



**Cheryl Pope**  
**Variations on a Love Theme**

Front and Back cover: *The Wind*, 2022

# Cheryl Pope

## *Variations on a Love Theme*

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Essay by Ksenya Gurshtein  
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**Essay**



## Tapestries of Loose Ends: Thoughts on Cheryl Pope's Variations on a Love Theme

by Ksenya Gurshtein

The first things that strike my eye when encountering Cheryl Pope's wool paintings in *Variations on a Love Theme* are their intense colors and patterns. This is then followed by an awareness of their undulating texture, whose haptic qualities promise to be so rich that I cannot help but rub my fingers together while imagining them. There is an intensity to the physical presence of Pope's works that immediately seduces the senses—viewers evidently regularly comment on a strong desire to touch the pieces; their scale allows one to lose herself easily in them; and I personally can think of few works I've seen recently in any medium that inspire a visceral draw as strong as Pope's.

Once I acclimate to the sensory seduction, which verges in places on Op Art-esque mesmerism, my mind begins to make connections between my mental art-chive and this very historically rooted work. For me, the first point of reference was

Matisse. For Pope herself, it is the Nabis. Pope grew up in Chicago and feels a deep connection to the city's Art Institute, renowned for its holdings of French *fin de siècle* art. She cites as the most profound influence on her current body of work the Nabis group of painters who accentuated flatness, patterns, and areas of intense color in their depictions of nature and domestic interiors in the service of capturing a stylized world depicted as if from memory rather than direct observation.

For her part, Pope has said that in making the wool paintings, she aims to create images of love that elevate vulnerability. "I hope that people feel love, see beauty in vulnerability, humor in attempted articulations, and a joy in the magical love stories that defy all politics and wars."<sup>1</sup> The last clause is surely a comment in part on the fact that so many of the images depict biracial pairs—a romantically involved Black man and White woman and a White mother with a Black baby. Because we live in a country where race is so fraught with meaning, one cannot write about Pope's work without acknowledging the skin colors of her subjects and the rarity with which such combinations of subjects have been depicted in the canon. Yet what I think is equally

<sup>1</sup> Caira Moreira Brown, "In Conversation with Cheryl Pope," *Sixty Inches from Center*, July 13, 2019, <https://sixtyinchesfromcenter.org/in-conversation-with-cheryl-pope/>

important for Pope's emphasis on love and vulnerability is that the work does not offer any further comment on race. Pope's is a vision of skin pigmentation as merely one visual fact of many in a world full of colors and patterns, and she fits that fact into resonant, if also very diffuse, narratives in a way that does not allow race as a social construct to overshadow the individual experience of her real or imagined subjects.

What ultimately keeps me coming back to the work, though, more than the draw of its lushness or dialogue with the canon, are the disjunctures—those things about the individual images and the series as a whole that seem incongruous and give me pause, making me stumble on my way to an easy conclusion about the content of the pictures. At first blush, for instance, Pope's highly patterned, colorful interiors look like they might belong on the pages of a fashionable lifestyle magazine. Yet the life observable inside those interiors is clearly someone's private, idiosyncratic, disheveled existence. The bodies and objects strewn inside point to the messiness, both literal and figurative, of the humans inhabiting these spaces—the things one emphatically does not see

in glossy magazines.

What's more, the colors and patterns of Pope's paintings seem to signal *joie de vivre*, yet a closer look suggests a gap in many of these works between visual sumptuousness and psychological unease. This is particularly evident in the images of a couple whose mostly naked bodies suggest their physical intimacy, but whose positioning and gazes, directed past or away from each other or absent altogether, also hint at emotional distance. The titles of *Room with Two Nightstands*, *Room with Two Sinks*, and *Room with Two Windows* further emphasize the sense that two lives are sharing the physical spaces depicted here while occupying separate emotional worlds.

Another point of disjuncture in these works is the viewer's relationship to the space. Are we standing on the outside, looking past a missing fourth wall to see a room shown in Renaissance single-point perspective? Or are we hovering, like a surveillance drone or the proverbial fly on the wall, inside the scene, watching it from above? Improbably, both perspectives seem to be true at once, as if Pope, who has no formal training in the established Western tradition of representing space and figure, is stitching



together a DIY axonometric projection in which it is somehow possible for the artist and viewer to both be and not be inside the scene and to toggle emotionally between empathic engagement and removed observation.

Perhaps the biggest disjuncture of all is that there seem to be stories attached to these images, yet the stories that Pope's works suggest are highly diffuse. Pope, who previously often worked with text, has acknowledged this in her own writing. In a previously unpublished text about her work from November 2020, she wrote: "[A]s I moved from public to private storytelling, that of my own, text did not hold the complexities of intimacy I was experiencing and seeking to better understand. The thread line was no longer linear and the absence was more important than the presence. Writing felt like I was trying to reduce the complexity of the narrative to merely information. And so I turned to painting for a more sensual act of storytelling." "When we look to read a painting," Pope asks in the same text, "how do we see what is missing, what mystery is birthed from wonder, and where is the opaque heart."

Despite the opaque heart of each individual work, there is also a palpable narrative arc formed by the stark contrast between her earlier pieces in the extended yarn painting cycle and the present body of work. The male and female nudes on striped mats, which were first exhibited at Monique Meloche in 2019 in *Basking Never Hurt No One*, were full of apparent joy and celebration of carnal pleasure. The mood of the present works, on the other hand, is pensive, with strong undertones of loneliness and alienation. Even though most still depict two figures, the romantic partners no longer touch or connect and the mother and child seem separate, the child remaining a faceless abstraction even when it is in the mother's arms. Indeed, even the animals in *Woman with Dog* and *Woman with Swan* seem remote from the humans next to them. The cigarette in the hand of the woman holding the swan is a masterful example of a small detail creating the kind of disjuncture that lies at the core of the mystery and appeal of Pope's work.

Yet I must confess that as a viewer, I initially found the diffuseness of any kind of suggested narrative in the individual works



and the whole series frustrating since I simply could not extract enough story from each work to account for its somber mood. The artist herself discusses the images she creates as an “orchestra of silence,” but does she really want to subject her viewer to the visual equivalent of multiple performances of Cage’s 4’33? She also compares the works to film stills and portraits of a particular feeling culled from personal memory. In interviews, we get glimpses of what some of those memories might be. When she and I spoke, Pope talked openly about the heart-breaking experience of multiple miscarriages, to which the images of mother and child are a response, and the woman in several paintings is clearly a self-portrait that sports the same large panther tattoo on the back as the artist herself. Yet looking at these works, I wanted more. If this is a still, I wondered, then what’s the rest of this movie about? If this is a memory, what’s the bigger story attached to the vivid recollection?

To make sense of this work, I started reading about the state of mind it insistently reminded me of because of the distant gazes of the figures, their aloof-

ness from each other, and the hypnotic effect the works had on my own mind as I got lost in their texture and geometric patterns. There is, it turns out, a surprisingly poetic term in the neuroscience literature: mind wandering. Pope’s figures look to me each lost in their own reverie—a state that often feels like a failure to control the conscious self or a waste of time in a productivity-driven world. However, the philosopher Joshua Shepherd reframes mind wandering: “It is possible that mind wandering is both a failure in one sense and adaptive in another. ...When the mind wanders... agents are distracted from the current task, and performance suffers. But when the mind wanders, it tends to find non-occurrent goals the agent possesses, generating planning that could be beneficial.”<sup>2</sup>

Shepherd proposes a theory that mind wandering is a mode of exploration wherein the mind, without voluntary activation, scans for either solutions to previously articulated problems or for entirely new, more rewarding, tasks to contend with. Framed this way, the story-less, undirected wanderings of an “idle” mind that can lead to a

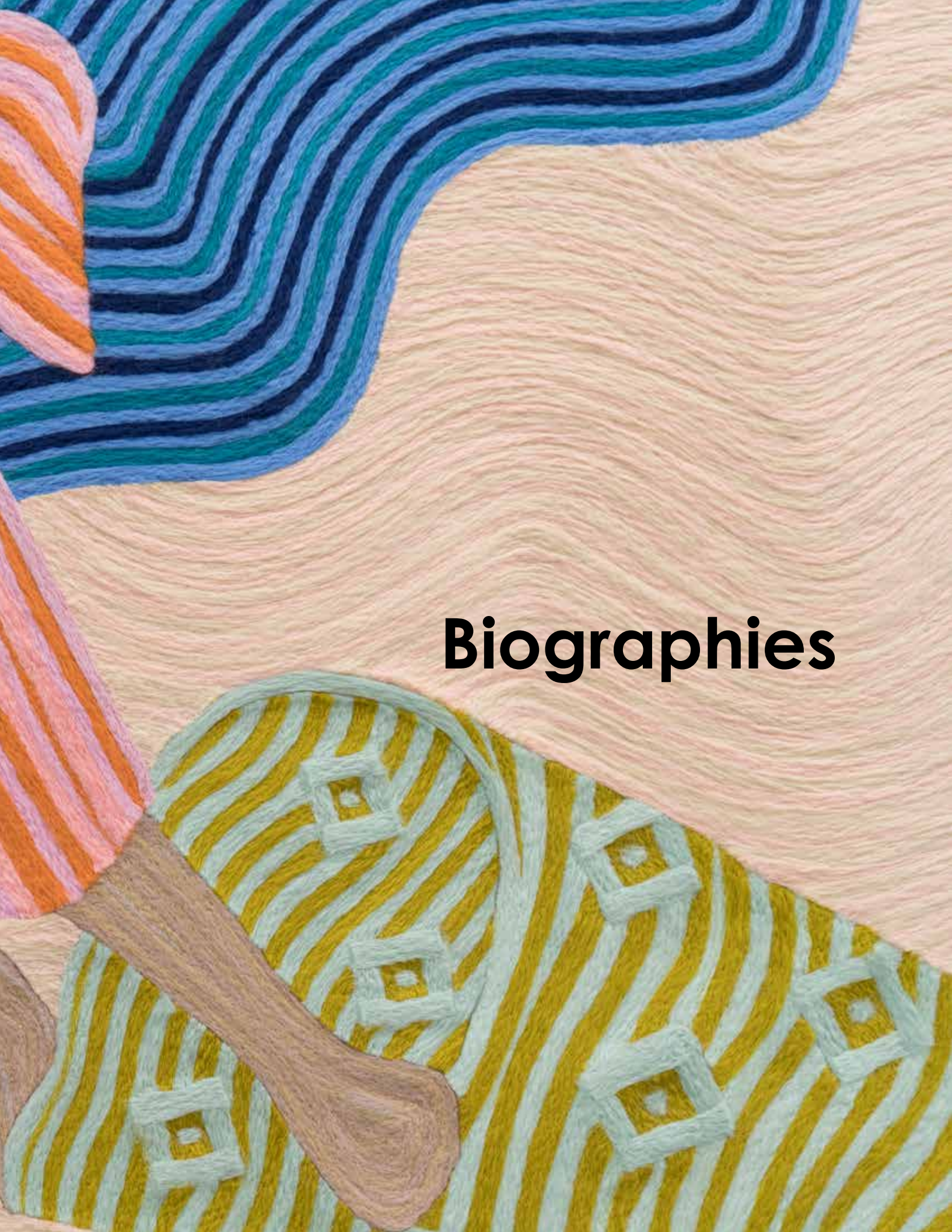
<sup>2</sup> Joshua Shepherd, “Why does the mind wander?,” *Neuroscience of Consciousness*, Volume 2019, Issue 1, 2019, niz014, <https://doi.org/10.1093/nc/niz014>

flash of insight turns out to be an important tool for the perpetual human project of searching for things to do with our lives and ways to give those things meaning.

I've come to see Pope's images as permission-giving encapsulations of this universal experience of being lost in mind wandering. They work for me this way both on the level of the subjects depicted and the very structure of the works. Whose visions are we wandering through? Certainly the artist's. But also perhaps her subjects', either imagined or real. Perhaps these are collective fantasies, so familiar from a repertoire of shared cultural tropes that we feel we know them even if we haven't experienced them ourselves. Some even feel as familiar as my own memories. The strength of the work is that it can sustain all these stories and that it allows us, just like mind wandering, to move in time, as well, since the works remain mum on whether we are seeing someone's actual past, an imagined past, or many different versions of the future. This wide open field of possible realities to wander in search of a flash of personal insight seems to accord with the metaphorical

potential of Pope's remarkable working process. Her medium is made up of thousands of individual strands of hair intertwined to form yarn. Hundreds of threads are then laid down over and over, hour after hour during 15-hour working days, to form a bigger hypnotic whole visible once the viewer steps far enough away. The pieces throb with an awareness and memory of the intense investment of time that went into their creation. Their texture up close is emblematic of the many paths Pope's mind surely wandered as she made the work, the mental paths one takes moving among loose ends, through interwoven threads, and amid the yarns we spin to tell ourselves. Go ahead, Pope's works seem to say on every level, lose yourself in all that. Who knows what you'll find when the whole picture comes back into focus.





# Biographies



**Cheryl Pope** received her BFA and MA in Design from the School of the Art Institute, Chicago, where she is an Adjunct Professor. She is the recipient of several awards and fellowships, including the Public Artist Award, Franklin Works, Minneapolis, MN (2017); Selected Artist, Year of Public Art, Chicago Cultural Center, IL (2017); Mellon Fellowship, Kenyon College, Gambier, OH (2016); and 3Arts Award, Chicago, IL (2015). Pope's work is in the collections of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Joan Flasche Artists Book Collection, Chicago; Seattle Art Museum, WA; Honolulu Museum of Art, HI; Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, CA; Poetry Foundation, Chicago, IL; DePaul University Art Museum, Chicago, IL; Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA; United States Embassy, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic; The Jackson West Memorial Hospital, Miami; and The Ulrich Museum of Art, Kansas. Recent and upcoming exhibitions include *Variations on a Love Theme*, Ulrich Museum of Art (2022); *Unmasking Masculinity*, Kalamazoo Institute of Arts (2022-23); *Can you see me?*, Weinberg/Newton Gallery (2022); *Skin in the Game* (2022); and *The Long Dream*, Museum of Contemporary Art (2020-21).





Photo by Kendra Cremin

**Ksenya Gurshtein** is the Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Edwin A. Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita State University. She holds a Ph.D. in the History of Art from the University of Michigan. Prior to coming to the Ulrich, she held curatorial positions at the National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. and the Skirball Cultural Center, Los Angeles.

Her research and writing interests range widely but are connected by recurring themes: an interest in underrepresented histories and geographic “peripheries”; artistic responses to social and political injustice; feminism and “women’s work”; conceptual and post-conceptual art; and the histories of photography, film, and new media. Her recent curatorial projects at the Ulrich include monographic exhibitions *Zoe Beloff: Emotions Go to Work*; *Lee Adler: A Mad Man Amid the Machines*; *Alice Ayccock in the Studio*; *Gordon Parks: I, too, am America*; *Renée Stout: Ghosts*; *Eija-Liisa Ahtila: The Annunciation | The Bridge*; and *Ann Resnick: Chapter & Verse*, as well as the group exhibition *Love in the Time of the Anthropocene*. Ksenya’s academic research has focused on unofficial, experimental, and conceptual art in state-socialist Eastern Europe. With Sonja Simonyi, she is the co-editor of the recently published essay collection *Experimental Cinemas in State-Socialist Eastern Europe* (Amsterdam University Press, 2022). She has also written as an art historian and critic for exhibition catalogs, edited volumes, and web publications, including, most recently, *Hyperallergic*.

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