



Zhenya Machneva, *Totem*, 2020, cotton, linen, and synthetic fibers, 73 5/8 × 75 5/8".

Zhenya Machneva

GALERIE GEORGES-PHILIPPE & NATHALIE VALLOIS

Zhenya Machneva uses a Finnish Varpapuu floor loom and colorful cotton, linen, and synthetic yarns to create detailed renderings of machinery she has observed and covertly photographed in derelict factories or abandoned industrial ports in and around her native Saint Petersburg—still Leningrad when she was born there in 1988. The artist's interest in such sites is both personal and political. Having long admired factories from afar, Machneva first stepped inside one in 2012 to visit her grandfather at the now defunct Krasnaya Zarya (Red Dawn) telephone factory. She was struck by what she perceived as a camaraderie between her grandfather and the machinery he had operated for fifty years. And as her recent exhibition "*Réminiscences*" attested, the social impact of Stalin's imposed industrialization and the demise of Russia's once-mighty manufacturing sector after the fall of the Soviet Union is a major concern in her work. The tapestries on view depicted antiquated technology without providing a sense of scale or any indication of what the various levers, wires, rollers, wheels, or cranks might do. Relieved of purpose and unabashedly anthropomorphized, Machneva's woven machines are fanciful, fuzzy, and poignant impressions of the Russian rust belt.

Back in the studio, Machneva takes liberties with the images she has collected on-site, tweaking buttons, knobs, gears, screws, and the like so as to allow these details to more readily suggest facial features. Occasionally, she makes major structural changes to an apparatus in order to give it a humanoid form. The most extreme case of anthropomorphism among the works on view could be found in the impressive multipanel tapestry *Totem* (all works cited, 2020). As it was installed in the gallery, this modular work (cited on the checklist as a single installation and as five separate individually framed works) clearly depicted a head, a neck, two arms, a barrel-like torso, and a pair of legs. Machneva's bold graphic style and industrial subject matter easily link her to Russian Constructivists such as Aleksandr Rodchenko—or, better yet, Liubov Popova, who created architectonic designs for Russia's state-run textile factories in the 1920s. But there is perhaps a deeper connection to be made with Soviet cinema. Aesthetically and thematically, Machneva's factory totems recall Aleksandr Andriyevsky's 1935 anti-capitalist film, *Loss of Sensation*, in which robots invented by a factory worker to ostensibly help his fellow workers end up replacing them. Though not explicitly anti-capitalist, Machneva's tapestries reify the intimate relationship between worker and factory by letting the machines take on physical characteristics of people—or perhaps it's the other way around.

Not all of Machneva's weavings are so overtly anthropomorphic. Some portray machinery in ways that suggest the inner workings of the body. In *Stranger*, a single white thread drops ominously from the bottom of the tapestry like an IV tube, zigzagging across a corner of the gallery before finally anchoring neatly into the wall. In the four-panel *Shell*, red thread suggests a lifeline that is even more elemental. Here, a roopy mass of crimson strings bulges in and out from the weaving to form two dangling bands, like umbilical cords. These types of corporeal embellishments, which notably bring the weavings into the real space of the viewer, imbue Machneva's industrial imagery with a distinctly human sense of vulnerability. Her tapestries allude to stories of machines draining workers' blood and, conversely, of workers bound to machines for their livelihood. This Faustian symbiosis animates all of Machneva's work.

— Mara Hoberman

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