

## Thinking Textile

*Thinking Textile* presents a cross section of primarily regional, conceptually driven textile-based work: a snapshot in time. As with any exhibition, inherent limitations of space and resources excluded work of excellence; this exhibition offers a sampling of current production. The textile-related work of students at Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design, and what I perceive as a growing use of textile in interdisciplinary work generally, initiated this project. My curatorial strategy has looked at how these interdisciplinary artists are using textile now. I have also considered a broader sense of textile, outside the narrow dictionary definition of woven or knit cloth. In curating *Bad Girls*, the landmark exhibition of “bad girl” feminist art in 1994, Marcia Tucker, Curator/Director at the New Museum of Art, New York, comments: “You don’t get an idea and then go out and look for artists to support your idea” (“Reclaiming the Body”). Rather, she discusses the curatorial process in terms of emerging patterns and similarities, of “opening out the dialogue.” The considered mix of emerging artists -- alumni of ECIAD -- and established mid-career artists presents a symbiosis with potential to stimulate a dynamic inter-generational dialogue including practitioners of both genders. As curator I’ve exercised the liberties of an artist, asserting a certain poetic license that draws from an eclectic range of practices. This eclecticism and its forceful inventiveness engages a plethora of means, both material and technical, to cover a range of topical themes. The majority of these artists also work in other media that may include sculpture/installation, painting, drawing, print, photography, performance or new media. A commonality lies in this hybridism and the prioritization of conceptual considerations. A student recently exclaimed, “We learn when we get to art school that everything (textile) we made before isn’t art!” What is the elusive art quotient, that criteria for naming what the work is doing? What does it take to play in the art ballpark? While these questions demand a debate beyond the scope of this essay, clearly, with the intention of this highly skilled work mere technical considerations are transcended. These artists never question their right to participate in aspects of the postmodernist debate and to occupy the cultural space of the gallery, claiming their position as artist.

## Textile is Tactile

We live in an age of touch, but that touch is more virtual than tactile. We push buttons on everything from computers, home security systems, and garage door and TV channel remotes to telephones, bank machines, calculators and myriad kitchen appliances. If the response is not instantaneous, our impatience rises exponentially. Twenty-first century touch is profoundly related to time, and time moves fast in industrialized countries. As part of the time equation, expectations of what we can do and can have escalate, and so does stress. Where do textile practices -- haptic, handmade, slow -- fit? Hollywood stars, both male and female, are knitting, filling downtime on the set and combating stress. Yet the absence of fabric stores, once a part of every mall and down town, is telling. Although not many people make their own clothes anymore, most people have at least one treasured textile family heirloom.

Artists in this exhibition have textile work in their family backgrounds. My maternal grandmother was apprenticed to a dressmaker after completing grade school. A “cuff and

collar girl”, her job was to make the whalebone parts so popular in dresses at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. My grandmother could sew anything without a pattern, which helped her to clothe her children during the Great Depression. Her own mother, an immigrant, passed her old age without a home of her own. Handed from one child to another, reliant on their charity, she crocheted relentlessly. I’ve seen the fine tablecloths she made. For her this activity was a coping mechanism, a means of retaining sanity, keeping quiet, staying out of the way. Most certainly it was a creative means of releasing tension.

## **Release /Tension**

Ironically, crocheting, knitting, and weaving all require an even tension to be held. This is one aspect of making that **Brenna Maag** picks up in *The Peacework Project*. *Release/Tension* is one in a series of printed postcards juxtaposing text with images of water patterns in nature and similar patterns mirrored in textile work. Globalization and the global is reiterated subtly through water imagery; water is truly global -- the same water has traveled the planet since the beginning of time. Maag writes that connections are made between the rhythms of nature, the meditative quality of working in textiles, and the pace of modern life, including global military and political tensions. Hybridism of text, textile, digital print and photography is notable in Maag’s work. One large-format digital print diptych is paired with five postcard diptychs, each printed with a pair of words. These imperative statements, based on the textile processes in the images, create a wordplay in the context of a peace initiative. With globalization and NAFTA, sweatshops have proliferated. Women worldwide are paid below-poverty wages, by the piece, for producing our clothes. This is piecework. Referencing Mail Art, Maag is sending each postcard in the series to an extensive list, laboriously compiled and prioritized, of individuals, businesses, non-profit organizations, politicians, and government agencies. Imagine the CEO of an armament company as recipient! As a public art project, Maag invites viewers to participate in this mailing campaign. A gift that challenges recipients to decipher relevance in their own lives, the personal impact is equally significant (Maag). Can art change the world? Maybe, in small ways transforming an individual’s consciousness, shifting things toward peace, piece by piece.

## **Who is a “real” Asian?**

**Noah Choy**’s work presents a confluence of art, fashion, pop culture and print in a series of silk-screened T-shirts. The *Dr. Choy* persona, at once personal and generic, allows for an open-ended, humorous exploration of Asian identity, expectations and culture, including notions of the exotic “other”. Why *Doctor Choy*? Choy plays on one of the cultural and social expectations typical Asian parents have for their children to succeed: to become a doctor. While Choy states that these expectations aren’t restricted to any particular cultural group, he capitalizes on the stereotype. The T-shirt is a social leveller, like blue jeans. It is a vehicle for the semiotics of language and sign in popular culture, a mini-billboard advertising our social and political affiliations, announcing our status as members or outsiders. The *Dr. Choy* signature is like a graffiti tag or, ironically, a label, the very thing the artist resists.

Choy states that it is a campaign to force a reanalysis of what is socially, economically, politically and culturally familiar. Imagine, with the proliferation of *Dr. Choy* T-shirts in the public realm, how the question of *Dr. Choy's* identity would escalate. Who is *Dr. Choy*? Because identity is the core issue, this suits the artist's intention. A clever marketing blitz could briefly separate these shirts from the fuzzy background of pop culture and media we tune out daily. Drawn from cartoon characters, children's book illustrations, and popular Asian products – name brands and packaging -- the logo changes style accordingly. Choy states his intention is to collapse “the model-minority stereotype of socially responsible, straight-A, kung-fu fighting Asians.” In turn, he stimulates a discussion of what replaces it.

### Who is a “real” Canadian?

*I Am Who I Am*, an installation of banners by **Gu Xiong**, relates Chinese-Canadian experience: a story of difference told in different voices. Some are ghosts from the past, some the voice of 5<sup>th</sup> generation Asian-Canadians. Gu's work is a thread in the trans national network of a global cultural community dialoguing on aspects of globalization. He asks the viewer to consider the complexities of formulating identity within an expanded diaspora. How are ties to the culture of origin maintained inside the dominant and dominating culture? How does one fit in? Hybrid cultural identity, complicated by ties of nostalgia, economics and politics, requires reinvention, revival and an immigrant's determination. On these banners, terse text in Chinese, French and English is superimposed over digitally printed photo portraits of Chinese-Canadians, historic and contemporary. This text records hardship, achievement, suffering and pride. Gu writes that text colours are partially symbolic: red and yellow, sacred in Chinese culture, suggest celebration and future prosperity. Unlike the conventional standard, these banners are almost square in format. According to Gu, banners strung across streets in China function as public announcements for celebration days such as Chinese New Year, Remembrance Day for the Ancestors, spring sowing time, and the harvest Moon Festival. Gu addresses a history of legislated hardship [The B.C. Qualifications of Voters Act denied Chinese and aboriginals the vote; Canada's 1923 Exclusion Act, repealed in 1947, prohibited Chinese immigration, and withheld the vote and citizenship to Canadian-born individuals of Chinese ancestry]. Simultaneously, he also manages to tell an abbreviated history of perseverance and success. In terms of identity, Gu's conclusion is simultaneously simple and complex: *I Am Who I Am*.

### Who is a “real” Indian?

With one foot in the white world and one foot in Native culture, for **Sonny Assu Gwa'gwa'da'ka'** identity is located somewhere between red and white. From the 1980s onward, Assu writes, he grew up absorbing pop culture from television, movies, comic books, and action figures but had little knowledge of his Laich-kwil-tach heritage. Assu states that his exploration of traditional cultural ties began with art school. Campbell River Hereditary Chief Dan Henderson taught Assu to make button blankets using traditional materials. To date Assu has produced silkscreen prints, painted drums and button blankets which combine First Nations design sensibilities with super-hero imagery -- Spiderman and The Incredible Hulk -- and cartoon characters like Mickey Mouse and Bugs Bunny. *The Great Appropriator Embrace* presents a bold blanket design with Mickey's face and gloved white hands, and button details

echoing the famous rodent's face and ears. While Disney Corporation lawyers are busy with appropriation lawsuits, having successfully lobbied U.S. Congress this year to prevent Mickey Mouse and his pals from entering the public domain, anyone, native or not, can access web sites with directions on making button blankets. At the same time as First Nations people are regaining ownership of ancestral remains and burial artefacts appropriated by white cultural institutions, Assu is deftly shifting the power paradigm, becoming appropriator. This is a cloak of power, made to be worn. For millennia, shamans from diverse cultures have used clothing and masks to traverse to the spirit world. In the end, the assumption of magical powers through the shaman's robe may not be so different from the transformation that occurs when Superman dons his cape.

**There are no safe spaces,  
Even inside my body  
There are few safe spaces.**

**This is written on my body.**

(Morin)

**Peter Morin** 's work *I wear this on my body* is a button blanket of traditional red and black Melton wool and abalone shell buttons that includes a lithographic self-portrait on mulberry paper. Morin's image peers out from the blanket, simultaneously confrontational and vulnerable. His skin is layered with crows, printed in a ghostly grey. Morin's figure and blanket conjure Joseph Beuys' famous, silent performance *Coyote -- I Like America And America Likes Me*. Beuys spent nearly a week in a New York loft gallery, wrapped in a wool felt blanket, penned in with a coyote and a pile of Wall Street Journal newspapers. The coyote, a native American animal, and Beuys ultimately cohabited, formulating a complex critique of America that achieved a symbolic, if tenuous, state of harmony. Morin, a member of the Tahltan Nation, also seems to seek harmony. Morin states: "I come from the Crow clan but I also feel like a ghost." When first introduced to the camera, some aboriginals feared the object was capturing their soul, making them ghosts. Edward S. Curtis produced 20 photographic volumes of First Nations People between 1900 and the Great Depression, documenting "the vanishing race" (Lyman). Button blankets traditionally declare the clan crest of the wearer, and continue as important regalia for potlatches, dances and other ceremonies. They identify the individual as part of the clan, signifying pride in belonging. Morin writes that with this blanket, he creates a physical, safe space for his body within his culture, and honours the ancestors, the ones who made possible his existence.

### **The Fabric of History/The Fabric is History**

Red trade cloth, called stroud, was standard on the Hudson Bay Company inventory. The English town of Stroud -- famous since Roman times for woollen production -- has for centuries produced this fine scarlet cloth used for military uniforms. Stroud features prominently in works by **Nadia Myre**, whose artwork critiques symbols of power and oppression in the context of aboriginal people. In *Indian Act* Myre, with the help of more than 200 participants, laboriously obliterated 56 pages of the repressive document by beading each

page to stroud cloth, compulsively covering the lines of text with tiny white beads and filling the white of the page with a sea of red beads, reducing meaning to colour and a series of dots and dashes, like Morse code or smoke signals (Hill 32-5). In the language of board games like Snakes and Ladders, Myre's work *Stars and Stripes* hints at play. Using stroud, this piece immediately references the United States flag. Myre deconstructs and rearranges this symbol of a recognized power broker in the destruction-salvation machine. Like a giant game board, moves are made and strategies of global politics played out. In the broken red bars lie broken lines of communication, broken treaties, uniforms, war paint, jail cell bars; the solitary yellow star suggests a beacon in the heavens, the badge of the law, the whole violent history of the woolly West, of settlement and reserves (Myre). Some modules are blank, yet to be written. The spaces between squares hint at the possibility of dialogue, flexibility and movement. Tailor tacks tentatively connect the bars to the stroud, suggesting sutures, old wounds, and the fragile possibility of healing (Myre).

### Telling Textile

In First Nations oral tradition Anishinabe artist **Rebecca Belmore**, known for her performance work, states that she is -- a storyteller, "a teller...who reveals things." Yet much of her performance work is silent. Based in an examination of the relationship between First Nations and European cultures, particularly in regard to women, Belmore states that she has a "history of collaborations with the Queen and the Royal Family" which includes dresses. Performance affords an opportunity to occupy time and space to address political situations that bother her, (Belmore) such as the women missing from the downtown Eastside of Vancouver, many whose ancestry includes First Nations. *Vigil* began with Belmore purifying space on a downtown Eastside street, silently lighting votive candles. Wearing the names of the missing women like grotesque tattoos on her arms, she screamed each name as she stripped a long stemmed rose through her teeth. Then, slipping on a red dress, she furiously nailed it to a telephone pole in the adjacent lane, violently ripping herself loose only to repeat the action until the shredded dress was crucified to the pole. Finally, James Brown's *It's A Man's World* commanded the silent crowd. That she has never rehearsed a performance piece (Belmore) is simultaneously risky and brave. This immediacy may account, in part, for the power conveyed in small gestures and common materials. Belmore says she approaches performance as an installation artist -- that performance becomes a forum for testing ideas. These extend into installation, sculpture, and photography works that employ textile. She capitalizes on historical and cultural associations of materials like black human hair, beaver pelts, red taffeta and plastic tarpaulin. Simple means convey maximum effect: political and emotional, visual and tactile, and ultimately powerfully poetic.

### Missing/Missed

The women missing from Vancouver's downtown Eastside over at least two decades currently number 61, according to the police list. As the investigation of the Port Coquitlam pig farm ends, the families will continue to suffer their loss in a very public way throughout the trial and endless media coverage. In *67 Shawls (for the families of the missing women)* **Kati**

**Campbell** has created a supportive intervention into the private process of grieving. Compiling

her own list of 67 names by consulting four lists, including two kept by family members, she researched the root meanings of each woman's first and middle names (Campbell). These translations acknowledge the hopes and aspirations we have for our daughters, evoking that particular word or phrase that constitutes their distinctive designation. The list becomes a poem, embroidered pink on palest pink across an edition of 67 shawls. The codified colour of baby girls and fine pashmina-type wool evoke the tenderness of maternal touch. Each shawl will be given, privately, to the family with notes locating the name of their beloved, missing and missed. In this personal effort to retrieve each woman from the stage of spectacle, to honour, mourn and comfort, Campbell solicits our participation. She has invited individual donations toward the production cost of each shawl, thus extending the act of naming to a corresponding list of contributors. The production of 67 shawls is laborious, parallel in stitches to the 370,000 cubic yards of soil 102 forensic anthropologists sifted through in search of DNA evidence. Each shawl exists as useful residue of the creative process: a gift poised to envelope the body in pink softness so oppositional to the concrete reality of life on the street, and death.

**a finite part of a statistical population whose properties are studied to gain information about the whole. ("sample")**

*Movie Samplers* is an ongoing series of text-based, machine-embroidered pieces which confirm **Kathy Slade** as a pop culture aficionada. With connections to contemporary artists like Ron Terada whose painted texts are appropriated from sources such as personal ads or the television show *Jeopardy!*, (Kealy 82) these works reference both textile history and painting. Stitched on cotton and stretched like paintings, these samplers exist between high and low art, taste and kitsch, occupying the gallery, the movie theatre and domestic space. Like sound bites, these texts are sampled from films including *Love Story*, *Spellbound*, *The Sound of Music*, and *Klute*. The artist, as collector of specimens, becomes the sampler. Some text is chosen for its pivotal position in the narrative; other lines are randomly excerpted, becoming humorous, even silly when taken out of context (Slade). For instance, just before Patty Duke passes out on the sofa in *The Valley of the Dolls* she mutters "boobies, boobies, boobies, nothing but boobies...who needs 'em?" It's all here: food, tear jerking romance and transgressive women. Historically the sampler functioned as a template for living, training young girls in the virtues of literacy, piety and needlework (Bank 10). Deprived of an academic education, this home schooling was all that was available to generations of women. Computer-assisted production alone creates an enormous gap between this work and the laborious hours of hand stitching in traditional samplers. Themes of drugs, sex and rock and roll are hardly material for a moral model. The fusion of sentimental mainstream movies with the kitsch sensibilities of needlework kits forms a disjunctive narrative, a sampler of who we are, or were at a specific moment in time.

**I don't much like my daughter sewing...Bel-Gazou is silent when she sews...silent for hours on end, with her mouth firmly shut...she is silent, and ...why not write down the word that frightens me---she is thinking...What are you thinking about, Bel-Gazou? Nothing, Mother, I'm counting my stitches.**

(Colette 214-16)

**Jennifer Whittlesey** is an embroiderer of consummate skill who works in miniature. *The Language of Thought* exists in a bubble, literally -- a sphere of blown glass containing a fine pastel-patterned carpet. Not immediately apprehended, the design is comprised of thousands upon thousands of fine French knots, relentlessly stitched. In her writing Whittlesey acknowledges a specific separation in the context of Colette's writing; Whittlesey equates embroidery with thinking, thereby establishing a gendered space. Centuries of social expectations and domestic reality kept women constantly busy and overworked. Idle hands being the work of the devil, plying the needle created an acceptable busy-ness and a subversive, solitary space for thought. Daughters could own an intellectual territory apart from the Mother. Her exquisitely detailed pieces are contemplative, existing in a scale the viewer must enter psychologically. Suggestive of the doll house, childhood and fantasy, they command a space of interiority, the small corner of reverie that activates imagination. As Gaston Bachelard writes, "to have experienced miniature sincerely detaches me from the surrounding world" (161). Between the 10<sup>th</sup> through the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the English *Opus Anglicanum* produced ornately embroidered ecclesiastical vestments, commissioned throughout Europe: ornamentation in the service of God (Parker 40). Whittlesey's *Where Does My Freedom Lie?* alludes to her interest in monasticism and enclosure, while questioning the general absence of religious themes in contemporary Western art (Whittlesey). Here the isolated space of the anchorite's cell is perfectly mirrored in the condensed space of the miniature.

### **Work Makes One Free**

**Barry Goodman** is interested in text, language, linguistic theory and textiles. This is apparent in his series of cross-stitch portraits of famous writers and theorists. His titles indicate the intimacy of a first-name basis: *Jacques (Derrida)*, *Roland (Barthes)*, *Margaret (Atwood)*. Indeed, Goodman's writing on his own work indicates that at times he mentally converses with these authors. He articulates a particular interest in structuralism, a method of inquiry whose origins are generally credited to Saussure's complex linguistic system of semiotics [which proposed that cultural activity can be analyzed objectively as a science] (Browitt and Milner, 94-96). Yet despite systems of rational thought and analysis, including deconstruction and post-structuralism, extreme perversity is irrational. Goodman's cross-stitch piece *Arbeit Macht Frei* (work makes one free) is based on a photo of the entrance to Dachau concentration camp. There, in the iron gate, hard words are literally embedded in the architecture. In the context of the Holocaust, the objective reading structuralism proposes is impossible. Goodman says his intent is to bridge the gap between his own Jewish experience and these events through the work itself. The measured activity of the stitch implies an attempt to gain a sense of control, measuring in stitches the lives lost, the hours of labour by Goodman mirror the hours of forced labour in the camps. Cross-stitch requires long hours of visual, mental and motor concentration, a process that can be punishing as well as meditative. In the translation of image/text into letter/number/colour and in compulsive repetition lies the territory of reverie and atonement. Stitch by stitch, the conversion of iron words into a softer materiality allows for healing. Perhaps understanding 'lies' in the work of making: work makes one free.

Pain has an element of blank;  
It cannot recollect  
When it began, or if there were  
A day when it was not.

Emily Dickinson

In the photo-based cross-stitch piece *Splint* **Rachel Brett** addresses the uncertainty pain brings. This confined and confining activity -- comprised of small movements, repetitive and controlled -- has selected Brett by virtue of her physically imposed limitations due to a chronic pain syndrome. Brett states that she has selected cross-stitch in ironic recognition of an initial misdiagnosis of repetitive strain injury, a mistake that has complicated her condition. Cross-stitch embroidery employs numerous stitches that form tiny crosses. In the context of chronic pain, the cross stitches become prisoners (of the body) crossing off the days, crosses to bear, and points of crossing or pivot. The sculptural object Brett uses is a wrist support prosthesis. She embroiders its surface with a detail cut from a photo. The accompanying photo catches a moment of transition between daylight and darkness, a road as it curves through a mountain pass, a moment of uncertainty, possible opportunity. What lies ahead is as yet unknown. When worn the splint creates an awkward, paw-like appendage suggestive of an hybrid animal-human, possibly cyborg. Disability exists on the cusp of cyborg culture through aspects of medical intervention and the suggestion that disability requires improvement or fixing (Society for Disability). Descartes' mind-body dichotomy is a basis for historical attitudes which viewed the body in purely mechanical terms. More pertinent to disability is the Cartesian cultural inheritance of the allopathic medical model that continues to insist on mind-body separation. Disability as a social construct, including societal and cultural attitudes and myths of control, is a highly complex navigation (Wendell 93-113). Brett's laborious work of embellishment creates an object of beauty in support of her journey.

### **Interweaving/Intertextual: Textile**

In *Settling the Tabling* **Nora Blanck** examines the dynamic of negotiation. Using actual notes recorded in meetings over the course of a year of contractual negotiations, Blanck shreds and weaves these papers into a delicately nuanced, silently transgressive tablecloth. The repositioned words and doodles become illegible, reduced to a series of marks and dots, a lyrical fabric of nonsensical shorthand. Communication and confrontation, posturing and emotion, secrecy and calculation, acquiescence and insistence, drama and intrigue all come to the table. As Blanck's use of the present participle in the title indicates, this process is in constant flux -- sometimes tabled, never settled or fixed. With two sets of legs, the corporate and the domestic, *Settling the Tabling* interweaves two ritualized polarities of culture -- dinner table and boardroom -- both negotiate behind closed doors (Blanck). *The Fabric of Culture* uses one of Blanck's favourite literary and cultural artefacts: the newspaper. Blanck states that her use of a multiplicity of ethnic papers is in wry opposition to the dominance of the English language press, and the ownership of that press in North America by a handful of power brokers who control and mediate our reception. By literally interweaving the voice of the other, many others, Blanck undermines this dominance, asserting the cultural diversity of Canadian identity and our global circumstance. Through interweaving, information is reconstituted and, just as in the newspaper, randomly, even bizarrely juxtaposed. The



intertextuality of Kristeva is made manifest, a literal “mosaic of quotations” (Payne 258-9). The material delicacy of the newsprint speaks to the fragility of communication. Although we communicate with great difficulty, the ordered grid of weaving retains a reassuring taxonomy.

### **Nature, Women, and the Cyborg**

**Ruth Scheuing** has explored mythological and historical weavers such as Penelope, Arachne, and Philomena in her writing and textile work (“The Unraveling”). Building on the metaphor of Arachne in the world wide web, Scheuing utilized digital aspects in an Internet project on textiles as metaphor (“Ada”), and then again in a series of Jacquard pieces, designed in Photoshop and woven on a computer-assisted handloom. She has examined the historical development of the Jacquard loom, with its series of punch cards and 0-1 system, as the early model for the computer. These weavings feature images of mathematician Ada Lovelace, “Queen of the Engines and other virtual webs” and author of the earliest written software program (“Ada”). Scheuing’s recent weavings investigate women in relation to the cyborg and nature as a social construct, a reference carried in the ornate floral Jacquard patterns. *Flowers and Leaves #12: cyborg.leaf* presents the female figure as scientific invention for dress pattern construction (Scheuing). The background floral, replicating an historical damask pattern of 1705, contrasts with the “natural” leaf superimposed across the constrictive stays of the figure. *Flowers and Leaves #19: green.tea* is a filmic representation of a woman drinking tea, based on an Eadweard Muybridge photo sequence from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The nude figure, sitting solitary amid the woven greenery, elicits an air of the eccentric and the voyeur. Scheuing cites Donna Haraway’s influential “Manifesto for Cyborgs”, which locates the cyborg at a fluid juncture of human, animal and machine rather than defining them as oppositional or binary positions (“Nature”). With this work Scheuing weaves multiple layers of history, theory and reference into beautifully luxurious textiles.

### **Textile is Transgressive**

There is a relationship between **Barbara Cole’s** early site works, which traversed landscape like metres of cloth, measured and unfurled, and her current production in textile. To date Cole has produced four textile works, lengths of quietly subversive fabric which occupy the juncture between public and private bodily terrain. Building on her work of the 1990s which investigated sex and the eroticism of engagement, these textiles surreptitiously push the forbidden into the public arena. Drawn from sources such as hair patterns in the body’s secret recesses, stains, or salacious puckers, they exist in the innocent guise of pattern no longer traceable to the source. Cole writes that a metre of the cloth has the potential to become anything -- cushion cover, curtain or garment -- and locate anywhere. One pattern is based on castings of the anus, which Cole sees as “sexual, yet unencumbered by gender.” These small sculptures were initially intended for a pocket, to be touched like a talisman during difficult meetings, or sent, anonymously, through the mail (Cole). Cole’s corresponding textile pattern based on this talisman could infiltrate the parlour, incognito. Other patterns focus on imperfections: moles, freckles, age spots. In *Camouflage* the artist works with embroidery to mollify these glaringly unacceptable signs of the crime of aging. Cole’s production, whether large-scale earthworks, discreet sculptural objects or textile, is always meticulous and perfectly groomed. The voluptuous quality of the bolt has a sculptural potential to unwind and move

through architectural space in a variety of configurations. Cole states that textile's portability allows her to work while traveling. Two works woven at the Tasara Centre for Creative Weaving in Beypore, India, combine aspects of both digital design and e-mail communication with the slow handwork of the loom.

## **FELT/felt**

Felt, first produced by nomadic herding cultures, has featured prominently in the work of various artists such as Rachel Whiteread, who cast an entire section of floor in thick white felt (Stroud 298-301), Robert Morris and Joseph Beuys. Felt has an important role in industry, as well as an extensive history in relation to Canada ranging from First Nations button blankets, Ukrainian and Inuit felt boots and R.C.M.P. hats to padding in hockey uniforms, maple syrup filters and more (Walter, 22-43). **Emilie O'Brien** has made a pair of soft, stuffed-felt high heels resplendent with sexually charged potential. *Impotence* presents this pair of size 7 shoes quite innocently until we see them worn. The accompanying video loop documents the performance aspect of this piece. As the shoes are worn we immediately see the absence of support in the heel. As they flatten out and squash down, walking is complicated; they carry the awkwardness of some sexual encounters. As the shaft of the heel deflates, there is a witty subversion of the Patriarchy -- a collapse of at least a few inches. The aspect of *jouissance* likewise deflates. Absent is the sexually charged arch of the calf the high heel creates, causing one to question if it is the male or the female who is rendered impotent -- or whether perhaps it is both. In light of the popular collective impulse of the female toward the acquisition of shoes, the suggestion of the shoe as Freudian fetish is witty. Humour is rendered in fabric "with all of its feminine (passive) connotations" (O'Brien). This work speaks to the uncomfortable space between expectation and reality, a space which *Impotence* ultimately embodies (O'Brien).

## **Textile and Interdisciplinary Practice**

Why does textile lend itself so readily to interdisciplinary practice? Textile is particularly well positioned to carry feminist and other political themes, located as it is in a gendered field of social and cultural history. Hybrid practices that obscure art/craft boundaries actively draw on this history, embracing referents to craft and production. The history of collective effort -- the quilting bee, the weaving cooperative and knitting circles -- presents a special compatibility for conceptually based textile art in broader community projects. Textile history includes the histories of colonization and trade that extend to contemporary themes of globalization and the global economy. The horrendous working conditions and low pay of the Industrial Revolution textile mills in England and New England continue in the *maquilas*, the largely American-owned factories that dot Mexican cities along the Rio Grande as a result of NAFTA. However, the mass-production of globally marketed consumer goods affords handmade items a difficult potential to assert and retain cultural specificity.

Many areas intersect in textile. The crossover between textile and fashion, and fashion and art is articulated in exhibitions such as *Radical Fashion* (Wilcox), mounted by the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Intellectual and extreme designers such as Alexander McQueen, Stella McCartney, John Galliano and Hussein Chalayan attended Central St. Martins art school before

hitting the international stage of haute couture. Innovative textile research is currently being conducted to develop “textiles smart enough to monitor heart patients, strong enough to move buildings, and sophisticated enough to camouflage soldiers in changing terrain” (Newman 51). Biotechnological breeding of goats with a spider gene means the goats now produce milk containing a spider-silk protein; incorporated into a new fibre five times as strong as steel, it has a potential use in bullet-proof vests (Newman 60-61). The intrinsically flat nature of cloth invites the use of digitally assisted design processes in developing surface pattern and digital projection onto fabric: virtual and sensual aspects of touch coexist. These sensory qualities can slow the speed of our world, albeit briefly, reintroducing in this material sense of touch a more profound connection to the body. In the context of digital and the hand of the artist/artisan lies a mind/body dialectic that is more integrated than mutually exclusive. Cloth, universal to every culture, touches the entire distance of our lives, from birth to the grave. In the daily touch of clothing’s second skin lies a familiarity, an immediate commonality and easy physical understanding that affords a springboard to the more challenging aspects of *thinking textile*.

Deborah Koenker, curator

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