

Sarah Crowner's *Rotated Two-Way Arabesque*: The Power of Woman to Lead

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Sarah Crowner, *Rotated two-way Arabesque*,
2015. Acrylic on canvas and raw canvas, sewn, 79
× 96 inches (200.7 × 243.8 cm). The Hill
Collection.

Rotated two-way Arabesque by Sarah Crowner is a part of the bigger composition: *Everywhere the Line is Looser*. Made in response to a Harper Bazaar photoshoot from the 1950s, the curves of the arabesque pay direct homage to a photoshoot by Richard Avedon that embodies a feminine fierceness. By infusing inspiration from the 1950s, the *Rotated two-way Arabesque* underscores the impactful position women hold in leadership.

Rotated two-way Arabesque appears to have a flat monochrome background that is simplistic to the eye yet intricate in composition. Crowner has composed this piece by sewing

different pieces of fabrics together. At first glance, the canvas resembles an eyelash. In *The Sea, the Sky, a Window*, a project by Sarah Crowner at the Hill Art Foundation, the work is presented near the entryway and next to a large window. The sunlight highlights the piece and its complexity. The soft velvety texture of the canvas, specifically the black arabesque, becomes apparent; the viewer may begin to wonder how this velvety feel was achieved. Crowner engages in a distinct process where, “patterns are drawn, painted, cut, sewn and stretched.” Delving into the intricacies of Crowner’s artistic methodology, “central to Crowner’s practice is research into the history of 20th century abstraction and modernist design, as well as an obvious penchant for textile production. Rooted in these various lineages, Crowner’s works display a contradiction: they are as much paintings as they are objects.”¹ The canvas acts as both a painting and assemblage due to the manipulation of materials.

Sarah Crowner is a Philadelphia raised, New York City based artist. Born in 1974, she draws inspiration from artworks made during the 1950s and 60s. Sarah Crowner started her career off with painting, however she is continuously testing her limits by dabbling in ceramics, sculpting, assemblage, and more. In her artistic process, she is constantly considering the art of those who have come before her. After graduate school, Crowner started to experiment with mediums other than painting. She yearned to create in a way she never had before. She studied different artists such as Beatrice Wood that served as inspiration to work in different mediums such as ceramics. The versatility and the overlapping of mediums of Crowner’s work speaks to her exposure to the broad scope of artmaking.²

¹ *Sarah Crowner’s Modernist Patchworks - Caseykaplangallery.Com*, caseykaplangallery.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Crowner-Press-Kit.e2.pdf. Accessed 16 Jan. 2024.

² McGlynn, Tom. “Sarah Crowner with Tom McGlynn.” *The Brooklyn Rail*, 28 Jan. 2021, brooklynrail.org/2021/02/art/SARAH-CROWNER-with-Tom-McGlynn.

Crowner drew her inspiration for *Rotated two-way Arabesque* from a Ray Johnson painting featured in the background of a Richard Avedon photo from a 1956 Harpers Bazaar photoshoot. The black and white print captures a group of women in front of the Ray Johnson artwork. The first picture takes place in front of the arabesque with two women standing in front. Although the women are dressed in formal attire, their poses as well as the gesture of their bodies bring a feminine elegance to the picture that is repeated through the lines. In the picture, it is as if the models are leading the objects surrounding. In Sarah Crowner's very own piece, she uses a similar curve to create the wing-like shape, resembling an eyelash, that takes up a majority of the space in the center of the piece. The connection between the Harper Bazaar print and Sarah Crowner's *Rotated two-way Arabesque* emphasizes the power women have to lead. By sewing the painted canvas together and recreating the black curves depicted in the Ray Johnson work Crowner makes a reference to the fierce femininity the picture exudes.

The Harper's Bazaar photoshoot took place in 1957, right before the onset of the second wave feminist movement. The first wave feminist movement fought for the legal rights of women such as the right to vote. Second wave feminism arose in protests to women's place in society. The time period in which the photo Crowner references was taken is a time where women were still recharacterizing the way they decided to take up space in the world. By referencing a photo from such a pivotal point of time in women's history, Crowner is speaking to the power women have to lead. By placing the arabesque at the start of the show, Crowner welcomes the audience into the exhibition with a feminine twist. She is allowing the revolutionary power of women from all time periods to lead us into the exhibition. ³

³ "Feminism: The Second Wave." *National Women's History Museum*, 18 June 2020, www.womenshistory.org/exhibits/feminism-second-wave.

The composition of the *Two-way Rotated Arabesque* as well as the transformative period it is referencing speaks to the power of the work. The inspiration Crowner draws to create her pieces acts as an ode to the work of those who have come before. Crowner's reference to the Harper Bazaar photoshoot from the 1950s speaks to the power women have to lead. By using artwork from earlier time periods as inspiration, she shows appreciation as well as continues the legacy of these pieces by adding her own twist. She carries the relevancy of the artwork and has the power to recreate the story. By opening *The Sea, the Sky, a Window* with *Rotated two-way Arabesque*, she allows the power of the women at this time to lead the audience into the space.

References

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