

about the exhibition

For most, the act of seeing is an unremarkable event — few people give much thought to the mechanics behind this commonplace activity but, for New York-based artist Devorah Sperber, how the brain interprets visual information forms the centerpiece of a fascinating artistic practice. *Interpretations: Devorah Sperber* features sculptures by Sperber that not only explore how the brain interprets visual information but also finds surprising bridges between classic painting techniques and modern digital technology.

At first glance Sperber's sculptures appear to be multi-colored abstractions composed from volumes of craft materials like spools of thread, chenille stems, map tacks, gem stones, or marker caps. For instance,

Sperber's homage to Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* comprises 20,736 spools of thread which create a life-sized mural that is almost 30 feet wide.

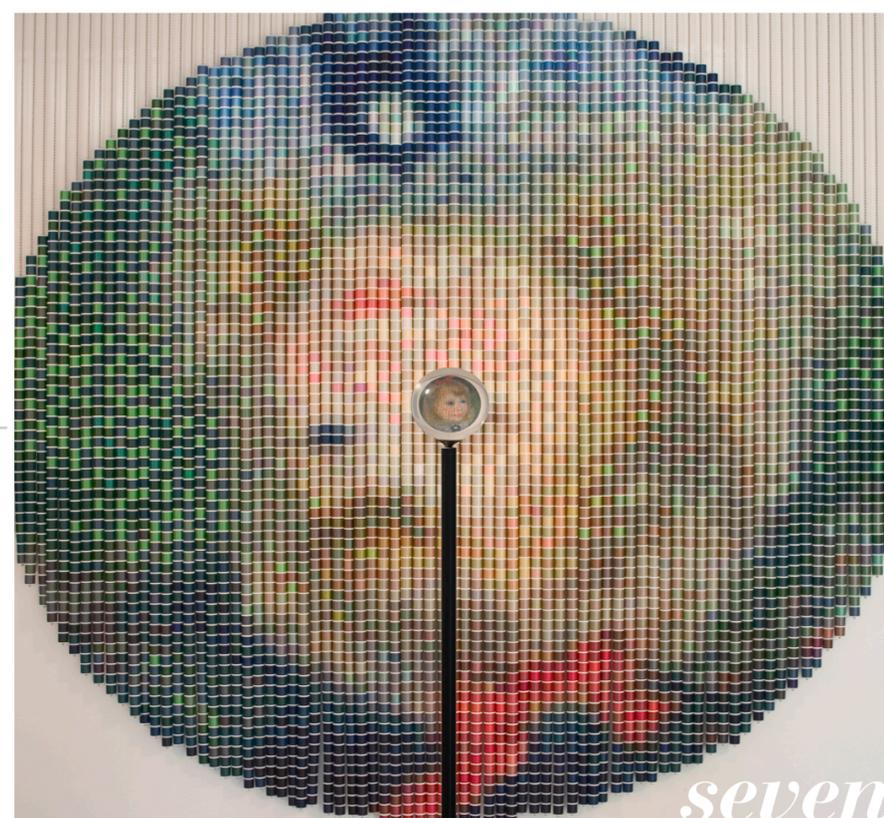
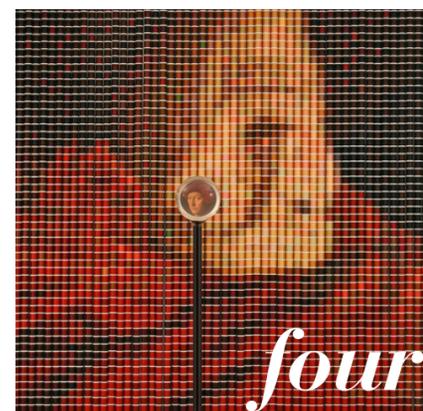
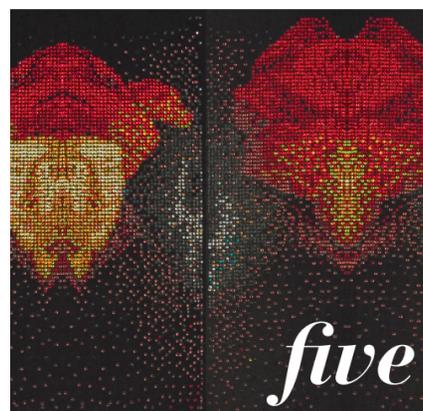
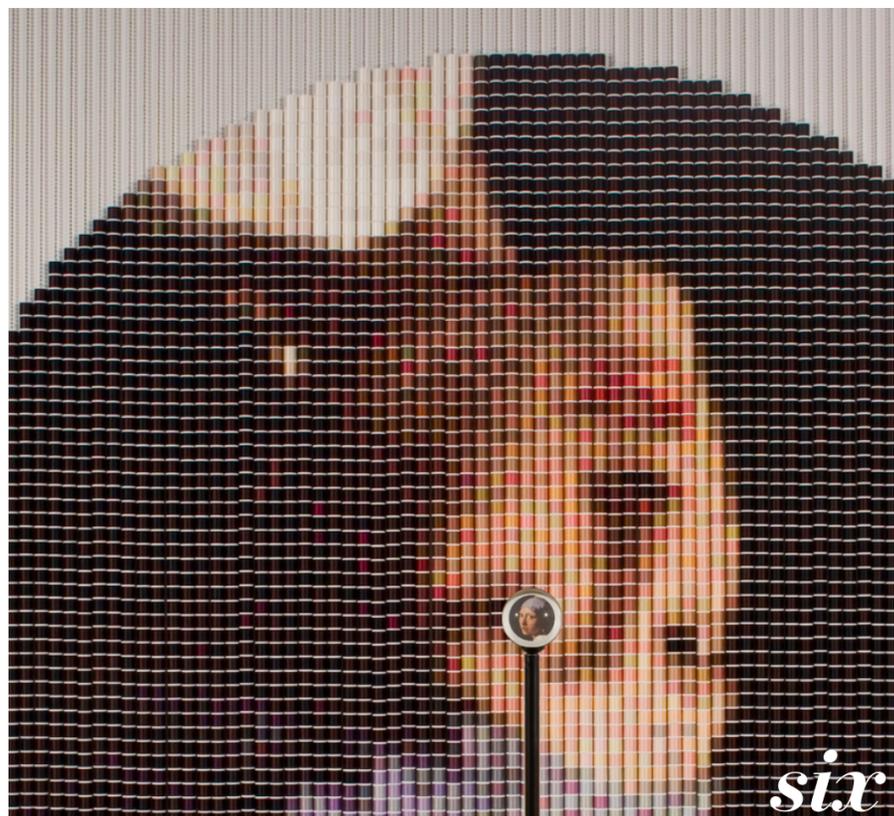
When viewed through special optical devices like a clear acrylic sphere or a convex mirror, however, recognizable images from art history surprisingly emerge.

Sperber meticulously crafts her works so the viewing process mimics the way the eyes and brain interpret visual stimuli. Many of her abstracted images are constructed upside-down and backwards, which is the way the eyes absorb information.

The optical device functions as a brain, condensing, inverting, and reversing raw color and value into something identifiable.

Upside-down and backward composition alludes not only to the biological mechanics of sight, but also to the mechanics of the camera obscura, a projector-like device some art historians believe many Old Masters may have used.

The construction method most apparent in Sperber's work — using individual bricks of color to assemble a larger image — is her nod to modern technology. A computer program breaks her chosen image into pixels, the building block of digital imaging technology. She translates the pixels into sculpture — her spools of thread, chenille stems or gem stones function as three-dimensional pixels. Her mirrors and lenses operate not only as human eyes and brains but as computers, 'zooming out' and pulling the colors together, reforming the picture.



one & two

After Mona Lisa 2 (2005)
A tribute to Leonardo da Vinci
by Devorah Sperber
5,184 thread spools

After Mona Lisa 3 (2006)
A tribute to Leonardo da Vinci
by Devorah Sperber
425 thread spools

three

After The Last Supper (2005)
A tribute to Leonardo da Vinci
by Devorah Sperber
20,736 thread spools

four & five

After van Eyck (2006)
A tribute to *Man with a Red Turban*
by Devorah Sperber
5,024 thread spools

After van Eyck 2 (2006)
A tribute to *Man with a Red Turban*
by Devorah Sperber
10,232 Swarovski crystals

six

After Vermeer 2 (2006)
A tribute to *Girl with a Pearl Earring*
by Devorah Sperber
5,024 thread spools

seven

After Renoir (2006)
A tribute to *Girl with a Watering Can*
by Devorah Sperber
5,024 thread spools

eight

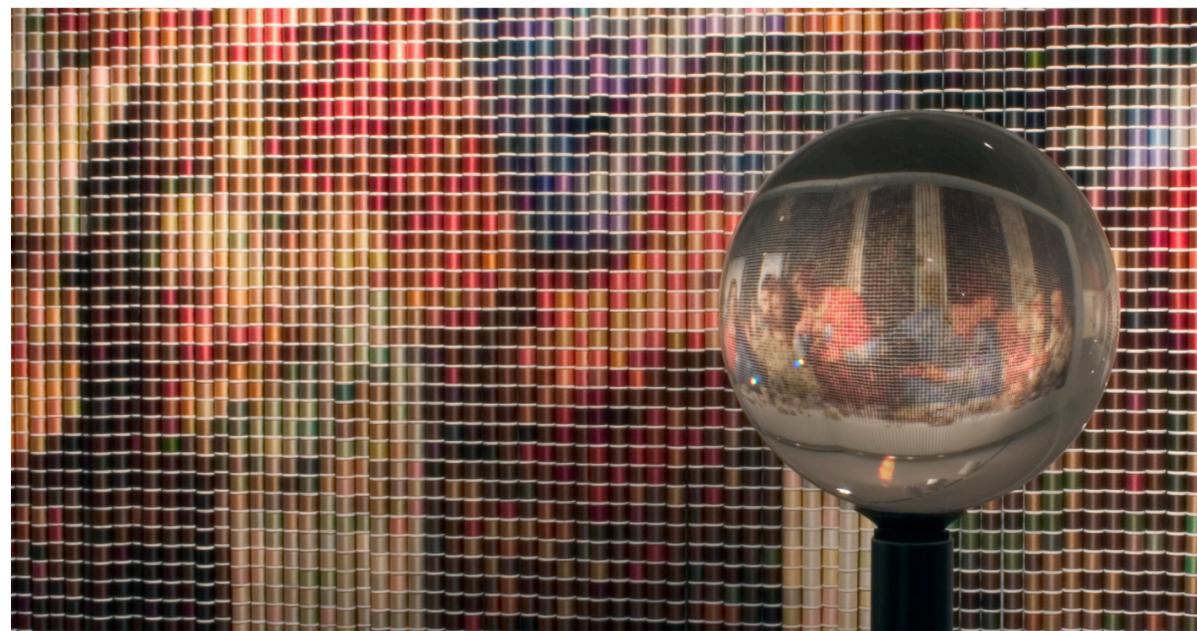
After Grant Wood 1 (2006)
A tribute to *American Gothic*
by Devorah Sperber
500 thread spools

artist's statement

My current body of work consists of sculptures assembled from thousands of ordinary objects — spools of thread, marker-pen caps, “flower power” stickers, map tacks, chenille stems (a.k.a. pipe cleaners), and Swarovski crystals. The imagery is derived from digital photographs and renderings, which I manipulate and translate into “low-tech” pixels.

While many contemporary artists utilize digital technology to create high-tech works, I strive to “dumb-down” technology by utilizing mundane materials and low-tech, labor-intensive assembly processes. I place equal emphasis on the whole recognizable image and how the individual parts function as abstract elements, selecting materials based on aesthetic and functional characteristics as well for their capacity for an interesting and often contrasting relationship with the subject matter.

My thread-spool works are often installed so that viewers first perceive the spools of thread as a random arrangement of colorful cylinders.



It is only after they view the thread-spools through an optical device that the recognizable image emerges.

Most of my thread-spool installations incorporate clear acrylic spheres as optical devices. The viewing spheres shrink and condense the thread spool “pixels” into recognizable images while also rotating the imagery 180 degrees like the human eye. This shift in perception functions as a dramatic mechanism to present the idea that there is no one truth or reality, emphasizing subjective reality vs. an absolute truth.

My interest in the biology of vision grew from my desire to understand how viewers experience my work. My thread-spool installations illustrate specific visual experiences related to the biology of vision such as how the human eyes and brain process sensory data:

Photons bouncing off the spools of thread reach our eyes where they are turned into a pattern that is sent to the primary visual cortex where the rough shapes are recognized. The pattern is then sent to higher regions where colors are recognized and where thread-spool identities are encoded along with other knowledge we already have about thread spools. This direction of flow is called feed forward, meaning the data is moving from bottom to top (eyes to brain).

Bundles of nerve cells carry information. Traffic flowing from top to bottom is called feedback or top-down processing. There are 10 times as many nerve fibers carrying information down as there are carrying it up. So what we see is based on what neuroscientists call “top down processing.” And what we see depends on the framework built by past experience that interprets raw data. In other words, the brain is assembling or projecting what it knows about an object into a recognizable image.

When the top (or brain) is convinced it knows what it is seeing (in this case, initially fixating on what appears to be a random arrangement of thread spools), the bottom level of data is overruled. This may explain why my use of thread spools creates such a jolt when the viewer sees the recognizable imagery in the viewing sphere, as the brain abruptly shifts focus from the individual spools to the whole recognizable image.

Overall, my current body of work exemplifies my interest in the links between art, science, and technology through the ages, visual perception, repetitive processes, truth of materials, the feminist art preposition of bringing genres into “high art,” and the scientific systems theory which focuses on the whole as well as its part to gain understanding.

— Devorah Sperber, 2008

about the artist

Born in 1961 in Detroit, Michigan, Devorah Sperber graduated from Colorado Art Institute in 1981 and Regis University in 1987. She moved to New York City in 1989 and currently divides her time between studios in Manhattan and Woodstock, New York.

Since 1999, Sperber has created a series of large-scale installations and multi-part works, which utilize pixilated, photo-based representation in formats that fluctuate between representation and abstraction. In 2003, Sperber represented the Brooklyn Museum and the United States at the Ljubljana Print Biennale, for which she created new thread-spool works. A solo exhibition featuring these works was on display at the Brooklyn Museum from January 26 to June 17, 2007 in *The Eye of the Artist: The Work of Devorah Sperber*. The exhibit included full-scale re-creations of Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* (29 feet wide) and *Mona Lisa* (30 x 21 inches). The concept was based on the technology of print-making and how mechanical reproductions alter images and the scale of artworks.

Lisa because they are two of the most recognizable and reproduced images in the history of art. The works on view at the Brooklyn Museum, along with new works, have since traveled to the Oda-Park Foundation in The Netherlands and the Fleming Museum in Burlington, Vermont. In addition to Kidspace at MASS MoCA in 2008-2009 Sperber's work will travel to the Boise Art Museum in Idaho; Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico in San Juan, Puerto Rico; and the Knoxville Museum of Art in Tennessee. She will also be featured in the inaugural exhibition at the Museum of Art and Design, New York. Public works by Sperber can be seen in New York City's One Penn Plaza; Centro Medico Train Station, San Juan, Puerto Rico; and the Royal Caribbean cruise ship *Independence of the Seas*, (maiden voyage, May 2008). Regional exhibitions have included Sperber's work, most recently at the Albany International Airport Gallery, Albany, New York, and the University of Rochester Memorial Art Gallery, Rochester, New York.

Interpretations was organized by Kidspace Director of Exhibitions and Education Laura Thompson and Artist Devorah Sperber. Eternal gratitude to the staff of MASS MoCA for promoting, designing, and installing the exhibition.



about Kidspace at MASS MoCA

Kidspace opened in January 2000 as a collaborative project of the Sterling & Francine Clark Art Institute, Williams College Museum of Art, and MASS MoCA. A contemporary art gallery/studio and educational program, Kidspace promotes the understanding and teaching of art through experiential learning opportunities. School programs and educational materials are designed for elementary schools in North Adams, Florida, Clarksburg, and Savoy, Massachusetts, as well as Stamford, Vermont. Kidspace organizes after-school artist mentor programs for local students in grades 4 – 10. Working with Kidspace staff and artists, students and teachers learn new ways to connect contemporary art to their classroom activities and to their everyday lives.

Public Hours

School Year: Saturdays and Sundays, noon to 4 pm, plus holiday hours. (The rest of the week is reserved for school groups.)

Summer: beginning on June 30, open everyday from noon to 4pm. Admission to Kidspace is free. Public art classes and special workshops are offered during school breaks and over the summer. Please call Kidspace at (413) 664-4481 ext. 8131 for more details on hours, programs and program fees, and exhibitions. And check out the Kidspace web site at www.massmoca.org/kidspace.

Kidspace is a collaborative project of the Sterling & Francine Clark Art Institute, Williams College Museum of Art, and MASS MoCA. Major support for Kidspace is provided by the William Randolph Hearst Foundation; the National Endowment for the Arts; the Winny Foundation; the Brommberg Charitable Trust and Alice Shaver Foundation in memory of Lynn Lattman; the James and Robert Hardman Fund for North Adams; a fund of the Berkshire Medical Institution grant; The Vermont Arts Council provided the Stamford School District with funding to support their involvement in Kidspace.

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Kidspace
at MASS MoCA

