

Warren Seelig: Textile per se

Maryland Institute College of Art
Baltimore, MD
Dec. 4, 2009–Mar. 14, 2010
mica.edu

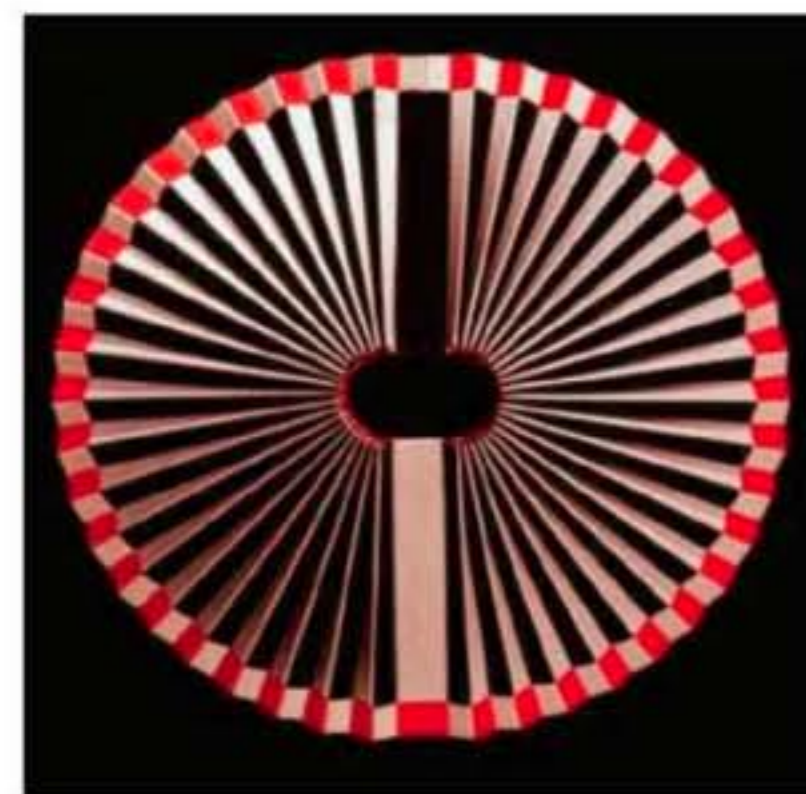
By Sarah Tanguy

For Warren Seelig, understanding the phenomenon of textile has always been primary. Vital to this pursuit has been exploring light, shadow and line as physical entities full of metaphoric potential. In his experimentation with material, he lets individual properties drive the search. Each new step in building up a surface represents a discovery that tells him what to do next, with the goal of releasing and, ultimately, making present the material's chi. As the final form emerges, so too the ideas. His empathy with materials and the importance of connecting to the physical world remain the pillars of his oeuvre.

This retrospective covered nearly four decades, from early woven pieces to recent Shadowfields and affirmed Seelig as one of the most influential and revolutionary

figures in his field and beyond. New ways to think about textile, fabric and weaving abound, while precise construction and unfettered imagination are evident throughout. In addition to the 43 principal works, the show included examples of his critical writing, ephemera and preparatory works, as well as the monumental *Drawing Writ Large*, 2009. A collaboration between Seelig and MICA students, the installation, made from 14,000 translucent and opaque-colored sipping straws, took over Leidy Atrium with its sinewy yet staccato presence.

Seelig explains his 1969 epiphany when he first peered into a loom and watched thousands of intersecting threads grow, like a living skin or membrane, into a cloth. The repetitive process mesmerized him, suggesting infinite expansion beyond the



Top left: *Conjuncture*, 1978, double woven cotton, rigid polyester inserts, 7 x 8 x 1 1/2 in.

Bottom left: *Montego*, 1983, warp-faced grosgrain cotton, aluminum frame, 52 x 50 in.

Right: *Blue Oval*, 1994, stainless steel spokes, frame, lathe-turned counterweight, vinyl-coated mesh, 124 x 92 x 18 in.



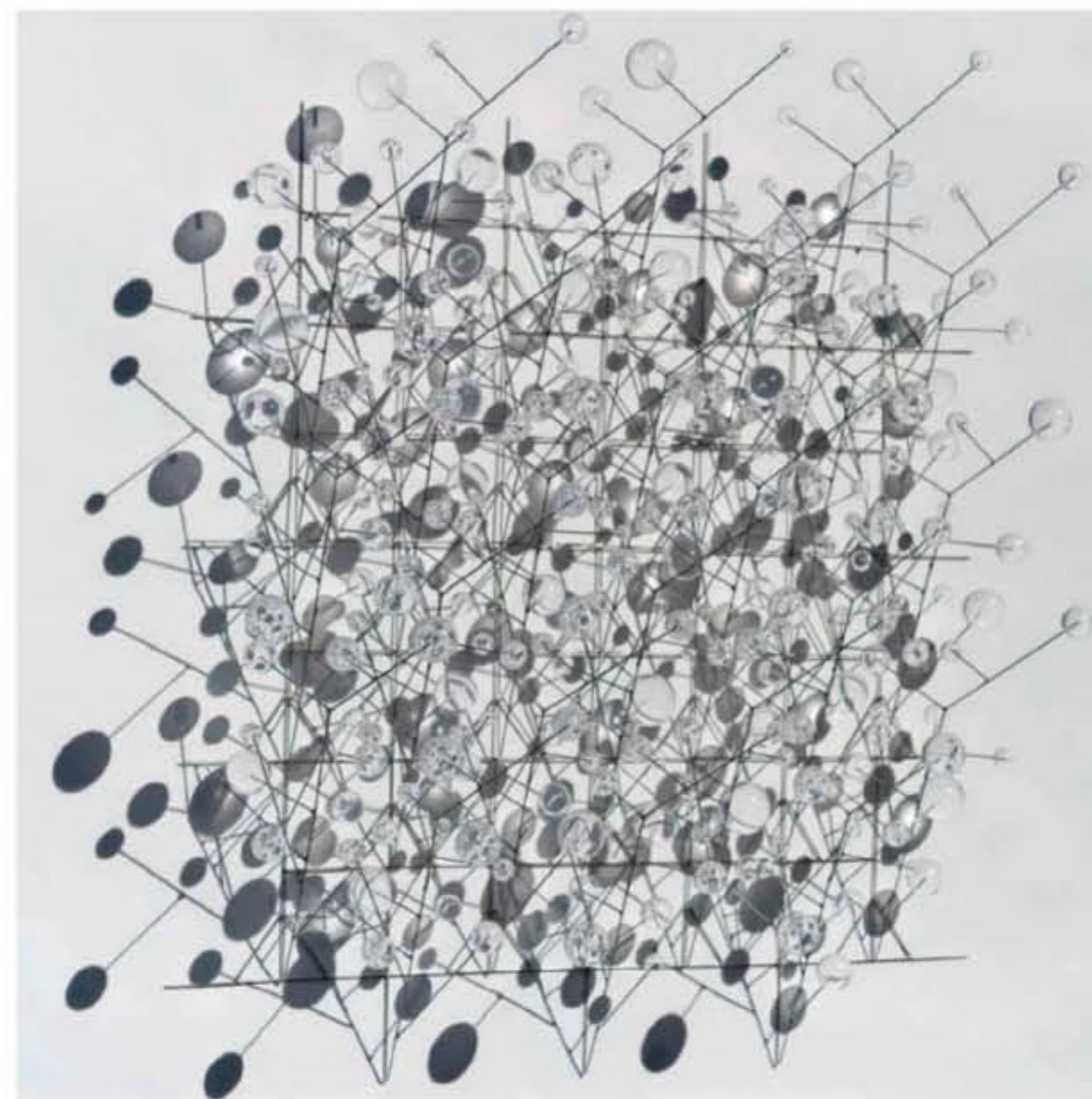
Seelig's empathy with materials and the importance of connecting to the physical world remain the pillars of his oeuvre.



Blue Oval photo Jack Ramsdale / Montego collection of Cranbrook Academy of Art Museum.



Top (detail) and bottom: *Shadowfield Crystal*, 2009, stainless steel, Lucite balls, 24 x 24 x 3 1/2 in.



Photos Jack Ramsdale.

cloth's parameter. Equally inspirational have been an appreciation of the medium's structural and architectural potential from reading Anni Albers's *On Designing* as a student and the childhood memories of being wowed by the machinery of his father's textile business. The exhibition "Objects USA" further opened his eyes to the possibilities of craft art: "I realize now that from the very beginning my concern has been more with textile as image rather than textile as a means of image making."

Already Seelig's Vertical Shields and Cinctures from the late 1970s differ from the roughly textured, emotionally charged handmade hangings dominant at the time. In his double weave abstractions he exploits the play between tension and compression to control form, and creates a

skin and skeleton relation by inserting rigid Mylar strips between the fabric planes. Embedded color assumes new significance in his masterful Ribbon Folds from the early 1980s. In these warp-faced grosgrain works, color bands of varying width result from the complex weave of sewing thread at 180 ends per inch. Light dances along their ribbed surface and brings out their three-dimensionality. So does their diagonal wrapping between two steel rods, which reveals an identical front and back pattern.

Like Joan Livingstone, Anne Wilson and other contemporaries, Seelig made the decision to abandon the loom, first seen in his arcing spoke-and-axle structures from the early 1980s. Intuitively designed, these fluted aerial works evoke the thrill of experimental flying machines. Their skins are continuous strips of monochromatic stained organdy mesh, dyed rip-stop nylon and Tyvek paper, among other materials, tautly stretched over stainless steel, fully visible skeletons. The tension is palpable and endows a sense of life. In some, a lathe-turned counterweight maintains equilibrium.

Returning to the wall, Seelig's Shadowfields expand on the nascent energy fields of his earlier flat works. Their basic dynamic involves interweaving and pruning modular elements that project at different lengths from a trellis. With the play of light and shadow now paramount, the materials are increasingly intangible, from the red shale shards of *Stone Carpet Shadowfield*, 2005, which suggests a meeting between an asteroid field and the Maine shoreline, to the reflecting, refracting Lucite balls in *Shadowfield Crystal*, 2009. In *Shadowfield White Drawing*, 2009, the trellis disappears and the sublime takes over. Shadows bouncing off the white wall gain in substance over the complex interconnected densities of linear steel triangles painted white.

"Textile per se" confirmed Seelig's stature as a major artist, writer, teacher and curator. In work after work, we experienced the endless potential of a textile-based language, the wonder of material transformation and the harmonious balance of process and meaning. Based in Washington, DC, Sarah Tanguy is an independent curator and critic, as well as a curator for the Art in Embassies Program.

+ The catalog is \$40, store.mica.edu.