

MAKESHIFT MENDINGS

By

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Whitney Mahoney

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Abstract

The following is a written thesis of the concepts and visual aspects of Whitney Mahoney's MFA thesis exhibition, installed at the University of Kansas Art and Design Gallery from February 17-22, 2013. The exhibition, *Makeshift Mendings*, is a suspended fabric barrier constructed using a variety of hand-stitched white cotton fabrics. Stitches were pulled and manipulated to create a smocked rippling texture. The work spanned the length of the gallery and was suspended from the gridded gallery ceiling using clothesline and pulleys. The clothesline ends were attached to the wall using cleats and weighted down to the floor using a combination of handmade sandbags and worn bricks.

Makeshift Mendings

In the presence of tragedy, immediate solutions and quick fixes become a necessary defense against the resulting trauma. In the aftermath, emotional distress must be tended to in order to facilitate healing. Often, rapidly constructed emotional walls provide a necessary shelter from painful experiences. If the demolition of these walls is stalled, the emotional façade becomes a burden that restricts healing and creates a detachment from reality.

Walls, burdens, and façades portray a dismal view of disaster and grief, but immense strength and beauty is revealed through the therapeutic removal of emotional bandages. Such meticulous self-repair and introspection engenders prudence, resilience, and perspective, while scars and other evidence of distress remain as a richly textured picture of life experience and growth.

Makeshift Mendings acts as a barrier, obstructing luminosity while depicting the tensions and manipulations necessary to create a physical and emotional façade. Provisional suspension and weighting illustrate a chaotic hastiness in the creation of an adequate blockade. Collectively, the mending, scrunching, and scarring in this work illustrate the strain of growth and the resulting beauty of adaptation.

Personal Connection

The initial decision to work with textiles was an obvious one because of their accessibility to me throughout life. When I began my art studies, cloth dominated the work I created due to the already established relationship I had with the material, both through its placement in our lives and through the work and history of women in my family. The connection

I have to cloth is what I rely on in order to allow viewers to make a personal connection to my work through their memories and experiences of cloth.

Due to our necessity for cloth, beginning upon our entrance to this world, and the connections we make to specific fabrics throughout life, I feel driven to work with concepts of the human condition and life experience. The fluidity of cloth and its ability to be strongly manipulated allows for these concepts to develop. Due to anxieties I have experienced throughout life, I have spent a great deal of time observing human actions and reactions as well as quietly reflecting on my personal experiences and actions in solitude. A number of tragic events have occurred over the last several years of my life, beginning with the death of my brother in 2007 that have caused me to critically analyze reactions to tragedy and the resulting growth and healing processes. Distance and time have allowed me to address these issues in a positive, inclusive, and meaningful manner. Everyone experiences the painful emotions of grief and loss in some form, but it is the growth and development over time that speak to the human condition and spirit. If we only experience tragedy, dwell on the resulting emotions, never allow the wounds to heal, and build barriers to keep others out, we create restrictions that exclude ourselves from the beauty the experience of life brings. Our ability to heal and grow and remove those walls is what makes human life so unique and valuable.

Appearance

Makeshift Mendings measures thirty feet in length and fifteen feet in height and is assembled utilizing more than 150 yards of a variety of cotton fabrics. A large scale is imperative to properly spotlight the viewer's initial confrontation with the material. This confrontation is necessary to create contrast between two opposing environments expressed through the two sides of the work. A combination of new and used fabric was meticulously hand-stitched using

numerous spools of cotton and nylon thread. Each vertically stitched cotton panel was sewn together side-by-side and end-to-end to achieve the appropriate length and width. Thread tails were then carefully cinched and knotted to reveal loose smocking and textural planes. Embellishments of embroidery and beading and the addition of “bandage” fabrics, such as cheesecloth, were then applied to the surface to achieve additional layering and volume.

The 30-foot panel is suspended with white clothesline fed through rusted pulleys and weighted along the back gallery wall using handmade burlap sandbags and weathered and burned bricks. The whole edifice is attached to the wall using rusted cleats. The use of more fasteners and weights than structurally necessary to support the fabric is intended to highlight the effort necessary to maintain the barrier. Lighting serves to accentuate the divergent sides of the fabric. Dim lighting flattens the front side while the passage of light through the cloth illuminates the backside. The illumination reveals a radiant, soft, rippling surface, reminiscent of skin and illustrative of the strength and beauty of an experienced human spirit.



view of front



view of back



weighting



weighting

Material Selection

Cloth has always been the foundation in my process and is aesthetically and conceptually vital to this particular piece. Aesthetically, cloth is necessary to achieve a profound sense of movement and volume. Repetitious hand stitching, meditative in nature, allows the time and space necessary for reflection and enables me to both lose and rediscover the work on a daily basis. Visually, the hand-stitch is important to accentuate the obsessive consuming nature of creating this barrier. Stitching by hand allows for a greater variation of line that serves to highlight the beauty of the imprecise human hand. No two stitched lines are identical; every line follows a different path to create a unique variation.

Due to its vast number of practical and decorative uses, cloth has been a part of daily human life throughout history. As a result of this connection to life, the decision to use cloth in my work was natural. Allowing viewers to envision their own histories and relationships to cloth while viewing the work is imperative to its visual power. In her book *Textiles: The Whole Story*, Beverly Gordon writes: “The fifth property of cloth is that it has ‘living’ qualities. Cloth absorbs. It takes in physical substances—bodily fluids such as saliva, sweat, and blood, and gaseous substances from the air, such as odor and smoke” (30). Through the manipulation, labor, and care for this fabric, a history is created.

History is also considered in the decision to incorporate older, discarded fabrics. The word “used” holds power as it applies to cloth and describes a human quality. Gordon describes this idea:

A new textile, like a new life, is clean and fresh, and unused cloth often functions as a symbol of purity as well as wholesomeness. Unsoiled fabric represents promise and possibility. In contrast, worn cloth represents the end of wholesomeness and, like a worn-out life, has little future...The ultimate fragility of cloth—it is subject to degenerative processes such as illness and decay—is another reason it is tied to mortality and the passage of time (25).

While the resulting message of *Makeshift Mendings* is intended to be that of positive regeneration, the careful incorporation of used fabric serves as a necessary reminder of history.



details of panel



detail

On Style

The aesthetic decisions for every aspect of the work is carefully developed and the processes used are ones that are traditional to cloth and ones that many could replicate. The fabric selected for this work falls into a range of whites and creams and thread colors are limited to cream, muted yellows, and occasionally red. Maintaining a neutral color palette allows the repetition of textures, folds, and lines of stitching to dominate the visual experience. In *The Infinite Line: Re-making Art After Modernism*, Briony Fer, writing on Agnes Martin, states: “Imposing strict limits on her format enabled her to increase the play of difference within it. Rather than constraining difference, repetition allows for maximum difference, exacerbating, even the multiplication of variables” (56). The vertical format of the fabric panels and the imposing repetitious vertical stitches creates a rigid visual structure that is easily disrupted

through the simple act of pulling threads. Lucy Lippard described the work of Eva Hesse, stating: “repetition can be a guard against vulnerability; a bulletproof vest of closely knit activity can be woven against fate. Ritual and repetition are also ways of containing anger, and of fragmenting fearsome wholes” (209). Although a barrier at first confrontation, the calming lines revealed on the illuminated backside are meant to create a sense of comfort and protection from harm.



detail

Conclusion

Tragically, as humans, we are unable to escape the effects of loss and tragedy on our lives. Whether a global, national, or personal tragedy, pain and loss touch everyone at some time. However, the journey of coping and healing is a fascinating story because it allows us to move forward and achieve greater understanding of the importance of seemingly random events. We

learn the immense strength of the human spirit and, though scars may remain, these scars serve as reminders of history and allow us to view our future in a more thoughtful manner.

Fer, Briony. *The Infinite Line: Re-making Art After Modernism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004.

Gordon, Beverly. *Textiles: The Whole Story*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 2011.

Lippard, Lucy. *Eva Hesse*. New York: New York University Press, 1976.