GENDER EQUITY IN MUSEUMS MOVEMENT

Opening Lecture

The Art of Becoming: Exploring Gender Equity Through Textile Art and Craft, with the SJSA

We've all seen them: *quilts*. Every-day, mundane objects meant to serve a function—a purpose. In our mind's eye we can trace the contours of the shapes, the unique patterns and kaleidoscopic colors. However, what we may not know is that each individual stitch and piece of fabric woven together represents a cultural transition; a change in function; a change in mindset—*a shift in consciousness*. The colors of the materials reverberate in these works, echoing stories of eras long past, and summoning up pain long since forgotten. The fabrics, the textures, the thread, indeed all of these materials, reflect centuries of non-idol hands—fingers possessing the most refined dexterity and vision to create. The detailed elements in each finely woven stitch bear open souls long since forgotten and even obscured.

More than just mundane objects, quilts have a great deal to tell us about women's lives and daily activities. Legally and socially discouraged from participating in the public—masculine—arenas of politics, education and trade, women during the nineteenth century were confined to the activities of the home—a singularly female domain. For women, quilts became a medium for expression, exceeding their original commonplace function**.** Where their thoughts on politics and social reforms were not openly accepted, women used quilts to give voice and agency to their shifting roles within society and in the home. Women who gathered in sewing circles and parlor craft communities were able to control, and indeed, infuse meaning into their circumscribed lives through their collective creativity in cloth. As historian Elaine Hedges put it: "their needles became their pens," and their cloth—paper[1]. It is through this expanded view of the documented experience that quilts were not just artifacts of the home, but rather, historical records: first-hand accounts of personal experiences set within a given framework of social and political circumstances. Because, while not all women of the nineteenth century were taught to read and write, they were however, nearly all taught to sew[2].

Prior to large-scale industrialization, both female and male productivity in and around the home impacted the success or failure of the home and its ability to sustain a family.[3] Thus women experienced direct gains for their efforts and were equal partners within the agricultural family unit. All members of the family—including children—contributed to the work product of the home. Sewing, weaving, darning socks, making clothes, blankets,

[1] Ferrero, Hedges, and Silber, Hearts and Hands, p. 11
[2] Ferrero, Hedges, and Silber, Hearts and Hands, p. 11, and 16-21
[3] (Woloch 2000, 120); (Schneider 1993, 151)

and other household textiles were a major part of the household productive economy[4]. When the productive economy shifted outside of the home and into urban centers that focused on factory-work, women were largely excluded from the new sources of compensation, and thus their work was devalued in a social system that increasingly regarded monetary payment as a measure of individual worth.[5]

Quilts recorded women's responses to the social, political, and economic environments in which they lived. Abolition, Civil war, temperance, suffrage. Women pooled their thoughts, their tears, their attitudes, and their participation in tense, politically charged themes, and bonded them into their quilts. Where women could not themselves participate in the public sphere, quilts surreptitiously moved outside the domestic realm and into a kind of political commentary. According to Hedges,

> […] women used their quilts and other textile products to help create for themselves a new, more public role. From their church and missionary work through their participation in Civil War relief to their work in such major reform movements as abolition and temperance, women used their sewing and quilting skills to assert their agency in the world outside of the home, to claim and secure for themselves more public and political space.[6]

However, this kind of political work often only existed within the confines of white American womanhood, and socio-economically-advantaged womanhood at that. Following the Industrial Revolution, the leisure class dominated the activity of sewing. Black, brown, Native American, and immigrant women—while they did sew—they were all largely excluded from these spaces articulating a new form of American womanhood and political participation.

Flash forward to our own time, and this tradition of using textiles as a form of political activism and self-expression is alive and well.

The Social Justice Sewing Academy (SJSA) and founder, Sara Trail, are no strangers to difficult issues. Founded in 2017 following the murder of Trayvon Martin, the SJSA was created as a youth-driven, educational organization bridging textile arts with activism, advocating for social justice. Their quilters and crafting artists attack hard-hitting and challenging subjects. Subjects that are not only incredibly difficult topics to discuss, but also to visualize—*to look at*. These subjects include war, gender discrimination, sexual assault, mass incarceration, gentrification, rape, police brutality, gang violence, and so much more. The quilts and banners designed by Sara and her crew of Artivists, focus on the victims of these violent acts. Their names, identities, and the fatal circumstances surrounding their deaths are sewn by volunteer 'artivists' and set into cloth.

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[4] (Ferrero, Hedges, and Silber, Hearts and Hands, p. 21)
[5] (Bock 2003, 9-10); (Woloch 2000, 87)
[6] (Ferrero, Hedges, and Silber, Hearts and Hands, p. 11.)

Pooled together online, under the hashtag #sew4justice, the quilts and banners are an exhibition of scale—representing the sheer volume of lives lost to violence in the United States—a virtual graveyard that spans over 1,000 posts. It's overwhelming. The SJSA doesn't just list the seemingly enumerable and violent injustices enacted against these bodies—the SJSA denounces these acts in visual form and context. They put into physical imagery through textiles what words often lack in storytelling: a visual vernacular for loss, rage, pain, joy, beauty, and above all—and even in spite of it all—*pride*.

To quote Sara, looking at these quilts, "[…] means understanding the life beyond the name, the circumstances of their death, and working to create art that informs others." Sara says, this work "means [we have to] sit with [our] own discomfort and "hold the victim close"—memorializing both the beauty that was the individual's life, but also the great injustice that took them from us and this world far too soon.

So, with that, let's get Started.

Panelists will have about 4 minutes to answer each of the following questions:

1. One of the challenges that artists face is how to express the multiple and overlapping aspects of their identities and experiences in their work. How do you navigate this complexity when you begin a new project? What are some of the questions or themes that guide your creative process? We would love to see some examples of your work that illustrate your answers, so please feel free to share your screen and show us some of these images.
2. The quilts that you create are not merely decorative objects, but powerful expressions of your personal and collective histories. How do you decide what images to include in your quilts, and what do they reveal about your identity and experience? How do you balance your own voice and vision as an artist with the voices and visions of those you represent or honor in your quilts? How do you navigate the complex and sometimes conflicting aspects of your identity, such as race, gender, class, religion, or nationality, in your artistic choices?
3. As we discussed, quilting and sewing have a long and rich history that reflects the social and cultural changes of different times and places, tell us a bit about your personal

experience in the modern sewing guild. What are some of the challenges you are up against? How has the modern quilting community responded to your mission and work?

4. Following up on my previous inquiry, I wonder how the art world has responded to your creations. How can museums foster more diversity and spark deeper conversations about these topics? I would like to hear your thoughts on collaboration and the role of our institutions in raising awareness and advancing positive change.
5. Textiles holding memory—the stories they tell. Why this medium?
6. How has gender equity, diversity, and inclusion evolved in your art practice over the years? What advancements (if any) have you witnessed in the art field? What draws you to this particular theme over, say, gun violence, or the other topics covered by SJSA artivists?
7. And for our final question, before opening it up to our audience: what do you foresee for your art practice in the next 10 years? Talk to us about the roles you hope to take on, topics you want to tackle, and groups you want to engage with, in this time. What do you hope to achieve?

Q & A

Now we'd like to open the program up to you, our attendees, and have you ask our panelists some questions!

Closing

I very much want to thank everyone for your participation in this evening's GEMM Circle, and I especially want to thank Sara, Stacy, Dyese, and Jocelyn, for working with us on this project and for sharing their expertise and insights with us.

Both GEMM and the SJSA believes that leadership is not a privilege of the few, but rather, a potential of the many. You don't need to be in a position of power to take up space and control the conversation. Start from where you are. Sometimes all you need is just a needle and thread.

THANK YOU for being here!