

THE EXPOSING STITCH: PERSONAL FEARS OF CHILDBEARING

A thesis presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of  
Western Carolina University in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Art.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
List of Figures .....	3
Abstract .....	4
Introduction .....	5
Women's Work .....	6
The Regiment .....	8
Fears .....	13
Influences .....	22
Conclusion .....	27
Bibliography .....	28
Appendix A: MFA Thesis Exhibition Documentation Compact Disc .....	29

LIST OF FIGURES  
(all works, unless otherwise noted, by Britney Carroll)

Figure	Page
1. “The Exposing Stitch: Personal Fears of Childbearing”, installation, 2009.....	9
2. “The Exposing Stitch: Personal Fears of Childbearing”, installation, 2009.....	10
3. “The Exposing Stitch: Personal Fears of Childbearing”, installation, 2009.....	10
4. “The Exposing Stitch: Personal Fears of Childbearing”, installation, 2009.....	11
5. “The Exposing Stitch: Personal Fears of Childbearing”, installation, 2009.....	11
6. “The Exposing Stitch: Personal Fears of Childbearing”, installation, 2009.....	12
7. “The Exposing Stitch: Personal Fears of Childbearing”, installation, 2009.....	12
8. <i>Fold</i> , detail, 2009 .....	16
9. <i>Squeeze</i> , detail, 2009 .....	16
10. <i>Cut</i> , detail, 2009 .....	17
11. <i>Strip</i> , installation view, 2009 .....	17
12. <i>Yield</i> , detail, 2009 .....	18
13. <i>Snip</i> , detail, 2009.....	18
14. <i>Whirl</i> , detail, 2009.....	19
15. <i>Nurture</i> , installation view, 2009 .....	29
16. <i>Wilt</i> , detail, 2009 .....	20
17. <i>Yellow</i> , detail, 2009.....	20
18. <i>Cocoon</i> , detail, 2009 .....	21
19. <i>Empty</i> , installation view, 2009.....	21
20. Judy Chicago, <i>The Dinner Party</i> , installation, 1974-79 .....	22
21. Louise Bourgeois, <i>The Woven Child</i> , Fabric, Steel and Aluminum, 2002 .....	24
22. Io Palmer, <i>Kitchen Anxiety Series</i> , Color Print of Private Performances, 2002 .....	25
23. Io Palmer, <i>Serving Up</i> , Installation of Sewn Garments and Recipe Cards, 2002.....	25
24. <i>Cocoon</i> , detail, 2009 .....	26

## ABSTRACT

## THE EXPOSING STITCH: PERSONAL FEARS OF CHILDBEARING

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My art work has evolved with a special interest in exploring gender roles. I want to push social boundaries with dynamic interactions between objects, images and viewers.

“The Exposing Stitch: Personal Fears of Childbearing” is an inquiry into my apprehension about pregnancy. My investigation of this subject is manifested through the craft of functional garment making and embroidery. I create aprons, which are generally used to protect and conceal the body, and use them to expose each of my unspoken fears related to reproduction. Muslin has become a metaphor for my own skin and embroidery, a cathartic experience. I have used the monotonous process of stitching as a way to discharge the emotional tensions caused by my fears. I correlate the time spent laboring through this process to the gestation period of pregnancy.

It is my intention not only to analyze myself through “The Exposing Stitch: Personal Fears of Childbearing” but to encourage the viewer to investigate his or her unspoken fears.

## INTRODUCTION

My art work has evolved with a special interest in exploring gender roles. I want to push social boundaries with dynamic interactions between objects, images and viewers. “The Exposing Stitch: Personal Fears of Childbearing” is an inquiry into my apprehension about pregnancy. My investigation of this subject is manifested through the craft of functional garment making and embroidery. I create aprons, which are generally used to protect and conceal the body, and use them to expose each of my unspoken fears related to reproduction.

## WOMEN'S WORK

Aprons are historically seen as an essential garment for doing housework. Worn to protect clothing while cleaning households, in America's South aprons are stereotypically perceived as being worn by women. Prior to the 1960's, aprons were vital to the housewife's attire. However, after washing machines became more readily available aprons became less popular and began to be used more by both men and women (Jones, sect. 3).

Aprons were chosen as a meaningful article of clothing for "The Exposing Stitch: Personal Fears of Childbearing" because of the rich cultural ties they have to the American South and for me personally. Growing up in Georgia, I noticed many gender stereotypes were reinforced and accepted without question. Getting married and becoming a young mother is the current norm in the small town where I was raised. Presently I am strongly affected by both personal and social pressure to have children at my current age of twenty-six. Expressing the fears I have about this stress through clinical illustrations embroidered on an apron that I can wear directly on my body is the most basic and honest approach for me to begin confronting my uncertainties. Most of my fears of conception and childbirth are rooted in fantasies and inaccurate information of what will happen to my body. Researching medical diagrams and photos has made me realize my lack of understanding about childbirth.

I embroider the images on the aprons because this states the connection I have to women throughout history. Whether out of hobby or obligation, women have used

embroidery to leave their own marks on the world. Embroidery has become a cathartic experience for me. I have used the monotonous process of stitching as a way to discharge the emotional tensions caused by my unspoken fears. The craft of embroidering the diagrammatic and invented images has become my major focus in this body of work. I correlate the time spent laboring through this process to the gestation period of pregnancy and believe the time spent sewing and doing embroidery is just as valuable as the finished product.

I chose muslin as the apron fabric for a number of reasons. Muslin is very breathable, making it appropriate for dry, hot climates of the humid South. It is also a practical material used to make functional aprons due to its low material cost. Traditionally dressmakers have used this natural fabric to test a garment's fit before cutting the more expensive fabric used for the final garment ("Muslin"). Muslin has become a metaphor for my own skin. All the aprons are custom made to fit my body. The dress forms were purchased in size 6/8 and adjusted for correct height to resemble my current body size.

My aprons test my fears and anxieties of conception and childbirth because they do not seriously affect my physical body. When I place an apron onto my body or the dress form, I consider the physical consequences of childbirth without commitment or pain. This process has become the first step in my decision to reproduce or not.

## THE REGIMENT

The installation of “The Exposing Stitch: Personal Fears of Childbearing” is essential to the viewer’s experience of the work. The installation is site specific to the Fine Arts Museum Special Projects Gallery at Western Carolina University where the viewer is required to enter the gallery through a hallway that closes off the space from the large central museum space. As viewers turn the corner, they encounter a regiment of dress forms. Four rows of three dress forms are perfectly in line, setting an imposing mood. Low lighting is intended to create an unexpected sense of discomfort as one is forced to enter the constricted formation to view each apron. The viewer penetrates the configuration of the installation yet remains an intruder because there is no place in the formation for the viewer and he or she cannot wear the aprons. The installation is a metaphor for my experience of developing the work. It was a personal journey witnessed and influenced by many; however all the witnesses have been outsiders looking in on my experience. The outsider had no effect on the confrontation with my fears, and facing them was a personal, creative experience between me and creating the art.

Each apron correlates with a specific personal fear I have concerning childbearing. Most images are diagrammatic, while some have evolved to express my rendition of the fear. Viewers may never entirely comprehend the significance behind each stitch, but I do intend viewers to relate each apron to their individual experience.





Fig. 1. “The Exposing Stitch: Personal Fears of Childbearing”, installation, 2009.



Fig. 2. "The Exposing Stitch: Personal Fears of Childbearing", installation, 2009.



Fig. 3. "The Exposing Stitch: Personal Fears of Childbearing", installation, 2009.



Fig. 4. "The Exposing Stitch: Personal Fears of Childbearing", installation, 2009.



Fig. 5. "The Exposing Stitch: Personal Fears of Childbearing", installation, 2009.



Fig. 6. “The Exposing Stitch: Personal Fears of Childbearing”, installation, 2009.



Fig. 7. “The Exposing Stitch: Personal Fears of Childbearing”, installation, 2009.

## FEARS

Many of the aprons deal with issues relating to childbirth that are either not discussed or ignored in the society in which I grew up. *Fold* is the first apron created for “The Exposing Stitch: Personal Fears of Childbearing”; therefore, it is the most accurately designed functional apron. It is a muslin half apron with a line drawing of a vulva embroidered on the front lower center. I began with the vulva because it has been an unmentionable subject thus far in my life. The vulva and related topics are not widely accepted as satisfactory subjects for conversation. Only in the comfort of doctors’ offices and the company of close friends do I discuss my genitalia, and then I am not totally honest. This work marks the beginning of my being publically honest about my worries relating to my body and procreation.

For the aprons *Nurture* and *Wilt*, I was drawn to both the diagram of the circulatory system and mammary glands because they show how strong a woman’s body can be. Research about childbearing has allowed me to appreciate how my body was created to withstand procreation. However, fears of my individual body not having the capabilities to perform these functions are intensified after learning these medical facts, such as how a woman’s circulatory system alters to support a fetus, and mammary glands produce milk to sustain a baby’s life.

Pain is a substantial fear related to childbirth: cesareans, hysterectomies, perineal tearing and/or an episiotomy during childbirth, as I illustrated in *Snip*. These procedures are horrifying unless someone who has experienced it explains the entire process and

how one heals. *Yellow* is the image of a cesarean section opening stapled together in the process of healing, and *Empty* is a vacant womb and umbilical cord that is developed to nurture a full term fetus. These are all potentially painful events occurring during childbirth. Additionally, hysterectomies and breast deformation not only cause physical pain to the body, they may result in emotional and psychological distress. These pieces pose the question, what is the ultimate cost of trying to give birth to a child? The outcome could be death to my child or me. Discussing emotional and psychological effects are such taboo subjects in my family that the possibilities remain endless and unsolved to me. I remain overwhelmed by the lack of control I have over the outcome.

*Squeeze* reveals the other end of the spectrum, the fear of infertility. The apron has the uterus, fallopian tubes and ovaries embroidered on to the front. Safety pins are piercing the ovaries demonstrating a loss of function. It expresses my current fear that in pursuing all contraceptive measures possible to prevent the conception of a child, I will later discover I am unable to conceive. The overall risk of what I am doing to my body with pills and contraceptive devices remain a mystery to me, and the medical world also seems undecided about the inherent risks involved.

*Cut* is a floor length half apron with a life size placenta embroidered at floor level. The umbilical cord begins at the placenta, continues down the apron-ties to form a knot around my neck, and continues down to a pocket on the apron, where it is bundled up and sewed in. The apron here is intruding on the body, as it seems to strangle or attack me. Although the placenta is the lifeline for the fetus in the womb, it uses the mother's energy and nutrients, a fact that leads me to perceive a fetus as a parasite potentially feeding on my body.

Following the theme of my body becoming a host for an organism that potentially generates harm, *Yield* is a transformation of the apron to resemble a tutu with an umbilical hanging down from underneath, trailing along the gallery floor and out the door. The horrifyingly long cord traps me because all of my actions are centered on dragging the cord. The tutu is a metaphor for freedom and when juxtaposed with the umbilical cord, it symbolizes the loss of freedom in having the lifelong responsibility for another person.

*Whirl* and *Wilt* begin to explore my fabricated versions of reality. The tangible medical illustrations are equivalent to true representations of pregnancy opposed to the uninformed images I imagined before my research. My aprons do not symbolize personal experiences in my life but only fears; therefore the fantasy behind childbearing remains fresh on my mind. Visions of my vagina exploding and my breast toppling down my body exist among the facts.

*Cocoon* has been altered more than the other aprons and clearly departs from the actual function of an apron. *Cocoon* ties around the neck, has two extended sleeves, and then balloons out, tying to body again under the waist. The long sleeves cross over the front of the body to tie in back, resembling a straight-jacket. The viewer's eye is then led down by red string flowing like blood to a red glob on the floor. This apron can appear to be either suffocating the body or protecting the body like a cocoon.

It was my specific choice not to include the fetus within any image because I am examining distinct uncertainties pertaining to my body, not the doubts about rearing children. Omitting the fetus shows the ambivalence I feel towards progeny.



Fig. 8. *Fold*, detail, 2009.



Fig. 9. *Squeeze*, detail, 2009.





Fig. 10. *Cut*, detail, 2009.



Fig. 11. *Strip*, installation view, 2009.



Fig. 12. *Yield*, detail, 2009.



Fig. 13. *Snip*, detail, 2009.



Fig. 14. *Whirl*, detail, 2009.



Fig. 15. *Nurture*, installation view, 2009.



Fig. 16. *Wilt*, detail, 2009.



Fig. 17. *Yellow*, detail, 2009.

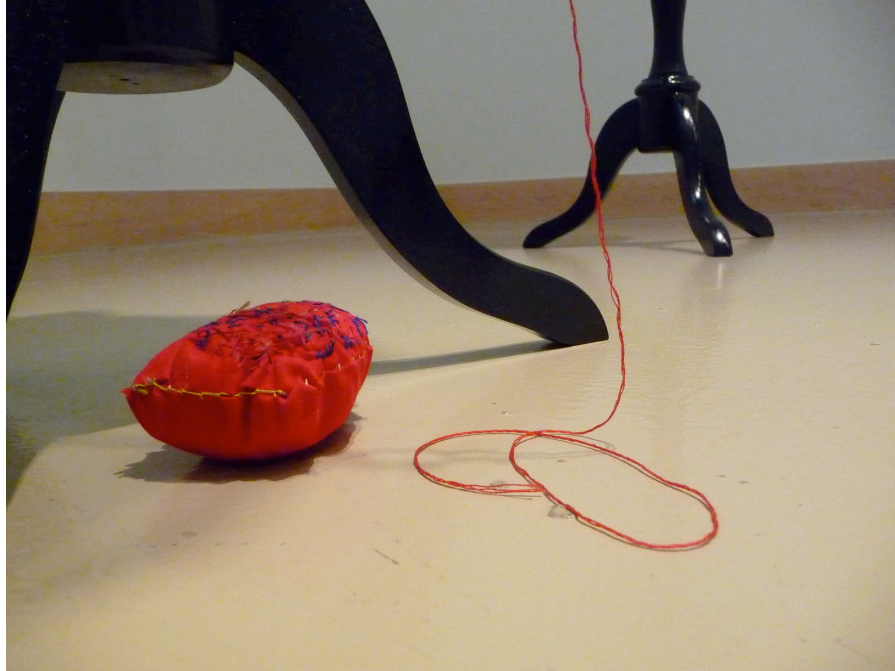


Fig. 18. *Cocoon*, detail, 2009.



Fig. 19. *Empty*, installation view, 2009.

## INFLUENCES

Many artists have used the female reproductive organs and childbirth as topics for their own work. Feminist artist Judy Chicago's (American, b.1939) work of 1974-1979, *The Dinner Party*, is perhaps her most famous. Chicago stated that its purpose was to "end the ongoing cycle of omission in which women were written out of the historical record" (Fineman). *The Dinner Party* contains a triangular table with place settings each featuring an embroidered table runner with a woman's name and images or symbols relating to her accomplishments. All of the plates incorporate a ceramic sculpture of a vulva symbol. A collaborative effort of many female artists, *The Dinner Party* celebrates traditional female accomplishments such as textile arts and china painting, which have been characterized as craft or domestic art, as opposed to the more culturally valued, male dominated fine arts, i.e. painting or sculpture (Chicago).



Fig. 20. Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, 1974-79

Chicago's use of ceramics and needlepoint to create a powerful statement about the position of women throughout history inspired me to take the same approach in my art work. The creating of a garment and embroidering onto it are modest acts of craft making usually stereotypical to women. I want to personally reclaim these acts and use them to create my voice as a contemporary woman artist.

*The Dinner Party* is pivotal in the history of contemporary art and has had a great impact on my work. Chicago's vulva themed plates were vital to the acceptance of this type of imagery in the art world outside of the male gaze. Her work set the foundation for women to express themselves with the most direct form of female symbolism.

Maternity was a central theme for Louise Bourgeois (French, b.1911). It constantly reoccurs throughout her years of writing and art making, beginning in the late 1930's before her immigration to the United States. Bourgeois feared that she could not conceive a child and adopted her first child, Michel. Bourgeois related maternity to the "original, uterine sense of germination, fecundation and reproduction" (Morris 175). Through this understanding her work expresses pain, pleasure, guilt and contentment towards motherhood, all aspects I strive to understand and express personally. I relate to the ambivalence Bourgeois expresses toward maternity through her work.

For example, *The Woven Child* is a sculpture created from delicate remnants of fabric crudely patch-worked together. The mother figure lies headless and vulnerable on her back. The figure is unable to either accept or reject the infant trapped inside her. *The Woven Child* creates the tension of "estrangement and intimacy, awkwardness and tenderness, inadequacy and promise" ("Louise Bourgeois").



Fig. 21. Louise Bourgeois, *The Woven Child*, Fabric, Steele and Aluminum, 2002

Io Palmer (Greek-American, b.1970) is another contemporary artist utilizing aprons as the basis for her artwork. *The Kitchen Anxiety Series* (2000) consists of private performances documenting actions that take place in the kitchen. Palmer was making aprons that paralleled the anxiety she felt in the kitchen and cooking for other people. The aprons were exaggerated and bulky with knots of fabric stuffing the kitchen space in order for Palmer to feel the weight of each piece as she wore them. The aprons became like canvas for the food stains showing a record of the entire process (Palmer).





Fig. 22. Io Palmer, *Kitchen Anxiety Series*, Color Print of Private Performances, 2002



Fig. 23. Io Palmer, *Serving Up*, Installation of Sewn Garments and Recipe Cards, 2002

Palmer's aprons influenced the design of my aprons by the transformation that occurred during the process of making them. The first apron I made is the basic half apron but as the series developed, the aprons were modified to express my personal

emotion. For example, *Cocoon* contains the basic elements found in all the aprons shown, ties on with straps, covers front portion of body, is made of muslin and includes embroidery. However, the apron form has been intensified to encompass the entire body and contains sleeves that tie behind like tie-backs. By opposing the title *Cocoon*, which is defined as a protective envelope, with the imagery of a body enclosed to the point of oppression, the apron encourages the viewer to feel my contradictory emotions of suffocation and support.



Fig. 24. *Cocoon*, Detail, 2009

## CONCLUSION

Louise Bourgeois once said, “What counts, our whole purpose, is to try to understand what we are about, to scrutinize ourselves. Art is an aid to this” (“Louise Bourgeois: The Spider, The Mistress and the Tangerine”). It is my intention not only to analyze myself through “The Exposing Stitch: Personal Fears of Childbearing” but to encourage the viewer to examine his or her unspoken fears. Creating this body of work has forced me to become honest about my uncertainties and inexperienced views towards reproduction.

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APPENDIX A: MFA THESIS EXHIBITION DOCUMENTATION COMPACT  
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1. Britney Carroll, Exhibition View, 2009.
2. Britney Carroll, Exhibition View, 2009.
3. Britney Carroll, Exhibition View, 2009.
4. Britney Carroll, Exhibition View, 2009.
5. Britney Carroll, Exhibition View, 2009.
6. Jan Parker, Exhibition View, 2009.
7. Amy Guthrie, Exhibition View, 2009.
8. Ashley Evans, *Fold*, detail, 2009.
9. Ashley Evans, *Squeeze*, detail, 2009.
10. Ashley Evans, *Cut*, detail, 2009.
11. Ashley Evans, *Strip*, installation view, 2009.
12. Amy Guthrie, *Yield*, detail, 2009.
13. *Strip*, detail, 2009.
14. Amy Guthrie, *Whirl*, detail, 2009.
15. Ashley Evans, *Nurture*, installation view, 2009.
16. Ashley Evans, *Wilt*, detail, 2009.
17. Ashley Evans, *Yellow*, detail, 2009.
18. Amy Guthrie, *Cocoon*, detail, 2009.
19. Ashley Evans, *Empty*, installation view, 2009.