

String Theory

Text
Christina Ko

There is a simple beauty to Windy Chien's knot and rope sculptures — and beauty, it must be noted, is a word not often used in the art world these days, pushed aside in a time that seems to prize politics over process. Her practice melds art and design, the practical and the decorative, craft and concept, analogue and digital, and is as much about the journey as the destination. As final products, her works are minimal and meditative rope sculptures: macramé wall hangings inspired by circuit boards, functional pendant lights suspended from strands resembling DNA spirals, or interlocking rings forged from a single line of rope twisted in the same manner we chain tyres to guard them against slippery ice.

Her best-known work is likely the one whose first edition hangs in the offices of Facebook: Chien's first foray into art after careers as a record-shop owner and an Apple executive, which saw her learning a different knot every day for a year. What started as a personal project and means of gaining fluency in a new language became, almost organically, a new career — as Chien pinned the new knots to a wall, she realised she'd begun creating not just a consistent meditative practice, but an artistic one too. *The Year of Knots* has grown into a multi-edition installation, an Instagram account, a book and a way of life.

The fluency Chien has gained is not simply in execution. 'Knotting is truly a universal language. I regard every knot I learn as a new letter in an unwritten alphabet. There are almost four thousand documented knots, and mathematicians tell us that an infinite number

are possible,' she explains. 'The majority of documented knots were invented by sailors, but knots are also used by farmers, basket makers, seamstresses, rock climbers, soldiers and so on. We all tie our shoelaces in the morning. So, functional knots have been used throughout history, and then there are the rich decorative knotting traditions of China, South Korea and Japan.'

Following the broad exploration involved in *The Year of Knots*, Chien's subsequent projects have been deep dives into single knots — 'taking a knot as far as necessary to uncover its fullest expressive potential', as she describes it.

By eschewing colour for the most part, Chien forces the focus to be squarely on the technique. 'My work is about lines, not about colour. So I remove colour, preferring to stay within a neutral palette or use only one colour so that multiple colours don't begin to converse with each other,' she says. 'If I use colour in my work, it must serve a purpose that adds to the meaning of the work.'

And therein lies the distinction that defines her work as art rather than design. 'For me, the difference lies in approach, intent and process. A designer may start with a problem or a predetermined goal and then try to solve it; I start with my materials and try to understand them thoroughly, then explore what they can become. In this way, my approach is that of a craftsperson. The studio craft movement further blurs the lines, as it identifies the practice of craftspeople who make work for aesthetic and artistic reasons rather than utility.'

Facing page, left
Rope artist Windy Chien's practice involves exploring the potential of knots; in doing so, she contemporises macramé and elevates knot tying to a craft. One such exploration resulted in *Diamond Ring*, made from a single unbroken piece of rope that becomes a series of roving paths
Image by Peter Prato

Facing page, right
Chien works on *Circuit Board*, a rope sculpture inspired by electronics parts and New York City's subway map
Image by Molly DeCoudreaux





Top
The sculptural quality and technical details of each knot in *The Year of Knots* are accentuated by the lack of colour
Image by Cesar Rubio

Bottom
As Chien pinned each new knot to the wall, *The Year of Knots* began to take shape as a sculptural installation that has since evolved into a multi-edition artwork
Image by Annie Martin