

EXHIBITION DIGEST

WAYS OF ATTACHING

A riot of drapery hits Spike Island in the form of Rosemary Mayer's
beguiling fabric installations

Written by Ellen Mara de Wachter

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Spike Island, 133 Cumberland Rd, Bristol

In April 1978, Rosemary Mayer travelled upstate from New York City to create a work of art in memory of her late parents and her friend, the artist Ree Morton. She inscribed advertising balloons with their names, and with the respective April dates in which they were born and died, alongside the names of spring flowers and stars. Entitled *Some Days in April*, Mayer's private performance interwove the lives of loved ones with cosmic and seasonal cycles, aligning their passing with the transience of nature.

It was one of several 'Temporary Monuments' she created in the late 1970s with impermanent materials, from balloons and ribbons to crumpled paper and snow. She intended these ephemeral pieces to live on beyond their moment in her drawings, photographs and books, many of which can now be viewed in

Bristol, as part of the first English exhibition of Mayer's art. At the time, she noted in her journal that art 'should not be still, unmoving and independent of its circumstances. Nothing is.' Inspired by the spectacle – and atmosphere of precarity – in Italian Mannerist painting, her temporary monuments marked a deliberate move out from the gallery and into the wider world. Mayer's 1981 *Full Moon Celebration*, held on the rooftop of her Tribeca loft, was a wildly festive affair. In a radical rejection of the artistic obsession with objects, she considered these gatherings to be, in themselves, works of art; an attitude that presaged the repudiation of physical artworks popular in the 1990s.



Photo documentation of *Balloon for a Birthday* (1978), installed on 7 November 1978, rooftop of 461 Park Avenue, New York, NY.
Courtesy the Estate of Rosemary Mayer, New York

Born in 1943 in New York City, Mayer studied classics, whose aesthetics were a lifelong inspiration to her art. In the early 1970s, she dedicated a series of singular fabric sculptures to women from across the ages, from Roman empress Galla Placidia to Eleanor of Aquitaine. Fashioned from wooden dowels and string, adorned with ribbons and hand-dyed fabrics, including silk and cheesecloth, they feel like estrangements of the voluminous garments many of these powerful women might have worn. Equally, they allude to the gravity-defying drapery in works by 16th-century painter Jacopo Pontormo, whose diaries she translated. As throughout her work, her soft, airy constructions propose movement; fittingly, the final piece in the series, *Hypsipyle* (1973) can be pivoted away from the wall.

A key figure in the feminist art scene, Mayer co-founded the USA's first all-woman co-operative gallery, Air, in 1972. A prolific freelance art critic, her writing can be read as a strategy for archiving her own creative ethos at a time when women's art was woefully neglected by the establishment. She was immersed in New York's artistic community – and found support in alternative art spaces – but was

never taken on by a commercial gallery. From the early 1980s she worked full-time in advertising to make ends meet.

Rosemary Mayer, *Galla Placidia*, 1973, satin, rayon, nylon, cheesecloth, nylon netting, ribbon, dyes, wood. Courtesy the Estate of Rosemary Mayer

Spike Island's exhibition is the first institutional survey of Mayer's work, and will gather these pioneering pieces for the first time since 1972. It promises to celebrate her extraordinary ability to synthesise hard materials with soft; symbolism with specifics; individuals with the cosmos.

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