



PROFILES

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Repeating Patterns

Artist Liz Jaff uses paper to create sculptures that endure—both physically and as memories





New York-based artist Liz Jaff (left) was commissioned in 2018 by the Widmer Theodoridis Gallery in Switzerland to transform a barn on the property. She created and installed a series called *Dust*, where it remained for six months; the individual pieces are sewn together. “Sometimes a space dictates what a piece should be,” she says. Another series, *Hedge* (opener and above), measures 18’ × 16’ 1”, the whole of it composed, as are all her works, of hand-cut paper.

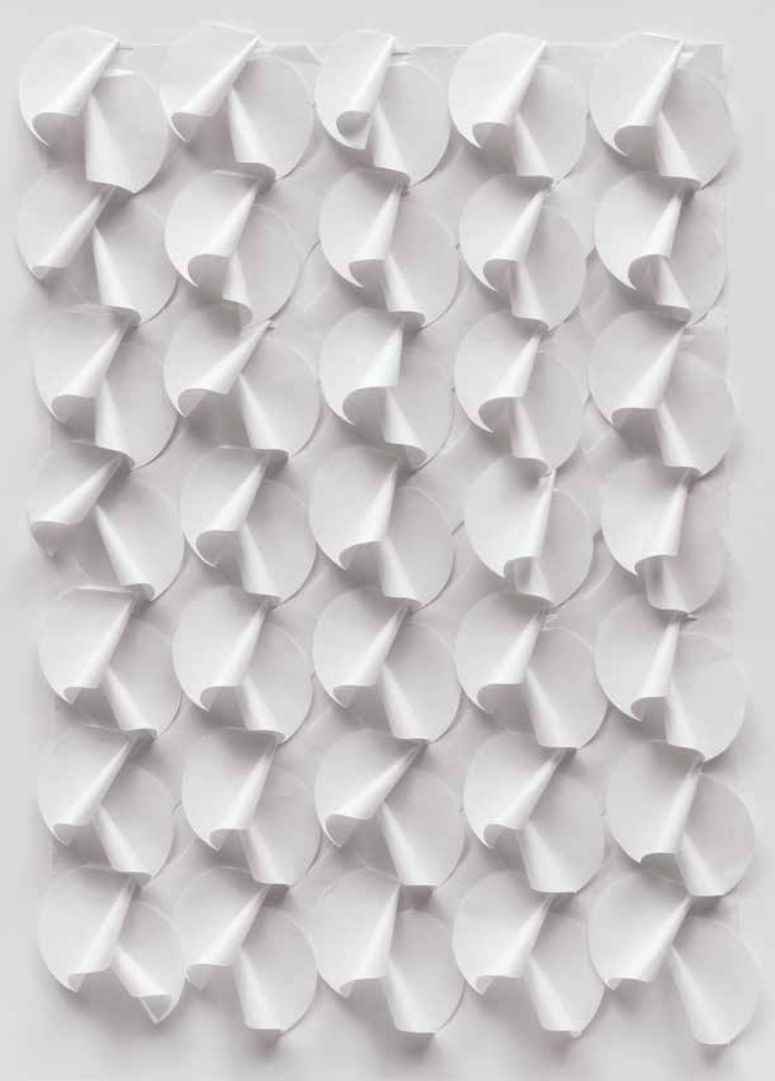
Liz Jaff does something to her completed artworks that likely no other artist anywhere does. Once she has meticulously cut her repeating patterns of white paper, folded them into shapes, sometimes sewing the pieces together with thread, and displayed them, her next act of creation is even more startling.

“After I take the work down from a gallery space, perhaps within a week, I destroy it,” she says. “It never exists again.” Just as the act of creating the works is a kind of meditative ritual she practices in her Brooklyn studio, so, too, is the act of destroying, or what she prefers to call “recycling.” “I’ve conducted fire ceremonies, sometimes

I’ve had cutting ceremonies where I will cut the works into pieces so fine they become dust.”

But the artist, whom many describe as a master sculptor with paper, often then remakes the artworks, even using the original titles. In replicating, mostly by memory, those artworks, Jaff makes subtle changes with each iteration, especially since every element is hand cut. “When I recreate a work, it becomes a different work in that process, though the language of the piece stays the same.”

Jaff is known for her exuberant, startling, and outright beautiful works composed of repeating patterns of white paper; she is almost certainly *unknown* for what she



leaves on the streets of New York. Jaff visits her studio every day, following her “day” job as Senior Preparator for Paper at the Guggenheim Museum, where she oversees their collection of works on paper, including prints, photography, and drawings. Often, while making the walk from the subway to her Brooklyn studio or West Village apartment, she’ll affix elements of a sculpture to a city street pole or tree, a girder or scaffold beam, letting the elements eventually subsume them. To find one of Jaff’s paper sculptures on the street has become a kind of aesthetic New York treasure hunt. “It’s my way of saying that these works can exist anywhere, not just in a white-box art gallery,” she says. “It’s a democratizing of art, of giving these individual folded sculptures a personality.”

As an installation artist, Jaff is commissioned by galleries, foundations, museums, art fairs, universities, and individuals to create site-specific works, chiefly ones composed of elaborately cut and folded pieces of paper configured into a repeating pattern or motif. “I’m interested in formality, minimalist formal structure, geometries,” she emphasizes, “and I also like repetition. The act of repeating something can become a meditation.” To achieve that state, Jaff seeks out quiet, not an easy goal in New York—but she has secured it in a contemplative rented studio workspace. “It was important for me to find that place, to create energy and space around me that allow for these works to emerge. That quiet that surrounds me becomes part of how the works turn out.”

The pieces, some stretching dozens of feet, can be folded up and put away, then unfolded and displayed again. Jaff covets the idea of art that not only repeats, but is also portable. She likens herself to an “art nomad with a suitcase.”

While some might think that works of paper are by nature of the material fragile and ephemeral, Jaff insists that is a myth about the medium. “If you think about objects in the world, some of the oldest surviving ones are objects of paper. Paper can last a very, very long time.”

While Jaff, who earned a BFA in painting from the Rhode Island School of Design, uses various colors in her works, white is what prevails. “White is one of the few colors that doesn’t have preconceived notions about what it’s supposed to represent. Also, white reacts to light and shadow in ways that other colors do not.”

Jaff insists that she is more interested in “creating experiences” than she is in making objects. And in that she is successful, for once a viewer has encountered and experienced one of her paper sculptures, its rhythm, its form, and its quiet presence in a space linger, like a memory that doesn’t fade. ■

Left, top to bottom: The artist uses only the highest-quality unlined acid-free paper, and of differing weights, depending on the scale of the work. The paper elements of Jaff’s 2017 work *Tease* were positioned on board. Her *Pushover*, also on board, dates from 2017. “White, when used in a three-dimensional form, plays with shape and color, especially if natural light is present,” she emphasizes.

"I want my work to feel both ambitious and dreamy, and it's also meant to be quiet," says Jaff. "I want the foldings to look very architectural." Glue, scissors, and surgical scalpels are the chief tools of her art. Her first iteration of *Hedge* dates from 2014.

