

ARTIFACTS OF EXPERIENCE: A THESIS EXHIBITION

BY

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Submitted to the graduate program in Design,
and to the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts.

Chairperson

Committee members

Date defended: _____

The Thesis Committee for Karla Freiheit certifies
that this is the approved version of the following thesis:

ARTIFACTS OF EXPERIENCE: A THESIS EXHIBITION

Committee:

Chairperson

Date approved: _____

Artifacts of Experience: A Thesis Exhibition

The body of work presented in my thesis exhibition entitled *Artifacts of Experience*, is made from everyday, ubiquitous items of cloth and thread. The pieces are made using the commonplace sewing techniques of layering and stitching. In my hands and with my sensibilities, the results of these mundane activities and substances transcend the ordinary. They become artifacts of a visual and material celebration of all that life brings to us as human beings.

The diverse combinations of motifs, material characteristics, and techniques applied to each textile, together with my personal processes, result in unique entities. All are made of cloth, thread, layering and stitching and are double-sided. This commonality is akin to the human being's DNA profile: we all have the same DNA components. What makes us each unique is the arrangement of these universal factors, not unlike the different composition of elements within each artifact. One example of this is the textile entitled *Mindfulness Cloth: Relax*, a collection of different remnants, organized and pieced together into wide vertical bands. The labrys-shaped openings in the outermost layers of cloth are particular to this textile.

The recurring visual motifs of stripes, cross-hatching, vortices, organic shapes, and energy lines formed into vertical, diagonal, and concentric pathways, represent my varied lived experiences. Some sources of these motifs include events from my childhood and adolescence, while others include my passion for personal, idiosyncratic ritual, and mark-making. I develop these visual motifs into themes that address my desires to know about the world and to be known along with my need to

incorporate empowerment, mindfulness, meditation, and healing into my daily routine.

The individual pieces in this body of work are scaled to human size or smaller. They are often reminiscent of domestic textiles. This is important because I seek to connect the intimacy of domestic textiles visually and tactilely with my specific processes and with the need all human beings share for physical and emotional intimacy. The smallest piece, *Healing Cloth: I Love My Brain*, is the size of a handkerchief, alluding to an intimate connection with the body.

From materials such as corduroy, organza, brocade, and gauze made of fibers such as cotton, nylon, silk, rayon, and polyester, I create intricate, complex textiles that evoke haptic responses. The physical attributes of these materials convey the strength and resilience of canvas, the durability and comfort of flannel, the soft drape of chiffon, and the smooth luster of satin. Sometimes I undermine the features of the fabric types and sometimes I enhance or expose their inherent characteristics. For instance, some areas of the textiles are deliberately lace-like and delicate to imply vulnerability. The accumulation of these tactile and associative qualities exemplify a range of human emotions, such as the longing for the security of infancy. The complexities of this experience can be represented in a simple manner through the union of form, materials, function, and scent of a well-loved baby blanket. One rendering of this experience is *Empowerment Cloth: Cells*. It is reminiscent of the silky feel, pink satin appliqué, and eventual deterioration of my own receiving blanket, something so fundamental to my childhood I named it “Gootsy Blanket.”

The individual techniques of devoré (“burning out” of cellulosic fibers), discharge (color removal), hand and machine embroidery used to construct the artwork evoke associations to our lifestyle and lifecycle: “burned out” connotes a maximum of stress. Similarly, the layering of both technique and cloth refers to the developmental stages of life from the simple to the complex. Layering and cutting away hides and reveals as do building up colors, then bleaching them out or covering them with stitching. My “space-is-full” aesthetic is a metaphor for life-is-full. Since situations or events are neutral, whether they are perceived as “good” or “bad” depends on an individual’s attitude. Some pieces are tentatively and precariously held together by only a few threads to acknowledge the fragility of life. In contrast, other textiles are robustly constructed with as many as six layers of material, as in *Healing Cloth: Meander*. Likewise, *Mindfulness Cloth: Here I Am* is densely stitched with four layers of material.

The accumulation of these techniques methodically applied becomes my personal process, similar to the constants and variables of our DNA structure. I manipulate the textiles within discrete systematic parameters using variables, with an outcome of one-of-a-kind cloths that fulfill a particular purpose, as indicated by such individual titles as *Empowerment Cloth*, *Healing Cloth*, *Meditation Cloth*, and *Mindfulness Cloth*.

The overall approach that I use is first to assemble disparate scraps of fabric and combine them into a whole. I fill spaces with stitching and other mark-making, maintaining awareness of the dialogue between both sides of the textile. This

marking on both front and back integrates the composition to create a unified and double-sided whole. Occasionally, I embed stitched text that is mostly obscured within several layers of fabric. For example, in the piece entitled *Empowerment Cloth: Wabi-Sabi*, the act of writing the text has the personal purpose of empowerment, rather than a public one of communication.

After a certain amount of mark-making I remove layers of fabric by applying devoré chemicals or reverse appliqué. The process demands that I handle each fabric differently. Some I handle roughly, scrubbing out tenacious particles of fibers to show what lies beneath. With others, I am gentle with the cloth when I recognize that it needs special attention and handling to coax out what it wants to reveal. Exposing hidden layers is a way to discover new information that I can respond to and further develop. It is also a means to uncover inner beauty, allowing it to be seen and appreciated.

If and when I err as I use a technique, I will “highlight” the mistake and incorporate it into the design rather than hide or fix it. For example, when I accidentally catch a fold of cloth under the sewing machine foot and stitch it together, I cut the fold free and then stitch around the resulting opening to emphasize the error. This serves to remind us of our imperfect nature as human beings. It also takes advantage of the beauty in the unexpected, as when “happy accidents” occur in the making. Imperfections can create singular, idiosyncratic objects that are beautiful because of their flaws, not in spite of them.

I am in constant collaboration with my materials, processes, and techniques to allow the work to disclose its next step. Sometimes it tells me quickly, while other times I must lay the piece aside and return to it later. In this manner, the work evolves. In the end, the layers, text when present, motifs, and the front and back of each textile become fully synthesized.

I make this work as a method of presenting artifacts of my lived experience. For myself, I stitch and manipulate cloth to heal, soothe, and to create patience and focus. Writing text reinforces my positive thoughts and produces a sense of intimacy with the work. It also helps me to better understand myself as I calm my mind. In addition, I make the work in order to live in the moment of creation and to construct positive, celebratory relationships with myself and others. As an eternal optimist, I feel good about making beautiful, celebratory work that expands on the gifts of the world around us.

I also make my artwork as a mode of visceral communication with others. I seek to communicate with those whose experiences are similar to mine so they know they are not alone. I also offer my work as a means to connect with those whose experiences are dissimilar, so that they may be able to access a different perspective on life. This intent is like that of writers of memoir. As a reader of memoir, I appreciate such intimate access to others' experiences. Both my work and memoir provide a way to understand and gain perspective on how a life is lived, either by design or by default. Thus, my artwork provides a visual and material surrogate for myself when I cannot exchange stories directly.

I also see the work as a medium to share the human impulse for creative expression and mark-making, and to finding meaning in creative activity. It is the latter that differentiates us from other animal species. Furthermore, as I hear reactions to the artifacts, I learn what they mean to others based on their own lived experiences. For instance, many people seem to identify with the labor involved, as suggested by questions about the time required to make a particular piece. Another person sees the entire body of work as representative of the circulating life force known as *qi* in East Asian philosophies. The range of reactions is as varied as the individuals who express them.

In the end, the work serves to create mindfulness, document experiences, and arouse memory. It is a physical reminder that beauty may be created out of nothing that is significant in itself. It reminds us to slow down, to pause and ponder, and to enjoy what life offers us in each moment.

Collaboration with materials, processes, and techniques is essential to my creative act. In addition, my goal is to broaden this collaboration to include or draw people directly into the making. The body of work in *Artifacts of Experience* reflects a partnership of artistic production with artists and other ordinary people. Although limited in number and duration, these relationships are a generative force for my personal studio practice, creating energy from the interaction and subsequent momentum to reenter the solitary work of the studio.

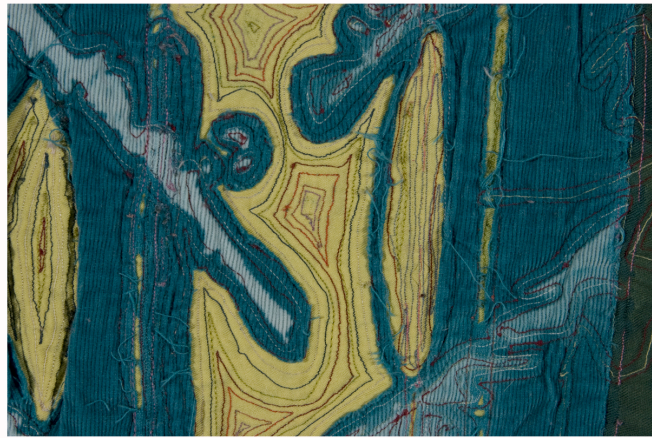
As I look ahead to new collaborative work, I anticipate that my artistic practice will become an ambassador, opening doors that were previously closed. I

have already achieved this kind of access as a volunteer teacher for Arts in Prison, Inc. of Kansas City, KS. My intent through this activity is to help individuals voice their experiences, record their existences, and so help them reinforce and appreciate their human dignity. I identify with the students in this setting because they are disenfranchised and I often feel like an “outsider” myself. One collaborative method involves presenting cloth for others to mark, followed by a series of exchanges for making new marks on the most recent version of the textile.

Soon I will travel abroad to Yemen, where I will live for two years. I will use my work and my interest in the creative work of other cultures to open doors for opportunities to collaborate in art making with Yemeni women. I hope to learn their techniques, materials, and forms, to share mine in return, and to collaborate with them in art making. As I use these artistic endeavors for empowerment and communication, I look forward to sharing life experiences and celebrating what life offers us in each moment.



Karla Freiheit
Mindfulness Cloth: Relax
(front view)



Karla Freiheit
Mindfulness Cloth: Relax
(front view detail)



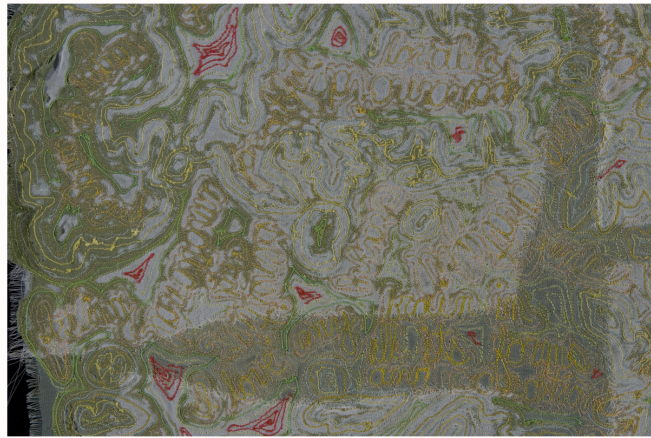
Karla Freiheit
Mindfulness Cloth: Relax
(back view)



Karla Freiheit
Mindfulness Cloth: Relax
(back view detail)



Karla Freiheit
Healing Cloth: I Love My Brain
(front view)



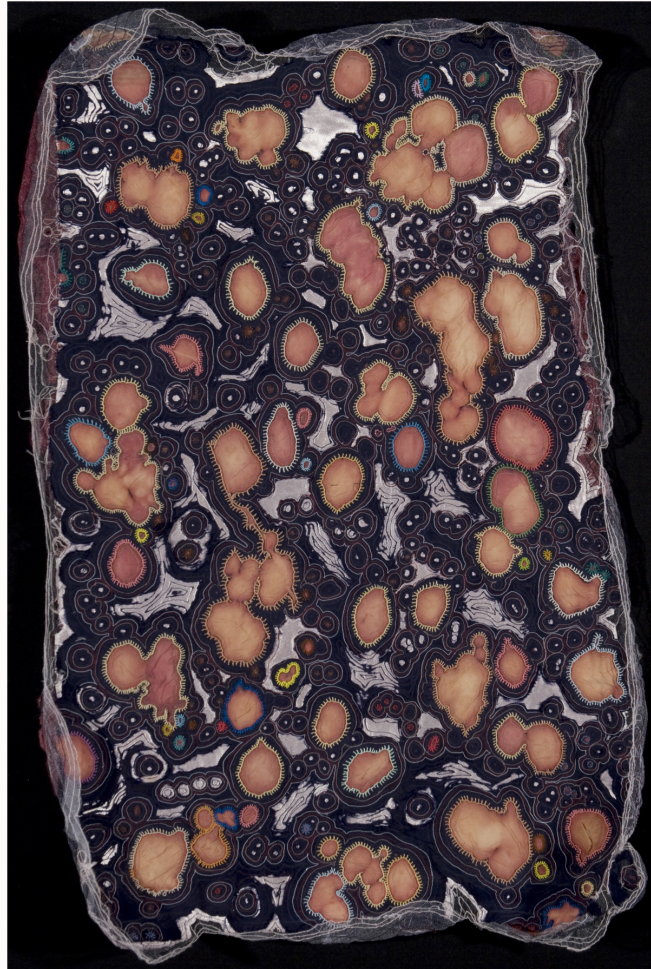
Karla Freiheit
Healing Cloth: I Love My Brain
(front view detail)



Karla Freiheit
Healing Cloth: I Love My Brain
(back view)



Karla Freiheit
Healing Cloth: I Love My Brain
(back view detail)



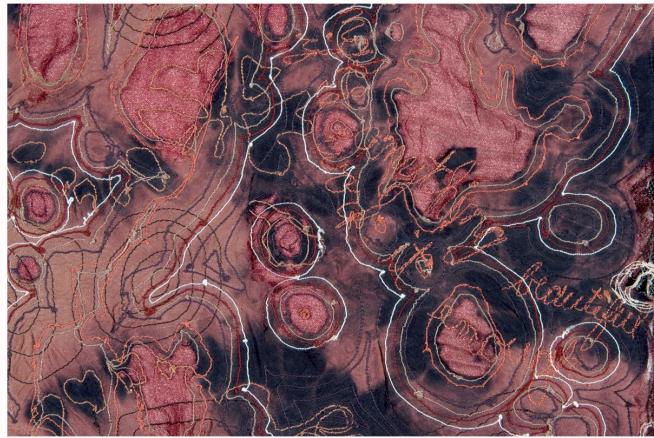
Karla Freiheit
Empowerment Cloth: Cells
(front view)



Karla Freiheit
Empowerment Cloth: Cells
(front view detail)



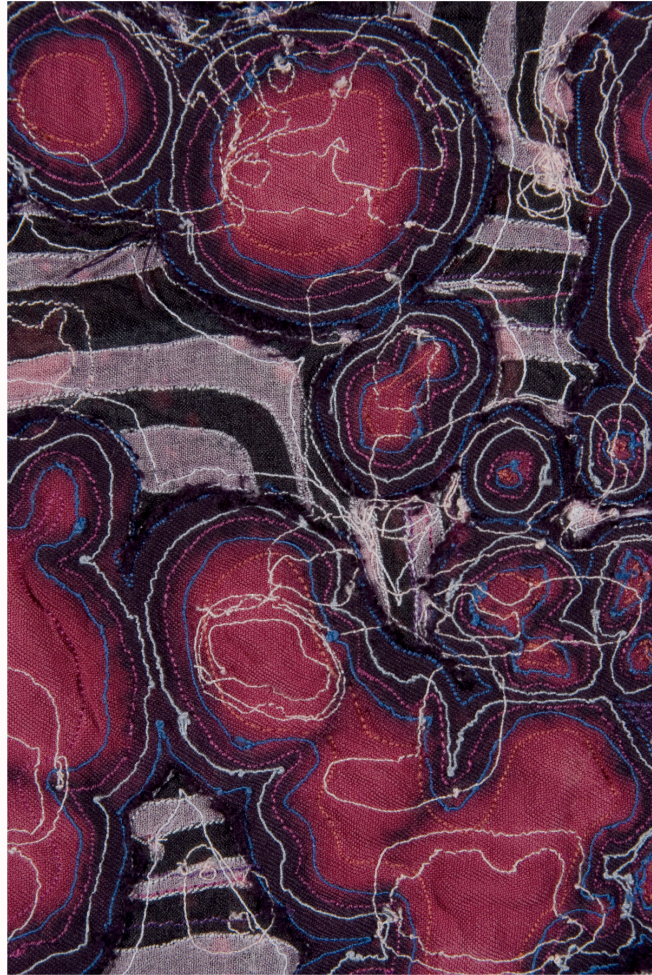
Karla Freiheit
Empowerment Cloth: Cells
(back view)



Karla Freiheit
Empowerment Cloth: Cells
(back view detail)



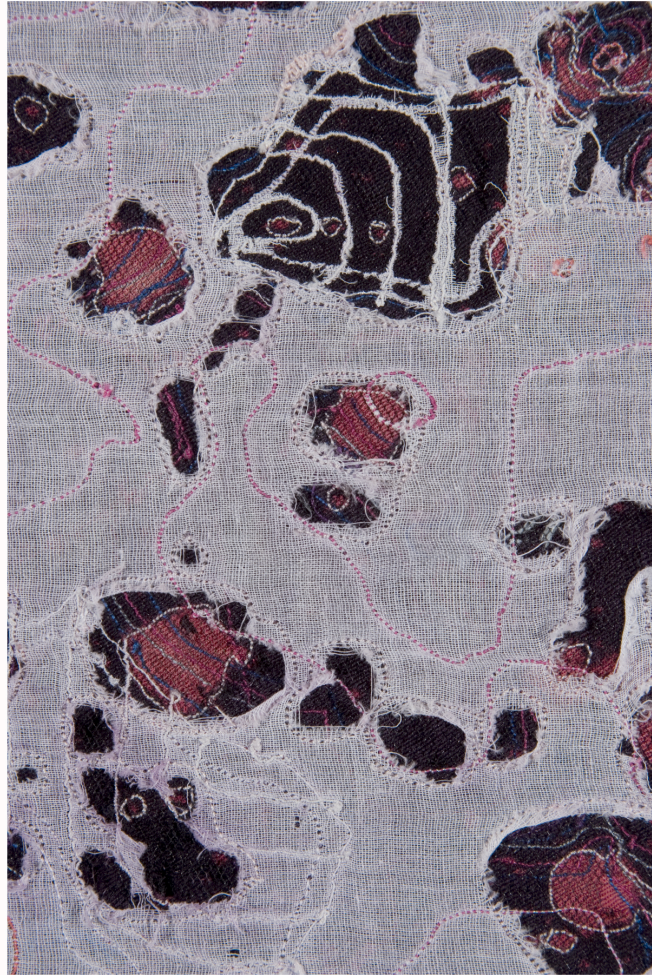
Karla Freiheit
Healing Cloth: Meander
(front view)



Karla Freiheit
Healing Cloth: Meander
(front view detail)



Karla Freiheit
Healing Cloth: Meander
(back view)



Karla Freiheit
Healing Cloth: Meander
(back view detail)



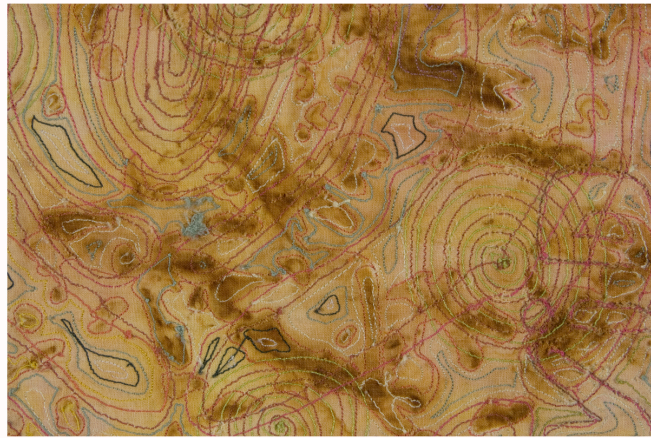
Karla Freiheit
Mindfulness Cloth: Here I Am
(front view)



Karla Freiheit
Mindfulness Cloth: Here I Am
(front view detail)



Karla Freiheit
Mindfulness Cloth: Here I Am
(back view)



Karla Freiheit
Mindfulness Cloth: Here I Am
(back view detail)



Karla Freiheit
Empowerment Cloth: Wabi-Sabi
(front view)



Karla Freiheit
Empowerment Cloth: Wabi-Sabi
(front view detail 2)



Karla Freiheit
Empowerment Cloth: Wabi-Sabi
(back view)



Karla Freiheit
Empowerment Cloth: Wabi-Sabi
(back view detail)

Abstract

Through layered cloth, devoré, bleach discharge, hand and machine embroidery, art textiles create this MFA thesis exhibition entitled *Artifacts of Experience* by Karla Freiheit. The layers of fabric hide and reveal information such as text, idiosyncratic mark-making, and recurring visual motifs. Cotton, silk, rayon, nylon and polyester are some of the materials that create expressions of the lived experiences of the maker. Sometimes these are emotional responses to daily living; sometimes the expressions function as cognitive therapy that serve to calm and focus the artist's mind. The work is intended to give the audience a break from routine where spaces for memory and mindfulness can be achieved. Viewing these ritual-like textiles allows for moments of empowerment, healing, and meditation. Collaboration with materials, techniques, and the development of relationships with people are inherent to the artistic process. Ultimately, the textiles are a celebration of life and the world around us.