

CASEY KAPLAN
121 WEST 27TH STREET
NEW YORK NY 10001
TEL +1 212 645 7335
FAX +1 212 645 7835
WWW.CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM
INFO@CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM

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Inside Art

Art of the Wear and Tear

By Robin Pogrebin

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Sit with the artist N. Dash in her studio in Long Island City, Queens, and you'll notice that she is constantly worrying a tiny piece of cloth in her hand, working over the fabric with her fingers.

This is not a nervous habit; this is her art.

For 15 years, Ms. Dash, 35, has photographed fabric sculptures made of cotton swatches that she carries around — “what people use to buff their cars” — until the pieces resemble scraps from a baby blanket a child could not bear to surrender.

“I think of it as an alternative recording device, where the body has the capacity to register information through touch onto the material,” she said. “It prioritizes physical experience and is outside of language.”

Ms. Dash then arranges the weathered scraps in various configurations and photographs them in her studio. Now some of those works, along with her paintings, will be on view at the Casey Kaplan gallery on West 27th Street in Chelsea starting on May 3.

Her paintings are composed of adobe earth that she brings back from New Mexico — where she lived for a time — sifting debris from the dirt to make her own paint.

Ms. Dash always carries the fabric with her — three pieces at a time in different stages of deterioration.

“I stop working on each one when they can't handle the wear anymore and will simply disintegrate,” she said.

“Words can be limiting,” Ms. Dash continued. “This is one of the most effective ways in which I communicate.”

“It's my responsibility to make this work,” she said. “So I don't question it.”



An untitled work by N. Dash. Credit Courtesy of the artist and Jean Vong/Casey Kaplan, New York