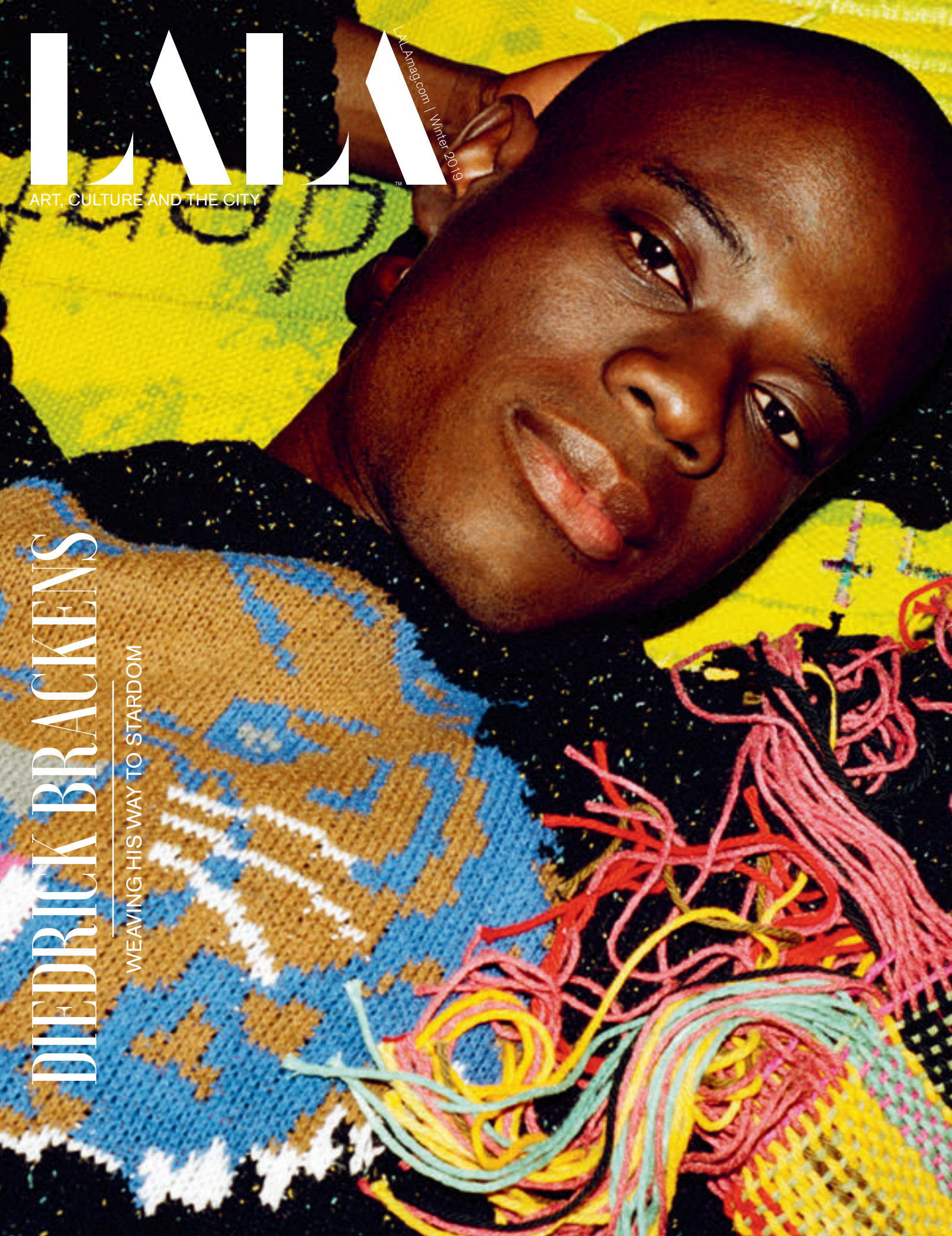


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ART, CULTURE AND THE CITY

# DIEDRICK BRACKENS

WEAVING HIS WAY TO STARDOM



# LAYERS OF THE LOOM

Diedrick Brackens is peeling back historical notions of identity and material with his poetically powerful woven textiles.

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"Diedrick Brackens intelligently integrates a multiplicity of historical European and African methods and images as well as his own subjective responses to being a young, black, gay man in today's America."

—Bruce W. Ferguson

#### IT SEEMS AS THOUGH JUST AS A MEDIUM

has been defeated by a new communications technology—as analog media has been displaced by digital—an artist puts the seemingly outdated medium into play in a new and persuasive manner. For instance, just as 16 mm film appeared to be “over” due to the advent of new technologies and a lack of film supply, the great South African artist William Kentridge began to make the most memorable of all 16 mm films perhaps in history. Or Grayson Perry, a British ceramicist and well-known cross-dresser, won the Turner Prize in 2003 for using classical forms of ceramics to depict contemporary social and personal issues. And, of course, there are hundreds of other traditional skills used by artists and artisans alike continuing older, even antique, practices. These artists defy the conventional understandings of these traditions while utilizing them.

One such artist is Diedrick Brackens, now an LA local, whose work—intricately woven tapestries that comment on social and political ideologies—has earned him the 2018 Joyce Alexander Wein Prize from The Studio Museum in Harlem and was most recently shown in the Hammer Museum’s “Made in L.A. 2018” biennial. Brackens has quietly, but determinedly elevated the skill of weaving, which in the art world, was always assumed to be lesser, even marginal, and considered traditional rather than innovative. But, just as those prejudices and biases are widely employed, artists like Brackens find new practices to make “peripheral” mediums relevant, central and urgent. In one of the most definitive exhibitions to support this argument, “Radical Lace & Subversive Knitting” at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York City in 2007, the curators rightly identified that “Woodturners and carvers, potters and sculptors, knitters, lacemakers and crochet virtuosi are in the forefront of

creativity.” Clearly, such an eruption into a traditional, artistic process is at the heart of what Brackens manifests in his calm, but enduring studio practice. Born in Mexia, Texas and growing up in the state, he was always aware of social and political issues and their implications for himself. One doesn’t need much imagination to think about how those experiences might have played out for an experimental artist in the reddest of states.

Brackens went to the University of North Texas in Denton for his undergraduate degree. It is a school, which, like weaving itself, is perhaps underestimated. It has powerful faculty members and a series of strong graduates, and Brackens’ emerging work was encouraged there. He then went to San Francisco to do graduate work at California College of the Arts. Both the school and being in San Francisco—a hotbed of social and political change—clearly influenced his visual productivity. Some of his earlier weavings made direct political references (such as the “hands up, don’t shoot” image spotlighting the fatal shooting of Michael Brown by a white police officer) and some referred to village communal production with Brackens’ use of the strip-woven kente cloth of Ghana.

Brackens intelligently integrates a multiplicity of historical European and African methods and images as well as his own subjective responses to being a young, black, gay man in today’s America. Using everything from commercial dyes to traditional colorings and both natural and chemical invasions, Brackens works on a small floor handloom. The visual and textual results always seem to be as intimate as his working procedures even when the subject is a large one, like a map of a river system. Some of the work is seemingly abstract, but closer examination usually yields meaning via the material, if not a recognizable image. The familiar handmade textiles reflect the artist’s care



Diedrick Brakens is leading a cohort of young artists who are pushing traditional crafts to the forefront of the contemporary art world. For the Texas-born, LA-based artist, working with cotton is an opportunity to explore the historical implications of the material.



Brackens' woven textiles and tapestries have an assemblage-like quality with disruptions and disjunctions that complicate the potential for a singular narrative. Opposite page: *the bravest sons*, 2018.

and empathetic attitude, evident in each committed work.

One of the subversions in this subtle process that Brackens employs is his purposeful transition of a domestic activity into the public sphere. A bit like the “personal is political,” with its gender overtones, his woven textures have within them breaks, interruptions, discontinuities and other material and visual disruptions, using fine materials joined with commercial cheap fabrics and incompletions of wefts and warps. All these material disturbances are themselves allegories of the disjunctions of identity, whether personal or largely cultural in nature. His narrow strips, determined by the width of the small loom, are sewn together side by side, which prevents a smooth narrative of unity.

The repetitiveness of Brackens' working methods is echoed in the motifs and symbols he uses—flags, bandages and mythical animals, for instance—which are all relatively pervasive in his woven pieces and embedded in visual cultures. Like Jasper Johns' re-use and re-rendering of the American flag, many of Brackens' works lightly, but potently, question

the usual straight and conformist uses of the symbols and materials they incorporate. Cotton in American history is immediately tied to slavery and to its significance as a driving economic force in the post-revolutionary period. “Primarily I work with cotton. I am attracted to the material,” Brackens has said. “It's got a long history that is both beautiful and violent, particularly in the U.S. So for me it is particularly important to employ that material.”

It has been said that Brackens' textiles reference his own biographical past. Actually the works are, like all art, fictional to the viewer. But they are fictional in the same way that all images are, more forceful and effective than reality and its anecdotal status. I liken what Brackens is doing to a kind of poetry. It is not declarative or analytical or even critical on the surface. Yet, by using the handmade imagery, disturbed surfaces and unexpected interruptions as a political gesture, he is creating an unfamiliar vocabulary of dissent and resistance—gentle, but capable of heated and ferocious readings. These works have a deep life as they deepen ours in response.









Experimenting with different processes and natural and chemical dyes, Brackens creates fibers and textiles that often carry vibrant hues.



Brackens uses a small floor handloom to weave his pieces, which creates an intimacy of scale and size in all of his works, such as with *ventriloquist*, 2018, opposite.

