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Touched with All the Radiance that a Sudden Sun Discloses

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Women Themselves Became the Commons

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
at Virginia Commonwealth University

by

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Abstract

Touched with All the Radiance that a Sudden Sun Discloses

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The thread running through my work is a constant impulse to rend and repair; to make, unmake, and remake. This repetitive and circular approach allows me to confront the cyclical nature of gendered oppression. What does it mean to make something beautiful and then to dismantle it? How do we reckon with the pieces that remain? By deconstructing the beautiful and lovingly crafted objects that I spend hours making, I recenter “craft” as a verb rather than a noun, forcing myself and my audience to resist the comforting illusion of certainty.

I contextualize my piecework and quilting in a long line of American women who have wielded needle and thread to speak truth to power. Informed by intersectional feminist studies and grounded in the historical tragedy of the witch hunts of the Middle Ages, my research plumbs the confluence of quiltmaking and language, both encoded and overt. I believe that textile crafts, as the media least reified by the fine art establishment, hold a potent ability to confront the capitalist, sexist, and colonialist assumptions propping up the false dichotomy between mind and body, between art and craft, between those who are permitted to speak and those who are silenced.

*As we go marching, marching, in the beauty of the day
A million darkened kitchens, a thousand mill lofts gray
Are touched with all the radiance that a sudden sun discloses
For the people hear us singing, bread and roses, bread and roses.¹*

¹James Oppenheim. "Bread and Roses." Poem originally published in *The American Magazine*, Dec 1911. verse 1

Introduction

“No matter how sturdy cloth seems, it is usually quite fragile. It is one organizing contradiction of textiles that the more they are cherished, the more they disintegrate.”²

This is a story of a loss of faith. Of a world going to pieces. Of longing. Of bodies and hands, of knowing and not knowing. Of rage and helplessness and hopelessness and hope. Of solidarity and strength. Of cutting things up and stitching them back together.

I was twelve years old when my aunt gifted me a copy of the *Mists of Avalon*, a King Arthur epic told from the perspective of the women. I read the 876 page tome in a matter of weeks, inhaling the history and fantasy and most of all, the strength of the multifaceted female characters. They were priestesses and queens, servants, sisters, and goddesses. The character I loved most was the Druid priestess Morgaine, most commonly known as the witch (and King Arthur’s sister) Morgan Le Fay. Though her story is long and tightly woven with instances of ritual magic, one scene in particular burned itself into my memory: Morgaine spends three days and nights fashioning a leather and velvet scabbard for Excalibur. She covers the opulent red velvet sheath with gold embroidery, stitched in the finest thread and infused with protective spells. I had never encountered such a thorough and reverent description of the act of making a textile object before, and it’s telling that it is this scene that has stayed with me most vividly all these years. But *The Mists of Avalon*’s influence on me extends far beyond the spark of fascination in the cult of goddess worship; reading this story was my very own postmodernist undoing. This novel fell into my hands at a time in adolescence when I was most unsure of myself, when I was looking to the world around me for answers and reassurance, but all I found were more questions and complications. Ironically given by my evangelical Christian aunt, this book completely unraveled my faith in religion and spirituality of all kinds, decimated my belief in a universal truth or sense

² Bryan-Wilson, Julia. *Fray*. University of Chicago Press, 2017. 274

of right and wrong, and awakened within me the insatiable need to question everything I was ever taught. I have never shaken this need; I doubt I ever will.

The thread running through my work is a constant impulse to rend and repair; to make, unmake, and remake. This repetitive and circular approach allows me to confront the cyclical nature of gendered oppression. Finding myself unable to stanch the flow of violence and injustice in the world around me, I turn inward and contemplate my own culpability. What does it mean to make something beautiful and then to dismantle it? How do we reckon with the pieces that remain? By deconstructing the beautiful and lovingly crafted objects that I spend hours making, I recenter “craft” as a verb rather than a noun, forcing myself and my audience to resist the comforting illusion of certainty. I find peace at the point of contradiction, of unknowing. When we accept that we don’t know, we can begin to rebuild this broken world.

*As we come marching, marching, we battle too, for men,
For they are in the struggle and together we shall win.
Our days shall not be sweated from birth until life closes,
Hearts starve as well as bodies, give us bread, but give us roses.³*

³ "Bread and Roses," verse 2

Backing



Quilt

Quilts are nothing special, really. Anyone can learn to quilt with relatively little investment of time or equipment. All that is really needed are scraps of fabric, a needle, thread, and a little patience. The process is associated with amateurs who shop at Joann's and Hobby Lobby, with stay-at-home moms and retirees, with older (and needless to say, "irrelevant") women. While the majority of quilts made today are driven by motivations other than necessity, such as memorializing loved ones, marking major life events, the development of technical skills, or pure creative enjoyment, the process evolved from the need to prolong life- the lives of textiles that were falling apart due to use, and human lives that needed to be sheltered from extreme cold or weapons. Some of the earliest examples of quilts come in the form of cloth armor worn by Arab soldiers in the Middle Ages.⁴ Despite the origins of quilting in the Middle East and Europe, the form took a distinct aesthetic turn during the colonization of North America, when fabric was in short supply and every scrap hoarded and used. As such, the patchwork quilt as we know it is claimed as a quintessential American art form.

Much like the formation of our country, quilts are inseparable from issues of race and class. Patching together a blanket arose from a place of deprivation, though like all art forms, quilting was eventually co-opted as a bourgeoisie pastime and marker of status. A robust and extraordinary African American quilting tradition arose on southern plantations; enslaved

⁴ Schnuppe von Gwinner. *The History of the Patchwork Quilt*. Schiffer Publishing Ltd., 1988. 12

African women who were originally forced to fix or complete the quilts needed by the colonizers' household came to create their own masterpieces, drawing on rich African piecework aesthetics and color stories, pushing the medium further than the tightly geometric motifs favored by white settlers. To this day, some of the most widely recognized quilts are descended from this tradition.

Quilts speak to us of comfort and care, of thrift and domestic economy, of home and matrimony and coming of age rituals (especially of hope chests), of transmission of traditions between generations. They are bound up in a worldview that assumes their maker will have progeny who will need quilts to mark momentous life events and who will ultimately inherit their mothers' trousseau. They circumscribe the bonds formed within nuclear families. Taken at face value, patchwork quilts can be considered incredibly normative, and as such are fertile sites for challenging normative stories about life.

It may be helpful at this juncture to return to basics. A quilt is a blanket or covering made of three layers of fabric stitched together, with the middle layer consisting of uniform batting, most often of wool or cotton, though any fibrous material will do. Quilts frequently feature pieced (or patchworked) top layers, but it is possible to have a quilt without a pieced top⁵ and it is also possible to find a pieced coverlet without the layers or quilting stitches. The layperson most often associates the term "quilt" with the patchworked top and so frequently confuses what a quilt actually is (layers stitched together) with the surface treatment of the top layer. Aside from the joy I feel while piecing and quilting and the overwhelming sensory experience of encountering a finished handmade quilt, one of the things I love most about quilts is this deep theoretical misunderstanding- the victory of the decorative over the structural. The need to patch small scraps of cloth into something that can keep oneself warm birthed an entire art form that continues to be lauded and co-opted by modernism to this day. The incessantly misguided efforts by white collectors, curators, and art institutions to co-opt Gee's Bend quilts as 'high' art, most strikingly critiqued by art historian Anna Chave,⁶ are proof of this trend. It is in the quilt that usefulness and aesthetic concerns are most inextricably combined and that the false dichotomy between surface and form, between craft and art, is most resoundingly refuted.

⁵ Called whole cloth quilts

⁶ Anna Chave. "Dis/Cover/ing the Quilts of Gee's Bend, Alabama." *The Journal of Modern Craft*, Volume 1 Issue 2, July 2008.

Craft

In Western culture, and particularly in the Western art history tradition, materials and technique have consistently been relegated to secondary importance in the hierarchy of art. *What* we make something out of or *how* we choose to make it, concerns based in material and the act of making, are assumed to be less relevant than what we *think* about before, during and after making. Simply put, the gatekeepers of art institutions and criticism still consider thinking with one's brain inherently superior to thinking with one's hands. This insidious preference for intellectualism runs deep within us, and is grounded in a colonialist, patriarchal way of confronting the world: that our mind or soul is separate from and elevated above our profligate bodies. But anyone who has ever stepped into a studio to begin a conversation with materials understands that there is more than one way of thinking and knowing. Materials have agency—they talk back to us and have much to teach us. A practice that centers craft and materials likewise centers the hands and bodies of the makers, the complex histories (and herstories) that envelop every object we make, and draws on haptic knowledge buried deep within each of us.

To trace the root cause of this prejudice in Western thought would require a deep dive into philosophy, beginning with Plato's theory of Forms and progressing through countless other scholars' *ouvres*, most notably Descartes' project to institute "an ontological divide between a purely mental and a purely physical domain"⁷ that took hold at the end of the Middle Ages and bolstered the rise of capitalism and its accompanying witch hunts. I will not attempt such a dive in this discrete thesis, as many others before me have done so at much greater length. But my work as a student of the crafts, of craft and material studies, of Craft, is haunted by the philosophical devaluation of my chosen approach to making. In particular, the art world's consistent and continued exclusion of craft work (and particularly textile crafts) from serious criticism is a problem that flows directly from the classist, racist, and sexist hierarchy placing the mind above the body. This hierarchy is reinforced by the prioritization of painting, sculpture, and performance, as these art practices are assumed to eschew purposes other than art for art's sake and are, not surprisingly, dominated by men. As art historian and curator Elissa Auther so beautifully summarizes in *String, Felt, Thread: the Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art*,

⁷ Silvia Federici. *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*. Autonomedia, 2014. 138

“...Two of the most consequential distinctions made between art and craft- the way artists are perceived as winning a battle with materials while craftspeople simply produce a pleasing surface effect- are themselves hierarchies of the masculine over the feminine... The deep-rooted association of the female with the physical, bodily realm in the history of Western thought further suggests the degree to which the second opposition-- that which associates art with the mind or the idea and craft with the body or materials- is also a gendered one. Significantly, all of these distinctions can be shown to be derived from the hierarchical relation between form and matter central to Western philosophy and the history of art.”⁸

Having spent nearly a decade living and working at Penland School of Craft, how could I not believe deeply in the value of working directly with materials? At Penland, I witnessed material exploration transform people's lives on a daily basis. In my own experience, after an undergraduate education in design that left me devoid of the desire to make anything for almost five years, it was through hand-welting a pair of leather shoes that I was once again delivered to my creative practice. But my allegiance to craft goes beyond sentimentality and rejects entirely the “craftivist” belief that making things by hand, slowly, can change the world. I have way too little faith to believe that anything can truly change the world, and it doesn’t help that capitalism’s infiltration of studio craft gradually turns most makers into commodity producers. Rather, I align myself with the ethos and methods of craft work as a political stance, as a way to challenge the “pillar of the scientific method: the ontology of detachment that validates the claims of objectivity and rationality.”⁹ As craft and sustainable development scholar Emilia Ferraro writes,

“... the craft model of knowing also restores the scholarly importance of the senses not only as objects worthy of scholarly attention, but more importantly as appropriate ways of knowing in their own right. Such an ontology and epistemology provide a powerful research methodology that helps restore the

⁸ Elissa Auther. *String, Felt, Thread: the Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art*. University of Minnesota Press, 2010. 63

⁹ Emilia Ferraro. “The Ecology of Life. Reflections on Craft, Biodiversity and Knowledge for Sustainable Development.” *Making Future* Conference, St. Andrews, Scotland, September 2011. Unpublished conference paper. University of St. Andrews, St. Andrews, 2011, Print. 7

fully sentient human being, and puts the subjective, the body, and the senses back to where they belong: at the core of the process of knowing. To the ontology of detachment of science, craft counteroffers an ontology of engagement...”¹⁰

If, as I believe it to be, the devaluation of craft practice is an inherently sexist and racist construct, what do I gain by identifying resolutely within the marginalized group? (In this case as a “craft artist” or “fiber artist”?) By so identifying, I continually challenge myself to engage with an anti-modernist way of thinking and knowing. I strive to decenter the gaze, the wall, the discrete and “purposeless” art object. I embrace multiplicity and destruction and by doing so attempt to embody a different way of being in the world. I align myself with the feminist artist and the artist of color and the queer artist and those who champion their difference rather than attempting to fit into the mold placed on us by the overwhelmingly white and male art institutions. Though I may not believe that craft can change the world, it remains as far as I can tell the most feminist and postcolonial way to approach the institutions of the fine art world.

“That field of art which is the least academic, the least fortified by authority, will be best fitted to prepare for constructive process. The fine arts have accumulated much dignity.

The crafts? They have had a long rest.”¹¹

As I write this thesis, the Oregon College of Art and Craft is in the process of closing its doors for good. The University of North Texas is holding its final classes in weaving and surface design as its textiles program is unceremoniously eliminated. My closest textile mentor’s graduate program in fiber arts was shut down many years ago. The list could go on. This is not a field with stable institutional support. Concurrently, the popularity of fiber and craft processes is widespread in VCU’s graduate program, as numerous painting, sculpture, photo, and visual communications graduates in my year are working in woodworking, ceramics, and fiber processes. Multiple students in these other departments have enrolled in craft courses, have utilized craft department facilities, and have sought independent studies with craft faculty. Yet

¹⁰ Ferraro, 9

¹¹ Anni Albers. “One Aspect of Art Work.” *Anni Albers: Selected Writings on Design*, by Anni Albers and Brenda Danilowitz. University Press of New England, 2000, pp. 25–28. 27

the majority of funding in VCU's School of the Arts does not flow to the Craft and Material Studies program, despite the anecdotal popularity of the field. Of course, craft work doesn't need academic institutional validation to survive or thrive. Textile craft traditions and knowledge will not evaporate without university endorsement. But when the people who practice these forms of making are continually and systematically excluded from conversations and resource allocation, hegemony is reinforced. It's a problem of power. Without teaching and learning what it takes to produce a bolt of cloth, for instance, those in power continue to devalue the work done historically by women and other marginalized populations. By devaluing this labor and knowledge, the lives of those that do this work worldwide are by extension drastically devalued.

Witch

I can hardly imagine a system that inherently devalues the bodies and livelihood of greater swaths of the human population than the toxic marriage of colonialism and capitalism. Capitalism may be an obvious scapegoat for the world's ills-- large and abstract enough to hold all the evils we wish to unload onto it and yet granular enough to affect every one of our lives on a minute level-- but my research, far from lending nuance to a complicated issue, has only entrenched my distrust and dismay in this obviously evil system. We may be told in grade school that capitalism is the superior economic structure that drives Western competition and "progress," but its original ties to deep inequality, white supremacy, and especially misogyny are less often expounded to those outside of academia. As I entered thesis year, my research largely focused on the period of primitive accumulation in Western Europe at the end of the Middle Ages, the subsequent conflation of women's bodies with natural resources under fledgling capitalism, and the resultant witch hunts spanning continents. Though this monumental shift in the social order occurred hundreds of years ago, the narrow gender roles and restrictions on female bodies remain salient today, as our culture is *still* obsessed with policing women's bodies and largely denies them full humanity except in their relationships to men and offspring.

The first act in the violent march towards a monetary economy was the wresting of the communal lands and fisheries from peasants' use by the bourgeoisie in the late 15th century in Europe. This theft destroyed women's previous systems of livelihood and social power, leading to a reification of their place as subordinate to white men. Prior to this economic turn in Europe,

women enjoyed less unequal status with men in both professional and domestic spheres and held significant bodily autonomy, choosing for themselves when and if to procreate. In the new capitalist system, however, the biological imperative to produce bountiful offspring (i.e. more and more workers for the state) prohibited abortion and led to strict divisions of labor along gendered lines.¹²

At the same time, the Cartesian dichotomy between mind and body took a newly vigorous hold on the popular imagination, fueled by capitalism's requirement for a self-disciplined workforce. As it turns out, humans are not predisposed to wage labor and naturally prefer leisure over industry when left to their own devices. As Silvia Federici reminds us in *Caliban and the Witch*, "capitalism... attempts to overcome our 'natural state' by breaking the barriers of nature and by lengthening the working day beyond the limits set by the sun, the seasonal cycles, and the body itself..."¹³ Indeed, in the attempt to create a workforce divorced from bodily autonomy and unproductive pleasure, the ruling class outlawed games, drinking, public baths, taverns, nakedness, and all forms of sexuality that could not result in offspring. Significantly, commoners, and most particularly "common women," were forbidden to swear and curse.¹⁴

The ancient belief in the female's mystical connection to the forces of nature was exacerbated at this time through superstition as the new paradigm centering rational thinking above all else took hold. It is not difficult to imagine how older women beyond their childbearing years were recast as pernicious witches with the power to call down misfortune on those who refused to offer the food, money, or shelter they were reduced to begging for. Ultimately, the "rationalization' of the natural world... passed through the destruction of the witch."¹⁵ Over the next several centuries, the witch hunt became the state's primary tool of enforcing the social order necessary for new capitalism's infinite appetite for productive labor. The fear and loathing of women, who came to represent embodied and alternative forms of knowledge, grew to massive proportions, swelling throughout medieval Europe and following the colonizers across the Atlantic Ocean.

¹² Federici, 97

¹³ Federici, 135

¹⁴ Federici, 137

¹⁵ Federici, Silvia. "Witch-Hunting, Past and Present, and the Fear of the Power of Women." *DOCUMENTA (13): 100 Notes - 100 Thoughts, No 96*. Germany, June 2012. 8

Those educated in America are surely familiar with the Salem Witch Trials of the Massachusetts colony, where more than 200 people, mostly women, were accused of signing their names in the devil's book, marking the largest witch hunt in US history. But this meager account pales in comparison to the hundreds of thousands of societal outcasts, primarily women, but also enslaved, indigenous, and queer people, who were captured, tortured, and murdered in Europe and colonial America at the end of the Middle Ages, often for no better reason than having uttered a displeasing word for the wrong ears to hear. Ironically, the fearsome witch casting nefarious spells was often nothing more than a female speaking against male authority.

The power of speech, particularly of women's and other oppressed people's voices, became a research obsession for me. As Jane Kamensky deftly puts in her essay "Female Speech and Other Demons,"

"Hectoring, threatening, scolding, muttering, mocking, cursing, railing, slandering; the list reads like a handbook of verbal etiquette for witches... To a society that was deeply concerned with governing the verbal exchanges that constituted and enforced social hierarchy, the witch's speech revealed the full destructive potential of the female voice."¹⁶

If women were to be brought under the control of proletariat men and by extension the state, they would need to be silenced. This silencing went hand in hand with the dismissal of alternative realms of knowledge such as folk medicines, herbal remedies, and midwifery, all ways of knowing that superseded an "objective" male worldview and instead centered the lived experiences of women. Though I have little interest in "magic" or witchcraft as it is portrayed in popular culture today, I am interested in drawing connections between the demonization of the body (with women as the gatekeepers of bodily concerns), the devaluation of alternative forms of knowledge, and craft as an under-appreciated discipline centering embodied experience and intimacy with the material world.

¹⁶ Kamensky, Jane. "Female Speech and Other Demons; Witchcraft and Wordcraft in Early New England." *Spellbound: Women and Witchcraft in America*, edited by Elizabeth Reis, SR Books, 2004, pp. 25–51. 27

Voice

“Textiles can offer a form of communication that, ironically, may go unnoticed precisely because of the “innocent” materials in which these messages are told... As record keepers these textiles reveal that attempts to stifle free speech in fact do little to suppress public outcry. Instead, artists seek alternative materials and metaphors such as thread and cloth to record injustice and violation, particularly against the female body.”¹⁷

Textile production and creation have historically afforded female-identifying folks the opportunity to gather, spin yarns, and patch together survival strategies, whether in the form of literal quilted maps to the Underground Railroad or metaphorical whisper net(work)s tracking sexual predators. Quilts, identified by Lucy Lippard in the 1970s as “the prime visual metaphor for women’s lives,”¹⁸ offer a rare opportunity to share disenfranchised stories in a format approved by the white supremacist patriarchy.

Postcolonial African author Yvonne Vera coined the term “domestic graphology” to describe textiles’ unique ability to communicate that which is too difficult to speak aloud. In her fiction, textile processes, like the rhythmic weaving of cloth, and objects, like a bassinet woven from thorns, are embedded with women’s experiences of violence and trauma. Graphology is the pseudoscientific study of handwriting, usually for the purpose of discerning details of an individual’s personality. Art historian and textile critic Jessica Hemmings defines domestic graphology as any process that engages the hand and reveals vital details about an individual’s experience, or as she puts it, “the voice of cloth.”¹⁹ The information embedded in a textile process might only be discernible to others who regularly engage in that same process, thus communicating truths hidden in plain view. One of my favorite short stories that illustrates this idea beautifully is *A Jury of Her Peers*, written by Susan Glaspell in 1917. The story centers around the murder of a farmer and the suspected guilt of his wife. In the course of the police

¹⁷ Jessica Hemmings. “Speaking When No One Else Can: Textiles and Censorship.” Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings, 2006. <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/331>. 285

¹⁸ Lippard, Lucy. “Up, Down, and Across: A New Frame for New Quilts.” *The Artist & the Quilt*, edited by Charlotte Robinson, Alfred A. Knopf, 1983, pp. 32-43.

¹⁹ Hemmings, 285

investigation, two women, wives of the local authorities, are left alone in the kitchen of the accused after being sarcastically tasked with “looking for evidence.” “But would the women know a clue if they did come upon it?” the sheriff muses aloud as he leaves the room.²⁰ Of course, the wives uncover evidence of domestic discord in the disarray of the kitchen, and most importantly in the irregular and frenetic stitching of a few log cabin blocks in the accused’s quilting basket. In this case, stitches themselves become the clues necessary to piecing together the story of an abusive marriage and a justifiably vengeful wife.

Fiberwork’s rich relationship to language and the written word can be traced all the way back through the etymology of the terms “textile” and “text,” which are both derived from the Latin verb “texere: to weave.” When contemplating textile work in conjunction with the written word, the tyranny of the embroidery sampler springs most readily to mind. Indeed, attaining the feminine ideals of submission, maternal nurturance, and quiet industry have been bound up with needlework for hundreds of years. But my particular interest lies in work that turns the needle against such ideals; textile craft that subverts, perverts, and resists the forces of oppression, both real and imagined.

For example, In Charles Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*, French taverness Madame Defarge sits behind the bar all day, silently knitting, pausing only to permit an endless string of Jacques into her back room for secret revolutionary meetings. As she knits, a seemingly innocent pastime, she encodes the names of those destined to meet the guillotine into her formidable cloth. I remember first reading *A Tale of Two Cities* in eighth grade, a full year before I’d be required by my high school English curriculum. Though she was clearly cast as a villain, I identified with Madame Defarge’s anger and desire for vengeance, and even as she frightened me, I secretly rooted for her triumph.

Leaping from fiction to the very real antebellum confederate capital of Richmond, Virginia, we see formerly enslaved abolitionist and spy for the Union Army Mary Bowser using her needlework skills to pass vital information to General Grant from her covert position as a house-slave in Robert E. Lee’s mansion. Assumed because of her gender and race to be illiterate,

²⁰ Susan Glaspell. 1876-1948, et al. *Her America : "A Jury of Her Peers" and Other Stories*. Iowa City : University of Iowa Press, 2010. 89

Mary spied on confederate planning meetings and then stitched the secret plans into the seams of a garment that was easily smuggled out of the house to her co-conspirators at the local seamstress' shop.

Perhaps the most striking example of a domestic graphology, though, comes in the form of the Underground Railroad Quilt Code, conveyed by Ozella McDaniel Williams to scholars Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond Dobard in 1998. Enslaved people in the antebellum south had a rich quilting tradition. Beyond necessity, their quilting served as an artistic outlet and ultimately a tool of resistance in the new world. The Underground Quilt Code consisted of ten to twelve quilt designs, each featuring a pattern conveying a specific message, that would be strategically displayed in the windows of enslaved peoples' quarters over the course of several weeks leading up to the planned day of departure, signifying to the enlightened that they should begin preparations for their difficult journey.²¹ Warnings, directions, and distances were encoded in the patterns through use of color and size of stitches, all of which would be read as nothing more than aesthetic choices by those not privy to the secret. The validity of this quilt code research is challenged by countless scholars, who object to its veracity on the basis that there are no written accounts of the code's use, and that it has been passed down through oral history. Truly, the Cartesian adherence to a particular form of disembodied, rational knowledge is alive and well even today, thriving in a postcolonial world. Whether the Quilt Code is based in reality or not seems to me to be of secondary importance to the questions of how history is documented and perpetuated, and ultimately whose voices get to be heard.

I feel it is important to point out here that there is nothing inherently feminist or revolutionary about fiberwork. For most of human history, knitting, quilting, and the like has both imprisoned women and been used in conservative propaganda to glorify war efforts. As Julia Bryan-Wilson writes, "textile handicrafts are inherently neither 'radical' nor 'conservative' but are often poised, in tension, somewhere in between."²² Likewise, we must avoid the claims that textile processes hold a mystical connection to the feminine spirit; as Judith Butler and Julia Kristeva remind us, "'women cannot even be said to exist...' to be a woman is to have become a woman, to compel

²¹ Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond G. Dobard. *Hidden in Plain View: a Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad*. Anchor Books, 2000. 177-183

²² Bryan-Wilson, 249

the body to conform to an historical idea of woman.”²³ It is through the needle that women have been compelled to conform, and so while an essentializing view must emphatically be rejected, fiber processes and objects remain intimately associated with the lived experiences of women.

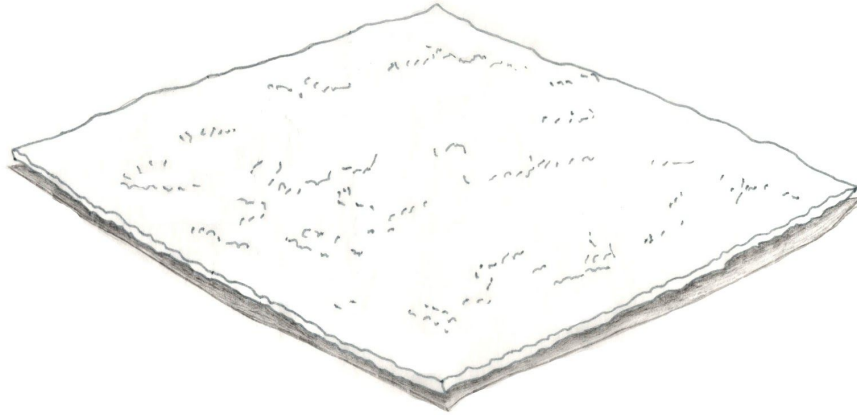
Given this history and my own intimate relationship to fibers processes passed down to me from the women in my family, I contextualize my art work in a long line of American women who have wielded needle and thread to speak truth to power.

²³ Julia Kristeva qtd. in Judith Butler. “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.” *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 4, 1988. 522, 529

*As we come marching, marching, un-numbered women dead
Go crying through our singing their ancient call for bread,
Small art and love and beauty their trudging spirits knew
Yes, it is bread we fight for, but we fight for roses, too.²⁴*

²⁴ "Bread and Roses," verse 3

Batting



Fall 2017

Returning to an academic program after ten years away from a formal institution required a recalibration; a heaping dose of humility and a forced vulnerability transformed my creative practice drastically within the first semester. True to form, I chose to start my research with a process I had never done before and which would push me out of my two-dimensional comfort zone: basketry. I began to approach personal and familial narratives, drawing on the disconnect I feel with my Catholic upbringing, relationships to women in my family that remain distant in spite of a longing to connect, and the sadness and disillusionment we experience as we grow up and lose loved ones.



Figure 1: Ed Rossbach, plaited cedar bark from Washington state with heat transfer drawing, waxed linen, rayon and rags, 1998

Drawing inspiration from the extensive experiments of Ed Rossbach, my basketry explorations eventually culminated in a hanging basket coated in beeswax and full of hundreds of candle wicks. During critique, I chose to activate the piece through performance by inviting my fellow grads to light the candles with me, but I found the audience participation fell flat, and ultimately, I was less interested in the live performance. Instead, I chose to document myself lighting the piece and allowing it to burn. The act of cremating *Pyre* awakened within me an interest in the destructive force, in particular my choice as an artist to destroy that which I have spent hours lovingly creating.

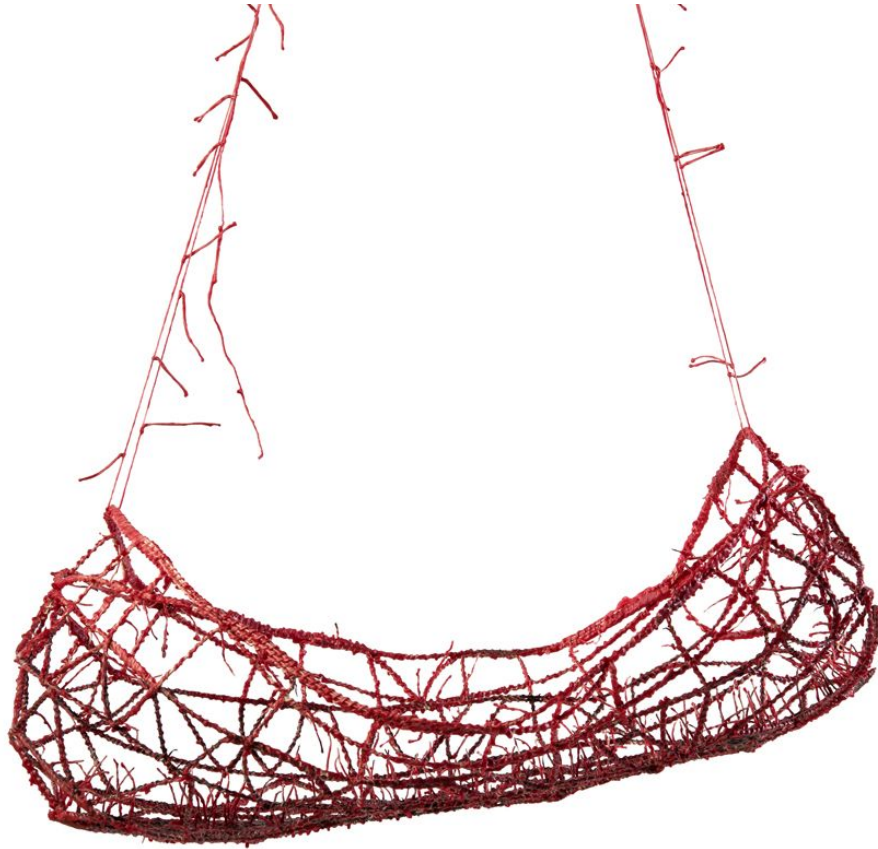


Figure 2: *Pyre*, reed, wax, cotton wick, 2017



Figure 3: *Pyre* in various states of conflagration, 2018

For my next piece, I returned to my first love: quilting. Textiles enjoy a close relationship to the body and to ideas of comfort and shelter. I began to wonder what would happen if I deliberately rendered a quilt discomfiting, and to ask myself how the work is activated differently on and off the wall. I also began to pay more attention to the inner layer, thinking of a quilt as a fully three dimensional object. Arguably the most functionally important layer, the quilt's batting provides warmth, loft, and texture, but usually remains neatly tucked away from sight and mind. My research turned to the Process Art and Fiber Art movements of the mid-century, particularly Robert Morris' cut felt pieces and Robert Ryman's rope sculptures. I realized that I identify most strongly with artists who allow the natural tendencies of their materials to dictate the final form of a piece, trusting in intuition and chance to complete the work.



Figure 4: Robert Morris, *Untitled (brown felt)*, 1973



Figure 5: *Discomfort Object*, recycled clothing and bedsheets, thread, dyed cotton batting, 2017



Figure 6: *Discomfort Object on chair*, recycled clothing and bedsheets, thread, dyed cotton batting, vintage rocking chair, 2017

I continued my explorations into familial relationships with *Don't Call Me Grandmother/Quilt for Grandmother*. The matriarch of my family was not a warm person and resented the grandmotherly moniker. Using the devoré burnout method, I dissolved the natural fibers of her shirt, while the hand stitched embroidery (rendered in synthetic thread) remained, a physical metaphor for loss and the way personal memories of loved ones must sustain us after they are gone. The accompanying thread piece begs the question of what a quilt made for a cold, disconnected family member might look like. My mother's mother was a demanding woman, with exacting standards, who certainly never made a quilt for her daughter or for me. By my mother's own account, I am so much like MaDot: an artist, a perfectionist, a difficult woman with a short temper. But I never really got to know her; indeed I was afraid of her for our entire relationship. And yet, of all the women in my family, she is the one I most long to have known. This piece is an elegy to her.



Figure 7: *Don't Call Me Grandmother*, grandmother's cotton shirt, polyester thread, 2017



Figure 8: *Quilt for Grandmother*, thread, 2017

Spring 2018

The first few weeks of spring saw a quick succession of material explorations, rapidly overtaken by a desire to incorporate political content into the work.

It is Bread We Fight for, but We Fight for Roses, Too, was directly inspired by the #MeToo movement. At times considered a symbol of solidarity and consciousness-raising, and at others denigrated as a throwaway gesture of performative allyship, the hashtag was cut repeatedly into the quilt, rendering a usually comforting object unusable through a cathartic act of destruction and anger.



Figure 9: *It is Bread We Fight for, but We Fight for Roses, Too*, bleached clothing, towels and bedsheets, hand-dyed cotton batting, thread, tinsel, 2018

Having read David Batchelor's *Chromophobia*, I was particularly struck by his theory that in western cultural traditions, excessive color "is made out to be the property of some 'foreign' body - usually the feminine, the oriental, the primitive, the infantile, the vulgar, the queer or the pathological."²⁵ Because confronting sexual oppression in a postcolonial world requires acknowledging the role race plays as well, it's my intention that the colorful batting stand in stark contrast to the problematic whitewashing of the outer layer, bursting forth and disrupting the field of whiteness. The piecework patterns I chose were inspired in no small part by African American quilt motifs, in particular the "four eyes" pattern as seen in Pecolia Warner's *Four Eyes Quilt*.²⁶

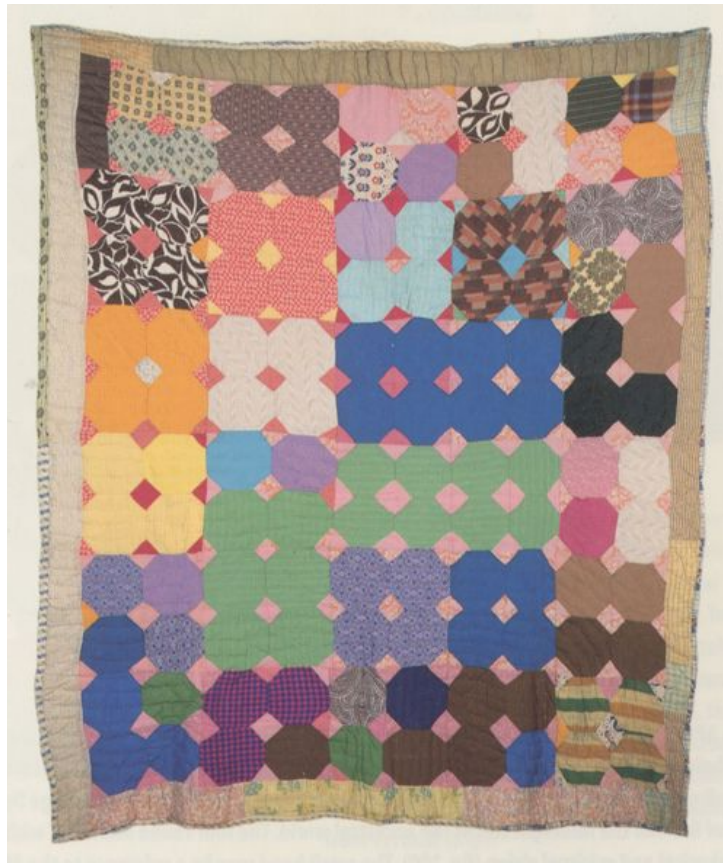


Figure 10: Pecolia Warner, *Four Eyes Quilt*, 1982

²⁵ David Batchelor. *Chromophobia*. Reaktion Books, 2009. 22

²⁶ Maude Southwell Wahlman. *Signs & Symbols: African Images in African American Quilts*. Tinwood Books, 2001. 99

To construct *Hearts Starve as Well as Bodies*, I first sewed the largest quilt top hanging farthest back. I then cut away everything except the seams, setting the removed fabric pieces aside to be stitched into the next quilt top, slightly smaller than the first. I repeated this process again and again until the pieces were so small I had to stitch them together by hand into a tender, heart-sized quilt. In the midst of the #MeToo movement, I find myself grappling with exhaustion and frustration at women's seemingly endless struggle for dignity and humanity. How many times must we tell the same stories before we are heard? How many times must we stitch ourselves back together after we have been torn apart? What is left of us after this endless scrapwork?



Figure 11: *Hearts Starve as Well as Bodies*, seams, thread, clothespins, 2018

Still, the collective solidarity of voices rising in protest through the ages nurtures a seed of hope. With my next piece I turned towards my interest in quilts as communication tools, as conveyors of secret messages. For *The Rising of the Women Means the Rising of Us All*, I created an

alphabet in quilt patterns and translated the lyrics of two protest songs into piecework designs. The top layer translates Beyoncé’s contemporary protest anthem, *Formation*, into organza piecework. The two layers of the quilt are held together by tinsel knots, (referencing the traditional string-tying method of quilting) at points of punctuation throughout both songs. The bottom layer of hand-dyed cotton batting spells out the words of the early 20th century poem, *Bread and Roses*, which was first set to music and sung at a textile factory workers’ strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts in 1912, celebrating the indefatigable nature of the female spirit over a centuries-long struggle.

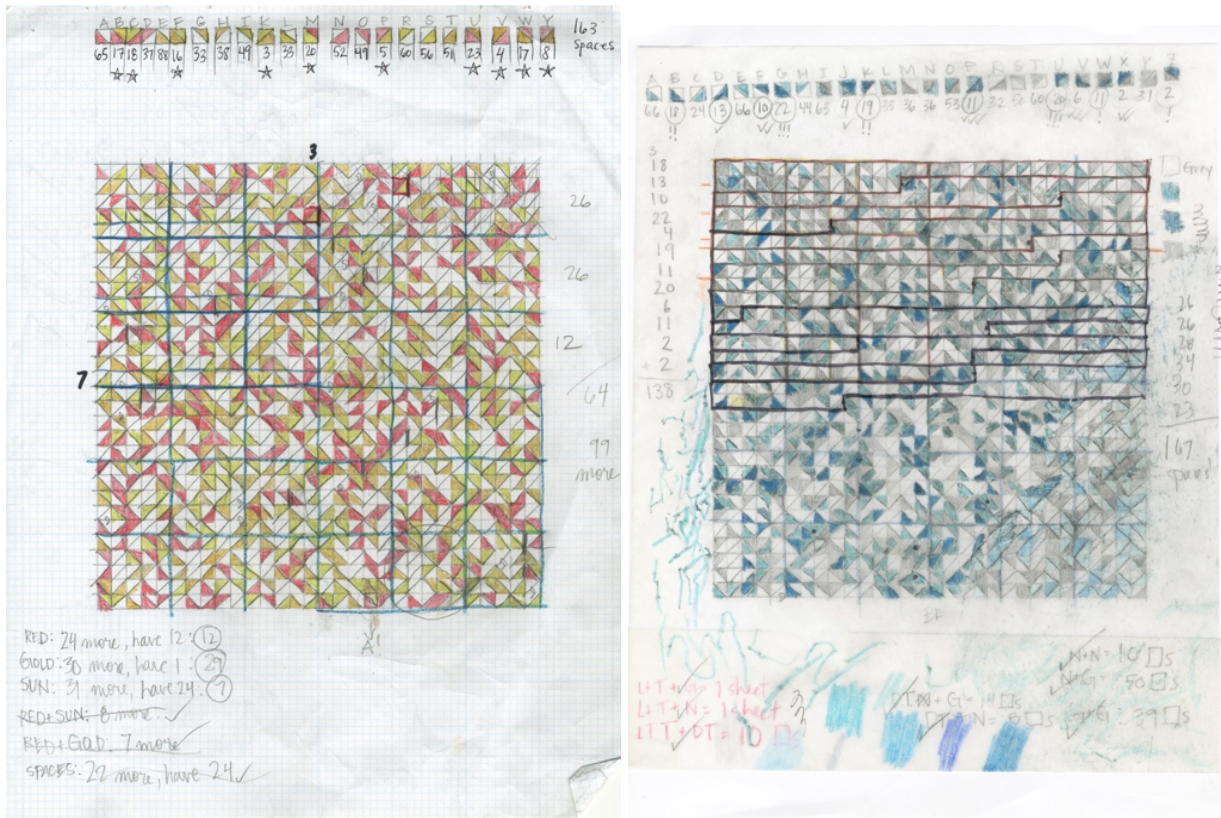


Figure 12: sketches of the quilt code

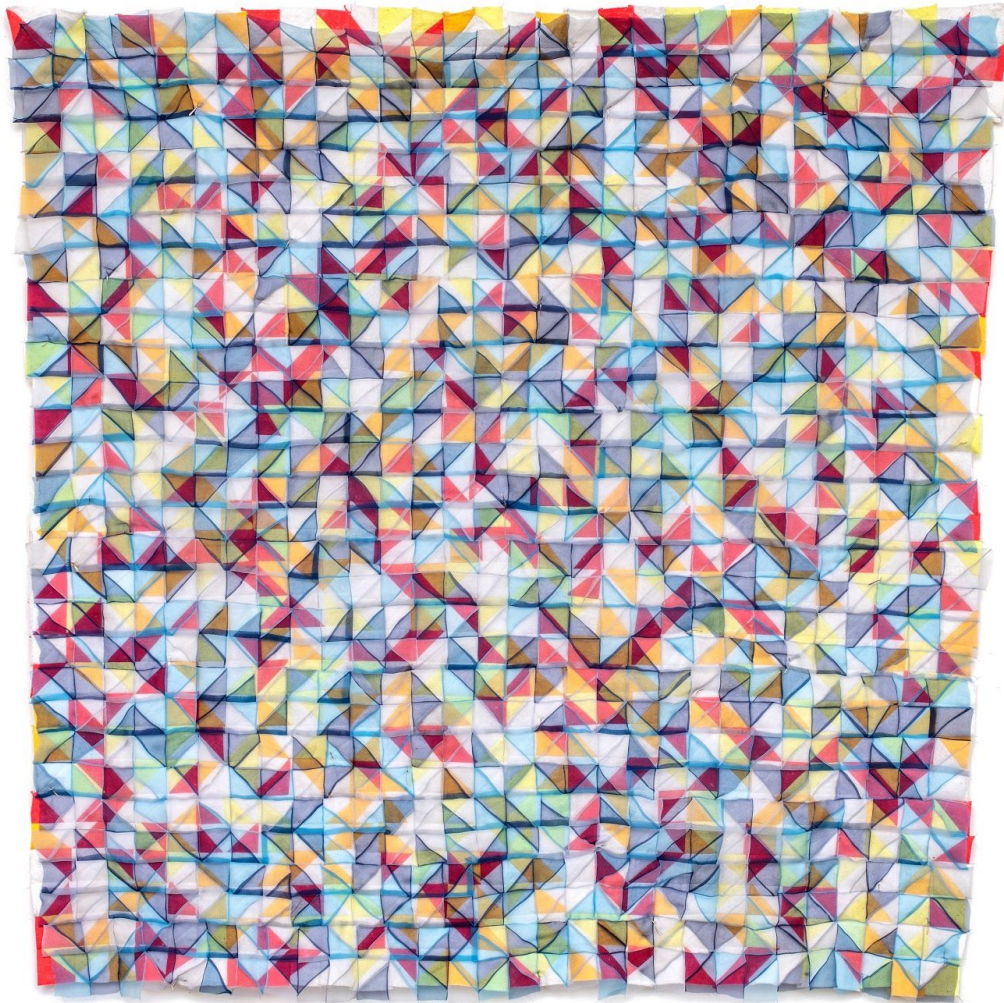


Figure 13: *The Rising of the Women Means the Rising of Us All*, hand-dyed cotton batting and silk organza, thread, tinsel, lyrics from protest anthem Bread and Roses and Beyoncé’s Formation translated into quilt patterns, 2018

Through my research into the history of protest songs, I learned that as early as the thirteenth century, “renegade clerics ... adapted Latin hymns in order to lampoon the Catholic Church.”²⁷ It seems that as long as there have been oppressive institutions, people have set words to music to inspire change. From Billie Holiday’s *Strange Fruits* to Beyoncé today, the protest song has been a constant companion to social justice movements and consciousness raising efforts.

²⁷ Dorian Lynskey. *33 Revolutions per Minute: a History of Protest Songs, from Billie Holiday to Green Day*. Ecco, 2011. 541

Fall 2018

As my time in grad school progressed, I became less interested in abstraction and more interested in overt statements made through text as a medium. This was likely brought on by a formative studio visit in which a visiting artist challenged me to point more directly to the problems I was addressing through my work. She asked me what I would gain if the textiles I made named the injustice and violence that women experience on a daily basis outright, rather than existing in the safe zone of abstraction.



Figure 14: *The Devil's Book/I Almost Forgot that my Experiences Don't Really Matter, Thanks for the Reminder*, silk, wool, feathers, 2018

The Devil's Book is an attempt to answer her question. I made this piece shortly after Christine Blasey Ford was forced, by the US Senate Judiciary Committee tasked with determining the fitness for office of Brett Kavanaugh, to relive her sexual assault at the hands of an entitled and violent teenager. Constructed from a quilting pattern named The Courthouse Steps, the piece is an album quilt²⁸ featuring the names and words of women who have been put on trial for living out of the norm, voicing opinions, or speaking openly about trauma, primarily in the United States. I used exclusively animal fibers: silk, wool, feathers, and hair, both taken and willingly given, ironically emphasizing the obsessive associations of femininity with bodily concerns. Inspired by the bold autobiographical and textual work of Tracey Emin's applied banners, I wanted to see how I might react to embedding my frustrations directly into the quilt through plain spoken language. In much the same way that Emin's work is either adamantly loved or loathed, I feel both attracted to and repulsed by this desperate and gauche attempt at voicing the depressingly mundane violence enacted on women in our culture.

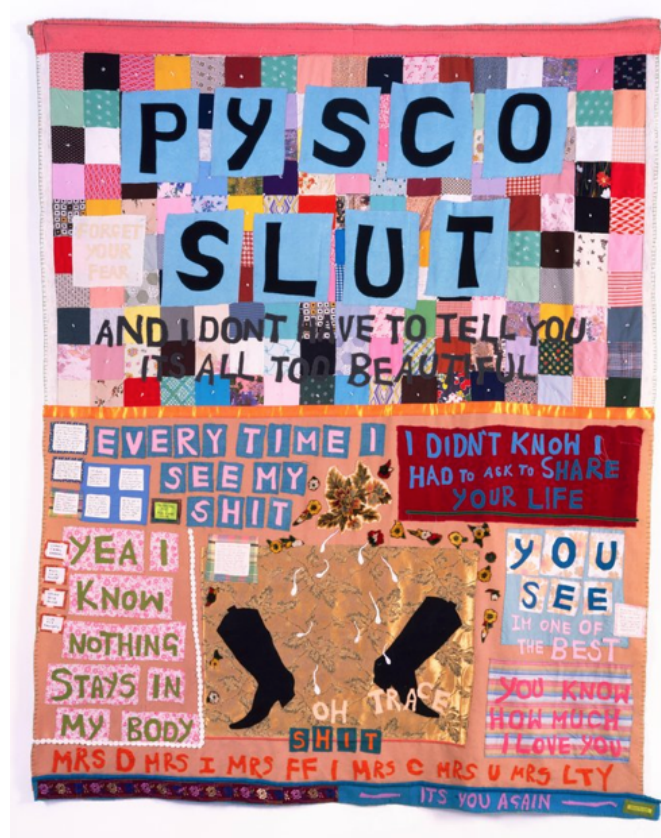


Figure 15: Tracey Emin, *Pysco Slut*, 1999

²⁸ An album quilt features quilt blocks that depict the names of a group of friends or imagery from a life story. Often, but not always, each quilt block is made by a different quilter, so the finished quilt acts as a friendship album, displaying the varied styles of each needleworker.

Responding even more directly to the travesty of the Kavanaugh hearings and the assaulter's eventual installment on the highest court in our land, *Indelible in the Hippocampus* incorporates text, specifically testimony, as an integral material. A field of methodical slices transforms a quilt into a tool of entrapment, simultaneously exposing the viscera of the quilt. The words of Dr. Blasey Ford's testimony during the Senate judiciary hearing²⁹ act as the literal quilting stitches holding the layers of fabric together. The yellow piecework motif, at once referencing targets, eyes, spider webs, and the nightmarish short story *The Yellow Wallpaper*³⁰, hints at the disbelief if not outright hostile reception women are met with when telling the truth about their lived experiences. The physical stretching and tension of the quilt-cum-net echoes the great lengths women go to to serve and comfort those around them, often at great neglect of their own wellbeing- a literal manifestation of stretching oneself thin. The slices and stretching also distort Dr. Blasey Ford's words, rendering them almost unreadable; though we know she spoke them, I am left wondering- did anyone really hear them?



Figure 16: Dr. Christine Blasey Ford testifying in front of the Senate Judiciary Committee

²⁹ To determine Brett Kavanaugh's suitability for the position of US Supreme Court Justice. He was found unobjectionable and is now a Supreme Court Justice.

³⁰ By Charlotte Perkins Gilman, published in 1892



Figure 17: *Indelible in the Hippocampus*, cloth, thread, testimony, 2018

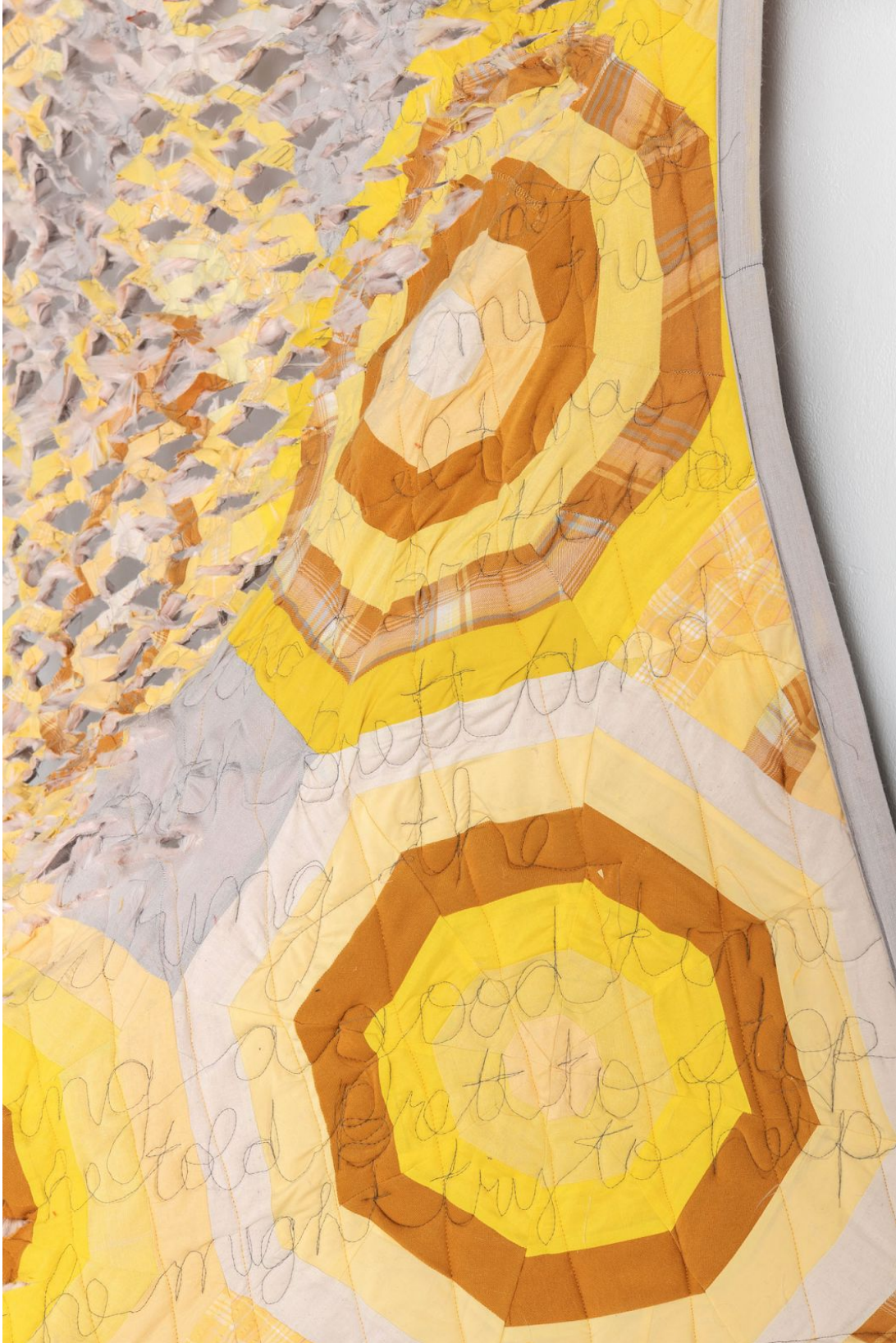


Figure 18: detail of *Indelible in the Hippocampus*, cloth, thread, testimony, 2018

*As we go marching, marching, we're standing proud and tall.
The rising of the women means the rising of us all.
No more the drudge and idler, ten that toil where one reposes,
But a sharing of life's glories, bread and roses, bread and roses.³¹*

³¹ "Bread and Roses," verse 4

Pieced Top



Throughout the two years in my graduate studio, the major driving forces in my practice have been to lure myself out of my comfort zone, to introduce elements of chance or the uncontrollable into my work, and to constantly push the form of a quilt further and further. I observed within myself a strong impulse to work more sculpturally, to be less wall-bound (as is the typical format of contemporary art quilts), and to flirt with audience participation. As I approached my thesis, fueled by years of reading angry feminist literature and cultural critiques, I knew I wanted the work to purposefully take up as much space as possible and to include an act of intentional dismantling. It has not been enough for me, the making of something large and beautiful... there has always been an urge to transform, deconstruct, or destroy that which I have just produced.

Drawing heavily on the research of Silvia Federici, a feminist scholar of witches and witch hunts, *Touched with All the Radiance that a Sudden Sun Discloses* took shape as an audience-participatory installation blurring the lines between human figure and landscape, critically examining our culturally sanctioned delusion that under capitalism, women's bodies, time, and emotional energy are *still* considered natural resources, available to all.

“Once women’s activities were defined as non-work, women’s labor began to appear as a natural resource, available to all, no less than the air we breathe or the water we drink.

This was for women a historic defeat. For in pre-capitalist Europe women's subordination to men had been tempered by the fact that they had access to the commons and other communal assets... In the new capitalist regime *women themselves became the commons.*"³²

This passage resonates with me fiercely. I think of it every time I am expected to organize a social gathering, to initiate the regular deep clean of my shared housing, to temper my emotional response or the timber of my voice, or to constantly and incessantly consider the well-being of others above my own. I think of it as my mother, happily retired from a decades-long career, agrees to care for her toddler grandson four days a week, without even the expectation of help from her husband, to the detriment of her own body. The labor women are expected to do is by now so embedded within our culture that most people don't even register it as work. And these are such benign examples, reflecting my privileged situation; many women worldwide feel the implications of their conflation with natural resources much more acutely than I.

³² Federici, 97



Figure 19: *Touched with All the Radiance that a Sudden Sun Discloses*, cloth, thread, batting, sweat, blood, hair, exhaustion, anger, despair, centuries of unacknowledged and undervalued labor, 2019

The visual rhythm of improvisational piecework has frequently reminded me of aerial agricultural landscapes. Or perhaps it is the other way around- the fleeting view of farmland from an airplane window; or more often the drone photographs populating my Instagram feed, have always hinted at textile designs and constructions- elaborate patchwork fields, resist-dyed mountaintops, ships scattered as colorful embellishments across indigo oceans.

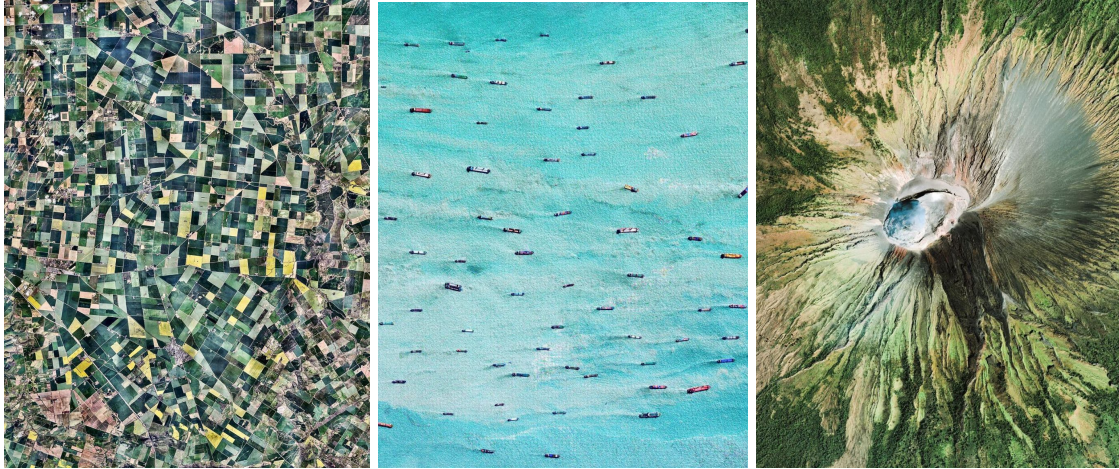


Figure 20: aerial photographs pulled from DailyOverview Instagram account

I chose to hand-dye the fabrics that I pieced into a landscape, both to achieve a wider range of specific colors and to maximize the amount of labor I put into the production of the room-sized quilt. Lifting, stirring, and rinsing yards and yards of hot wet fabric is a grueling physical undertaking- matched only by the manipulation of a dry but massively heavy, multi-layered quilt. I am invested in the difficulty of the making, in the time consuming, back-breaking labor that goes into the beautiful textile object that I then poignantly invite others to destroy. With the snip of each seam, hours of my labor are rendered pointless, futile, irrelevant.

I aim to instill a sense of irreverence in my work. I embrace a lack of preciousness and devotion to the art object. Nothing is sacred; everything is sacred. The quilt is laid on the ground, in a gesture echoing the “lowness” of Harmony Hammond’s *Floorpieces* and subversion of art world hierarchies.³³ But unlike Hammond’s pieces, which were intentionally placed on low pedestals to prevent being stepped on, I force my audience to walk on my piece by extending the quilt to all four corners of the gallery space. Because of the location of my gallery on the first floor of the Anderson, literally every visitor to the thesis exhibitions have been required to walk on my piece.

³³ Bryan-Wilson, 75



Figure 21: Harmony Hammond, *Floorpieces*, installation from 2007

To cover or to smother, to comfort or to suffocate; I hold a complicated view of women's historical relationship to string and cloth production. As one of the most ancient craft processes, we can never know for sure how fiberwork became so intertwined with the female sex, but scholars have theorized that women's biological role in reproduction and child-rearing made work that can be done around the hearth, with minimal safety hazards and maximal interruptibility, most desirable for the "second sex," at least in temperate climates.³⁴ To produce textiles for the home and family may be a sacred tradition and an enjoyable activity (I, myself am a nester and greatly enjoy domestic activities), but as Betty Friedan pointed out so poignantly decades ago³⁵, the relegation of women to reproductive concerns and the domestic sphere creates a suffocating prison. In my thesis installation, the massive land quilt drapes over the female forms, obscuring them from view and muffling their voices. My invitation to the

³⁴ Elizabeth Wayland Barber. *Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years*. W.W. Norton & Company, 1994. 33

³⁵ In *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963

audience to deconstruct the quilt is an invitation to free the figures, to discover who and what is actively being trapped.

But even as the audience cuts the layers of the quilt away, the women below remain shrouded by pieced cloth. As much as we may try to free the figures, to achieve a revelation of sorts, we are prevented from reaching any easy answers. Like Russian nesting dolls or a painting of someone holding a painting of themselves holding a painting of themselves... this move is towards infinity, towards futility, towards the endless recursion of patriarchal oppression. In her discussion of embroidery's relationship to feminist movements, Rozsika Parker tells of just such a cyclical notion:

“Change, however, is slow and uneven... Second Wave feminism, with its condemnation of the denial of female desire and critique of domestic relationships, repeated the insights of the earlier suffrage movement. Yet while similar issues are re-visited-- as I hope I have indicated in this brief introduction-- both feminism and embroidery continue to evolve, although tracing a pattern of progress which is less suggestive of a straight line than a spiral.”³⁶

³⁶ Rozsika Parker. “The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine.” *The Textile Reader*, edited by Jessica Hemmings, Berg, 2012, pp. 297–304. 303-304



Figure 22: Cast fabric figures placed under the landscape quilt in the final installation

Even though my feelings about the state of the world and women's place within it sit much more squarely within hopelessness than hopefulness, the impulse to remain in abject despair is always countered by a pull towards the thing with feathers³⁷. It seems that to tear it all down and scorch the earth as I go is too easy of an answer, too. The pieced quilt tops draping over the female figures feature quilt patterns that were used in the Underground Railroad quilt code: Log Cabin, Cross Roads, Bow Ties, Bear's Paw, Flying Geese, and Wedding Ring. The women are communing with one another, sharing a casual intimacy and a physical closeness that nods to the revitalizing effects of female friendship. I chose to cloak my figures in shades of blue as a reference to the wide open expanse of sky and to the color of the sacred feminine in Catholic imagery.³⁸ Encircling the patterned centers are encoded messages of hope and resistance, rendered in the same quilt code I developed in the making of *The Rising of the Women Means the Rising of Us All*. The language I chose are quotes from feminist theorists, authors, and

³⁷ A colloquial phrase for "hope." Taken from Emily Dickinson's poem "Hope Is the Thing With Feathers," believed to have been written in 1861 and posthumously published in 1891

³⁸ Victoria Finlay. *Color: a Natural History of the Palette*. New York : Ballantine Books, 2002.

artists. They remain hidden in plain view, visible only to those who take the time to excavate the key and decode the embedded messages.



Figure 23: Quilt code key embedded in batting layer of landscape quilt

By inviting the audience to deconstruct my work, I knew, intellectually, that I needed to be prepared for the outcome, whatever that may be. Still, it is one thing to theoretically understand that I would need to relinquish attachment to the final result and quite another to *feel* the effects of my voluntary surrender. As the artist, I felt naked and exposed as participants began cutting, slashing, rending; they behaved in ways I didn't anticipate, and the utter helplessness I felt through my abdication of control has been humbling. The audience cut into the cast figures themselves, a move I didn't expect was even possible given the durability of the glue-covered fabric in juxtaposition with the flimsiness of the snips provided. As the cuts in the shrouded figures accumulated, I felt an echo of the exhaustion and helplessness that crossed Yoko Ono's face as a man cuts her bra straps during her performance of *Cut Piece* at Carnegie Hall in 1965³⁹.



Figure 24: still from Maysles documentary of Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*, Carnegie Hall in NYC in 1965

³⁹ Maysles, Albert and David. "Yoko Ono Performing - Cut Piece." YouTube, published 20 Oct, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-yqhSZsXIJQ>.

Though I did not present my own clothing or body for excavation in my thesis, and the motivation driving my audience's cutting of the cast fabric forms is much less sinister than the move to undress Ono (I believe my audience's misunderstanding and curiosity were at play in the former, versus a leering objectification in the latter), I can't help but draw comparisons. The consideration and labor I invested in each pieceworked figure serves as a proxy for my physical presence, and I felt each cut quite deeply.

I am fascinated with my distressed reaction to the work's transformation. In a way, the piece fully embodies my worldview of finding peace even on the vanishing ground of certainty and control. Ultimately, I suspect the installation would have fallen flat if I was not forced to confront my own lack of answers, my own inability to manifest the neat and tidy image that germinated in my imagination. But I cannot pretend that I have approached the ongoing destruction with peaceful detachment; I am uneasy, tense, and just a little bit frightened to enter the Anderson each day and face the fresh cuts. Still, there is a comfort to the chaos of it all, and to the opportunity to rebuild in its wake.

"Our world goes to pieces, we have to rebuild our world... Out of the chaos of collapse, we can save the lasting."⁴⁰

Only when we accept that we don't know, we can begin to rebuild this broken world.

⁴⁰ Albers, 25



Figures 25 & 26: Deconstruction of *Touched with All the Radiance that a Sudden Sun Discloses*
in process

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