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IF CHIVALRY IS DEAD, WOMEN HAVE KILLED IT

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Art at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Abstract

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I am interested in the dual meaning of pattern. Pattern is a design format used for decoration. By introducing certain images into patterns, they have the ability to give meaning or messages. The repetition of a certain image emphasizes importance to a particular idea or issue.

I embroider pattern designs onto pre-manufactured clothing pattern pieces as a response to things in society that I find absurd. This body of work focuses on female iconography. The delicate nature of these materials lends themselves to feminine associations. Embroidery, which is stereotypically associated with women's work, is used to play on these clichés.

Patterns also are instructions. The original intent for these pattern pieces was to construct a wearable garment. I am using these specifically shaped pieces to create flat representational images on the wall to point to the “roles” that people undertake consciously or unconsciously in their lives

Previous Thoughts and Preconceived Notions

Pre-graduate school I had some strong opinions on the lives lived by past generations. Having been greatly influenced by Hollywood and the media, I was looking at past generations, particularly the 1950's, with a nostalgic attitude. "The 1950's was a profamily period if there ever was one. Rates of divorce and illegitimacy were half what they are today; marriage was almost universally praised; the family was everywhere hailed as the most basic institution in society; and a massive baby boom, among all classes and ethnic groups, made America a "child-centered" society." (Coontz 24) I viewed this era as a less complicated time, when gender roles were more simply defined, and people were content with the roles set forth. I did not recognize that these notions were compiled and absorbed from images that I had been seeing on television and in magazines.

My initial graduate work consisted of small-scale pictorial embroideries. These embroideries ranged from four inches square to eight by sixteen inches, and all represented images of dresses. In most of these pieces I was experimenting with different types of thread such as cotton, rayon, and metallic based fibers. I was also interested in different ways of applying my images, by trying things such as photo transfers and drawing directly onto the fabric with different pens and markers.

I had been previously interested in the dress as a form (a visual shape), for quite some time and wished to further explore this image. Yet I was unable to combine these small-scale embroideries with the narratives I wished to engage in my work. The smaller works I was doing at the time were very much about the dress image itself. This led me to become more interested in my ideas about the female in relation to the dress. The first step in making this change was the reassessment of the scale of the work. I grew increasingly interested in the possibilities inherent in having “the dress” become the entire piece, and how it may end up functioning in a more sculptural mode. I wanted my image to be the entire piece rather than pictorial.

I had become aware of a document that was on the Internet called “The Good Wife’s Guide.” It was supposedly from a nineteen fifties magazine entitled “Housekeeping Monthly.” This guide instructed women of the many things she could do for her husband to ensure him a pleasant arrival home from his job. After reading this literature I became curious about the way people take on roles and how these roles are projected into society. I began to wonder if what we actually saw from people who lived this way was merely a façade. It seemed apparent to me that it would be almost physically and mentally impossible to do all of these tasks, and that anyone projecting these images could not be “telling the truth.”

In response to this reading, I created a series of five dress facades all around 36”x34”x17”. They were constructed of embroidered white vinyl tablecloth fabric and free-motion machine embroidery. The patterns embroidered onto the pristine white vinyl skirts contained imagery taken directly from “The Good Wife’s Guide” guide. Each dress served

as a direct representation of one of the duties that a woman was instructed to do, such as washing up her children before her husband was to arrive home, or preparing the presentation of herself and cooking his favorite dish. In installing these dress facades it was important that they all be presented as a line up. By constructing them all about the same size, and making them out of the same materials, I was making a comment on the rigid instructions this guide presented. Creating them to look like uniforms was my interpretation of the readings. Their wasp waists worked as a signifier of the unrealistic expectations this guide was placing on women. These ill-proportioned figures seemed distorted, but pretty at the same time, according to how Hollywood and the media assesses beauty, (thin, busty, feminine clothing).

“As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night-she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question-“Is this all?” (Friedan 15)

Contemporary Artists

There are many contemporary artists working in fibers and as well as other areas that I am influenced by. Three in particular are Kim Dingle, Ghada Amer, and Jennifer Angus. Kim Dingle and Ghada Amer deal with gender stereotypes in their work, while Jennifer Angus' installations reflect more formal issues of pattern. All three of the artists work in different ways, with different subject matter, which I can relate to.

Kim Dingle is influenced by Hollywood and the media. Growing up in the 1950's, she is familiar with the "perfect family" image that was projected on television during this time. Her work consists of paintings and installations of little girls that are dressed very prim and proper in frilly dresses, pinafores, and Mary Janes, only they behave wildly bad. Though at first glance the viewer might think this work reflects flawless little girls, quickly you notice the horrible things they are doing. In the *Never in School* series, Dingle depicts two little girls, one white, one black, named Fatty and Fudge, doing a series of naughty things, such as writing dirty words on a chalkboard, wrestling with each other, and mooning viewers. In one work, *Never in School (Two Girls, One Barfing)*, Fatty's head is forced downward by Fudge, as Fatty vomits on the ground. (Honigman 1) What I am drawn to in this work is the way Dingle uses images that originally came from something

innocent to depict work that is humorously dark, dealing with issues of gender and stereotype.

Ghada Amer who also is an artist concerned with ideas of gender, does embroidered paintings and sculpture. As an Arab woman she is greatly influenced by her heritage. Her interest in the suppression of sexuality in Islam has been the subject of some recent works. Amer's paintings first appear to consist of only abstract lines, but when come into focus, they are images of women in sexual positions, sometimes traced directly from pornographic magazines.

Jennifer Angus' "wallpapered rooms" interest me because of the mind trick that they play on the viewer. At first glance her installations seem to be rooms covered in a repeat pattern of wallpaper or fabric, but on approaching these pieces more closely, one realizes they are elaborate patterns constructed out of thousands of insects. She has concerns with "what we think we know." (Angus 2) The viewer is faced with an image that references the home (wallpaper), only to realize it is constructed of something very few people let in their homes, insects.

What interests me about all three of these artists is the way they distort imagery or information that viewers are familiar in daily life, to create their own ideas and to make commentary.

Technical Processes

In the past two years I have been concentrating on embroidery. My first semester I experimented with embellishing fabrics that I had drawn directly onto with sharpie marker as well as onto photo transfers. A photo transfer is a process where a color photocopy of an image is reversed and then transferred with heat onto the fabric leaving a slight film on the fabric as well. With hand embroidery I was also experimenting with a range of different surfaces, from natural and synthetic fabrics, to different types of paper and vinyl.

The “Good Wife’s Guide” series that I completed the last semester of my first year were made of vinyl that was embellished with embroidery, with poly/cotton sewing threads and machine embroidered fabric. Machine embroidered fabric is made by densely sewing on water-soluble fabric, in this case Solvron, which is a boil away fabric. After dropping the feed dogs, the mechanism that normally pulls the fabric through on the sewing machine, you are able to move around the fabric in free motion. Once these stitches overlap each other many times they are stable enough to hold each other together creating a fabric of only stitches, even after the Solvron is boiled away.

Sweet Submission, If Chivalry Is Dead Women Have Killed It, and Angst (release) are all constructed from clothing pattern paper. Because of the thin tissue like quality of the pattern paper it was necessary for me to stabilize the paper in order to be able to embroider onto it. On pieces earlier in the year I was laminating the paper to strengthen the surface. This created a plastic covering on both sides of the paper that preserved it. Though this worked well it really changed the appearance of the pattern paper, giving it a

“skin-like” covering. Though I liked the skin-like quality of the lamination, I wanted the pieces to represent pattern pieces in their more natural form and was not interested in changing the surface in such a significant way. By using a product called Heat-n-Bond I fused silk organza fabric to the pattern paper and did not change the appearance of the front surface. I only altered the back of the paper, keeping the embroidery stitches from ripping through the paper.

I used a Therma Fax screen-printer to print text onto the pattern pieces. This machine imprints photocopies onto a film-like screen paper, creating a silk screen that pierces the paper enough to allow ink to go through when squeegeed onto a surface.

Embroidering in an obsessive fashion is something that has been constant in my work over the last two years. The nature of the repetitive embroidery I do in my pieces, as well as the time it takes to do them, serves well as an outlet to my compulsive side, which is apparent in my work.

Thesis Work

As defined in the Merriam – Webster Dictionary, pattern is 1: an ideal model for making things, 2: something used as a model for making things, and 3: an artistic design. The three pieces in my thesis exhibition are derived from all of these aspects of “pattern”. In contemplating these definitions I am also thinking about how human behavior is formed in a pattern like manner. We have many behaviors that mimic patterns. For example, many people have rituals that they do each day ranging from how they get ready in the morning, to how they treat people and how they let people treat them.

In the work, the pattern paper itself is representative of instruction. Garment pattern pieces are typically used as a means of constructing a wearable article of clothing. The embroidery is representative of design in the tradition of decorative fashions. Though the imagery I am using is not typical of clothing patterns, the physical alignment of the patterns is. All three pieces in this exhibition represent a particular human behavior.

The first in this series is entitled *Sweet Submission*. In the book “Fascinating Womanhood,” by Helen Andelin, she speaks of how a woman should have a “spirit of sweet submission” towards her husband. (Andelin, Helen 271) As I read this section of the book I was shocked by her ideas. She was serving as an instructor by giving her reader’s directions on how to live their lives in this way. It was at this point that I realized that combining the different aspects of pattern would be appropriate to executing a piece about this idea. The piece is made up of a dress pattern from 1963, the year the book was

originally published. I choose an image of a female dog that was rolled onto her back, exposing herself in a natural submissive position. I repeated the pattern onto both the shirt front and back pattern pieces emphasizing submissiveness. On the remaining pattern pieces I embroidered images of ice-cream cones and hard candy in a repeated pattern referencing sweetness. Throughout the piece I screen-printed text that was taken directly from Helen Andelin's book "Fascinating Womanhood". I printed this text in places on the pattern paper where one would typically expect to see cutting or sewing instructions. It was my intention for this text to blend in with the text that was already there, serving as additional information in the form of direction. This added text does not instruct one how to construct a garment, but instructs the viewer of Helen Andelin's directions on how to be a "submissive woman". She writes, "The feminine woman is inclined to be trustful, adaptable, and fearful, with tender emotions for the innocent and the suffering. In addition, she has a dependency upon men for their care and protection." (Andelin 269) The pattern pieces are displayed on the wall, and are arranged to represent an image of a handgun. The gun image is a direct indicator of my response to the text. The pattern pieces themselves, as well as the images that were applied onto them, (the dog, the ice-cream cones, and the hard candy) are all things that appear to be non-confrontational, and non-aggressive, yet in turn, work to create a final image which is aggressive, a weapon.

If Chivalry Is Dead, Women Have Killed It is about protection. To protect is to keep safe, shield, preserve, defend, shelter, or secure. There are many stereotypes that have placed the male as the protector of the female. According to Amy Vanderbilt's "Complete Book Of Etiquette, A Guide To Gracious Living," it is customary in America

for the man to walk on the curbside of the sidewalk when accompanying a lady.

(Vanderbilt 188) In Helen Andelin's book "Fascinating Womanhood," and "Man of Steel and Velvet," a book by her husband, Aubrey Andelin, a lot of text informs the reader of all of the circumstances in everyday life that women need protection from. These situations range from the seriousness of rape and sexual harassment, to the absurd, such as keeping a woman from driving a truck to preserve her femininity, and protecting her from heavy traffic. (Andelin, Aubrey 93) Helen Andelin describes a feminine woman as being fearful when approaching an intersection and needing to cling to a man's arm for protection and guidance. (Andelin, Helen 274) What I find so amusing about this particular notion is the way it insults women's intelligence, and makes the assumption that a female will not be aware of when it is safe to cross the street if a man is not present.

I chose to embroider on the pattern pieces of a man's suit jacket because of the stereotypical belief that a chivalrous man will offer his jacket to a woman, to protect her from the cold. The embroidery consists of a repeated pattern of the same masculine-looking cars, arranged so that they appear to be in bumper-to-bumper traffic. Periodically throughout the pattern there are women who are either running away from the cars or are positioned in front of the cars throwing their hands up in the air gesturing as if they are about to be hit. This piece is a mocking response to what would happen to women in busy streets if there were no men around to protect them. The pattern pieces in this work are arranged to reference an image of an umbrella. An umbrella is used for protection all of the time, but it protects us from something that won't really hurt us, the rain. At the same

time the umbrella can be viewed in a similar vein with the gun and hammer piece, because it has also been used as a weapon at times.

The third piece in this series is *Angst (release)*. Instead of using pre-manufactured garment patterns in this piece, I created my own. I did not use the garment patterns in this final piece because it is not an attempt to impose the Andelin's convictions onto the viewer. This piece serves instead as my critical review of the text that I have been reading for the last year. I created the pattern for a hammer, as it is a tool can be used to build something, as well as to break something down. The books I have been reading are instructional, and intended to "build up" a certain persona, which in turn I have analyzed and broken down. As with the other two pieces, it too can be seen as a weapon. The decorative pattern screened onto the paper consists of axes and curtains. These images are an attempt to address the connections I hold with the Andelin's views on how the family dynamic in the home should take shape.

In the installation of the thesis show, the configuration of these three pieces in relationship to one another is important. I have arranged the gun piece so that it is not directly pointing at the corner of a wall, and has enough space so that the viewer can walk next to it and be aligned with the direction its pointed. The umbrella, which is on the wall next to the left of the gun, is not mounted centrally; instead it is positioned more towards the right to create a closer relationship with the gun. The final piece, the hammer, is hung across from the gun, on the wall next to the umbrella piece. This piece is positioned furthest away from the other pieces, its isolation presenting it's different concerns. These pieces are signifiers to my reactions towards the beliefs of Helen and Aubrey

Andelin, and their books. I am representing Helen Andelin as the gun piece, and Aubrey Andelin as the umbrella. I see myself as the hammer, creating my own pattern in response to their ideas and instructions.

“If chivalry is dead, women have killed it. They have killed it by becoming capable, efficient, and independent, able to kill their own snakes. They prove their strength and ability that they don’t need masculine care and protection, that they are well able to take care of themselves.” (Andelin. Helen 133)

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Education and Workshops

- 2005 MFA, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia
- 2000 BFA, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia
- 2000 Peters Valley, Summer Workshop Machine Embroidery,
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Exhibitions

- 2005 "If Chivalry Is Dead, Women Have Killed It," Anderson Gallery,
Richmond, Virginia
- "Twelve By Twelve," ADA Gallery, Richmond, Virginia
- "Sweet Substitute," Stevenson Blanche Gallery, Valencia, California
- 2004 "Hodge-Podge," FAB Gallery, Richmond, Virginia
- "Candid," Plant Zero, Richmond, Virginia
- "Kass-a role," Artworks, Richmond, Virginia
- 2003 "Purpose," (2 person show), Visual Art Studio, Richmond, Virginia
- "Fiber Directions," Wichita Center for the Arts, Wichita, Kansas
- 2002 "All Media Show," Shockoe Bottom Arts Center, Richmond, Virginia
- 2000 "Annual Holiday," Artspace, Richmond, Virginia
- "New Talent," Hand Workshop, Richmond, Virginia
- 1999 "Spring," FAB Gallery, Richmond, Virginia
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Awards and Honors

- 2005 Surface Design Association Outstanding Student
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- 2005 Adjunct Faculty, Beginning Textiles, Virginia Commonwealth University,
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