

The Semiotic Transformation of Silk Fiber in Contemporary Soft Sculpture

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ABSTRACT

Silk fiber has become an increasingly significant medium in contemporary soft sculpture due to its rich historical associations and distinctive sensory qualities. In current artistic practice, it is used not only as a material form but also as a carrier of cultural memory, emotional experience, and symbolic meaning. Grounded in Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, this study adopts a qualitative case study approach combined with visual analysis to examine selected contemporary silk-based sculptures across different cultural contexts. It explores how silk fiber moves from sensory materiality to symbolic meaning and ultimately to mythic cultural narrative. The findings indicate that the softness, translucency, and pliability of silk fiber actively engage embodied perception and stimulate psychological projection, evoking themes of belonging, memory, displacement, and resilience. As these sensory experiences accumulate, silk fiber becomes integrated into socially constructed mythic structures, through which abstract ideas such as cultural transmission, healing, and collective identity are naturalized. In this process, soft sculptural works function not merely as spatial objects, but as mediating forms that connect individual experience with shared cultural imagination. By tracing the transformation of silk fiber from signifier to myth, this study contributes to material semiotics and contemporary sculpture studies by proposing a framework for understanding how soft materials generate cultural meaning. It also highlights the potential of silk fiber in constructing effective and culturally sustainable narratives within contemporary art.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sculptors today actively push beyond bronze or stone; they increasingly favor yielding materials that invite direct physical interaction. This specific shift has positioned soft sculpture as a crucial area for art experimentation. Rather than projecting permanence, these pliable forms rely on spatial permeability and tactile engagement to pull viewers into immersive environments. As artists navigate this interactive landscape, silk fiber has re-emerged not just as a traditional fabric, but as a primary medium capable of linking raw sensory input directly to deep cultural resonance (Zhang & Krotova, 2024).

Historically, silk holds a complex dual identity. It functioned as a heavily traded commodity while simultaneously acting as a vehicle for transferring artisanal heritage across early global routes. While its physical weightlessness and slight transparency are well documented, contemporary installation artists are currently exploiting these exact vulnerabilities for entirely new purposes (Yao & Jiang, 2024). Huang and Wang (2025) argue that today's practitioners pull silk far away from traditional weaving; by employing methods like raw biological silkworm growth or architectural suspension, they reshape the fiber into complex spatial environments.

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These structural interventions allow the material itself to speak directly to modern psychological struggles. Viewers encountering these delicate threads often project their own narratives regarding diaspora, the search for a safe haven, and personal recovery.

Scholarly discussions surrounding this fabric generally remain confined to textile history or craft theory. Such approaches tend to isolate the physical thread from its active conceptual role in modern galleries (Huang & Wang, 2025). This research still lacks a clear understanding of exactly how a fragile, tactile strand evolves into a robust vessel for contemporary social messaging. To map this specific operational mechanism, this investigation applies Roland Barthes' semiotic theories to three-dimensional art. This study utilizes his triad of signifiers, signified, and myth to track the material's journey. Instead of treating the fiber as a passive backdrop, this paper argues that silk functions as an active medium of meaning production. By visually breaking down specific cross-cultural sculptures—ranging from intimate enclosures to expansive webs—this study examines how the physical sensation of encountering silk naturally constructs complex ideas about who we are and how we remember our past (Žukauskienė, 2023).

Mapping this trajectory from raw material to established myth reframes how we interpret sculptural language today. Observations from these art practices suggest that soft media do far more than simply look aesthetically pleasing; they actively wire private, individual memories into a broader public consciousness. In an era marked by constant social displacement, these yielding forms appear crucial for maintaining fragile emotional bonds. Ultimately, examining silk through this semiotic lens grounds the discussion of cultural sustainability in tangible, physical encounters, proving that delicate materials can securely anchor our shared histories.

Despite the growing body of research on soft sculpture and textile-based art, existing studies tend to focus on material properties, craft traditions, or historical development. While these approaches provide valuable insights into the aesthetic and cultural significance of textile materials, they often treat silk fiber either as a technical medium or as a historical artifact. As a result, there remains a lack of systematic analysis of how silk fiber functions as a semiotic system within contemporary sculptural practice. In particular, the process through which silk fiber transforms from a sensory material into a culturally embedded narrative—moving from signifier to signified and ultimately to myth—has not been sufficiently theorised. Addressing this gap, the present study applies Roland Barthes' semiotic framework to examine how silk fiber operates as a material language that constructs meaning, identity, and cultural narratives in contemporary soft sculpture.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews the key theoretical and contextual developments related to soft sculpture, material language, and silk fiber as a contemporary artistic medium. It examines existing scholarship from three interrelated perspectives: the expansion of material language in soft sculpture, semiotic interpretations of material transformation, and the cultural significance of silk fiber in both historical and contemporary contexts. While prior studies have provided valuable insights into the sensory, historical, and technical dimensions of textile-based art, there remains a lack of systematic analysis regarding how silk fiber operates as a semiotic system within contemporary sculptural practice. In particular, the process through which material properties are transformed into culturally embedded narratives has not been sufficiently theorised. By synthesising these strands of research, this section establishes the conceptual foundation for applying Barthes' semiotic framework to silk fiber soft sculpture, thereby identifying the critical gap that this study seeks to address.

2.1 Soft Sculpture and the Expansion of Material Language

The origins of using pliable materials to challenge rigid sculptural traditions often point to the early twentieth century; Marcel Duchamp's *The Typewriter Suit* introduced flexible mediums into a field previously dominated by bronze and stone. Han (2022) identifies this specific piece as a historical starting point that effectively launched the integration of yielding fabrics into spatial art. By moving away from monumental permanence and displays of

authority, these works prioritize somatic responses, inviting audiences to process personal narratives through tactile engagement.

Within Eastern contexts, this medium operates beyond mere aesthetics to harbor complex social histories. It frequently intertwines localized craft traditions with gendered narratives and domestic labor. Lu (1996) argues that Chinese practices deliberately occupy a marginal position; rather than erecting enduring monuments, artists weave together spatial storytelling and regional textile techniques. Such boundary-crossing methods allow the resulting objects to hold diverse community voices. Instead of demanding distance like classical statues, pliable resources—whether raw linen, animal hides, or delicate silk—actively encourage viewers to project their own physical vulnerabilities onto the artwork. Dang (2021) highlights how this inherent 'softness and friendliness' dissolves rigid gallery boundaries, closing the psychological gap between the spectator and the physical object. Consequently, the fabric operates as a direct channel for human empathy rather than a passive visual display.

Most current literature heavily prioritizes these sensory or formal traits. However, what remains insufficiently examined is the precise mechanism turning these yielding textiles into structured, culturally legible signs within modern discourse. Recent public sculptures frequently rely on pliable structures to facilitate community recovery. Investigating urban interventions, Zhang et al. (2022) demonstrate that non-threatening, fabric-based forms generate an 'inclusive space atmosphere'; this specific tactile approach offers tangible psychological grounding to civic audiences. Because practitioners continually invent new structural applications for textiles, decoding exactly how these fibers accumulate social meaning drives ongoing critical inquiry.

2.2 Material Transformation and Semiotic Perspectives

Current gallery ecosystems treat physical matter as much more than a structural necessity; raw components actively record specific historical tensions and institutional frameworks. Lange-Berndt (2015) argues against viewing these elements purely as passive visual tools. Instead, the author positions artistic matter as an active participant that embeds physical trauma, civic ideology, and complex social codes directly into the final object. Within pliable three-dimensional works, this physical vocabulary operates on two distinct fronts: it channels raw emotional vulnerability while simultaneously anchoring broader cultural narratives. Crucially, these specific semantic functions do not exist in isolation; they continually mutate as gallery visitors physically or psychologically engage with the pliable forms.

To decode this interactive process, Barthes (1957) offers a robust three-tiered framework comprising the signifier, the signified, and the overarching myth. This study adopts this triad to trace the material's conceptual evolution. When artists utilize delicate silk threads, the raw physical presence acts as the foundational 'signifier.' Spectators immediately link this tactile evidence to deeper, unspoken realities—the 'signified'—such as domestic isolation, marginalized gender narratives, or ancestral displacement. As these individual readings accumulate, the fabric eventually hardens into a comprehensive 'myth' surrounding human resilience and community heritage. Addressing this mechanism directly, Barthes (1967) states, 'The aim of semiotics is to research the functioning of sign systems, whether in social life or in works of art.' This suggests that critics should evaluate physical fibers through their active role in shaping social reality rather than judging them solely on formal aesthetics. Translating this specific linguistic theory directly onto three-dimensional, yielding textiles remains surprisingly rare in current scholarship, making the precise mechanics of silk's cultural encoding a critical site for further investigation.

2.3 Silk Fiber as Cultural Symbol and Contemporary Medium

Long before it entered modern galleries, silk operated as one of humanity's earliest mass-produced natural textiles; its cultural weight has consistently eclipsed its physical fragility. Rather than serving purely utilitarian functions, the material actively anchored early Chinese societal structures. Zhang (2011) highlights how historical texts and visual arts frequently deploy these delicate threads to negotiate imperial authority, natural cycles, and gendered domestic labor. This material evolution can be observed in preserved imperial artifacts. Distinct technical advancements—such as the intricate weaving of Han Dynasty brocade, specialized Tang tribute fabrics, or later Qing kesi tapestries—did not merely improve fabric durability. Instead, as Chen (2008) observes, these evolving production methods physically wove dominant political hierarchies and ethical codes directly into the textile.

Today, this extensive historical significance directly informs globalized artistic exchange. Historical trade arteries like the original Silk Road, alongside contemporary geopolitical frameworks such as the Belt and Road initiative, continually rely on this specific fiber to project overarching narratives of cross-cultural integration. Consequently, artists operating today inherit a medium deeply saturated with transnational history. Contemporary art practices frequently appropriate traditional visual motifs while simultaneously disrupting established material hierarchies to invent entirely new aesthetic languages (Qin, 2011; Li & Liu, 2022). Yet, art historians evaluating these modern sculptural interventions tend to retreat into familiar craft histories or strict textile analyses. While researchers diligently document the weaving techniques, critics rarely apply a rigorous semiotic lens to evaluate how three-dimensional, yielding silk structures actively generate meaning within contemporary spaces. This specific analytical gap obscures the precise mechanism driving silk's current effectiveness as a powerful cultural signifier.

2.4 Art Intervention, Affect, and Community Contexts

Civic spaces currently face increasing social fragmentation and widespread emotional fatigue, prompting practitioners to reconsider the utility of public sculptures. Rather than merely beautifying plazas, current civic projects actively attempt to regulate collective psychological stress and stitch fractured neighborhoods back together. Yielding materials prove especially potent here, because these pliable structures physically invite human touch, they operate as highly effective therapeutic tools within urban environments.

Clinical perspectives on aesthetics suggest this recovery happens in distinct stages. Hou & Liu (2025) map out a specific trajectory—moving sequentially from basic understanding, through cognitive processing, and culminating in deep empathy—where the physical substance of the artwork drives the entire emotional arc. Examining this specific mechanism, Zhang (2016) finds that highly textured fiber sculptures directly trigger somatic memories of warmth, offering immediate physiological comfort to distressed populations. Building on this somatic link, Li and Chen (2018) demonstrate how varying fabric densities and dye palettes unlock dormant autobiographical memories. The resulting encounter generates a secure, empathetic holding environment for the spectator.

Because silk bypasses typical psychological defenses, it functions as a highly adaptable intervention tool within marginalized or traumatized communities. The material lacks the imposing rigidity of traditional bronze monuments; instead, its physical vulnerability encourages hesitant residents to physically enter and claim the installation space. When practitioners weave these threads into large-scale, accessible enclosures, they encourage a shift from passive observation to active, shared participation. This communal interaction contributes to reshaping local social dynamics, providing a flexible framework for ongoing cultural renewal. Despite observing these strong participatory outcomes, critics still struggle to explain exactly how a simple biological thread reliably manufactures such intense civic bonding.

Previous studies successfully isolated the historical pedigree of textiles or measured the clinical outcomes of tactile art. However, weaving these isolated observations into a comprehensive framework that connects raw material properties directly to cultural narrative construction proves challenging. This study seeks to address this fragmentation. By mapping Roland Barthes' semiotic progression directly onto modern art outputs, our analysis bridges the critical gap between initial physical sensation and complex social storytelling. Tracing the thread's exact journey from a basic sensory trigger to a fully realized, socially embedded myth clarifies the precise methods contemporary artists use to construct durable spaces of belonging and collective memory.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology to examine how silk fiber operates as a medium of cultural signification in contemporary soft sculpture. By integrating visual analysis of selected artworks with Barthes' semiotic framework, the study investigates how the physical properties of silk are transformed into culturally embedded meanings. This approach enables a systematic examination of the transition from material form to symbolic and mythic structures, positioning silk fiber as an active material sign within contemporary sculpture.

3.1 Semiotics Theory Perspective

Roland Barthes' theory of signification anchors the analytical framework of this study. Barthes famously argues that humans construct reality by linking a physical 'signifier' directly to a conceptual 'signified.' Moving beyond this basic linguistic pairing, his second-order concept of 'myth' explains how repeated symbolic forms eventually naturalize specific ideologies. Within this expanded theoretical layer, ordinary gallery materials shed their neutral status; they actively absorb ideological weight and function as durable containers for shared community histories.

To explore how silk fiber soft sculptures generate meaning in contemporary art, this research applies Barthes' semiotic model using a three-step analytical path: signifier → signified → myth, forming a conceptual bridge between material perception and cultural narrative.

Table 1. Semiotic Analytical Framework

Stage	Description	Key Focus
Signifier	Physical and sensory qualities of silk fiber	Softness, translucency, tactility
Signified	Symbolic meanings derived from perception	Memory, identity, fragility
Myth	Cultural narratives constructed from meaning	Healing, diaspora, ecology

This layered model allows the research to trace how sensory experiences with silk fiber evolve into culturally embedded meanings within artworks.

3.2 Research Framework

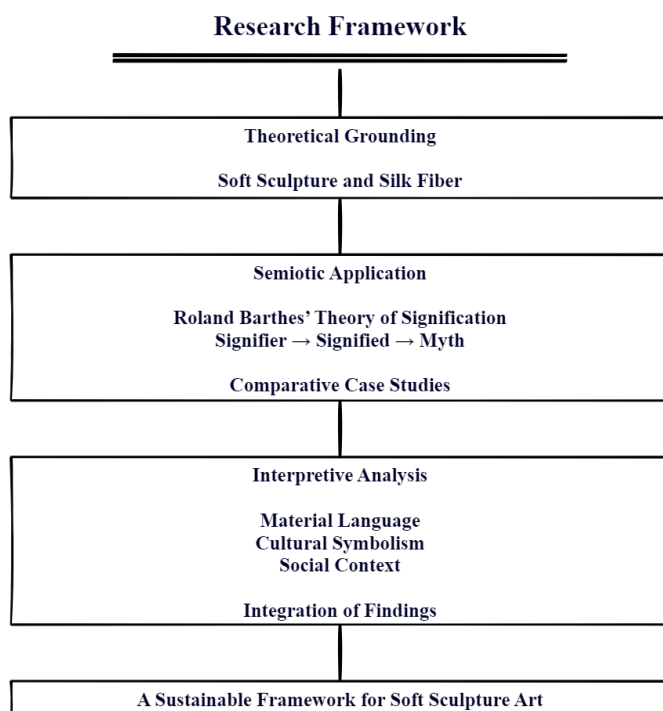


Fig.1. Research Framework for the Symbolic Analysis of Silk Fiber in Soft Sculpture

This analytical framework deliberately avoids treating physical textiles and abstract theories as separate entities. Instead, qualitative observations are directly integrated with Roland Barthes' semiotic model in the analysis of actual art practices. This specific methodology maps a dynamic progression rather than presenting a static list of formal traits. The analysis first examines the raw, physical properties of the fiber to understand its actual behavior as a sensory signifier. The investigation then shifts to interpret the immediate psychological associations that audiences project onto the yielding fabric. Culminating this process, the analysis articulates how individual reactions coalesce into broader mythic narratives embedded within the gallery space. Approaching the artworks through this sequence

ensures that fragile physical threads remain visible within abstract cultural theory. It effectively wires the literal tactile encounter directly to the broader ideological shifts defining modern artistic discourse.

4. From Signifier To Myth: Silk Fiber In Contemporary Soft Sculpture

Building upon the preceding theoretical discussion, this section examines four contemporary artists—Liang Shaoji, Ann Hamilton, Do Ho Suh, and Kiyomi Iwata—whose practices centre on silk-based soft sculpture across East Asia and North America. Despite divergent artistic languages and cultural contexts, each artist elevates silk fiber beyond a mere material medium, transforming it into a site where sensory perception, symbolic connections, and cultural narratives converge.

Applying Roland Barthes' triad directly to these sculptures clarifies how this material transformation occurs. The initial tactile encounter with the yielding thread acts as the primary signifier. Spectators naturally project deeper signified meanings onto this fragile barrier, frequently surfacing private anxieties regarding forced relocation, diaspora, or the search for sanctuary. As these individual psychological projections accumulate within the gallery, the artworks solidify into overarching cultural myths. They effectively naturalize broader contemporary struggles, ranging from ecological symbiosis to collective trauma recovery.

Evaluating these cross-cultural sculptures side-by-side demonstrates exactly how yielding textiles shed their traditional domestic baggage. Tracking the thread's journey from a tangible spatial intervention to a fully embedded ideological narrative exposes the precise tactics sculptors use to reinvent historical fibers as an urgent contemporary language.

4.1 Signifier: Sensory Language of Silk Fiber as Material

Barthes (1967) defines the "signifier" strictly as the perceptible form of a sign; it is the raw material presence that our senses register long before cognitive processing begins. Applying this baseline to contemporary spatial art, meaning originates entirely from embodied perception rather than abstract thought. The physical reality of silk—its distinct weightless drape, yielding texture, and slight transparency—builds a unique tactile vocabulary. Rather than projecting the distant monumentality of carved stone or cast bronze, these delicate strands demand close physical proximity, engaging the viewer through sheer vulnerability and immediate sensory contact.

Liang Shaoji isolates this exact sensory activation in *Bed/Nature Series No.10*. Instead of manually weaving the fabric, the artist allows live silkworms to deposit raw threads directly across a discarded metal bed frame, gradually coating the industrial object in a living surface. Visually, the sharp collision between the cold, rigid copper wire and the highly vulnerable biological filaments forces the audience to actively imagine the tactile sensation of touching both materials. As the threads slowly accumulate, the previously dead structure assumes a breathing, organic presence. Operating purely as a signifier at this stage, the installation confronts the audience with undeniable physical fragility and raw texture long before any conceptual reading takes hold.

Ann Hamilton relies on the exact same material responsiveness to govern the massive architectural environment of *The Event of a Thread*. By tethering suspended sheer curtains to a field of active swings, Hamilton ensures the fabric physically reacts to the shifting weight of seated participants. As people move, massive waves of cloth continually oscillate overhead. Because the fiber is extremely lightweight and permeable, it visually maps invisible air currents and synchronizes the crowd into a shared bodily rhythm. In this dynamic setup, the yielding fabric functions as an active signifier; its sheer permeability directly orchestrates how the public physically navigates and feels the surrounding room.



Fig.2. Bed/Natural Series No.10, Liang Shaoji, 1993-2018, burnt copper wire, silk and cocoons, 11 (H) x 160 x 40 cm (in 8 pieces).
Source: <https://www.shanghartgallery.com/galleryarchive/work.htm?workId=102340>



Fig.3. The Event of a Thread, Ann Hamilton, 2012, silk fabric, variable installation size.
Source: <https://www.clubantietam.com/2013/03/01/ann-hamilton-the-event-of-a-thread-at-the-park-avenue-armory/>

Observations from these spatial interventions confirm that the fabric functions first and foremost as a sensory catalyst. The distinct pliability and transparent surface of the thread establish the absolute foundation of meaning-making in these works. Long before a viewer decodes the material as a complex cultural myth, they process it as an affective physical presence that immediately triggers perceptual awareness. Ultimately, this unavoidable physical encounter provides the mandatory grounding required to build higher-level symbolic narratives.

4.2 Signified: Constructing Belonging, Identity, and Memory

Barthes (1972) defines the “signified” as the conceptual layer where culturally mediated ideas attach to a raw signifier. Once audiences physically register the material, their own historical backgrounds and collective memories dictate the interpretation. Consequently, sculptors specifically harness the fabric's loaded background to explore complex psychological struggles, often focusing on the search for a safe haven or the trauma of relocation.

This conceptual projection can be observed clearly in Do Ho Suh's monochromatic sculptures. By fabricating life-sized replicas of his former residences entirely from translucent fabric, the artist forces the material to act as a spatial archive. Visitors walking through these ghostly corridors experience a physical threshold suspended between actual presence and distant memory. Here, the sheer fragility of the walls directly mirrors the inherent instability of living a transnational existence. Instead of merely viewing cloth, the audience reads the conceptual membrane as a direct translation of cultural dislocation and deep nostalgia.

Kiyomi Iwata tackles this same symbolic dimension by utilizing kibiso—the coarse, irregular outer fibers that silk factories typically discard. Elevating this marginalized waste product allows Iwata to effectively challenge traditional aesthetic hierarchies. Her tightly compressed, folded structures physically embody a sense of stifled silence and

withheld historical memory. Because kibiso is dense and visually resistant, the medium itself becomes a powerful metaphor for the suppressed narratives surrounding her specific Japanese-American heritage. The rough texture forces viewers to recognize the painful reassembly of a fractured identity.



Fig.4. Home Within Home, Do Ho Suh, 2014, silk fabric, stainless steel, 744 x 827 x 805 cm
Source: <https://mymodernmet.com/do-ho-suh-home-within-home-new/>



Fig.5. Silkworm Pupa, Kiyomi Iwata, 2014, kibiso, 64x140x18cm,
Source: https://blackbird-archive.vcu.edu/v14n2/gallery/iwata_k/evolution.shtml

These specific art decisions confirm that the physical thread ultimately surrenders to conceptual depth. The raw tactile substance essentially disappears, replaced by complex mental constructs regarding borders, personal trauma, and survival. Establishing this deeply personal, associative layer provides the absolutely necessary foundation for the subsequent semiotic stage, where these individual meanings harden into universally recognized cultural myths.

4.3 Myth: Silk Fiber as a Cultural Narrative Mechanism of Contemporary Expression

Barthes (1957) positions "myth" as a second-order system where established signs are re-articulated within broader ideological narratives. Instead of inventing completely new definitions, this mechanism takes deeply personal, historically constructed associations and hardens them into seemingly universal, self-evident truths. Once a yielding fabric enters this final stage, private memories regarding displacement or resilience stop operating as isolated experiences; they mutate into broadly accepted social realities articulating collective identity and ecological philosophy.

Table 2. Symbolic Structure of Silk Fiber Soft Sculpture Artists

Artist	Signifier (Sensory Presentation)	Signified (Symbolic Meaning)	Myth (Cultural Narrative)
Liang Shaoji	Silk textures, white tonality, organic accumulation over metal surfaces	Natural symbiosis, life cycle, corporeal fragility	“Silkworm Cosmology”: Naturalized vision of ecological interdependence
Do Ho Suh	Translucent silk architecture, monochromatic palette, walkable domestic structures	Displacement, fluid identity, migratory nostalgia	“Portable Homeland”: Naturalisation of migratory belonging
Ann Hamilton	Flowing silk curtains, participatory motion, immersive spatial responsiveness	Collective empathy, sanctuary, temporal flow	“Empathic Architecture”: Naturalized image of collective restoration
Kiyomi Iwata	kibiso silk, coarse texture, compressed asymmetrical forms	Marginal identity, suppressed memory, material revaluation	“Silent Resistance”: Naturalized narrative of marginal resilience

This ideological shift can be observed in Liang Shaoji’s ongoing experiments with live silkworms. The initial tension between industrial copper wire and fragile biological threads eventually establishes a comprehensive ecological cosmology. Private observations regarding the insect’s life cycle naturally expand into a sweeping narrative of organic symbiosis. By positioning yielding filaments against rigid metal, the artist successfully normalizes a specific Eastern ecological ontology, presenting human intervention and natural growth as completely inseparable forces.

Do Ho Suh’s monochromatic structures force a comparable evolution. While a translucent corridor initially triggers individual nostalgia for a lost residence, the sheer scale of the installation elevates this feeling into a comprehensive myth of the “portable homeland.” The suspended fabric no longer simply represents one man’s past; it effectively naturalizes the grueling condition of spatial mobility, framing transnational migration as a standard existential norm for the global era.

Moving from private diaspora to public congregation, Ann Hamilton utilizes sheer curtains to manufacture a myth of collective healing. The physical rhythm of the oscillating fabric actively orchestrates a ritualized spatial encounter. Consequently, the installation dictates that communal presence itself acts as a restorative agent. Shared physical vulnerability, mediated entirely by the shifting textiles, is powerfully reframed as the structural foundation for social cohesion.

Furthermore, Kiyomi Iwata pushes coarse kibiso fibers far past their status as industrial waste, constructing a durable myth of silent resistance. Elevating this rejected byproduct deliberately normalizes a cultural narrative where suppressed ethnic histories and hybrid identities serve as ultimate sites of strength. The compressed, asymmetrical forms function directly as an ideological manifesto regarding cultural persistence and the systematic exclusion of minority voices.

Evaluating these four distinct art approaches confirms that raw textiles ultimately abandon their passive descriptive roles to actively dictate social narratives. The tactile substance stops merely suggesting ideas; it explicitly governs how contemporary audiences comprehend fluid identity, ancestral continuity, and community survival. Ultimately, these spatial interventions prove that delicate material language possesses the inherent capacity to permanently naturalize complex cultural ideologies.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Material Affect and the Embodied Dimension of Meaning

Tracking silk fiber from a raw physical encounter to a naturalized ideological construct reveals how yielding materials shape human affect. Rather than operating as passive visual stimuli, the distinct bodily affinity of

silk—specifically its permeability and yielding drape—guides a perceptual trajectory. Viewers do not simply look at these sculptures; they physically engage with the material properties, a process that leads from immediate sensation toward more complex conceptual interpretation. Evaluated through clinical aesthetic frameworks, this spatial intervention does not deliver direct psychological "healing." Instead, silk fibers function as affective mediators, creating a secure physical environment that encourages audiences to reflect on vulnerability, memory, and the search for belonging.

5.2 Cultural Belonging and Participatory Imagination

Individual artistic practices extend beyond isolated works to influence broader cultural contexts. When practitioners such as Ann Hamilton or Do Ho Suh engage with silk fiber, they transform private narratives into shared spatial experiences. The portability of translucent architectural structures, combined with the responsiveness of suspended textile environments, suggests that silk-based materials can reshape how audiences experience space collectively. These works do not merely represent themes of migration; they contribute to the normalization of mobility and transnational identity within contemporary society. Through the construction of temporary yet immersive environments, silk fiber becomes a medium through which new forms of collective empathy and cultural belonging are articulated.

5.3 Implications for Soft Sculpture and Material Semiotics

Mapping Barthes' semiotic progression onto silk fiber soft sculpture reconsiders the role of material within sculptural practice. This study demonstrates that silk fibers extend beyond aesthetic function to operate as active agents in cultural meaning production. The transition from tactile signifier to cultural myth indicates that material qualities such as softness and translucency participate in the construction of symbolic and ideological frameworks. Consequently, contemporary practice may benefit from a more critical awareness of the semiotic potential of textile materials. This perspective also suggests that historically marginalised, domestic materials possess the capacity to sustain cultural narratives and contribute to the formation of collective memory.

6. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that silk fiber operates as more than a physical material in contemporary soft sculpture; it functions as a critical medium through which meaning is constructed. By applying Barthes' semiotic framework, the analysis traces how silk fiber evolves from a sensory presence into symbolic meaning and ultimately into culturally embedded myth across diverse artistic contexts.

This transformation follows a distinct trajectory. The tactile permeability and yielding drape of silk initiate an embodied encounter, prompting viewers to engage with the material at a sensory level. This immediate physical experience then gives rise to personal and culturally situated interpretations, often associated with memory, displacement, and identity. As these interpretations accumulate, they are elevated into broader cultural narratives, through which silk fiber contributes to the naturalisation of concepts such as ecological interdependence and diasporic belonging. In this sense, silk fiber does not merely support meaning—it actively shapes contemporary social imagination.

By mapping this progression from signifier to myth, this study contributes to material semiotics by demonstrating how sensory experience and cultural narrative are structurally interconnected. The findings suggest that soft materials, particularly silk fiber, possess a unique capacity to operate simultaneously as perceptual, symbolic, and ideological agents within contemporary art.

At a practical level, this analysis challenges the traditional dominance of rigid and monumental materials in sculptural practice. It indicates that material vulnerability, tactility, and permeability can serve as alternative modes for constructing cultural meaning and fostering collective engagement. Rather than functioning as secondary or decorative elements, silk fibers emerge as structurally significant components in shaping spatial experience and emotional resonance.

Future research may further investigate how silk fiber operates across different cultural and social contexts, particularly in relation to audience reception and interpretation. Examining how viewers negotiate, reinterpret, or resist these material narratives will provide deeper insight into the role of soft sculpture in the ongoing construction of cultural identity in contemporary society.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors agree that this research was conducted in the absence of any self-benefits, commercial or financial conflicts, and declare the absence of conflicting interests with the funders.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Zhang Yingfang: Conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, writing, original draft preparation. Sharmiza Abu Hassan: Supervision, validation, writing, review, and editing. Liza Marziana Mohammad Noh: Supervision, validation, writing, review, and editing.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this work, the author used ChatGPT (OpenAI) to improve the clarity and language quality of the manuscript. After using this tool, the author reviewed and edited the content as necessary and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The authors declare that this research did not involve human or animal subjects. The research is based on qualitative visual analysis of publicly available artworks and archival materials. No experimental procedures or human participant data were involved.

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