

Contemporary Handicraft, Textile Art, and Feminist Social Critique

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ABSTRACT

My thesis looks at the work of female contemporary artists who use what has historically been considered “women’s craft” such as embroidery, knitting, stitching and other various textile arts. Since the Women’s Art Movement of the 1970s, women have used these creative outlets to express discontent and injustice in their lives revolving around gender and identity. In my research, three main themes emerged as addressed in each chapter. The first theme addresses the topic of domesticity and memory including unseen female labor, such as domestic chores and motherhood, and how fabric holds memories. Chapter two covers gender politics- specifically the politics surrounding menstruation, reproductive rights, the objectification of the female body and focusing on the feminist idea of the personal is political. Chapter three is about a wide range of intersectional topics and themes including war, race, class, and climate change that shows how craft has evolved into its own medium over the years. Overall, my thesis engages in why craft is an effective medium for social critique and advocacy for its specific traits and historical connotations.

INTRODUCTION

Art works can take various forms from representation to abstraction, and for some the medium is part of the message.¹ Specifically, regarding fiber and textile art, artists might choose that medium as part of the interpretation of that piece. In this contemporary age, craft has become an “essential tool of resistance considering its historical use in the women’s movement of the 1960-1970s.”² Handicraft and Textile Arts has become this indispensable tool for so many people to express their political and personal opinions. Many widespread activism projects like the Pussyhat Project and the Tempestry Project use craft, as the medium to carry their message to the public³. A trend of feminist embroidery and stitchery appears on Instagram and social media⁴. The historical origins of these craftivist movements and its connection with different cultural movements: the women's movement, craft as fine art, etc. is particularly interesting to consider. Along with how the complicated history of the medium and those inferences that come with it affects the artist’s message. Therefore, I decided to do a deep dive into fiber and textile art as tools of societal change for my thesis. I wanted to find more relevant, contemporary examples of handicraft engaging in protest. Historically, especially in the Colonial and Victorian era, women who felt unjusticed by systematic discrimination expressed their anger and injustice

¹ Atkinson, Nathalie. “The rise of craftivism: Weaving together the political and the deeply personal” *The Globe and Mail*. October 15, 2014.

² Decker, Juilee. “Craft as DIY, Open-Source Activism of the Twenty First Century” in *Crafting Democracy: Fiber Arts and Activism*. Edited by Juilee Decker and Hinda Mandell. Published by RIT Press, 2019.

³ The Pussyhat Project is about advocating for women’s and human’s rights. Their website provides info and resources for knitting their signature pink hat and they accept donated Pussyhats to give out at marches and rallies. See more: <https://www.pussyhatproject.com/>. The Tempestry Project is about data visualization specifically regarding conservation, climate change and tracking global temperature changes through the creation of ‘Tempestries’. See more: <https://www.tempestryproject.com/>.

⁴ Shannon Downey’s Bad Ass Cross Stitch for example.

through the forms of embroidery samples and stitchery because those were the creative outlets made readily available to them. More recently, online community-based projects, like the Pussyhat Project and the Tempestry Project, **chose** to use handicraft, especially knitting, to achieve their project's goals.

Art historian Rozsika Parker makes it clear that the relationship, between women and handicraft, is originally one of subjugation as the needle was the “instrument which enabled women to obliterate aspects of herself which did not conform to femininity” but also the instrument in which women quietly protested and expressed themselves creatively⁵. It is due to this that handicraft has a complex role as both an instrument of repression but also a tool of empowerment for women. During the second feminist movement, artists like Judy Chicago embraced handicraft and unapologetically used “craft” as fine art. As a result, handicraft has become widespread and varied as a tool of political dissent as we are submerged in the third wave of the feminist movement. Topics like intersectionality, #MeToo (prevention and accountability for sexual assault), gendered wage gap, cost of birth control, the societal perception of menstruation, abortion, and female pleasure, the sexualization and objectification of the female body and environmental awareness are some of the central issues explored by artists working with fiber and textile art. In her article for *Timeline*, Stephanie Buck says “Craftivism isn’t just some millennial arts and crafts fad. For centuries women have used the ‘domestic arts’ to educate, protest and connect— even through periods of intense adversity.”⁶ “Craftivism” has often resulted in hand-crafted, socially engaging rallying cries; resulting from

⁵ Parker, Rozsika. *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*. New York: Routledge, 1989. Pg. 164.

⁶ Buck, Stephanie. “Women craftivists are reclaiming domesticity as a quiet form of protest”, *Timeline*, November 22nd, 2016.

its role as a historical tool of resistance; the medium has become intersectional allowing for the discussion of so many different topics at once.

Craft allows uncomfortable or unfamiliar conflicts to be conveyed in a safe, familiar way. A result of the symbolic nature of fabric and our own emotional and physical attachment to fabric. When we are born, we are immediately swaddled in a blanket. We all wear fabric, we all sleep under fabric: “constantly, fabric is present in our daily lives as congruous and familiar symbols.”⁷ Fabric, textiles, and clothes exist as ways of self-expression, as ways of conforming to social standards and as a functional object in our lives. It is the familiarity of the medium that encourages dialogue. It is this characteristic of fabric that makes the topic easier to talk about because of the medium but also harder because it infringes upon a level of comfort and solace.⁸

This thesis is composed of three chapters, each based on central themes including: Domesticity and Memory, Gender Politics and The Social Fabric. For each chapter in this document, the art was selected and curated in a way to express a rejection of ‘meaningless abstraction’ and focus on form, content, and artist’s social responsibility.⁹ It is important that art has meaning and that the content and message informs the formal qualities of the piece. This sentiment is reflected in this quote by Ben Shahn, “if art seeks to divorce itself from meaningful and associative images...it holds material alone as its objective.”¹⁰ I am purely interested in art that seeks out those meaningful associative images and makes its objective: critical examination of constructs in society and eventual systematic change.

⁷ Prain, Leanne. *Strange Material: Storytelling through Textiles*. Arsenal Pulp Press. October 7, 2014.

⁸ Atkinson, Nathalie. “The rise of craftivism: Weaving together the political and the deeply personal” *The Globe and Mail*. October 15, 2014.

⁹ Boas, George. "The Social Responsibility of the Artist." *College Art Journal* 6, no. 4 (1947): 270-76. Accessed January 13, 2020. doi:10.2307/772652.

¹⁰ Shahn, Ben. “The Shape of Content”, Harvard University Press, 1957.

Chapter one delves deep into the memory and history behind handicraft. It covers the precedent of women using stitch as an act of protest in the colonial and Victorian era. The chapter covers topics such as motherhood, female domestic labor, social expectations, and how contemporary women are reconciling the expectations with their own visions of what a modern woman and mother should be. Chapter two examines the female body; literally and symbolically— as a battleground for laws and as visual feminist iconography. The chapter delves deep into internalized shame, menstruation, reproductive rights and the ‘othering’ of the woman into a sexual object. Chapter three covers a wide range of topics; from climate change, race, class, human right violations, and more general social problems that are reflected in the metaphorical ‘social fabric’

CHAPTER ONE: DOMESTICITY AND MEMORY

There is a longstanding assumption that women belong in the home or should be limited to the 'private' or 'domestic' sphere; this concept was tied to such subjects as motherhood and domestic labor. The idea of separate dominions gained precedence in the Victorian era when it was popularized by the rapidly growing middle class and the subject of etiquette and gender roles. The concept of separate spheres revolved around the domestic sphere and the public sphere. Victorian women, largely white middle-class women, were expected to see to the management of the household in terms of morals and economics; all to make sure the home runs smoothly. While the man was expected to provide the money to support the home and take care of anything in the public eye such as politics.¹¹

This was a long-lasting ideal that still has effects in contemporary society and modern gender roles. And, in addition to the role women were expected to fulfill; there were other guidelines and expectations to being the 'proper woman'. One such example is the corset, women would endure the physical constriction of their body to fulfill societal expectations for how one should look. This is important because fabric and clothes are innately symbolic to us. Fabric, textiles, and clothes exist as ways of self-expression but also as ways of conforming to social standards; clearly expressed by the corset and countless of other fashion standards throughout history.¹²

¹¹ Boardman, Kay. "The Ideology of Domesticity: The Regulation of the Household Economy in Victorian Women's Magazines." *Victorian Periodicals Review* 33, no. 2 (2000): 150-64. Accessed January 27, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/20083724.

¹² Prain, Leanne. *Strange Material: Storytelling through Textiles*. Arsenal Pulp Press. October 7, 2014.

In the 1963, Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* expressed the widespread unhappiness in housewives who were subject to those strict gender roles. After World War II, when men returned to the US and took back their jobs; women had to return to the home. Women were once again relegated to the domestic sphere and this role was reinforced by consumer culture. Consumer culture and media today reinforce many gender roles as seen by magazines like "Good Housekeeping". Undoubtedly, women have historically been relegated to the home where their contributions to the family in terms of domestic labor such as cleaning, cooking, child rearing, etc. went unnoticed for the most part.

Amy Meissner, an American artist working in Alaska, combines traditional handwork with contemporary imagery to explore the subject of memory and domesticity. Her work asks questions about women's lives about birth and sex and about misunderstanding and fear.¹³ Her materials are vintage, discarded, donated, or found domestic linens and Meissner manipulates unknown histories to shape a narrative or myth for each artwork. Meissner says she is a "memoirist whose preferred medium is textiles and preferred language is the stitch". By reusing these abandoned textile works, Meissner attempts to recognize unseen female labor and acknowledges the literal, physical and emotional work behind each repurposed object.¹⁴ The discarded cloth is used to create two-dimensional quilts and three-dimensional sculptural works that critique the erasure and disregard of women's handwork in society.

In her artist's statement Meissner states that she uses the quilt for its connotations of maternity, protection, and comfort so that she can heave against it— using those female

¹³ "Inheritance. Makers. Memory. Myth." Anchorage Museum. Accessed January 27, 2020. <https://www.anchoragemuseum.org/media/press-releases/inheritance-makers-memory-myth/>.

¹⁴ "Amy Meissner." Amy Meissner. Accessed October, 2019. <https://www.amymeissner.com/>.

stereotypes and subverting them. Her *Inheritance* series uses vintage abandoned donated and forgotten embroidery/sewing projects that were passed down through generations. Meissner speaks on the weight of intangible memories and emotions each piece of fabric or handiwork possesses:

These salvaged embroideries, linens and crocheted items embody the original makers' intentions for beauty, home and possibility. Difficult to discard, but burdensome to store, this cloth was saved for grandchildren, saved for someday, with the very best saved for never. Cutting such material apart and reconfiguring it for a contemporary context meant sifting through the tangible and intangible detritus of women's lives. Some of it speaks long after its solitary makers no longer can."¹⁵

It is by reworking these memories and narratives into her own work that Meissner shows how she explores this literal connection to women's work. "*Fatigue Threshold*" (See Fig 1.1) shows women's strained connection and history with domestic work. With the repeating phrase: "MAKE THE BED AND" bordering the edges of this bright yellow quilt. The repeating phrase expresses the repeating chores and labor, women were engaged in day after day; there is an inequity in domestic labor and chores that even continues to this day. A new generation who have seen their mother's labor go unappreciated and do not want to follow in their footsteps. Meissner's use of text, and fabric meld together in this innocuous chant; a chant that is passed down through generations of women. Meissner expresses the exhausting, arduous work that often went unnoticed in a household. Inside the boundaries of this yellow quilt, are starbursts or flower-like arrangements with a slit centered inside each one. This imagery is symbolic of female genitalia as flowers, such as lilies, as often used as visual references to indicate such; while the slit at the center is perhaps a much more straight-forward visual clue.

¹⁵ "Inheritance Project" Amy Meissner. 2019.

Meissner, specifically, takes advantage of the qualities of a quilt and blanket as an object of warmth, protection, and its familiarity to us. This symbolic comfort the cloth brings us allows Meissner to open into a deeper dialogue with her viewers because they feel safe. Meissner takes these objects entrenched in their innate domesticity and femininity and she reclaims it by putting the domesticity on display. Many artists have been doing this by using inherently feminine objects and materials in their work, such as kitchen utensils, hair, dishes, pads, lingerie, etc.¹⁶ Meissner uses this strategy in some capacity by relating it to pure ‘domestic’ objects such as blankets, tablecloths, curtains, pot holders, etc. to more easily relate it back to her message about acknowledging the forgotten and unseen labor of women.

Quilting is a ‘genre’ of creative work that has always been associated with women. Catherine Morris tells us “quilts are products of domestic labor with clear connections to women makers” and that these quilts defy easy categorization while pushing the boundaries of what is art due to their connections with craft and femininity.¹⁷ Morris curated an exhibit titled *Workt by Hand: Hidden Labor and Historical Quilts* where this concept of unacknowledged labor is supported. The “hidden labor” Morris references is the “considerable creative energy women used to create quilts—labor that often went unrecognized by a society that placed greater value on creative activities undertaken by men” which seems incredibly similar in concept to the kind of female labor that Meissner wants to acknowledge in her own quilts in addition to the actual physical labor women engaged in.¹⁸ Meissner’s work is reminiscent in several ways to the

¹⁶ Buck, Stephanie. “[Women craftivists are reclaiming domesticity as a quiet form of protest](#)”, 2016.

¹⁷ Morris, Catherine. “Workt by Hand: Hidden Labor and Historical Quilts” published by the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Issued winter/spring 2014.

¹⁸ “National Museum of Women in the Arts.” “Workt by Hand” | National Museum of Women in the Arts. Accessed September 10, 2019. <https://nmwa.org/exhibitions/workt-hand>.

“femmages” created by Miryam Shapiro and Joyce Kozloff. Femmages were often made of collected, saved, and combined materials just like Meissner’s work. Each material used in the femmage harbored memories. “Each cherished scrap of percale, muslin or chintz, each bead, each letter, each photograph, was a reminder of its place in a woman's life, similar to an entry in a journal or a diary.”¹⁹ There is a likeness in how Meissner approaches her materials with memory in mind that seems synonymous with this ideal. According to the criteria listed in *Waste Not Want Not: An Inquiry into what Women Saved and Assembled*, it would seem that Meissner’s work clearly reflects many aspects of what a femmage is.

A femmage is defined by the following criteria: 1. It is a work by a woman. 2. The activities of saving and collecting are important ingredients. 3. Scraps are essential to the process and are recycled in the work. 4. The theme has a woman-life context. 5. The work has elements of covert imagery. 6. The theme of the work addresses itself to an audience of intimates. 7. It celebrates a private or public event. 8. A diarist's point of view is reflected in the work. 9. There is drawing and/or handwriting sewn in the work. 10. It contains silhouetted images which are fixed on other material. 11. Recognizable images appear in narrative sequence. 12. Abstract forms create a pattern. 13. The work contains photographs or other printed matter. 14. The work has a functional as well as an aesthetic life. Meissner accomplishes most of these criteria throughout her body of work.²⁰

The “*War Room*” quilt (See Fig. 1.2) from Meissner’s the *Inheritance* series, tells its own narrative with the memories the abandoned textiles possess. At one level, textiles hold onto

¹⁹ Miriam Schapiro and Melissa Meyer, “Waste Not Want Not: An Inquiry into what Women Saved and Assembled--FEMMAGE.” *Heresies* I, no. 4 (Winter 1977-78): 66-69.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

memories in the way of stains, creases, odor, or other kinds of damage.²¹ Whether worn or used-textiles show the effects of human actions upon it over time; and in this way textiles may express its history and memories to those that see its age. We see the textile's memories with our eyes when we view its age. But, we also experience memories through our body. Tactile sensation, the desire to touch and explore; it is all encouraged by the nature of the medium. *War Room* is a white quilt covered in old fashioned lace doilies; it is a refashioned baby quilt. There's an embroidered compass in the corner; alongside red and black detailing. The detailing becomes trenches and the landscape of war; all while resembling a pattern of alternating hearts. With dozens of sewing needles poking from the surface of the quilt; it is transformed into something more threatening. It turns the familiar on its head and the familiar becomes dangerous. So, what does it mean to create such an untouchable and unwelcoming quilt. It is devoid of the natural comfort one would assume originates in the warm embrace of a handmade quilt.

The tiny quilt appears threatening, dangerous— impossible to touch in its current state; covered in needles. Each piece of fabric informs the narrative that must be unraveled- strand by strand and needle by needle. The baby quilt becomes a map of the battles; the needles are our enemies- a guide to the war before us. One could interpret this piece in several ways; it could be about a narrative of a fighting couple after several miscarriages. The tension could originate from the desire for a child; the '*War Room*' is the bedroom where they hope to conceive. However, the narrative could be interpreted wholly as something else; perhaps in terms of domestic violence where the needles are representative of literal pain. The possible narratives contained in this quilt is intriguing; and it is not made clear to the viewer who this war is against.

²¹ Diamond, Sara. "The Fabric of Memory: Towards the Ontology of Contemporary Textiles" in *The Handbook of Textile Culture*. Bloomsbury Academic. 2016.

Meissner's third work *Hysteria* is made of vintage potholders, doilies, domestic/household linens, and abandoned quilt work (See Fig 1.3). The bright colorful arrangement seems cheerful and light-hearted. Meissner breathes life back into the discarded. The colors remind me of a rainbow; the shape of the collage resembles a 'U'. I find the shape puzzling; is it an upside-down rainbow? These potholders extend from a large central white potholder where the two sides of the collage meet. In some ways, it reminds me of a wingspan stretching out from behind. The cheerful persona of this arrangement is puzzling because the term hysteria is riddled with sexism and misunderstanding. Hysteria was considered a disease common among women in the 19th century.²² However, women were diagnosed with the now defunct condition called hysteria for many reasons from having too much sex, too little sex, being too emotional or whenever they did not meet societal expectations. Women who were wrongfully diagnosed may have been sent to an insane asylum or, worse, forced to undergo a forced hysterectomy.²³ And, "hysterical neurosis" didn't disappear from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders until 1980.

Yet, through her collage of potholders, Meissner is reexamining this history of assumed psychosis in women. How women were presumed to be mentally ill if they did not fulfill their roles set out by society as expected by their family, loved ones or neighbors. And, Meissner does it with an arrangement that seems frenzied, over active and in the midst of a mania or perhaps, slightly, hysteric. However, the warmth and comfort that this art seems to radiate cannot be ignored. Somehow this arrangement feels protective in nature; as if the wingspan spreading from

²² Gilman, Sander Lawrence, Helen King, Roy Porter, G. S. Rousseau, Elaine Showalter. *Hysteria Beyond Freud*. University of California Press, 1993.

²³ If you're looking for a more general history of Female Hysteria:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Female_hysteria

that central point could allude to some symbolic guardian angel. Perhaps, the title is meant to allude to the false assumptions; does this piece represent Hysteria at all? Or does it represent the normal women who were wrongfully diagnosed. Meissner leaves her audience questioning.

Noël Palomo-Lovinski, an American artist, works with clothing and fashion; she has an extensive background in textiles, fashion, and visual culture. She is both a Professor at Kent State University and an author of *The World's Most Influential Fashion Designers: Hidden Connections and Lasting Legacies of Fashion's Iconic Creators*. Palomo-Lovinski uses dress as a metaphor for identity as she explores motherhood, gender roles and female self-image through fashion. How we dress means something, it is the nature of our social reality.²⁴ We drape our skin in cloth and we indulge in the colors, luxury, and status our clothes afford us. The constant presence of textiles perhaps has its greatest effect in what we wear.

“Textiles are veils, they cover, hide, obfuscate, but also enhance, add luminescence and allure to our world of appearances. We shroud the unknown with veils of mystery, and we enhance the symbolic language of our social being as we drape our bodies from cradle to grave.” — Otto Von Busch, 49.

Clothes transform our bodies; dressing in specific ways grants benefits to the wearer such as empowerment, respects of others, prestige. It influences the perception and judgement; what a person is wearing reveals clues to identity, wealth, marriage status and personal interests.

Noël Palomo-Lovinski considers these characteristics of clothing when producing her unconventional dresses. The dresses, from the project called *Confessions*, were shown in the exhibition, *Confessions and the Sense of Self*, where these dresses were shown in the Kent State

²⁴ Von Busch, Otto. “Use your Illusion: Dazzle, Deceit and the ‘Vicious Problem’ of Textiles and Fashion” in *The Handbook of Textile Culture*. Bloomsbury Academic. 2016.

University Museum. She has designed her clothing with meaning in mind; infusing it into every aspect. Palomo-Lovinski collected anonymous confessions by women posted on public websites and wove these personal narratives into her work to portray the tension between the archetype of the nurturing female and the existence of the contradictory confessions.²⁵ *I Feel Great!* (Fig 1.4 and 1.5) consists of a two layered loose dress and a tight constricting neck piece that covers half the face. The red shiny fabric that makes up the neck piece is well constructed and appears thick. It hides the mouth and looks suffocating or uncomfortable to the wearer. Like a bright red muzzle, it would be hard to talk through or breathe through. The dress itself is layered with answers to the question: “How are you?” The top layer are niceties, deflections we tell strangers— the expected responses we are meant to answer as to not make anyone uncomfortable by telling them the truth. The bottom layer printed in red, like the red of the muzzle, is the uncomfortable truth absent of the expectation of polite conversation.

Palomo-Lovinski’s second dress also deals with social expectations; specifically, expectation regarding motherhood. This dress is titled, *Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety* (Fig 1.6 and 1.7) and appears to constrict the wearer and limit them. The dress and the cowl-like cushion appear to be swallowing the figure whole. It almost appears cocoon-like. The structure of the dress seems to create this sense of weight on the shoulders; meant to weigh down the wearer. And, embroidered into the dress (see Fig 1.7 for detail) are some of the confessions and personal narratives that Palomo-Lovinski collected. These confessions all come from women who are dealing with the pressures and demands from society they receive as mothers. Their

²⁵ Mida, Ingrid. “Confessions and Sense of Self: Works by Noel Palomo-Lovinski” on *Fashion is my Muse*. See this website for more information: <https://fashionismymuse.blogspot.com/2009/12/confessions-and-sense-of-self-works-by.html>.

sense of not being able to achieve the impossible expectation set before them; have pushed these women on to anonymous websites for community, advice, and comfort.²⁶

In an interview with Palomo-Lovinski she talks about the story behind her series, about how she was learning to negotiate the demands of life as a mother, wife and professional. She found herself going through a process of self-scrutiny and she found her personal feelings reflected in other women posting on these blog style websites.²⁷ She continues in the interview to talk about the act of confession; the intimacy that comes through shared experiences through being vulnerable with other people. She explains that clothing is connected to this idea of vulnerability because it conveys messages about who the wearer is; what they believe in and what perception they want you to take away. Clothing marks identity; and by putting these confessions on to these clothes it becomes a way to broadcast the narrative in each dress.²⁸

Both Amy Meissner and Noël Palomo-Lovinski use personal and shared narratives to open a dialogue on what it means to be a woman today. Both recognize in their own ways the expectations and gender roles enforced in society and use familiar fabric materials such as dress, clothing, potholders, quilts in a symbolic way. By doing so, these two artists call upon memory and domesticity to further rework the complex relationship between a belabored history of women, impossible expectations, and the contemporary generation's experience.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Prain, Leanne. *Strange Material: Storytelling through Textiles*. Arsenal Pulp Press. October 7, 2014. 47.

²⁸ Ibid. 48.



Fig 1.1. Amy Meissner. "Fatigue Threshold," (54"W x 79"H) Abandoned quilt, vintage doilies & upholstery, bedding, wool, silk organza, 2016.



Fig 1.2. Amy Meissner. "War Room," detail. (46"W x 62"L x 3"D) Vintage baby quilts, abandoned embroidery & domestic/household linens, upholstery foam, tapestry needles, 2017.



Fig 1.3. Amy Meissner. "Hysteria," (approx. 105" W x 95" H) Vintage potholders, doilies, domestic/household linens, abandoned quilt, 2018.



Fig 1.4. Noël Palomo-Lovinski. *I Feel Great!*, 2009



Fig 1.5. Noël Palomo-Lovinski. *I Feel Great!*,

2009



Fig 1.6. Noël Palomo-Lovinski. *Motherhood in*

the Age of Anxiety, 2009

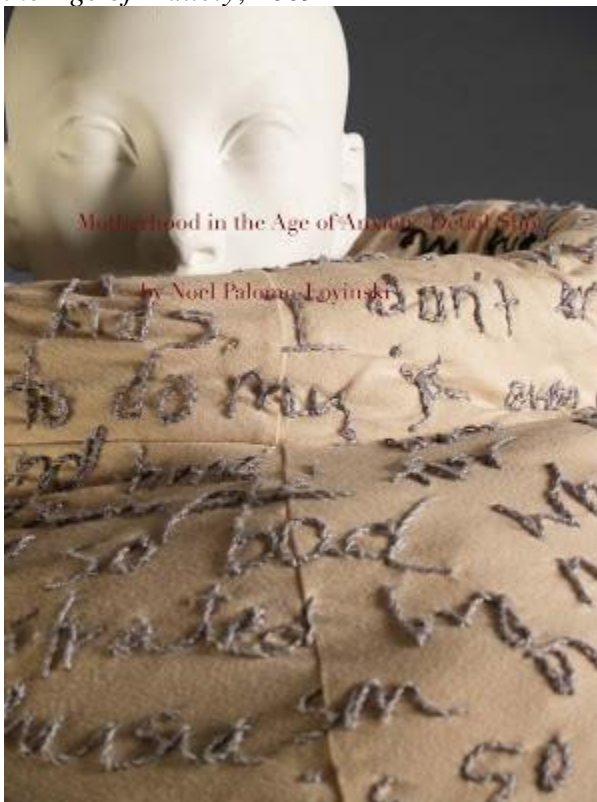


Fig 1.7. Noël Palomo-Lovinski . *Motherhood in*

the Age of Anxiety, 2009.

CHAPTER TWO: GENDER POLITICS & THE FEMALE BODY

Gender Politics is about how gender influences the shared personal experiences of women on a local and global level. Gender influences economic, workplace and political opportunities.²⁹ Gender also informs who is most vulnerable to violence and abuse in their own homes and intimate relationships.³⁰ The second-wave feminist movement of the 1970s brought out the phrase, “the personal is political,” expressing the shared belief that the personal experiences of women resulted from their political situation and gender inequality.³¹ This concept comes from the policing and regulation of women’s bodies (in legal decisions such as *Roe v. Wade*) and also women’s personal experiences that may stem from societal oppression of their gender.

The 1950s-1960s had strict gender roles, there was an assumption that women belonged in the home and their place was in the ‘private’ and ‘domestic’ sphere. Betty Friedan’s *Feminine Mystique* (1963) showed the widespread unhappiness in housewives who were subject to those strict gender roles. These restrictions were far stretching and included restricting what kind of art women could practice. In terms of artistic practices, they did practice, it is said in Rozsika Parker’s book, *The Subversive Stitch*, that girls and women were restricted to practicing ‘women’s work’ like embroidery or stitchery. Often the products were utilitarian in nature such as clothing, curtains, blankets, or tablecloths and were considered less significant due to being

²⁹ See more: Celis, Karen. “Introduction: Gender and Politics: A Gendered World, a Gendered Discipline.” *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics*. Edited by Georgina Waylen, Karen Celis, Johanna Kantola, and S. Laurel Weldon. March 2013.

³⁰ If you would like to read more on violence against women please see the World Health Organization’s fact sheet on the subject: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>

³¹ Kelly, Christopher J. “The Personal Is Political.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., May 1, 2017. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/the-personal-is-political>.

both utilitarian and produced in a domestic space. Women's work was perceived as less valuable or culturally and aesthetically inferior to 'fine art' done by men. In the Victorian era, women's work was encouraged because it was thought that 'busy hands' were less likely to get in trouble but also because embroidery was the place where "women manifested supposedly natural feminine characteristics" such as "piety, feeling, taste and domestic devotion."³²

The specific critical feminist art practices examined in this chapter discuss aspects of gender politics using a feminist iconography to critically examine or push back against gendered and sexed boundaries involving: sexual behavior, cultural perceptions/ gender stereotypes, equal pay, reproductive rights and female pleasure. This iconography uses the female body to make a visual language. Menstruation, sexual reproductive organs, and human hair all become symbolic as the artists explore the female body's role as an involuntary political battleground and sexual object.³³

Two artists, Shayna Kiblin and Nava Lubelski use their art and embroidery to discuss the stains and shame associated with menstruation. Although menstruation is a natural biological process for women, menstruation carries with it a strong cultural taboo that commands it not be

³² Parker, Rozsika. *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*. New York: Routledge, 1989. Pg. 164.

³³ Another Artist who deals with these topics but does not work with just fabrics is Swedish American conceptual artist, Michele Pred who uses sculpture, assemblage, and performance to delve into feminist culture and politics. Her work focuses on subjects like the #MeToo Movement, women's rights, especially women's reproductive rights, and equal pay. She uses everyday objects to explore these topics and to "drive conversation" into public spaces. Some of the objects she has included in her work include: vintage purses, expired birth control pills, riot shields and razors. Her objects are chosen often with her message in mind; she chose vintage purses to comment on wage gap and cultural sexism. She uses these purses as individual 'small-scale' billboards for women to carry and to create discussion about gender stereotypes and social expectations of women.

seen, discussed, or acknowledged.³⁴ In many cultures the experience of menarche, a girl's first period, results in shame or fear. In 1996, participants of a study, published in the *Journal of Aging Studies*, said that they had felt "contaminated" by their first menstruation.³⁵ Menstruation, specifically menarche, acts as a bodily event signifying the coming of age where a girl enters womanhood. However, the act of menstruation takes on cultural significance in a society that oppresses women hence the feelings of contamination in the study and the need for concealing menstruation.³⁶ In third world countries, girls feel the impacts more strongly; as they miss out on school and opportunities due to being unable to attend school during their periods. All due to the lack of menstrual hygiene supplies; girls are forced to skip classes or drop out altogether. The MoonCatcher project based in Schenectady, NY started to help young girls in Zimbabwe deal with their menses. Today, the organization makes an impact in 15 countries around the world and supports girls' education.³⁷

Shayna Kiblin, a visual media artist from Buffalo, NY tackles these themes of menstruation in her *Untitled* series of embroidery work.³⁸ Kiblin studies photography at the Rochester Institute of Technology and is working towards her Bachelor of Fine Arts. Her work often explores themes of feminism, nature, and memory. Kiblin uses her art to work against the male gaze and highlight her own view of womanhood. I was intrigued by her embroidery work

³⁴ Schooler, Deborah, L. Monique Ward, Ann Merriwether, and Allison S. Caruthers. "Cycles of Shame: Menstrual Shame, Body Shame, and Sexual Decision-Making." *The Journal of Sex Research* 42, no. 4 (2005): 324-34. Accessed January 22, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/3813785.

³⁵ Lee, Janet, and Jennifer Sasser-Coen. 1996. Memories of menarche: Older women remember their first menstrual period. *Journal of Aging Studies*.
[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0890-4065\(96\)90007-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0890-4065(96)90007-9)

³⁶ Lee, Janet, Jennifer Sasser-Coen. *Blood Stories: Menarche and the Politics of the Female Body in Contemporary U.S. Society*. Psychology Press, 1996.

³⁷ See the MoonCatcher Project's website at <http://www.mooncatcher.org/>.

³⁸ See Kiblin's website at <https://shaynakiblin.com/>.

in this series, *Heavy*, *Flow* and *Spotting* are all bright red threads and beads on white cotton underwear. Visually, the one that brings the most impact is *Heavy* from 2018 (Fig 2.1). The glass beads atop the white fabric, resembles a heavily saturated pad. And, then *Spotting* (Fig 2.3) references bloodied stains on underwear. While *Flow* (Fig 2.2) resembles some kind of tentacled monster or perhaps marionette strings. The red against the white has a viscerality to it. Where the white can be interpreted as referencing girlhood and childlike innocence red beads or thread reference the menarche and the shame that comes with it. The visual of menses perhaps causes intense shame or feelings of being ‘contaminated’ due to the connection of menstruation, sex and procreation resulting in a focus on girls’ emerging sexual potential that comes with being a woman. And, this unwanted sexual potential at an early age may be the cause of many women expressing a desire to return to girlhood before sexual maturity and remove that which had stained them (their potential as a sexual being or object).

In *Walk* (Fig 2.4) Kiblin embroidered words on a nude bra in pink and red. These words make up phrases a woman may commonly hear while being ‘catcalled’ which usually is when a man makes a whistle, shout, or comments of a sexual nature to a woman walking past. Kiblin, herself, described the object as, “My catcall bra from 2017 using quotes men have yelled at myself, friends, and strangers on the internet who sent me their stories” in a post on Instagram.³⁹ In a society where women suffer unwanted sexual attention from in their day to day lives, reaching sexual maturity signified by the bodily event of the menarche results in negative feelings perhaps partially due to her recognition that society will view her in a way she, herself, does not. Society views a sexually mature women in many ways from their value as an object of

³⁹ See Shayna Kiblin’s Instagram feed at: <https://www.instagram.com/shayna.jpeg/>

desire or only in their reproductive value. And, this unwanted sexual attention compounds the feelings of shame for young girls.

Amy Meissner, an artist previously mentioned in the last chapter about domesticity/memory, also works with this topic in her textile series called *Girl Story*. One of these quilts (Fig 2.8.) called "Girl Story #2" aptly expresses menstrual shame. The red stain on the white quilt looks like a gaping wound and it is bordered by embroidery of childlike drawings referencing girlhood and childlike innocence. The quilt references the menarche and the shame that comes with it while also expressing the desire to return to a blank slate (to girlhood) and implies one could return to how they were before if only they scrubbed harder— they could remove that which had stained them. This phrase, 'Scrub Harder' is repeated throughout the series emphasizing the need to hide the stains and a sense of uncleanliness that goes with menstruation.

As can be seen in the detail of *Girl Story #2* (Fig 2.9), the embroidery on this quilt that goes around the border looks like a child's drawing. In Fig 2.9, however, we see a girl in a princess crown; this girl represents the sense of self. And, in the center of the girl's chest is a red patch of thread. This could be symbolic of the girl's heart as the circles radiating out of this patch could be interpreted as a rhythm like from a heart beat. But, each one of these little scenes embroidered along the border have this red patch of thread and several circles radiating from it, emphasizing the red spot. Perhaps these red spots are simply representative of drops of blood; stains on the childish innocence girls once had at least before they reached sexual maturity.

Nava Lubelski, a contemporary American artist based in Asheville, NC, is known for her work in fiber that often examines the tension between creation and destruction. Specifically, her

work as a whole examines sewing's and stitchery's traditional role as a 'dutiful' act of repair.⁴⁰

Like Kiblin, Lubelski examines female stereotypes with visual iconography like stains.

Lubelski's work is also meant to reference society's judgement of alcohol and promiscuity through her stains. Her piece, *Clumsy* (Fig 2.5) is made up of thread and stained tablecloth. The cloth itself is a bright cheerful canary yellow; and the stain is reddish pink, possibly from wine while the thread bordering and extenuating the outline of the stain is bright pink. Lubelski's work pushes against gendered beliefs about women's consumption of alcohol and is concerned with female pleasure and indulgence.⁴¹ Pleasure in all its different forms are often sources of shame for women whether the pleasure be based in eating, drinking, drugs, sex, or some other indulgence.⁴²

Women are judged more harshly for moral sin or indulging in vices (such as sex, drugs, overeating, etc.) that men were often expected to engage in and that sentiment is very much still true today.⁴³ This is most likely a remnant of older cultural expectations including the moral pedestal women often were meant to assume as seen in colonial and Victorian America.⁴⁴ The colloquial sentiment that "boys will be boys" expresses the amount of leeway society gives

⁴⁰ "NAVA LUBELSKI: ART." NAVA LUBELSKI | ART, www.navalubelski.com/.

⁴¹ Skelly, Julia. *Radical Decadence: Excess in Contemporary Feminist Textiles and Craft*. Bloomsbury Academic. May 4, 2017. Pg 49.

⁴² *Ibid.* Pg 51.

⁴³ An interesting article if one wanted to read more about the progression of women's drinking to being an acceptable way of medicating oneself to being morally despicable as a method for pleasure and enjoyment: Travis, Trysh. "Toward a Feminist History of the Drug-Using Woman—and Her Recovery." *Feminist Studies* 45, no. 1 (2019): 209-33. Accessed January 24, 2020. doi:10.15767/feministstudies.45.1.0209.

⁴⁴ You can read more about the ideal of the 'Moral Mother' - a Victorian female ideal that showcases the religious and moral expectations of women: Bloch, Ruth H. "American Feminine Ideals in Transition: The Rise of the Moral Mother, 1785-1815." *Feminist Studies* 4, no. 2 (1978): 101-26. Accessed January 24, 2020. doi:10.2307/3177453.

males when it comes to these ‘vices’ but women are held to a higher standard. These social pressures are placed on women to conform to a certain ideal of femininity, both in the past and present, casting shame on the numerous women who fail to meet that ideal.⁴⁵

Female activities like menstruation are shrouded in shame. Jennifer Manion describes shame as, “a self-reflective emotion of negative global assessment” that it “involves a painful, sudden awareness of the self as less good than hoped for and expected.” Among the emotions that play significant roles in our moral lives, shame is ingrained into the idea of self. Shame is a warning that one is about to transgress our culture’s moral expectations, however, when our culture clearly describes menstruation, an unavoidable natural biological process, as something to be hidden—to be ashamed of then it feels natural to assume that women are held to impossible ideals. Shame is intrinsically linked to the female experience, as the very expression of shame suggests a kind of weakness that would go against stereotypical male traits such as assertiveness and dominance.⁴⁶

Nava Lubelski’s white lace tablecloth (See Fig 2.6.) is a subtle reference to domesticity, the home and marriage while the stain suggests an irreversible contamination of the fabric and a destructive feminine force. This feminine force implies the destruction of the home, the marriage or rebellion against domesticity. Her work shows how this anonymous woman has failed in her moral duty and did immoral things such as drink alcohol. But, by doing so, this unseen woman has expressed agency in her destructive and immoral choice. The red thread suggests construction; reparation and a feminine constructive force (See Fig 2.7 for detail of

⁴⁵ Manion, Jennifer C. "Girls Blush, Sometimes: Gender, Moral Agency, and the Problem of Shame." *Hypatia* 18, no. 3 (2003): 21-41. Accessed January 24, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/3810862.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

thread). Implying an effort to fix the destruction she accomplished or create something new entirely from what was left over. One could interpret this constructive force as a subjugation of the woman as she tries to return to the past. It could also be interpreted as the anonymous woman making her own choice to not be ashamed of the stain. As the embroidery does not mask the stain or attempt to cover it; instead the stain is acknowledged by the embroidery and transformed into this beautiful object.

American artist Alicia Ross explores various aspects of female identity and representation using photography, fiber, video, and installation. Her large scale embroidery projects are of specific interest as they use female pleasure to challenge the objectification of women. She expresses the female body in a sexual manner or in a sexual act, while creating ambiguity about whether it is an act of self-pleasure or whether this act is with another person. Ross' work rejects the traditional male gaze by showing the female form without context making the act of masturbation and sex- an event solely focused on female pleasure. During her process, she removes the female body from their original context to force the viewer to ascribe their own personal context/values to the figure in the image. By doing this, her work is meant to create dialogue about the female form and gender roles within the context of the male gaze.⁴⁷ Ross' work contains specific themes of unwitting audience participation as it is the audience's dispositions and assumptions about the female body that informs the work as they view it. Ross has purposely removed all other context and by doing so she forces the audience to bring their own personal context whether it be: personal experiences, values, ideals, or prejudices.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ "ALICIA ROSS." ALICIA ROSS, Blogger, 29 Aug. 2019, www.aliciaross.com/.

⁴⁸ Frieling, Rudolf. *The Art of Participation: 1950 to Now*, Thames & Hudson, 2008.

Ross's body of work also uses the stitch as a pixel; hybridizing digital and analog together as she translates digital images into physical cross-stitch. In the process of her work, she takes these images of the nude female body from the internet and such sources as pornographic websites, fashion magazines and more. And, she uses that relationship from where she sourced the work to comment on the commodification of a woman's body this so called 'othering' as women are treated as less than when they are reduced to a pixel. There is a literal dehumanization a body goes through when it's digitized. And, Ross engages in a public dissection of how female forms are portrayed by the media; why when a woman is pixelated we treat these women even more so as objects. She melds mass media into the physical body as they are dislocated and warped. The result is an objectified body that is forced into various states of fragmentation, the female form in *(You) By Default* is shown in the midst of destruction but also reconstruction as the connective thread alludes to some kind of restorative process (Fig 2.10).

Just like Lubelski, it can be seen that there remains a tenuous strain between the forces of creation and destruction in Ross's embroidered fabric. The gray linen fills the absent area of the disembodied form; there is an uncertainty as she appears cast in shadow. Ross's other pieces, *Amend* and *Chasm* (Fig 2.11.) and (Fig 2.12.) are of a similar aesthetic and message. *Amend* shows a woman in what could clearly be perceived as an act of masturbation and self-gratification, her head tilted back in pleasure. While the title clearly hints at a restorative message; a positive change that pertains to the clearly suggested female pleasure. *Chasm* seems to suggest the opposite. The title refers to a hole or deep fissure; one could infer the destructive force to have made the chasm. The title also clearly references a vagina; as another kind of 'hole'. The woman embroidered into this linen seems to be languishing, exhausted perhaps showing a woman after a sexual act. It is left ambiguous.

As can be seen in all of these artists' works that each piece holds a strong discussion about gendered and sexed boundaries on the topics of menstruation, sexual behavior, female pleasure and shame. These artists engage in these specific critical feminist art practices through a feminist iconography that makes a symbolic, visual language in regards to the female body. Menstruation and the act of menarche becomes a symbol of contamination and transformation of an innocent girl into a corrupt woman. Stains, of both blood and alcohol, are representative of a destructive female force. Embroidery and stitchery become acts of creation that emphasize the dichotomy and a tenuous strain between the forces of creation and destruction in these works; as they become microcosm for the female body's own creative and destructive forces in terms of its reproductive system. The female body treatment under the male gaze is examined by artists, such as Alicia Ross and Kiblin, as they examine the process of 'othering' and how the female body becomes a sexualized object. This chapter widely encapsulates several public dissections of how the female body is treated and how girls and women have been trained by society and cultural norms to feel ashamed of their bodies.



Fig 2.1 Shayna Kiblin, Heavy, 2018, Glass beads, thread, cotton underwear



Fig 2.2 Shayna Kiblin, Flow, 2018, Thread, cotton underwear



Fig 2.3 Shayna Kiblin, Spotting, 2018, Thread,

cotton



Fig 2.4 Shayna Kiblin, Walk, 2017, Thread, cotton and

spandex bra



Fig 2.5. Nava Lubelski, Clumsy, 2007, thread on stained tablecloth

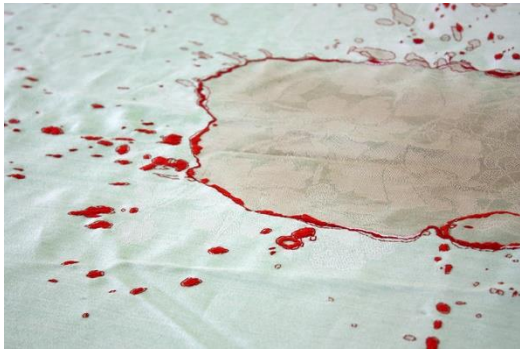


Fig 2.6. Nava Lubelski, Ruin, 2011, thread on stained tablecloth



Fig 2.7 Nava Lubelski, Ruin, 2011, details of thread on stained tablecloth

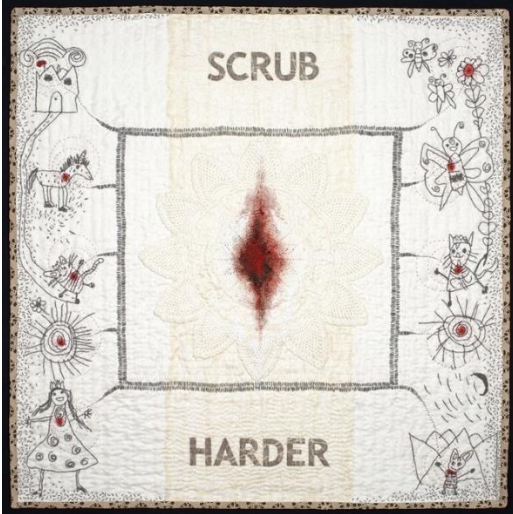


Fig 2.8. Amy Meissner "Girl Story #2" (35.25" x 35.25")
Vintage domestic linens, silk organza, cheese cloth, ink. Hand embroidered, hand quilted, 2014.



Fig 2.9. Amy Meissner. "Detail of Girl Story #2"
(35.25" x 35.25") Vintage domestic linens, silk organza, cheese cloth, ink. Hand embroidered,
hand quilted, 2014.

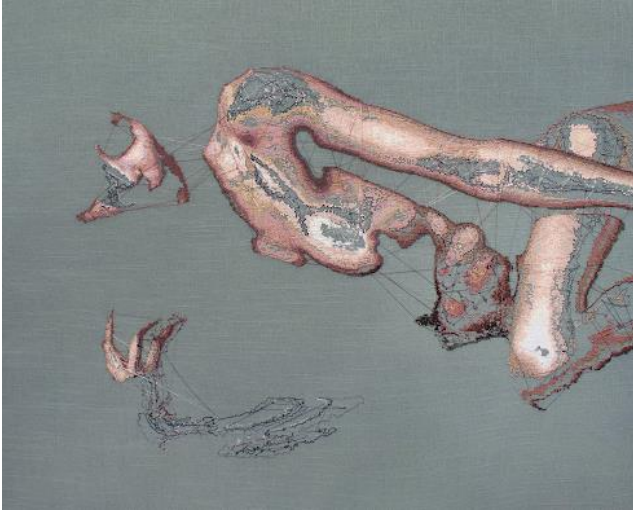


Fig 2.10. Alicia Ross, (You) By Default, embroidery on linen, 2019.

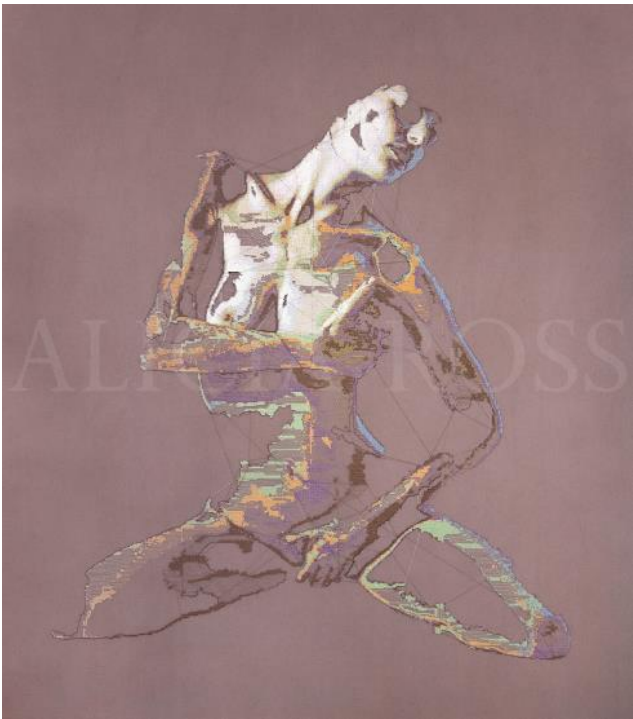
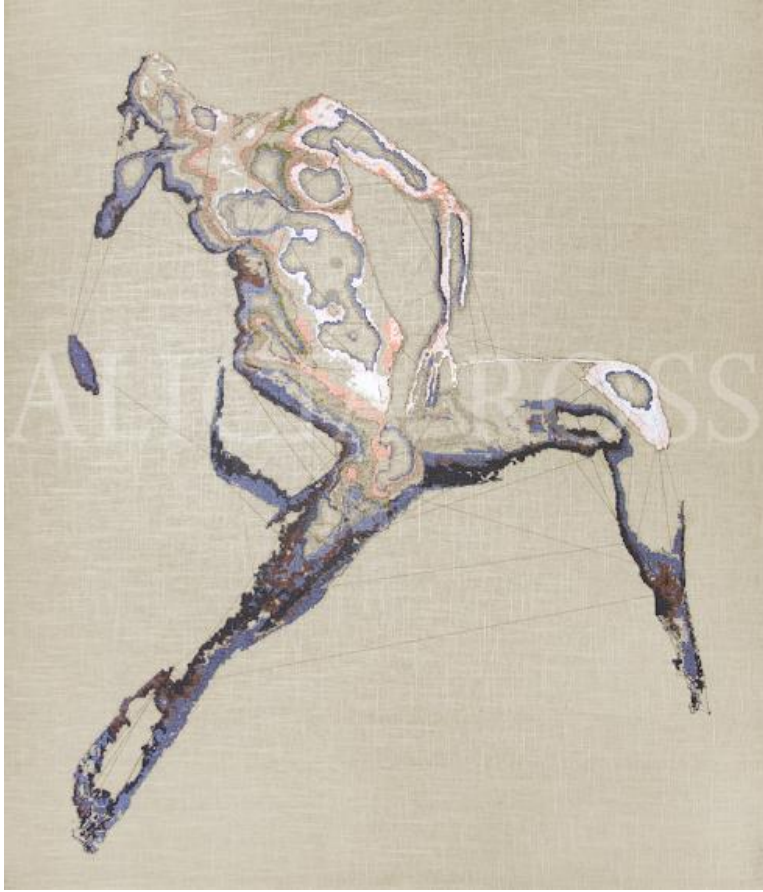


Fig 2.11. Alicia Ross, Amend, fiber, 2016.



2016

Fig 2.12. Alicia Ross, Chasm, fiber,

CHAPTER THREE: THE SOCIAL FABRIC

The term social fabric is a metaphor that expresses relationships and connections between all the members of society representing a person or organization as a part of a larger whole or to show the common thread that runs through it all. Social fabric is also the makeup and demographics of a defined area; consisting of its ethnic composition, wealth, education level, employment rate and regional values.⁴⁹ This chapter engages in social critiques that deal more with intersectionality by discussing topics such as race, class, and the environment. These topics are, in a way, the common thread running throughout the social fabric as everyone has seen or felt the effects of these topics in one way or another. The fabric of society expresses an interwoven relationship between many people, and many threads; it shows the social order as one cohesive unit. Which is also why the metaphor is excellent at expressing discontent with society; the form of a disintegrating or failing social order could easily be visually expressed with a fraying cloth.

Cecilia Vicuña, born in Chile in 1948, has long used her work to explore class issues, political strife, and resistance against oppressive states. She is well known for her contemporary poetry, textile installations, performance, and activism. She went to study her MFA in London; where she would remain exiled by the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet for many years.⁵⁰ Her work continues her larger body of work she calls “Lo Precario,” containing over 400 *precarios*; these ephemeral sculptures are carefully assembled from found materials: thread, driftwood,

⁴⁹ social fabric. BusinessDictionary.com. WebFinance, Inc.

<http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/social-fabric.html> (accessed: March 01, 2020).

⁵⁰ Brostoff, Alex, et al. “The Dazzling and Dooming Art of Cecilia Vicuña.” *Hyperallergic*, 25 Sept. 2018, hyperallergic.com/462470/the-dazzling-and-dooming-art-of-cecilia-vicuna/.

feathers, rocks, bones, or little bits of debris.⁵¹ Often, they are left somewhere, vulnerable to weather and the environment. Also making up her body of work, are large installation pieces she calls *quipus* inspired by Incan record-keeping devices woven from colored wool and punctuated by knots. These textiles were read via touch and served as an essential mode for reading and writing, registering, and remembering.⁵² This method of recording and keeping knowledge among indigenous people that was banned by the Spanish during their colonization of South America. Vicuña reclaims it as part of her own heritage, using the tactile mode of communication on a massive scale in her own installations.

Vicuña has many connections to the Chile tradition of *Arpilleras*; historically and culturally. *Arpilleras* are the small burlap-backed cloth quilts/ wall hangings that became a widespread cultural practice in the 1970's and 80's.⁵³ These quilts depicted police brutality, military oppression, kidnappings, tortures, and other human-right violations in the Pinochet era; protesting the injustices of the regime. The quilts helped communicate the stories of an oppressed and silenced group of people. The act of making the *arpillera* was therapeutic and examined the grief and injustice that affected the community as a whole. The quilts pictured the traumatic treatment of the civilizations; a testament to the people who had gone missing under Pinochet's rule and the treatment they suffered.

⁵¹ Rinaldi, Ray Mark. "For Cecilia Vicuña, 'Consciousness Is the Art'." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 3 Dec. 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/12/03/arts/cecilia-vicuna-miami.html.

⁵² "Cecilia Vicuña: Disappeared Quipu." Brooklyn Museum: Cecilia Vicuña: Disappeared Quipu, www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/cecilia_vicuna. Also, see more general info about Quipus here: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quipu> .

⁵³ Bryan-Wilson, Julia. *Fray: Art + Textile Politics*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2017. Pg 107.

According to Rebecca Onion’s article, “many of the people who disappeared under Pinochet’s rule were men, and their female family members were often left behind to suffer in economic insecurity.”⁵⁴ The quilts became not only a therapeutic tool but also an economic tool, as the quilts were sold through the Roman Catholic Church outside of Chile, the profits were redistributed amongst the women providing a living wage. This created a measure of economic stability for the women and their families before the regime banned the creation of *arpilleras*.⁵⁵ This was probably because the Church was selling these quilts and then people were taking notice of the brutality, and scenes pictured on the quilts. The *arpilleras* created by the Chilean women depicted both the disappeared and tortured victims of the regime—but also the everyday indignities one endured while living in Pinochet’s Chile. The *arpilleras* attempted to knit back together the community that the government tore apart and expressed the day-to-day sadness and anger of Chilean women.⁵⁶

Vicuña’s work also deals with her identity as a Chilean woman and her indigenous background. Her *quipus* mix language and textile referencing the pre-Columbian language and weaving-as-writing. Referring to these works as “quipoems” a combination of poem and *quipu*. Often these *quipus* respond to local geography or current climate related events. For an exhibition in Berkeley, she wanted to make a new *quipu* because there were five local forest fires

⁵⁴ Onion, Rebecca. “The Colorful Quilt Squares Chilean Women Used to Tell the Story of Life Under Pinochet” published on Slate on SEPT 10, 2014.

⁵⁵ Prain, Leanne. *Strange Material: Storytelling through Textiles*. Arsenal Pulp Press. October 7, 2014. Pg 83-84.

⁵⁶ News articles about more *arpilleras* being shown:
<https://www.potsdam.edu/news/sewn-protest-exhibit-showcase-chilean-patchwork-arpilleras-suny-potsdams-gibson-gallery-feb-14>
<https://www.indiantime.net/story/2019/02/14/news/sewn-in-protest-exhibit-to-showcase-chilean-patchwork-arpilleras-at-suny-potsdams-gibson-gallery-on-feb-14/30494.html>

raging as the exhibition was opening.⁵⁷ For Vicuña's "*Quipu Womb*" (Fig 3.1) the massive sculpture was a part of *Documenta 14* in Athens so the dye she used was sourced from a local Greek provider. The sculpture itself is made of dyed unspun wool; consisting of giant red strands of wool, that are meant to in reference to an umbilical cord that symbolically ties the Andean mother goddesses and ancient Greek mythologies together.⁵⁸ The viscerality that comes from the color of the textile along with its name references menstruation and female reproduction. *Quipu Womb* references creation and birth while also simultaneously referencing violence, and blood. Her acknowledgement of the history of the *quipu* and lost indigenous traditions addresses post-colonial themes; and language and words are a constant theme throughout her body of work as a poet.⁵⁹

Adrienne Sloane is a contemporary fiber artist with a political focus based in Lexington, Massachusetts. Sloane's work often comments on war, race, class, injustices and, specifically, on things she would like to change. Her work comments on systems such as government or the social fabric. Betty M. Bayer explains, in the *Crafting Democracy* foreword, that textiles offer "models of complex abstractions" as an object that embodies labor but also unravel or result in a tangled web of knots.⁶⁰ The object can embody labor that has been undone while also acting as a representation for many things coming together as one.

A metaphor for a nation; Sloane capitalizes on these subtle metaphors in her work to discuss her own personal political statements. Sloane addresses universal issues but maintains a

⁵⁷ Rinaldi, Ray Mark. "For Cecilia Vicuña, 'Consciousness Is the Art'." *The New York Times*.

⁵⁸ "POETRY IN WOOL." *Selvedge Magazine*, www.selvedge.org/blogs/selvedge/wool-wins-at-documenta.

⁵⁹ Read Cecilia Vicuña's essay poem about language, poems, and immigrants:
https://www.documenta14.de/en/south/904_language_is_migrant

⁶⁰ Bayer, Betty M. "Foreword" in *Crafting Democracy: Fiber Arts and Activism*. Edited by Juilee Decker and Hinda Mandell. Published by RIT Press, 2019.

focused critique of war, poverty and the ‘unravelling’ of society throughout many of her pieces. Literally, her piece titled *The Unravelling* (Fig 3.3) shows the gradual unravelling of a knitted American Flag. The flag obscures a copy of the Constitution behind it (See Detail Fig. 3.3). Commenting on the political climate of the US, Sloane calls into question the institutions that make up the federal government and how long-lasting these institutions may be. In her piece, *At the End of my Rope* (Fig. 3.4), Sloane once again utilizes the imagery of the American flag as she references racism through the symbol of the noose; heavy with its historical connotations.

Lynching was a method of social and racial control that terrorized African Americans into submission through fear.⁶¹ The act of lynching was frightfully common from 1870 to 1950. The National Memorial for Peace and Justice records and memorializes over 4,400 black Americans who lost their lives to angry lynch mobs.⁶² However, racism is still an issue in the US. In 2017, the Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville, VA made it clear that white nationalists still very much had a presence in the US’ political climate. And, were still violent, after the death of Heather Heyer. To add insult to injury, the 45th US President, Donald J. Trump released a statement following the incident that condemned the violence at the rally but did not condemn the white nationalist and neo-Nazi groups in attendance.⁶³ It's likely that Sloane is responding to

⁶¹ Lartey, Jamiles, and Sam Morris. “How White Americans Used Lynchings to Terrorize and Control Black People.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 26 Apr. 2018, www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/apr/26/lynchings-memorial-us-south-montgomery-alabama

⁶² “The National Memorial for Peace and Justice.” *Legacy Museum and National Memorial for Peace and Justice*, musemandmemorial.eji.org/memorial.

⁶³ ABC News, ABC News Network, abcnews.go.com/US/happen-charlottesville-protest-anniversary-weekend/story?id=57107500.

the current political climate and racial tension in the US best reflected in the current president and his long history of inflammatory and racist remarks.⁶⁴

Sloane conveys her own exhaustion and frustration with the political and cultural status of the country in both pieces with a central knitted American flag. Like many knitters, Sloane is tapping into a long history of craft in the U.S. that is inextricably bound up in race, gender, and class issues. The symbolism of the flag, especially in the US and the imagery of Betsy Ross sewing the first flag is also reclaimed by Sloane's work. The long legacy of women making 'samplers' often the first form of education for Quaker girls that showcased the alphabet is referenced. But, also, from the 1760's where women would make their own home-spun cloth and clothing in defiance of the British; handicraft was a political agent from before the birth of the United States. It was a path of political expression for women that maintained traditional gender roles; suffragists used the imagery of needle-crafts to make themselves seem less threatening.⁶⁵ Once again, the fibers become a language; yarn, thread, fabric, and scissors become the avenue used to discuss a broken democracy.

This form of activism is a peaceful way to bring issues to the forefront to engage with people of all walks of life. Textiles are accessible, personal; and you can make your own with a little practice and motivation. This form of activism is meant to provoke discussion and thought. The act of knitting is thought of as meditative and quiet, perhaps even submissive in nature. Yet, the kinds of art pieces Sloane produces; have a latent destructive quality to them; they are loud

⁶⁴ Story by David A. Graham, Adrienne Green. "An Oral History of Trump's Bigotry." *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 20 May 2019, www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/06/trump-racism-comments/588067/.

⁶⁵ Segal, Corinne. "Stitch by Stitch, a Brief History of Knitting and Activism." PBS, Public Broadcasting Service, 23 Apr. 2017, www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/stitch-stitch-history-knitting-activism.

and expressive in their calmness. The imagery of a deteriorating American flag is a powerful one that would cause anger in many who place the American flag on a kind of pedestal; as if a government could be sacred.

Often, in the media, those who represent the destruction of the American flag or literally destroy the American flag are met with anger and disgust by those who believe an object is deserving of respect. Dread Scott's *What is the Proper Way to Display a U.S. Flag?* from 1988; was an installation meant for audience participation that involved a US flag on the floor, a book on a shelf, a pen, and the question. However, to get to the book to write your answer down on the book; one would have to walk across the US flag. The art piece became the center of national controversy over its invitation for people to trample the flag; President Bush Sr. called it "disgraceful" and the entire US Congress denounced it.⁶⁶ I think Scott's work is an interesting predecessor to Sloane's because it shows in some aspects by the lack of vitriol and controversy that Sloane's work has caused that the disposition towards the American flag as a symbol has changed.

Incorporating both symbols and language into her work, Monica Jahan Bose, a Bangladeshi-American, lawyer, artist and activist, focuses on climate-change, gender and women's literacy with her project *Storytelling with Saris*, an art and advocacy project in collaboration with women from Bose's ancestral village in Katakali, Bangladesh, an island community disappearing from climate change. The art and advocacy project includes collaborative printmaking on saris, video and photography, writing, self-documentation in journals of the women's lives, performances, and workshops and installations on climate change in the US and in Bangladesh. Bose creates a trans-border connection between individuals in the

⁶⁶ Dread Scott, www.dreadscott.net/works/what-is-the-proper-way-to-display-a-us-flag/.

US and Bangladesh, instead of approaching climate change with facts and figures; Bose's project personalizes global warming by giving voice to affected women in Katakali.⁶⁷ The WRAPture installation at the Anacostia Arts Center in the DC area (Fig 3.5) is one such resulting collaborative installation. The cotton saris used in the installation were decorated with woodblock printing and painting on fabric by both the DC and Bangladeshi participants in *Storytelling with Saris*.

Bose crafts an intriguing dialogue between two communities on climate change with her saris; the saris become these letters back and forth between them. The woodblock prints their logographic language as they engage in a dialogue. Each block seems to have its own story, and the communities were the ones to decide which images were created. What words they needed to talk to each other. Then Bose begins work on the block; she has made over two hundred wood block designs. Resulting in a rich, picturesque language for the two communities to communicate with. Interestingly, the name of the installation, WRAPture, probably references the biblical Rapture, consisting of an "end-time event" or perhaps better described as an apocalypse. The assumption is climate change is the "end-time event" hence the inclusion of its connotations in the name.

February 2019 in Washington, DC; Bose held one of her many collaborative workshops. She welcomed back the many returnees; and there was laughter, and warmth to be had. Bose had helped the Anacostia community come together in this room; building upon what was already there. The attendees pledged changes in their lives and updated Bose on the changes they had already successfully made in DC. And, Bose switched between her roles of educator, artist, counselor, and friend at will. As an outsider to the Anacostia community, I observed at the

⁶⁷ More details are found at <http://storytellingwithsaris.com>.

workshop. It was made clear that Bose's project nurtured two communities and helped amplify the voices of marginalized people inside them; this art was a kind of therapy for them. It was a way for their voices to be heard and a productive outlet for the anger that came from being ignored in their own city.⁶⁸

Shinique Smith, an African-American artist based in Brooklyn, NY, reuses abandoned objects to discuss class issues and poverty through the inclusion of excess & waste in her sculptures, installation, and collage. She is well-known for her monumental sculptures in her *Bale* variation series. A bale being a bundle of paper, hay, cotton, etc., tightly wrapped and bound with cords or hoops; literally describing the form of her sculptures as massive bundles of fabric wound together. Many of them appear totemic in nature; familiar images, brands, or pop culture icons appear on the clothing and fabric that goes into the Bale variants. One, is entirely made of Mickey the Mouse objects; a mound representing the capitalist mega-giant that is the Disney company and brand.

Smith's work is both critical of the culture of consumerism that has created the waste and excess she uses in her work but also the culture of excess when juxtaposed against the groups of impoverished, needy, or homeless people that exist alongside the excess and waste. It also references homeless people who must carry all their belongings along with them in bundles, grocery carts wherever they go. Her work, *Bundle Me*, (Fig 3.6) expresses the consumption of material while also expressing the displacement of people through the cocoon-like figure bend over with a low head; where the figure is synonymous with the fabric that has been discarded.

⁶⁸ Leone, Lauren. "Crafting Change: Craft Activism for Community-based Art Therapy" in *Crafting Democracy: Fiber Arts and Activism*. Edited by Juilee Decker and Hinda Mandell. Published by RIT Press, 2019.

Smith does this to remark on how society has discarded or abandoned these groups of people and Smith uses her work to raise awareness for a growing global epidemic of homelessness.⁶⁹

The Bale variants represent the literal accumulation of material; seeming to resemble religious totems in some way. The massive structures were crafted by bundling the found items and binding them with rope, tuxedo ribbon or cotton clothes line.⁷⁰ The Bale variant titled ‘Christmas’ (Fig 3.7) resembles a Christmas tree with wrapped presents surrounding the vertical structure. The context of the work assigns new vocabulary to the items and materials that people purchase, use and discard, reflecting the throw-away culture of the modern world.⁷¹ It forces the viewer to reflect on their own actions and purchases; their previous Christmases. In this self-reflection, the viewer may find sources of excess and waste in their own lives, raising awareness not only for those who are lacking. But, raising the awareness of those who are contributing to the excess; and engaging the viewer in a time for self-reflection on their role as a consumer.

The artists discussed here deal heavily with large topics and themes and can affect anyone regardless of gender, race, or age. War, poverty, disease, climate change, and globalization are far-reaching in their effects. While the phrase, the fabric of society expresses the relationships and connections between people; it also expresses the idea that every person is a part of a larger whole. A system that depends on many to run smoothly; people are the backbone

⁶⁹ “Shinique Smith: Refuge.” CAAM. Accessed February 23, 2020.

<https://caamuseum.org/exhibitions/2018/shinique-smith-refuge>.

⁷⁰ “Shinique Smith's 'Refuge' Explores Shelter, Homelessness and the Excess of Our Stuff.” Los Angeles Times. Los Angeles Times, June 13, 2018.

<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-ca-cm-shinique-smith-caam-20180613-story.html>.

⁷¹ “Shinique Smith's Curious Hanging Sculptures Are Upcycled from Her Own Wardrobe.” Inhabitat Green Design Innovation Architecture Green Building. Accessed February 23, 2020. <https://inhabitat.com/shinique-smiths-curious-hanging-sculptures-are-upcycled-from-her-own-wardrobe/shinique-smith5/>.

of any major state or civilization. These artists cover the systemic problems that plague the social order; how the linked social systems that make up that order are flawed. And, the critical artistic expressions of five artists who are discontent with the current state of that social order.



Fig 3.1: Cecilia Vicuña, Quipu Womb (The Story of the Red Thread, Athens), 2017, dyed wool.



Fig 3.2 : The Unravelling, cotton/ poly knit fabrics, 2017.



Fig 3.4: Detail of The Unravelling, cotton/ poly knit fabrics, 2017.



Fig 3.5: At the End of my Rope, 2019.



Fig 3.6: WRAPture installation at the Anacostia Arts Center in the DC area. Installation using cotton saris with woodblock printing and painting on fabric from DC and Bangladeshi participants in Storytelling with Saris



Fig 3.7: Shinique Smith, *Bundle Me* (2004).



Fig 3.8: Shinique Smith, *Bale Variant No. 0021*

(Christmas) (2011-18). Photo by Brian Forrest

CONCLUSION

Betsy Greer, the inventor of the phrase Craftivism, said that textiles are a medium that are ripe with metaphorical and historical symbolism: to craft is to place yourself among a complicated history of dissenters, and change-makers.⁷² To that degree, the crafters contained within these pages are all artists who chose the medium of craft, fabric, fiber, and thread for its meaningful associative images. The breadth of topics within the three themes (Memory & Domesticity, Gender Politics & the Female Body, Social Fabric); shows the impressive versatility that the medium has. There remains a repeating strategy or common thread that follows through all the pieces that the textiles were all used for a similar purpose to engage in social critique. And, as an effect resulted in some repeating uses of key characteristics of textiles that artists made use of to accomplish that goal. Themes the fiber and textiles themselves carry and perhaps reflective of why artists chose handicraft as the creative outlet to where they engage in protest.

We are connected to textiles; dress ourselves in them daily. Sleep beneath them. What textile we wear for what occasion matters. Fabric, textiles, and clothes exist as a way of self-expression and as far as a functional object goes; it has incredible symbolic meaning. Because of their innate familiarity, textiles are a safe-space; which is why many artists choose textiles to explore uncomfortable topics. There is a language to fabric and textiles easily carry narratives and poetry to the audience. Textile merges the personal and the public; often people have memories and emotions tied to fabric. Making it easier to forge a connection between the art and the audience. Textiles have carried the stories of those whom society has overlooked; the

⁷² Greer, Betsy. "Crafting a Place in History: Creating Subversion with Handcrafts in Modernity" in *Crafting Democracy: Fiber Arts and Activism*. Edited by Juilee Decker and Hinda Mandell. Published by RIT Press, 2019.

marginalized and oppressed.⁷³ Projects done with fabric and thread are labor intensive and repetitive; often called meditative. Handiwork becomes an intimate experience between the crafter and the craft; its a method of transformation, of mending and of agency.

Artists choose to use handicraft to share their personal stories and to open a dialogue; to make the personal, political. Handicraft calls upon memory and domesticity, upon the impossible expectations of women, and carries the connotations of home, comfort, and motherhood. Yet, handicraft and textile arts also manage to effectively carry out dialogue about contamination, transformation, and destruction. Embroidery and stitchery emphasize the tenuous strain between the forces of creation and destruction in these works. Largely, handicraft and textile arts are accessible. It is a medium that is shared, it is communal. Handicraft became the medium for discussing topics like war, poverty, disease, climate change, and globalization because handicraft is about shared experiences, empathy, and community. Threads come together in a piece of fabric; a single part of a larger whole. It was in many ways a natural evolution of the medium. Handicraft has been an essential tool of resistance. It is a tool for resistance. And, I suspect for as long as handicraft is still practiced it will continue to be an avenue for people to peacefully and dissent. As long as people desire to speak out, seek systematic change, and to connect with people through the art of craft; then it will continue to exist as a source of empowerment for marginalized groups of people wanting to be seen and heard.

⁷³ Prain, Leanne. *Strange Material: Storytelling through Textiles*. Pg 10.

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