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Seeing Things | Studio Visit: Pae White

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Collection San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; courtesy 1301PE, Los Angeles, and greengrassi, London.

Photograph by Fredrik Nilsen.

Pae White, “Smoke Knows” (2009). For the 2010 Whitney’ Biennial, White created a similar work called “Still, Untitled,” a nearly 40-foot long tapestry that depicts wisps and curls of smoke.

I recently visited the artist Pae White in her Los Angeles studio, where she was busy working on a new exhibition for [the Power Plant](#) in Toronto. The exhibition, which opens on Oct. 9, will feature a number of her recent tapestry works as well as a new commissioned tapestry called “Sea Beast.” White has called the show “Material Mutters” because, she explained, “it’s about the exploration of process and the material is doing the talking.” Smoke has been a recurring motif in her work lately, and she has been exploring ways to capture its elusive qualities in various media, including a series of carved paper works that she was finishing for the Toronto show. Because smoke moves so rapidly and changes form so quickly, White likes the way the image of something so immaterial contrasts with the physicality of fabric. “It’s one material trying to understand another and it turns the fabric into something other than itself,” she said. At the [Whitney Museum’s Biennial](#) this spring, her monumental digitally woven tapestry “Still, Untitled” was a showstopper.

White in her Los Angeles studio.

Visiting an artist’s studio offers a glimpse into a much more personal and intimate space than the gallery or museum, where the artist’s work is usually seen. White’s studio, a large airy garage attached to her house, is a colorful, vital place, full of books, fabric samples, tapestry swatches, prototypes and found objects, including a papery wasp’s nest, a beautifully formed leaf, images of butterflies and birds. Some of these things are works in progress, like an editioned work that will be a small box containing the pieces of a broken butterfly, while others she simply finds beautiful for their natural forms and textures. White is always working on multiple projects at many different scales. She showed me a briefcase that contained a “swatch book” of neon tubes that she used for a massive installation, of five layers of neon, that will open at the Gloucester Road underground station in London for the 2012 Olympics. She described it as being “like a Persian rug S.A.D. lamp” because its range of white shades will counteract seasonal affective disorder. The neon installation, like much of White’s work, is physical and ephemeral, tactile yet elusive. If you’re in Los Angeles this fall, you can see White’s work in the Museum of Contemporary Art’s coming exhibition “The Artist’s Museum,” for which she has also designed the title graphic.