John K Raustein

Oslo, Norway
b. 1972

John K Raustein is not afraid to take an idea and allow it to permeate and transform an entire space, engaging the power of colour and its capacity to trigger profound emotional responses. His dreamlike spaces are, in the truest sense, weirdly familiar but deeply unsettling. Cinematic in the 'art/body horror' oeuvre of David Cronenberg and Matthew Barney, it is as if they have emerged from – or are transporting us into – that liminal state between conscious intellectualism and subconscious vulnerability.

Raustein defines his practice as 'an ongoing investigation of the possibilities of textile tradition and textile craft, materially, technically and conceptually'. Since 1995, in evolving and increasingly resolved aesthetic ways, he has used the persuasive capacity of textiles to illuminate complex themes, such as queer identity, invisibility, privilege and resistance.

His spatial installations consist of almost endless lengths of fabric taken straight off the bolt, draped, wrapped and tied over architectural armatures. Barely contained soft, bulbous forms pile up and nestle together, multiplying and self-generating like cells under a microscope, their DNA replicating, disintegrating, rebuilding and folding outward and back in on themselves. Some areas splay awkwardly in fat, tentacle-like shapes; others feature multiple udder-like pads; stuffed strips are woven together; ribbon-like strips are tied to frames as broken walls. The repetition invites the viewer to search for clues, as if pattern recognition might help us understand not only what we are looking at but what we are feeling while doing so.

The work is monochromatic and monumental, a synthesis of colour-driven seduction with an undercurrent of existential dread. The palette of drab creams, muted mint greens, terracotta, soft pinks and gradations from pale grey to charcoal evokes hospital gowns, waiting rooms and uncomfortable public spaces we would rather not be in. Such 'institutional' colours are deeply linked to the modern human experience and all the discomfort that comes with it. Forms echo 'gateway' spaces and domestic objects of heightened vulnerability – curtains, bedspreads, cushions, mattresses, door frames and windows – folding inward and exploding outward. This juxtaposition of softness and disquiet creates an unsettling tension that is deeply felt but difficult to pinpoint. Raustein acknowledges that the experience is inherently physical: the scale and intensity create a strangeness that skirts the edge of discomfort, eliciting a visceral response that feels intimate yet almost grotesque.

In his light-filled riverside studio, Raustein has plenty of space to work on these supersized projects. He often enlists assistants for complex projects, as his creations involve hundreds of hours of meticulous hand and machine stitching. He frequently works in trilogies, each piece informing the next, allowing his ideas to expand into room-encompassing site-specific installations. 'In my artistic process, I draw inspiration from personal experiences, memories, and societal and cultural issues. I am particularly interested in how everyday objects can carry deeply personal and collective stories. I seek to explore how textiles can be used to challenge and investigate questions of queer identity and how societal norms shape our perception of ourselves and others.'

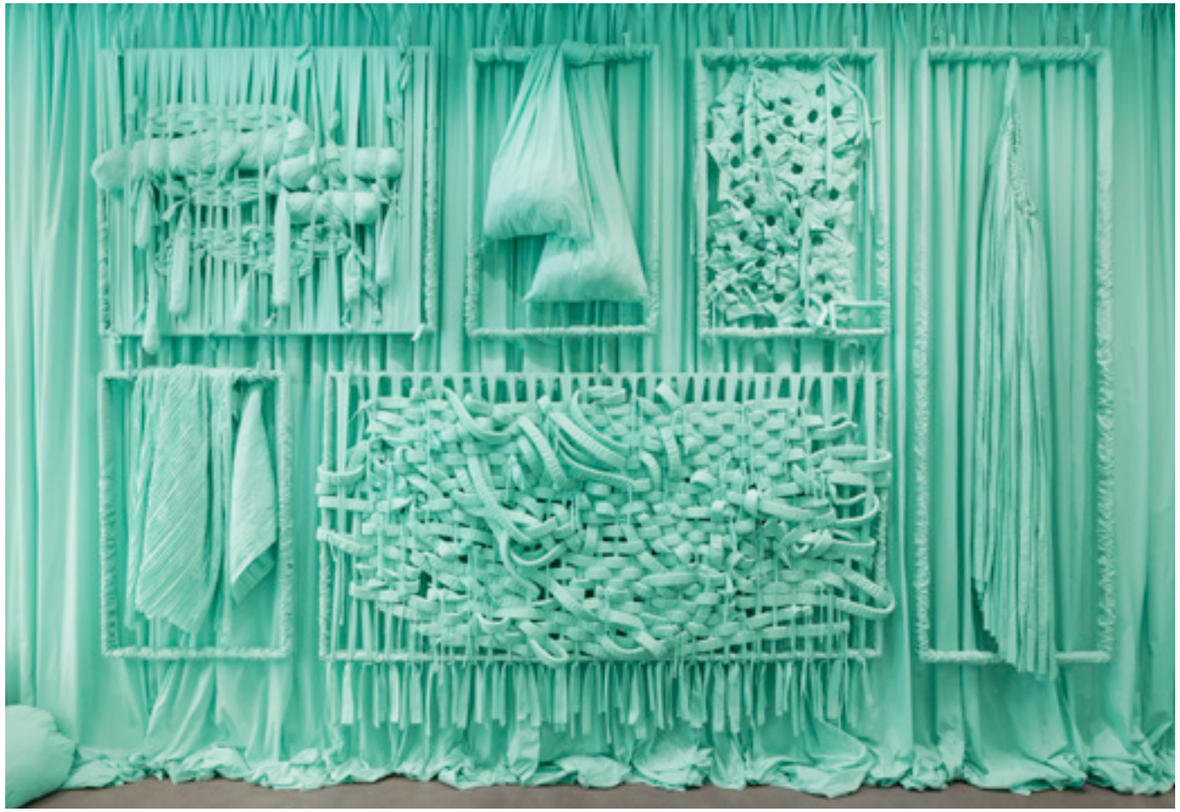
Despite the experiential complexity of his works, Raustein approaches their creation from a minimalist perspective, deliberately employing the devices of simplification, repetition and process. Sewing techniques, including rouleau, folding,

weaving and draping cotton canvas keep him close to the work, leaving room for subtle differences to arise and responsively inform the work in progress. Each new iteration and location represents an opportunity to further develop this textile language and explore its associative potential in ever-evolving combinations.

The mind's eye can latch onto the smallest fragment of memory and magnify it into a monstrous form, leapfrogging intellect and going straight to the 'lizard brain'. Raustein uses these triggers to create enveloping universes of texture and colour that are primeval and intoxicating. Works offer suggestions that something has gone profoundly awry in both the tangible and liminal realms. This masterful approach demonstrates Raustein's profound understanding of textiles, particularly the way that those found in the mundane contexts of domestic life are imbued with deeply personal histories and subjective memories of experiences that can be joyful or painful.

Raustein is acutely aware of the traditional perceptions of textile art as 'women's work' and recognises his place within a rich heritage that exists outside conventional patriarchal norms. While his early works, such as *I Am Trying to Be a Handyman* (2000), directly interrogated these societal conventions by embroidering masculine motifs on home textiles, his more recent creations engage with these critiques in a subtler, more layered manner. The physical accumulation of fabric mirrors the accumulation of meaning, with each layer contributing to the narrative complexity of his work.

'The taste, scent and experience of colour are important elements in my work. I want viewers to experience the emotional resonance of colours and how they affect their perception. Colour can be a kind of bridge between the personal and the collective, evoking memories and feelings.'



p. 231: *When Everything We Know Becomes Strange (tomorrow, everything repeated itself again)/primrose,* 2023, textiles, filling wadding, wood, PVC pipes and metal pipes, 270 x 170 x 60 cm

p. 232: Installation view of *When Everything We Know Becomes Strange (controversial decisions),* Sølvberget Gallery, Stavanger, 2023

p. 233 (top): Installation view of *Facilitated Truths (the new world),* Nitja Centre for Contemporary Art, Lillestrøm, 2022, textiles, filling wadding and wood

(bottom): Installation view of *Facilitated Truths (the new world)/mint,* Nitja Centre for Contemporary Art, Lillestrøm, 2022, textiles, filling wadding and wood

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p. 235 (top): Installation view of *Facilitated Truths (the new world)*

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