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Perpetual Dowry: Fiber Art as Continuation of Thread Craft Lineage

by Tatjana Mirkov-Popovicki



About the Artist

Tatjana Mirkov-Popovicki is a 2025 MFA graduate from Emily Carr University of Art + Design, a painter with more than twenty years of studio practice, and a writer of literary short stories. Her work is informed by ethnographic histories, Balkan folklore and empathetic observation. She has exhibited her artwork in solo and group exhibitions across Western Canada, and her short stories have been published in literary magazines in Canada, the US, and Europe. Tatjana is grateful to live and work on the unceded land of the Kwikwetlem, Musqueam, Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh, Katzie, Kwantlen, Qayqayt, and Stó:lō Peoples.

Perpetual Dowry: Fiber Art as Continuation of Thread Craft Lineage

Tatjana Mirkov-Popovicki

My mother grew up in rural eastern Serbia during the post-World War II period of poverty and enthusiasm for rebuilding the People's Republic of Yugoslavia. Her people grappled with a complex system of beliefs, a mix of Slavic Paganism, Orthodox Christianity, and newly introduced Communism. When my mother was twelve, she was an apprentice to a healer known as the Village Witch. As a child, I pestered my mother to remember what she had learned from the healer, but all she could recall was the chant, 'white thread, red thread, black thread.' In rural Serbia, it is believed that a piece of red thread tied around a baby's hand provides protection against evil spirits. Although my mother was a passionate communist and non-believer in superstitions, she was an avid sewer, knitter, crocheter, and embroiderer. The women from her family were renowned for their excellent weaving skills. Where I come from, being a woman means having a deep understanding of thread crafts. I am grateful to my ancestors for passing on this beautiful and essential technology to me.

I have been threading stories, in words, paint, and fiber, for as long as I can remember. Over the past few years, I have been seeking a visual storytelling language that resonates with my Serbian background and my present life in Canada. My stories deal with multigenerational displacement and migration, including my own immigration to Canada in the nineties. Through my art practice, I am interested in history and in imagining what lies ahead.

According to my mitochondrial DNA analysis, my maternal ancestors left East Africa 67,000 years ago. Their journey took them farther north than I could have ever imagined, all the way to the lands of the Sámi people, scattering their genes and bones throughout Eastern Europe. Somehow, my ancient foremothers found themselves at the southern tip of the Carpathian Mountains in rural eastern Serbia, where my mother's family lived for generations. What they encountered and how they persevered on those journeys, I can only imagine. I have no doubt that they faced wars and displacement, but they also experienced periods of prosperity marked by love, friendships, technological

discoveries, and more-than-human collaborations as they made a home in new places. As Giorgos Velegrakis and Eirini Gaitanou write: “What gives a place its specificity is the fact that it is constructed ‘out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting, and weaving together at a particular locus’ (Doreen Massey cited in Velegrakis & Gaitanou 2019, 259).

The difficult stories of people and more-than-humans affected by the predicament of migrations over the centuries are tremendous. I dream, write, speculate, and philosophize about their effect on how we live now and what we can imagine of the future. I feel these stories in my body and put them into my art. My work builds on Amaya Querejazu’s notion that “[t]hinking about the world(s) in pluriversal terms is about imagining and apprehending, which is an intellectual challenge and an exercise of mental flexibility we are not used to, prepared or willing” (2016, 12). This challenge can be met with research-creation practice. The many questions that trigger my exploration boil down to a few: As displaced people, how do we cultivate a sense of home and build community in foreign places? What is the contribution of displaced people to the future? What do we take with us on our journeys?



Figure 1. Handwoven pillowcase passed on to me by my mother’s family, 2026.

I inherited several hand-woven keepsakes, including a beautiful dowry pillowcase (see Fig. 1), from my mother’s family and brought them with me to Canada. This wool

yarn textile was woven in rural Eastern Serbia, on an ancient floor loom housed in my great-grandmother's cabin, sometime between 1945 and 1970. I am certain about this timeline because it was promised to me when I was a child, and I have been told that all the family's possessions, anything of value and beauty, were lost during WWII when this region of Serbia was occupied by the German and Bulgarian armies. Before that, between the 15th and 19th centuries, Serbia and the Balkans were under the Ottoman Empire. Over those centuries, Serbian culture was looted, suppressed, and modified. The motifs in Serbian heritage textiles changed and evolved under the influence of Ottoman culture (Maskareli, 2026). Somehow, the ancient Slavic Morning Star symbol (Vytautas, 2023) survived on my dowry pillowcase. As a child, I admired this pattern without knowing its meaning. Rediscovering it recently through my research sparked a practice of creating woven paintings (see Fig. 2) as a dialogue with history and a continuation of my maternal lineage of thread crafts.



Figure 2. The process of “painting” with thread by weaving cotton thread on a table loom, using modified Morning Star patterns and the inlay technique (Moorman, 1975).

As an expressive painter with a background in engineering, I am interested in combining visual metaphorical patterns and structural gestures in my artwork. Tim Ingold describes the world's matter as chunky and woven, with substance and coherence (2019). The woven-in matter records all the external and internal processes that take place while the structure is being created. As makers, we have the potential to process and carry this history forward. The stories we retell are embedded in the material, the

making technology, the colors, shapes, textures, and patterns, as elements of our visual language. Two centuries ago, Ada Lovelace noted the algorithmic similarity between the Analytical Engine (a precursor to machine computation) and the Jacquard loom, which stores binary information for reproduction (Elliott, 2017). More recently, Sadie Plant connected deep feminist histories of weaving with the contemporary information science and post-patriarchal futures (Plant, 1998). Combining these ideas and taking them into the space of artistic practice, I integrate weaving into my expressive visual language by observing patterns and emotions associated with migration, such as maps, footprints, navigation, and processing of memories. For instance, I design variations of the Morning Star pattern into the warp/weft structure, which I activate with displacement gestures such as folding, fraying, and unravelling (see Fig. 3).

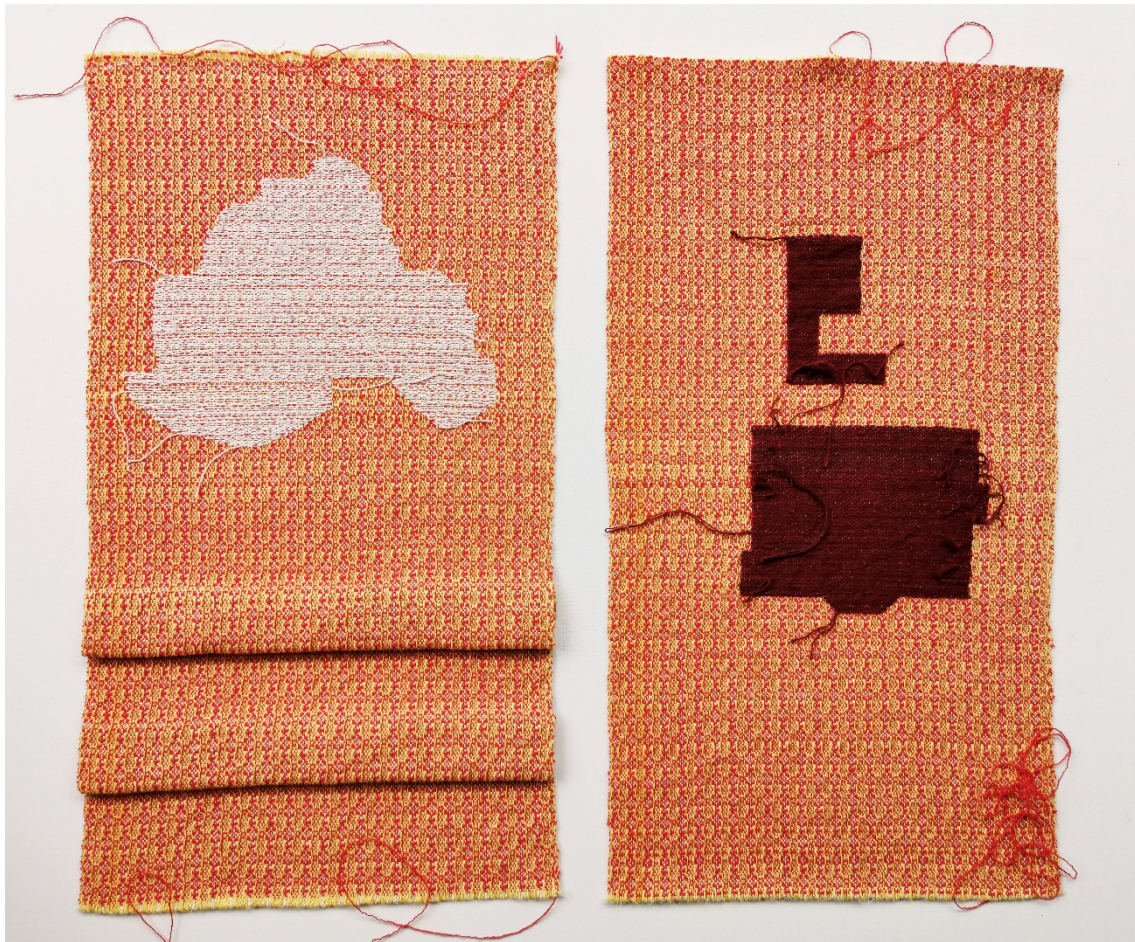


Figure 3. Mirkov-Popovicki, Tatjana. *Phrenic Footprints: Birthplace, Homesteads*. 2026.

The eight-pointed Morning Star symbol represents the planet Venus (Orchiston & Howse, 2000), a crucial navigational technology in the saga of displaced people worldwide. Millions of travellers, refugees, and adventurers have gazed at the celestial

bodies above, seeking direction and inspiration on their journeys. Given the broad reach of this motif across many cultures and the beauty of its depictions, I speculate that this knowledge was revered, considered sacred, and collaboratively shared among ancient cultures. My ancestors have woven the beautiful Morning Star pattern into the red pillowcase, part of the bridal send-off package (see Fig. 1). It was meant to watch over the newlyweds, keeping them safe through the night. I embrace and bring this narrative to the present time in the *Phrenic Footprints* (2026) series (see Fig. 3–4).



Figure 4. Mirkov-Popovicki, Tatjana. *Phrenic Footprints: Celestial Guardians, Dream Home, Stars Between Us*. 2026.

In this body of work, the Morning Star is woven into the background. Featured in the foreground are the shapes that represent the footprints of places so deeply ingrained in my psyche that I feel them in the pit of my stomach. The heart-like form in *Birthplace* (2026) (see Fig. 3) is a map of the city on the Danube where I grew up. In *Homesteads* (see Fig. 3), I recall the footprint of my old house in Serbia juxtaposed with the one I live in now in Canada.

Celestial Guardians (see Fig. 4) is a personal meditation about more-than-human protectors I imagine looking over us in troubling times. *Dream Home* (see Fig. 4) remembers my childhood daydreams of a fantasy home where my loved ones and I would one day arrive and live happily ever after. *Stars Between Us* (see Fig. 4) measures the sizes

of Canada and the former Yugoslavia, and the relative distance between them, in the number of woven stars. While creating these works, I imagined conversations with my ancestors, thinking about their tenacity and creativity, which I also find in my own practice and consider a strength to be passed on into the pluriversal future.

The idea of an all-inclusive world of many worlds (de la Cadena & Blaser 2018) resonates in a collaborative piece of weaving with materials donated by more-than-human inhabitants of pluriverse (see Fig. 5). This project was a part of the *Leaning Out of Windows*, a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) funded interdisciplinary art + science project with collaborations between Emily Carr University of Art + Design and TRIUMF, Canada's particle accelerator center.



Figure 5. Mirkov-Popovicki, Tatjana. *Woven pluriverse*. 2025.

The non-humans were represented by the plants from my garden. The donated materials include gardener's twine, ivy vines, lily leaves, bamboo stems, moss, cyanotype on canvas, fabric projection screen, oil painter's rag, dyed cotton ribbons, painted canvas remnants, and acrylic thread. The randomness of the materials in *Woven pluriverse* (2025) (see Fig. 5) metaphorizes the haphazardness of history, the present, and the future, in which the processes of disturbance, modification, and re-creation never stop. The structure resists planning and expectation, yet it holds together, bound by the circumstance of gathering, as best it can. I find this point of view anxious but hopeful.

Although a conflict-free society may be a utopian ideal, there is hope for artistic contributions to oppose the negative effects of displacement. Art depends on observation, imagination, and collaboration, all of which are vital for imagining an inclusive, postcolonial world. Creating art is my way of showing that the cultural in-between state is neither temporary nor a deficit. Instead, it's a dynamic space with great potential for fostering multicultural harmony.



Figure 6. Mirkov-Popovicki, Tatjana. *Remnants of Time*. 2025. MFA Thesis Exhibition at the Emily Carr University of Art + Design, Vancouver, BC.

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