

**THESIS**

**UNWEARABLE WAR: A VISUAL EXPLORATION OF TRANSVERSAL POLITICS**

**Submitted by**

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**In partial fulfillment of the requirements**

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WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER OUR SUPERVISION BY SARA PIERCE ROCKWELL ROCKINGER ENTITLED UNWEARABLE WAR: A VISUAL EXPLORATION OF TRANSVERSAL POLITICS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING IN PART REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS.

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## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

### UNWEARABLE WAR: A VISUAL EXPLORATION OF TRANSVERSAL POLITICS

As a child of the 1960s, I was raised on melting-pot rhetoric and civil-rights activism. I took literally what leaders of the day were saying. “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country,” (John F. Kennedy, 1961); “I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed. ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal’,” (Martin Luther King, Jr. 1963). In addition, my life was infused with Mahatma Gandhi’s legacy of nonviolence through the parenting style and activism of my parents.

Much has changed since those idealistic times. Today I know that one nation’s salvation may be another’s destruction. The world is not “fair.” The color of your skin does matter. “All men” does not necessarily mean all human beings, or that all people are “all the same.” Yet I continue to hope for compassionate solutions to global dilemmas addressed not only by educated progressive thinkers, but also by multitudes of oppressed people around the world. For me, this hope is manifest in my art-making practice. It is my way of confronting injustice and encouraging empathy, attempting to see issues from multiple angles, and asking the question, “What does it feel like to be someone else?”

Such questions are at the heart of what is known as transversal politics, a democratic process of talking, in spite of differences, to bridge and resolve significant politicized conflicts. Transversal dialogue recognizes differences and does not strive to remove them, gloss over them, or ignore them. Nor does transversal dialogue accept differences as permanent and binding; through greater communication, transversal dialogue leaves open the possibility of redefining boundaries between individuals avoiding the assumption of either universal understanding or strictly drawn boundaries. Transversal politics is a creative examination of power structures and

relationships. It is not a top-down hierarchical approach, but a respectful and shifting dialogue rooted in the knowledge and experiences of all parties.

Combining my art practice with transversal politics allows me the potential to shift my own thinking with increasing awareness, to speak from that new point of view, and to be an advocate for human rights through the visual arts. Transversal politics affords me the support I need to create work that acts as a bridge between my experience and the experience of others. My work explores the boundary between “us” and “them.” Do we have common experiences? Do we share responsibility? Can basic human emotions bond us and close the gap of our differences? At what point do we come close to that? Do we ever? Would we benefit from this? These questions are seemingly endless to me, but the study of transversal politics supports me to keep questioning, and, as I learned years ago, to contribute what I can.

Textiles have an intrinsic association with home and family. I work with the commonality of thread and fabric to illicit a feeling of familiarity within my viewers. I often use clothing, such as a dress or suit jacket, as a universal form, albeit Westernized, to suggest to my Western audience that the global subjects I depict are in fact intimately connected to them, and that my more intimate subjects have global implications. Wondering what it is like to be someone else, I overlap sheer fabrics to suggest how experiences may overlap, visually challenging boundaries between individuals. My goal is to create a bridge for my viewer over which to cross into someone else’s experiences, a recreation of my own process of awareness and empathy.

Many hours pass in my studio, dyeing and painting fabrics, while I consider the circumstances of my subjects and how our lives do or do not overlap. I choose my materials carefully to add to the impact of my work, such as using nylon because it is an oil-based fabric, which offers a reference to the war in Iraq. Although I usually begin with an intentional plan, I do not force the dye process. I seek a balance between the nature of my materials—for example, the

flow of liquid dye—and my intended use for these materials. Leo Tolstoy wrote about art as an instrument of spiritual connection among people. I believe art is also a means of “communion” between the artist and the self, and artists and their materials.

As with the turning of a potter’s wheel, the sewing machine can conceal the artist’s presence or be manipulated to reveal her touch. Rigid and structured or fluid and experimental, for me the process of free-motion machine drawing feels always new and improvisational. In my work, the personality of the intentional mark made by needle and thread is meant to be as intimate as a signature. I seek to highlight the “artist’s touch” through the curve of a line, the tension on the thread, or the uneven stitch lengths created as I move the fabric freely under the needle.

As I begin to layer and stitch these fabrics, my human figures emerge. The images I create are of people often engulfed in emotion, and I strive to convey their emotion fully, connecting it intimately to my own experiences, or contrasting it with difference of circumstance. In my piece titled “Two Sided War” in Figure 1, I depict mothers on either side of a floor-length panel, one grieving the loss of her son killed while serving in the United States military, and the other, an Islamic mother with her young son present, grieving an unknown loss. When viewing this sheer panel, lines from one side mingle with their counterparts on the other side. A hand crosses over. The boy stands with both women. Conflicting loss is shared.

As seen in the above example, I leave many long thread ends hanging on the surface of my work to continue a line entirely free from my stitched drawing, suggesting on its own the movement of the figure or the natural curve of the body. These sensual, moving, and changing thread lines expose an important intersection, where the pure potential of my materials crosses paths with the imperfect reality of humanity. Raw materials suggest the potential for perfection by the hand of the artist, yet I do not strive to represent ideal humanity. Instead, I suggest human authenticity, individuality, and imperfection through irregularity of contour line, color, wash,

stain, and human feature. This intersection of materials and human experience supports my exploration of how people around the world might be connected through the imperfect commonality of being human, thus furthering empathetic communication through differences.

Creating this work has been a series of battles for me, oscillating between my personal voice and assimilated conventions, between my own expectations and the surprises inherent in my process, between fear and courage, and between the hope of justice and the silent sand into which I am tempted to stick my head. But in a democracy, one's voice is vital. With this work, I embark in hopes of countering my own silence and the silence of others. This work is intentionally uncomfortable. It bears witness for those, often far removed from myself, who carry more than their share of the burdens caused by the choices of others. This work challenges responsibilities and boundaries that separate "us" from "them" and replaces these divisions with an empathetic view and the potential for connection.

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Thank you all for your investment in me!

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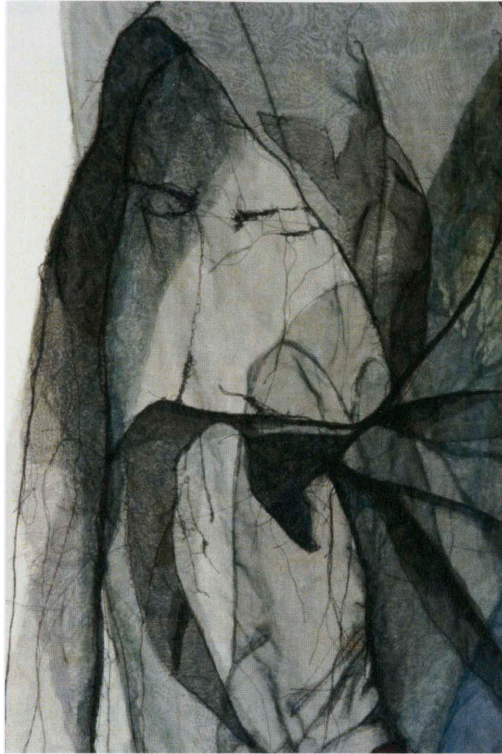


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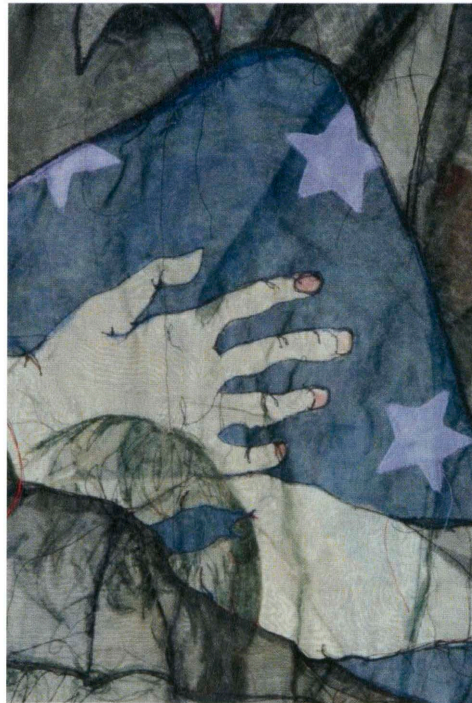


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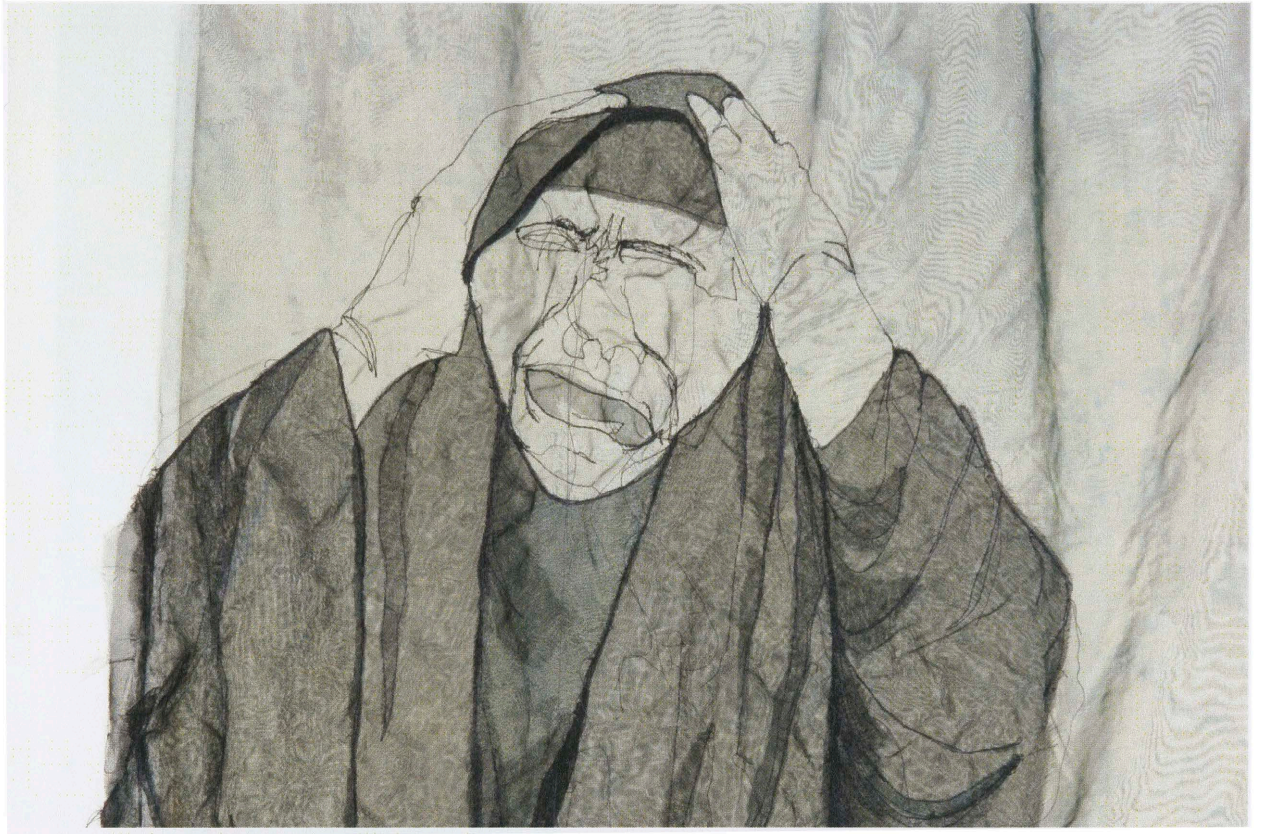


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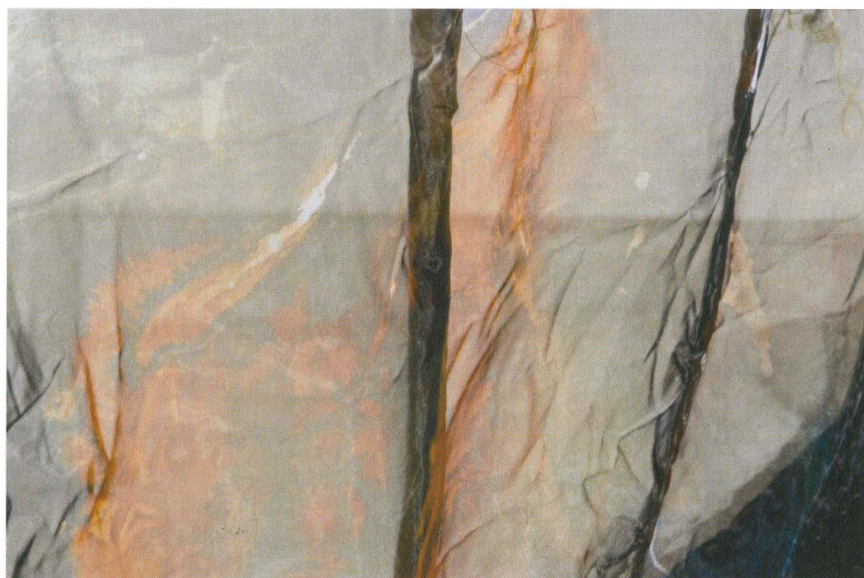


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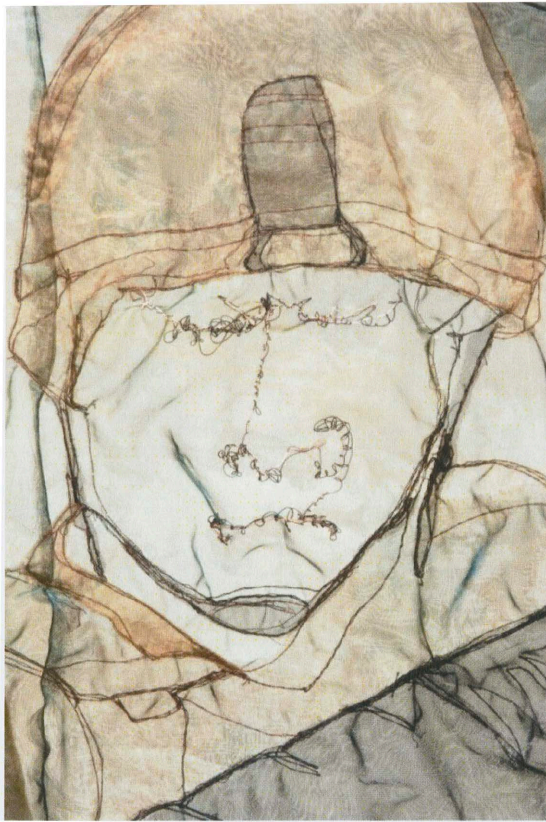


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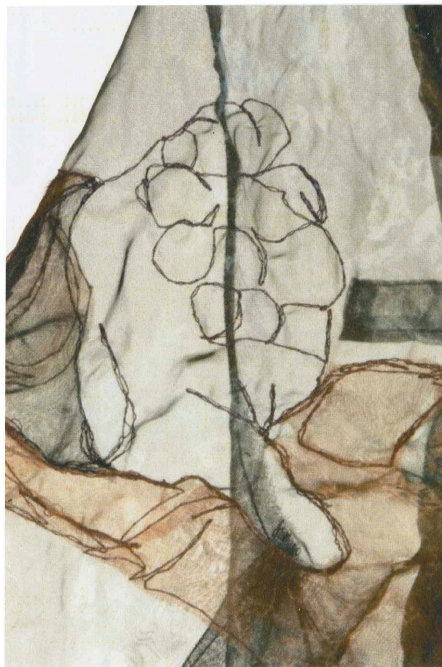


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