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The Evolution of Craft in Contemporary Feminist Art

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This Senior Project is dedicated to my Grandmother, Gloria Carolyn Reich.
Thank you for giving me the invaluable skills that have inspired my art and being the model for woman I strive to become. Thank you also to Professor Susan Rankaitis for inspiring my dedication to this project, and to Professor Nancy Macko for being such a supportive and encouraging advisor, thesis reader, and role model.

Women's art is rooted in a long history of traditional craft practices. It is said that during the times of male-dominated society, if a woman had any brains she would explore her creativity through quilting, clothing design and needlework; creating utilitarian objects for the household to serve her husband and family. Being a part of an extended family lineage of talented and inspired craftswomen has provoked me to analyze the evolution of craft from a domestic practice into a higher form of feminist art. I have collected family heirlooms of craft works dating back to baby quilts my great-great-grandmother Carolyn made for my great-grandmother in 1907. My art making is highly influenced by the extraordinary women in my family and the techniques they have taught me throughout my childhood. My great-grandmother Fleta lived all over the country, going through three marriages and being a single mother for the majority of her adult life. She worked numerous different jobs so she could take time off during the summer to spend with her daughter, my grandmother Gloria, when she was out of school. At one point she was a Broadway dancer in New York. She was an ambitious independent woman who supported herself and her daughter through most of her life. My grandmother Gloria received her Doctorate and was the Executive Director of the American Tinnitus Association for 25 years, an organization dedicated to researching for the treatment of Tinnitus, a condition Gloria has suffered from since youth causing her loss of hearing. She was introduced to fiber arts by her mother and continued the tradition of making beautiful heirlooms for her family and teaching her daughter and granddaughters how to sew. The way that these women lived their lives beyond the confines of the patriarchal society they were a part of and the art that they created inspired me to explore the stereotypes of women's art that have developed and how the use of craft in contemporary feminist art breaks them down.

Before the women's movement in the 60's and 70's, most women's art was denied the title "fine art" because the techniques they used and the work they created was marginalized and devalued by the male-dominated art world. A hierarchy of the arts developed and was maintained by a common opinion that these decorative forms are less intellectually involved and serve only domestic and aesthetic needs. As craft has become apparent in more contemporary art, it is more accepted by the art community mainly because women themselves are being accepted as artists. At the same time, any association with the practices of needlework and domestic art can be dangerous for an artist, for often it immediately references the time when needlework

defined a decorative piece for the household created by an anonymous woman. The transformation to fine art was defined by craft moving into the public sphere where women were creating works of art that surpassed the anonymity of domestic craft and could be viewed by the spectator. The alternative craft movement has brought craft back into the public sphere by using traditional craft techniques to make social and political statements. My fall and spring semester senior projects use materials that have been passed down from the past five generations of women in my family to demonstrate the evolution of craft from an anonymous form to feminist art. I will be looking at traditional needlework and quilting as well as exploring circular forms which represent connectivity through generations and creating a sacred space for art making. By creating these installations for my Senior Project and exploring the history of craft in feminist art, I hope to create a forum in which the spectator can critically engage in a work of craft as a piece of feminist art as opposed to viewing it as a utilitarian object, breaking down the confines of the hierarchy of the art world.

Chapter 1: The Circle

I come from a family where I have been fortunate enough to have had a close relationship with my mother, my grandmother, and my great-grandmother. My great-grandmother had my grandmother when she was 27, my grandmother had my mother when she was 27, and my mother had me when she was 27, establishing the circular connection between our generations. One of the unique things about the women in my family is the bond established from passing down traditional craft practices. Dating as far back as my great-great-grandmother Carolyn Elizabeth, the women in my family have created beautifully crafted family keepsakes from quilts to clothing for all occasions. I learned everything I know about craft and sewing from my mother, grandmother and great-grandmother, who learned from their mothers and grandmothers as well. Some of the most memorable and emotionally powerful times of my life have been spending time with the women in my family, sitting in a circle working on a sewing project and talking about the past, present and future.

Ever since the age of the cave man where the first circular dwellings were built, “a constant inter-dance has existed between the concrete presence of the circle in every direction of daily living and the sense of the circle as an abstract form of great purity and therefore in some

sense or another a symbol of the absolute"[1]. The most powerful embodiment of the circular form is the actual presence of a group of people forming a circle as a mode of communication. The term "calling a circle" is a "visionary statement of belief that gathering in peer-led, spirit-centered circles could help us successfully face the challenge of our times"[2]. A circle is "a council of ordinary people who convene to create a sacred space and from that space accomplish a specific task. Because it has a sense of containment, the circle has a beginning, middle, and end that are framed through simple rituals appropriate to the group and setting. The circle has a shared, verbalized intention so that everyone knows why they are gathered. The circle self-governs and corrects its course through the adoption of commonsense agreements of behavior… in such a circle leadership rotates, responsibility is shared, and the group comes to rely deeply on spirit"[3]. Calling a circle is a source of power for those who feel they have none, which was a very important practice for women living in a patriarchal society. The circle creates a sense of personal placement and security of being rooted to a middle ground.

The circle creates a sacred space of trust and respect, which is why the form has been applied to many different situations where open communication is so important. In Alcoholics Anonymous, people sit in a circle all on even ground. No one is in front or back, no one is any more powerful or has more authority than the person sitting next to them. Psychologist M. Scott Peck considers AA to be "the most significant source of change in the 20th century" because "it introduced the idea that people can help themselves" [4]. By having their circle of peers to confess, reflect, and heal without consequence or judgment, they become empowered and gain the strength to abstain. "For tens of thousands of years, in kinship-based social groups across the globe, our ancestors in the human tribe adapted to variations of climate, terrain, and natural resources. They developed social structures that helped sustain them on the land, and spiritual myths that helped them explain the mysteries of life. These structures, and their spiritual base, are evident in paintings, carvings, petroglyphs, runes, crafts, and later in architecture. What seems to have been intact in all these settings were the concentric circles of interconnection- the

[1] *Mystic Circle*. Burnaby, B.C.: Burnaby Art Gallery, 1973

[2] Baldwin, *Calling the circle the first and future culture,* 1

[3] Ibid, 14

[4] Ibid, 16

campfire, the extended family, the larger society, humanity, nature, and the mystery of spirit"[5]. Inuits were known to meet in circular councils and build round dwellings. Native Americans built teepees in circular communities. By building their communities in these forms, the people were "applying the circle as a form of community governance"[6]. Campfires were significant in many cultures for the effect the circle had on their community. The fire was a sacred source "that provided a cohesive center [and] allowed space for each person to face the flame... Out of this instinctive taking of place, community developed"[7]. The same form of the circle is applied in other situations. At Scripps College for example, we are blessed to have the benefits of a small school where class discussions are held in a circle, where students and the professor sit together and speak to one another as equals with the trust and respect of a family. In traditional quilting groups, women would gather to sit together in a circle to converse about their lives and current situation while exploring the bounds of their artistic abilities by creating beautiful quilts for their families.

The circular tapestry I created is woven from fabrics passed down from my mother Evelyn, grandmother Gloria, great-grandmother Fleta, and great-great-grandmother Carolyn. The inspiration for the project stemmed from my intrigue with the circular form and how I relate it to my life and family lineage. The tapestry's circular form represents the connection that the women of my family have with each other by continuing the tradition of craft to express our creative talent and femininity. For my fall semester installation, I juxtaposed the circular tapestry on the wall with a pile of blank stretched embroidery hoops piled on the ground. Continuing with the theme of circular imagery, the embroidery hoops represent the anonymous works of art by the women who were not accepted into the art community by creating them. The hundreds of hours spent to create a quilt may result in just a blanket or the all of the tedious stitching only to make a pair of winter pants is only a small testament to the displaced works of the incredibly talented.

[5] Ibid, 27

[6] Ibid, 19

[7] Ibid, 28

(R)evolution (2009)

Chapter 2: The History of Craft

Historically, women's art was defined as traditional craft: knitting, sewing, cross-stitch, crochet and patch-working. Women weren't accepted into the competitive and conceptual world of fine art and neither was their art because the work they created was marginalized and devalued by the male-dominated art world. Women's work was denied the title "fine" art, and "it is precisely the specific history of women and their artwork that is effaced when art historical discourse categorizes this kind of art practice as decorative, dexterous, industrious, geometric and 'the expression of the feminine spirit in art. However, the use of these terms which maintain the hierarchy and establishes distinctions between art and craft represents an underlying value system. Any association with the practices of needlework and domestic art can be dangerous for

an artist, especially where that artist is a woman,"[8] for often it immediately references the time when needlework meant a decorative piece for the household created by an anonymous woman.

Artists, critics, and historians view art history from certain perspectives and place art into categories based on a system of values, which creates a hierarchy of art forms. In this hierarchy, mediums like painting and sculpture have a certain value placed on them and are perceived to hold a certain status, while other forms of art that serve as adornment or utility are "relegated to a lesser cultural sphere under such terns as "applied', 'decorative' or 'lesser' arts"[9]. This hierarchy is maintained by a common opinion that these decorative forms are less intellectually involved and serve only domestic and aesthetic needs. Since the Renaissance, a clear division between decorative and fine art has emerged and is "reflected in changes of art education from craft-based workshops to academics and in the theories of art produced by those academics"[10]. At one point in the history of women's art, it was considered to be "as scandalous for a woman not to know how to use a needle as for a man not to know how to use a sword,"[11] yet although women were expected to have fine craft skills the works they produced were never fully appreciated by the society that demanded them.

In this hierarchy of the arts, the distinction between art and craft is not only defined by the materials being used but the intentions behind the work; where it is created, who it is for, and for what purpose. While fine arts are "a public, professional activity," craft is traditionally practiced in the home and can be defined as "domestic art".[12] The "conditions for production and audience for this kind of art are different from those of the art made in a studio and art school, for the market and gallery. It is out theses different conditions that the hierarchal division between art and craft has been constructed; it has nothing to do with the inherent qualities of the object nor the gender of the maker".[13] This social construction made it nearly impossible for

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[8] Carole Shepheard in Full Flight, *Roziska Parker & Griselda Pollock, Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*

[9] Parker & Pollock, *Crafty Women and the Hierarchy of the Arts*, 44

[10] Ibid

[11] Ibid, 46, (*Lady Mary Wortly Montague, 1753)*

[12] Ibid, 51

[13] Ibid

women's craft to present itself to any kind of analytical spectator. Mary Linwood was an embroidery artist whose craft was one of the first to be viewed in the public sphere as fine art. While using traditional needlework as her medium, the fact that her work was created in a non-domestic environment for a non-utilitarian purpose made viewers critique her work on a different basis than other craft, though in her time these critiques were mislead by ignoring the historical context of her work.

"The ladies of Great Britain may boast in the person of Miss Linwood an example of the force and energy of the female mind, free from any of those ungraceful manners which have in some cases accompanied strength of genius in a woman. Miss Linwood has awakened from its long sleep the art which gave birth to painting" (Library of Anecdote, quoted Jourdain, 1910, pp.171-2)[14]

This piece was considered to be fine art only because it is a craft medium used to imitate the fine art form of painting. The fact that "embroidery has a history is ignored by this critic, for

[14] Ibid, 49

whom it only 'awakens' and wins recognition when it apes painting and moves outside the domestic sphere to be exhibited publicly as framed pictures".[15]

Needlework is a craft that has many social and historical implications when looking at women's art. Women have always made art, but throughout history "the arts most highly valued by male society have been closed to them for just that reason"[16]. Therefore, many women have put their creativity towards needlework, a "universal female art form transcending race, class, and national borders. Needlework is the one art in which women controlled the education of their daughters and the production of art, and were also the critics and audience… it is our cultural heritage"[17]. Elizabeth Stone, whose *Art of Needlework* was published in 1840, insisted that there was an "indissoluble, God-given link between her sex and the craft and provided needlework with long, pious history to sanction the hours of upper- and middle-class women spent at their work"[18]. To identify a certain medium as our cultural heritage as women is difficult, because "while women can justifiably take pride in these areas, asserting their value in the face of male prejudice does not displace the hierarchy of values in art history. By simply celebrating a separate heritage we risk losing sight of one of the most important aspects of the history of women and art, the intersection in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of the development of an ideology of femininity, that is, a social definition of women and their role, with the emergence of a clearly defined separation of art and craft"[19]. As I discussed in the critique of Mary Linwood's embroidery piece, the appreciation of craft as a form of high art cannot come from demanding equality between needlework and oil painting, it is about recognizing the context in which these works of craft were created. My great-grandmother was trapped in a patriarchal society where her only outlet for her intellectual creativity was in needlework, and her identity as a woman celebrating her femininity and working to provide for her family gave her art value. A stereotype has been established that craft is a devalued medium, and what accounts for it? It is "precisely the necessity to provide an opposite against which male art and the male artist find

[15] Ibid

[16] Ibid, 45

[17] Ibid, 45 (*Patricia Mainardi, 'Quilts: The Great American Art' Feminist Journal, 1973, p.1)*

[18] Ibid

[19] Ibid

meaning and sustain their dominance. That there are Old Masters and not Old Mistresses and that all women's art is seen homogeneously as inevitably feminine in painting and sculpture as much as in the crafts is the effect of this ideology. We never speak of masculine art or man artist, we say simply art and artist. But the art of men can only maintain its dominance and privilege on the pages of art history by having a negative to its positive, a feminine to its unacknowledged masculine"[20].

Baby Quilt by
Carolyn Elizabeth McNaughton, 1920

Terminal C, Susie Brandt
1980

Quilting was a mode of expression that women exercised by using their craft to both express their creativity and provide for their family while creating an extraordinary work of historically pertinent art. "Personal, political, religious and social meanings were sewn into these quilts in abstract forms by means of color and symbolic compositions. Free from the pressures of the dominant conventions of contemporary painting, perspective, illusionism and narrative subject matter, the quilt-makers evolved an abstract language to signify and communicate their joys and sorrows their personal and social histories. It is this exploration of abstract forms and

[20] Ibid, 54

colors, which invited the reconsideration of quilts in recent times because they thus compare with contemporary forms of modern art. But when the quilts are appreciated as decorative wall hangings or examples of abstract *design* rather than as structures of abstract symbols, it is the specific language that is suppressed and denied"[21]. The collective process of quilt making has been misconceived and deemed artistically insignificant "because they are made by many unknown hands. However, the actual quilt-top was always the work of one person"[22]. The lack of recognition of the identity of artists is one of the ways that the male-dominated art community has marginalized craft. While the works of my ancestors is at a level of perfection of detail that I can only hope to attempt to replicate, their work was never recognized by any art community because there was none. By taking what I have learned form them into an area of spectatorship by creating my senior project, I hope to bring awareness to the marginalization of the craft practices of the past and celebrate the evolution of craft into a form of "fine" feminist art. The embroidery hoops piled on the floor as part of my installation are meant to represent the emptiness associated with craft and the anonymity that defined the woman who created it.

Chapter 3: Craft in Contemporary Feminist Art

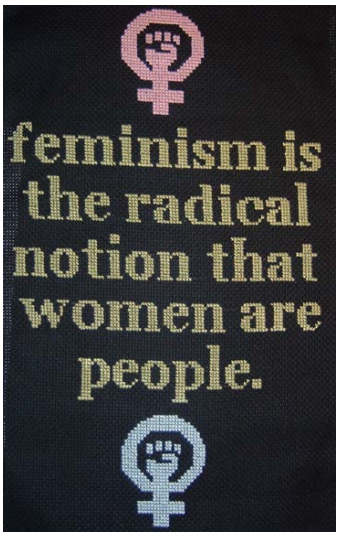
Craft has finally emerged as a common form of feminist art by using traditional craft techniques for social and political activism. It is important to realize the historical connections between radical activism and crafts because it has been a main source of power for women who did not have a public voice during the feminist movement. "Before women were able to vote the guise of home crafts was often used as an excuse to get together and plot. The Arts and Crafts movement of 19th Century England was a direct response to the soul-less Industrial Revolution. Crafters have used their skills to inspire action and revolution"[23]. Craft communities have developed over the past few decades to empower women to insert their voice into political pieces using traditional craft techniques. *Radical Cross Stitch: Seriously Seditious Stitching* is one organization that states that "we are underutilizing the potential for crafts to express our rage at

[21] Ibid, 53

[22] Ibid, 53

[23] Radical Cross Stitch DIY, *Radical Cross Stitch » Seriously Seditious Stitching*.

the stupidity of the world, demonstrate our vision for how to do things better and at the same time honor our mothers, grandmothers and great-great-great grandmothers. Women (and men) are rarely getting together to create community-based craft projects designed to express a creative vision for a better world"[24]. *Sublime Stitching* and *Subversive Cross-Stitch* are other examples of craft organizations that "introduce edgy embroidery patterns, all-in-one embroidery starter kits and entertaining, now-I-understand-it instructions to bring embroidery back to life for a new generation of crafters"[25].



[26]

The women's movement brought about the rise of feminist artists such as Jacqualine Fahey, Patsy Novell, Judy Chicago, Janine Antoni and many others "whose work challenged the patriarchal paradigm surrounding the art world, and who sought to break down barriers for all forms of women's art. They created an alternative space for women artists, where craft was intentionally used as an expression of feminist art, and where traditional female art was celebrated. They worked collaboratively, organized alternative exhibition spaces (installations,

[24] Ibid

[25] About | Sublime Stitching. *Home Page | Sublime Stitching*

[26] Radical Cross Stitch DIY, *Radical Cross Stitch » Seriously Seditious Stitching*.

interactive sculptures) and bypassed the “art market” by creating non-saleable pieces such as performances”[27].

The tapestry that I have created for my senior project is woven together from fabrics passed down from my family and is meant to create the sacred space of a circle that I relate to the actual practice of craft making. An artist that gave me a lot of inspiration for this concept was Janine Antoni and her performance piece, *Moor*. In an interview with Janine Antoni for Art21, she says that “because "Moor" is made out of materials from my friends, I thought I could make a rope from materials of my life and walk it like a lifeline”[28]. She used an alternative form of craft to create a rope on which she learned to tight-rope walk, creating a sacred space for herself by weaving together the materials of her life. Judy Chicago’s *Dinner Party*, an installation representing a “massive ceremonial banquet arranged in the shape of an open triangle—a symbol of equality”[29] was also an inspiration by using the cultural heritage of women’s art to honor the history of women.

Exploring contemporary feminist art is a difficult thing because while feminism still exists in many facets, true feminism as it existed in the 60’s and 70’s can only be truly understood by those that lived during that time and experienced it. Patsy Norvell, a feminist artist from the 70’s, speaks of the feminist art revolution: “feminism entered the art community with an intoxicating empowerment of women artists. Consciousness raising led to strong connectivity and formed community around issues of inequality. The critical discourse was concerned with the exclusion and restrictiveness of western art theory and practice, providing us cause and propelling us to make changes. Ideas, about what art could be and how it could be made, expanded in multiple ways. Non-traditional and non-mainstream processes and materials were explored and incorporated. Many women artists, whether personally identifying themselves as feminist, contributed to and benefited from the impact of these innovations”[30]. Norvell, being hesitant about incorporating traditional “women’s work” such as sewing and weaving into her art because

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[27] Radical Cross Stitch DIY, *Radical Cross Stitch » Seriously Seditious Stitching*

[28] Art:21 . Janine Antoni . Interview & Videos

[29] Brooklyn Museum: Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art: The Dinner Party: Place Settings

[30] Brooklyn Museum: Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art: Patsy Norvell

of the stereotypical implications, made a list of what feminism means to her without engendering the term. “Feminism is not about: Making or following dogma, Hierarchy, Stereotyping/Categorizing, Bias, Restriction, Hatred and Revenge, Force. Feminism is about: Empowerment, Individual and social consciousness raising, Recognizing and reversing injustice, Equal opportunity, Community, Humanity”[31].

Patsy Norvell. *Untitled*, 1972-1973

After being discriminated against and marginalized by the fine art community, the women artists emerging out of this revolution of craft and art acted as pinnacles of strength and inspiration for the feminist artists to come during my generation and the generations to come.

Conclusion:

Feminist Art has made an enormous amount of progress over the past century, but “the stereotype of feminist artists as socially abnormal or marginal individuals still holds sway in our society… The tenacity of the image of the archetypal, bra-burning feminist is disparaging to the true diversity among women, and is as reductive as the view of the demur feminine ideal from which we were "liberated" in the last few decades”[32]. Feminist craft artists have many stereotypes to overcome in their work to gain respect in the art community; being a woman, a feminist, and using traditional craft practices. After a long struggle to gain a public voice and a

[31] Ibid

[32] Brooklyn Museum: Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art: Grimanesa Amorós

place in the fine art world, it is inspiring to see so many women "working, and showing, speaking in their art about their visions, their lives, translating into color and form their unique voices--making public their presence. We may not so easily realize it now, but considering millenniums of lack of recognition and rejection, making and showing art is a courageous act for women"[33]. Although Feminism may not be a movement as active as it was during times of more apparent inequality, we as women artists must still remember the women who have paved the way for our place in the spectatorship of the art community. The craft movement is still struggling to break down the stereotypes that marginalize women's art, but the nature of the craft movement will be what sustains it. "The joy in producing craft comes from working with other women, learning from them and sharing experiences, whether in a craft group or at a craft market. Craft empowers women; it brings them together. It allows them to bypass consumer culture and reclaim traditional women's skills devalued by society. It is essentially a collective act, and a consciousness raising one at that"[34]. That is precisely the philosophy and set of values that I have been raised on that inspire me to continue the traditions of my ancestors.

During the Spring Semester of my senior project, I took the concepts applied to (R)evolution and evolved them further into a modern interpretation of the quilt. The quilt is modeled after the baby blanket that my great-great-grandmother Carolyn made for my grandmother Gloria *(see page 11).* In order to pay homage to the women in my family who have passed down their knowledge of crafts to me, I followed the pattern of the quilt while using unconventional materials associated with fiber arts and needlework. The use of pins, needles, and clothing hooks in conjunction with fabric swatches from my grandmother surpass the utilitarian function of a quilt while highlighting the detailed craft that goes into such a piece of art. My main goal with this piece was to detach the quilt from its utilitarian function while maintaining it's image as quilt but not just a blanket.

By developing my Senior Project using traditional craft practices to create a contemporary piece, I hope to honor the women who have worked to bridge the gap between art and craft and continue to create art that challenges the hierarchy of art practices in our society.

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[33] Brooklyn Museum: Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art: Nancy Azara, *Nancy Azara, Re-Visioning catalogue, Maitland Art Center*

[34] Radical Cross Stitch DIY, *Radical Cross Stitch & raquo; Seriously Seditious Stitching*

(R)evolution (2009)

Gloria's Quilt (2010)

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