

# PIXEL PERFECT BUILDING BLOCKS

Thought you'd seen it all? Well there's another way to play with thread. Artist Devorah Sperber reinterprets famous images using thousands of individual cotton reels

**T**hreads mend and embellish cloth, join flat patterns into whole garments, attach buttons and zips and secure hemlines. In each of these roles, thread transforms our ability to use cloth. However, American artist Devorah Sperber is interested in none of the above. She works with untouched thread, deploying thousands of thread reels to explore what she refers to as the 'biology of vision' or – more simply – how we see.

Assembling thread reels into pixelated versions of familiar works of art, Sperber challenges the veracity of our vision by creating recognisable images that are not entirely present. Many of the works in the ongoing Thread Spools series are installed upside down and viewed through an optical device that condenses and inverts the image.

Sperber cites the first time she saw an image of her own work on a computer screen as crucial to the way she works today. In the mid-1990s she, like many artists, began transferring the 35mm slides that documented her work into digital files. When she saw the low-

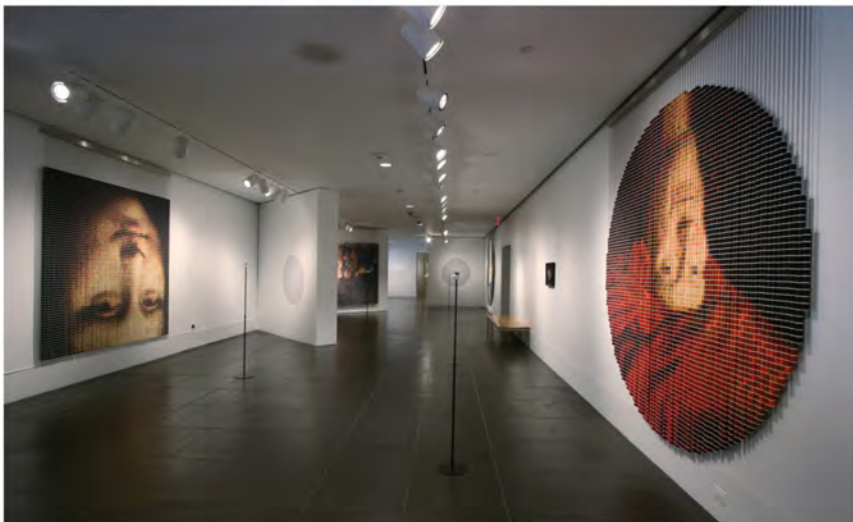
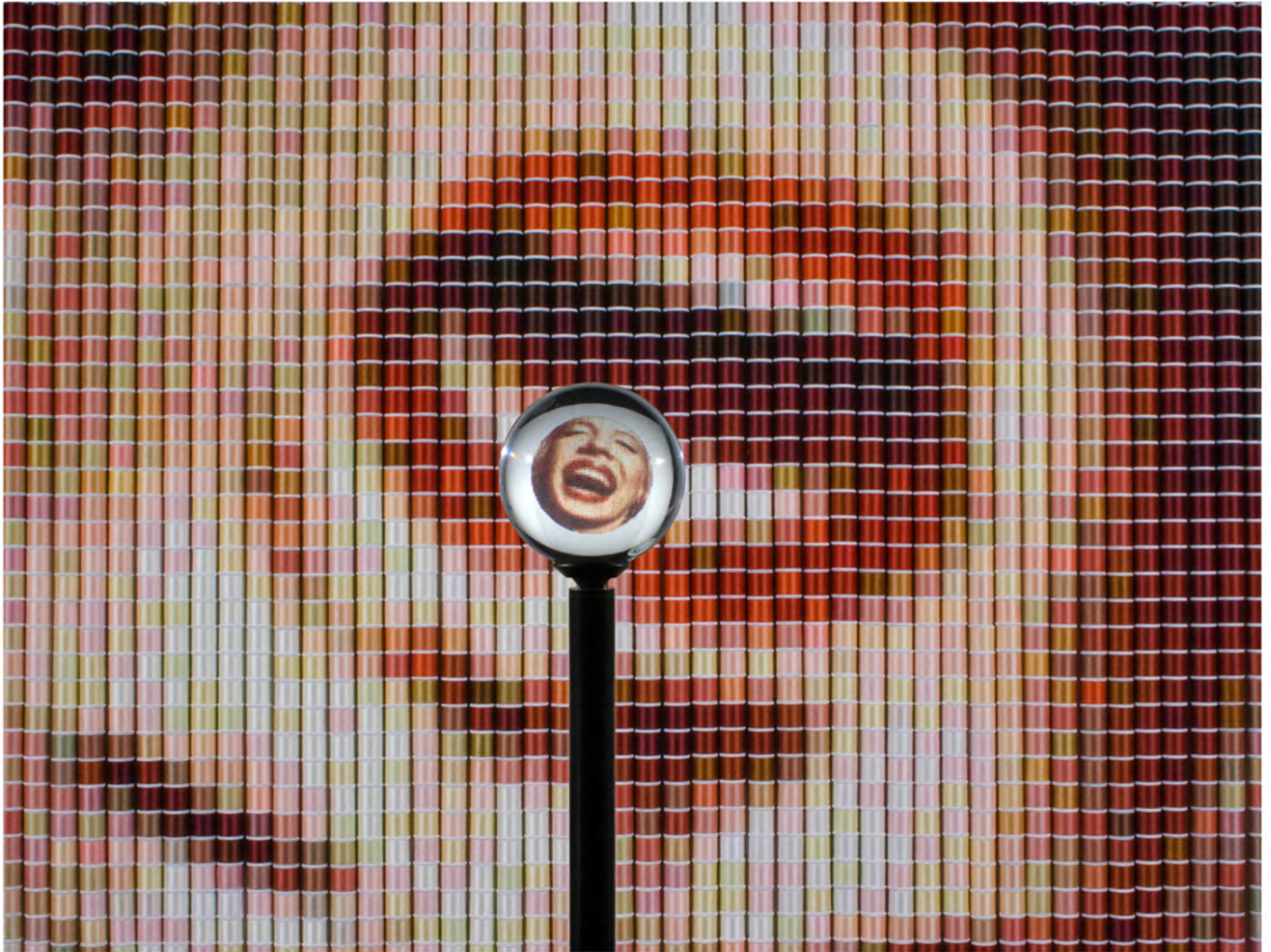
resolution images on the computer screen, she began to consider what her new virtual portfolio might look like if returned to three dimensions. Along with pipe cleaners and felt-tip pen caps, she settled on reels of thread as her chosen material: discrete objects that possess their own individual beauty and, conveniently, are available in a vast array of colours.

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Initially trained as a graphic designer, Sperber was encouraged by her family to pursue an education for the purpose of employment. Art for art's sake was not on her radar. She refers to a 'mid-life crisis in my early 20s' that led her back to education where she 'stumbled upon

sculpture'. A decade living in Colorado followed, during which she carved stone. While her current materials may seem antithetical to these beginnings, Sperber notes that 'enjoyment of process' defined her early work as clearly as it does her practice today. A move to Manhattan, New York in 1991 forced her to reconsider the scale of her work and she began casting plaster forms in a 'repetitive process' she jokingly compares to a 'one-person sweatshop'. A decade after she first began exploring multiples, Sperber was invited to represent the United States with an installation at the Ljubljana Print Biennale in Slovenia in 2005 that addressed mechanical production. *After Mona Lisa 1*, *After Mona Lisa 2* and *After the Last Supper*, all from the Thread Spools series, were exhibited.

To date, seven reductive versions of *After the Mona Lisa* have been created, ranging from 425 reels used in version one, to 5,084 in version seven. The amount of information contained in each work is not enough to depict



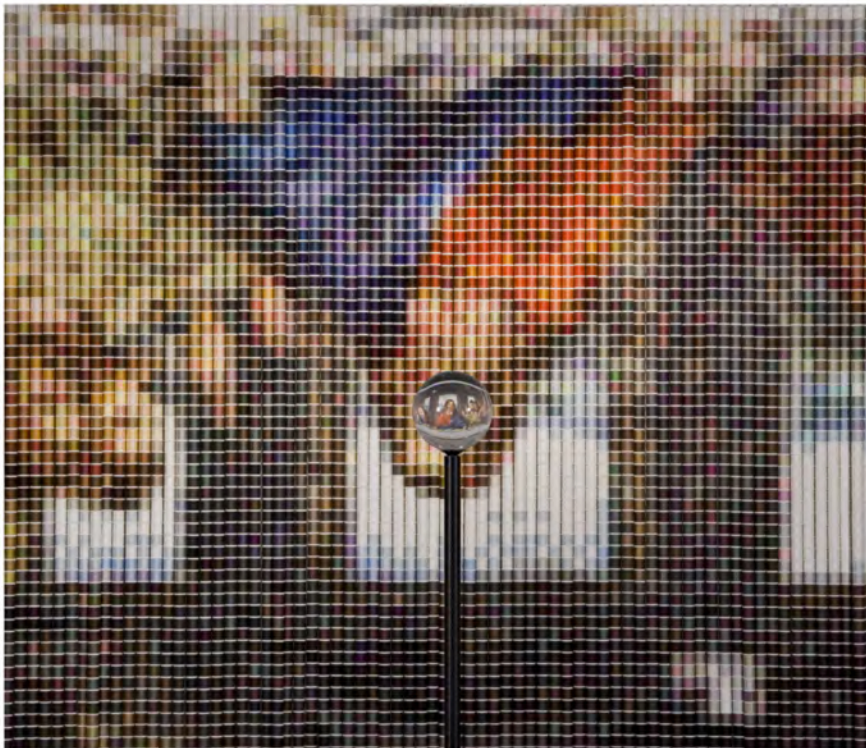
A detail of *Marilyn 2*, 2009, made from 3,024 reels of thread, a clear acrylic sphere and metal stand. 188 x 195.5cm

Left: An installation view of the exhibition 'The Eye of the Artist: The Work of Devorah Sperber' held at Brooklyn Museum in 2007

[www.devorahsperber.com](http://www.devorahsperber.com)

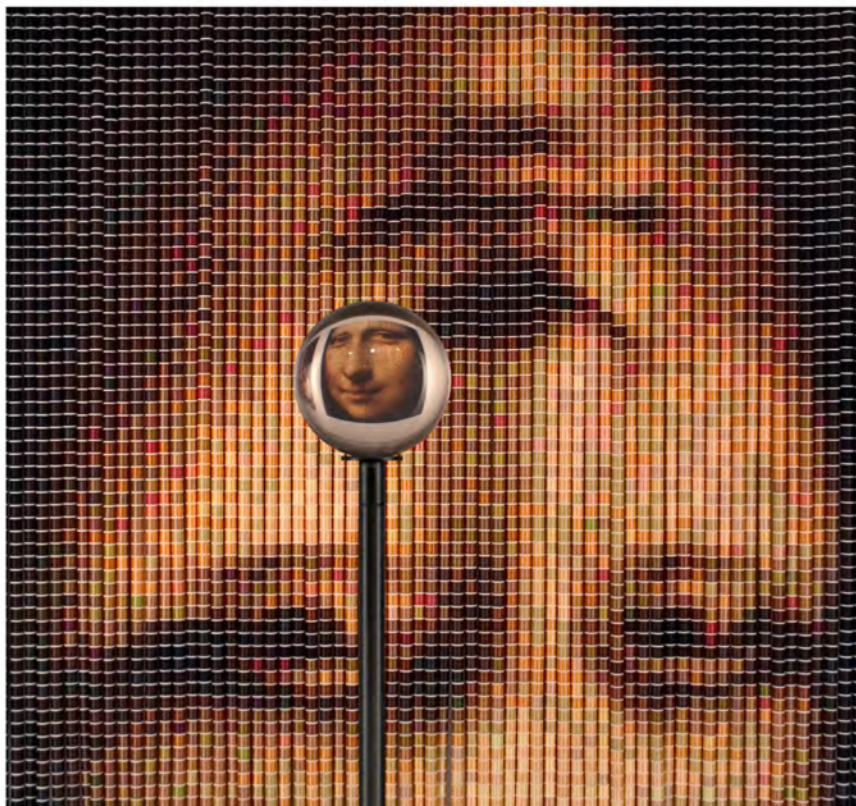


*After The Last Supper*, 2005 (and detail below)  
 created from 20,736 reels of thread. 216 x 74cm



Leonardo da Vinci's enigmatic painting as we know it but, nonetheless, that is what we see when faced with Spier's collection of carefully selected reels.

Glancing between the wall hanging and glass sphere, viewers begin to recognise that much of what we think we know is made through our mind's inference of content. In contrast, the centred-eye series created in 2006 uses a consistent number of 5,024 reels to rebuild familiar portrait paintings by Renoir, da Vinci, Vermeer, Picasso, Rembrandt and Van Eyck, which she explains were inspired by a scientific survey by Christopher Tyler of three-quarter view portraits. More recent work has departed from Spier's early interest in what could be described as traditional art history and instead referenced mass-produced images such as Andy Warhol's soup cans, Marilyn Monroe's smile and, most recently, the cultish images of Star Trek.

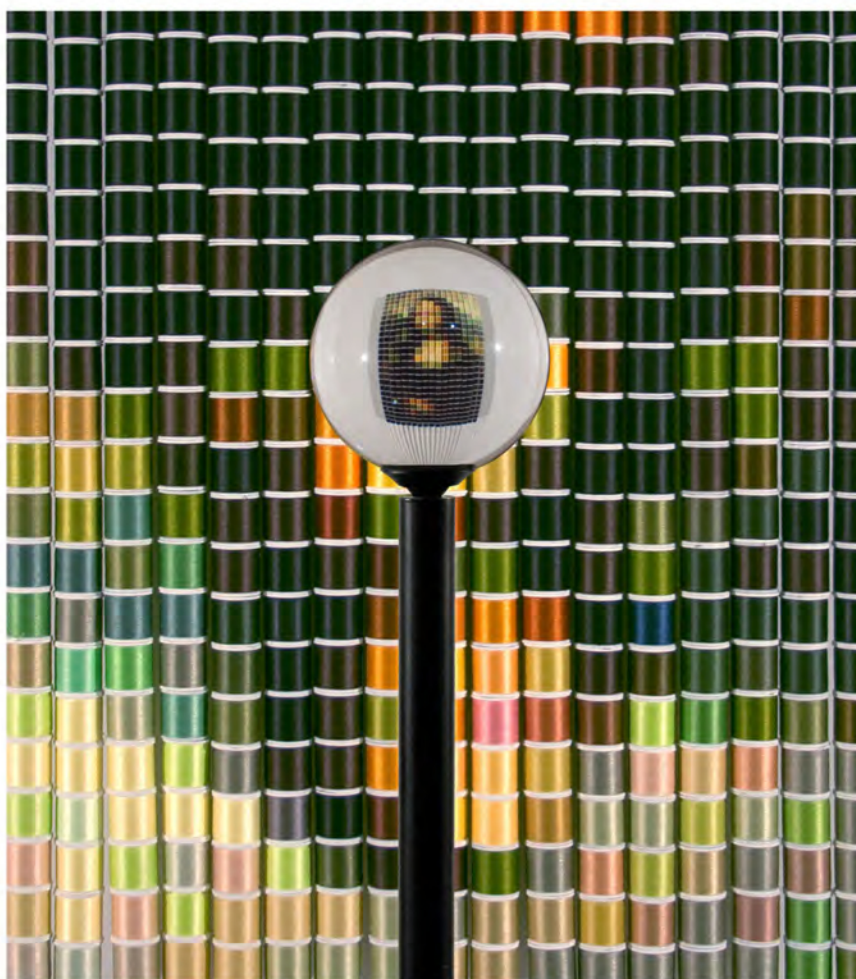


Above: *After The Mona Lisa 1* and a detail (below) of *After The Mona Lisa 2*, which Sperber created from 5,184 reels of thread in 2005. 216 x 218cm

In contrast to John Berger's thesis in *Ways of Seeing*, (inspired by Walter Benjamin's essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*) which fears for the vitality of reproduced art, Sperber by way of her process and chosen materials, returns a sense of the magical and unique to her reproductions. She defends her recent departure from the canon of western art history, explaining that 'light-hearted can be underrated'. It might be fair to add that in the current global climate, light-hearted takes on an increasingly vital role of escape, distraction and easy intrigue that provides a necessary counterbalance to an increasingly disturbing reality.

In addition to the art works Sperber develops independently, she also takes on commissions, which she compares as 'closest to working like the graphic designer' of her early education.

Marilyn Monroe and her billowing



Much like a weaver, she notes a lot of tweaking of colour is needed to push and manipulate the palette

Right: *Transporter: Kirk and Spock Beaming In*, 2007/08. Two beaded figures hang in front of mirror panels installed in a corner to create the illusion of six figures beaming in. Constructed from more than 100,000 loose beads. 264 x 183 x 183cm

Main image, opposite: A detail of Spock from *Transporter: Kirk and Spock Beaming In*

Below: A view of Devorah's commission for the Lobby of One Penn Plaza, New York City – *The Subway Grate and Marilyn* (2007)

Below: Devorah Sperber at work on an installation. *Portrait by Jennifer May*



skirt reappear in a rare grey-scale work for the Lobby of One Penn Plaza in New York City; a version of work by the surrealist Magritte is now installed on a Royal Caribbean Cruise Line ship; Monet's *Water Lilies* in thread reels now flank the marble wall of Wells Real Estate Funds in Arlington, Virginia. I speculate that the commissioning process could feel restrictive but Sperber disagrees, explaining: 'I like responding to something rather than picking from an infinite number of potential ideas' Works such as *After Monet (Water Lilies)* (2005) rely on an 'instinctive response to space'. She initially balked at the idea, thinking that the impressionist style was 'already too close to the idea of pixilation itself' but found the aesthetic content too appropriate for the setting to dismiss.

It is here, in Sperber's intuitive rather than technical decisions, that her methodical process gives way to something far more unexpected. Much like a weaver, she notes that 'a lot of tweaking of colour is needed to push and manipulate the palette'. In spite of the references made to machine and repetition, this work is about materials, labour and the magical ability of the two, when put in perfect combination, to make you see the world a little differently. ☺

*Jessica Hemmings*

