

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Textile Society of America Symposium
Proceedings

Textile Society of America

9-2012

Fallen Soldiers

Vita Plume

North Carolina State University, vitaplume@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf>

Plume, Vita, "Fallen Soldiers" (2012). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 729.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/729>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Textile Society of America at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Fallen Soldiers

Vita Plume

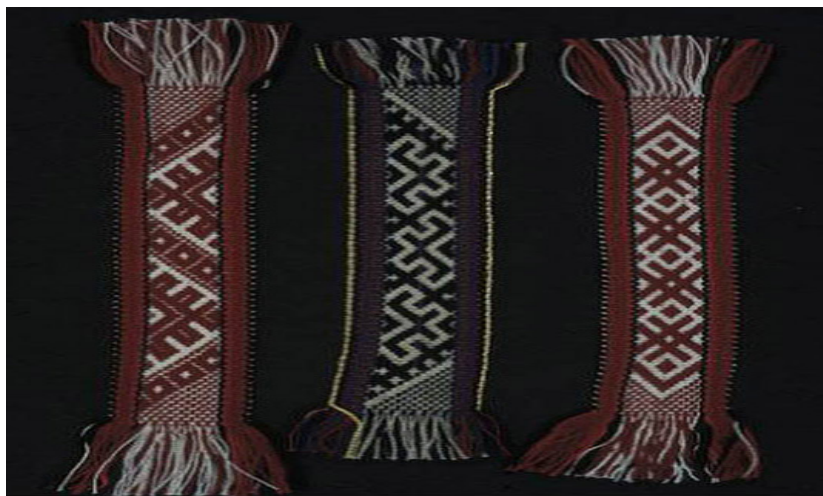
vitaplume@gmail.com

I am a direct result of the Second World War. Leaving in the path of oncoming communist occupation, my parents left Latvia separately, my mother, a single mother at the time, met my dad in England, they married and then emigrated to Canada in 1954.

My parents wish to return to Latvia to live near their families was made impossible by the 45 year long communist occupation. This dislocation left an ongoing strain on the family and this wished for and imagined homeland became a central theme and myth in my family.

As you also saw in that video, my family's efforts to keep the Latvian traditions going, gave me a kind of split personality... we had no English language books in the house and I spoke no English until I started going to school. I was expected to excel in English school, Monday to Friday, as well as Latvian school on Saturdays. When I expressed doubt about whether I wanted to go to school on Saturdays, my dad assured me I would love it and if I didn't, I could stop attending. Well, I did not like it, but there was not option, I attended from grade one until graduation, in grade eleven!

My first teachers of embroidery and weaving were Latvian mothers and grandmothers. Eager to learn more, I went to Sheridan College, in Toronto, to study as much about weaving as possible, as well as learning about textile traditions from other cultures and periods. I was lucky to have a first job weaving large-scale tapestries in a small weaving studio outside Montreal. I then went on to get my Masters degree at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, at the time, a very conceptually oriented school.



*Figure 1. Backstrap bands & mat of sewn together bands, c. 1974,
Each band approx. 2" x 7", cotton, woven pick up.*

But the very first band weavings that I had done on those back-strap looms (figure 1) became the basis for my first, conceptual series of woven pieces exploring my Latvian Identity.

Latvia is a tiny country with a small population. During the cold war, Latvian culture was in danger of disappearing as the communist regime followed a policy of cultural genocide in an effort to ‘Russificate’ the population of the immense and culturally diverse Soviet Union.



Figure 2, left. Dievs Tava zeme deg / Latvian Flag II, 1983, 40” x 90”, woven, traditional Latvian pick-up technique, dyed warp, cotton, wool, synthetics, Collection of the Latvian Cultural Centre, Toronto.

Figure 3, right. ... kur taut alia ietu? / Back to the Wall, 1985/86, 10’ x 20’, woven, traditional Latvian pick-up technique, knotted, dyed warp, cotton, wool, barbed wire, wood, Collection of the Museum of Decorative Art, Riga, Latvia, photo credit: Eriks Dzenis.

At the top of this weaving, *Dievs Tava zeme deg / Latvian Flag II*, (figure 2) you see the maroon white and maroon colors of the Latvian flag. These panels contain a diversity of Latvian patterns. These patterns freeze as they are assimilated into the central area of Soviet red and at the bottom the designs and colours dissolve into a black plain weave tabby cloth.

The pattern and color progression in the piece *...kur tauta lai ietu? / Back to the Wall* (figure 3) moves from the Soviet red to black plain weave on one side of this barbed wire fence and white plain weave on the other. Each belt is knotted on the fence. On one side we have the disintegration of the culture as a result of Russification within the Soviet Union and on the other, Latvian identity in the diaspora was becoming weaker with integration in the societies the immigrants had assimilated into. In both cases the pattern of Latvian life seemed doomed to be eradicated. When this piece was shown in Latvia, one year prior to the end of the cold war, the audience wove flowers into the barbed wire and also placed flowers at the base line of the fence. I was deeply touched by this quiet exhibition of understanding and lament.

Through my work, I have explored my identity through my clothes. *Rescuing the Fragment* is a series of pieces I did based on my Latvian blouse (figure 4). I felt and thought about how my traditional costume had not always been a comfortable fit. How it changed and defined me. I thought about how my Latvian identity was the lens that filtered my understanding of the world and influenced my perception of it.

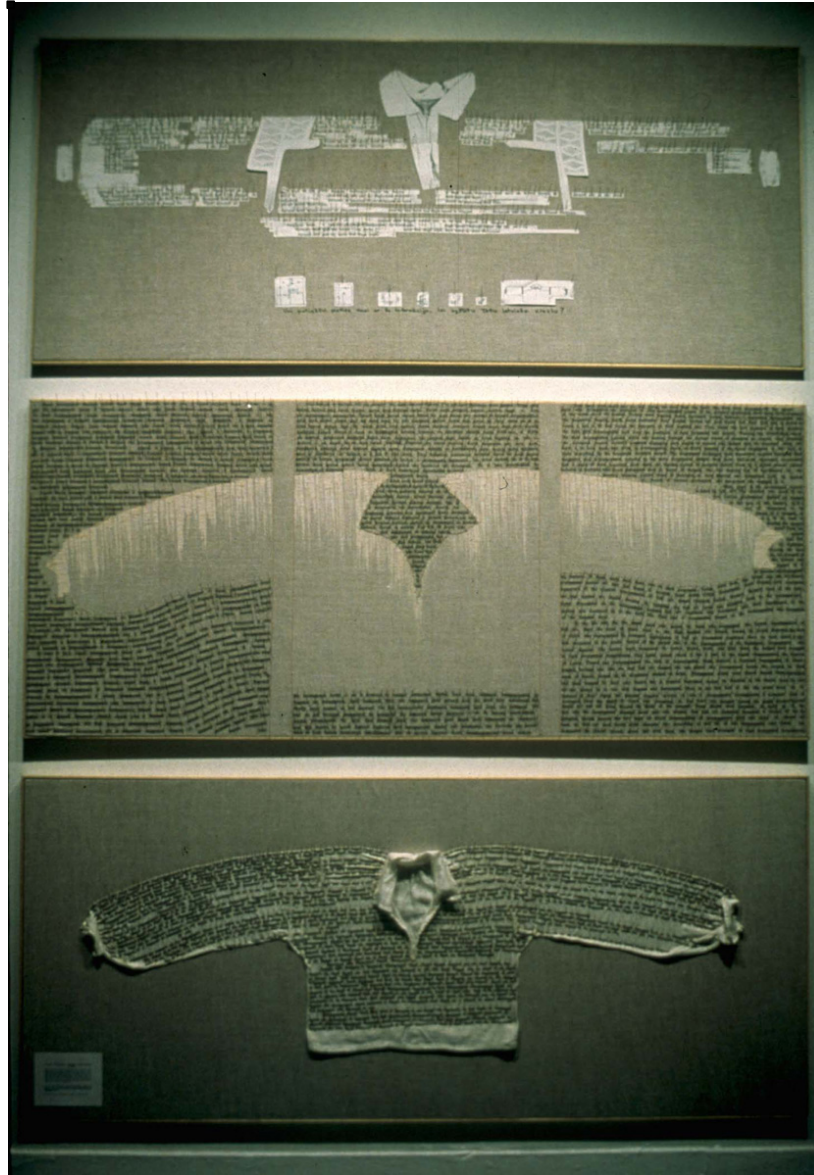


Figure 4. Rescuing the Fragment, 1991/92, each panel 75" x 32" x 2", Latvian blouse, text, paper, rusted pins, linen, pine frame.

As access to digital Jacquard handlooms became possible I used more photographic imagery to explore my father's identity and war experiences using his *Aliens Passport* (figure 5) when he was a war refugee seeking political asylum in Sweden. While my parents taught me many things about their past, there were many stories about the war that they concealed. I learned about some of the horrific things they lived through only as a young adult.

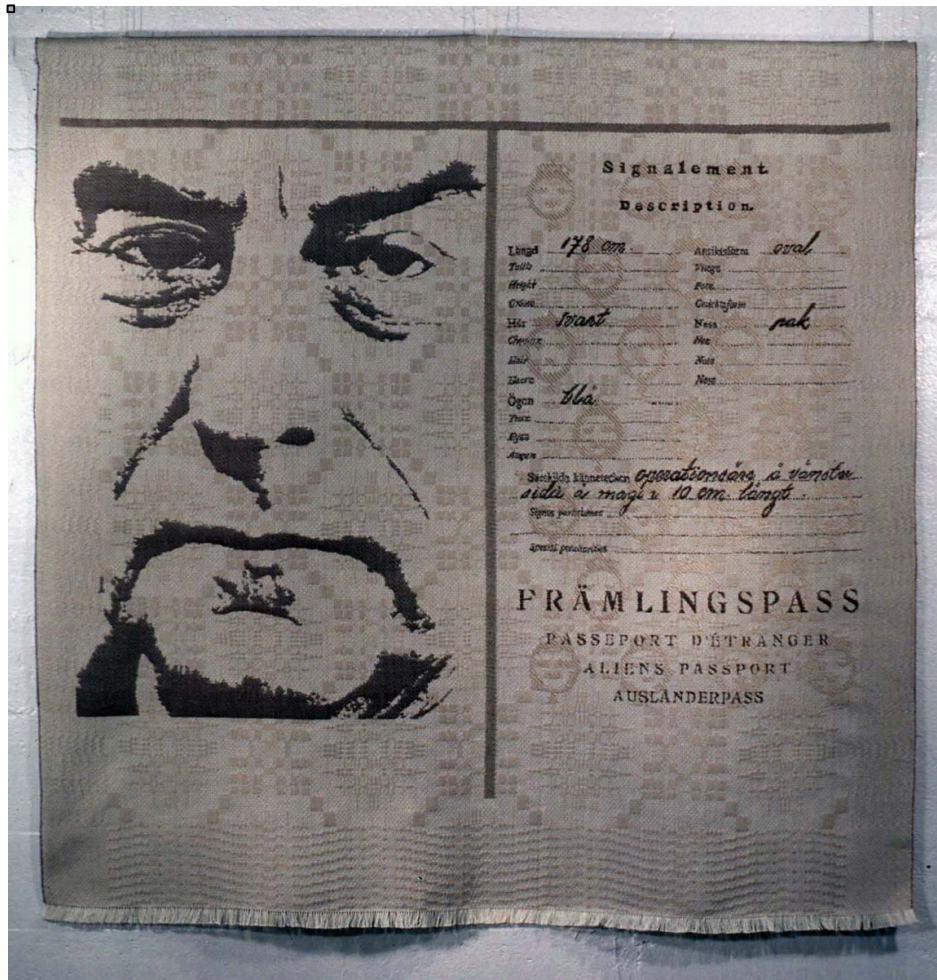


Figure 5. *Aliens Passport, 1999, 41" x 50", cotton, hand woven on a digital Jacquard loom.*

My father died when I was 17 years old and I have since read incredible records of his escape from Latvia and Sweden. I wove pieces about my mother (figure 6) and thought about the experiences and patterns that defined her. Although she spoke of her experiences in displaced persons camps in Germany, she rarely spoke of the war itself. However, I heard the emotional impact of those war experiences in the recurring nightmares that would wake me up at night.

War leaves its biggest impact through the stories that are too horrific to be told. Through the silences of what cannot be shared. I thought about the fact that my mother never got to see her father and mother again and that it took over 40 years to be reunited with her sister. I thought about who I was and how the patterns and experiences of my parents had left their impact on me and my sisters and my sister's children.

I moved from Canada to the US just three weeks prior to the attacks on the World Trade Centers on 9/11. I taught a studio class the afternoon after the attacks, where students laid out their hearts and fears and patriotism in a way that was foreign to me, the Canadian.



Figure 6. Gogsite's Album, 4 panels each 13" x 10", 2004, cotton, polyester, hand woven shibori on a digital jacquard loom, Collection of Izolde Spurmanis.

When the US went to war, with Iraq and Afghanistan, I was surprised by my own overreaction. I was overcome with panic. I realized that the last time my family lived in a country at war, my family was torn into pieces and after 50 years we were still feeling the repercussions. I was literally terrified. How would I find my way back from North Carolina to Canada. I admit it sounds a bit crazy, but I planned an escape route... kept my gas tank filled so I could drive as far as possible and walk the remainder of the way. My colleagues, in an effort to calm me said, "Don't worry, the US has been at war before in our life times and our lives were never directly affected. You'll be fine.." In many ways they were right... we have longer lines at airports and the business of crossing the border is much less friendly, ... but they were right... the US went to war and my life there went on pretty well just as before.



Figure 7. Fallen Soldiers (Canada), detail, Jefferson Clifford Frances, 2011 – present, each panel approx. 9" x 11", cotton, polyolefin, hand woven shibori on a digital jacquard loom, photo credit: Doug van de Zande.

Since WWII the Canadian armed forces have been known as a peacekeepers, but in 2002 Canada joined the war in Afghanistan as allies of the US. This caused a huge controversy in Canada whose positioning as peacekeepers is important to our sense of national identity. Among the young men who went to fight was my husband's x-wives nephew, Captain Jefferson Clifford Frances (figure 7). He was killed along with 5 of his comrades on July 4, 2007 in a personnel carrier that ran over an improvised Explosive device. This was the largest number of soldiers Canada had lost in one incident in the war.

I was at our cottage in Canada when this happened and I listened to the radio coverage and watched on TV as all of the country mourned. A huge controversy ensued about the efficacy of war and why Canada had chosen to participate in this one. Clearly it had been a political decision, perhaps to show that Canada was as capable at making war as the big guns... in fact the experience in Afghanistan showed that peace keepers were trained differently than warriors and that the Canadian armed forces lacked the required training and appropriate equipment to fight in this foreign war.

On a much more personal level I witnessed the tragedy this one death caused within this young man's family. Jeff left behind a 6 month old baby, his wife, sister, mother, father, uncles, aunts, cousins, and friends. The impact of just one war dead, or an injury, is multiplied many times over in all those other people it leaves a lasting effect on.

I returned to the US in the fall and as I planned to leave my job at North Carolina State University and return to Canada, I wanted to make a piece that reflected my experience there. Jeff's death made me think back to the words of my colleagues as the US invaded Iraq and Afghanistan... that our lives would not change.



Figure 8. Fallen Soldiers (Canada), detail, photo credit: Doug van de Zande.

However, the lives of the families of all these fallen soldiers has changed (figure 8). The lives off all those who have been injured have also changed. A total of close to 8,000 troops from the joint international forces have died in Iraq and Afghanistan. More than 3 times that amount have been injured.

To date I have woven only 2% of the 6,000 US soldiers who have died and all 158 Canadians. They are sometimes shown together and sometimes in smaller contingents. Always with a key or map identifying each individual soldier. This is what the US contingent looked like at the Gregg Museum, in Raleigh, this past August (figure 9).



Figure 9. Fallen Soldiers (US), Installation view of 180 panels at Gregg Museum, Raleigh, North Carolina, photo credit: Doug van de Zande.

In considering these issues of commemoration, war and family I have been struck by the notion that we have become overly accepting of fighting as a way to resolve political conflict.

Global conflict is in front of us daily. We see graphic images of fighting in Syria, Afghanistan, the Congo and the list goes on... we know that these conflicts would not continue if it was not profitable to someone. This military industrial complex that many of us accept as normal has a true cost...

Fallen Soldiers commemorates the thousands of soldiers who have died in Iraq and Afghanistan and all soldiers who have fought and died in service to their countries. These ghostly portraits remind us that war is not only measured by words, like democracy and freedom, but also by **all** the lives that have been shattered... this is the true cost of war.