

Interests Crisscross in Homespun Art



Gabriele Stabile for The New York Times

Mark Barrow with his wife and collaborator, Sarah Parke, at home in Queens. A show of his new work just opened.

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The artist Mark Barrow and his wife and collaborator, Sarah Parke, live and work in a small apartment in Sunnyside, Queens, with no living room. Or to be more precise, the space where their living room should be is dominated by two manual looms the size of upright pianos, leaving no room for furniture.

The arrangement serves aptly as a metaphor for their relationship: the loom, one of humanity’s first machines, is the engine that pays the young couple’s bills, unites their interests and propels their creative livelihoods. Ms. Parke works in textile design for the merchandising department of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and when she is not making fabrics there, she is making them in her apartment to serve as the primary material for Mr. Barrow’s meticulous textile-based paintings, which are increasingly sought after. Her husband’s easel and paint table sit only a few feet from her looms, sandwiched between them, giving the apartment the look of a demonstration booth at a state fair.

“Friends of ours joke that we have this little mini-Bauhaus set up in our home,” Mr. Barrow said one recent evening, pushing his large horn-rimmed glasses up on his nose.

“Or a sweatshop,” Ms. Parke added, “depending on how you look at it.”

A show of new work by Mr. Barrow just opened at the Elizabeth Dee Gallery, whose exhibition space on West 20th Street in Manhattan was mostly spared by Hurricane Sandy. Even more than the couple's previous works together, the new paintings are artifacts of one of the more unusual working relationships in contemporary art.

What appear to be quiltlike slabs of color over a stippled grayish ground are actually intricately calculated combinations of red, green and blue — the color model that gave birth to the television and computer imagery that pervades the contemporary visual landscape.

Mr. Barrow's fascinations generally run toward mathematical, geometric and psychological models that shape modern life. (When he revisited his high school once and told his teachers he had become a painter, he said, "they were shocked and told me, 'We thought you'd become a chemist.'") But the technological beginnings of the paintings are medieval, if not older.

To make the fabrics that he transforms, Ms. Parke sits at one of her eight-harness Leclerc looms, pumping the treadles with her feet and pulling rhythmically back on a horizontal beam known as a beater bar to push the weft thread securely into the weave.

For the new paintings Mr. Barrow and Ms. Parke came up with formulas to weave fabric with varying ratios of red, blue and green threads. Mr. Barrow mixed red, blue and green paint in the same ratios as those of the fabrics, yielding shades of gray. Then he applied this paint, not all over but — in a technique that has defined his work — in tiny dots, as if pixelating the fabric, using the intersections of the thread in the weave as a grid.



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Elizabeth Dee Gallery

“Together they’ve come up with something that they couldn’t have independently,” said Matthew Higgs, the director and chief curator of the alternative art space White Columns, which first exhibited Mr. Barrow’s work in a 2007 exhibition organized by Clarissa Dalrymple. “The paintings are genuinely quite peculiar objects that I don’t think could have come about another way.”

Karen Rosenberg, reviewing a 2010 show in *The New York Times*, described the work as the offspring of “some wonderfully complicated DNA: Americana, modernist geometry, feminism and Neo-Impressionism, to name just a few strands.”

Mr. Barrow, 30, and Ms. Park, 31, met at the Rhode Island School of Design, but signs early on did not seem to point toward a fruitful collaboration. He went on to pursue an M.F.A. at Yale, studying with the conceptualist pioneer Mel Bochner. She took a job to pay the bills at a home furnishing company known for bright, whimsical throw pillows.

“At some point, though, we kind of realized we were doing the same thing,” Mr. Barrow recalled. “I was painting colored dots all day, and she was filling in colored dots on a computer all day for loom patterns.”

The affinity went even deeper than it seemed. The Jacquard loom, an early-19th-century mechanical loom that helped revolutionize the textile industry, used punch cards to direct the weaves, a precursor of computer software. Mr. Barrow, whose father is a professor of biological and environmental history at Virginia Tech, began thinking about technological progress, fabric and the relationship of both to the history of painting.

This led to a kind of epiphany while looking at the minimalist paintings of Agnes Martin at *Dia:Beacon* in Beacon, N.Y. “Beneath her tiny grids there was another tiny grid — the weave of the canvas,” he said. “It was a really simple idea, but it opened up a lot of other ideas the more I thought about it.”

A visit to the couple’s apartment-studio, in a new building along Queens Boulevard with a CVS pharmacy on the ground floor, suggests how intermingled their obsessions seem to have always been. A baggy-looking early painting made from coarse Belgian linen, hanging on the wall, gives the impression that it was Mr. Barrow, not his wife, who was working in home furnishings. “It’s somewhere between a pillow and a painting,” he said, smiling.

Ms. Parke’s loom, with a bolt of chaotically colored fabric spilling out toward the floor, oddly resembles an industrial printer, the kind that the artist Wade Guyton, now the subject of a career survey at the Whitney Museum of American Art, uses to “paint” on the fine linen he forces through them.

Though neither Ms. Parke nor Mr. Barrow seem to mind being crowded out by their work and their machines, a measure of success is finally promising a little breathing room. They have plans to buy the apartment below theirs to live in, while maintaining the other one as a studio.

“Maybe we can get a couch,” Ms. Parke offered brightly.

Mr. Barrow agreed but, shrugging, added, “We pretty much just work all the time anyway.”