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I Need Tracey Emin Like I Need God

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- *Craft Histories, Textile Futures: emotional affectivity in quilt design.* Design and Emotion Conference, Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Turkey, 2004
- *Craft Histories, Textile Futures: emotional affectivity and design hybridity in quilt design.* Design Research Society, Futureground Conference, Monash University, Australia, 2005
- *I need Tracey Emin like I need god...* University College for the Creative Arts Conference, Sketch, London, 2005
- *Craft Histories, Textile Futures.* Design and Technology Association Conference, Sheffield Hallam University, 2005
- *Textile Texts.* Rhode Island School of Design, USA, 2006

An odd little website calls Tracey Emin “the original craft whore”...

*My father’s mother’s quilt was an ‘Ulster utility quilt’ – patched irregular bits from the Sunday dresses and working shirts of Alice, Lily and Eileen.
My mother threw it out after our dog had her pups on it...*

*Homer Simpson’s dog shredded the family quilt.
“Six generations, ruined!” screamed the Marge...¹*

*Witness Sarat Maharaj’s academic quilt “Half-on-wall, half-on-floor”,
simultaneously a “domestic commodity” and “conceptual device”...²*

Crafting and whoring might be more connected than we think. Both are, if not exclusively the employments of women, then at least conventionally ‘women’s work’. Both are, again in traditional terms, considered ‘lesser pursuits’. Both seek pecuniary reward. Both are materials driven (*flesh or fabric, sir?*)...

The White Cube’s website shows a photograph of a solemn woman working on the floor, pulling threads from fabric. On her knees, pushing fabric rather than flesh and hardly whorish, Tracey Emin nevertheless ‘craftily’ positions herself in notable

¹ *Bart’s Dog Gets an F. The Simpsons* (writer: Jon Vitti; Director: Jim Reardon) 2nd session, Ep.16, aired March 7, 1991.

² Maharaj, S. *Textile Art – Who are you?* in Jefferies, J. ed. (2004) Reinventing Textiles: Vol 2 – Gender & Identity. Brighton: Telos.

relation to late twentieth century separation of high 'art-thinking' and lowly 'craft-making'. In a 'white cuboid' conceptual arena, she shrewdly (even demurely) stages the hand-made hand-job. This woman's work, not least for cash, fundamentally conjoins creativity with 'making things'...

And cleverly, as soon as craft (with all its intermingled associations of the 'nicely made', the functional, the proper and appropriate, the domestic and utilitarian, the low, the decorative...) is established, Tracey (like my whelping dog) makes her glorious mess...

Emin memorably gave us the (so-called) whore's bed, and told us whom she'd slept with. No shy seamstress, she frequently operates the cult of celebrity and notoriety to her great (dis)advantage. But, for this punter, it is her appliquéd blankets that tell us the stories of that bed, and the love, sex, and death that gets sited there...

I do not expect (2002) is a bleak text on a blanket big enough to lie, love and die under. If textile quilts have a tradition and expectation of being handed female generation unto female generation, this is closer to Marge's "six generations, ruined"³ than to Lippard's assertion of the quilt as a "prime visual metaphor for women's lives, women's culture"⁴. The careful blanket stitching around its upper edges is a demarcation, a form of textile closure – the text's grim stoicism is about social determinism – life without issue, loneliness in the end, a fading out rather than a blaze of glory, a yearning for something more hopeful, something present in youth and gone in life. Pink and blue blankety fleece, hand stitched to make cosy layers, emblazoned with the overarching definitive text, breaks up into floral cloths cut out and pieced, scattered flower appliqué, scraps and fragments of thinking, hoping, wishing...and always, always in Emin's work, something unclear but about loving...

The formal composition of *I do not expect* is other to the obvious reference of the 'womanly work' of the more known of historical quilt-making. In that practice (as witnessed, for example, in the immigrant homesteads of 18th and 19th century US America), the making of textile coverings was indeed firstly a functional necessity, an essential usage of salvaged fabric, but one that developed quickly into a celebration of feminine hand-skill, value and virtue, and symbolic of household industry. Arguably, these Jacob's Ladder, Wedding Ring, Friendship and Album quilts' attributes are now mythologised by us in romantic attachment to a seemingly more stable, static, homely time, as imaged in, for example, Jocelyn Moorhouse's film *How to Make an American Quilt* (1995).

However, a closer reference is the utility quilt made by my paternal grandmother, Maggie Harper (née McCully). She – an impoverished hill farmer in deepest rural

³ *Bart's Dog Gets an F*. Op.Cit.

⁴ Lippard, L. *Up, Down and Across: A New Frame for New Quilts* in Robinson, C. ed. (1993) *The Artist and the Quilt*. New York: Knopf Press, p.18.

Ulster – epitomised the grinding abjection behind less romantic quilt-making. Her awkward patchings of misfit, ill-matched bits of cloth were made literally so “her family wouldn’t freeze...her heart wouldn’t break”⁵. Made, metaphorically, on her knees: her terrors – of infant death, of abject starvation, of land failure, of unwanted pregnancy, of moral dissolution, of life itself – were warded off by relentless sewing, as if the constant action of stabbing cloth would puncture harm, as if the talismanic use of family fabrics would outshine the ‘evil eye’. As Emin tells us, this is something much darker than decoration therapy.

And, keeping it dark, she shifts again: *Automatic Orgasm* (2001) is no less a blanket, a cover, a quilt...but the biblical and erotic invitation is to ‘come unto me’ (*Cum into me* whispers the whore). Evidence of sex, death, and a kind of transcendent masochistic pleasure shifts the gears of tradition ‘womanly virtuous’ sewing. Emin becomes Christ and Cross, ready for repeated puncture, and stabbing stitchery...

Colour is saturated, bloody maroon, deep and immersive, sublime and sexual. The command – come unto me – is urgent, passionate, irresistible. The feminine voice articulating as the Voice of God is breathy, inviting, generous... Many will come, slip under the blanket, feel something ‘so beautiful’ ... Again, the sewing is evident, the markings of hand-labouring, or care, of industry. Again, the almost-kitsch, almost-nostalgia of cut-out, sewn-on flowers. Again, that blankety, felty softness that comes of old fabrics, many times washed and dried, many times loved on, laughed over, stained and torn.

So, why do I love these works so much?

Sarat Maharaj notes the particular space inhabited by the textile quilt as it rests “half-on-wall, half-on-floor”, simultaneously a “domestic commodity” and “conceptual device” ...⁶ And that textile hybridity has been articulated in the quilt- or blanket-referencing works of Faith Ringgold, Jane Ray, Cuerto Benburry, Barbara Todd...as well as in the historical double-functions of African-American slave quilts and story quilts, and contemporary analogous fictions. Maharaj argues that the “allusive, narrative force”⁷ of the quilt is never quite liberated from just keeping warm in bed, by hearth and at home...

It is somehow the very homeliness of Tracey Emin’s blankets that I adore, more than their allusion to negotiations of the feminine in Western culture, more than their performance of the monstrous feminine, more than their impermanent textile challenge to the authority of the wall, and more than their obsessive repetition of texts and motifs. I love their radiant honesty, their frankly work-a-day feel, I love that they seem to be a show-and-tell of how Emin felt on the day she made each one.

⁵ Baker, J. *History of American Patchwork*. www.handmade.com.au

⁶ Maharaj, S. Op.Cit.

⁷ Maharaj, S. Ibid.

They are direct and somehow 'true', narrating a simple set of 'facts' of the moment in a particularly open and straightforward way. They have a kind of honour, an almost puritanical fervour, a verve and nerve.

Ardens sed vivens, said my grandmother, in relation to her God.

Sewing and loving, says I, in relation to mine.

Image details

Tracey Emin

I do not expect

2002

Appliqué blanket 264 x 185 cm.

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Photo credit: Stephen White

Courtesy Jay Jopling/White Cube (London)

Tracey Emin

Automatic Orgasm

2001

Appliqué blanket

103 9/16 x 84 1/4 in. (263 x 214 cm)

© the artist

Photo credit: Stephen White

Courtesy Jay Jopling/White Cube (London)