



Soft Architecture **work by Sage Dawson**

September 15 – November 7, 2026

James K. Schmidt Gallery / Voney Art Center / Principia College / Elsah, Illinois
Principiacollege.edu/jameskschmidtgallery



(above) *Eternal Loop II*, 2025, Reductive linoleum cut and acrylic on canvas, 25" x 30"

(right) *Distance Grows Nearer*, 2019, Acrylic on paper, 11" x 8.25"

(front cover) *Eternal Loop III* (detail), 2025, Reductive linoleum cut and acrylic on canvas, 25" x 30"

Introduction

by Sara Phillips de Borja

We are delighted to welcome Sage Dawson's artwork to our Principia College community, where its interdisciplinary spirit complements our liberal arts environment by weaving elements from multiple fields and demonstrating their interconnected nature. Her work draws on a variety of interests, revealing the ways in which seemingly distinct ideas and disciplines can intersect and inform one another. Incorporating perspectives from history, sociology, architecture, and technology, Dawson pieces these elements together to establish a layered presentation of something entirely original. The complexity of her work bridges modern and traditional methods, computers and needlework, while creating a dynamic interplay of color, pattern, playfulness, and gravity.

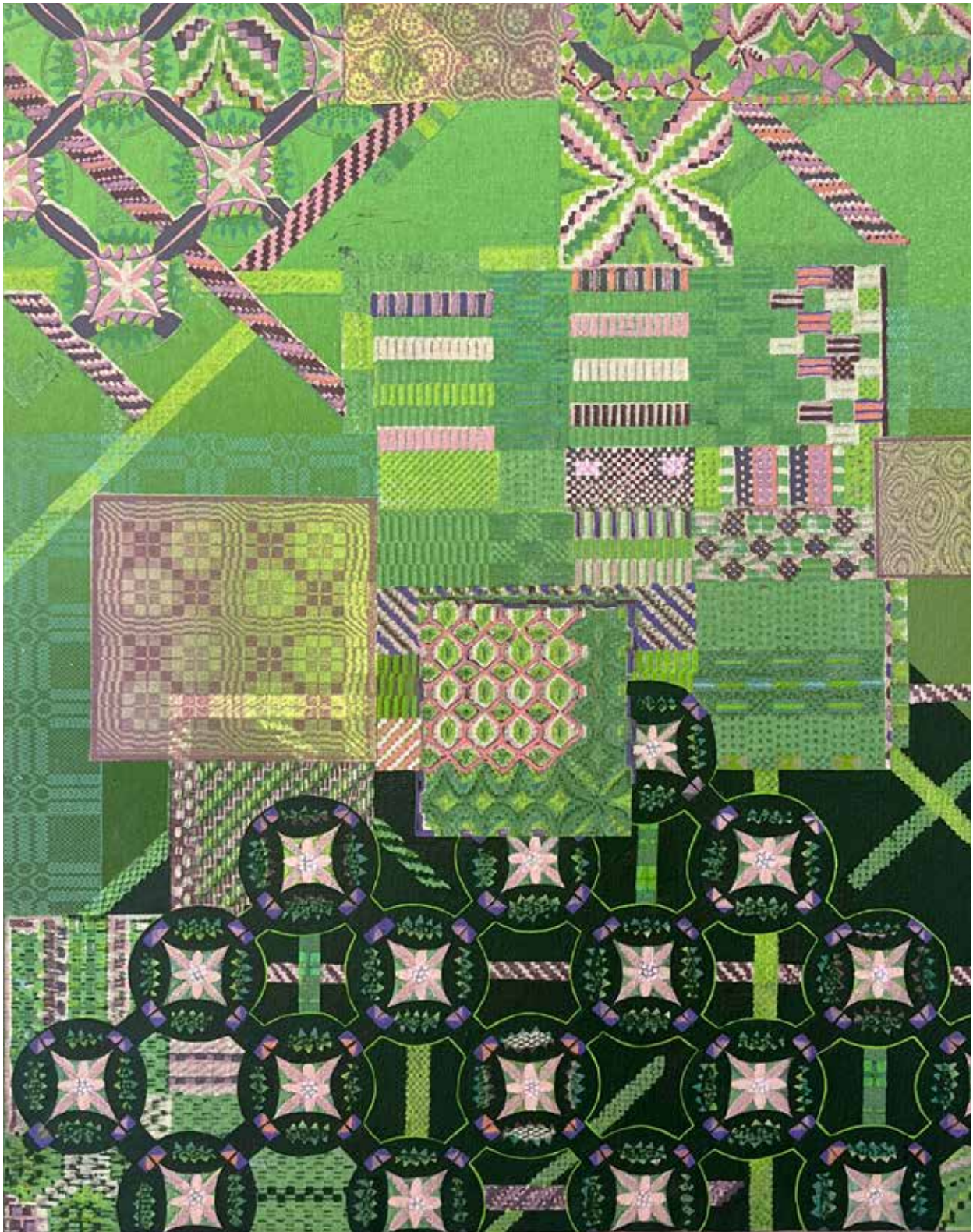
In giving this exhibition the title *Soft Architecture*, Dawson combines seemingly opposed ideas into a unified whole—the malleable nature of cloth and the solidity of structural features. I encourage you to look closely at these works to discover the individual parts while also stepping back to appreciate how these diverse elements synthesize to establish a vibrant, cohesive idea.



Acknowledgments

This exhibition would not have been possible without the efforts of so many. Much appreciation goes to Sage Dawson for sharing her work with Principia College. Stephanie Weissberg has written an essay that thoughtfully explores the concepts presented in Dawson's work. This exhibition has required the help of individuals throughout our community, and I am grateful for their generous assistance. Bruce Rea and Mike McMullin in the Mail and Copy Center brought the exhibition catalog and marketing materials to fruition. With her attention to detail and

institutional knowledge, Deb Wold, the James K. Schmidt Gallery registrar was invaluable. And much thanks to Ishmael Ochieng for his assistance with this exhibition; to Jon Hosmer, Principia College Web Director, for his work with the gallery's website; to David Weis for his photographs; and to our Principia College facilities department, especially Shim Baker and Jon Chester. And a special thank you to my colleagues in the Visual Arts department for their support of the James K. Schmidt Gallery.



(above) *Eternal Loop I*, 2025, Reductive linoleum cut and acrylic on canvas, 25" x 30"
(right) *Eternal Loop III*, 2025, Reductive linoleum cut and acrylic on canvas, 25" x 30"

Eternal Loops

by Stephanie Weissberg

Artist Sage Dawson works in layers. She produces densely patterned images that draw on imagery from historical textiles, architecture, and digital environments. While printmaking forms the foundation of her practice, she pushes beyond traditional techniques, cycling between hand- and machine-made, analog and digital, material and immaterial. These interchanges contribute to the visual quality of her work, which remains in a state of flux, constantly pulsing between registers. Peeling back the layers of Dawson's images reveals the underlying histories that unite these seemingly disparate approaches.

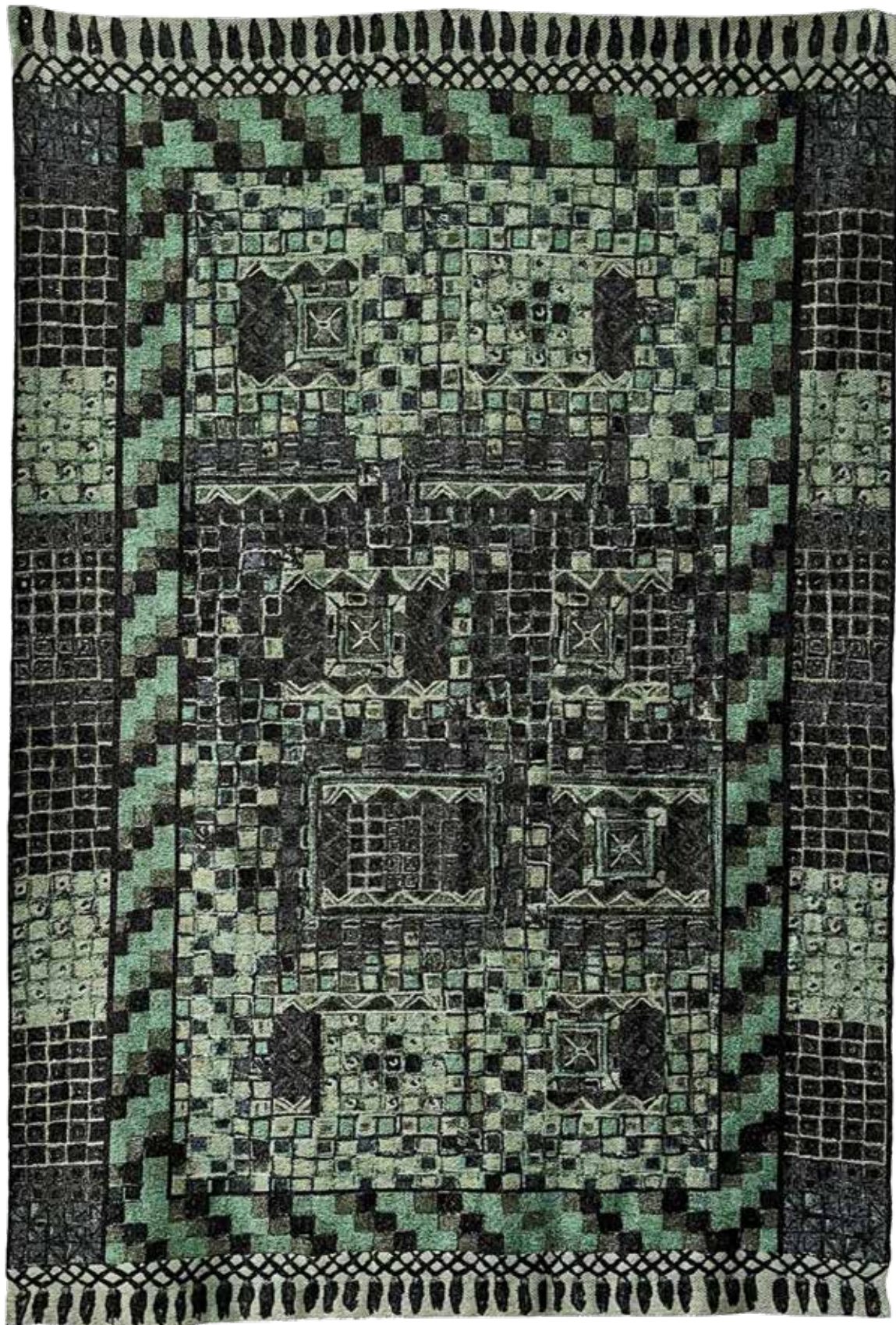
The artist's 2025 series of linoleum cuts on canvas titled *Eternal Loop (I-III)* simultaneously read as motherboards, collections of bitmap images, and intricately patterned textiles. Much of the imagery is, in fact, direct quotations from handwoven Ozark coverlets from the collection of the Shiloh Museum of Ozark History in Springdale, Arkansas. Primarily woven by women during the early settler period as vernacular architecture was being constructed by men, these textiles represent the often unacknowledged labor that helped make daily life possible. These intricately designed coverlets served as both functional and aesthetic objects. They were placed on the bed where they provided critical warmth while also serving as one of the largest decorative elements in the domestic space. Because the primary bed was often the largest piece of furniture in the home, the coverlet occupied an especially prominent visual role.

Ozark weavers combined regionally recognizable motifs with variations in color and weave structure to produce endless design possibilities. Many of the patterns represented in the Shiloh Museum's collection can be found in draft notations recorded by specific women. The "Dapple Gray," otherwise known as the "Snail Trail," for instance, is represented in a draft by Martha Powell Wilson (1825-1915) from Tennessee.¹ These documents

reveal the ways in which popular patterns were subtly modified as they spread from maker to maker. Many motifs represent historical events or flora and fauna native to the region such as "Pine Cone Bloom," a pattern frequently cited by Dawson throughout all three compositions in her *Eternal Loop* series.



To produce these works, Dawson scans images of Ozark coverlets, which she uses as the basis for laser-cut linoleum print blocks. In the process, she translates the meticulously woven textiles into dematerialized digital representations which she then reconstitutes through machine technology. Once the laser cuts are produced, Dawson manually modifies the blocks, leaving slight inconsistencies as traces of her hand. She then prints from the block onto a canvas, another woven structure. She repeats this process dozens of times, layering many patterns to produce visually complex compositions in which textile and print, analog and digital, handcrafted and machine-made become indistinguishable. Her



(above) *Soft Architecture*, 2019, Jacquard weaving, 68.5" x 44.5"

(right) *One North, Topping Out Day* (detail), 2019, Collagraph, monotype, and acrylic on canvas, 19' x 12.5', photograph by David Weis



iterative process and the title of the series *Eternal Loop* call to mind the computational term “infinite loop,” which describes an endlessly repeating system.

While textiles are often positioned as female-coded craft objects whose significance is relegated to the ornamental, Dawson’s work points to weaving as a technology that birthed critical aspects of the modern world, including computing technology and architecture. Weaving is based on a binary system of “on” and “off”—the weft threads are either passed under or over the warp threads. This process is repeated countless times to make complex patterns. With the patent invention of the Jacquard Loom in 1804, this system was translated to a series of cards that controlled which warp threads were lifted, allowing the weaver to pre-arrange intricate patterns with maximum efficiency. The earliest computing systems were directly based on this logic. Ada Lovelace (1815-1852), widely recognized as the first computer programmer, observed of a prototype for an early computational machine, “[it] weaves algebraical patterns just as the Jacquard-loom weaves flowers and leaves.”²

Dawson directly references weaving’s history as the inspiration for modern computers with her 2019 work *Soft Architecture*. To produce the piece, she began with a drawing on paper, which she then digitized and used as a cartoon for an electronic Jacquard weaving (an evolution from the card-based Jacquard mechanism of the nineteenth century). The original drawing is acrylic on grid paper and is part of a larger series Dawson began in 2019. The artist refers to the colorful images with dense patterning and tassels depicted at either end as “magic carpets.” While the drawings are certainly in dialogue with textiles, they also draw on imagery from decorative tilework. Dawson drew inspiration for these patterns from sources ranging from the hyperlocal, including the abundance of ornamental tilework present on and in historic homes in the St. Louis area, to further-afield referents, such as the masterful Byzantine mosaics that adorn the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul.

In *Soft Architecture*, Dawson transposes the imagery of hard building materials onto soft surfaces – first paper and then woven fibers. Notably, the influence of carpet patterning can be observed in architectural programs including stone and tilework as far back as ancient Egypt and Assyria. German architect Gottfried Semper posits “Textile art is a primordial art (Urkunst). It alone generates its types from itself or from analogies in nature; all other arts, including architecture, borrow types from this art.”³ Semper traces the earliest architectural forms to woven walls used by nomadic civilizations to provide shelter and demarcate space, creating separation between the inner life and outer world. He argues that “Most of the decorative symbols used in architecture have their origin and derivation in the textile arts.”⁴ Given this history, Dawson’s *Soft Architecture* latently records yet another transposition, that of the patterning of woven carpets onto the architectural elements that form the primary referent for her images.

With her ambitiously scaled monoprint *One North, Topping Out Day* (2019), Dawson again combines imagery from architectural forms native



(above) *One North, Topping Out Day*, 2019, Collagraph, monotype, and acrylic on canvas, 19' x 12.5', photograph by David Weis
 (right) *Itty Bitty Squiggy*, 2025, Paper pulp, 24" x 14"

to St. Louis with those from the ancient world. At the center of the composition stand several representations of the Gateway Arch—the city's triumphant monument to westward expansion on which construction began in 1963. Nearby, three triangles—one red and two silver—represent the keystone that completed the arch on topping out day on October 28, 1965. By referencing the assembly of the monument, Dawson indirectly points to the most infamous moment of its construction when in 1964, civil rights activists Percy Green and Richard Daly climbed the arch in protest against its building manager, MacDonald Construction Company, for racial discrimination against Black workers. Their protest remains one of the best-known acts of civil disobedience in St. Louis history, drawing attention to the structural inequalities on which the city and its legacy were built.

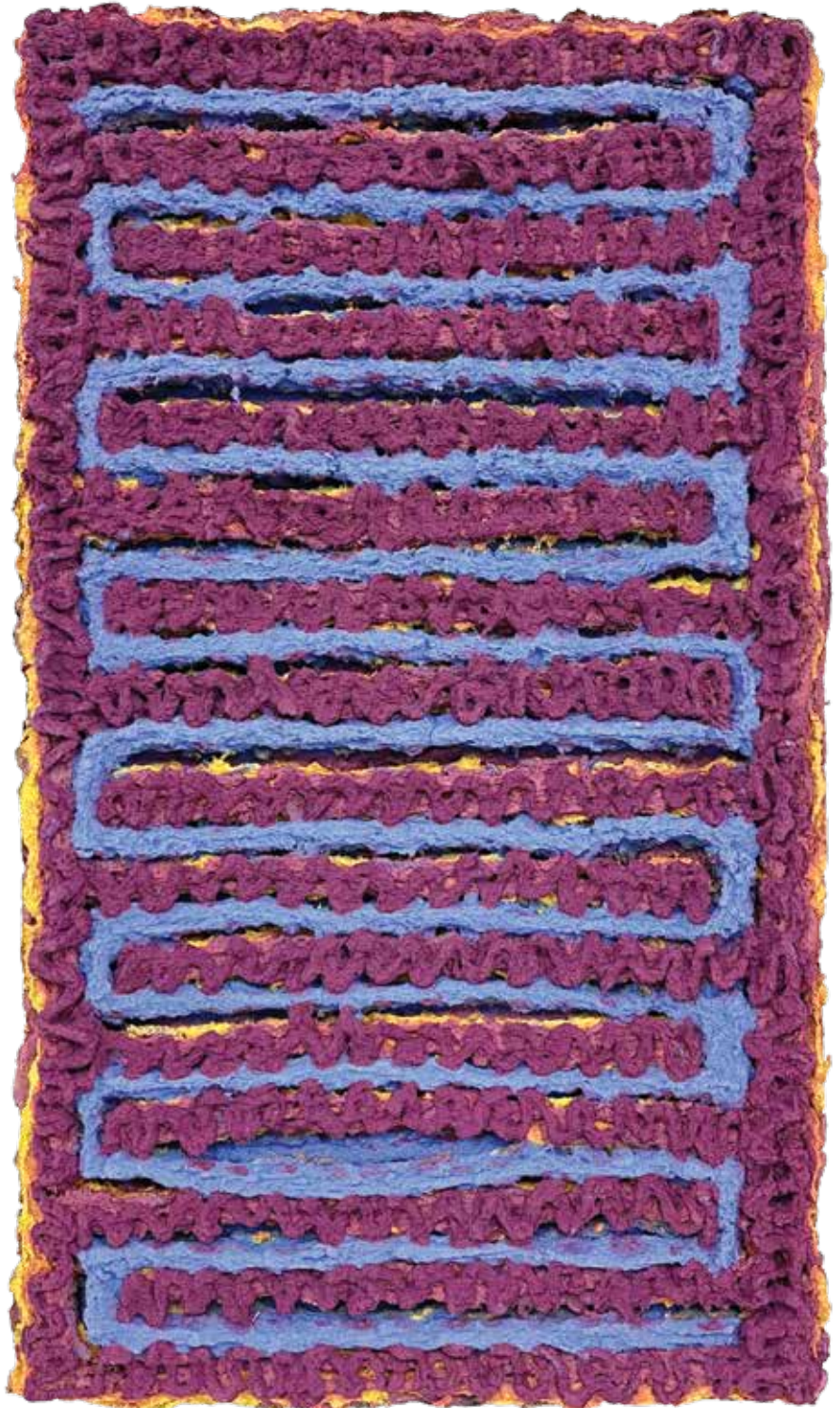
Radiating out from the arch, Dawson has rendered a field of abstracted forms in varying shades of green that read at once as decorative architectural tilework and as a plan view of a neighborhood. Both associations evoke the historic housing stock that was demolished, through eminent domain, to build the Arch and the surrounding Gateway Arch National Park between 1935 and 1938. The project ultimately resulted in the destruction of over forty blocks of historic buildings and disproportionately displaced Black and working-class residents.

Like with her "magic carpet" drawings, Dawson has rendered tassels at either end of *One North*, once again blurring distinctions between architecture and textile. She has installed the work in two ways – both of which underscore this slippage. In its original presentation, she directed the viewer's gaze overhead by suspending the monumentally-scaled canvas from the ceiling so

that it sloped downward, forming the inverse curve of the Arch. This choreography is, of course, reminiscent of the humbling experience of standing at the base of the Arch and craning one's neck skyward in an attempt to take in the entirety of the massive landmark, though the inverted form offers a sharp critique of the structure's status as a monument dedicated to the American people. Dawson's gesture also acknowledges older models from which the Arch took its cues, such as the soaring domed ceiling of Hagia Sophia adorned with millions of tesserae. Originally built as an Eastern Orthodox basilica during the Byzantine period, Hagia Sophia was later transformed into an Islamic mosque during the fifteenth century. In both contexts, the decorative program served as an important tool for storytelling to a population that largely could not read. This building of layered narratives through abstract imagery chimes with the spread of weaving patterns across the Ozark region that has been a point of inspiration for Dawson in other works.

At Principia College, Dawson has suspended *One North* from the wall, allowing the work to meet the floor and spill across it. This presentation brings to mind ancient mosaics, which adorned the floors of many public and private buildings as early as the third millennium BCE. The tilework motifs present throughout the work speak to the connection across millennia from the architecture of ancient Greece and Rome to nineteenth and twentieth-century buildings of St. Louis. Two Doric columns lie on their sides at either end of the composition, reminding viewers that modern history is rife with its own ruins.

Rather than presenting history as a linear progression, Dawson reveals it as a series of recursive exchanges in which forms, technologies, and ideas continually migrate across media and through time. Motifs reappear as architecture becomes fabric, textile becomes code, and vernacular craft becomes the language of digital systems. Her works ask viewers to look beyond



the surface of images to the networks of labor, knowledge, and cultural transmission they contain.

Stephanie Weissberg is Senior Curator at the Pulitzer Arts Foundation in St. Louis, Missouri, where she has organized more than a dozen exhibitions including monographic surveys and thematic exhibitions exploring intersections of art, architecture, and social history. She holds a BA from University of California, Berkeley and an MA from New York University.

Endnotes:

¹ Martha L. Benson and Laura Lyon Redford, *Ozark Coverlets: The Shiloh Museum of Ozark History Collection* (Shiloh Museum of Ozark History, 2015), 80.

² Ada Lovelace, "Translator's Notes to Sketch of the Analytical Engine Invented by Charles Babbage" by Luigi Menabrea, *Taylor's Scientific Memoirs*, Vol. 3 (1845): 696.

³ Gottfried Semper, *Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts; or, Practical Aesthetics*, translated by Harry Francis Mallgrave and Michael Robinson, (Getty Research Institute, 2004), 13.

⁴ Gottfried Semper, *The Four Elements of Architecture and Other Writings* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 246.



(above) *Meander Pulp*, 2025, Paper pulp, 39" x 31"

(below) *Shilly-Shally*, 2025, Paper pulp, 39" x 31"

(right) *Cinnabar Lattice*, 2025, Paper pulp, 39" x 31"





Artist's Statement

Sage Dawson's work is about the politics of housing and labor that shape the American city. Over the past decade, she has explored local history through the built environment, focusing on the history of brick, limestone, and cast iron production, and their use as building materials and vernacular architecture. Working at the intersection of printmaking, archival research, and material activism, Dawson's work sometimes embeds directly into the urban landscape as architecturally responsive works that comment on our ever-shifting politics of space. Her projects reveal the systematic erasure of local architecture, showing how our physical surroundings and lives are directly connected.

Recently, her work has shifted toward understanding domestic labor in the Midwest during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By connecting textiles with labor history and

urban studies, Dawson brings stories out of archival storage and into public conversation. She is drawn to analog approaches to technology, and explores making that typify historic domestic labor: banner-making, needlepoint, open-work, patterning, and stitching. She also uses repeating, multi-layered printing blocks to build layered textiles that bridge analog and digital technologies. In her prints, digital tools blend with traditional hand-carving without losing their distinct, handmade mark. Dawson's plays with the shared grid patterns of the computer screen, the silkscreen, and the weaving loom, where each relies on a base structure—code, mesh, or warp—to organize information. This back-and-forth cycle between analog and digital explores the tension and common ground between handmade and digital marks and forms bridges between traditional craft and digital literacy.

Artist's Bio

Sage Dawson is a Senior Lecturer at the Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Art at Washington University in St. Louis, and she is the Founder and Co-Director at STNDRD (Granite City, Illinois) and NON STNDRD (Sauget, Illinois).

Dawson has exhibited, lectured, and presented work at various sites including the Center for Contemporary Printmaking Norwalk, NARS Foundation, Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts Project Space/Printed Matter, the Urban Institute for Contemporary Art, Pulitzer Arts Foundation, Chicago Artists Coalition, Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, Tate Exchange, Boston University School of Visual Arts, Terrain Biennial, Saint Louis Art Museum, Laumeier Sculpture Park, Springfield Art Museum, The Luminary, City University of New York, Counterpublic Triennial, University of Pennsylvania, University of Toledo Center for the Visual Arts, Minnesota Center for Book Arts, Work • Detroit, and the International Print Center New York.

She is a recent recipient of the Futures Fund granting initiative awarded by the Luminary



and funded by the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, the Creative Stimulus Award from Critical Mass for the Visual Arts St. Louis, and is a Joan Mitchell Foundation Grant Nominee. She has been in residence at ACRE, the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, the Cité International Des Arts in Paris, Zygote Press, the Luminary, Vermont Studio Center, Pyramid Atlantic, and has worked in collaboration at the Tamarind Institute of Lithography. Her work has appeared in *Art in America*, *Elephant Magazine*, *From Here to There* published by Princeton Architectural Press, *New Art Examiner*, *New City Art*, Saint Louis Public Radio, *60 Wrd/Min Art Critic*, *Art in Print*, *Dwell Magazine*, and *Hyperallergic*.

Website: sagedawson.com

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This exhibition was initiated and curated by the James K. Schmidt Gallery.

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