

# portFOLIO

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#02 **FRANCASONNINO**



## #02 PORTFOLIO FRANCA SONNINO

### Curated by

Paolo Cortese & Francesco Romano Petillo

### Text by

Paolo Cortese & Franca Zoccoli

### Translated by

Melina Paraskevopoulou & Nicolas Roome

### Art direction

Andrea Germoleo

### Photos by

Studio Boys, Daniele De Lonti, Thanassis Gatos

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FRANCA SONNINO\_THE THINKING HANDS

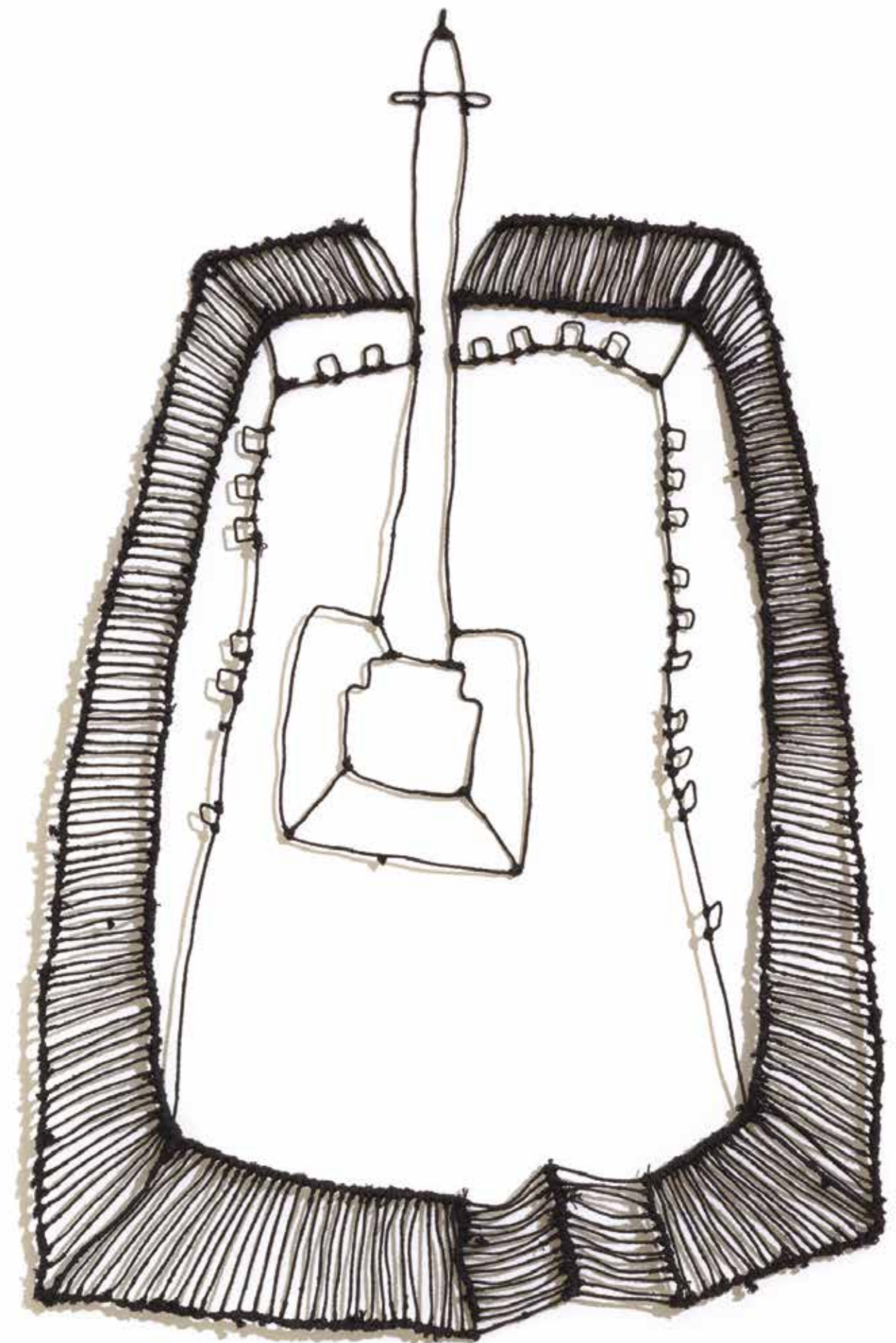
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## THE THINKING HANDS

Paolo Cortese &amp; Franca Zoccoli

Thread is a constant presence throughout Franca Sonnino's long artistic journey. At first, it is traced by her brush, which describes and evokes it on the canvas. Later, it forcefully enters her work, becoming the artist's preferred medium, ultimately replacing the brush entirely by the late 1970s.

Roman by birth, Sonnino graduated in Literature at La Sapienza University and studied drawing with Maria Lai, who lived in the same building. She entered the art world in the very early 1970s, a time when the capital was experiencing an era of intense intellectual vibrancy. She shared a studio with Lai and forged a lifelong bond of sisterhood. Although the materials used by the two artists may appear similar, the work they pursued developed along very different lines, not only technically and conceptually but also in terms of their motivation, while Lai's practice was mainly rooted in the collective sphere, Sonnino's unfolded in a conceptually abstract domain.

In the early 1970s, Sonnino created large canvases in acrylic and tempera, dense grids and multitudes of painted lines, whose deeper impulse arose from intimate poetic theorems rather than from Euclidean models. Shortly after, she began to experiment with materials drawn from the domestic universe and the feminine sphere like thread, wool, sequins, lace and fabric. One might argue that an inner drive led her toward a dimension closer and more congenial to her, deeply connected to her sense of being a woman and mother, where elements of her daily life and her art-making could coincide.

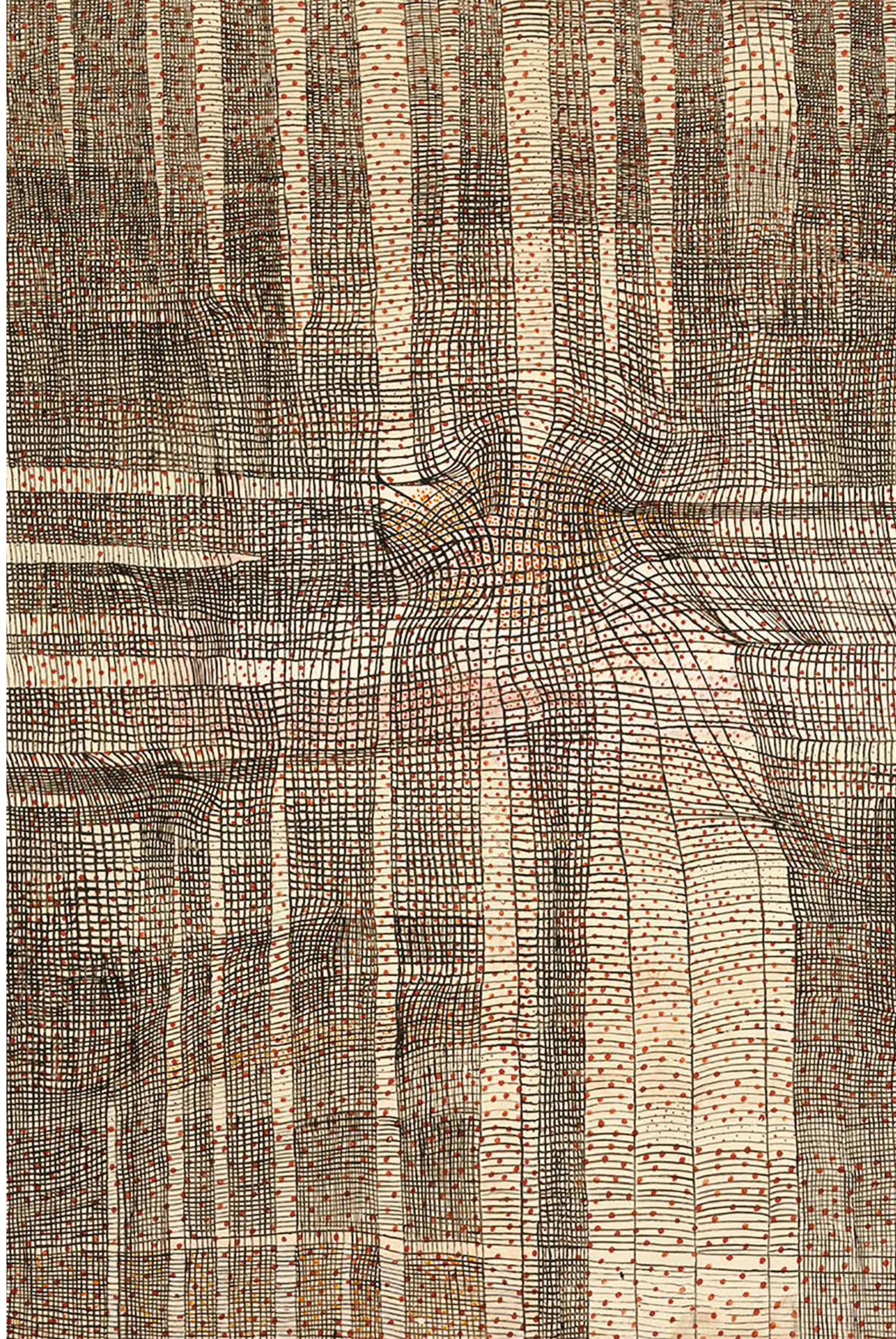
Sonnino also found interesting ways to use objects found on the beach like fish traps, nets, branches, on which she then intervened with thread, as if overlaying her own action on that of the sea, which had transformed them in the first place. Looking closely at her works from those years, the range of experimentation she pursued and the technical solutions she adopted, it is clear that Sonnino became a teacher and reference point for generations of artists in fiber art and beyond.

The decisive turning point came in the early 1980s when, feeling the need to give her work a kind of three-dimensionality, the artist invented the "solid thread," a cotton or wool thread with a metal core. With it, she was able to outline constructions made of emptiness. Indeed, her research was never confined to textile elements alone but always reached into the conceptual, creating sculptures that merged the physical and the immaterial.

Important cycles of work emerged, such as *Landscapes*, cultivated fields, rooftops and villages, *Mosaics*, large modular surfaces and *Transparencies*, superimposed frames engaging in a play of rhythmic suggestions. These evocative panels, hung on walls, make essential use of shadow, an element, which like emptiness, resists touch and becomes the very substance of the bricks and modules Sonnino uses in her constructions. By playing with voids and solids, the artist creates architectures that invade the space and enter into a relationship with it, through the shadows cast by their profiles.

But books, whether solitary, in small groups, in large installations or disassembled into scattered pages, are also among the artist's favorite subjects. Their pages can be light, dense, poetic, mysterious but also burned, stripped down, dramatic and sometimes bearing faint traces of writing. Again, it is the perimeter that suggests their covers and the fluttering of their pages, giving form to projecting libraries. It is no coincidence that in such a difficult historical moment as the present, the artist has created the large *Rainbow Library* installation for this exhibition, where groups of books in different colors harmoniously share the space, almost as if affirming a message of hope.

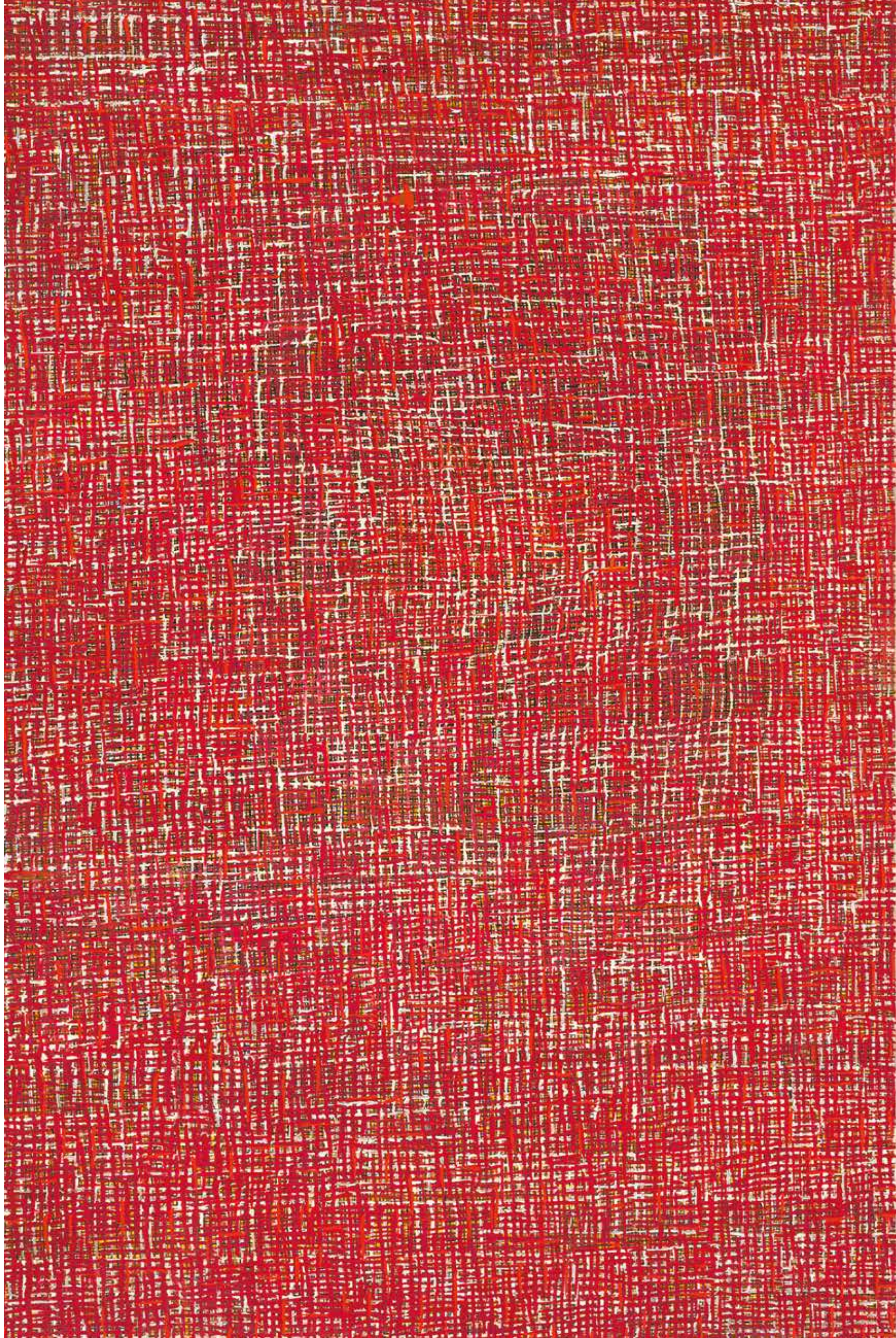
The title of the exhibition, *The Thinking Hands*, recalls an epithet coined by Marcello Venturoli back in 1980, in his introduction to a major retrospective held by Sonnino at the Palazzo dei Diamanti in Ferrara, a highly prestigious venue of the time. Even today, this definition perfectly sums up the artist's creative process, which has remained unchanged over more than five decades. Though the work begins with an idea and thus has an intellectual and conceptual origin, it is then carried forward by her hands, guided purely by instinct. The artist herself explains: *"When I start a work, I don't really know in which direction it will unfold or, above all, when it will be finished. I don't ask myself questions, it's a natural process not led by my head, but rather by my hands."*



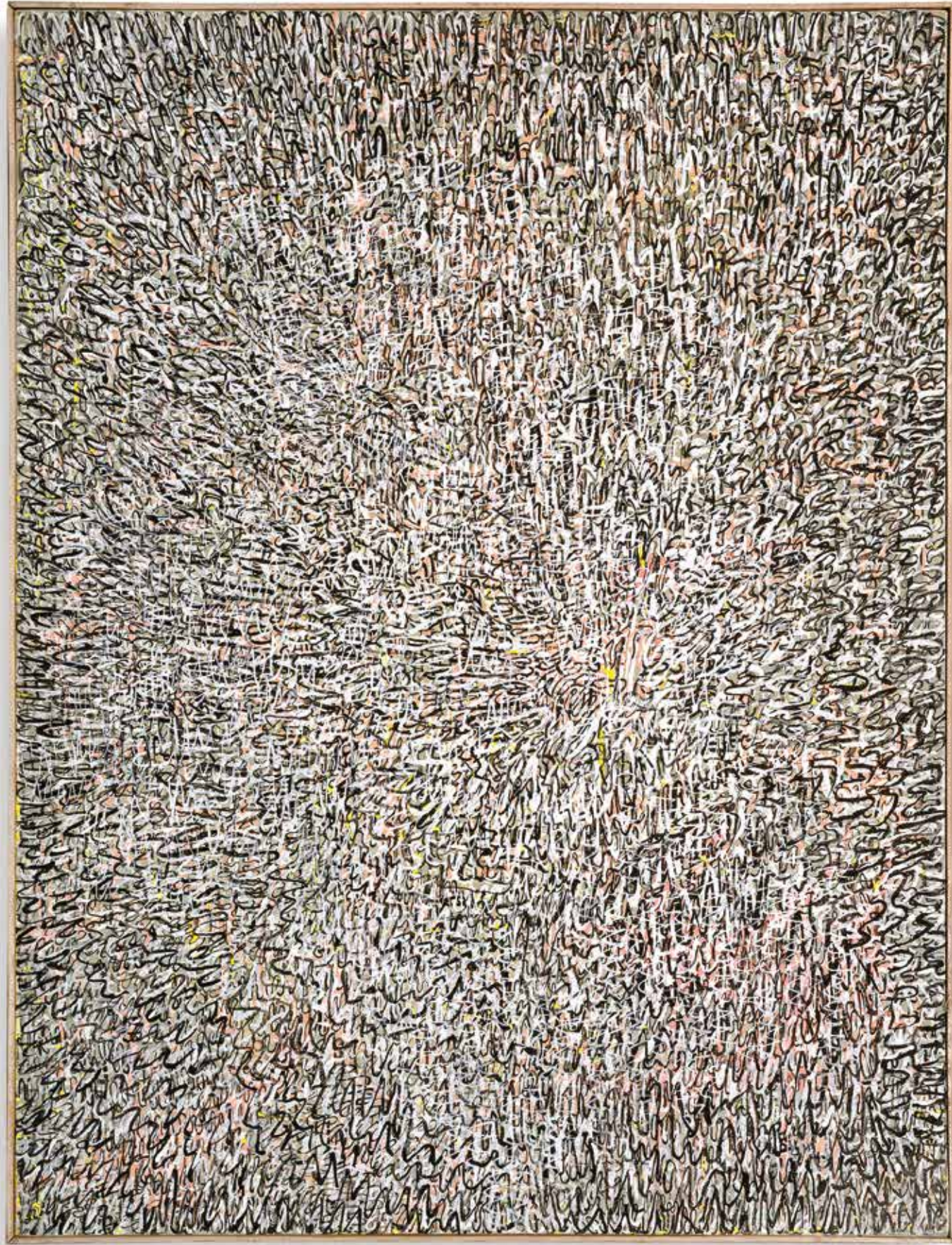
Trame 2 (Weaves 2), 1976  
tempera on canvas, 100x120 cm



*Trama rossa (Red Weave), 1976*  
tempera on canvas, 150x100 cm

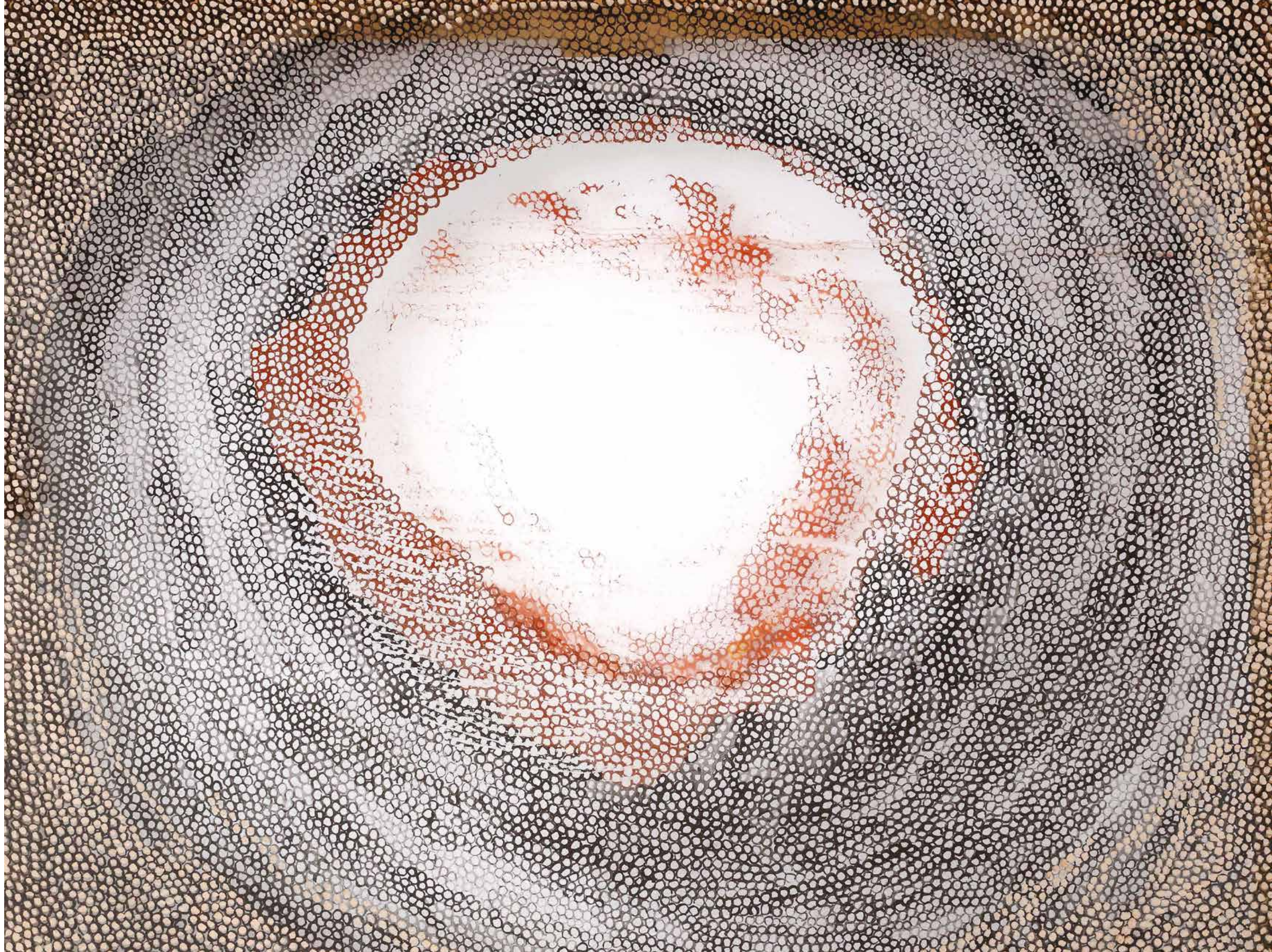


Portfolio\_Franca Sonnino



*Labirinto e vortice (Labyrinth and Vortex), 1978*  
tempera on canvas, 100x80 cm



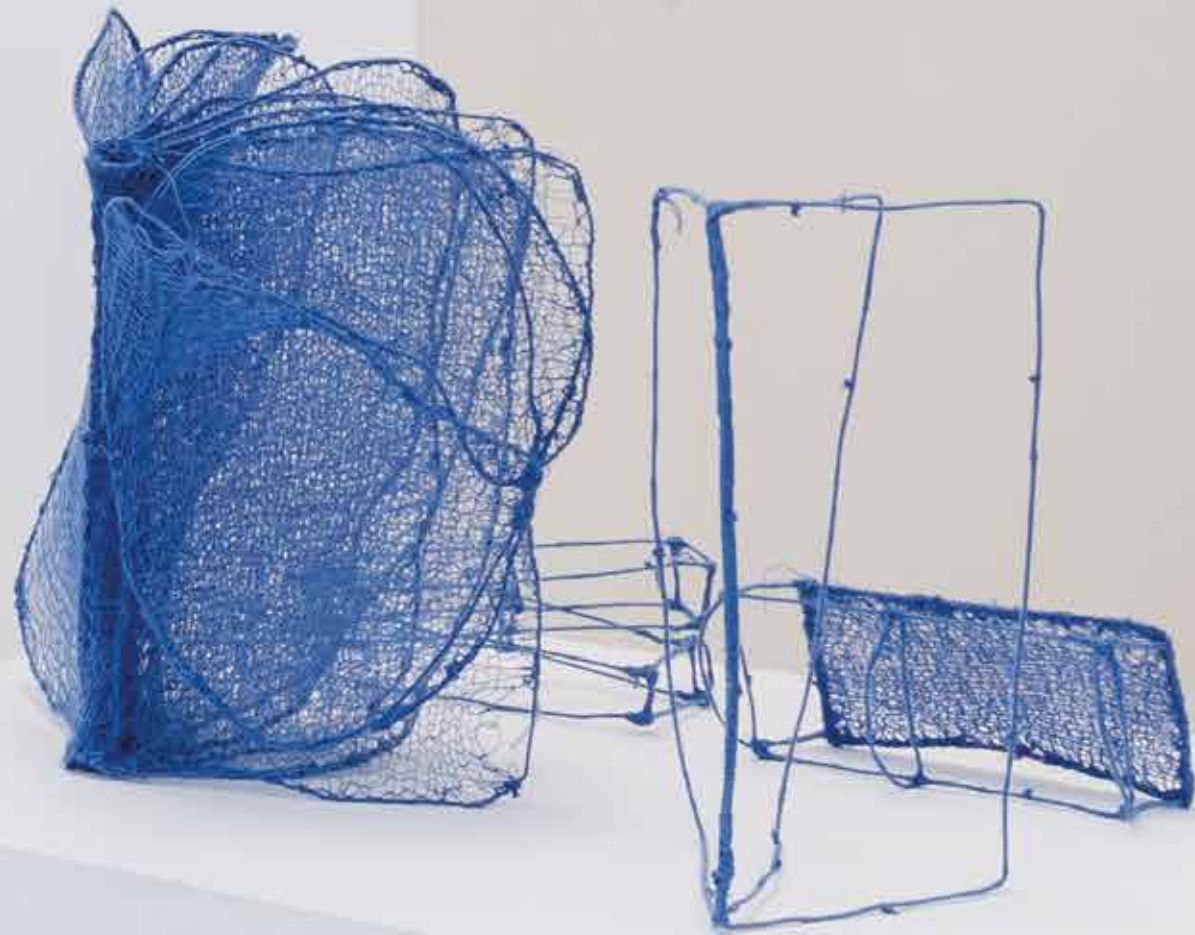






Tante reti (Multiple Nets), 1978  
wool, cotton thread and acrylic on canvas, 100x120 cm

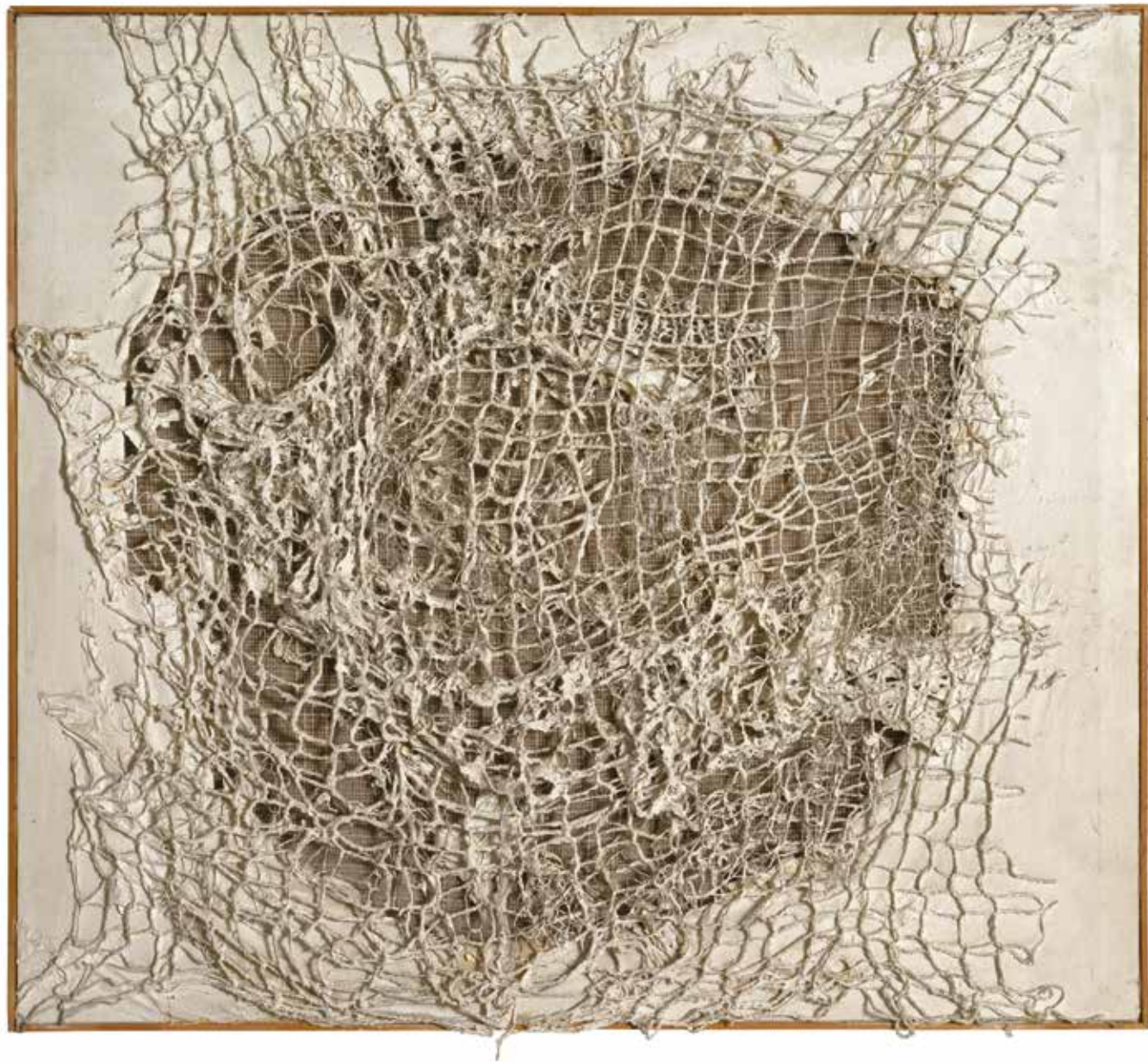








Trame e rete (Weaves and Net), 1980  
acrylic and cotton thread on canvas, 50x70 cm



Rete bianca 1 (White Net 1), 1979  
wool and white acrylic on canvas, 92x102 cm





Trama sottile (Thin Net), 1980  
cotton thread on canvas, 100x120 cm



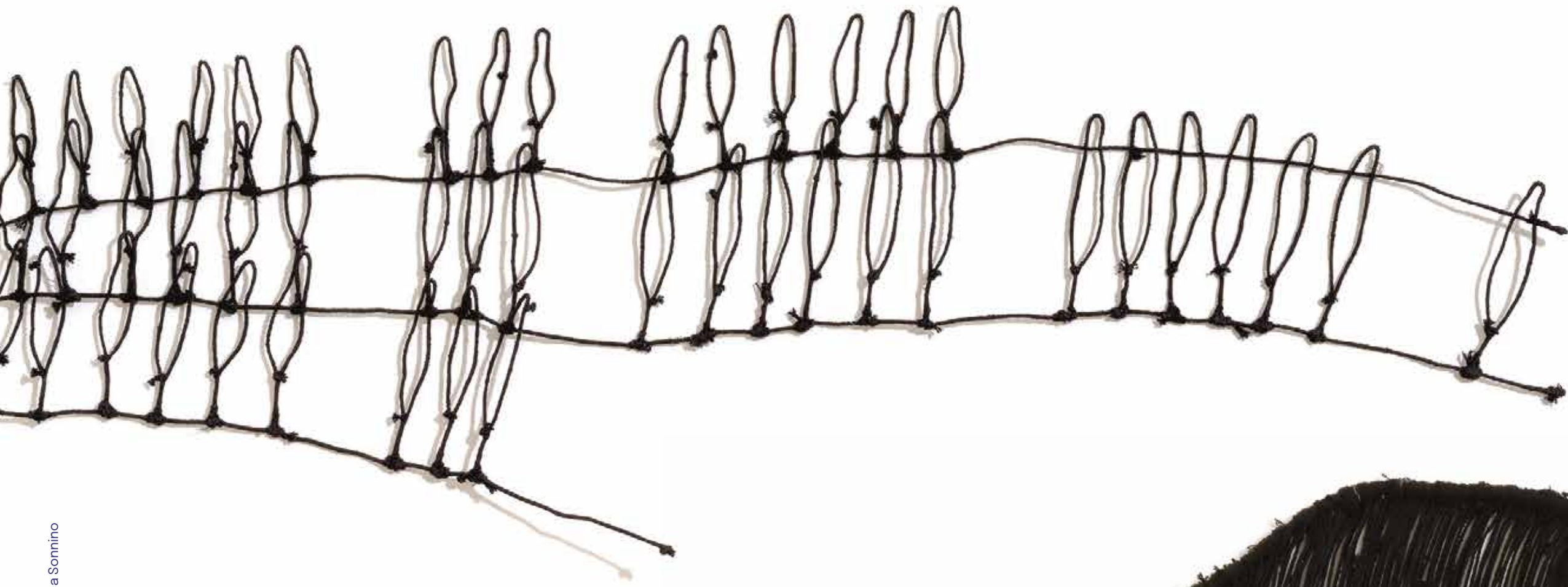








Alberi neri (Black Trees), 1987  
cotton thread and iron wire, 40x80cm



Campi coltivati (Cultivated Fields), 1987  
cotton thread and iron wire, 130x55 cm





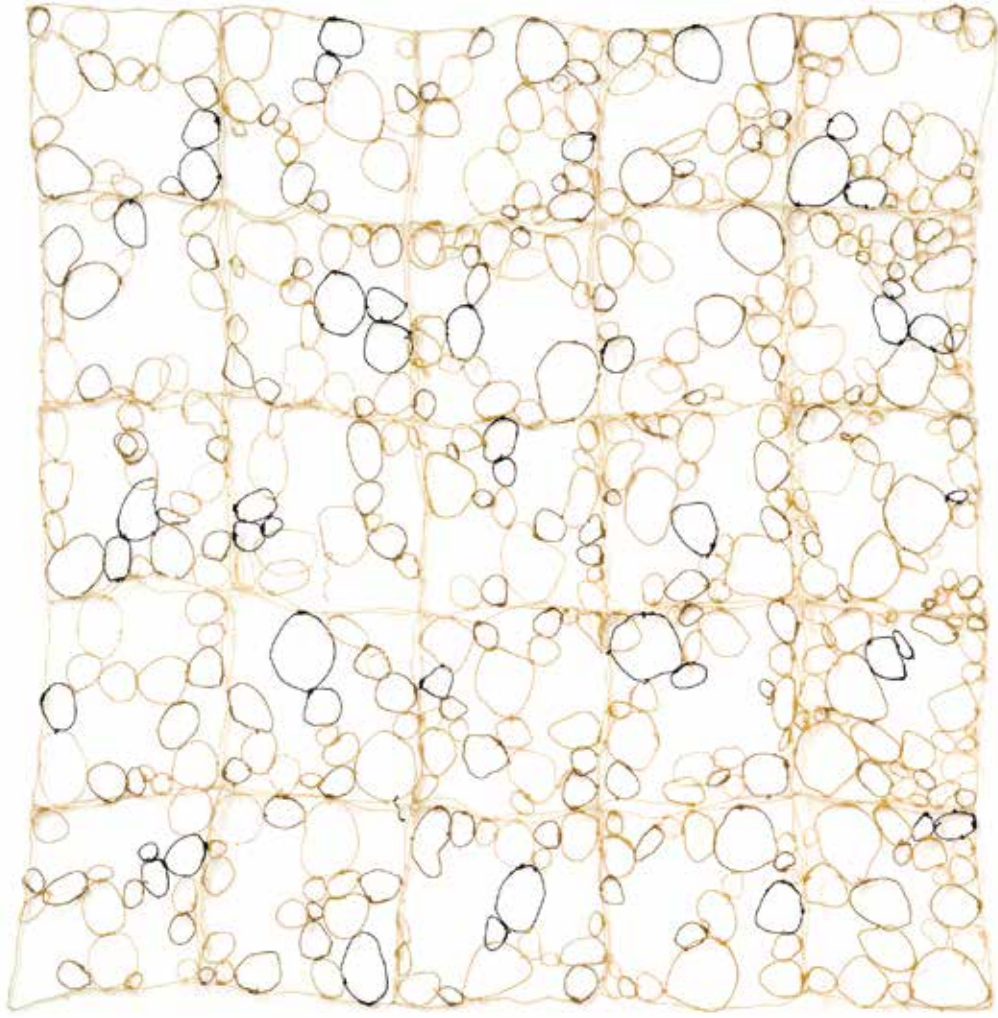




Foglie d'inverno (Winter Leaves), 1990  
cotton thread and iron wire on wood in perspex case, 70x100x17 cm

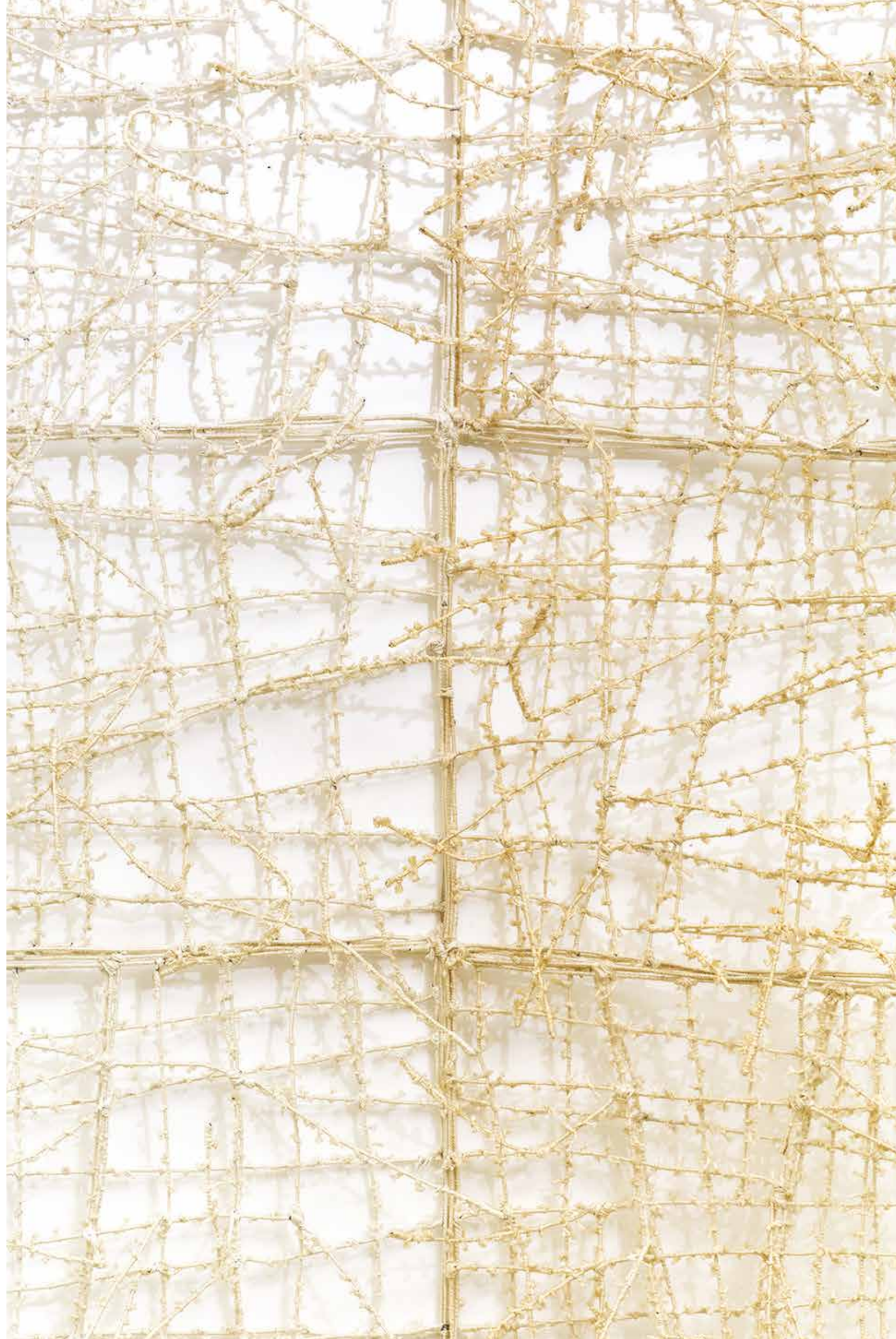
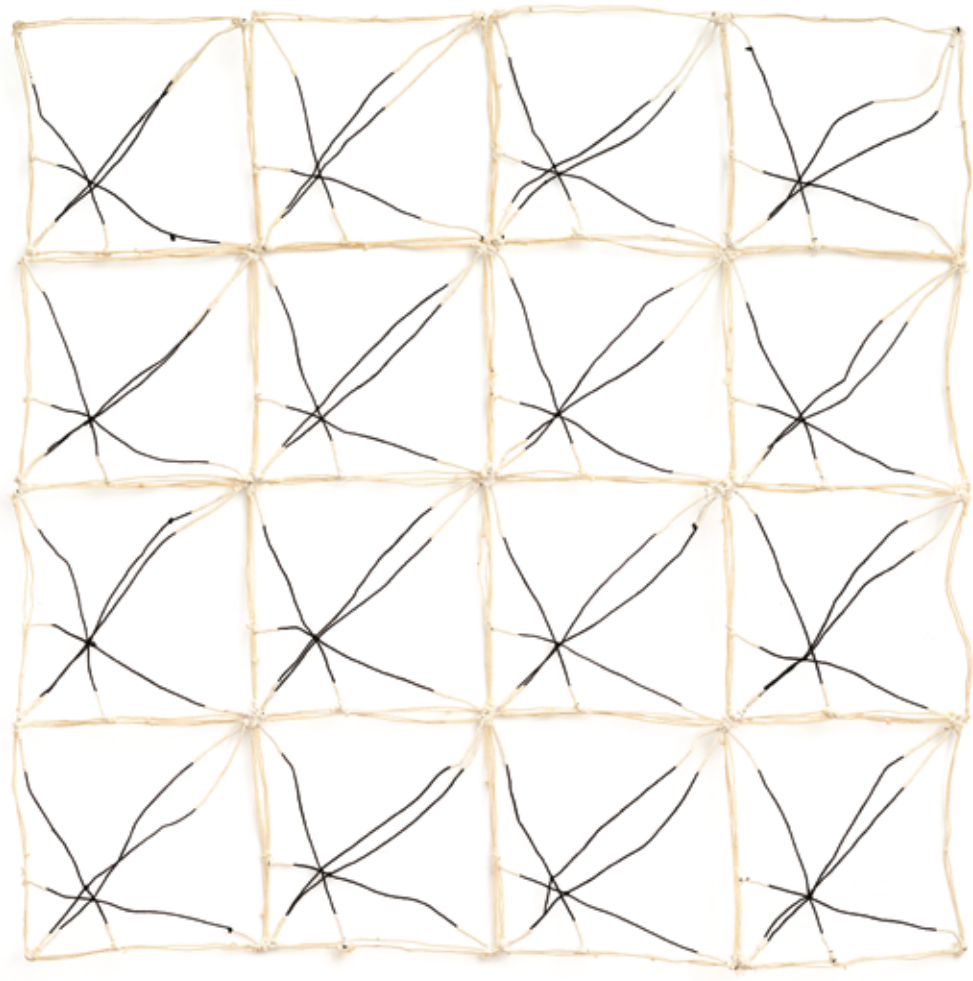


Mosaico di sassi (Pebble Mosaic), 1990  
cotton thread and iron wire, 150x150 cm



Portfolio\_Franca Sonnino

Mosaico bianco nero (Black & White Mosaic), 1995  
cotton thread and iron wire, 130x130 cm

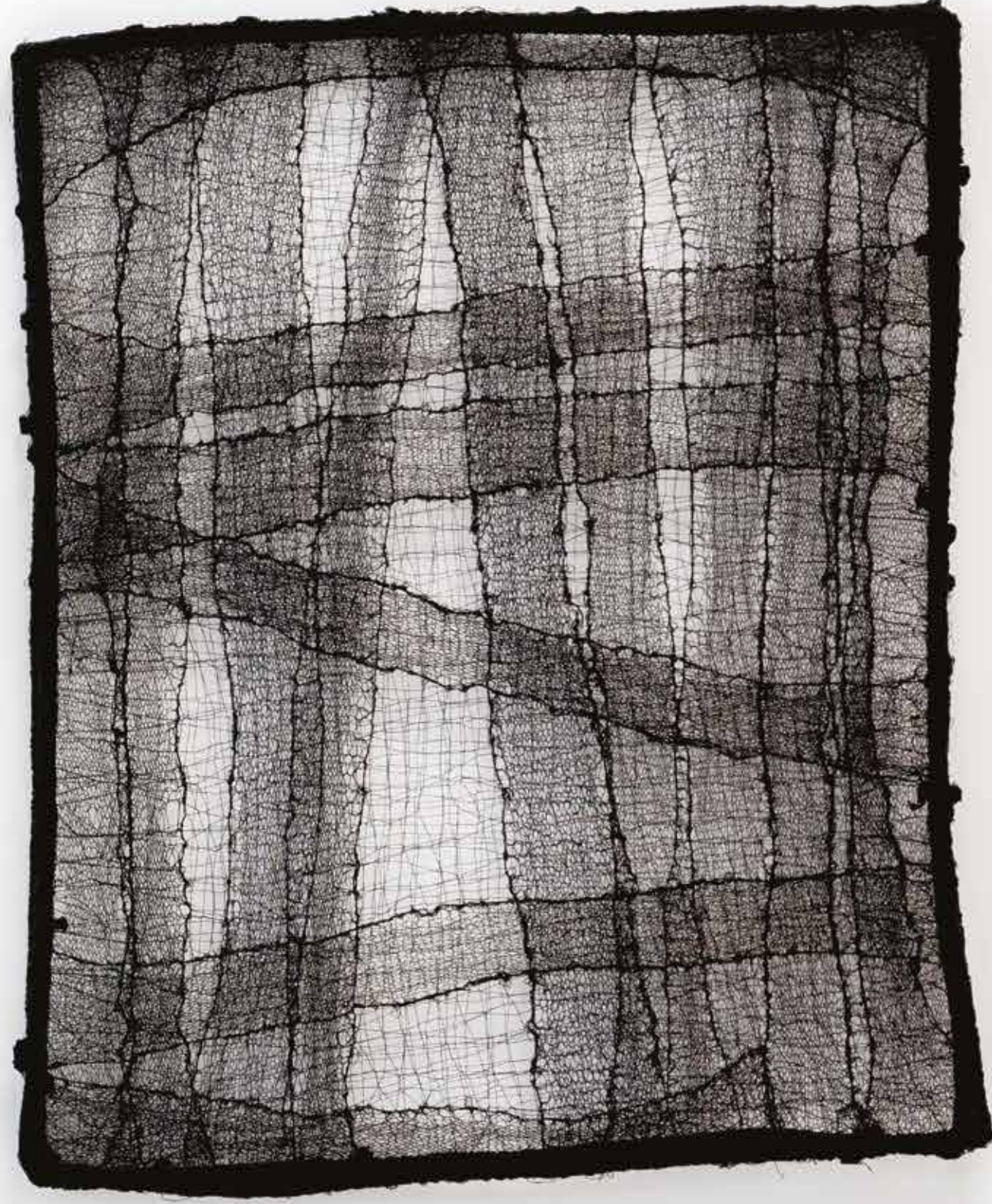


Filo spinato bianco (White Barbed Wire), 1995  
cotton thread and iron wire, 100x72 cm









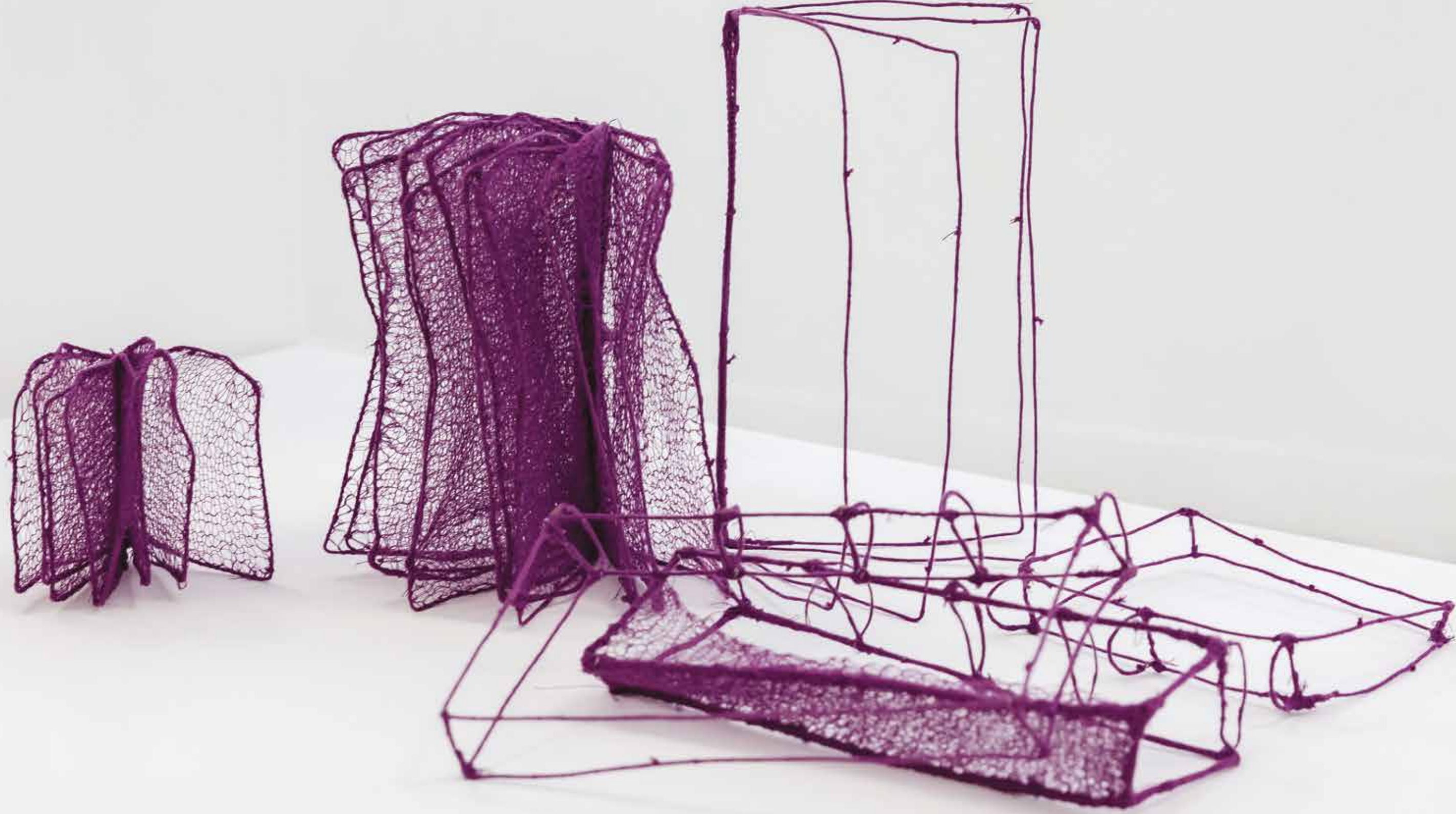




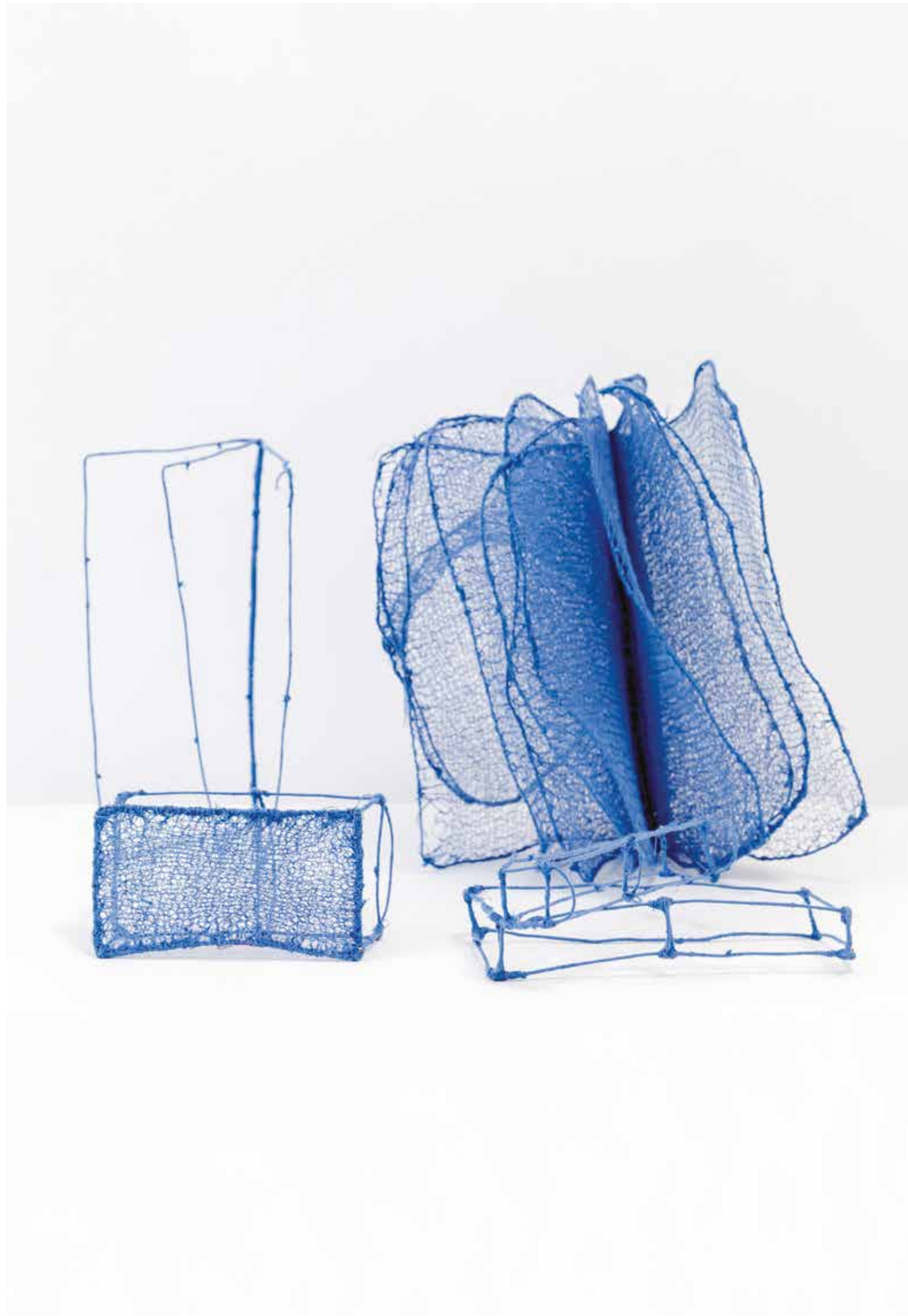




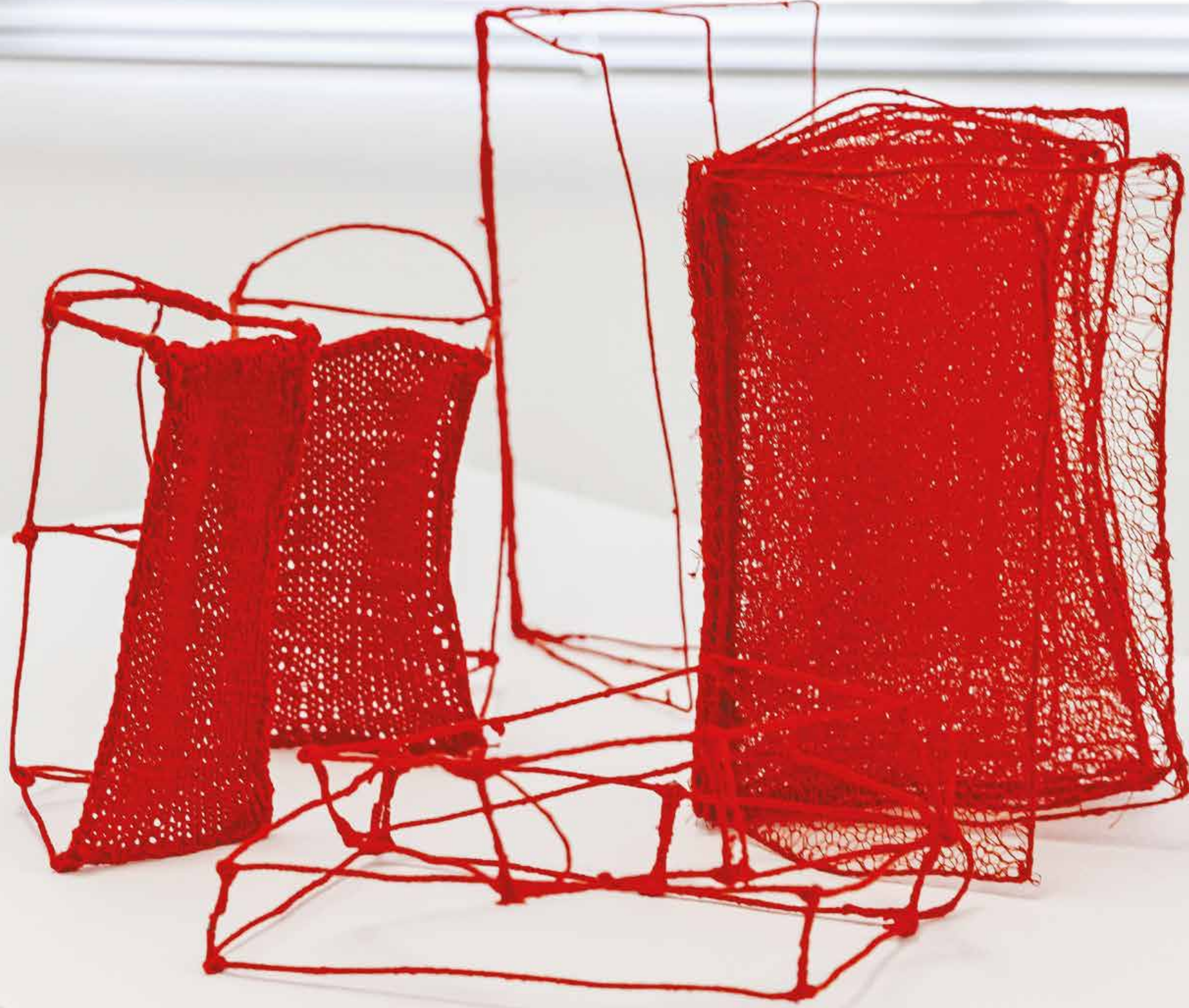


















# #BIO FRANCA SONNINO

1932/70

Franca Coen was born on February 13, 1932, in Rome. After completing her studies in Literature, she married Sergio Sonnino, a businessman in the textile industry, and adopted his surname. Her artistic journey started not in a conventional academic setting, but through a transformative friendship with the artist Maria Lai, with whom she studied drawing. The two artists lived in the same building in Rome and eventually shared a studio.

1970/75

She developed a distinctive artistic style rooted in geometry, balance, and spatial composition. Her early works featured linear forms and dense thread patterns reminiscent of textiles, guided more by intuition than by adherence to strict shapes or traditional motifs. By the early 1970s, her work began to attract public attention. In 1972, she held her first solo exhibition at SM 13 Gallery in Rome, followed by a monographic show at La Triade Gallery in Turin in 1973. Both exhibitions were supported by noted critics Marcello Venturoli and Luigi Carluccio. That same year, she was selected to participate in the prestigious Michetti Prize in Francavilla al Mare, one of Italy's foremost contemporary art competitions. Further exhibitions at Porta Romana Gallery in Milan and Schneider Gallery in Rome in 1974 and 1975 solidified her standing in the contemporary Italian art scene.

1976/79

In the second half of the 1970s, she continued to experiment with thread and other textile materials, further expanding her artistic vocabulary. She also began exploring the creative potential of everyday domestic activities, particularly knitting, as a way to rethink their cultural significance and artistic value. In 1976, she held a solo exhibition titled *Franca Sonnino* at L'Incontro Club d'Arte in Naples. The following year, she presented *The Weft and Its Double* at Il Brandale Art Center in Savona. Both exhibitions were introduced by respected art critics Maurizio Fagiolo and Ciro Ruju. Also in 1977, she took part in the group show *Sign and Identity: A Tentative Journey into Female Creativity* at the Pinacoteca di Ravenna, an exhibition focused on the role of women in contemporary art.

1980/89

The 1980s marked a pivotal transformation in Sonnino's practice. Motivated by a desire to bring her works into three dimensions, she developed what she called the "solid thread", a cotton thread reinforced with metallic wire, allowing her to "draw" her universe in space. This innovation opened the door to a new phase in her career and signaled her emergence on the international stage. Her new approach debuted in a series of exhibitions curated by Mirella Bentivoglio, including *Filo*, *Genesi e Filogenesi* (1980) at Galleria Duchamp in Cagliari, *Filo-logia* (1981) at Il Luogo Gallery in Rome, and *Fil'Sofia. The Concept of the Thread in the Woman-Artist* (1982) at Galeria Metrònom in Barcelona and Parpallò in Seville. In 1981, she also participated in the *Post Card Show* in Mexico City. The following year, her work was included in *Mostra Grafica* at Galleria Schweizer in Geneva and in *Not[e] Books - Italian Spring* (1982) at Quentin Gallery in Perth, Australia. In 1983, she was featured in *Not[e] Books* at the Ivan Dougherty Gallery in Sydney and *Art Italien Actuel* at La Chambre Blanche in Quebec, reflecting her expanding international presence. That same year, Sonnino presented a major solo exhibition, *The Thread of the Sign 1975-1983*, at the Palazzo dei Diamanti in Ferrara. The show featured large-scale installations, including her poetic "Libraries," which explored themes of shadow, form, and negative space. Throughout the mid-1980s, her textile-based investigations continued to evolve. In 1984, she took part in *Artists at Work: Maria Lai and Franca Sonnino - Drawing and Figuring Space* at the Calcografia Nazionale in Rome. The following year, she mounted *Franca Sonnino: Works 1977-1985* at Galleria Duchamp in Cagliari and created *Ghosts in the House*, an immersive installation that transformed her Rome studio into a landscape of suspended, net-like forms. In 1986-87, her work was featured in *Sixty Years of Cultural Life in Italy*, which opened at Palazzo Venezia in Rome and later traveled to Columbia University in New York. In 1988, she introduced her *Landscapes* series in a solo exhibition at La Cooperativa Esperienze Culturali in Bari, marking yet another new direction in her artistic journey.

1990/99

During the 1990s, Sonnino expanded both the scale and theatricality of her artistic practice. In 1991, she created the scenography *Voice Weavings* for a theatrical production by Ille Strazza in Rome, marking a significant move into performance-related work. The year before, she had already participated in several notable group exhibitions that explored contemporary textile practices and female creativity,

2000/18

The new millennium marked a period of significant academic and institutional recognition for Sonnino. In 2000, she was included in the fifth volume of *History of Italian Art of the 20th Century*, edited by Giorgio Di Genova, a testament to her established place within the national art historical canon. That same year, she participated in several important group exhibitions, both in Italy and abroad, including *Women of the Book* at the Ritter Art Gallery in Florida and *Fiber Art or Off Loom* at San Michele a Ripa in Rome. In 2005, Sonnino presented one of her most acclaimed solo exhibitions, *The Shape of the Void*, at the Complesso del Vittoriano in Rome, showcasing the spatial and poetic evolution of her fiber-based work. Her international presence was further affirmed in 2008 when she was featured in the Italian Pavilion at the 11th Cairo Biennial with the installation *The Other*. That same year, the Archivio

including *Textile Art in Italy* in Stuttgart, *The Disturbing Muses* at the Museo Civico di Rende, the *4th Women's Biennial - The Game of Roles* at the Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea in Ferrara, and *Three Generations in Comparison* at Palazzo dei Diamanti, also in Ferrara. Her international profile grew further in 1993 with her participation in *Photoidea*, part of the 22nd São Paulo Biennial in Brazil. The following year marked a significant thematic development in her work, with two major solo exhibitions: *Beyond the Sign* at Galleria Il Gabbiano in La Spezia and *Crossing the Border* at Galleria 5/55 in Rome. These exhibitions introduced her iconic mosaic series for the first time and underscored an increasingly environmental and spatial dimension within her textile practice. Throughout the mid-1990s, Sonnino remained engaged with exhibitions focused on artists' books and experimental formats. These included *Artist's Books* in 1995, *Digital Book* at Galleria Il Gabbiano, and *Listening to the Images* (1996) at Palazzo Mediceo in Seravezza. That same year, her sculptural fiber works were also featured in *Textile Sculpture in Rome* at Temple Gallery. By the end of the decade, she presented *The Environmental Measurement of Franca Sonnino* (1999), a solo exhibition curated by Mirella Bentivoglio at Galleria Giulia in Rome. In the same year, she also showed *On the Thread of Art* at Studio Gennai in Pisa. Additionally, her work was featured in the international exhibitions *Women of the Book* (1997) in California and *Women of the Book: Jewish Artists, Jewish Themes* (1999) at Kutztown University in Pennsylvania, further reinforcing her presence within feminist and cultural discourses.

2019/25

Crispoliti dedicated a retrospective, *The Art of Thread*, to her practice, presented as part of the *Vetrina Ripetta* series in Rome. Sonnino continued to exhibit actively throughout the following years. Notable solo shows included *The City* (2011) at Galleria La Cuba d'Oro and *Towards the Heights - An Imaginary City* (2012) at Lavatoio Contumaciale, both in Rome. She remained a central figure in exhibitions devoted to fiber art and artists' books, underscoring her ongoing relevance within contemporary Italian art. In 2016, her contributions were further recognized with her inclusion in *W. Women in Italian Design* at the XXI International Exhibition of the Triennale Design Museum in Milan, affirming her legacy as a pioneering figure in the dialogue between art, design, and textile-based practices.

Over the past decade, Franca Sonnino's work has continued to gain recognition on an international scale through both solo and group exhibitions. In 2019, her contributions to fiber art were honoured in *Masterpieces of Italian Fiber Art* at the Textile Museum in Busto Arsizio, where her work was exhibited alongside that of Maria Lai. That same year, she was featured in *Threading Spaces* in London, a group exhibition spotlighting four influential Italian artists, Nedda Guidi, Elisabetta Gut, Maria Lai, and Franca Sonnino. In 2021, Sonnino participated in *Histoire d'E - Part 2: Between Language and Object* at Gramma\_Epsilon Gallery in Athens and also presented a solo project at Frieze Masters in London, further cementing her international presence. The following year, her work was celebrated in a collaborative retrospective titled *Thread, Sign, Space*, co-hosted by Gramma\_Epsilon in Athens and MUACC in Cagliari. In 2023, she exhibited at the Mdina Biennale in Malta and held a solo show at Jochum Rodgers Gallery in Berlin. Most recently, in 2024, she took part in *The Different Revolution*, a group exhibition first presented at Artissima in Turin and subsequently at Gramma\_Epsilon Gallery in Athens.

\*When applicable, the titles of exhibitions have been translated in English to facilitate readability.



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