

The Woman

Textiles have surrounded me all my life. I've watched loved ones use them both as a form of expression and for practicality. Through these experiences, I've developed a fascination with the materials and the process. I want to define my relationship with textiles as a woman. The history of textiles and women have been intertwined for centuries. Quilting circles have helped women find and empower each other through an outlet of shared expression. But the art of textiles, for many generations, was never recognized as such. Instead, it was only seen to serve the purpose of functionality and domestic use.

In this quilt, I am paying homage to that history by creating a piece about my experience living as a woman. I am expressing the anger and depression that comes with the misogyny and oppression of the patriarchal world I am situated in. I am communicating this anger through the language of the stitch. The stitch is chaotic and messy. It is trying to piece my quilt back together where it has torn. This unpredictable messiness creates a wound-like essence. The embroidery creates images of powerful women who have felt the pain, weight, and objectification of being a woman. Their bodies are abstracted and pierced with safety pins in grotesque ways. These abstractions are extensions of my own emotions and my own body.

This is my experience.

Eli S.
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Textiles and Decay; Art that Matters

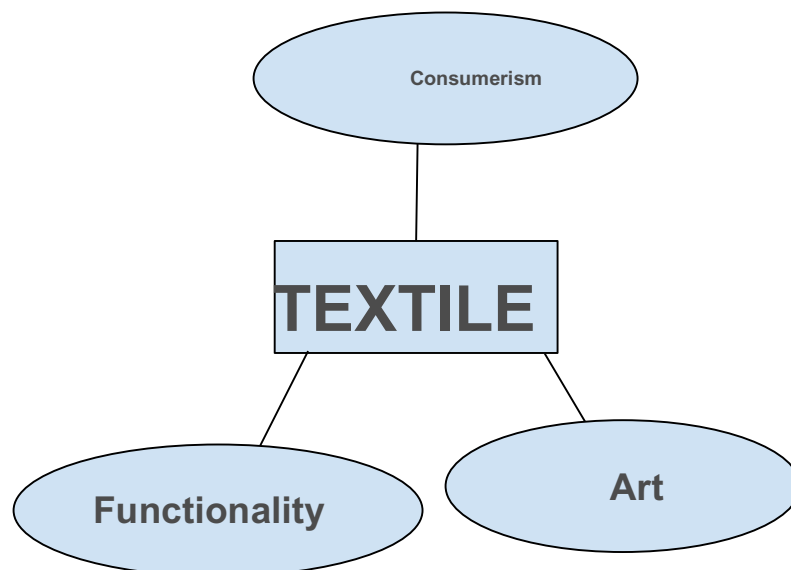
Eli S.



From even before I remember who I was I remember the cloth wrapped around me. For it was this cloth that I had been surrounded by my entire life. From the clothes I wear to the coasters to the napkins to the sheets on my bed I grew up always knowing this same cloth. Wrapped in this cloth from head to toe and if I dare let my cloth slip from my body or my chest for but a moment it would be dangerous, unruly, and unheard of. For many, this cloth is such a constant it begins to blur into the background like wallpaper. Textile is at the heart of everything, but for me, it symbolizes more than just functionality. For me, it not only makes up the wallpaper of the house but the art hung on this wallpaper and even the pictures of family members and memories that dabble throughout the house.

It was August of 2016 I was just about to start high school. I remember the tv shows and cheesy movies about stereotypical high school that had piled up in my subconscious in recent years. This is a nerve-racking enough time for any student but it didn't help that I was not only starting a new school but in fact moving out at the same time. This was because I was to attend an arts boarding school two hours away. The school was located in a new town I had visited maybe three times before. In the days leading up to the move, I received a package from my grandma. To my surprise, I opened it to find a beautiful handmade quilt. I remember she made a quilt of similar caliber for my brother when he moved out. Growing up watching her sew I knew how much time and effort she put into her textile work and I couldn't help but fill with pride knowing that she entrusted her piece of art to me. I remember since my family lived so so many miles away from her little house in Kansas it was always a special occasion to visit. I remember to mark this special occasion and the time I spent with her we would always make it an effort to start and finish a sewing project. Nothing too complicated of course. I would make little bags or potholders that I could then take home and use in my mom's house. There was always a place for the domestic use of textiles and sewing. Before my grandmother began to make textiles as gifts she would make things for functionality. When my mom was growing up my grandmother never had a lot of money and would have to sew clothing for all four of her kids. I believe there is an interesting overlap between functionality and art. I find another interesting overlap between textiles and women's history.

I have recently come to theorize there are three main ways textiles are utilized today or have been utilized at one point in history.



The diagram above highlights the three ways of using textiles. We can use a diagram like this one to map out how each definition of textiles can overlap. First, let's take a look at the three main categories. One of the most familiar examples of textiles for functionality is clothing. When defining Clothing in context to functionality it is often worn to aid us in some way and protect us from the climate and natural elements. It can keep us warm in the winter and protect us from the sun in the summer. There are many textile innovations that make our lives easier or more safe in some way. For example, take Potholders. They are a simple innovation often used in houses to protect us from the heat and allow us to transport hot foods in the kitchen. In many cases like potholders, textiles functionality overlap with domestic functionality. Perhaps this is because sewing is accessible almost anywhere and before machines could create these home amenities many potholders and clothing were handmade and homemade.

When examining how textiles affect the art world, we know that some of the oldest textile artwork includes tapestries. These tapestries would not protect you from the cold or make your life easier instead their purpose was to tell stories and to have a voice. One of the oldest tapestries includes The Cloth of St Gereon which depicts a decorative pattern of a bull being attacked by a griffin. Why tell stories through textiles? Part of the reason tapestries used to be so popular was because they weren't as heavy as paintings and the materials were accessible. The accessibility of textiles and sewing is key because it allows anyone to have a voice. Textiles and tapestries have also been used in theatre. Cantastoria is a form of theatre that utilizes tapestries as a way of storytelling. This is especially popular in puppetry companies and is a great example of an accessible artistic and political platform. Bread and Puppets theatre is one of these companies that utilizes Cantastoria.



Bread and puppet showed on the left.

Textiles were also used as a foot into the art world by many feminist artists throughout the 19th century. The Bauhaus school in Germany is a great example of this. The Bauhaus school was an art and design school founded on April 1, 1911, that changed the landscape of modern design forever. While the Bauhaus allowed women in the program, they were still biased as to what studios women were encouraged to work in. Many believed the women of the Bauhaus should reside in textiles and two dimensional mediums only. Many women entered the school

this way but slowly a few such as Alma Siedhoff-Buscher and Marianne Brandt were able to infiltrate the 3-D design studios. Marianne Brandt is extraordinarily remarkable for her time as she became head of the metal workshop in 1928 and became famous for works such as her metal teapot design.

What do I mean by “The overlap between art and functionality”? Take quilting for example: When we look back in history we can easily see the functionality of quilts. They were used as a way to keep warm but looking past this you can also see them as a form of expression and art for women before it was socially acceptable for women to be seen as artists. Historians often gaze over the enormous amount of work and eye for detail that goes into these quilts. In this way the textile definition of functionality and art overlap.



An example of this transition includes the quilters of Gee’s bend. The quilters of Gee’s Bend is a small community of black women in gee’s bend Alabama. Gee’s Bend being a fairly isolated location, surrounded by both sides of the Alabama river, hosts many descendants of slaves who had not much money or resources. In order to keep warm they would use and scrap of fabric they could find to create quilts and through this, they would survive. In doing so they also create beautiful abstract quilts that are a staple in African American art and are shown in museums such as the De Young. The traditions of the Gee's bend women and their quilts are still passed down and practiced today.



How has consumerism and industrialization recently effective the textile industry? How does it overlap with art? How does it overlap with functionality? Consumerism has mainly

overlapped with the functionality of textiles through the ever-darkening reality of fast fashion. When textiles and clothing are sold for the sole purpose of making a quick buck it is easy to forget and exploit the human hand behind the thread. Competition in the industry has a big part to do with this exploitation. Many companies especially larger corporations are always in a race to compete with each other and are always focused on creating the products with the lowest prices by any means possible. H&M sells their “Jersey Camisole Top” for \$2.99 While Forever 21 sells their “Floral Surplice Ruffle Crop Top” for \$3.00. To keep prices this cheap and yet still be making profit corporations need to cut corners in other places. This includes the quality and sustainability of the clothing piece along with the working conditions and salary of the workers. Fast fashion corporations are known for paying their worker’s incredibly small salaries as low as \$2.00 a day. These salaries are not enough to survive on let alone live on. Along with this, the working conditions are not only uncomfortable and cluttered but also unsafe. building inspections and workers safety are not considered in these workspaces and this can lead to disaster. Many times workers are exposed to unhealthy chemicals, unhealthy air, and asbestos. To make matters worse, the cluttered workspaces invite fire hazards and unsafe evacuation plans. One of the most memorable disasters caused by cutting corners in this way occurred in the 2013 Savar building collapse. In this tragedy an 8 story factory building located in Bangladesh on the Rana Plaza collapse in the process killing over 1000s people and injuring over 2000. This was caused by the building owner not listening to his workers when they brought to his attention to the instability of the building. The exploitation of workers in the fashion industry creates dark cycle clothes soaked in blood and tears. The majority of these workers were young girls and women who are put in danger every day for a quick buck. In this overlap textiles are no longer a way of expression but a way of oppression.

While exploitation of workers is one way to profit, another common tactic used to cut corners in the overlap between the consumerism and functionality of textiles includes creating less sustainable clothing. Large corporations have started to redefine the function of clothing to profit in a capitalist society. The original function of clothing was to protect you from the elements. Before industrialization and mass production of clothing, many garments would be made by hand and made by the wearer or someone close to the wearer. There was a sort of relationship between the consumer and the cloth that is lost when a distance is put in between the garment and the actual creator of the garment. This loss of relationship and respect is what makes fast fashion so successful. It allows for the materials and quality of craft to deteriorate without question. In the world of fast fashion, the function of clothing is made to be worn maybe once or twice then disposed of. This short-lived unhealthy cycle of clothing pushes to the consumer to buy more and more. According to the EPA, an average American throws away 81 pounds of clothing every year. In fact, the united states accumulate over 15 million tons of textile waste and of that 10.46 million tons were sent to the landfill.

When the world of money enters the world of art it can act as a distraction from one’s true authenticity. The artist could be swayed by the incentive of profit to create a certain type of art even if they don’t identify with it. In this way, consumerism in the art world can be used to stifle the voice that art gives the creator in the first place. Along with this, money can interrupt the normal cycle of life that an art piece has. Leonardo da Vinci once said “Art is never finished, only abandoned.” what he means by this is that an art piece can always evolve into something new. You can always paint over an old section of a painting or break parts of a sculpture. You can always add something new to it as well. Because as you work on a painting or a sculpture or a textile piece it can always evolve with you. Now, this doesn’t mean that you can’t abandon art

because sometimes that's what's needed. I just want to bring to attention that when someone buys art it becomes the consumers and not the artists. the art stops evolving because if it evolved it would be different than what the consumer paid for and thus a bad product. The piece of art becomes frozen in time to the point that even the natural aging and decay of materials can be a sign of an unsuccessful piece. In order to freeze a piece in time, even more, the artist then changes there an artistic process for consumption. The materials they use are no longer deliberate to piece of art but more so to make the art durable for consumption. In doing so they erase some authenticity¹ from the creative process

Another factor in preserving art could be fueled not by money but by fear. Perhaps the reason many artists choose to preserve their art so unnaturally is that of the idea of a legacy. Decay is a very natural and intimate idea for humans because it is and always has been a constant. A legacy allows humans to continue existing in the minds of others long after decay. Humans have slowly distanced themselves from the idea of the natural world along with the idea of decay in the modern world. Since the boom of industrialization Humans have produced enormous amounts of waste. Yet the individual is not the one to witness the decay of their waste. Instead, we have systems in place that obscure the processing and existence of our waste for us. Unfortunately with the amount of waste and the number of unnatural materials natural decay can't decompose all of our waste anymore. But the individual hardly thinks about this because of the "out of sight out of mind" mentality. Because of this distance created between humans and the natural cycle of decay, decay has taken on a persona of being feared and seen as disgusting. But it is in fact, this very natural cycle of decay that helps fertilize the earth and make room for new life. This fear of decay might even fuel the longing for a legacy in some.

How we utilize textiles is important because it has the ability to give power or take power. To give a voice or silence others. To preserve the idea of us as an individual or preserve the world. In the world of fast fashion, waste becomes so prominent and normalized that decay becomes irrelevant. Along with this, we normalize the mistreatment of women in the fashion industry. Textiles were once used as an artistic expression in a world where women were not recognized as artists even though they were. It helped build communities of women who found power in each other. Now we exploit women workers and textiles for money. On the other hand when someone crafts a quilt they may use that quilt for decades and decades before throwing it out. It is patched and worn and a symbol of decay in itself. Finally, in the world of fine art, we try our best to prevent decay whether for money purposes or the idea of a legacy. In hopes of one day being "one of the masters." I don't believe that to make meaningful art it needs to be permanent. The permanence should be found in the communities your work effects rather than conserving the work itself. Just like how the women of Gee's Bend have created a strong community through their art that's lasted for generations. The women of Gee's Bend also were able to bridge this patch between viewing textiles for functionality or for art. Burning away this label of using textiles in a domestic sense oddly parallels the liberation of women from the home as part of patriarchal oppression that second wave feminism accomplished. I believe the art you make needs to have a voice, to say something and most of all for you to believe in the work your

¹ "The only rule we used was to let consciousness-raising spur our feelings so that we could make authentic art. For example, I would advise the women: "As you listen to your colleagues tell their stories, let a slide drop in your mind, so that you're actually imagining what they are saying. They are using language- you make a pictorial translation for yourself" - Miriam Schapiro

making. I find beauty in decay and the natural cycle of the planet. I don't wish to disrupt this critical cycle with my voice or my art. Because if I began to disrupt this cycle I would disrupt the lives of others as well. Unnatural decay whether it be rapid like a fire or slow decay like a plastic bottle in a landfill *can* be harmful to the planet and the people who live on it.

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