



The «Sky Blanket» robe in the background took Meghann O'Brien over a year to weave. *Photo: Sophie Stieger*

Weaving one's life

The former professional snowboarder, Meghann O'Brien, looks back on and reappraises her indigenous origins when she is weaving. While weaving she realizes the same satisfaction as when riding freely through powdered snow.

When Meghann O'Brien is weaving, as she currently does in the museum of Rietberg, there is little to indicate that the 32 year-old once led a life of which many dream. The Canadian earned her living with snowboarding and lived in Whistler, a renowned skiing area in Canada's West. The mountains gave her strength. Whenever she skied down slopes of untouched fresh snow she thrived.

With her talent and her drive to prove herself, she made it to the top in five years. As a young woman, who descends from the indigenous people of the Haida and the Kawakwaka'wakw, she needed this. Since her childhood in Alert Bay on Vancouver Island, she asked herself the question, what were her actual roots?

Then a woman introduced O'Brien to the art of weaving berry baskets out of cedar, the tree of life of the Haida. "That was an unbelievably powerful moment", she says. She says it so authentically that one has to believe her. The weaving craft used to be an important part of her people and was predominantly done by women trained in the art. Through their work they communicated their views of the world. However,

through colonization a big part of this tradition was lost. This was also the case in O'Brien's family.

Bursts of energy through the body

Nevertheless, O'Brien felt a magic attraction to this kind of craft. She started to occupy herself intensely with the traditional textiles of her people. The blankets and garments with the motif of the Raven's Tail were her favorites. According to the beliefs of the indigenous people of North America the Raven brought water and light to the humans.

O'Brien was fascinated by the fact that she could create art objects with this symbolism out of natural materials. She delved into the world of her ancestors, started to reflect on herself, and suddenly felt a responsibility to hand her knowledge to the next generation. In 2009 she quit her professional career of five years and didn't touch a snowboard for a whole year.

The first months she only spun wool from the mountain goats and retreated into the mountains to immerse herself in nature. The yarn became a symbol of time for her. Later, while weaving, she initially missed the physical exercise that she used to experience on the snowboard. However, the more she engaged herself in the work the more intense her physical experience became. She experienced vertical and horizontal energy currents in her body. "There I noticed, that the work was good for me."

An old tradition newly arranged

Today, Meghann O'Brien is considered a rising star in the arts scene. When she is not travelling as an artist-in-residence, she weaves daily. Eight to ten hours are typical, but she also sometimes weaves until four in the morning. She works for years on larger objects. She asks three teachers for advice on a regular basis. O'Brien conforms to tradition in respect to materials, techniques, and patterns, but arranges them in a new way and introduces her values, "... but sometimes the art teaches me instead", she says and laughs. At one time she was weaving in a blue line. Just then she felt an urge to reassess her relationship with her teacher.

For every finished object she receives a new tattoo on her hand, as this is an ancient practice. She already has a bracelet for a raven tail blanket and four points for other traditional pieces. She will work until January 25 in Zürich as part of the "Cosmos" exhibition.

(The artist gives a talk on January 15th at 6 pm in the Hall of the Park-Villa Rieter)

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