

Emily Hermant



Vancouver Now! is a new exhibition series designed to take the pulse of the Vancouver art world.

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Vancouver Now!

Emily Hermant

There is a special moment when you first encounter a work by Emily Hermant. As you read this text, you may already have experienced it—the brief period when you are still confused by the material nature of what you are seeing. Not the subject matter, but the medium itself. When you first approach one of Hermant's suspended or wall-mounted objects, the immediate categorical question that comes to mind might be: Is this a painting or a textile? The answer could tip in one direction or the other depending on the specific work and your vantage point. A flat surface and strong colours might move you toward painting. A recognizably woven or shaggy surface, even at a distance, might lead you to textile. This is especially the case in recent works like *Talk Through Me* (2024) and *Pile It On* (2025), which swell with the volume of their fluffy, colourful materials. The effect from the front is reminiscent of

luxurious fringed or feathered capes and cloaks, while from the back the structure of their woven grids becomes apparent.

Your initial impression will only be confounded further as you approach the object and realize that while the form may be derived from the textile arts, the material itself is the refuse of our technological world—wires and data cables that have been woven or stitched together with a great deal of hand labour.

On closer inspection, the idea that you might be looking at a painting is also often neither confirmed nor fully denied. The work *Illumination* (2023–24), for example, is unambiguously pictorial. Standing before it, we can make out trees in the foreground, a body of water and perhaps a mountainous island in the distance at the horizon.

That horizon itself sits well down within the vertical orientation of the picture, so that most of the image is dominated by a roiling sky. Indeed, not just the sky, but all the pictorial elements are blurred by movement

that at times defines them and gives them form, while just as often sweeps through them in wide arcs. The painterly effect is that of the expressive gesture, but as we look closely the idea of spontaneity and emotional immediacy that this implies is defeated by our growing awareness of the materials themselves. In *Illumination*, wires—wrapped in their colourful insulation or exposed to reveal their shiny, conductive copper centres—are adhered to the surface in rows to create a painstakingly crafted flow of movement that is then carefully interrupted or shifted in colour to create pictorial forms. Or sometimes non-forms—such as Hermant's signature "glitch," an apparently random disruption—send the pattern in unexpected directions.

We might think of these works as tapestries, except there is no sense of an under-surface that is being sewn into; the wires are the surface and have no visible, predictable horizontal or vertical framework. In close-up detail what they most resemble is Indigenous North American quillwork, in which dyed

and flattened quills are stitched onto a surface to create a design. Similar effects are evident in two other works that are both inspired by meteor showers in the night sky: *Reflections on Geminid* (No. 3) (2020–21) and *Reflections on Perseid* (No. 3) (2018–19). Here the design is simplified into an abstracted flow of movement and colour transitions down the surface of the work, complicated, on closer inspection, by various “glitches.”

More explicitly sculptural works, such as *Billow* (2020–21) and *Drift* (2023), add a distinct material logic. At first glance they have the undulating ebb and flow—and an unhealthy flesh tone—of biomorphic sculptures. Considered further, however, the accumulated layers of insulated wires are more suggestive of geological accretion and therefore provide a sense of the deep timescale of geologic time. *Drift* playfully unwinds itself back into its basic components at its edges, with the woven wires untangling out into a draping fringe.

The refusal of many of Hermant's works to sit comfortably in existing art-object categories inevitably draws attention to their materiality and, through that consideration, to the labour of their creation. As materials they point, ironically, to the technologies that surround us and seemingly dematerialize our engagement with the world—or at least reduce it to an experience of screens and data—and which have also accelerated the speed of communication and the ravenousness of stimuli hungry for our attention.

In his influential book, *Speed and Politics* (1977), French theorist and philosopher Paul Virilio argues that we live in an accelerating culture in which new technologies and administrative techniques shrink both time and space. The emergence of the internet, cellular communications and, most recently, artificial intelligence, has made the pace of life and the collapsing of distances that Virilio wrote about seem leisurely and modest by comparison, even if—perhaps I am being

naively optimistic—his most paranoid conclusions remain unrealized. It is useful to recognize that even our most ethereal technologies have a material basis; the underlying reality of acceleration is that it is created by harnessing immense resources and human labour over a long period of time. If we think of a simple example of an accelerative technology, such as a highway, we can see that the user and creator perspectives are quite different. With the creation of the highway and the introduction of a car, the user simply moves with relative ease across distances between cities. For them, both time and space are collapsed. The labour to produce the highway in the first place, however, is immense. Add to this the hundreds or thousands of years of technological development required to make this possible and suddenly acceleration is revealed as the slow and laborious process it is.

—Richard William Hill

Emily Hermant

Since arriving in Vancouver in 2016, Emily Hermant (b. 1980, Toronto, ON) has steadily built a reputation within the city's art community as an artist to watch. Her work explores the materiality of communication. Woven hangings and sculptures—laboriously crafted from the discarded wires and data cables of the technologies that envelop us—thoughtfully shift the speed and focus of our attention. They invite viewers to move from the frenetic virtual experiences that increasingly characterize daily life to an unhurried consideration of the material basis of that simulated world. The effect is both revealing and surprisingly aesthetically satisfying. Hermant has also influenced the development of emerging artists in Vancouver for more than a decade, through her position as Associate Professor, Sculpture + Expanded Practices at Emily Carr University of Art + Design. Since obtaining her BFA in Studio Arts

from Concordia University in Montréal and her MFA in Fiber & Material Studies from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Hermant has exhibited internationally and received numerous grants and awards. Her work is held in many public and private collections.

Works in the Exhibition

Reflections on Perseid (No. 3), 2018–19

collected and stripped telecommunications
wires on canvas

Collection of Colin and Shannon Ferguson

Billow, 2020–21

collected and stripped telecommunications
wires, steel, gypsum

Collection of Renata Li and Jamie Christianson

Reflections on Geminid (No. 3), 2020–21

collected and stripped telecommunications
wires on canvas

Collection of Janet and Chris Bowell

Drift, 2023

collected telecommunications wires,
polymer modified gypsum, bronze powder

Collection of Claudia Beck

Illumination, 2023–24

collected and stripped telecommunications
wires on canvas

Collection of Canaccord Genuity Group

Frequencies (Fragment 1), 2024

collected and stripped telecommunications wires on canvas

Collection of Raechelle and Lorne Paperny

Talk Through Me, 2024

collected and folded empty ethernet jackets in mesh, heat shrink plastic caps, metal bar
Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery,

Purchased with proceeds from the
Audain Emerging Artists Acquisition Fund
VAG 2026.9.1

Pile It On, 2025

collected and folded empty ethernet jackets in mesh, heat shrink plastic caps, metal bar
Collection of Renata Li and Jamie Christianson

Farther From, 2026

collected and stripped telecommunications wires on canvas

Courtesy of the Artist and Monte Clark Gallery

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Photo: Courtesy of the Artist and Monte Clark Gallery

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