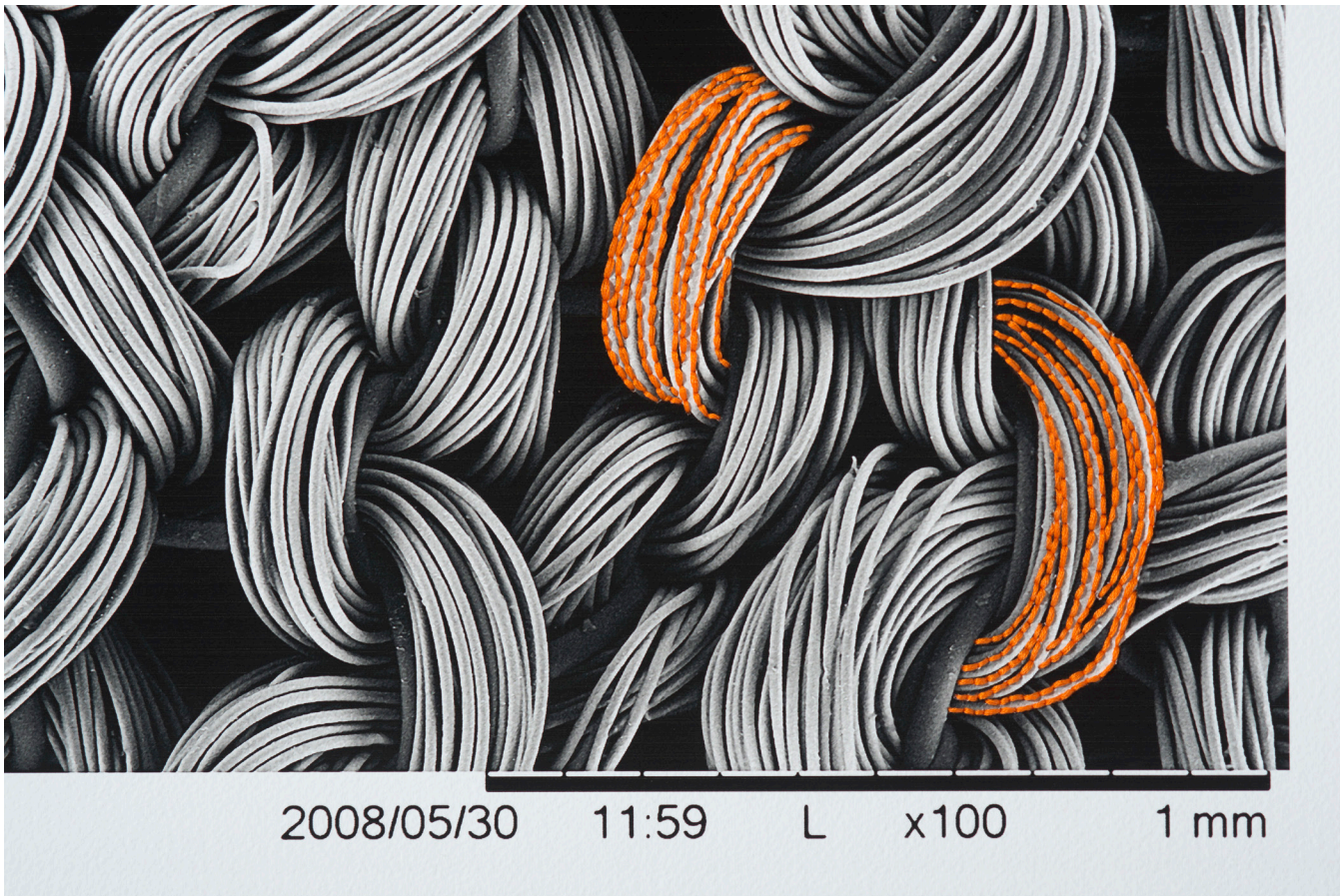
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L x80

1 mm





Ruth Tabancay *Purl 194X* 2019, watercolor paper, embroidery floss, scanned electron micrograph digital print, hand embroidered, 13" x 16".  
Top: detail.

In 2016, I was awarded the **Lia Cook Jacquard Weaving Residency** at **California College of the Arts**. Again, I used my scanning electron micrographs as my image sources for the computerized Jacquard weavings. But with this series, to leave evidence of my hand on the work, I embroidered areas of each weaving with stitches that resembled the weave structure or, in a nod to my former college major, microbiology forms.

For these latest works, *Nylon Knee Highs 156X* and *Purl 194X*, I embroidered directly on the printed micrographs to interact with the scanning electron microscope images. I feel I've come full circle from my first relationship with the laboratory light microscope—then, examining microorganisms and human tissue—to now using the scanning electron microscope to examine the materials with which I now work: textiles.

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