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ASSEMBLING NARRATIVES:
QUILTING IMPULSES IN CONTEMPORARY ART

SABRINA GSCHWANDTNER, KAROLYN HATTON, FAITH RINGGOLD,
DONNA SHARRETT, JOHN SIMS, AND ANNA VON MERTENS

Curated by Donna Harkavy and Flavia S. Zúñiga-West
April 11 – June 27, 2010

Opening reception: Sunday, April 11, 2:00–5:00 p.m.

Until the 1970s, quilts were historically seen and displayed as gendered utilitarian objects. As they moved from the bed to the wall, they typically were designated as folk or decorative art. Once on the wall however, the aesthetic character of quilts began to trump their former role as quotidian objects, and slowly they moved into the realm of fine art. This shift was due in part to the eroding boundaries between “high” art and popular culture, a phenomenon that began in the early decades of the 20th century, exploded in the 1960s, and has continued unabated into the present. One of the manifestations of these blurred boundaries was the incorporation of non-traditional materials and processes into the arena of painting and sculpture.

Materials and tools—fabric, thread, and needle—once considered the exclusive domain of women, were initially used by feminist artists of the 1960s and 1970s both as a reaction to the hegemony of white male artists and as a way to elevate historical women’s work. Since then the use of these tools and materials has evolved into a more gender-neutral and generally accepted artistic approach.

In addition to using quilting materials, artists today are also embracing some of quilting’s techniques such as piecing together salvaged fabrics and using intricate stitching patterns. There is a renewed appreciation for an art that employs humble materials and celebrates a slow process of

creation with an emphasis on the handmade. In an age of environmental awareness, some artists happily recycle old materials, giving them new life and transforming them in the process.

Throughout their history, quilts have been markers of social and personal history. Stories and events are embedded in their very fabric through the use of carefully selected materials, old clothes, or personal mementos. Quilts often documented important milestones—births, weddings, departures, and ultimately deaths. The time spent constructing these quilts was in itself a kind of symbolic passage.

As the primary tool of making quilts, the needle replaced the pen as a narrative instrument. Artists today continue to utilize the essential characteristics of quilts as conveyers of stories, biographies, and memories. *Assembling Narratives: Quilting Impulses in Contemporary Art* presents the work of six artists—Sabrina Gschwandtner, Karolyn Hatton, Faith Ringgold, Donna Sharrett, John Sims, and Anna Von Mertens—who appropriate quilting as a symbolic repository of personal and communal experiences. Even as they borrow the forms and processes of this traditional craft, they push the conventions of quilting in new directions by using unconventional materials, by cross-pollinating different disciplines, or by taking a decidedly conceptual approach.

Faith Ringgold has been an early and influential figure in bridging the realms of fine art and craft by creating hybrid works that combine elements of quilting and painting. As a political activist, social historian, and feminist artist, she has created an innovative body of work that chronicles her African-American experience. Ringgold began using cloth, instead of stretched canvas, in the 1970s with her Thangka paintings. Inspired by the embroidered Tibetan Buddhist paintings, this series encouraged Ringgold to return to her artistic and familial roots as the daughter of a seamstress and dress designer. They defiantly challenged the narrow parameters of what constituted high art and celebrated the innovative possibilities of women’s art. In the 1980s, Ringgold began making “story quilts”—narrative paintings with extended text, made of canvas and bordered by pieces of fabric. Driven by the civil rights and feminist movements, Ringgold’s imagery and storylines reflect her experience of the anger and pain of women in the African-American community.

Though the majority of her work highlights the female experience, Ringgold has created a handful of works that address the lives of African-American men. *No More War Story Quilt* (1985) and *No More War Story Quilt Part II* (1985) are collages of text, canvas, and fabric. In *No More War Story Quilt*, a female narrator, speaking in an African-American vernacular, tells the story of Tommy Lee, a black soldier missing in action during the Korean War. Her narrative expresses the frustration, suspicion, irony, and hopelessness experienced by African-Americans, who, in 1950s America, were sent across the world to fight for rights they did not have at home.

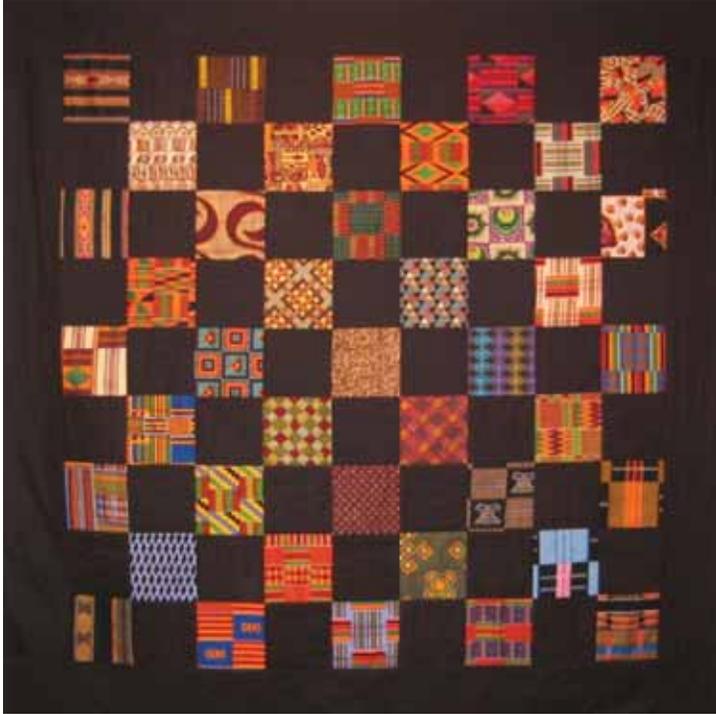
No More War Story Quilt Part II assaults the viewer with explicit language and raw descriptions of the atrocities of war. It powerfully conveys the momentary erasure of Tommy Lee’s racial identity and the bittersweet flash of equality. The explosive power of the text is mirrored by the abstract, graphic imagery, reminiscent of the patterns of



Faith Ringgold *No More War Story War Quilt*, 1985
© Faith Ringgold 1985



Faith Ringgold *No More War Story Quilt Part II*, 1985
© Faith Ringgold 1985



John Sims *My SquareRoots*, 2008

camouflage fatigues and nuclear fallout, printed onto large rectangles of fabric. *Part II* ultimately ends on a note of optimism as Tommy Lee and his father-in-law watch Jackie Robinson play baseball, a beacon of hope for the black community.

Sabrina Gschwandtner pushes her practice beyond prescribed limits of craft, employing an interdisciplinary approach that combines different mediums in unconventional ways. For example, she mixes knitting with performance, and film with sewing. Gschwandtner's translucent quilts are constructed out of strips of 16mm film that she salvaged from a cache of documentary films that were deaccessioned from the Fashion Institute of Technology. These educational shorts addressed subjects such as fashion, textiles, and quilting. The resulting film quilts, named after the movies from which they are made, elaborate on the conversations of tactile cinema and of gendered objects in fiber art. Gschwandtner fuses what has typically been a male-dominated medium—film—with quilting—a traditionally female craft—to create non-traditional quilts that memorialize their own history.¹ However, the artist likes to point out that in the era of early Hollywood, most film editors were actually women. Their sewing skills provided the expertise for the tasks required by film editing: Moving film through a projector (or Steenbeck) is similar to feeding fabric through a sewing machine. Moreover, cutting and splicing are integral to both filmmaking and quilting.

Gschwandtner was also struck by the similarities between the repeating imagery of film and the patterning of quilts. Flowing together to create a narrative, the individual frames of film are not unlike the pieces of a patchwork quilt and Gschwandtner fashions her film quilts after traditional quilt patterns. The reclaimed filmstrips are ideally suited for string quilt patterns, which are traditionally

made by sewing together long, thin fabric scraps left over from other projects. This pattern is the basis of *Quilts in Women's Lives* (2009), a work in which the detailed density of the film creates a push/pull between the individual elements and the overall pattern. Gschwandtner also exploits film as a medium of light by displaying her hybrid quilt in front of a light source, thus creating a textile of luminous splendor.

Symmetry, balance, rhythm, permutation, and transformation are at the foundation of John Sims's work. As an artist, educator, and curator he seeks to integrate "the tenets of mathematics and art, mind and hand, creativity and analysis."² For Sims, quilts are a metaphor for community; they bring together disparate but related elements into a unified whole. Whereas most of the other artists in the exhibition work in a solitary manner, Sims began quilting as a communal activity. He thought quilting would provide a visual language that would give material form to abstract mathematical ideas, particularly representations of π and the Pythagorean Theorem. In 2005, not yet knowing how to quilt, but in the possession of some African fabric, he sought assistance at Alma Sue's Quilt Shop in Sarasota, Florida, whose proprietor, along with her fellow Amish quilters, agreed to teach and work with Sims in exchange for fabric.

One of the fruits of this collaboration is *My SquareRoots* (2008), a patchwork quilt composed of cloth from Ghana and Harlem. As is often the case with the materials of traditional quilts, Sims's cloth carries within it the legacy of its origin—in this case, African life. Originally called *The African*, the current title *My SquareRoots* is a clever pun on geometrical form, mathematical concept, and African-American heritage. This muted, yet exuberant quilt is a riot of barely restrained syncopated rhythm and pattern.

Each of Sims's quilts has a corresponding mate. The match for *My SquareRoots* is *HyperQuilt* (2008), a digital projection compiled of images of thirteen actual quilts. The central image of *HyperQuilt* is *My SquareRoots*. The other quilts are Sims's exploration of the permutations of π in various bases, the Pythagorean Theorem, and two self-portraits. In *Seeing Pi* (the quilt in the upper right corner), Sims charted the irrational number in base ten. In a preparatory drawing, Sims began his number sequence (3.1415926. . .) in the center of the grid and allowed the numbers to spiral outward. He then assigned each number a corresponding color for the quilt. In deference to his mentors, he chose colors consistent with the Amish palette. *Seeing Pi's* inverse is a black and white version called *Pi in Binary*.

As with *My SquareRoots*, *HyperQuilt* has a political and social subtext. For example, in *American Pi: Base 3* and *African American Pi: Base 3*, Sims plotted π in base 3, using red, white, and blue for the former and green, black, and red for the latter. With the colors of the American flag on the left, and the Pan-African flag on the right, the artist places *My SquareRoots*, and thus himself, squarely in the center of contrasting traditions. Ultimately, the *HyperQuilt* becomes a meditation on math, art, community, history, and identity.

Donna Sharrett's intricate constructions pay homage to centuries of women who labored with their hands to fashion quilts, embroider cloth, tat lace, or string rosary beads. Equally significant, her elegiac art honors the memory of her mother and brother. Sharrett initially began sewing while taking care of her dying mother. The activity focused her mind and hand during a difficult time, and forged an intergenerational link with her mother and grandmother through a common skill.

After her mother's death, sewing became the mainstay of Sharrett's art. She also began to research the use of roses and hair in mourning rituals and to incorporate them into her work.³ Sharrett's materials are loaded with personal and symbolic meaning. She finds common bonds between objects that simultaneously have personal meaning for her, while carrying universal significance. Likewise, the sources of her imagery come from such symbolically powerful forms as mandalas and medieval rose windows.

In 2001, Sharrett suffered another painful loss—the unexpected death of her brother, a musician. While she was cleaning out his apartment, she found guitar strings and a jar of what turned out to be guitar-string ball-ends among his other musical equipment. She decided to incorporate these into her work as an act of remembrance. In addition, she named her pieces after her brother's favorite songs. Such was the transformation of her work from generalized memorial to individual memento.⁴

The structure of *Forever Young* (2007-2008), based on the design of the 13th-century rose window at the cathedral in Lausanne, is a series of concentric circles. Sharrett often uses circular forms because of their allusion to cycles, to the interconnectedness of things, and to the continuum of time wherein past, present, and future are embraced by a single shape. The acknowledgment of time as a continuous cycle is reinforced by the incorporation of dirt—with its association of “ashes to ashes, dust to dust”—which the artist has “smooshed” into lace and cut into a rosette pattern. Sharrett was inspired by recovery efforts at Ground Zero, which were taking place simultaneously to her own process of sifting through her brother's possessions. She was particularly moved by the unearthing of a wedding band in the dirt and rubble of the World Trade Center. In addition to motivating her use of dirt, that story led her to incorporate small golden rings into this and other compositions.

Radiating circles are also the predominant motif of *The Long Black Veil* (2003-2008), a work that strongly evokes the presence of the artist's brother. The circular form is reiterated through the inclusion of many pennies, all dated 1958, the year of Sharrett's birth. Her brother had saved them and given them to the artist on one of her birthdays. Each of the pennies is surrounded by

a halo of rose beads, hand made by the artist based on a 13th-century recipe used by nuns to make rosary beads. The beads function not only as beautiful objects, but as symbols of ritual. In her extraordinary works of art, Sharrett pieces together the remnants of cherished lives to tell the story of grief, healing, and remembrance.



Donna Sharrett *Forever Young*, 2007-2008

Traditional quilts often employ a kind of vernacular abstract language. **Karolyn Hatton** makes literal the idea of vernacular in her appliquéd banners that deconstruct language patterns and boldly proclaim the ubiquitous fillers of everyday speech. Though Hatton works with a range of media and artistic strategies, she often returns to fabric as a favored material. The tacility of cloth coupled with a hands-on approach provides her a refuge from an over-technologized world.



Karolyn Hatton *Whatever*, 2009

The seeds for these banners were planted years ago in Boston. Hatton had just returned to the States with her Irish husband, a teacher who was stunned by the frequency of the word “like” used by his American students. Hatton appliquéd the word onto a bright orange canvas and gave it as a gift to her husband. Her interest in the banner format actually dates back much further

to her childhood in Berkeley, California, where her mother was an activist. The artist’s early memories are populated with protest signs and demonstration banners. Hatton’s fascination with banners was further piqued when, as an adult, she had to attend a wedding preparation workshop in a convent. There, she noticed a series of banners with uplifting aphorisms that struck her as purely pedestrian and downright funny.

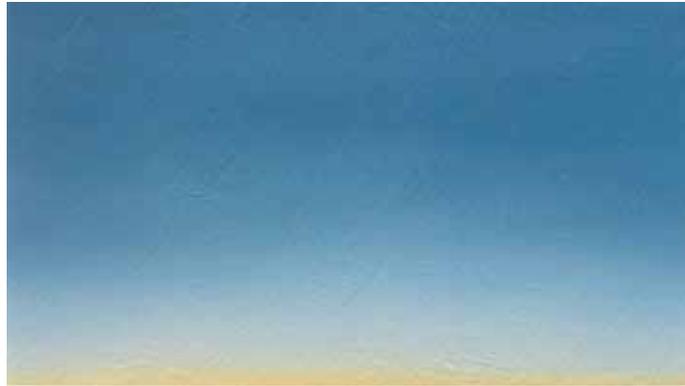
With deft humor, and not a little irony, Hatton decided to explore colloquial language, focusing on words such as “really,” “right,” “yeah,” “honestly,” and “whatever,” which are “about flow, but not substance.”⁵ Each word determines its own look. For *Whatever* (2009), the artist improvised on a Bauhaus type, and wanting a hand-made look, used wavering sewn lines, reminiscent of drawing, to fill in the letters. In *Right* (2009), she places the word, rendered in the typeface of an old manual typewriter, above a striped field resembling a television color test pattern. In much the same way meaning is embedded in material, Hatton’s typefaces invoke different associations. Playing with this idea, she tweaks both the look and content of words to make us aware of the ‘scraps’ of our language.

Anna Von Mertens’s work makes manifest the ineffable—the energy fields of the Big Bang or black holes, ocean currents, nuclear explosions, or time itself. Her artwork maps science and history through labor-intensive hand stitching across expansive fields of hand-dyed colored cloth. The enormity of her subjects is humanized by the intimacy of her process. Initially, Von Mertens displayed her quilts on bed-like, minimalist platforms. Even as a conceptual artist, she kept the horizontal orientation because of its association with traditional quilts and the bed’s central place in the home. More recently, however, she has moved her quilts from the bed to the wall, thus shifting the viewer’s relationship to a more cinematic orientation.

BIOGRAPHIES

Donna Harkavy is a New-York based independent curator. She has held curatorial positions at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Independent Curators International in New York, and the Worcester Art Museum in Massachusetts, where she founded a contemporary art program. As a free-lance curator, she has organized or co-organized exhibitions for a variety of institutions including “Say Good-Bye to...” for the Clifford Art Gallery at Colgate University, “Mark Innerst: Places of Wonder” for the Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute, and the traveling exhibitions, “The Culture of Violence” for the University Gallery at UMass-Amherst and “The Perpetual Well: Contemporary Art from the Collection of The Jewish Museum” for The Jewish Museum. Ms. Harkavy is Chair of the New York Chapter of ArtTable.

Flavia S. Zúñiga-West, Curatorial Assistant at the Northwest African American Museum, has a strong interest in American material culture and a passion for art and textiles. She graduated from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago with a B.F.A. in Fiber and Material Studies and earned a Master’s degree from the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences in the Museum Studies Program at New York University. Prior to working at NAAM, she interned at the Museum of Modern Art, the Museum of the City of New York, and The Art Institute of Chicago.



Anna Von Mertens *Dawn (Left Illinois for California, April 15, 1859)*, 2007

Dawn (Left Illinois for California, April 15, 1859) (2007) is from the series *Endings*, which explores significant moments in American history. Von Mertens uses a computer program to calculate the position of the stars at a given moment and from a specific location in order to document historical events. She then transfers her astronomical graphs

onto hand-dyed fabric and with needle and thread traces each star’s orbital trail. The works in this series focus on dawn and dusk. Charting these transitional moments in time, Von Mertens “considers how we straddle past and future, endings and beginnings.”⁶ The liminal space between darkness and light parallels the artist’s own location between the eroding borders of craft and fine art, traditional practice and conceptual approach.

The title *Dawn (Left Illinois for California, April 15, 1859)* is from an inscription on a 19th-century quilt made by two pioneer families as they are about to head west to California. For the artist, the fading stars symbolize a closing chapter in their lives, as the dawn suggests an unknown future. Even though the artist posits westward expansion as a rupture between past and future, *Dawn (Left Illinois for California, April 15, 1859)* nevertheless is a synthesis of past and present, a remarkable example of a contemporary quilt embodying the history of quilting. □

— Donna Harkavy and Flavia S. Zúñiga-West
New York City and Seattle 2010

NOTES

1. It has been noted that there is “an inherent tension between the sewing machine’s associations with female domestic labour and the film projector’s associations with the male world of technology.” Jessica Hemmings, “Reeling in the Years,” *Selvedge* 15 (2007): 58.
2. John Sims, “13 Quilts,” (unpublished artist statement in Donna Harkavy’s possession).
3. Roses were often strewn on the deceased, their belongings, and their graves. Moreover, flowers are often a primary element of makeshift shrines. In the Victorian era, the hair of a loved one was often preserved in mourning jewelry; a variation of that tradition was adapted by women in America during the Civil War. See Janet Marquardt-Cherry, “Donna Sharrett’s Mementos,” *Woman’s Art Journal* 23 (Autumn 2002/Winter 2003): 50.
4. Edward Gomez has eloquently noted, “. . . her thematic focus has shifted from an earlier interest in memorials to the ineffable nature of memory itself.” Edward Gomez, *Donna Sharrett: Reverb*, announcement brochure (New York: Pavel Zoubok Gallery, 2009).
5. Carolyn Hatton, conversation with Donna Harkavy, February 6, 2010.
6. Anna Von Mertens, quoted in Sara Meltzer Gallery, “Anna Von Mertens: Endings,” press release, 2008.

C H E C K L I S T

SABRINA GSCHWANDTNER

QUILTS IN WOMEN'S LIVES, 2009
16mm film, polyamide thread, cotton thread
71 x 48 inches
Courtesy of the artist

ONCE UPON A SUNNY MORNING, 2009
16mm film and polyamide thread
16 1/2 x 16 1/2 x 4 inches
Courtesy of the artist

KAROLYN HATTON

WHATEVER, 2009
Linen, cotton, and felt
51 1/8 x 89 1/8 inches
Courtesy of the artist

RIGHT, 2009
Wool, polyester, and cotton
63 1/2 x 59 1/8 inches
Courtesy of the artist

FAITH RINGGOLD

NO MORE WAR STORY QUILT, 1985
Intaglio, dyed and pieced fabric
63 1/2 x 97 1/2 inches
Courtesy of the artist and ACA Galleries, New York

NO MORE WAR STORY QUILT PART II, 1985
Intaglio, dyed and pieced fabric
71 x 101 inches
Courtesy of the artist and ACA Galleries, New York

DONNA SHARRETT

FOREVER YOUNG, 2007-2008
Rose petals, rose beads, synthetic hair, guitar-string ball-ends, garnets, bone beads, shell buttons, rings, synthetic pearls, cotton fabric, blue jeans, damask linen, silk ties, beads, and thread
32 x 32 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Pavel Zoubok Gallery, New York

THE LONG BLACK VEIL, 2003-2008
Rose petals, handmade rose beads, synthetic hair, guitar-string ball-ends, pennies, blue jeans, cotton fabric, rings, bone beads & buttons, synthetic pearls, and thread
26 x 26 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Pavel Zoubok Gallery, New York

JOHN SIMS

MY SQUAREROOTS, 2008
Cotton
92 x 92 inches
Courtesy of the artist

HYPERQUILT, 2008
Digital video installation
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist

ANNA VON MERTENS

DAWN (LEFT ILLINOIS FOR CALIFORNIA, APRIL 15, 1859), 2007
Hand-stitched, hand-dyed cotton
54 x 101 inches
Collection International Quilt Study Center & Museum, 2010.002.001

Cover: **Sabrina Gschwandtner**, *Quilts in Women's Lives*, 2009

A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

The genesis of this exhibition came from ideas articulated in Flavia S. Zúñiga-West's Master's thesis "Curatorial Perspectives & Exhibition Strategies: Quilts in the Museum and their Potential for Inclusive Discourse." We would like to thank David, Noah, and Karen Dorsky for their steadfast support of independent curators and their enthusiasm for this project. We would also like to thank the International Quilt Study Center & Museum for their loan, and all the artists and dealers, who made work available to us. We are grateful for the assistance we received from Dorian Bergen of ACA Galleries; Steve Weintraub and Pavel Zoubok of Pavel Zoubok Gallery; Rachel Gugelberger and Jeffrey Walkowiak of Sara Meltzer Gallery; and Grace Matthews, Faith Ringgold's assistant. We would like to acknowledge Anna Harsanyi for attending to all the registrarial details; Fred Wasserman and Daniel Ruiz for their editorial eye; Lowery Stokes Sims for her curatorial advice; Janis Ekdahl for providing research materials; and Debbie Rising for once again designing a beautiful brochure. A personal thank you to Rachel Crumpler for unflaggingly and cheerfully assisting on so many levels, and especially for her significant contributions to the essay. Finally, we extend a big thank you to all the artists for their responsiveness and participation in this exhibition.



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