

Elizabeth Carefoot

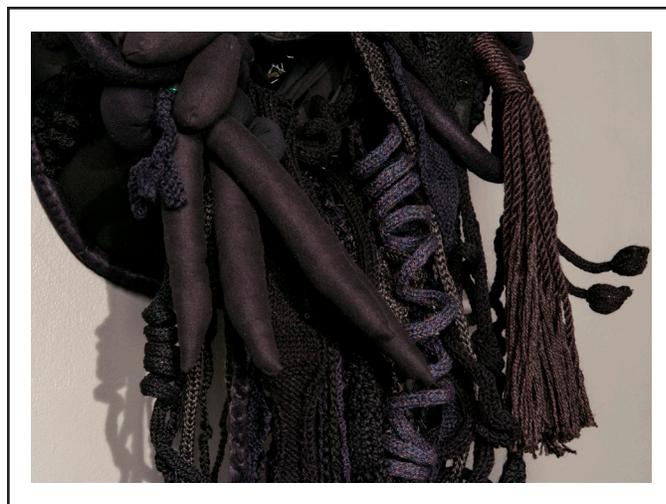
MY TOTEMS & DARK MATTER

Elizabeth Carefoot: Eccentric Abstractions

BY SOPHIE VANDENBIGGELAAR

Artist's Statements

ELIZABETH CAREFOOT



Elizabeth Carefoot: Eccentric Abstractions By Sophie Vandenbergelaar

Elizabeth Carefoot is a multimedia artist who transforms textiles and other materials to ignite the imagination of those who experience her art. Two such sculptures are *My Totems* (2012) and *Dark Matter* (2015) in Surrey Art Gallery's permanent collection. Her formative years and inspiration—ranging from the depths of the sea to outer space—cumulate in these tactile works. Shown together in the exhibition *Connecting Threads* (2018) along with the art of Cora Li-Leger, Barry Goodman, Ruth Scheuing, and others, Carefoot's sculptures contribute to the conversation of the possibilities of fibre art, and the viewer's various relationships to textiles.

Elizabeth Carefoot,
Dark Matter (detail), 2015

mixed fibre materials
(198 x 25 x 34 cm)
SAG 2015.09.01
Gift of the artist

Photograph by SITE Photography



Elizabeth Carefoot, *My Totems*, 2012, knitted natural and synthetic yarns, beads, fringe and miscellaneous materials, (254 cm H x variable width) SAG 2014.13.01. Gift of Cora and Don Li-Leger. Photo by SITE Photography.

Textiles have been a part of human history and culture for thousands of years across the globe. Techniques related to the manufacture, wearing, and design of textiles have evolved alongside technology, laying the foundation for what we now call textile art.¹ As Elena Martinique describes, textile art has gone through a long journey of being housed in renowned institutions to being discounted as a “women’s craft activity” and then being resurrected as high art once again thanks to the feminist movement of the mid-twentieth century. Carefoot embraces this reclaiming of fibre art and postmodern ideals in her sculptures.

Born in 1938, Carefoot’s studied at The University of British Columbia and received a Bachelor’s of Education in Fine Arts. During this time, she mentored under Gordon Smith and cites his painting class as a formative experience in her career. Carefoot also took courses in fabric design, etching, and painting, and then continued her art education at the Emily Carr College of Art and Design. After graduation, she was employed as Assistant Curator of Education at Redpath Museum at McGill University in Montreal for three years. She came to hold various positions at Simon Fraser University, including Graphic Designer and Illustrator, where she stayed for 35 years until retirement. Now a full time artist, she continues to push the boundaries of mixed media art with global and post-medium² condition influences.

Carefoot’s interpretation of Middle Eastern culture and belly dancing are also formative to her work. Belly dancing led to self awareness and a desire to share her ideas with an audience,³ which propelled her into the arts. Carefoot was the Artistic Director and choreographer for the dance troupe Twilight

Caravan for many years. She still teaches dance and lectures on Middle Eastern costume and customs. Her desire to teach and support emerging artists through a variety of mediums, as well as her involvement in the arts community, led to her receiving the Surrey Civic Treasure award in 2014. She has also been recognized with awards by the Arts Council of Surrey in multiple editions of their annual *ARTS* juried exhibition (including a first place award with *Dark Matter* in 2015).

Carefoot’s art practice is informed by a range of sources, from theoretical physics to nature and her travels in Fiji, Barbados, and Wales, where she lived for extended periods, as well as the landscapes of Crescent Beach and Vancouver Island, BC, where she currently resides. Though she identifies mainly as a fibre artist, her materials vary depending on the project, from found objects and rust-dyed cotton to wood and paint. A unifying theme that comes through in her diverse artworks is the importance of play and curiosity. *My Totems* and *Dark Matter* are prime cases of her inquiry and play-based style, where fun and exploration of material are front and centre.

Three vertical lines of stacked, knitted, and fringed yarns, as well as various elements like beads, make up *My Totems*. The three suspended forms are similar in height to a person, giving them an anthropomorphic presence. They have a sense of passed down knowledge and tradition, similar to the textile processes used to construct them. The stacking of “creatures,” or objects, resembles the development of ideas and the passing of time. Each section is imaginative and distinct but works as a whole through a unified colour scheme and repeated materials. The sculpture is given life by

the use of vibrant colours inspired by nature. These colours and textures follow on from a spectrum of postmodern and post-minimal works that reject



Elizabeth Carefoot, *Dark Matter*, 2015, mixed fibre materials (198 x 25 x 34 cm) SAG 2015.09.01. Gift of the Artist. Photo by SITE Photography.

restricted palettes and shapes to create pieces with many intriguing moments for eyes to linger on.

Another related postmodern theme Carefoot's questioning of the hierarchy of material and its relationship to the gallery. Textile art used to be considered more "craft" than fine art, until postmodernism brought all sorts of "everyday" materials in to the gallery, including textiles. One such pioneer of textile art is Robert Morris, whose sculpture *Untitled (Tangle)* (1967) is the sort of work that paved the way for Carefoot's own practice.⁴ With *My Totems*, she sought to construct an homage to the fading coral reefs of the world. With miscellaneous materials, Carefoot creates shapes that don't precisely resemble anything, but are reminiscent of marine life. When observing the work, audiences have associated *My Totems* with sea life, but also with alien life, and have described the sculpture as dream-like.

Dark Matter, which is also knitted, padded, and fringed, is made of comparable materials but gives the impression of being from another world. While both the deep sea and deep space are not clearly visible in everyday life, Carefoot brings them face to face with the viewer on a human-sized scale in familiar materials. Installed against the white wall of the Gallery, they confront the viewer like a mirror, asking people to reflect their associations and ideas back on to them, guided by visual cues. Symbols of sea life are prevalent in visual culture, but to interpret the dark matter of space, an inventive visual language is needed. Again, rejecting minimalism, Carefoot chooses an expressive alternative, "Eccentric Abstraction."⁵ This term, created by Lucy Lippard, describes an art movement that features sculptures that are soft, organic, or

in other ways tactile or eccentric. It reconsiders how material can be made into art, and moves away from the artwork as an image or imprint. Predecessors in this movement, such as Louise Bourgeois and Eva Hesse, redefined the viewer's relationship to materials with similar techniques to those used by Carefoot. A visceral pull and push, contrast of softness and explosiveness, is experienced when viewing *Dark Matter*. It is wound tight, yet unraveling and hanging loose in other parts. Completely black, it feels unwelcoming and foreign, but also bodily in its entangled and falling entrails. Using Eccentric Abstraction methods, Carefoot is able to access an intuitive, and relatable, emotional aesthetic of darkness and turmoil. The knots and darkness embody trauma, twisting around in the subconscious.

Often it is the case that the inner world of the mind is mimicked in nature and art. The knitted loops and sewn-on features in both sculptures show Carefoot's artistic hand, but there's also a spontaneous feel to them, as if they were alive and grew into those forms. When *My Totems* is installed adjacent to *Dark Matter*, the sculptures compliment and contrast each other.

Carefoot continues to explore how materials are given life, whether through painting, sculpture, or assemblage. Both sculptures show Carefoot's ability to create imaginative works that stretch the limits of representation and yet are familiar and affecting. Acknowledging the traditions of textile art, such as knitting and weaving, she builds upon techniques and artistic movements from before her and draws inspiration that come her own previous artworks, leading to an ever-evolving art practice.

Notes:

- 1 Elena Martinique, "The Versatility of Contemporary Textile Art," *widewalls.ch*, July 26, 2016. See: <https://www.widewalls.ch/magazine/contemporary-textile-art-artists>.
- 2 Post-Medium Condition: Refers to the condition of looking past material specificity and using a wide range of materials and found objects in one's art. "Post-medium is the term Krauss uses to describe the discursive field opened by conceptual art's critique of the claim that the ultimate guarantee of artistic autonomy lies in striving for formal unity and a purity of means." See: Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), annotation by Joanna Slotkin (*Theories of Media*, Winter 2004).
- 3 Elizabeth Carefoot, "Civic Treasures Recipient: Elizabeth Carefoot - 2004," City of Surrey, 2014. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OML3Nt44zww>.
- 4 Paul Wood, "Inside the whale: an introduction to postmodernist art," from *Themes in Contemporary Art*, ed. Gillian Perry and Paul Wood (London: Yale University Press, 2004), 10-19.
- 5 Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin Buchloh, *Art Since 1900: volume 2* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2011), 544-548.

My Totems Artist's Statement (2017)**Elizabeth Carefoot**

In *My Totems*, I combine sea creatures and totems. As an avid traveller who has snorkelled most of the world's reefs, I wanted to create a monument to honour the dying reefs and the beautiful forms and colours of marine life found within.

Dark Matter Artist's Statement (2015)**Elizabeth Carefoot**

To create my conceptualization of *Dark Matter* that physicists tell us cannot be seen, but accounts for most of the matter in the universe, I needed to develop an alternate language. I struggled to explore the limits of the descriptive process in order to understand and interpret this idea. I wanted to convey something that pulls you in and pushes you out again—something soft on one hand, yet on the other hand, explosive.

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