

# Marian Schoettle

## Sensitizing the Incomprehensible

For 30 years, conceptual clothing artist Mau (Marian Schoettle) has worked out of a large, sky-lit loft in Kingston's Shirt Factory. It is furnished with a long table draped with fabric that recalls the utilitarian workspaces of New York's Garment District. The table was put to good use starting in 2008, when the artist employed a sewer for her line of Tyvek jackets, dresses, and bags. The woman was later replaced by a family-owned company in the actual Garment District, which cut and sewed the clothes. Mau then finished the items by sewing on the cuffs and adding fasteners made from industrial packaging surplus items. The material was lightweight, waterproof, reversible and very durable—practical street wear with an aesthetic that didn't hide its industrial origins (hence the artist's description of it as "post-industrial folkwear"). Mau attended craft fairs to promote the clothing and sold it at museum shops and boutiques in the U.S., Europe, and Japan.

The term *conceptual clothing* connotes garments as a social intervention, as a vehicle for ideas, rather than clothing as a fashion statement. While *metaphorical clothing*, to cite another term she has coined, has been central to her practice, Mau has also made sculptures, assemblages, and abstract fabric pieces that reflect on human interference on the environment. She has staged site-specific installations and performances in which the public itself plays a key role, not simply as participants but as collaborators in the making of meaning.

In her Port City Projects, she travels to a city, equipped with two vintage IBM metal cases packed with pulleys, ropes, and fabric. She walks the streets and researches an aspect of local history, particularly as it pertains to labor, before collecting objects that relate to that history and creating an installation in conjunction with some local arts event. In 2019 she traveled to Toronto and got the

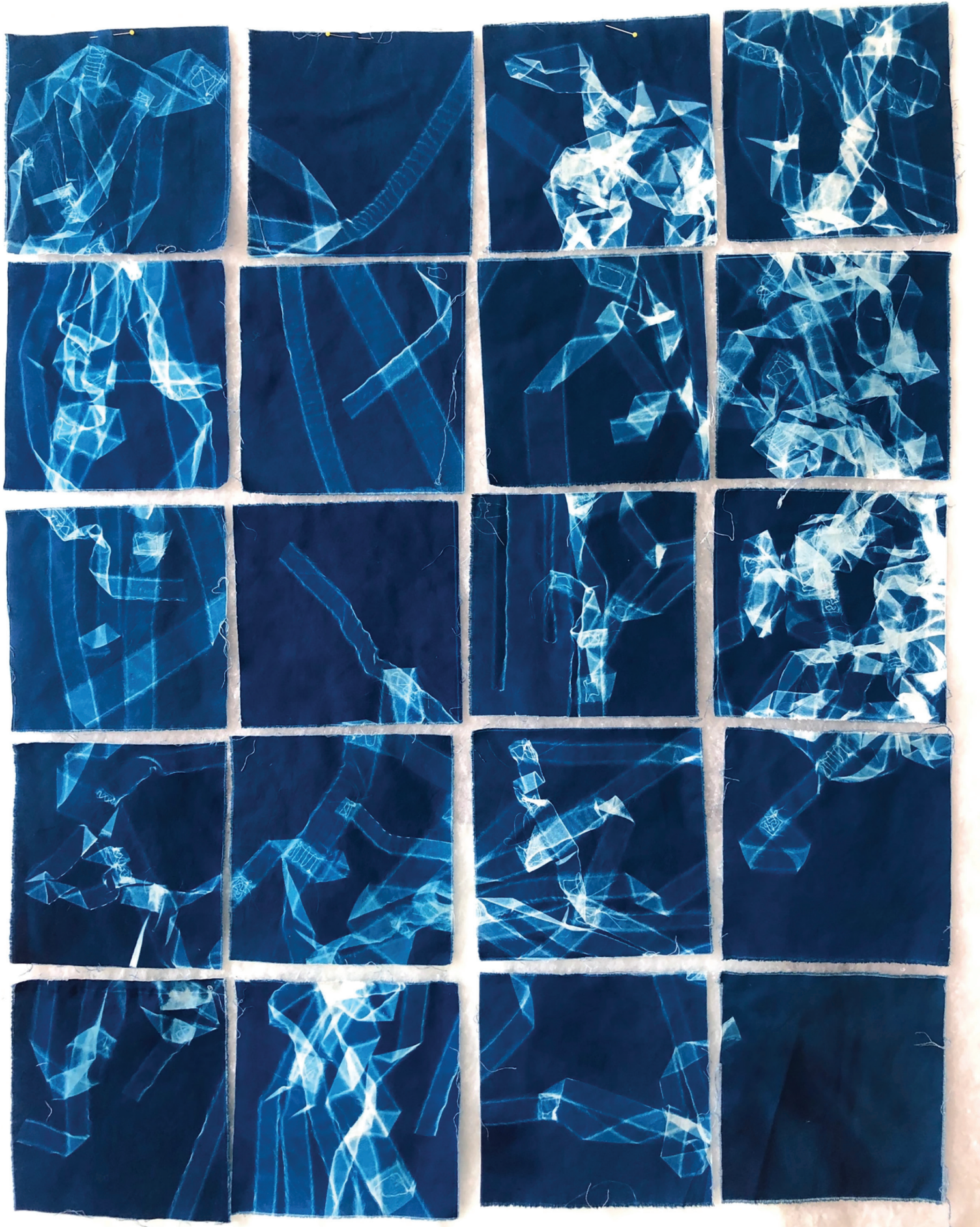


ABOVE: *The Clouet Gardens Project - I See*, Port City Project, New Orleans, detail, 2014, cardboard eye amulets, and deflated parachutes with old file cases attached are caught up in the old oak tree in a public occupation of a city park: exploring issues of surveillance and agency. Fringe Festival.

RIGHT: *The Double Shirt, Clothing Enigma Series I*, 1984, silk mousseline and silk taffeta. (human scale)







*Mumble and Murmur Series, 2021-2025, cyanotype on fabric with connective tissue, cotton and silk, 8' H x 6' W*



*Reconstructed Shirts, Port City Projects, Marseille, 2018. Detail from storefront installation, public process project about departures and arrivals, mapping and mending.*

idea for an installation after collecting an oddball array of discarded objects that related to the creation of a beach on an island by expanding its land mass through the piling up of debris-filled bags. Mau contacted a local arts organization and was invited to participate in La Nuit Blanc, an all-night arts event in which she was given use of a large plaza. Her installation consisted of a large white splayed-open debris bag that served as a boat. Along with two kayak paddles, it was suspended from ropes attached to two of the large metal pink parasols that lined the plaza. The suspended objects dangled above two Adirondack chairs overlooking a blue tarp partially covered with sand. To complete the setup, two orange flexible driveway markers were wrapped and extended to resemble fishing poles.

"There wasn't a person who came by who did not get in the boat," Mau recalled. The unprompted participation of passers-by "addressed issues in which immigration is conflated with disaster preparedness and with leisure to create an experience. People said 'I need a navigator; can anybody help navigate?' and 'I gotta get out of this town. This is driving me nuts' and 'I have to go to Nigeria, I'm on my way,' to which someone replied 'You're going in the wrong direction'" —comments which heightened the overall sense of absurdity, while underlying and helping forge the piece's meaning. Indeed, the installation itself became integrated into the street culture when a

homeless person approached her around 4 a.m. "He said, 'You got a really nice place,' and I told him, 'I'm leaving tomorrow, so I'm going to fold it up nicely and put it over there by the building,' letting him know he could live in it."

Never a fan of art-world pedestals, Mau has always been most interested in explorations of psychogeography. Her installations are a kind of excavation designed to choreograph interactions that reveal a place's societal and ecological disjunctions. But there's also an imaginative inventiveness about her work, a spirit of discovery inherent in the spontaneity of her process, which invites people to play.

"From an early age, I saw clothing as a sort of mutable identity and shape-shifter," she says. As a young child, she accompanied her mother on visits to thrift stores for collecting used clothing, which they would cut up and remake at home. She made art in high school but switched from art to sociology in college and took several classes in multicultural education at the University of Massachusetts. Returning to her hometown of Philadelphia, she landed a job at The Fabric Workshop, which she describes as "the epicenter of conceptual textile work."

Her first project there was with Karl Wirsum, one of the six Hairy Who group of Surrealist artists based in Chicago.





re DOCX Seamstress, *The Mine Project/DadaSpill*, Port City Projects, Rosendale, 2013. Collaborative public project with Kate Hamilton and 30 volunteers in The Widow Jane Mine. The re DOCX Seamstress cut, altered, and tailored identity documents and was one of 5 interpretive guides that instructed folks on issues of data security within the mine.

“He wanted me to upholster the outside of a Piper Cub airplane with this fabric he had printed with all sorts of ancient symbols. We were about three fourths of the way through when he changed his mind and said, ‘actually I want you to make pajamas for me,’ which I did instead.”

In the early 1980s she moved to London with her husband, a newspaper man, followed by stints in Paris and Amsterdam. She began making her first conceptual clothing garments. With fellow artist Fran Cottell, Mau organized an exhibition that was the first of its kind and toured all over the UK and the U.S. (It’s the subject of an upcoming book, *Conceptual Clothing Revisited*, which features an extended conversation between Mau and Cottell, as well as numerous essays on art clothing particularly as it relates to feminism.) She also devised sound and light installations in Holland and the Czech Republic with the TROPISTs collaborative; was involved in many other collaborative experimental projects; made clothing for a variety of contexts, including dance, performance art, and theater; and taught at art and design academies.

In 1994, Mau and her husband returned to the U.S. with their two sons and settled in Esopus. Inspired by the natural beauty of her surroundings, she exposed rayon dresses she had made to the elements, bleaching out the color and patterning it with splotches that resembled the rain clouds from which they were produced. The series

was called *Storm/Stroke Structure: Dress Cartography* and was organized into three subsets: Time-based Meteorology, in which the garments were characterized by slight discolorations; Plate Tectonics, in which they were cut open to reveal an underlying material; and Topography, in which a white circular thread stitched into the garment caused the wearer to have no sense of front or back. “You’re traversing a topography, you are a topographical object and you’re wearing it,” levels of interaction representing an intriguing pivot between personal utility and artifact, performance and metaphoric meaning. She exhibited her clothes at Julie: Artisan’s Gallery, in New York City, and also devised projects in which her clothing played an activist role at many protest events, including OCCUPY NYC, the Women’s March, and Chashama NYC.

In 2013 Mau and fabric artist Kate Hamilton created *The Mine Project / DaDa SPILL*, a large-scale multimedia installation and performance piece in an abandoned cement mine in Rosendale. The theme of breached data was dramatized by different stations to which dozens of visitors were led by costumed guides. They were positioned on a rocky incline rising from an underground lake lit by floating miniature boats bearing flashlights. This was followed by her Port City Projects, in which she occupied a public park in New Orleans, set up the aforementioned installation in the public plaza in Toronto,



*The Clouet Gardens Project - Dirty Laundry*, Port City Project, New Orleans, detail, 2014. A print out of the 60 page legal document against 97 oil and gas companies for breach of contract was hung like a laundry line back and forth across the park in a public occupation that explored issues of surveillance and agency. Silk with orange detailing from prison inmates’ work clothing. Fringe Festival. 200’ long x 18” tall.

and set up residency in a storefront in Marseilles that was open to the public and focused on map making, stitchwork, and storytelling.

Hanging on one wall of her studio are three mediative works, recently made and marked by a poetic beauty. The curtain-like pieces of white silk each frame a large black rectangle in which a bright skein or splotch of white—imagery derived from cyanotypes made with fishing nets and pieces of found plastic—suggests exploding galaxies and quantum entanglements. These contrast with thin white lines snaking atop the surface like territorial outlines on a map or insect borings in a piece of wood. Mau describes the pieces as “an exploration of energy fields. The strange linear intrusions represent the way humans think.” Titled *Mumble and Murmur*—a name derived from Mau’s fascination with the murmuration of birds and

her love of punning—the works were a direct outgrowth of reading Timothy Morton’s book *The Hyperobject* in an eco-feminist group the artist belongs to. “The hyperobject is an object difficult to get your head around due to its enormity, such as climate change, gender problems, and covid,” Mau said. “These are things beyond our comprehension, so I tried to start sensitizing myself to the incomprehensible.” An intervention that refuses to harden into an obdurate “art object,” as is witnessed by the opening of a window; the lightweight silk begins to move, shifting the image, suggesting new patterns and the next step.

INTERVIEW AND WRITING BY LYNN WOODS  
COPY EDITOR: KRISTI MCGEE

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