

What is the meaning of Lyn Carter's stripes?



Lyn Carter, *11th Line*, installation view, 2016, Art Gallery of Peterborough.

The most salient feature of *11th Line*, Lyn Carter's recent exhibition at the Textile Museum of Canada, the Art Gallery of Peterborough, and the Musée d'art de Joliette, is the artist's application of lines and stripes to her sculptural objects. Whether printed, stitched, or hand-painted, Carter's recent works present an array of monochrome (mostly black and white) linear patterns that cover all visible surfaces of her forms. Like mattress ticking, her patterns suggest a utilitarian cloth used to cover bedding and pillows. But they also suggest an uncovered surface, an object unadorned, an object stripped down to its underwear.

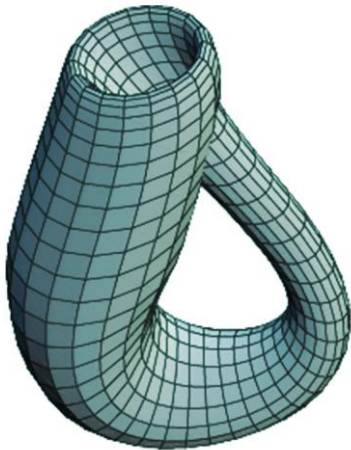
The works in *11th Line* appear to come in two formats: vertical—upright against gravity (like figures), they stand taller than the viewer, and one must crane the neck to take their full measure...

or horizontal—low to the ground (like landscape), the viewer must walk their length and breadth to assess their extent and topography, or squat to consider their details.

The sculptures in *11th Line* appear to touch or hover just above the ground (or floor), but they do not evince obvious connections or attachments—their weight (if any) is difficult to judge. One is presented with an outward form—a highly articulated envelope—but no apparent entry. It is as though the works are all exterior—a class of one-sided object, like the Klein bottle or the mobius strip that seemingly makes no distinction between inside and out.



Lyn Carter, "Marker," installation view, *11th Line*, 2015, Textile Museum of Canada.



Klein Bottle (mathematics) - a closed surface with only one side, formed by passing one end of a tube through itself and joining it to the other end.
Image: Lukas Hozda, 2005, public domain

This exteriority is both mysterious and very frank. One senses an internal structure upon which the cloth is draped—sharp corners where the cloth is projected into space, or gentle inward curves where the cloth retracts or falls with gravity.

Carter's objects are constructions of cloth, wood, and aluminum, but the sculptural articulation of her forms derives as much from her handling of textile as it owes to the rigid armatures within her works. This is especially the case with the artist's spindle-like objects: *Quick Turn #1* and *Quick Turn #2*. Here, a series of internal hoops maintains consistent circular diameters, but it is Carter's precision in piecing cloth that creates the elaborate textile architecture. The linear patterns upon these tensile structures undergo radical changes of scale, but their enlargement and diminution is not a matter of stretching (like the surface of a balloon). Rather, it is Carter's mathematically calculated cut of cloth that generates the startling transformations between the wide skirt-like edges and the narrow waist-like necks.

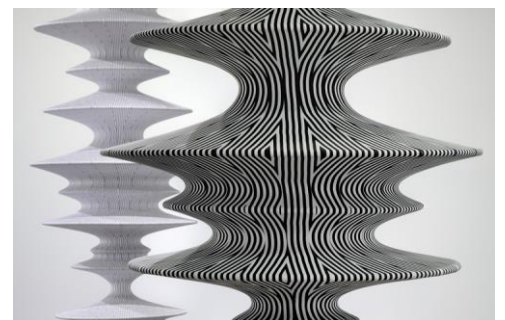
Quickturn #1 and *Quickturn #2* can also be allusive, evoking at moments the body and women's clothing, at others almost contradictory associations with architecture and built form. The upper reaches of both works resemble a wide-brimmed hat, and the fall of the textile below the brim recalls the hat and veil of the traditional beekeeper. The multiple wasp-waists of the two works create an almost comic effect in their resemblance to the stereotypical feminine silhouette. This image is further endorsed by the works' cantilevered forms, by the symmetry of their shaped panels, and by their use of internal hoops (as stiffeners), all of which recall aspects of corsetry or boning. The sharp edges of both sculptures, moreover, share something of the brazen pointiness of many post-World War II designs for women's brassieres and swimsuits.



Lyn Carter, "Field," installation view, *11th Line*, 2015, Textile Museum of Canada.



Installation view, *11th Line*, 2015, Textile Museum of Canada.



Lyn Carter, detail, "Quick Turn # 1" and "Quick Turn #2," *11th Line*, 2015, Textile Museum of Canada.



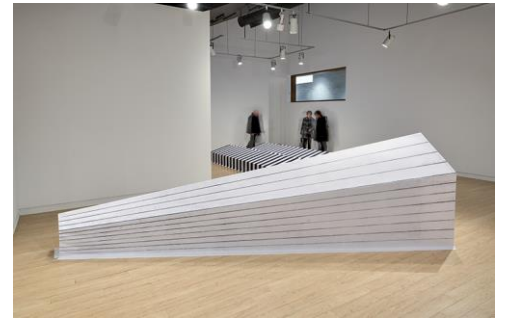
Permalift Girdle, 1951
 photo: James Vaughan, Flickr, 2010,
 Creative Commons.

The linear patterns of *Quick Turn #1* and *Quick Turn #2* may be compared to the incised fluting of architectural columns, and their vertical division into segments is analogous to the masonry drums stacked to build stone pillars. The contour of both works—their elegant expansion and contraction—suggests the property of "entasis," the intentional thickening of columns towards their middle to enhance illusions of straightness or solidity.

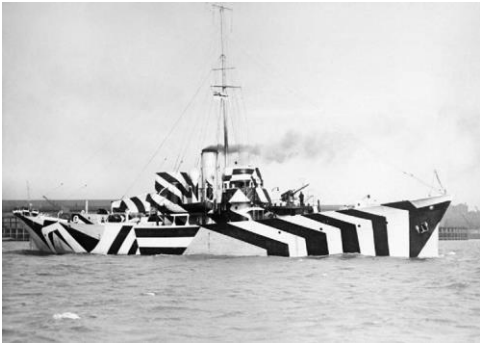
11th Line endorses the scales of both the intimate and the enormous—suggesting the intimate sphere of clothing, mattress, and bed cover, as well as the larger measures of house, shed, and furrowed field. Carter's work *Skew* is a case in point. The work seemingly embodies the image of the house (or shed) as a platonic form, and yet the sculpture both deviates from, and conforms to, the expected properties of such a figure. Front and rear "elevations" appear to match in shape and orientation, but are sharply offset in position and size. Yet the planar surfaces of *Skew* are large enough to eclipse one's reading of the corresponding faces. The viewer's expectations of symmetry and rectilinearity are thus subtly undermined by the work's strange geometry—causing the object to virtually enlarge and shrink before one's eyes.

Lyn Carter's linear divisions often parallel her works' longest dimensions, though her lines assume both optical and sculptural charges. Thus, her standing column *Marker* is clad in long vertical divisions, while her low-to-the-ground *Field* displays broad facades of horizontal stripes. *Quick Turn #1*, *Quick Turn #2*, and *Rise* all present alternating or converging patterns of zigzags or chevrons that endorse or emphasize the works' actual concavities or projections.

The works in *11th Line* are highly aesthetic and yet they can be literally hard to look at. Like the dazzle camouflage of World War I naval vessels, Carter's objects have the paradoxical status of graphic vividness while playing tricks upon one's eyes.



Lyn Carter, "Skew," installation view, *11th Line*, 2016, Art Gallery of Peterborough.



British gunboat "HMS Kildangan" in dazzle paint, 1918. Photographer unknown, public domain.

From a distance, individual stripes may be too small to resolve—the works may vibrate with an indefinite tonality. At closer range, the black and white divisions become starkly visible, but also incite optical afterimages. The value and colour of the linear patterns can morph into fields of chromatic activity, at moments generating an optical confusion verging on blindness.

11th Line borrows its title from the name of the division (and gravel road) that marks the upper edge of the artist's property north of Toronto. *11th Line* designates a space where Carter works and takes shelter, and a landscape (in these sculptures) that she virtually wears. Her parallel stripes may be read as a reference to the cladding of the industrial sheds and silos used by her agricultural neighbours. The pattern is also reminiscent of the clapboard walls and building envelopes frequently depicted in the prints and paintings of Canadian artist Christopher Pratt. And like Pratt, Carter often places herself (and the viewer) at a threshold between inside and out, at a point where one seems to linger between what is intimate or seemingly familiar and what is unfamiliar or seemingly unknowable. The inaccessible interiors of Carter's works only further these effects, creating a remove from her objects, even a psychological distance, while also conflating the categories of inside and out, of interior and exterior.



Christopher Pratt
Winter Moon, 1987,
National Gallery of Canada.
(unlicensed image)

The works in *11th Line* embody the Euclidian notion of the point defining a line, the line enclosing a shape, and the shape expanding (like an extrusion) into volume. Carter's works are divided into segments or divisions as though their expansion or replication could continue without end. They are like models or core samples that reveal a parcel or fragment of a larger process. Moreover, her linear markings become a form of measurement. The regularity of the stripes reveals the shape and dimensions of the sculptures' surfaces as well as their changes of orientation, distortion, and tension. The patterns also allow the volumes to be more acutely



Lyn Carter, "Rise," Installation view, *11th Line*, 2015, Textile Museum of Canada.

perceivable, and like the shading effect of fishnet stockings, the stripes imbue the sculptural forms with an almost tactile vividness.



Jill Haworth, 1965, in the television series *The Rogues*, Wikipedia Commons.

Carter's use of stripes may be compared to the markings placed on many lightweight structures. Objects such as airships, pavilions, awnings, kites, hot air balloons, etc. (objects infused with air or wind), are often enhanced by stripes or linear markings upon their textile surfaces.

French critic Michel Pastoureau provides the following explanation for this phenomenon: "The stripes on ships' sails fulfill three functions: a technical function (to assemble pieces of cloth in order to form a large textile surface), an identifying function (a striped sail with two or many colors can be seen from a distance), and a dynamic function (inflated by the wind, a striped sail seems to move the ship forward more quickly than a plain sail..."¹



Prisoners in striped garb at Utah Penitentiary, c.1889 - some of approximately 1,300 Mormon men convicted for polygamy in the nineteenth century.²
Photo: Charles R. Savage, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, public domain.

Lyn Carter's sculptures are evidently handmade works, but their construction requires abundant use of digital processes to enlarge, to print,

and to scan their many elements. As such, Carter's works mark a long-standing ambivalence between the traditional hand-work of the artist and the machine-made replica of industry. Carter's linear patterns, her use of both commercially printed textile, as well as her hand-painted stripes upon cloth likewise convey a negotiation between touch and machine. Her works assume the scale and geometry of many modernist and minimal sculptures, yet her cloth and lightweight structures also suggest the ephemeral forms of stage sets or temporary architecture.

Carter's sculptures are sumptuously crafted, the result of the artist's extraordinary skill developed over decades, and her long experience with a broad range of media. Against the prevailing attitudes of piety in contemporary art, Carter's striped works are boldly aesthetic, even beautiful, whether experienced as individual sculptures, or seen in relationship to one another as with her installations in *11th Line*.

The exactitude of Lyn Carter's assemblies and the repetition of her linear patterns place her works alongside the serial and modular constructions of artists such as the American Sol LeWitt or Britain's Richard Long, and yet also ally her works to domains such as clothing and haute couture. Carter's sculpture thus occupies a subtle and complex position among categories of art, craft, and design, between so-called women's (or men's) work, and between the preciousness of original "creation" and the ubiquity of the mass-produced. Carter's works are rigorous in their formal and optical properties, and yet they embody a playful, even mischievous aspect in their allusions to the body and to undergarments, and in their disposition to disclosure, concealment, even mystery.

Peter Legris,
February, 2018

¹ Michel Pastoureau, *The Devil's Cloth: A History of Stripes* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2003), 115n81.

² "Geometrically and metaphorically, there is a very strong link between the horizontal stripes of penitentiary wear and the vertical stripes that make up the prison bars. Intersecting at right angles, stripes and bars seem to form a web, a grill, even a cage, that isolates the prisoner even more from the exterior world. More than just a mark, here, the stripe is an obstacle. Moreover, it is this same obstacle stripe—very often red and black—that we encounter today at grade crossings, border posts, at all places where it's necessary to stop." Pastoureau, *The Devil's Cloth*, 58.