

MARIANA CHKONIA



'A fabric must be "grasped," only when it is grasped can it be understood according to its most important quality: tactility.'
Otti Berger

Borrowing ancient techniques from Georgian and South Caucasian felt tradition, Mariana Chkonia revitalizes an almost extinct medium with a contemporary approach to texture, color, and spatial dimension. E.A. Shared Space (located in Tbilisi, capital of Georgia) presents the first solo exhibition of Mariana Chkonia, featuring her recent tapestry series under the title *The Night of the Wolf-Headed King*.

As I enter the exhibition on an opening day, I cross the crowd among monumental textiles and seek the artist with my eyes as if it were a reassurance that I have arrived at the right destination. I try vigorously not to affix my vision on any particular piece of work until I've been 'greeted' by the artist. And there, I see Mariana Chkonia standing next to *Bufoon* in the last room, with her hand slid under the thick multi-layered textile, telling the visitor to come and feel a particular spot where the felt reaches unmatched density. In the self-effacing era of 'Do Not Touch The Artwork,' I am pleased and relieved that a woman who's spent hundreds of hours felting the wool encourages tactility as a way of perception. Sensory interaction, yet not always a must to be actualized, still creates a vivid memory of wanting to feel the surface, figure out what's holding the piece and its weight, and what would come out of one touching it. I'm having flashbacks from the gallery's previous exhibition by Florian Meisenberg, where fragile PLA 'weavings', drawn out in air using a 3D pen, had frozen in the space, imprisoning perishable fruits and vegetables, only to expose their shriveled skin - the same way the human skin shrinks dipped into soapy water when wet felting, a technique utilized by Chkonia alongside dry (needling) method.

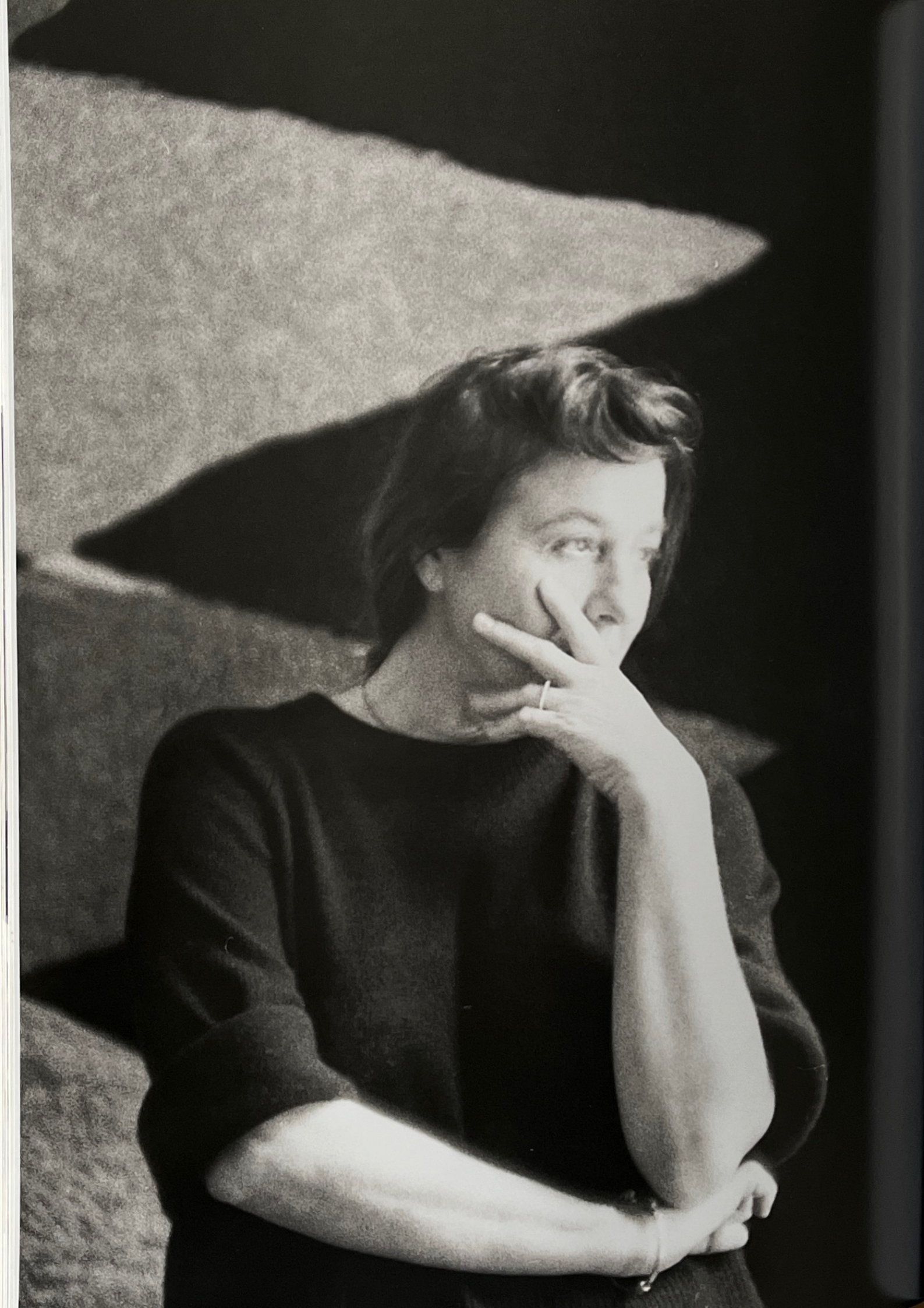
Craft versus fine art hierarchy has always dispositioned fiber-related practices as conceptual periphery in art theory, on the contrary granting it peculiar freedom inherent to haptic modality, and I see an author more true to her working material and senses than those who have turned to 3-dimensional medium and left it to mere optic delight. In *The Night of a Wolf-Headed King*, the exhibition space is tenanted by eight hunched-over tapestries of unprecedented monumentality and weight, deliberately disregarding the relational laws of installation, as evident via *Untitled* exciding the doorway. This ideological and material surpass of these stiffened fabrics sums up Chkonia's efforts, who indeed comes from an architectural



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MARIANA CHKONIA, THE WOLF-HEADED KING, 2022. WOOL, DRY AND WET FELTING METHOD. 183 X 227 CM



background, to emancipate rigid structures with audacious acts of soft power coaxed under a layer of forged naivety. Thus, I continue to think that textile art remains the primary successive response to conceptual boundaries imposed by flawed power dynamics of society and offers an opening for rehabilitation.

Zooming back in, let's take a closer look at the medium itself. The artist engages with the organic material - sheep's hair. Mythologies and transcultural folk tales have long explored the philosophical notations of mammal hair and the vital healing properties it nurtures and conveys. This DNA-stamped organic matter has been commonly employed in feminist art practices in the twentieth century and contemporary times. If the Body art movement icon Ana Mendieta radically approaches gender politics, transplanting male friends' facial hair onto her own, Keith W. Bentley's much more morbid, creeps-inducing approach with his horse-hair works births further questions of exploitation and sustainability. Regardless, the fibrous natural element that is hair has undergone various methods of artistic play and representation, falling under the realm of queer expression concerning identity and ecology tactics.

The exhibition title, *The Night of the Wolf-Headed King*, derives from a namesake poem by Gogita Chkonia (1950-2009), the artist's father, evokes a certain primordial sensibility, one in tune with nature in its anthropomorphic signaling. The image of a dear figurative drawing *Wolf Girl* (1999) by Kiki Smith, pops up in my head, making me wonder if these two artists have much more in common behind the surface.

After visiting the exhibition, I also took the liberty to speak with the author herself in order to grasp her felt textiles better through personal interaction. Here's an interview with Mariana Chkonia, a visual artist based between Tbilisi and Nukriani:

This is your first solo exhibition, and you named it after your father's poetic script, *The Night of the Wolf-Headed King*. Tracing back to the very beginning, how did growing up in a creative environment affect you?

My house was filled with such spirit all the time. Film was my father's whole life; he lived with film, thought through film, and breathed through film. First, he was an architect and then moved toward cinema, which he regarded as experimental cinema. Indeed, it was experimental, especially here in the 80s. My grandmother, who raised me, was an architect and a lecturer at the Art Academy. The students she mentored would come to our house, and that's where I met many of my colleagues. I don't even remember how I started reading architectural plans when I was little. Deciphering blueprints and plans was taught in our house, like ABC, and I thought everyone could do it. Also, women in my house sewed all the time, and so did I. It was not their work but pleasure. My mother and grandmother used to make patterns and sew, as apparel construction and pattern-making are pretty similar to

architecture. I sewed a jacket for myself when I first entered university to study Western European Languages. Now such precision gets on my nerves. I also remember that my grandmother had a 'faced Nabadi' at home, and that's how I knew about it from an early age.

It seems like you've combined your architectural background with a textile medium. The felt of such volume is on the verge of sculpture and stiffened fabric.

It is part of the interior but stands on its own and sustains itself. It is monumental. If I combine everything from my past, architecture, and model-making, which I witnessed all my childhood, it will accumulate all things retained in me. After reaching a certain age, I kept obsessing over the thought of collecting all goodness from my family, like gathering pearls in my hand palm. This inner state brought me to textiles. Attempting to reflect leaves behind such a product. Anything related to handicrafts was always of great interest to me. I never imagined I would ever be able to do 'faced Nabadi,' but I initiated, tried, and did it. I feel incredible joy every time I complete a new piece.

Felting tradition has existed for centuries in Tusheti, Kakheti, Khevi, and Javakheti regions of Georgia, the most prominent samples being Nabadi [Batt coat] (written sources document the common export of Nabadi within wool trade in the Middle Ages) and Kecha [Felt rugs]. However, its production for original purposes has declined since 1930, exhausting felt-making with souvenir-like mien, which I assume caused the aversion from the medium for many artists. What led you to start making contemporary felt pieces?

I don't think they even made large-scale rugs with this technique. Some are still working now in felt, but in a smaller format; there are some patterned pieces in Sighnagi, and they are still making Nabadi. Nowadays, Nabadi has taken on a decorative form and has lost its original function. Nabadi and even shepherds are now looked upon as exponents of a Museum.

It is exceptional when something happens 15 years before, and you realize it happened for that exact reason. Twelve years ago, I bought a house in Kakheti, and as if a puzzle was missing, I was always looking for what to do in Nukriani.

I wanted the place to be whole and my presence there to be alive. Besides, where I live (obviously in Telavi as well, because Tusheti starts from Telavi), Kizik is considered the mountain of Kakheti, and accordingly, this branch of craft is well-developed. In Sighnagi, there were ceramics and felt-animal husbandry. Where there is livestock, there is also felt. Strangely enough, nobody here knew how to work with felt; Maybe they had heard more about it than others, it's in their genetic code, and the girls knew it at that level, then we learned to ram it together. I didn't learn from anyone. I did it myself. I acquainted myself with the technique via book, where it was theoretically explained, and I followed the steps. What we see now is my improvisation, and the thickness is not something conventional; the faced felt is traditionally thinner. I wanted to do something that I could not imagine, and I made it bigger than myself. I wanted something to happen in the process that would drive me crazy. When we women do it together, such joy and energy are going around that it's absolutely meditative. Women generally work the felt on tables, and I realized that this table was binding me. When you press it with your entire body weight, it compacts better, and putting it on the table is not convenient. I do it alternating two techniques, wet and dry technique; it is dry on top, so when the felt has been coated one or two times already coated, then I put it on the table and work it with a needle. Sometimes I do all the work alone. It's such a pleasant process that sometimes I'm hesitant to share the work with the girls. Wool itself has its properties. It is biologically alive. When I'm working, there's such a warmth buzzing out of it that I have an absolute feeling that this material is helping me make what I want to accomplish - it's very compliant.

I understand that the process is as important to you as the end result. Do you trust the process till the final point, or do you work with a sketch?

It depends. I had sketches for every textile in the series created for this exhibition, but sometimes the sketch and the final product don't match. Something that fits into a sketch might require more in the textile form. I tried sketching with watercolor and gouache, even pastels, but it didn't give me the texture of the fabric. This was my discovery. *(She takes out her phone and shows me a digitally drawn sketch on the screen)* These brushes have many different faces; they look like stone, as felt does.



MARIANA CHKONIA, STONE FLOWER, 2022. WOOL, DRY AND WET FELTING METHOD. 197 X 176 CM



MARIANA CHKONIA, THE NIGHT OF THE WOLF-HEADED KING, 2022. WOOL, DRY AND WET FELTING METHOD. 220 X 315 CM

During the early days of the Bauhaus Weaving Workshop, textiles turned to photography as an adjacent proliferate sphere.

Exactly, because it is a cellular network. One work is called "Dreamcast." This was when I was in the midst of preparing the exhibition, and I was driven by all this; every cell filled with this, I was thinking about what to do. There is a view of a building in front of my house. I like that it has a single cut-out window on the entire facade. Sometimes the light is on, sometimes not. It's evening. I look and see some lines reflected on the building's wall. I opened the camera, and I saw geometrical imagery, which is not visible to the eye, visible only to the camera, and the face of this felt was drawn out on the facade (*The only graffiti tag on the blank wall reads Dreamcast*). I transferred it directly into the program and processed the colors. The camera, in the middle, is the mediator. Unfortunately, I often forget to take photos because it's not my habit, but I use it to find the form. Mostly I start with color. Color just comes to me, and I want to bring it to life.

This time, when the natural undyed wool arrived, it dictated the face to me, and I surrendered to its needs. When wool was brought to me in a roll, I opened it, fixed the exact picture that had been procured, and created a backdrop for it. This is how the piece "The Night of the Wolf-Headed King" came about. Its surface reminds me of both stone and wood. It was fascinating to realize that this is sheep's hair, and you give this sheep's hair some form, and you get a piece of earth that looks just like a mineral.

In some cases, it started as a completely different work; I had made a drawing I liked in the sketch, but it didn't work, so I deleted it. Although I didn't delete it, you can rip it off, but I prefer to overlay it. When these layers are added, it shows its development and tells the story of how the piece was made.

I feel you are in tune with the landscapes surrounding you. Along with its relief-like qualities, your body of work is very painterly. Does the color palette that's encoded in Georgian visual culture influence you?

Thinking about influences distracts me from work. During the process, I should not think about anything, and I should blindly follow my impulses. However, of course, everything comes from prior knowledge. It is not only Georgian; Bauhaus also has a great influence on me. I am very interested in that period when women were dominantly working on rugs, although there was no felt there. Despite our extensive tradition of this handicraft, we missed this experimental period, and still, it remains a regional craft rather than an art. It could not enter. I have a feeling that they never allowed it to enter.

Since this is your first solo exhibition, I wonder what it was like to arrange the complete series of works in relation to the space.

I knew the space where I was to have the exhibition, and it was always at the back of my mind. At some point, I still went with what I was urged to do, even though I thought the space wouldn't fit some work; I thought if I made it too huge, where would it fit, although I tried to complete the series with one continues breath, and I listened to the rhythm of this breath. One exception to this series is *Puzzle (Study of Vera Pagava)*, which hangs in the gallery's office. Vera Pagava inspired it. I was looking for this color of Vera, which is a fragment of her painting. This insert is with merino; it is a different yarn. Before we agreed on having my solo exhibition, there was an idea to have a dialogue between Vera Pagava and my works. When I had not seen Pagava's original works, I thought they were large in format, but then I found out they were pretty small. Still, she could fit so much in that scale she was exploding the paper. I was inspired by this, and I really wanted to transfer this into felt. I looked deeply into her paintings and the arrangement of colors. Looking at her work for a long time closed me off for a while, and I was released from it when I just imagined where this woman was standing and what she was seeing. As soon as I imagined what she was painting, it changed my route completely, it became clear to me.

After talking with Mariana Chkonia, I had the opportunity to hear what the curator of this exhibition, and the founder of the gallery, Elene Abashidze had to say about Chkonia's practice.

E. A.: Mariana and I connected very naturally since we have known each other for a long time. Although the gallery's program varies across mediums, one unifying interest is

feminist practices. Mariana may not even position herself as a feminist artist, and it might be secondary for her to think about it, but it still can manifest in such a way. For me, Mariana's art is also interesting in this respect. The practices of Georgian artists do not have a direct political frame since they come from different schools based on a different culture. Georgian art is closely tied with applied arts, and Mariana is no exception. It was often women who were more actively involved in the applied arts than men. Mariana's case also happened naturally; It wasn't that she woke up one day and decided to become an artist. These processes, free of any artificiality, are very interesting to me. Mariana naturally aligns with the culture she represents.

Returning to the applied arts and what Mariana has done, apart from these felts being contemporary and less ornamental than traditional Georgian felts, she has added a more monumental and sculptural character to this technique. Even observing the technical aspects of making, these textiles are made sculpturally. In the end, it is still a textile, but the process is very similar to working on a sculpture; the work is built as it goes through the dry process. It starts with pure wool, you have one pure material, and you build it from this big lump. It's like liberating a sculpture from marble, stone, or sculpting bronze on top of each other. However, Mariana works with hair, which is always associated with female artists in art. This is one of the expressive symbols of feminist practice. For me, these works also have a certain masculine dimension, but it comes more from the monumental nature. For Mariana, architecture is of great importance. She thinks in spatial terms, which is evident in her works, as well as in the exposition - her perspective is always three-dimensional.



MARIANA CHKONIA, PUZZLE (STUDY ON VERA PAGAVA), 2022. WOOL, DRY AND WET FELTING METHOD. 187 X 128 CM