

1) Title: “Women’s Work”: The Embroidered Patch as Cultural Self-Portraiture

2) Abstract:

The purpose of my project is to create a series of large-scale embroidered patches like those found on items of clothing. I am interested in investigating the embroidered patch’s involvement in the dissemination of ideals and beliefs, specifically tied to femininity. Due to the patch’s association with clothing, my work will focus on issues of everyday life filtered through the lens of women’s interaction with clothing. Pieces may range from depictions of the mundane to the intensely intimate. By presenting aspects of both the public and private self, the work will explore how women’s self-expression affects discussions surrounding issues such as reproductive rights, occupational opportunity, and sexuality. This exploration will highlight how the embroidered patch paints a self portrait not only of its wearer, but of broader society as well.

3) Description:

This project will utilize fiber art and installation to examine experiences of femininity within American culture. Each piece will break from the traditional rectangle form associated with fiber works such as quilts or tapestry. Fabric will be recycled from worn clothing to further this connection to the everyday. To create new textiles, I will create screen print designs I feel fit individual pieces. Larger pieces will be constructed using techniques of applique and embroidery. The exhibition space will be staged as if each piece is a patch on a jean jacket to create a sense of unity. I am interested in exploring how we read collections of

objects as both self-portraits and cultural portraits. In this case, the collection will be a series of large-scale patches depicting a collection women's experiences.

The significance of fiber art as a feminist tool lies in how it came to be coined "women's work." In a study on domestic art, Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock note that up until the Renaissance, "most of the professional needleworkers were men, and there were no rigid divisions 'between art made with paint or stone and art media made with thread or fabric'" (19, Torsney). It wasn't until women found opportunities in the embroidery market, corresponding with an exodus of male workers, that needlework came to be recognized as "women's work." The "frivolous" activity of embroidery was then viewed as a method to keep women busy at home, outside the public sphere. Yet, many did not recognize the subtle subversive nature of these fiber works. Deprived of decision-making opportunities, patchwork and embroidery was a way to exercise control. Thus, there is feminist interest in embroidery for its ties to a perceived form of suppression met by creative female resistance.

For these women, fiber art was an assertion of their identity. Using the metaphor of a patchwork quilt, Robin Morgan's poem *Piercing* draws parallels between the creation of a quilt to the creation of an assembled self, restoring a sense of power and authority to the creator of the quilt (39, Torsney). Each quilt was, in a sense, a self-portrait, indicated by a favorite stitch, pattern, or even a signature. Aside from solitary creation, there were friendship quilts which were created communally, serving as a communal self-portrait. Thus, there is value in reading needlework creations as visual texts of identity.

In the 60s and 70s, fiber art and craft reached a new level of visibility in the broader social context. This was due to a cross-section of trends, such as Hippie fashion, a renewed interest in folk art, and “the feminist recuperation of craft traditions” to name a few (25, Auther). Shifting away from their functional use of extending a garment’s lifespan, patches became a purely aesthetic choice. In a way, the patches on clothing became akin to a fragmented quilt of self-expression that could be presented to the broader public. These patches often referenced certain political beliefs and ideologies as well. Therefore, they acted as both self and cultural portraits.

Beyond this history of fiber use as self-expression, there is also the long-held debate over the distinction between art and craft. In his *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, Immanuel Kant divides art and craft along the lines of purpose. To him, art is characterized by its independence from a particular use. Craft, however, is inseparable from, “its utility and cannot be appreciated aesthetically apart from it” (xvi, Auther). Art historian, Terry Smith, makes an additional distinction that the purpose of art is to communicate something of significance. His approach to the divide includes two additional categorical differences regarding material relationship and composition. Concerning materials, he explains that “for artists they are a vehicle; for craftspeople they are sacred” (xviii, Auther). In craft, composition is regarded as something that is primarily a surface effect, while art compositions are “images won out of the medium or against it.”

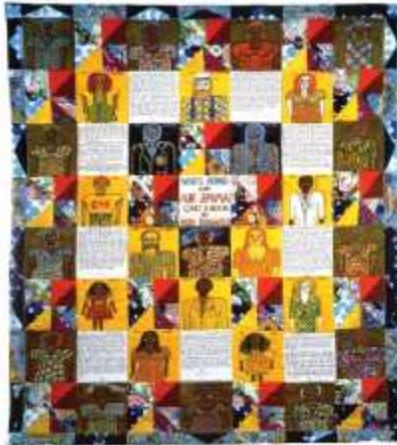
To address fiber's specific role in this divide, there were three movements: the fiber art movement, the process or post minimalist art movement, and the feminist art movement. The fiber art movement was concerned with liberating the material from its craft associations. Artists within the process or post minimalist movement were attracted to fiber as a medium precisely because of its "non-art" qualities. Feminist artists were drawn to the medium because of its associations with craft and femininity. They used these associations to expose the way the art world used the classification of "craft" to either marginalize or dismiss female artists. Work within this category serves to both question the aesthetic boundaries set within the art world and to critique many aspects of everyday life. This thesis falls within the category of a feminist approach to fiber art.

4) Previous Work:

Faith Ringgold is a painter, mixed media sculptor, and performance artist. For Ringgold, part of what it meant to make "women's art" was to work in a way that was "free from the restrictive conventions and attitudes of the mainstream art world" (100, Auther). That meant finding inspiration in places where the artists weren't taking cues from a "male, white mainstream" definition of art. She regards the women who quilted as the "original artists" because they were making art without associating with the art world. In the 1980s, she began to create her "Story Quilts" in which she paints and quilts fabric. These quilts sometimes included text, such as her 1983 piece *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?* (figure 1). In this piece, she rewrites the story of Aunt Jemima, therefore granting her new agency and voice within the culture. This mirrors Ringgold's larger goal of

bringing awareness to the fact that African American women artists were being denied access to exhibit their work. By combining paint with quilting techniques, she poses this traditional form within the framework of high art while maintaining connections to the women she drew inspiration from.

Figure 1. *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?*, 1983, acrylic on canvas, dyed, painted, and pieced fabric, 90 x 80 in.



Shifting the focus to embroidery, Ghada Amer creates ironic, mixed media pieces that depict pornographic scenes. Through the delicate thread, she turns these objectifying scenes into those that are tender and intimate. For example, in her 2008 piece *The Fortune Teller* (Figure 2), the layers of acrylic and embroidery jumble together to partially obscure images that, in their typical context, would be presented bluntly. The piece, like many of her other works, thus has an intimate yet erotic feel. Another piece, *Snow White Without the Dwarves* (Figure 3), depicts an embroidered Snow White with women touching themselves in the background. The imagery in conjunction with the title highlight her overarching goal to depict women as free in their sexuality in the absence of the

male gaze. Like many other feminist fiber artists, she chooses to embroider these works to invoke femininity and the social history associated with fiber art.

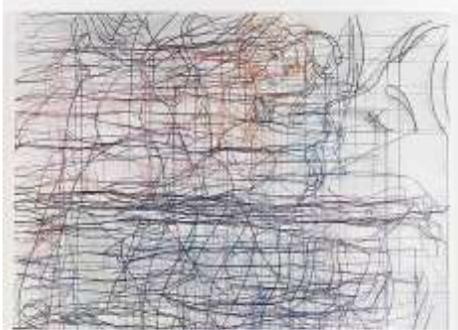


Figure 2. *The Fortune Teller*, 2008, acrylic, embroidery, and gel medium on canvas, 50 x 60 in



Figure 3. *Snow White Without the Dwarves*, 2009, acrylic, embroidery, and gel medium on canvas, 126 x 150.5 in

Sophia Narrett's use of embroidery is similar to Amer's in that the imagery is often erotic in nature. Narrett's work, however, is smaller and breaks away from the rectangle. In doing so, her wall pieces become highly sculptural. Narrett's work examines adult sexuality and how pop culture influences what we deem as desirable, even if such actions might have adverse consequences. Her *Wishes* (Figure 4) is an example of how her pieces evoke a sense of fantasy with a subcurrent of unease. The larger piece feels as if it could be a fairy house or a magic garden, yet closer inspection reveals images of adult fantasy. These pieces are related to patchwork in that they are comprised of many narrative vignettes pieced together. Unlike Amer's work, Narrett's juxtaposition of embroidery and erotic imagery is far more unsettling. It serves to critique the negative effects of reality TV and pornography on how women and men relate to their own sexuality.

While there are many other examples of feminist art utilizing fiber, these are just a few key examples of work that take on a form closely related to the work I would be making. All the artists mentioned so far have either adapted a form of creation to speak about cultural issues, such as Ringgold's "Story Quilts," or they have adapted a form of modern culture, such as Amer's embroideries based on pornography. Unlike the previous forms mentioned, there has not been explicit investigation into the potential of the embroidered patch as the basis for an art form.



Figure 4. *Wishes*, 2019, Embroidery Thread, Fabric, Acrylic, and Aluminum

5) Significance:

Ringgold manipulated the quilt to create a form tailored to provoke explicit conversation about cultural ideas while remaining tied to past traditions. By being placed in the art world context, she was able to communicate these ideas to a broader audience. The creation of large-scale patches would similarly manipulate a preexisting form into something new. This collection of work would also challenge the notion of fiber work as craft by presenting it within an art institution as installation. However, unlike quilts or tapestries, the embroidered

patch is an object worn and assembled as a collection rather than a work of many pieces. Since the 70s, they have also been a more public method of spreading ideas and beliefs than quilts or tapestries. However, patches are somewhat limited by generality in their typical form, often declaring a stance rather than cultivating a detailed conversation. Injecting them with a nuanced visual vocabulary would allow them to declare a stance yet provide avenues for greater understanding of the issues facing women. Thus, I believe patches as an art form have great potential to examine how fiber art affects cultural conversations surrounding issues facing women.

6) Proposed Methodology:

- 1) Sketch concepts for individual pieces, finalizing designs by the end of November.
- 2) Generate a series of color studies through the process of dyeing cloth and thread by the beginning of October.
- 3) Experiment with materials on a small scale throughout the semester.
- 4) Research past forms of installation.
- 5) Explore structural techniques throughout the semester, choosing one by the beginning of November.
- 6) Begin creating larger scale works no later than mid-November.
- 7) Find and secure a space to show the work by January 1st.
- 8) Plan how pieces will work as installation elements for the space. Finalize a design by mid-March.
- 9) Put on an exhibition before April 20th

7) References:

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