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TEXTILE

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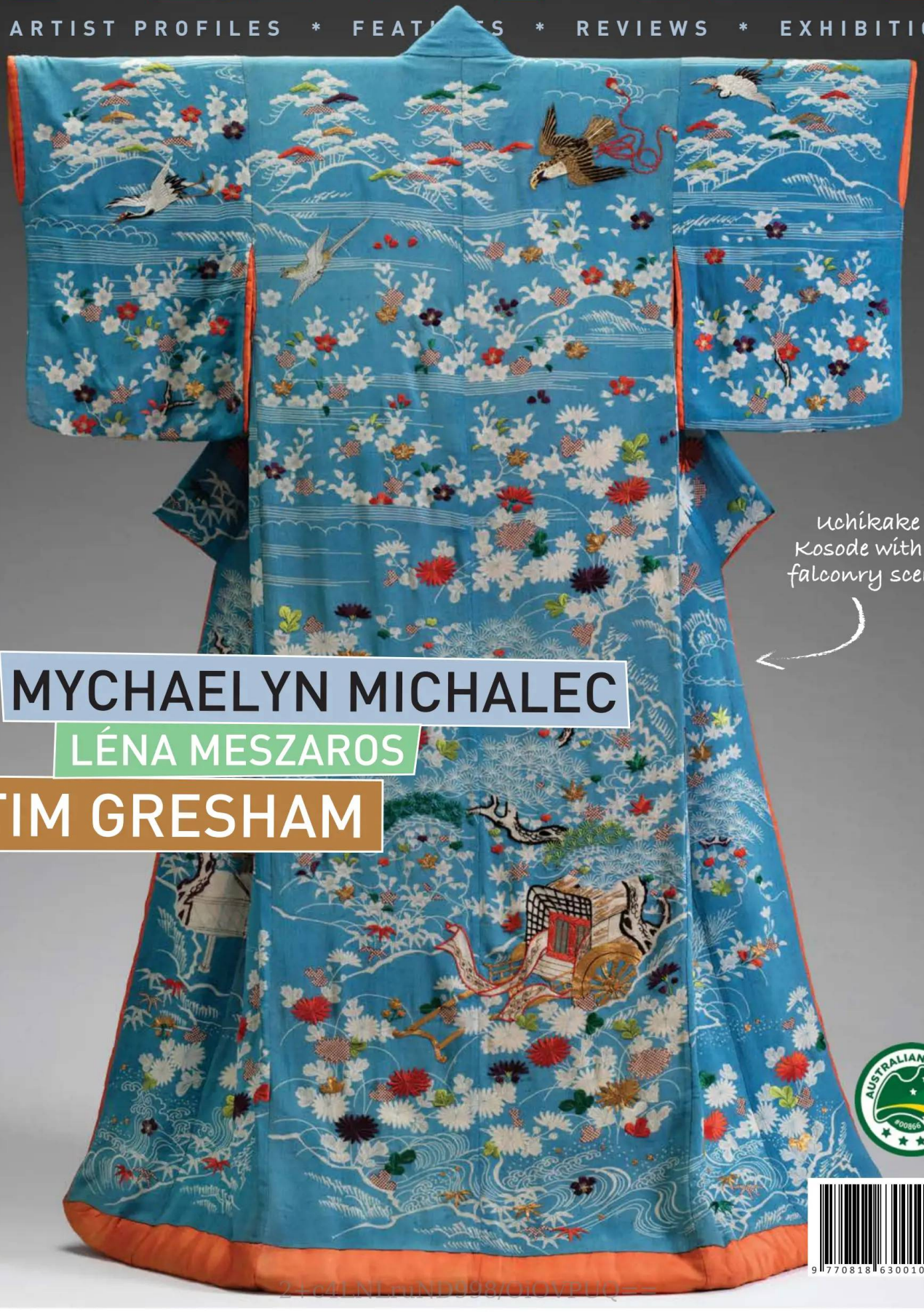
ARTIST PROFILES * FEATURES * REVIEWS * EXHIBITIONS



Uchikake Kosode with a falconry scene

MYCHAELYN MICHALEC

LÉNA MESZAROS

TIM GRESHAM

AUSTRALIAN OWNED

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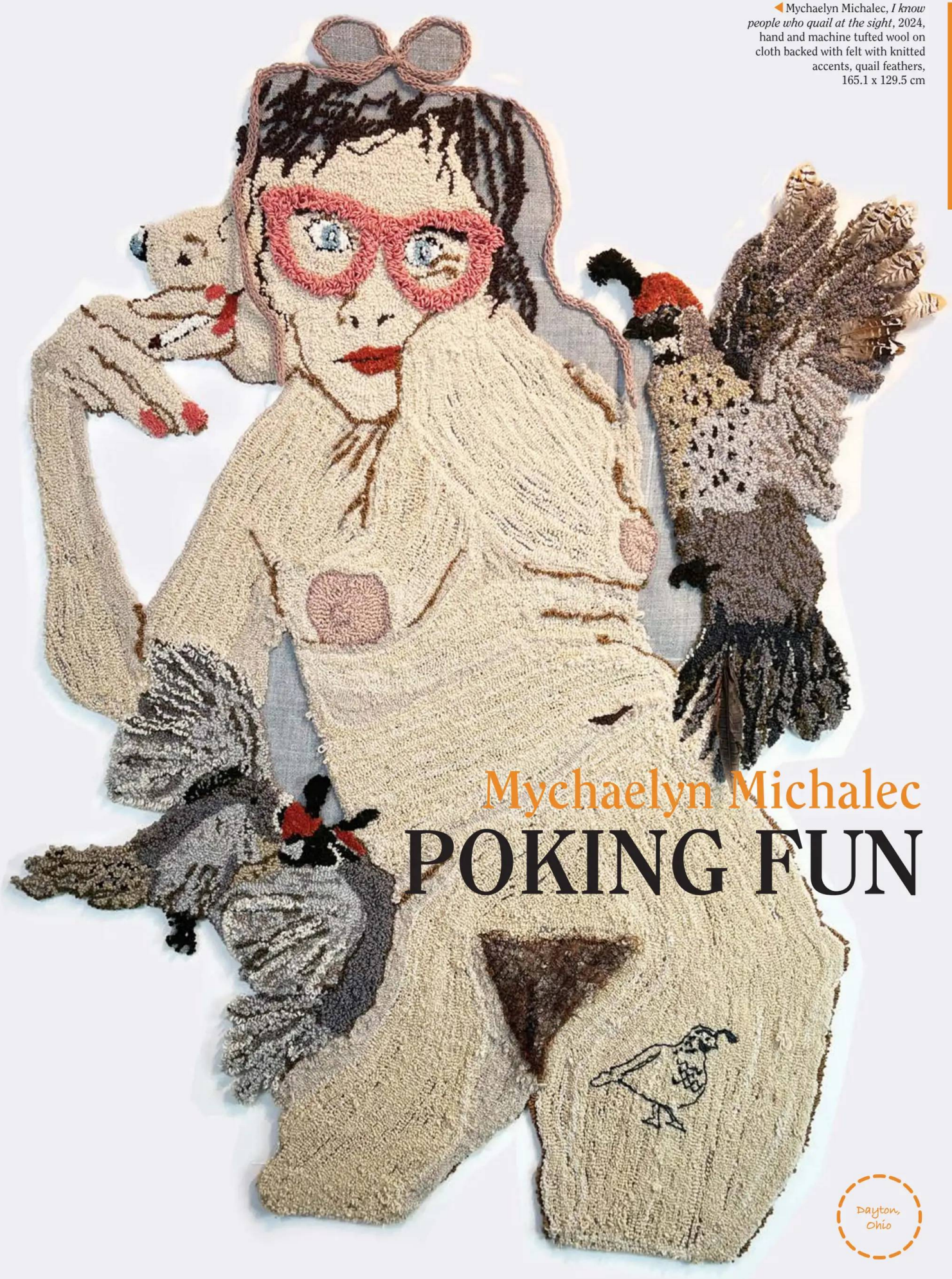
AUTHOR: Grace Sandles



Mychaelyn Michalec, *I know people who quail at the sight*, 2024, hand and machine tufted wool on cloth backed with felt with knitted accents, quail feathers, 165.1 x 129.5 cm

Mychaelyn Michalec

POKING FUN

Dayton, Ohio

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◀ *I know people who quail at the sight*, 2024, *Detail*, hand and machine tufted wool on cloth backed with felt with knitted accents, quail feathers, 165.1 x 129.5 cm

▼ *Mrs. Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, 2024, hand and machine tufted wool on felt backed cloth, 172.7 x 162.6 cm. (Private Collection)



Birds abound in the work of Mychaelyn Michalec. Originally a painter, she now creates tufted tapestries that interrogate feminism, gender stereotypes, labour division, and sexuality through an art historical lens with a distinctly contemporary sensibility – and sense of humour.

▼ *Punch and Judy's Turn to Cry*, 2025, hand tufted yarn on felt backed cloth, 160 x 147.3 cm



The American artist has been moving from strength to strength of late, with honours ranging from a solo booth presentation with K Contemporary at Untitled Art Fair Miami 2025 – listed as one of the top ten booths by Artsy, and reviewed in the *Wall Street Journal* as one of the best things to see at the Fair – and a 2025 Individual Artist Grant from the Montgomery County Cultural Arts District. Michalec was selected as an Ohio Woman to Watch (2023) by the Ohio Advisory Group for the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C, alongside a number of recent solo and group exhibitions.

Prior to the 1990s, when non-impact – and more specifically, inkjet – printers became the default PC printer, the dot-matrix variety was the preferred, being reliable, cost-effective, and versatile. It's in these terms, 'where line by line you are building up the image,' that Michalec theorises the practices of knitting and weaving, which she picked up as a creative outlet during her fifteen-year hiatus from her studio

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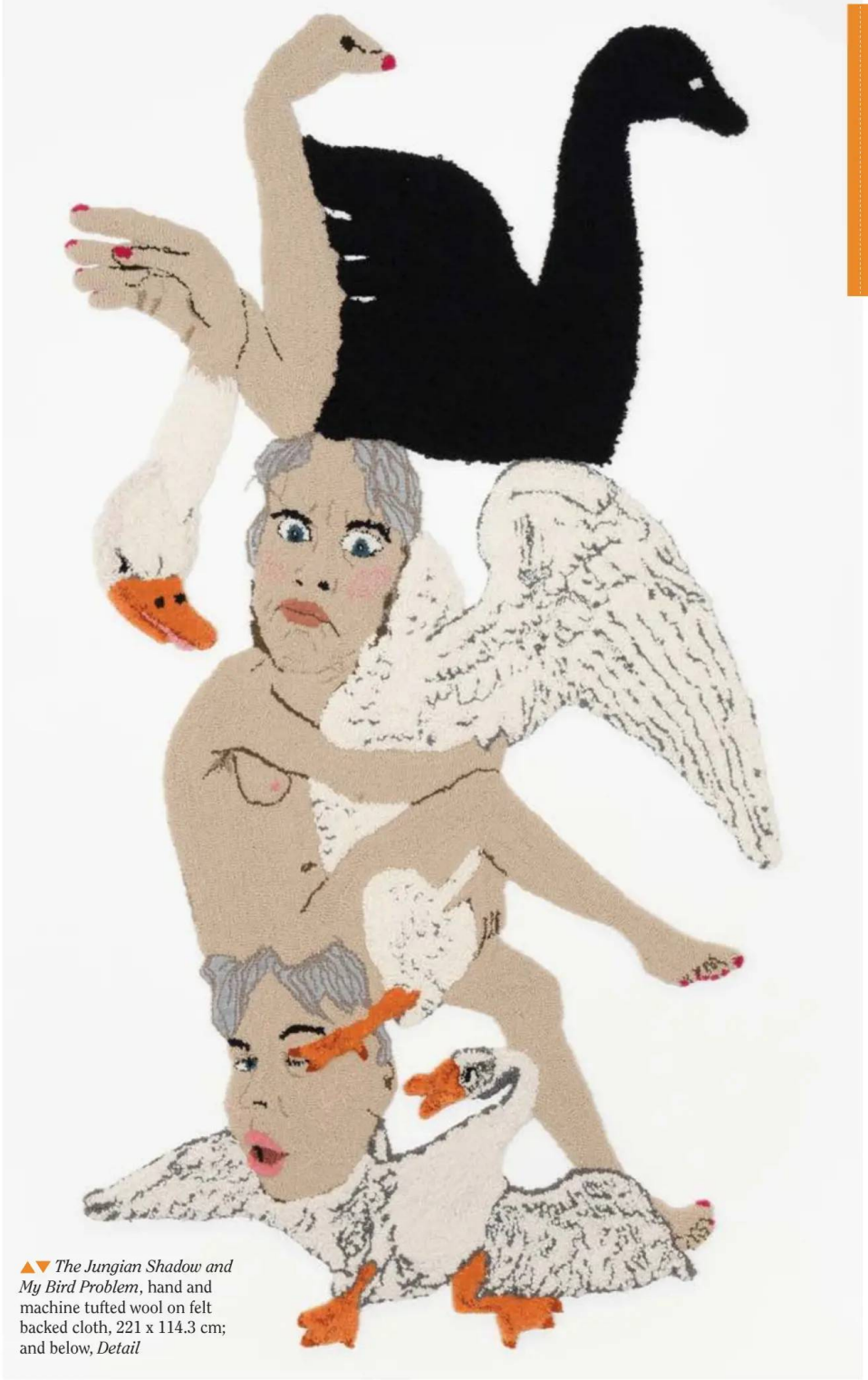
painting practice. This hiatus came after graduating with a degree in painting, drawing, and art history from The Ohio State University, when the trappings of domestic life dominated her attention – funnily enough, exactly what she'd been making art about, and something of a foundational notion for the work she continues to make now.

Yet, she realised, as first and foremost a painter, that she was in need of a tool that allowed her to replicate a painting or drawing process in the making of her textile work, especially the immediacy of the mark-making she was used to. A commercial tufting gun, which pokes yarn through a backing at high-speed, which she discovered through YouTube, enabled Michalec to transfigure these aspects, through trial and error, into 'rugs.' "I don't necessarily use the tools the same way a commercial rug maker would, but to me that's not the point," she notes. In truth, nor is the term 'rug' an accurate one for the tufted paintings she creates, anyway.

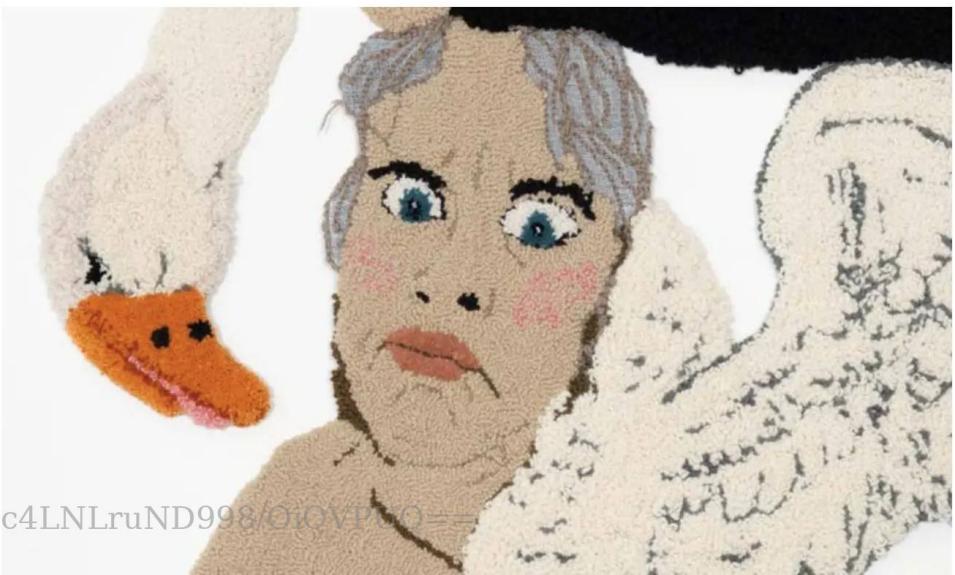
Michalec's work, which is held in institutional collections, and has been acquired by prominent collectors such Sarah M. and Michelle Vance Waddell, and Brooklyn-based art patron Carla Shen, lately draws on imagery from medical textbooks, historic photographs, and Anatomical Venuses. (These life-sized wax figures are designed to be anatomically correct yet aesthetically pleasing, often featuring human hair, glass eyes, and jewels; also known as 'Slashed Beauties' or 'Dissected Graces').

"With a Masters in Library and Information Science [from the University of Southern Mississippi], I love doing research," she says. "The degree in library science, which was originally a specialisation in arts librarianship, was not to pivot away from art, but was an extension of my interest in art history, archives, and research. Once I gather a fair amount of information and images I make tons of line drawings. I scan them all into my computer and I spend a fair amount of time Photoshopping narratives together. When I have an image that's intriguing and I feel would work well for the tufting process, I project it onto my base cloth and then begin tufting."

Embellishing her tufted tapestries through embroidery, hand knitting, found objects, and vintage sewing



▲▼ *The Jungian Shadow and My Bird Problem*, hand and machine tufted wool on felt backed cloth, 221 x 114.3 cm; and below, *Detail*



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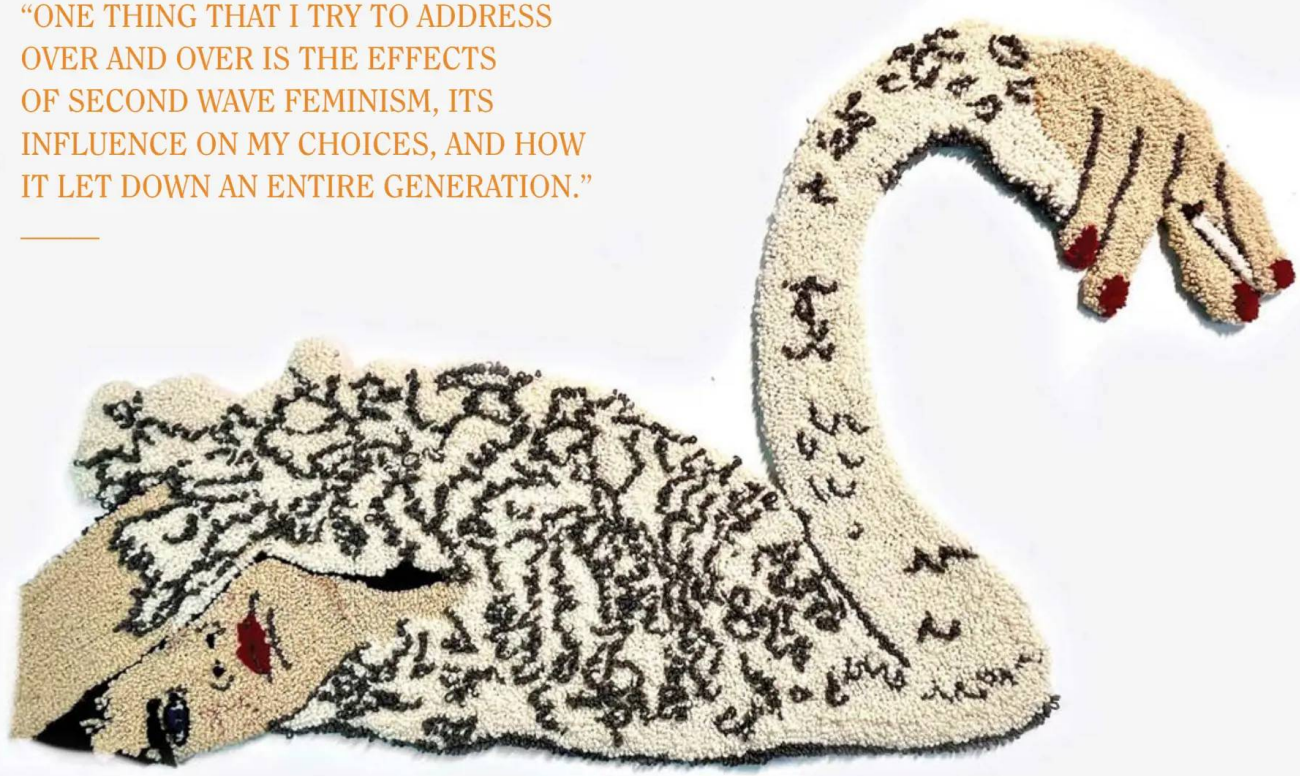
▲ *Like Sands Through the Hour Glass*, 2025, hand tufted wool on felt backed cloth, 104.1 x 104.1 cm
◀ Mychaelyn Michalec in her studio

"ONE THING THAT I TRY TO ADDRESS OVER AND OVER IS THE EFFECTS OF SECOND WAVE FEMINISM, ITS INFLUENCE ON MY CHOICES, AND HOW IT LET DOWN AN ENTIRE GENERATION."



▲ *Well, I swan*, 2024, hand tufted wool on felt backed cloth, 63.5 x 111.8 cm

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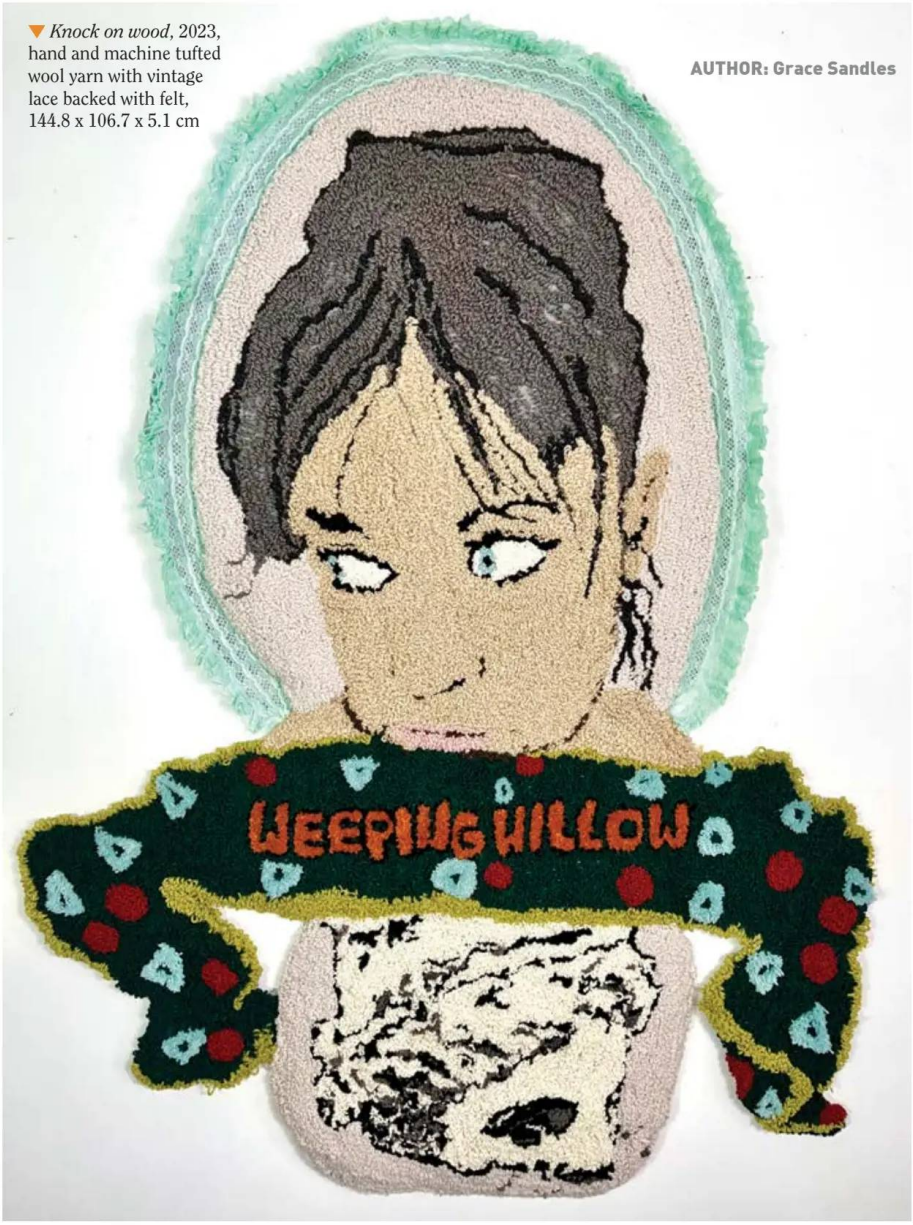
notions, Michalec interweaves themes of gender, labour, stereotypes, feminism, sexuality, and art history with a surrealist absurdity. Working from her Dayton, Ohio, studio, she is acutely aware of the shortcomings of previous feminist movements, and offers her practice as a way of injecting nuance and a critical eye to the discourses she has inherited. "One thing that I try to address over and over is the effects of second wave feminism, its influence on my choices, and how it let down an entire generation," she explains. "In fact, a generation later it is still a difficult legacy to contend with. Children of second wave feminists were told you can be whatever you want to be but that still isn't true and if you do attempt it, what is the price?"

Michalec's humorously grotesque compositions almost invariably contain some image of herself; "In a way, it's about trying to contend with the expectations and difficulties of being a woman, but I also feel these are universal subjects: invisible labour, the male gaze, bodily autonomy, and hysteria." She continues, "Currently I'm very interested in the history of hysteria and its influence on how we perceive women, their emotional state, and allow or disallow them to have agency of choice because of it. Hysteria was surprisingly a diagnosis in the United States until the 1980s."

Historical touchpoints reveal the art historian that informs the artist. Michalec understands her work to be a contemporary manifestation of ageless artforms and investigations. "The practice of tapestry has a long history in art and often I reference art historical images, from the work of artists such as Ree Morton [1936-77] or Honoré Desmond Sharrer [1920-2009], to classical Greek or Roman sculpture," she remarks. For her, what it comes down to is an interest in "narrative and how women are portrayed in art historically and contemporaneously as both subjects and artists." This makes her unique work, by nature, simultaneously versatile and able to fit and work in dialogue with other artists' – perhaps why the list of recent group exhibition inclusions is so long. Michalec has worked with leading American curators including Laura Dvorkin, Maynard Monrow, Matt Distall, Sso-Rha Kang, and Michael Goodson.

▼ *Knock on wood*, 2023, hand and machine tufted wool yarn with vintage lace backed with felt, 144.8 x 106.7 x 5.1 cm

AUTHOR: Grace Sandles





▲ *Rump Roast*, 2025, hand tufted wool on felt backed cloth, 108 x 118.1 cm

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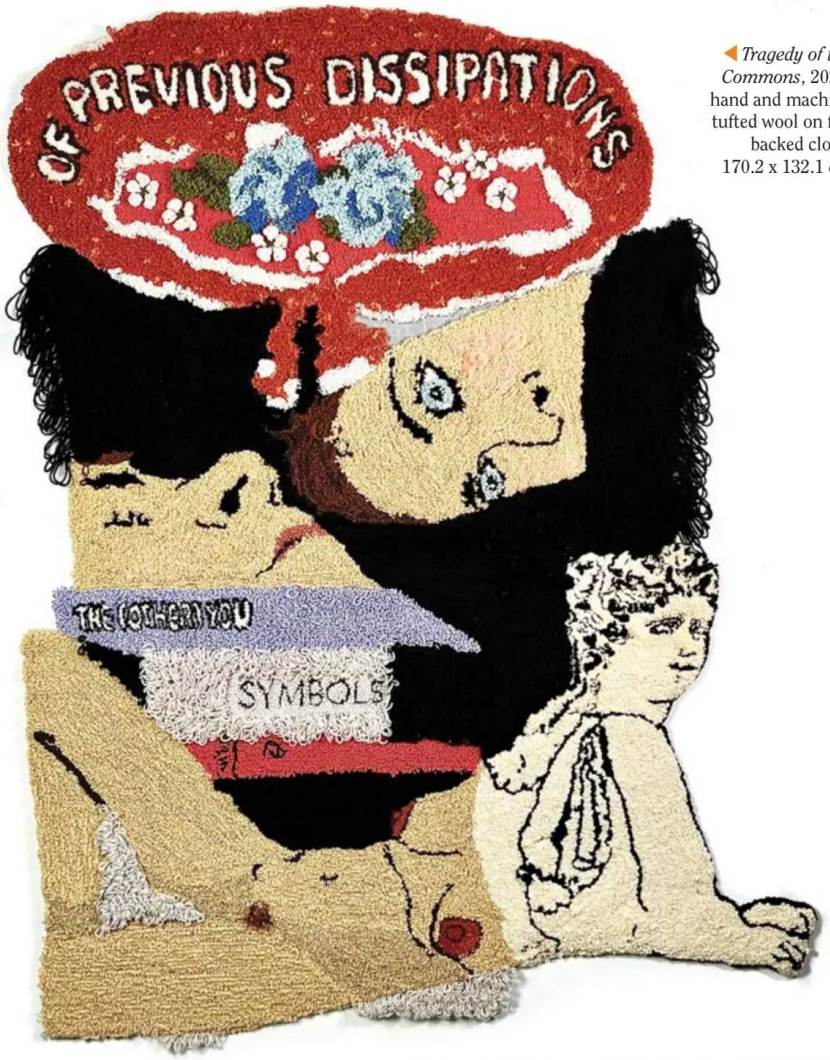
▶ *Hypericum perforatum (I am the poison and the antidote)*, 2023, hand and machine tufted wool yarn on felt backed cloth, 162.6 x 172.7 cm



◀ *Tragedy of the Commons*, 2023, hand and machine tufted wool on felt backed cloth, 170.2 x 132.1 cm

A SEEMINGLY ENDLESS WELLSPRING OF INSPIRATION, MICHALEC OFTEN FUSES HER LIKENESS WITH THOSE OF DIFFERENT BIRDS – MOSTLY SWANS AND GEESE. THE CHIMERICAL BODIES CRITICISE GENDER STEREOTYPES VIA BIRDLY CONNOTATIONS: FRAGILITY, YES, BUT ALSO BIRDS AND 'BIRDWOMEN' SUCH AS THE SPHINX, HARPIES, AND SIRENS FROM MYTHOLOGY.

A seemingly endless wellspring of inspiration, Michalec often fuses her likeness with those of different birds – mostly swans and geese. The chimerical bodies criticise gender stereotypes via birdly connotations: fragility, yes, but also birds and 'birdwomen' such as the sphinx, Harpies, and sirens from mythology.

"It started out as an obsession with swans," notes the artist. "There are hundreds, if not thousands, of depictions of the myth of Leda and the Swan. But when you look at myths and folklore involving birds and women, there are many examples from many cultures." It therefore comes as no surprise that there is a correspondingly long tradition of using the bird terms as pejorative designations for women: "bird descriptors have entered the vocabulary in many ways. Women are described as 'old birds,' 'hens,' or 'chicks.' Men can be described as 'henpecked.' Women can be described as 'feather-' or 'bird-brained,' or an 'ugly duckling," says Michalec. "But birds can also be symbolic of being wild and free or domesticated and caged."

Her works make fun of and pull apart these metaphors, titled things like *I know people who quail at the sight* (2024) and *My Duckling Days Are Through* (2025). Recent solo exhibitions have similarly witty titles, such as *The Geese Don't Care that I'm Crying Again*,

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▲ *My Duckling Days Are Through*, 2025, hand and machine tufted wool on felt backed cloth, 73.7 x 149.9 cm (total area). (Private Collection). ▼ *Don't Let A Bird's Feathers Fool You,* 2025, hand and machine tufted wool on felt backed cloth, 160 x 129.5 cm. Collection, The Floating Art Museum, Alameda, California.

My Bird Problem (both 2025), and *Trying to get all my birds to land in the yarn* (2024).

Her next solo show at K Contemporary (31 October-23 December, 2026) in Denver will centre on hysteria and women's autonomy, expanding on her recent preoccupations with the themes. It is an exciting prospect to imagine what she will grow from this fertile soil. Michalec is a truly original artist, managing to achieve levity and solemnity at once. You know what they say. *Two Birds...*

Grace Sandles

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Mychaelyn Michalec is represented by:
K Contemporary, Denver & Santa Fe:
kcontemporaryart.com
The Camp Gallery, North Miami:
thecampgallery.com

Unless noted, all works are collection of the artist. Photos: Courtesy of Mychaelyn Michalec Studio.



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