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NOT EVEN OR PRETTY: IMPROVISATIONAL TEXTILES FROM RECYCLED
CLOTHING

By

Karen Anne Habeeb
B.A., University of Louisville, 2001

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Department of Fine Arts
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2014

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A Thesis Approved on

November 14, 2013

by the following Thesis Committee:

Professor Lida Gordon

Dr. Delin Lai

Professor Jeffrey Skinner

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my best friend

Alisa Richie Childress

who has always listened patiently,
provided an example of dedication and strength,

and

laughed with me through everything.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank Professor Lida Gordon for her constant encouragement, patience, and guidance. I also thank the other committee members, Dr. Delin Lai and Professor Jeffrey Skinner, for their excellent teaching, enthusiasm, and thoughtful comments. I also most gratefully thank Drs. Elizabeth and Frederick Cressman for funding support, and Bill Fischer for granting the department studio space to work at Our Mother of Sorrows School. The photographic images of my own works shown here were created by Wayne C. Moore of Back River Photography LLC, Savannah, Georgia. I thank my good friends Alisa Richie Childress, Emily Noonan, George Tiser, Suzette Winona Summers, Erica Bailey, Wendy Coulter, Graham Strouse, Christopher Allen, Molly Domenjoz, and Steve Hedger, whose fellowship and comraderie have sustained me these many years. Thank you to my very excellent parents, Doug and Clare Habeeb, and the Habeeb, Kuehne, Root and Seeber families, who gave me wonderful opportunities and a foundation in intellectual inquiry, artistic expression, moral conscience, and faith. My husband, Dr. Robert Terry, has been a faithful partner and father through much absurdity and chaos. Lastly, and most importantly, I thank my daughter, Maia Kuehne-Seeber, artist and writer in her own right, who at a very critical moment during her sixth year surmised correctly that hope and belief would help me best. She is my pole star, inspiration, and guiding compass.

ABSTRACT

NOT EVEN OR PRETTY: IMPROVISATIONAL TEXTILES FROM RECYCLED CLOTHING

Karen A. Habeeb

November 14, 2013

This thesis accompanies an exhibit of hand-stitched abstract geometric compositions in wool and other fibers recycled from discarded clothing. My work is process-driven, centered in a method of improvisation intended to break down the egocentric, perfectionist tendencies that are a barrier to free artistic action and creativity. An introduction sets the context for inquiry into strategies to pursue creative work fluidly without anxiety. A chronological discussion of specific works illustrates the gradual learning process and research that led me to articulate an effective working practice. Various cultural traditions and artists inform my work: the Gee's Bend and other African-American improvisational quilts, the *wabi sabi* aesthetic and historic rural textiles of Japan, Byzantine icons, and 20th century artists Alberto Burri, Andy Goldsworthy, and Alan Thornhill. My method has developed from Zen Buddhist theories of "no mind" (*mushin*) and "beginner's mind" (*shoshin*), along with Nakamura and Csíkszentmihályi's ideas of "flow".

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INTRODUCTION

When I first began to make fiber art pieces, it was solely to fulfil a studio art requirement for the art history degree I was pursuing at the time. I found to my surprise that I was able to complete projects for this class with a steady fluidity, lack of anxiety, and consistent progress of work that I had never had in music or writing -- subjects in which I felt I had some expertise, training, and talent. I had often failed to successfully finish work in these disciplines.

I was very grateful to be allowed to switch my degree major to studio art after that semester. I kept working with the materials and techniques I used first for courses in fiber. But it seemed to me that my methods and ideas were unorthodox and eccentric, and I had a hard time explaining and justifying what I was doing and why. That might not have mattered had I been working on my own, but in a class critique one often has to present some kind of statement or rationale -- if only to have a reason why. For example, why one resists keeping a sketchbook or any visual catalog of ideas and inspirations, or why one insists on working on the floor instead of putting things on a wall to view, or why one cannot undo seams that have been done. These things I often did not understand myself-- I only knew as if compelled that some ways of working were "right" and some were not.

A larger and far more interesting question stayed in the background: why was this working? What was I doing differently here than in other disciplines that allowed for the sudden strange success? (By *success* I mean here *completion of an acceptable piece of work by a deadline*. For me, that was a significant step forward, though it may not be a useful criterion for others.) Was it a fluke? Was it luck? Could it persist and be replicated? Could I learn to apply this method or principles to other areas of my life and creative work?

To answer these questions, and not least to have something to say at final critiques, when presenting a finished work for a grade, I looked to historical traditions and contemporary artists that either resonated deeply with me or had strong similarities of methods or aesthetics. I hoped that research would show that the way I was working had validity and a meaningful rationale. I began with inspirations from the Gee's Bend tradition and that of other African-American quilters. I felt a strong affinity with the Japanese *wabi sabi* aesthetic, and was deeply moved by rural Japanese textile traditions, particularly that called *boro*. Elements of necessity, efficiency, economy, and functional utility-- art produced under strong constraints of time, energy, or resources-- seemed very important to pursue. Piecing and patchwork -- the methods, the cultural and personal reasons for these techniques, the economic conditions they imply -- became a strong vein of research. I studied Australian *waggas*, Korean *bojagi*, Buddhist *kasaya* robes. Over time, I read up on other African improvisational textile traditions, ethnomathematics. This is only a sampling from the list. I revisited some old

friends from the early Qing Dynasty: Shi Tao and Zhu Da, “eccentric” individualist painters and philosophers of art. I wrestled with waste in the global textile industry and the concept of “sloppy craft”. I drew on the 20th century artists Alberto Burri, Andy Goldsworthy, and Alan Thornhill for validation and inspiration. I began to study improvisation in a serious way, not as some haphazard scrambling technique of the lazy and late, but as a discipline with principles and methods of its own, though they are better recognized in the fields of music (jazz), theater, and, increasingly, business. I began to study Zen.

What follows is a discussion of individual pieces from the show and the research, background, techniques, and insights that accompanied each work. It seems important for me to explain that these works are not significant, really, as objects in themselves. They are exercises and vehicles for learning, evidence of work, not only the end result of it. I am happy if people find pleasure or meaning in them, and they are functionally useful as textiles at base, but the significant thing to me is that I believe I have learned what I set out to learn by creating them. I think I *have* been able to articulate a creative method and stance that is applicable and useful in my larger life.

METHODS, INFLUENCES, AND RATIONALE

The Quilts of Gee's Bend and Function over Form

I needed a blanket. It was the middle of January. I had a little apartment and a three year old child. We were chilly. I had no extra money. More pressingly, I had no extra energy. Certainly not the will to get up and dress and go down the three flights of stairs and drive to KMart™. And the baby was sleeping.

What I did have was clothes. A large pile of old clothes, most of them not even mine, spilled out of the closet. I had needle, thread, and scissors. No machine. Even if I had wanted one -- I didn't. They frighten me, frankly—and it would have woke the baby.

I grabbed two old wool sweaters. One was green and one greyish. Someone had mistakenly washed them on hot and felted them. (Felting is the process of transforming wool from the springy stretched knitted stuff of your new sweater or scarf to a denser, tougher, un-stretchy shrunk version. Hot water and agitation do it best.) Numbly, I cut the largest squarish pieces I could out of them. (Straight edges sew together easier. Large pieces mean fewer seams. That means less and quicker sewing.) I laid them out on the floor. I did not have a table or chairs. If the baby woke up it would be all over. I stitched them together fast with a big needle and big sloppy stitches.

Figure 1. *Containment*. 2011. Wool and linen.

Some months before, I had been lucky to see the exhibit *The Quilts of Gee's Bend* at the Speed Museum, and I was thinking of that as I sewed. The fairly isolated town of Gee's Bend has become famous in the last decades as the site of a distinctive tradition of African-American quilting that goes back perhaps a century and a half ¹. It is clear in the narratives of the makers that these quilts were made for use and out of need, in homes that lacked modern conveniences of heat, running water, and access to big box stores, by women that *worked*, often in fields, while raising large families, caring for relatives and putting food on the table each day. Two things had struck me in particular out of the many revelations from that exhibition, and I thought of them now as I stitched.

The first was that a strong thread in the narratives of the quilts was the expression of grief using the clothes of the departed. Often these would be "work-clothes" of male relatives that had passed, in heavy denims in blues and browns and greys. These quilts were some of the most powerful in the group.

"It was when Daddy died. I was about seventeen, eighteen. He stayed sick about eight months and passed on. Mama say, 'I going to take his work clothes, shape them into a quilt to remember him, and cover up under it for love.' She take all his old pants legs and shirttails, take all the clothes he had, just enough to make that quilt, and I helped her tore them up."

--Arlonzia Pettway, recalling her mother Missouri Pettway's words from 1942²

Figure 2. Lutisha Pettway (1925-2001). “Bars” work-clothes quilt. Circa 1950.

Denim and cotton. 80 x 84 inches.³

Figure 3. Lucy Mooney (c.1880-1969). Blocks and strips work-clothes quilt.

Circa 1935. Cotton, denim, wool. 87 x 68 inches. ⁴

The second striking aspect was that in contrast to the more widespread patchwork tradition, which tends to weight form and display over function, and the other quilters at Gee's Bend prioritized function, creating an idiom of economy to develop their own conventions of form based on constraint, individuality, and improvisation. Many of the makers attested to the need to make quilts quickly to keep warm, without time for fancy, exact piecing according to a pattern. One memorably recalled comparing her quilts with more traditional ones down the road—that her quilts might be just “lazy gals”, but they kept her children warm just the same.⁵ Arlonzia Pettway reported, “It was when my mother-in-law told me I didn’t have to follow nobody’s ideas that I learnt myself to follow my head.”⁶

As I threaded my needle and cut up the green and grey wool for this piece, I reminded myself I had recently lost someone very dear. I was making a grief blanket, I said. And I did not think too much about how to design it or what it would look like. I put the pieces together so it was big enough to cover my daughter and it did not look too ugly. If it kept us warm, I told myself, it was good enough.

Though I did not realize it then, the lack of any expectation of excellence or artistic merit, and a concrete, easily obtainable metric for success (functionality as blanket) would prove to be the keys to my artistic process.

Figure 4. *Transgression Blues*. 2011. Wool and silk/cotton blend.

Seams and strips

As I worked on the first pieces, I used a method of construction in which I would lay out a blanket composition rapidly on the floor-- in a magic but transient window of time during naps or daycare or visit to grandma's-- and sew the various pieces together fast into a whole with large, quick stitches. Once the entire blanket was assembled (and could be worked on safely without someone messing it up or losing any bits), I would go back and cover each seam with strips of cloth recycled from old clothing like the rest of the blanket.

I had two reasons to do this. First, I thought that my sloppy seams were ugly. But this did not hinder me because, like a writer beginning, I knew this was "only a draft", only for expediency, and this would not be the finished product. I was about to "edit", and cover the ugly parts over. Second, I had some idea that my hand-sewn, hasty seams into knit wool fabric (which has gaps, and is prone to unravel; nor is wool yarn the strongest fiber) were weak. I did not think that they would hold together very long, or be able to support the weight of the finished blanket once it hung on a wall (or went through the wash).

I wanted to reinforce them with additional, more careful support. I stitched them down into the wool with a "hidden stitch", also called a "ladder stitch"; in this kind of seam, the thread and stitches cannot be seen at the surface.⁷ I really, really liked the visual effect this technique made. The stitching seemed to embed the fabric strips into the wool, making a beautiful juncture between the matte woven fabric and the fuzziness of the knit wool. The stitched seams became emphasized as actual lines of composition in ways I had not anticipated.

Even though I retained my lack of expectation or planned result, I began now to think of what I was doing for its linear qualities. I began to see the seams as the most important visual and meaning-making element. Other people who looked at it seemed to focus on the composition, the colors and the various blocks. I had a hard time articulating that the seams were what I cared about; the seams were the art.

In fact, these hand-sewn seams have the capacity to be very strong. A hand-sewn seam may not be as uniformly tight as a machine-made one, but because of this, the juncture may be more flexible, and have more 'give' and 'play'. Depending on the material, the use, and the forces on a seam, this may make for more durability. It depends on many factors, but I came to reflect that my choices were not inherently defective and my work not necessarily weak. I came to see that even though the initial seams might be strong enough, I still wanted to hide them, and I still wanted to reinforce them. Underlying these thoughts were likely what psychotherapists are referencing when they speak of "establishing boundaries".

Figure 5. *Red Window Icon*. 2011. Wool, cotton/polyester blend, metal zippers.

Figure 6. *Blue Window Icon*. 2012. Wool and rayon satin.

So, think: a seam is both the weakest place and the strongest place. It is a site of simultaneous separation and joining. The line of the seam is both binding and boundary. It is constructed action by action, stitch by stitch, in progressing time. The individual stitches, visible or hidden inside or at back, are the evidence of the passage of the needle. The entire history of a seam can be read by the eye; not just its end result. If one erodes away the rest of the fabric, the architectural scaffolding of the seams will remain the longest. They are the skeletal structure. Each stitch, its placement entering the fabric, its placement exiting, its individual tension, is a specific choice in time. When working this way, I am not making a single choice and then blindly, dully executing the design. It is a series of tiny choices, a continuous, progressive mindful awareness.

It was difficult to explain that by the time I'd finished these two pieces, *Red Window Icon* (fig.6) and *Blue Window Icon* (fig.5), I felt I'd drawn a set of lines, much as one would do with a pencil on paper, putting the pieces together not as I usually would to make up a certain size blanket, but in order to make up a pattern of internal lines. One does not really look at the spaces between lines in a drawing as anything substantial: it's negative space. Yet in my blankets the red or blue or grey wool between the seams, the stuff inside the edges, could not disappear, but had solidity.

In this red and grey piece particularly, I chose a matte grey fabric almost exactly the color of the grey wool behind it, and red knit cotton very close to the red wool for the strips. I think, somehow, at the same time I was highlighting the boundaries, I also wanted to erase them, make them hard to see, to make the

viewer look longer. I had the feeling that I was creating a window, creating a scaffolding in space, and making explicit gaps through which a viewer might peer and gaze into something beyond. Perhaps in this I was inspired by Byzantine and Greek Orthodox thinking about icons. Icons are not, for those of the faith, images or pictures in the most technical sense. They are rather windows, openings, to view another reality, in this case, Heaven. ⁸

In this piece, the stitched lines and the strips covering them became both the structure to support the opening in space, and the "bars" to prevent the viewer from entering into the other reality. At the same time, they both enabled and prevented connection. Any expression that simultaneously connotes one state or condition and its opposite fascinates me.

Piecing: Balancing the Crazy

As I continued to work with discarded and second hand sweaters, I would cut out any sections of them that had alternating colors, designs, or patterns. Most of the time I wanted to work with solid colors only; I found patterns too busy for my eyes and unharmonious. But after a year or so, I had amassed quite a pile of patterned scraps of wool. I began stitching them together like a puzzle. It grew outward and inward and in angular and spiral directions. My parameters for this blanket were just to make it roughly rectangular and not to have any of the same pieces touching. I began it rather naively-- but very quickly realized why most crazy quilters --that is, piecers of crazy quilts-- work in manageable, contained blocks. It isn't just for ease of management so as not to have the whole cumbersome thing laid out at once while working. It is also an efficient compositional technique. In an assemblage of square blocks, each square only needs to be coherent within itself, a reasonable mix of lights and darks and textures. The organizing principle for the eye becomes the square grid. Without that, I was just making one very large "block". The puzzle and the consistent triangulation of space and symmetry quickly became very complex, and very time consuming.

One of the consistent factors I try to achieve in any work is spatial balance, to try to guide the viewer's eye harmoniously through the work. (I say "the viewer's eye", but really I only have my own, and my only rubric is that a piece cannot make me agitated when I look at it.) I think of symmetries not in a usual Western bipolar sense, divided evenly along a central axis, but favor an

Figure 7. *Landscape Development: Green Space.* 2012. Wool.

asymmetry with a sense of motion organized into rough triangles. These are features common in traditional Japanese design aesthetics, and used prominently in garden design.⁹ A single, central focal point can dominate a composition unpleasantly, while two focal points cause the eye to bounce back and forth between them like a frenetic ping pong ball. Triads and arrangements in triangular shapes give a work what Keane calls "visual stability".¹⁰ To me, they allow the eye to move in a relaxed way and not become "stuck" in any one place.

When I am piecing I am always trying to make each new scrap balance, usually with color as the primary characteristic, but also with a scrap's size, shape, and texture. I stitch them down as I go, so there is not much chance to sit, ponder, and rearrange to make the best optimal overall composition. Rather, each decision for each new scrap has to be made in real time calculations for each, say, 2 by 3 inch scrap increase as I have more and more to balance it against. This work took me months, far longer than any other I have done, and by the end of it, I had a gap in the middle and was out of any patterned scraps that would work in that spot. For lack of a better option, I pulled a light green scrap out of another bag, and thought that maybe it was a solution that would harmonize this piece with other pieces if they hung together, since I had used a lot of that color elsewhere. I was happy with this work as an abstract composition, recycling scraps so as not to waste. But when it was put on the wall, I could see how much it evoked the encroachment of urban sprawl, the oppression of a busy and hectic world onto "green space", and the fragmentation

of and disregard for the natural environment. The global textile industry perpetrates a massive human and environmental toll on the world in terms of poor working conditions, water use, soil degradation, and toxic contamination. I was very aware of that as I thought about other pieces, as I began planning for an eventual thesis show, but not as I worked here. I seemed to have made a visual pun. Of all the work I have done, I think this is the only one that can be seen as having any representational overtones.

Figure 8. *Progressive Disintegration*. 2012. Cotton, polyester thread.

Boro, Authentic Utility, and Disintegration

This work, *Progressive Disintegration*, is made of navy and black cotton sweaters. I veered away from my usual material -- wool -- because I had been inspired by Japanese rural textiles, which often use indigo cottons, but perhaps also, I came to understand later, because of cotton's more "shaky" qualities. It does not felt or fuse together as wool does, and because of that it is far more prone to unravel, fray, stretch, break, and be generally unstable in a knit structure.

When I encountered textiles in the *boro* (=“ragged”) tradition (figs. 9, 10), I was profoundly moved and inspired. The author of the influential Sri Threads gallery and website describes *boro* :

“Japan's mended and patched textiles are referred to as boro, or ragged, both in Japan and abroad.

Boro textiles are usually sewn from nineteenth and early twentieth century rags and patches of indigo dyed cotton. The diversity of patches on any given piece is a veritable encyclopedia of hand loomed cotton indigo from old Japan. In most cases, the beautiful arrangement of patches and mending stitches is borne of necessity and happenstance, and was not planned by the maker.

Imagine that boro textiles were stitched in the shadows of farmhouses, often at night by the light of one dim andon, on the laps of farm women. This unselfconscious creative process has yielded hand-made articles of soulful beauty, each of which calls upon to be recognized and admired as more than the utilitarian cloth they were intended to be.”¹¹

Figure 9. Early indigo cotton *boro* futon cover with *sashiko* stitching (detail).

Reproduced from *KimonoBoy*, <http://www.kimonoboy.com> (Austin n.d.)¹²

Figure 10. Unknown, *Boro noragi* sleeve, early twentieth century. Cotton, 23.5 x 13 in. Sri Threads. Reproduced from srithreads.com ¹³

Boro had to me the same qualities that had so inspired me in the Gee's Bend tradition ¹⁴and in other textiles made with functional need and economy in mind, such as Australian *wagga* textiles (fig.11), which were composed of feed sacks and flour bags and any textile available in frontier 19th and early 20th century in that country. ¹⁵

A kind of partial fantasy of rustic authenticity was present in my initial understanding of *boro*. I had assumed it was made by rural people of their own cloth, which must have taken considerable time and resources to weave, and, being so valuable, would be reused intently even when worn out. Thinking so added to its sense of poignancy and close-to-the-source purity. Later, I read that cotton was a luxury imported fiber not often grown in Japan at the time. Most *boro* was pieced together from bits and rags of highly prized garments discarded by the elite, or recycled rags and fiber that was gathered by specialized merchants and shipped around to different ports in Japan for reselling. Cotton was sought because it was far more absorbent, warm, and soft than the fibers accessible to the rural Japanese for their own cultivation.¹⁶ These ragged things were carefully gathered and assembled from trickle-down secondhand materials of the rich. Because I also work with materials that are far more expensive when new than I could afford, which I only have access to because of a secondhand market, the real history, beyond my imagined projections of humble utilitarian simplicity, has a much greater meaning and resonance.

Figure 11. Red blanket *wagga* (detail). Wool and silk, dyed with eucalyptus.

National Wool Museum, Geelong, Victoria. Reproduced from Victoria and Albert Museum website.¹⁷

For *Progressive Disintegration* (fig. 8), I naturally started with large squareish chunks, doing only minimal trimming to make one piece fit along an angle with another. As one proceeds, the pieces one has available to work with become smaller and more irregularly shaped. For example, I might cut out the sleeve and open the seams of a sweater. After the easy and obvious chunks are used from the sleeves, front and back, there are the more complicated and smaller fragments: shoulders, neckline, wrists and waist, any leftovers that have been trimmed. This kind of large to small progression of available pieces as a sweater is "butchered" or broken down has been the same in all my work processes. This time, however, I had set for myself a top to bottom rule: I would only work in one vague direction, beginning from the top and adding on towards me as I knelt on the floor. Without my meaning to, this preserved the general chronology and order of the work. As one keeps fitting piece by piece into the puzzle moving downward and hoping to make a final piece that is blanket-like, the composition becomes more and more complicated, fragmentary, busy, skewed. This paralleled my mental state as I made this piece. I kept the unfinished and unravelling ragged edges and frayed appearance to reflect this.

Progressive Disintegration (fig.8) is on the floor because it does not look good under gravity: the cotton knit is too heavy and stretches it, distorting the lines and threatening to tear out the stitches. I also chose to place it on the floor because it heightens the association with landscape. Many people have commented on the associations of much of my work with landscape imagery. I did not intend that in the beginning, and perhaps it is a natural consequence of

working with so many irregular blockish geometric shapes with borders; but I like the similarity and the metaphors possible in the linking of the two.

Figure 12. *Work Unseen*. 2013. Wool and wool/cotton/acrylic blends. This side is the initial site of work, or the ostensible “right” side, although I chose to display the reverse side (fig. 13) later.

Mistakes, Randomness, and “Sloppy Craft”

At the time of *Work Unseen* (figs.12,13), I was very dispirited with making art in an academic context. In an immature fit of pique, I nearly burned all my work and quit. But again the reluctance to waste saved me. I still had so many scraps and shrunken sweaters left. What I had done so far could still be used for warmth. So I started another blanket, absolutely resolute that I would *not* be making art. It would only be a blanket. It would take its place in the stacks of blankets my family keeps in each room to handle temperature fluctuations and save on heating costs.

I worked on the floor as usual. By now I had developed a method to include safety pins instead of stitching each piece as I composed. I still honored the integrity of the method: once I had pinned something, I would not change it. But pinning allowed me to work even more rapidly on a whole composition and then get it off the floor. Later, when I thought the piece was finished, I turned it over, and realized its “wrong side” was perhaps better than its “right side”. This “surprise” element made me ponder again, as I often had before, what degree luck and randomness played in the success or failure of my work. I always seemed to make art best when I did not mean to. Again, as I had seen before, a lack of intention or plan appeared to be a key factor in how I was able to work without fear or stress.

Figure 13. *Work Unseen*. 2013. This is the “wrong” (reverse) side, which eventually became the display side. A red sweater which had been lined with dark grey wool accounted for the difference in coloration on the reverse.

Looking back over the past semesters, I knew that not all my "mistakes" had been felicitous and some of the random accidents were not successful. In the year before, convinced that I should try to do what real artists do, I had spent weeks sketching out, planning, and gathering the perfect green and black luxury wools for a piece I wanted to be horizontal, long, and to represent the organic forms of grass. I also decided I would show my ability to stitch precisely and neatly in many different textural techniques. I labored over this, and proudly brought it to class for a preliminary critique. No one liked it, and no one understood it, despite my explanations of my intentions. It did not evoke any emotional reaction. Since I had begun the program, it was the first time such a thing had happened. This led to the belief that ego-involvement-- wanting to impress-- and over-intellectualization had separated me from the spirit of the work.

This realization reinforced my feeling that I was most interested in the personal experience of the creative process, and in its therapeutic and stimulating effects. To create a physical object in a desired form was secondary. I did not care what happened to the finished pieces when I was done, though I had to keep them as the record of work and for this show. It is likely I will give them away or use them as blankets when this thesis project is completed.

To answer the above question of how randomness came into play, I made an experiment. I would make a blanket with rigorous random lack of attention to design. I would reach my hand into a bag of scraps without looking, and stitch

whatever I had onto whatever edge of the blanket was facing me as I had taken it up from the basket where it was stored. I would never look at the "composition" as a whole until it was of a certain finished size. If this work had a similar pleasing design as my others, I reasoned, then I was just lucky, and the methods I had developed were not so valuable as I thought. But (perhaps you will guess) the truly random work was truly hideous, and no one who saw it hesitated to tell me so. These "mistakes" showed that however "artless" and "unconscious" my ways of working might seem, what I was doing was not random and there were consistent factors that led to success, not just luck.

I should note also here that by this time I had become comfortable with the visible stitching and used it almost exclusively. As I mentioned earlier, I understood that the stitches did not need to be reinforced for strength. But I also saw they were the visual evidence of my work, my presence in the work, my passage here. It is alright that they are not even or pretty; they are expedient, functional, good enough to keep "it" together. I am not trying to claim anything else. In this way, my work may be seen as fitting into the larger trend in the fiber and mixed media arts toward a thing called "sloppy craft" (figs. 14,15). Though definitions vary, one critic suggests that sloppy crafters take on techniques and skills only as needed to meet their immediate artistic goals, rather than mastering and polishing their craft in order to use that mastery to be most free creatively without being limited by technique.¹⁸

Figure 14. Lisa Walker, *Think Tank*. Glue, beads, jewelry pieces.

Reproduced from *RCA by Numbers* website.¹⁹

Figure 15. Josh Faught, *Untitled*, 2008. Crocheted hemp and garden trellis. Reproduced from *Art and Perception* website. ²⁰

In my opinion, sloppy craft is an attempt to separate contemporary art work from the accusations of being "just craft" or "crafty", categorizations long used pejoratively to lessen the effort and impact of artists working in fibers, decorative arts, folk arts, etc. Since the emphasis on fine craft has traditionally been on perfection of technique and obvious mastery of medium and skills -- this is what sets fine crafters apart from amateurs-- sloppy craft can be seen as a resistance to that categorization. In other words, artists adopting sloppy craft are refusing to be judged as "crafters" at all, and instead asserting their place as equals in contemporary art proper, making work that should be judged on its overall impact and meaning rather than its technical skill. For my part, I tend to believe I am working in a style that merges the traditional view and the "sloppy". I am very capable of fine stitching and patient technical crafting. But I choose to limit myself to simple tools and relatively uncomplicated techniques. Within that scope, I believe I have attained a certain basic mastery that allows me to work freely without distractions of technical difficulties. But not having anything to prove, and letting go of the need to work to any arbitrary criteria of "excellence" has empowered me. Indeed, I don't even know what any standard of predetermined "excellence" would be, art being largely subjective. I have been able to let go of perfectionism and mental paralysis and simply do creative work as I never could before.

Influences: Burri, Goldsworthy, Thornhill

At the time I was researching Arte Povera and especially Alberto Burri, a WWII surgeon and POW turned artist in post-war Italy, because a segment of his work consists of rough stitching and utilitarian materials.

Though Burri insisted that his only concern was formal considerations, and the use of humble natural materials, here burlap (fig. 16), to break from established "high art" conventions, it is impossible to look past the resonance in his work with the trauma of war and his work suturing wounds.²¹

Figure 16. Alberto Burri, *Composition*, 1953. Oil, gold paint, and glue on burlap and canvas, 33 7/8 x 39 1/2 in. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

Reproduced from *Guggenheim Collection Online* website.²²

Likewise, Andy Goldsworthy has always been a favorite artist I look to for inspiration. One of Goldsworthy's consistent themes is the void (fig. 17), or to create a place of absence. In the film *Rivers and Tides*, a documentary of his process and work, he suggests that this is an expression of the absence of a departed loved one. He also uses a method espousing improvisational composition in real time, embracing transience, the effect of natural forces of weathering and decay, and available materials.²³

Figure 17. Andy Goldsworthy, *Rowen Leaves and Hole*. 1987. Rowen leaves. Yorkshire Sculpture Park, UK. Reproduced from *LG Blog UK website*.²⁴

Alan Thornhill (fig.18) has been a third major influence. Thornhill's sculptural process evolved so that he felt he needed to abandon maquettes, armatures, and planning entirely to overcome creative inhibition. ²⁵In his personal artist's statement, he writes:

"His sculptures evolve through a prolonged dialogue with his medium, which enables him to draw on his deepest resources and faithfully to transplant images from the unconscious to the clay... His work is a celebration of the search for self-discovery and for a rooted sense of personal autonomy. Its reference is to the inner rather than the external world." ²⁶

Figure 18. Alan Thornhill, *Untitled*. Terracotta. Reproduced from *Alan Thornhill Sculpture* website. ²⁷

Figure 19. *Rent Curtain.* 2013. Wool.

Figure 20. *Sedimentary.* 2013. Wool.

Creating Gaps

Rent Curtain (fig.19), *Sedimentary* (fig.20), and *Ragged* (fig.22) each use prominent gaps or negative space and visible, often ragged stitches. Again, this began as a happy accident. I had not finished the seams in *Rent Curtain*, but hung it on the wall to work on it, and the weight of the piece caused the openings to take on a shape that spoke to me. I saw this as a continuation again of the preoccupation with creating zones of access into another realm, passageways into the space of the wall and beyond, with tearing through the barriers that separate us from the realms and people with which we long for connection. I had made other pieces before this that were obvious barriers, a barred and boarded shut door, yet still with ambiguous small gaps. One was titled *The Way is Shut* (fig.21). *Sedimentary* began with thoughts of layers of rock that fuse together, yet still water is able to seep through. *Ragged* had long frustrated me because I had stitched a prominent black 'X' in its center medallion. The figure was distracting, and referenced the Housetop quilting pattern in a way I didn't want. I intended to discard the whole piece, until one day I realized I could just ... remove the site of frustration, take the "blockage" out and create a space through. I took scissors and hacked the center panel out, and that finished the work.

Figure 21. *The Way is Shut* . 2012. Wool, cotton brocade, pushpins.

Figure 22. *Ragged.* 2013. Wool, acrylic, polyester thread.

CONCLUSION

This last anecdote, along with the many other “last minute” and “unplanned” choices and accidents I have described, illustrates why I have adopted improvisation as a crucial principle in my work. Successful improvisation in music and theater downplays individual ego and emphasizes group success through awareness, and openness to follow creative, intuitive choices instead of blocking them. ²⁸

Though it seems obvious, one cannot really know the end at the beginning. Perfectionism and ego can lure us into the belief that we can, and a kind of paralysis of anxious control ensues. Acceptance of that reality of not knowing if success is assured, not being able to control all things from the outset, and choosing to proceed anyway have become central to my work in creative pursuits, and, I hope, in my approach to life’s choices. It is only by beginning, working consistently despite not knowing the final outcome, continuing to make decisions, and trusting in my ability to alter course according to what arises that I can work effectively.

When I practice art in this mode, I become gradually more adept at entering a state of “flow”, the state described famously by Nakamura and Csíkszentmihályi. The hallmarks of “flow” are immersion in the present, loss of

self-consciousness, and experience of the activity as autotelic (intrinsically rewarding and pleasurable without regard to result). Flow is not a small thing: achieving it regularly and consistently contributes to a transformed, joyful, actuated life and stable positive affect.²⁹ Flow is related to the state of “no mind” (*mushin*) described in Zen Buddhism, a state in which one may act freely without anger, fear, ego, or judgment.³⁰

I am certain that art practice helped me to realize this understanding because, lacking much education or experience, I had to approach it with a “beginner’s mind”, the Zen Buddhist concept *shoshin*.³¹ A beginner, an apprentice, has a welcoming openness, enthusiasm, and lack of preconceptions. As Suzuki explains, even as one gains experience and mastery, this state of mind should continue be cultivated, because with it comes an openness to possibilities and a joyful, unlimited quality of life. In contrast to my other creative pursuits in music and writing, areas in which I believed I was talented and knowledgeable, I knew that I was basically ignorant about making art. I had no basis for any standard of achievement or excellence. I had to operate blindly at first. I did not realize that this state of unlearnedness was an asset at the beginning; my whole process has served to make me learn it after the fact. Now appreciating its value, I will work diligently to practice beginner’s mind in everything. I do not know if I have gained any mastery of art as a result of this work; but I know that art has shown me the foundations of mastery, and I am a small step further on the way.

END NOTES

¹ Many works have been published on the Gee's Bend Quilts and their makers. In addition to having viewed the traveling exhibit *The Quilts of Gee's Bend* at the Speed Museum, I have primarily used *The Quilts of Gee's Bend* (Beardsley, et al. 2002), and *Gee's Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt* (Arnett, Cubbs and Metcalf 2006). Amei Wallach's article "Fabric of Their Lives" for *Smithsonian Magazine* (October 2006) provides a useful summary and introduction.

¹ Joanne Cubbs, "A History of the Work Clothes Quilt," in *Gee's Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt*, eds. Paul Arnett, Joanne Cubbs, and Eugene W. Metcalf, Jr (Atlanta: Tinwood Books, 2006), 73.

¹ Lutisha Pettway, "*Bars*" work-clothes quilt, c.1950. Denim and cotton, 80 x 84 in. Reproduced from John Beardsley et al., *The Quilts of Gee's Bend* (Atlanta: Tinwood Books, 2002), 69.

¹ Lucy Mooney, *Blocks and strips work-clothes quilt*, c.1935. Cotton, denim, wool, 87 x 68 in. Reproduced from John Beardsley et al., *The Quilts of Gee's Bend* (Atlanta: Tinwood Books, 2002), 63.

¹ Personal recall of exhibit texts, viewed at *The Quilts of Gee's Bend* travelling exhibition, Speed Museum.

¹ (Erickson 2004)

¹ I thank Lida Gordon for suggesting and teaching me this stitch.

¹ (Patsourakos 2013)

¹ (Keane 1996), 134-36.

¹ (Keane 1996), 136.

¹ (Szczepanek 2003)

¹ (Austin n.d.)

¹ (Szczepanek, A nicely patched boro length: noragi sleeve n.d.)

¹ (Martin 2004). Lois Martin skillfully draws a comparison between the Gee's Bend tradition and Japanese *boro* aesthetics in this article.

¹ (Hucker n.d.)

¹ (Durstun 2011) ; (Sorgato and Crisa 2004)

¹ (Red Blanket Wagga n.d.)

¹ (Underwood 2009)

¹ (Knott 2010). Knott reviews a presentation by Diane Rocha Watt, discussing Lisa Walker's deliberate use of "amateur" materials and the appearance of an unskilled process to "purposefully pursue the randomness and creativity in 'sloppy craft' " in this work, *Think Tank*, and others.

¹ (Underwood 2009)

¹ (Blessing n.d.)

¹ (Blessing n.d.)

¹ (Goldsworthy 2001)

¹ (Andy Goldsworthy 2009)

¹ (Alan Thornhill 2013)

¹ (Thornhill n.d.)

¹ (Thornhill, Untitled n.d.)

¹ (James n.d.)

¹ (Csikszentmihalyi and Nakamura 2001)

¹ (Fink 2012)

¹ (Suzuki 2010)

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APPENDIX : Artist's Gallery Statement

My work primarily involves 2D abstract compositions in fabrics reclaimed from discarded clothing or other textiles, most often wool and linen. I started to work with sweaters not just because of my love affair with wool, but because I felt that they were often not appreciated or understood in our society, labelled as hot and scratchy or rough, and mistakenly washed on hot and ruined for use for what they were made for. I feel I have to recycle in order to honor the vast amount of labor that has gone into textile production worldwide, and the incredible toll of waste, water use, and pollution that the textile industry perpetrates on the global environment. It's also true that on some level, clothes evoke and represent the body and the past wearer, the potential wearer. When I disassemble garments, and reassemble them into something new, I feel I might be creating possibilities and visions for new bodies, new lives, new realities for me and for others. We all get broken down, cut up, underappreciated or thrown away in life. I believe that, like the clothes, we can all be remade into something useful and beautiful again.

I compose new pieces in a rapid, improvisational style, working flat, usually on a table, floor, or bed, using whatever materials I happen to have to hand. This keeps me connected to the idea that whatever else I am thinking of in the art vein, the ultimate utilitarian purpose at hand is to create something that can keep us or our home warm. I hand-sew everything, in part because I do not like the noise of machines, but also, and more importantly, because the practice of handsewing allows me to make decisions at a more measured and thoughtful pace. The activity is repetitive, physically and sensorily engaging, and creates space for meditation or reflection. I am also able to have much more control over the tension and placement of stitches one by one, and this is necessary for the kind of materials and effects I desire. For each project, I tend to set myself a few simple arbitrary rules or parameters, such as "no piece can touch another of its own kind", or "I will only use these three colors" or "this blanket must be big enough to cover my daughter". When I am working, I do not plan or sketch ahead. In fact, I deliberately try not to plan, but adopt a mental stance of no-thinking and no-expectation; I cultivate the belief that no creative choice can be inherently good or bad, and that one choice is as good as another in any moment. If, remaining aware, I see that a result is not good as I go, I can correct it moving forward. This stance cultivates trust in myself, and teaches me to avoid the paralysis of perfectionism and overthinking. Just as we cannot go backward in time and undo our mistakes, I cannot undo any seams or placement that I have made. I must find a way to incorporate all that I have done into

the final product. These pieces have been the vehicle by which I have come to understand this method, which I now realize can be an approach to life as well as to creative work. Until now, I have never been able to finish any creative project.

In keeping with this thinking, much of my aesthetic favors the rough, ragged, and unfinished. In my early work I tried to cover my seams with strips of other cloth because I thought that they were ugly, and perhaps not strong enough to hold together on their own. Later, I realized they were certainly strong enough, and what is more, they were the visual evidence of my work, my presence in the work, my passage here. They are not even or pretty; they are expedient, functional, good enough to keep "it" together. I am not trying to claim anything else. I have wanted people to understand that a seam is both the weakest place and the strongest place at once; the place where things are cut apart and joined simultaneously; the wound and its own healing; the boundary that separates and the connection that binds together. This process is not always easy, smooth, or clean.

I have been inspired and influenced by the work of the Gee's Bend quilters and the African American improvisational quilting tradition; the Japanese wabi-sabi aesthetic, and especially the Japanese folk textile tradition called boro. The early Qing dynasty painters Shitao and Zhu Da, eccentric individualists in style, have helped shape my thinking and methods, as well as the 20th century artists Alberto Burri, Andy Goldsworthy, and Alan Thornhill. I have only a rudimentary understanding of Zen Buddhism; that practice has made all the difference, however. I am very grateful for the support of the University of Louisville, and Professors Gordon, Lai, and Skinner. The students of the Fibers Workshop and my family and friends provided unfailing comradery and encouragement. I must also add that without the generous aid from Dr. and Mrs. Cressman, and the gracious room to work at the Bill Fischer Studios, I would have been entirely lost. Thank you.

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