

# Hana Miletić: Soft Services

April 4–August 4, 2024, Reference Gallery



MIT List Visual  
Arts Center

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*Materials*, 2021–22. Pale blue repurposed mercerized cotton, recycled nylon, repurposed plastic, rose-pink organic raw wool, variegated blue organic silk, gauze yarn, 7½ × 8¼ × 1¾ in. (19 × 21 × 2.4 cm). Courtesy the artist and The Approach, London. Photo: GRAYSC

Front cover:  
*Materials*, 2023. Carrot-orange organic linen, mint-green organic wool, metal wire, pale mint repurposed polyrattan, 46¾ × 17¼ × 10¾ in. (118 × 44 × 27 cm). Courtesy the artist; The Approach, London; and LambdaLambdaLambda, Prishtina, Kosovo, and Paris. Photo: GRAYSC

Since 2015, Hana Miletić has worked almost exclusively with hand-produced textiles, developing several ongoing bodies of work that subtly relate forms of historically undervalued labor, like the “women’s work” of weaving, to other narratives of social and economic struggle.

The shaggy, polychrome tapestries of her *Felt Workshops* (2017–ongoing), for example, are the collective product of a community-oriented social practice in which the artist collaborates with other female-identifying first-generation immigrants to Brussels (Miletić’s home since the early 1990s). Others, like her signature hand-loomed *Materials* series (2015–ongoing) and a related group of manually manipulated Jacquard woven *Softwares* (2018–ongoing), are conceived in relation to street photography. The idiosyncratic sizes, shapes, and color schemes of the delicate and bright *Materials* weavings are based on Miletić’s snapshots of stopgap repairs to buildings and other objects in urban public space. The artist’s abiding interest in such provisional interventions stems from her belief they are both “subjective gestures of care” and bellwethers for local issues.

Miletić’s first solo show at a US museum premieres several new *Materials* pieces that relate to maintenance to the List Center

building and development in the nearby East Cambridge neighborhood. These new works are presented alongside a focused selection of recent pieces that attest to her sustained material inquiries into care work, maintenance work, and the shifting relationships between manual labor, reproductive labor, and automation. *Soft Services*, the exhibition’s title, is a term borrowed from facilities management. As opposed to “hard services” like plumbing and electrical systems, soft services are not permanent parts of a physical structure. Instead, they are provisioned by workers over time, commonly including cleaning, waste management, catering, security, housekeeping, and landscaping. Soft services, a minor (but still essential) category akin to care work and reproductive labor, resonates with the temporary interventions indexed in Miletić’s art. These quotidian repairs to the surface of things, the artist suggests, are a vital practice of inhabiting and shaping a shared world.

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## Materials, 2015–ongoing

The seemingly abstract forms of the works in Miletić's *Materials* series are, in fact, textile renditions of temporary repairs or transformations to buildings and other objects in urban public space. Each piece, which Miletić hand weaves on a 1970s-era loom, is based on a snapshot taken by the artist—functioning like reference sketches, she calls them “cartoons.” The considerable variations in shape, size, and color of works in the series (and in the selection on view), as well as the scattershot heights at which the works hang, are all determined by the source images. (While the cartoons are never exhibited, the artist permits their reproduction in print materials accompanying exhibitions of her work, like this brochure.)

For Miletić, whose skills in the textile arts are largely self-taught, the meticulous, time-consuming hand labor required to reproduce these ad hoc repairs in fiber offers a slowness and material intimacy that she found lacking in photography (a medium in which she was formally trained). Miletić understands the interventions that are the subject of *Materials* as not only “subjective gestures of care” but also data points that illustrate collective needs (like infrastructure improvements) or indicate

changes like the construction that often accompanies gentrification.

Over the course of this ongoing series, several subthemes have emerged within this now-signature body of work. On view is a focused selection of recent and new *Materials* pieces that index makeshift interventions to trees and plants growing in urban environments. Some works reproduce protective netting placed around trunks during construction, while the overlapping knots in others show improvised efforts to train the growth of saplings in response to their environment. Several *Materials* that debut in this exhibition engage with the List Center site and the surrounding neighborhood. A significant new weaving is based on recent transformations to the gallery building—reproducing to scale brown paper panels that covered the doors to the List Center's galleries during renovations to the entry space. Others index temporary, construction-related interventions to public space in the rapidly transforming neighborhood of East Cambridge. Together, these works underscore the quotidian relationships of mutual support that sustain life in areas of development and disturbance.

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## Softwares, 2018–ongoing

Miletić's *Softwares* series, like *Materials*, is inspired by the artist's photo archive of minor repairs in public space. The rectilinear, wall-hanging textiles repeat a single image in a grided pattern. A few *Softwares* pieces even extend onto the floor, their accumulations of surplus length forming folded trains. Typically executed in muted colors, ranging from white to tan and pale yellow, the works conceal their relationship to a source image (as well as to the idiosyncratic shapes, colors, and

hanging heights of *Materials*) through their relatively monochrome appearance.

Unlike the handmade processes that guide Miletić's other series, these pieces are produced on a mechanized Jacquard loom—invented in the early nineteenth century to facilitate the repetition of complex patterns and the automation of textile production for mass consumption and export. Operated by punched cards, Jacquard looms also served as inspiration

for the earliest computers and computer programs. Just as many of the proletarian workers of nineteenth-century textile mills were women (“factory girls”), so, too, were many of the earliest software programmers, from the mathematician Ada Lovelace to the “ENIAC girls” that operated the first general-purpose computer.

In equating the marginal (and feminized) associations of textile craft with women's crucial (but overlooked) contributions to early computation, Miletić's *Softwares* draws attention to this historical connection and creates a tactile link between weaving and programming as forms of historically gendered labor. Attesting to the value of manual labor and “women's work,” the artist intervenes in the automated process, hand-manipulating the fabric as it is machined on the loom to create subtle distortions to an otherwise precisely repeating pattern.



*Materials* (digital photograph), Cambridge, MA, 2023.  
Courtesy the artist. Photo: Hana Miletić



*Softwares*, 2018. White polyester, vanilla cotton and nylon, white cotton, cream cottolin, variegated beige cottolin, gold polyester, silk, viscose, 118 $\frac{1}{8}$  × 59 × 1 in. (300 × 150 × 2.5 cm). Courtesy the artist and LambdaLambdaLambda, Prishtina, Kosovo, and Paris. Photo: Anna Zagrodzka

## LEARN MORE

- Bryan-Wilson, Julia. *Fray: Art and Textile Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017.
- Cooke, Lynne, ed. *Woven Histories: Textiles and Modern Abstraction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023.
- Livingstone, Joan, and John Ploof. *The Object of Labor: Art, Cloth, and Cultural Production*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007.
- Plant, Sadie. *Zeroes and Ones: Digital Women and the New Technoculture*. London: Fourth Estate, 1997.
- Praznik, Katja. *Art Work: Invisible Labour and the Legacy of Yugoslav Socialism*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021.

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Hana Miletić (b. 1982, Zagreb, Croatia) lives and works in Brussels. Recent solo exhibitions of her work have been held at Kunsthalle Mainz, Germany (2023); Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Rijeka, Croatia (2022); MUDAM Luxembourg (2022); Bergen Kunsthall, Norway (2021); and WIELS, Brussels (2018). Her work was included in Dhaka Art Summit, Bangladesh (2023), Manifesta 14, Prishtina, Kosovo (2022), and the 13th Sharjah Biennial (2017) and has featured in group survey exhibitions at institutions including Antenna Space, Shanghai; Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna; Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh; Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb; among many others. In 2021, Miletić was awarded the Baloise Art Prize.

*Hana Miletić: Soft Services* is organized by Selby Nimrod, Assistant Curator.

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## PUBLIC PROGRAMS



### Artist Discussion: Hana Miletić and E. C. Feiss

Thursday, April 4, 2024, 6:30 PM

In-person program



### Curator Tour

Friday, May 31, 12:30 PM

In-person program

All List Visual Arts Center programs are free and open to the public. Registration is required.

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