

# ART\_TEXTILES

the **Whitworth**

# Living Room, Classroom, Studio, Museum: The Cultural Versatility of Textiles

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Upon landing at the Jeddah airport en route to Mecca in 1964, el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz, also known as Malcolm X, was held in a dormitory for a few days while his documents were inspected. As he lived among other Muslim pilgrims awaiting clearance for passage, he made the following observations:

I began to see what an important role the rug played in the overall cultural life of the Muslims. Each individual had a small prayer rug, and each man and wife, or large group, had a larger communal rug. These Muslims prayed on their rugs there in the compartment. Then they spread a tablecloth over the rug and ate, so the rug became the dining room. Removing the dishes and cloth, they sat on the rug – a living room. Then they curl up and sleep on the rug – a bedroom.<sup>1</sup>

In this passage from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, el-Shabazz describes with great acumen a revelatory encounter he had with a textile as he elaborates upon the multiple uses and flexible functionality of the Islamic prayer rug in everyday life. The rug not only provides an arena for personal worship, it also demarcates social space that changes depending on its ever-shifting circumstances. Rather than walls or architecture marking off various rooms in which particular activities take place, the rug facilitates communal life as it is pressed into service as a border, a gathering place and a common focal point. He continues:

It dawned on me for the first time why the fence had paid such a high price for Oriental rugs when I had been a burglar in Boston. It was because so much intricate care was taken to weave fine rugs in countries where rugs were so culturally versatile. Later, in Mecca, I would see yet another use of the rug. When any kind of dispute arose, someone who was respected highly and who was not involved would sit on a rug with the disputers around him, which made the rug a courtroom. In other instances it was a classroom.<sup>2</sup>

Fluidly moving between serving as a portable object of religious contemplation and acting as the setting for eating, adjudicating and teaching, the rugs are notably 'culturally versatile'. Rather than understanding these rugs as merely expensive decorative objects, el-Shabazz articulates a new appreciation for the prices they command as they are imbued with value due to the 'intricate care' that attends their making. There is perhaps no more concise and elegant formulation written in recent history explaining our shared dependencies upon textiles – not only in Muslim contexts – as they distinguish between spaces and help create the codes by which we live and work.

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In the last forty years or so, artists – especially, but by no means exclusively, female artists – have also been concerned with what el-Shabazz termed the cultural versatility of textiles (admittedly from a vastly different perspective than his). Textiles, of course, have long been integral to artistic and craft traditions around the globe, from fine-art tapestries to wearable garments. But within recent Western art historical narratives, textile-based practices have often been given short shrift due to their (negative) associations with women's work. Unlike in el-Shabazz's account, in which a rug might be charged with different tasks, within much modernist twentieth-century art history, textiles have stayed firmly in the domain of the living room or the bedroom, understood as artefacts of material culture that are only occasionally – in fact, exceptionally – admitted into the realm of the art museum. It was precisely this denigration – or what Elissa Auther has influentially termed the 'hierarchy of art and craft' – that feminist artists sought to challenge when they turned to fibre-based work in the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>3</sup> Definitely making the case for the legitimacy of craft techniques such as knitting or sewing, feminist artists and critics in the 1970s did not just assert that textiles could be 'as good as' such media as painting, but even more radically looked to textiles as a way to produce an alternative to masculinist ideas about 'quality' altogether. These artists were less interested in producing 'fine art' versions of quilts than in demolishing distinctions between low and high.

Though Auther's book focuses on the United States, artists from other locations in the early 1970s disrupted assumptions about fibre-based work as it migrates between the realms of studio craft and art. For instance, with pieces like *Flexion*, from 1971, Jagoda Buić, from Croatia, redefined contemporary tapestries with her assertive forms that moved off the wall and became active, free-standing agents within the gallery space, confronting the viewer with muscular shapes and jagged textures that defied conventional notions of the softness or pliability of textiles. Polish artist Magdalena Abakanowicz has become one of the most well-known figures to utilize textiles, and a work from her *Abakan-Rouge* series, from 1971, in which a large red form with a provocatively sexual slit up its middle is suspended from the museum ceiling, served as a polemical and striking centrepiece for the 2007 exhibition *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*.<sup>4</sup> The work's inclusion in this show made several claims: first, that the women's liberation movement stirred in many national locations, and second, that textiles are crucial to the story of feminist art, broadly conceived.

Within the United States, projects like Faith Wilding's *Crocheted Environment (Womb Room)*, produced under the auspices of the Feminist Art Program's *Womanhouse* installation in Los Angeles from 1972, explored the devaluation of women's hobbyist efforts, as Wilding's expanded crocheted fibres sculpturally enveloped an entire room and provided an abstract counterpoint to some of the more representational rooms within the collaborative house. Though textiles continued to flourish among some US-based feminist artists throughout the 1970s, including Judy Chicago and Miriam

Schapiro (the co-founders of the Feminist Art Program), this type of work largely fell out of favour within the art world for several decades until a few years ago, when a resurgence of art world interest led to major shows such as the exhibition *Fiber: Sculpture Since 1960* at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston.<sup>5</sup>

The exhibition *Art Textiles*, which brings together mostly women artists from around the world, both rides and expands upon this wave of popularity. Though there is some overlap in participating artists between these two shows (and Wilding's piece appears in both), unlike *Fiber*, which made a largely modernist argument about medium-specificity, *Art Textiles* takes a somewhat different approach as it more explicitly explores how textiles – both in the moment around 1970 and for more recent practices in the 2000s – continue to comment upon debates about the politics of labour, gender, economics and sexuality. For the use of textiles for artists such as Wilding or Schapiro was never a neutral, formal choice; it was part of a broader feminist re-evaluation of women's overlooked histories, the meanings of everyday materials, and gendered associations of craft techniques. Schapiro's *Anonymous was a Woman*, from 1976, with her signature use of 'femmage', layers fabric swatches and painting to create a lively optical effect whose title references a Virginia Woolf essay about the erasure of women's creative contributions to culture.<sup>6</sup> As Schapiro writes, 'femmage' is 'a word invented by us to include... activities as they were practiced by women using traditional women's techniques to achieve their art – sewing, piecing, hooking, cutting, appliquéing, cooking and the like – activities also engaged in by men but assigned in history to women'.

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Many contemporary artists draw upon these legacies by incorporating needlework into their practices, resignifying such formats as the embroidery sampler (Lyn Malcolm, Elaine Reichel), the quilt (Risham Sayed and Michele Walker), the cleaning cloth (Susan Collis) and the blanket (Tracey Emin). Considerations of the intersections of gender and race are at the forefront of many of these practices, as in the work of Mary Sibande, who is based in Johannesburg, South Africa. Fabric is a vital component of Sibande's figural sculptures as she garbs her alter-ego Sophie in exaggerated dresses (sewn by the artist from modified domestic workers' uniforms) as she performs acts of both exuberance and of servitude. In one piece, Sophie appears to be in the midst of stitching a portrait of Madam CJ Walker, the African American businesswoman who popularized the hair-straightening comb. Or is Sophie undoing the portrait, pulling it apart? It is an ambivalent homage to this pioneering entrepreneur who is often credited with enforcing rigid standards of black hair and femininity.

In her *Test No. 8*, from 2013, Egyptian-born artist Ghada Amer uses stencilled letters to spell out Simone de Beauvoir's famous formulation that 'one is not born but rather becomes a woman'. Often taken as an anti-essentialist rallying cry, in Amer's piece the phrase is both emphasized –

it is repeated, after all, in capitals – but also complicated, as the letters bleed out of their borders in a tangle of dark threads that threatens to scramble the surface. Though it is still legible, the phrase looks as if it is unravelling, perhaps from overuse. Here textiles, like the status of ‘woman’, are perpetually in process.

Not every artist who works with textiles is concerned primarily with issues of gender. Others are also interested in their geopolitical circulation and the inequities that attend their global manufacture and trade – another critical aspect of the enduring cultural versatility of textiles is how they operate as commodities that travel across borders. Pakistani artist Risham Sayed investigates the knotty history of the textile trade and colonialism in her series *The Seven Seas*, from 2012. Using the quilt form as a story-telling device, Sayed depicts narratives of resistance and anti-colonial struggles against British imperial rule at various ports of trade in the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia. Her cotton fabrics are sourced from the locations that she depicts, and the panels are displayed so the viewer can see both sides, rather than up against a wall with only the ‘fronts’ visible, rendering the origins of the fabrics, and the artist’s acts of making, more transparent. Artists such as Sayed use textiles self-reflexively to comment upon the making and distribution of textiles – not just as another formal device to celebrate.

The recent art-institutional attention showered upon textiles is certainly a welcome change from the years in which they were ignored. At the same time, it bears repeating that many of these practices also came out of, and are embedded in, a political understanding of textiles as an implicit intervention in the modernist gallery. As Miwon Kwon has noted, there is a risk to this institutionalization, as it can highlight aesthetics while threatening to occlude other specificities. Writing about the recreation of Wilding’s *Crocheted Environment* for the 1995 exhibition *Division of Labor*, she noted: ‘to recreate the work as an independent art object for a white-cubic space... also meant voiding the meaning of the work as it was first established in relation to the site of its original context.’<sup>7</sup> In such a museum setting the piece became ‘beautiful but innocuous’. One hopes that exhibitions like *Art\_Textiles* (which includes a recreation of Wilding’s room) will re-open these debates as new viewers experience her installation alongside a different constellation of works. The very versatility and mobility of textiles enable them not only to activate various spaces, as in the prayer rug that is by turns a dining room and courtroom, but also to *be activated* across a range of sites, potentially catalysing the art museum to be a fertile site of disagreement and dialogue.

## Notes

1  
Malcolm X with Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Balantine Books, 1999), p. 334.

2  
*Ibid.*

3  
Elissa Auther, *String Felt Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

4  
*WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, curated by Connie Butler (Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, 2007).

5  
*Fiber: Sculpture since 1960*, curated by Janelle Porter (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 2014).

6  
Miriam Schapiro and Melissa Meyers, 'Waste Not, Want Not: An Inquiry into What Women Saved and Assembled – FEMMAGE', *Heresies*, 1.4 (Winter 1977–78): pp. 66–9.

7  
Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002), p. 43.

