



Sheila Pepe (American, b. 1959)

*My Neighbor's Garden, 2023*

## Artist Statement

In 2017, Gilbert Vicario, then chief curator at the Phoenix Art Museum, curated my first mid-career traveling survey, which was accompanied by a catalog that revealed a much broader array of works that live alongside the better-known large-scale crocheted installations made from domestic and industrial materials. The exhibition *Sheila Pepe: Hot Mess Formalism*, showed more than thirty years of accumulating a family resemblance (see Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*) of works in sculpture—installation—drawing and other singular and hybrid forms. Some are drawings on paper, or that live in space as sculpture—or sculpture that is furniture, fiber works that appear as paintings, and tabletop objects that look like models for monuments, and stand as votives for a secular religion. The cultural sources and the meanings twisted together are from canonical arts of the twentieth century, home crafts, lesbian, queer and feminist aesthetics, Second Vatican Council American design, an array of Roman Catholic sources as well as their ancient precedents.

*My Neighbor's Garden* joins this family of things that share both similarities and differences while advancing my mission to tussle with received knowledge, opinions, and taste. It is my first major outdoor installation. While it uses many material methods I have honed over time—crocheted shoelaces, string, and paracord pulled across spaces to draw in space—changing the context, from white box to urban park, changes nearly everything about the work. At the outset, when I first crocheted in space twenty-five years ago, it was a shout-out to challenge the hegemony of sculpture materials. Making contingent structures within the white walls of galleries and museums was a critical aspect of the work, infiltrating the masculine institutional space with chains of feminist stitches. Back then, crocheting was the outlier; knitting was the rage. Fiber work now seems ubiquitous, albeit we are likely still battling a few holdouts. For me, the mission of the work has shifted. As I perform large ephemeral fiber installations in small towns and cities across the country (and around the world), the formal elements change as variations on a theme, as a painter's work might evolve. At the same time, the preparation and programming around the work aim to make human connections as solid and honest as the many connections visible in the thousands of knots throughout the piece.

Moving out of the white box allows me the simple joy and challenge of sharing awareness with an audience not necessarily there for the art. The program is equally fundamental—affirming the fabulousness of an environment beyond my making and collectively celebrating everything and anything we might share in that space.