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TENACIOUS THREADS:
CRAZY QUILTS AS AN EXPRESSIVE MEDIUM FOR MAKING ART

by

MELISSA ANNE CRANFORD JOHNS

Under the Direction of Dr. Melanie Davenport

ABSTRACT

In this arts-based study, I will discuss using craft techniques such as crazy quilting in the creative process of making art. The paper describes the history of crazy quilts, a brief summary of artists who use quilts as a medium, and a description of how teaching craft-making skills in the classroom can encourage students to use them for art-making.

INDEX WORDS: Art education, Art vs. craft, Crazy quilt, Art quilt

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MELISSA ANNE CRANFORD JOHNS

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Art Education

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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2011

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Georgia State University

August 2011

DEDICATION

To my Mom, Anne Cranford, and my Maw-Maw, Sarah Davis.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Starting my first quilt when I was a teenager, I became hooked with the world of textiles. It was going to be a patchwork quilt. I chose the blocks from a patchwork quilt book and replicated the geometric shapes on poster board for patterns. Finding fabric was easy; my mother and grandmother were experienced sewers with a veritable and historical “stash.” They had made every Easter dress I had worn up to that point. My goal was to finish by the end of the summer. I hand stitched about nine squares before school began and had to put them to the side.

Years later, I received a sewing machine for a Christmas gift. What better way to break her in than making a simple square quilt for my then boyfriend? His mother’s family is from the Philippines so I chose the colors of the Filipino flag – shades and patterns of red, white, and blue – and tacked the corners of the squares down with embroidered gold stars. I only thought I was close to finishing by the time I had sewn the myriad of squares together. My mother and I brought the quilt top to my grandmother’s house with quilt batting and a large white sheet for backing. I will never forget spreading the quilt on the hardwood floor and, on our hands and knees; we basted the corners to the backing. I completed the quilt three years later and married the lucky recipient two years after that.

I grew up knowing how to sew and knit as well as excelling in drawing and painting. But it was not until I was an undergrad theater major in Art 101 that I realized that fabric can be a medium to make art. I quickly changed my major to concentrate on studying Fiber Arts. My Senior Exhibition, *Topical*, featured wearable art with surfaces adorned with female organs. Clothing with flowers and fruit has traditionally been regarded as feminine. I simply took the analogy literally and replaced the fruit with breasts, etc.

Purpose of this study

Since then I became interested in the debate of *art versus craft*. Knowing how hard it is to work with textiles, more specifically: to make a quilt, I wondered what separated it from drawing and painting. I inquired into contemporary artists who use quilting - *crazy quilting*, to be specific - as a medium. I felt there is a lack of textiles being shown at major galleries and museums and that quilting is regarded as an inferior medium. They are often considered decorative and included with domestic artifacts. At the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, the one quilt currently displayed is in the *Folk Art* exhibit. The quilt is neither a patchwork quilt with uniform squares, nor does it have the embroidery of a crazy quilt. It doesn't have any blocks and the strips of fabric are pieced together more closely resembling a log-cabin quilt. Crazy quilts differ from patchwork quilts in that there is very little structure in the blocks or squares. No two are alike.

I wanted to know if I could use quilt making as an expressive medium in the creation of my own artwork and also for my students. Feminist theory accepts non-traditional mediums and, in the classroom, teaching students the possibility that quilts can be *Art* encourages tolerance. Quilts can be discussed as art by using *Greenbergian* elements and principles. Crazy quilting as an art form is embedded with social, familial, and historical meanings. I hoped to understand these meanings and derive them from my own work. Considering these aspects of crazy quilting informed my pedagogy so that I may bestow the knowledge to future students.

I explored the technique of crazy quilting to increase my knowledge of the skills it requires to produce an artwork using the technique. As I made the quilt, the process helped me to better understand the differences between art and craft. I reflected and read more about nuances

between the two and hoped to be able to compose my own definition of what art and craft are. As a result, I hope to be better informed when teaching students about crazy quilting.

Terms

In this paper I will use the terms that describe the parts of a quilt.

- Crazy Quilt: “A patchwork quilt without a design.”
- Decorative Arts: “Art that is concerned primarily with the creation of useful items (as furniture, ceramics, or textiles) —usually used in plural.”
- Folk art: “the traditional typically anonymous art of usually untrained people.”
- Embroidery (a.k.a. “needlework”): “the art or process of forming decorative designs with hand or machine needlework.”
- Quilt top: The front of a quilt. It is the top layer of fabric with the batting in between the backing. The front is traditionally the side that all of the pieces and blocks are put together.
- Quilt block: A small, most often square, section of a quilt. Usually a quilt is made up of several of these fabric squares in a grid-like pattern to make a larger rectangle.
- Quilt: A blanket that is quilted, which is the part of the quilt making process when the quilt top (usually the connected squares) is stitched to the bottom with a “batting” in between. The quilting can be in a decorative pattern or along the seams.
- Digging in the ditch: Stitching along seams to hide the stitches where the fabric meets.
- Batting: Usually a large rectangle of felted fibers- a blanket-usually made of cotton or another synthetic fiber.
- I will also refer to the art elements and principles as the “formal elements.”

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

History of crazy quilts

Crazy quilts did not appear until after the Civil War (Shaw, 2009). With their elaborate embroidery stitches, multitude of rich silken fabrics, and no rhyme or reason to the pattern, they are exemplary of the Victorian era. They were made exclusively for decoration and displayed in the parlor where guests were received (Duke, 1987). They reflect the eclectic and exotic decoration found in a typical household (Shaw, 2009). The term “crazy” was not exclusively about the fragmented design; it was also a nod to the cracked surfaces of ceramics that were en vogue at the time (Shaw, 2009, p. 144). The popularity of the crazy quilt design grew to incredible heights, leading marketing campaigns for manufacturers and winning prizes at shows. The category of “crazy quilt” accounted for ten percent of the International Quilt Study Center’s collection of quilts made in the United States between 1870 and 1945 (Hanson, 2008, p. 106)

Making a crazy quilt was not - and is not - an easy task. An 1884 article in Harper’s Bazaar estimated “crazy quilts took over 1500 hours of labor, or an hour a day for four years” (Duke, 1987, p. 156). A similar process to the equally popular Log Cabin quilt pattern, the crazy quilt block began with a foundation square. Unlike traditional patchwork designs, scraps of all shapes and sizes of fabric were basted on to the square in an asymmetrical and haphazard fashion. The edges of the fabric scraps were finished and framed with elaborate needlework (Duke, 1987). Because it was made for decoration, when complete, a crazy quilt was rarely lined with a batting and “quilted”. The exceptions to this rule used either a technique called “running in the ditch” and stitched along seams to hide the stitches or they were knotted at the corners of the blocks to keep the layers of fabric and batting from shifting (Shaw, 2009, p. 143). Women in

a metropolitan area had access to exotic silk fabrics and threads while women living in the country made their crazy quilts with cotton or wool. These “country crazies... tended to be less heavily ornamented than those made of the finer fabrics” (Shaw, 2009, p. 150).

The inspiration for the heavily embroidered and disorganized pattern is said to have come from the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition, more specifically the Japanese display and the Royal School of Art Needlework (Shaw, 2009). Over nine thousand people visited the Exhibition in the year that it was open. The most popular display was the Japanese bazaar featuring the eastern style house and garden, heavily embroidered silk kimonos, bright carpets, and beautiful screens with asymmetrical designs (Shaw, 2009). The Royal School of Needlework’s tent dazzled visitors with heavily embroidered fabrics decorating every inch of the tent (Duke, 1987).

Hanson (2008) states, “The Aesthetic Movement, an anti-modern response to this growing feeling of displacement, encouraged women to engage in ‘fancywork’ as a mode of escape from the pressures of the modern world” (p. 108). Duke (1987) also recognized that “crazy quilts reflect creative responses to late nineteenth century artistic ideals and domestic lifestyles” (p. 159). The Aesthetic movement’s influence is most evident in the crazy quilt that featured an embroidered line drawing of Oscar Wilde. This particular quilt won \$150 at a fair (Duke, 1987).

Gordon (2006) offers yet another explanation for the fanciful themes in crazy quilts. While Aesthetic ideals transported people to the orient and medieval times, there was another ideal that transported people to “fairyland.” Grimm’s fairy tales were collected and translated to English in 1823 and as a result “fairyland iconography and conventions were thus transfused into all of the arts” (p. 32). This included women’s quilts. While fairies were not always included, subjects and themes of crazy quilts comprised of winged insects, Kate Greenaway’s children,

elves, cherubs and other whimsical objects and creatures from nature were stitched and painted into crazy quilts (Gordon, 2006).

Whatever the reason, manufacturers at the time sought to capitalize on the crazy-quilt hype. “The burgeoning enthusiasm for ‘crazy patchwork’ was fueled by the textile manufacturers, who by the mid-1880s were offering bags of silk scraps, for use in making crazy quilts, along with patterns for crazy blocks and embroidery stitches” (Shaw, 2009, p. 153). Women’s magazines published patterns and stitches (Duke, 1987). Also published were poems and altered lyrics to familiar songs. In 1895 *Good Housekeeping* published a song titled “The Crazy Quilt” to tune of “The Star Spangled Banner” (Shaw, 2009, p. 144). Crazy quilts continued to grow in popularity and won so many of the prizes at quilt shows that it was recommended to ban them from competitions altogether (Duke, 1987).

Reclaiming “quilt”

For many women, crazy quilts allowed them to express their creativity. They were able to personalize them and attached sentimental value. They became like “textile scrapbooks” (Shaw, 2009, p. 156). Shaw attributes this to the “conceptual malleability” of the crazy quilt technique (2009, p. 143). However, as an expressive art medium, quilt making has gotten the proverbial short end of the stick.

The use of textiles in an artwork is considered a “lesser” art form than paintings and sculptures that are accepted as “high art.” Auther (2010) attributes the hierarchy of fine arts and crafts to originating in the Renaissance. She further explores the separation philosophically by citing Kant, Greenberg, and Smith. Kant characterizes art as having a purpose unto itself and is an object of pleasure, while “craft” is utilitarian in purpose and has a particular function (Auther, 2010, p. xv). Greenberg later makes a further distinction that “craft” is “decorative” and “a

replica of itself” (Auther, 2010, p. xvi). For him “*conception, inspiration, and the idea*” constitute a work of art (Auther, 2010, p. xviii). Smith further defines craft as being separate from fine art by describing the person’s relationship to the materials: “for artists they are a vehicle; for craftspeople they are sacred...” (Auther, 2010, p. xix). Ironically, (and I will mention this in more detail later) the language that quilt artists use to present their work as “Art” derives from the vocabulary of these philosophers.

Auther (2010) further illustrates the feminist recuperation of quilt making:

In 1973 for instance, Linda Nochlin questioned whether quilts were evidence of women’s “ability to create a valid art apart from the male-dominated institutions of high art” or were best viewed as “tokens of women’s traditional ability to triumph over adversity, to make the best of things in the face of continual oppression... fulfill[ing] their aesthetic potentialities within the restricted safely ahistorical areas of the decorative and the useful.” Furthermore, shattered by feminist artists’ encounter of actual women practicing a traditional art form. (p. 102)

She continues to explore the separation between “the high art world and women’s traditional craft” and takes a further look into the works of artists Faith Ringgold, Harmony Hammond, Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago, all of whom use quilt-making as an art medium.

So how does one perceive a quilt to be a work of art? Witzling (2009) offers a threefold combination of aesthetic viewpoints to consider when looking at a quilt as a work of art. She calls it “a medium that has enabled and continues to enable, women to create works in which they speak the truth about their lives” (p. 619). Continuing her metaphor, she says that quilts firstly speak through their formal elements (geometric patterns), secondly through the history

and significance of the fabric, and finally through the social aspect of quilts as being a creative product of women's work (Witzling, 2009). The arrangement of the formal elements account for what she calls a "graphic wit;" no two quilts are the same. Each woman/quilt maker is influenced by her/his unique surroundings or experiences (Witzling, 2009, p. 621). When "reading the fabric" in a quilt, each fabric used adds significance and value. The quilt maker may have exchanged it with a friend, purchased it from a special location, or saved it as a commemorative scrap from an event or milestone in her life (Witzling, 2009, pp. 623-626). For her final point, Witzling (2009) offers another metaphor: the quilt being transformed by the quilt maker from pieces to a glorious whole. Along with finding beauty in ordinary and every day objects, these themes have long been associated as "feminine ideas" and they appear in works by contemporary women artists and writers (p. 630).

Spotlight on artists using a quilt medium

There are countless artists and quilt makers that create quilts. Of the textile artists that I have uncovered, I have selected three that use the quilt as an art medium: Alma Lesch, Marion Henrion, and Joan Schulze.

Also known as "the Grande Dame" of textile arts, Alma Lesch began her artistic career going back to school after a brief stint as a third grade teacher in Kentucky (Parker, 2001). However she had been working with textiles long before that. She made her first quilt when she was 12 and learned other textile techniques from her mother and grandmother (Heitenman, 1999). After earning a M. Ed. from University of Louisville in 1962, "she taught textile arts at Louisville School of Art 1961- 1970 and at the University of Louisville 1975-1982" (Parker 2001).

In 1997, Lesch's works were displayed in a retrospective showing the full gamut of her career and artistic endeavors: "appliqué, stitchery, linoleum block and screen printing, terracotta sculptures, knotting weaving and some vegetable dyed fibers" (Walcott, 1997, p. 34). The highlight of the exhibit was her *fiber portraits*. Ogden (1997) describes them as "fabric collage" (p.82) because they are clothing stitched on to a quilt as though they were positioned for a portrait. The person is absent, commemorating a character from literature or a member of Lesch's family. Walcott (1997) also points out that they "often reference classic paintings" like the iconic *American Gothic* by Grant Wood (p. 34). Lesch died in 1999 and in her article Heilenman (1999) recognizes the artist as a trailblazer for generations following her: "her major contributions includ[e] the concept of the fabric collage and the acceptance of needlework as art rather than 'women's work'".

Marion Henrion is an artist working with quilt as a medium. She is a Cooper Union graduate who specialized in graphic arts. She taught at the Fashion Institute of Technology and wrote a textbook about careers in fashion (Malarcher, 2004). Like Lesch, she retired from teaching and began pursuing art making. The first quilts she made were copies of older patterns, then she was inspired by Nancy Crow and Jeff Gutcheon who influenced her to use quilts as a mode of expression (Malarcher, 2004). She now displays her work in fine art galleries, such as the Noho Gallery, and on her website www.marionhenrion.com.

Freudenheimer (1992) compares her quilts to poetry; the stitches and fabric are like words and syllables. There are narrative elements to her work. She explores themes that are universal, like freedom, and each series that she makes is a variation on a particular theme (Sider, 2001). The pattern and stitches on the surface are indicative of architecture. This is especially evident in her Byzantium series (Martin, 2001).

Aesthetically, critics like Frudenheimer (1992) use formal elements to describe her work, denouncing one quilt because it lacked harmony. Sider (2001) describes the transformative colors and lines that the stitches create. Marion is aware of the bias against textiles. She feels so deeply about her work, that it is hard for her to call them “quilts” (Malarcher, 2004, p. 15). She might, instead, call them “textile paintings” (Sider, 2001, p. 14). Meanwhile, Henrion advocates for displaying quilts in exhibitions: “the more the art world sees of good work in a fine art venue, or with works in other mediums, the better it is for the field [of art quilts]” (Malarcher, 2004, p. 14).

The third and final artist I researched is Joan Schulze. She graduated from the Art Institute of Chicago and made her way to California where she found herself surrounded by artists. There, She began experimenting with textiles and needlework, making fabric and mixed media collages (Arney, 2001). Her first solo exhibition was in 1970 and she was “insistent that her work be judged by the same criteria as paintings” (Arney, 2001, p. 66). When she approached galleries to display her work, the owners claimed not to know how to talk about her work. She responded, “just use what you use when you look at a painting: composition, ideas, color” (Hager, 2010, p. 25). She was invited to the first Fiber Art Bienalle and has been an active contributor since (Sider, 2006).

Hager (2010) describes Schulze’s method of making art quilts as “ruthless” (p. 22). “[S]he has arrived at what one might consider a mature style. This is characterized by a number of elements, recurring themes, compositional grids designed to support clean, bold imagery; a signature color palette (with black and white always conspicuous); transparent fabric overlays; unique stitching elements; and ongoing incorporation of nontraditional materials” (Hager, 2010, p. 25). At the same time, her work is personal and contains narratives and corresponds with her

poetry (Bockel, 2002). Her work resembles collage, but she has a preference for the quilt medium. When asked “Why quilts? Shulze replies: ‘Why breathe?’” (Bockel, 2002).

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

I wanted to know if the technique of making a crazy quilt could be used as a medium for a work of art. To investigate this question and further explore themes from my undergraduate work, I made a crazy quilt using the same themes that I applied to my wearable art. Flowers and fruit were replaced with female organs. I used scraps of fabric made for the project as well as other fabric that I have purchased and manipulated in some way. Manipulations included dying, painting and embroidering the fabric to make it suitable for the concept. I used traditional crazy quilting techniques, which meant it was made by hand. I used the sewing machine sparingly, only to join the blocks and the edges.

The research questions I explored are:

- Can I reclaim my creative and visual process by making a crazy quilt and find that it is an expressive medium to be used beyond the purpose of craft to making art?
- How will this process help me to better understand the nuances of art versus craft?
- What ideas and implications can I derive for using textiles with my feminist designs?

To further examine these questions, I recorded the process by taking visual and verbal notes in a personal sketchbook. I also documented the process with photographs and read what other scholars have already written. I had not made a crazy quilt before. When there were any problems with the medium, i.e. how to display a quilt, I used resources such as how-to books to find a solution. I hoped to join a Crazy Quilt Club in Lawrenceville, Georgia to experience the social aspect of quilt making. I also hoped that this would be a good resource for stitches to put into the blocks.

Because of the amount of hours it takes to make a crazy quilt (1500 hours according to Harper's Bazaar in 1884) I limited the size of the quilt that I created to nine blocks that are ten inches square (Duke, 1987). I planned to display the work in the student thesis show in July 2011. This meant I would need to complete the quilt in three months and further justified the need to restrict the size.

Since I have begun teaching and studying art education, my time has been occupied with either teaching students or being taught as a student. Marion Henrion stressed the need for artists to exhibit their work: "If you make a work of art that nobody sees, it's sad. If you're going to do it, do the whole thing. I believe that if you're going to put the time and energy into making art, you should make an effort to get it out in the world" (Malarcher, 2004, pp. 13-14). I was looking forward to creating art again and I was honored to be showing it in the student gallery among other artists.

CHAPTER 4

CREATION OF WORK

Preparing the fabric

Because the majority of content in the artwork is in the fabric itself, I chose warm colored fabric with feminine colors like pink, purple, and deep burgundy. I manipulated some fabrics so that it had images of female anatomy in the pattern. I used several techniques to do so.

For a class assignment, I made a lino-cut of a pomegranate branch, replacing the fruit with breasts (an image I had worked with in my sketchbook). I wanted to put this image on fabric. I tried to put the image on fabric with water-soluble printing ink (Figure 1). However, I needed something that was permanent. I remembered in a previous course researching tapa cloth from the Pacific Islands and finding that the patterns in the cloth were made by placing the cloth over a raised design and rubbing solids of natural pigments over the fabric to make the design appear. I secured a piece of fabric over the linoleum. Using the side of a fabric dye crayon, I rubbed the image into the fabric. Now the image was permanent and I later found, when I dyed the fabric, that it would act as a resist to the dye so that the dye did not change the color of the rubbing. I did rubbings on multiple pieces of fabric. The design worked well for a focal point of one quilt block. It also turned out to be a good image to make a repeated pattern for more subtle shapes in the quilt.

There was another image from my undergraduate artwork that I felt should be part of the quilt. It was a line drawing of two women, one had a tightly laced corset and the other was drawn where the outer layers of skin were peeled away to reveal the disfiguration of the vital organs. The latter drawing was not anatomically correct showing the intestines covering the female reproductive system and pelvic bones. But it fit the theme of bringing what was unseen to the

surface. I scanned the image from a book and cropped it to remove the writing around it. I pasted the image into Microsoft Word and printed the image on fabric using an inkjet printer. The fabric had been prepared for the printer by ironing the fabric on to the wax side of an 8.5 inch x 11 inch sheet of freezer paper. The wax on the paper acted as an adhesive, allowing me to put the fabric through the printer. To remove the fabric from the paper, I simply ironed it again to warm the wax and pulled them gently apart. The result was a custom printed fabric (Figure 2). I made a large print of the image as well as a repeated pattern on a peach color fabric.

Dyeing the fabric was a more complex task. I used cotton fabric, which meant that I had to use a *procion dye* that is chemically suited for plant fibers. Another kind of dye is needed for protein fibers like silk or wool. Firstly, a dye concentrate solution of the selected colors had to be made by combining the dye powder, Urea, and hot water (Figure 3). I had to take safety precautions like wearing a dust mask and protective gloves. The concentrates can be added in differing amounts and combinations to achieve all kinds of colors. I had a recipe book, but the directions were not without error. I wanted to make cadmium red fabric that ended up being fuchsia. The dye bath is the specific large amount of water combined with soda ash (a fixative to help the dye become permanent). The dye concentrate and fabric was added to the dye bath and periodically stirred gently over an hour's time (Figure 4). Once the hour passed I rinsed the fabric of the excess dye and dried it on a clothesline (Figure 5).

For the pieces of silk I used a type of dye called *Dyna-Flo*. It has the consistency of liquid watercolor, perhaps slightly more opaque, and can be applied directly to silk with a brush. I mixed purples and pinks and reds together. Then I put the pieces of fabric on the ground outside, sprayed them lightly with water, splattered the paint, and watched the colors run beautifully together (Figure 7). The result was textured silk. The red looked like menstrual blood

red and the violets were a wonderful addition to the color palette. The small piece of silk that I rubbed over the linoleum print block revealed a white ghost image after it was dyed (Figure 8). I was able to bring the image out more after embellishing it and outlining it with embroidery stitches (Figure 9).



Figure 1 *Linoleum block and print of the breast fruit tree.*

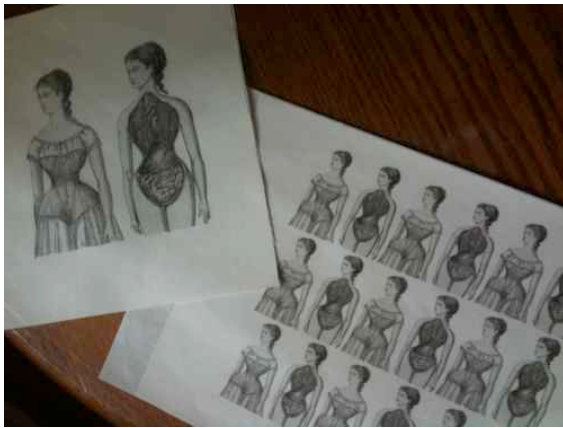


Figure 2 *Image inkjet printed on fabric before removing it from the freezer paper.*



Figure 3 *Mixing the dye concentrate with hot water.*



Figure 4 *Adding the dye concentrate to the water for the dye bath.*



Figure 5 *Rinsing the dye from the fabric to see the fabric crayon rubbing.*



Figure 6 *Drying the dyed fabric on a clothesline.*



Figure 7 *Splatter painting dye on pieces of silk.*



Figure 8 *The white fabric crayon rubbing on the silk after being splattered with dye.*



Figure 9 *The rubbing outlined with a running embroidery stitch.*

Preparing the blocks

All of the blocks were made by adding shapes to a 10 inch x 10 inch foundation square of cotton muslin. I could choose one of two technical routes after this step, as described below.

The first direction was starting off with placing a center square on the foundation square. The center square is a focal point for the quilt block and is given special treatment. One of the center blocks is an image of two women that I inkjet printed on fabric and added other fabric and embroidery (Figure 10). Figure 11 shows the sketch used to plan which colors and textures needed to be applied to the black and white image. After the center square is placed on the foundation square, other shapes of fabric are then placed strategically around it. They cover the foundation square without any pattern. These shapes have to be large enough to allow for tucking at least a quarter of an inch underneath on the exposed edges of the fabric. This prevents the edges of the fabric from raveling and it secures the unexposed edges of the fabric underneath

other shapes. The unexposed edges would overlap the neighboring shapes if they were not placed under.

The second route began by drawing the shapes on the foundation block with a disappearing ink marker. The ink in the marker disappears when cold water is applied to the mark. I kept the shapes consistently large to unify them with the other blocks with center squares. The fabric for the shapes was easy to view and select by color because it was located in a flat storage bin and it was stacked horizontally with the edges showing (Figure 12). Figure 13 shows the edges of the shapes arranged before I put them on the foundation block. Figure 14 illustrates the shapes after the edges were folded, ironed, and pinned to the foundation block. After this step, the edges shapes were basted (a loose stitch that is easy to pull out) to the foundation square with thread so that I could proceed to the next without the pins falling out.

Regardless of the path I went with the block, I finished it by embroidering the edges of the squares with intricate blanket stitches. Blanket stitches are embroidery stitches that secure the edge of a fabric on another. They can be made more complex by changing the direction of the stitch and by combining other colors and stitches. Each shape on the quilt block had a different blanket stitch. My aim was to use as many variations of the blanket stitch as I could. I found inspiration for the different variations in images of actual crazy quilts. In my sketchbook, I used markers or colored pencils to draw the lines the stitches make along a pencil line that represented the edge of the fabric. This was helpful because I could plan the direction of the needle and consider the placement of the stitches. I could also determine the space between the points where I pulled the needle above or under the fabric. I was able to draw a few blanket stitches on one page so I did not have to spend time searching for variations. Once all of the edges of all of the shapes are embroidered, the quilt blocks are completed.



Figure 10 *Applying fabric to embellish the printed image.*

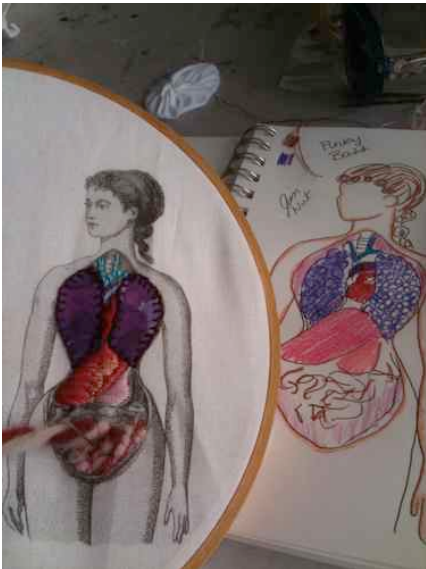


Figure 11 *Comparing the embellished fabric to the sketch.*



Figure 12 *Keeping the fabric organized so that it can be seen and selected easily.*



Figure 13 *Using the blue disappearing ink marker on the white foundation block as a guide to cut and arrange shapes before ironing and basting.*



Figure 14 *Ironed and Pinned shapes on foundation block.*



Figure 15 *Basting and Blanket stitches secure the shapes on the foundation block. The basting is removed after the embroidery is done.*

Putting the blocks together

Crazy quilts can be put together without a border or square between the blocks, but there are no guidelines as such. So I played with the blocks and pinned them vertically on a large sheet of fabric hanging on the wall. I experimented with various spacing in between the blocks. First I put them all side by side. The problem with this arrangement is that the crazy quilt is visually very cluttered and there is no place for the eye to rest. The goal was for the five blocks with center squares to be focal points (Figure 19). When I arranged them side-by-side, I did not want for pieces of the same fabric to be right next to each other (Figure 16). I had to turn the pieces like a puzzles, trying to find the best way to combine the shapes. Then, I arranged them with a few inches of space between the squares, like a window (Figure 17). I appreciated how I was able to focus on one block at a time this way. I also considered putting a solid fabric square between the crazy quilt squares in a checkerboard pattern. The result was a rectangle shaped quilt, but I felt the non-crazy squares were too much negative space (Figure 18). All of these arrangements considered, I felt the side-by-side arrangement would be best. This decision supported the goal of the artwork to draw in viewers who recognize it first as a beautiful quilt. Then amaze them with the content of the images when they take a closer look.

After using a rotary cutter to cut down each block to ten inches square, I used a sewing machine to sew the blocks together into one large square. I did a simple blanket stitch around the edge of each block, choosing the color of thread carefully. I ironed the large piece of fuchsia fabric that I dyed (Figure 6). I placed it face down on a clean, flat floor for the backing. Then I put the squares face up on top so that the edges matched. I pinned the top to the back at the corner of each square and did a running stitch around the edges of the squares to quilt the two together. I used a sewing machine to sew the border to the quilt top and what is called an

appliqué stitch to sew the border on the bottom layer. The appliqué stitch is a stitch used on the edges of fabric pulled through the fabric so that is not seen but attaches the two pieces together.

To display the artwork, I hand stitched the female side of a strip of Velcro across the top of the back of the quilt. The male side of the Velcro was on a piece of wood the same length as the quilt. The wood was then screwed on the wall at an appropriate height and I was able to hang the quilt easily by attaching the quilt to the wall with Velcro.



Figure 16 *Arranging the blocks side by side in a grid.*



Figure 17 *Adding three inches of space between the blocks.*

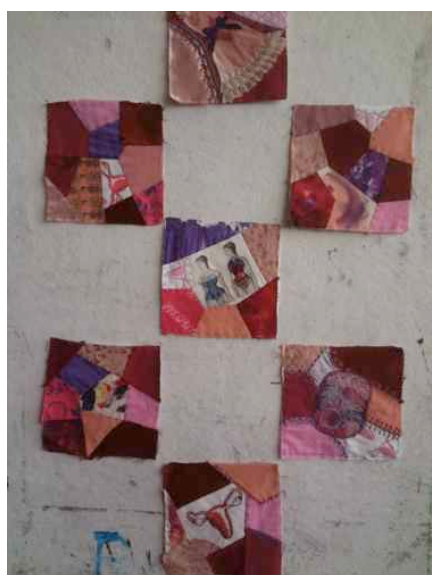


Figure 18 *Arranging the blocks in a checkerboard pattern.*



Figure 19 *Quilt blocks with a center square.*

CHAPTER 5

REFLECTION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

Reflection on process

My artwork began as a statement about modesty. I grew up in the American South and the value of modesty personally seems more important than having a healthy body image. There is also a generally accepted perception that any image of a nude is pornographic. In my personal artwork, images of female nudes and anatomy are not meant to be offensive. They are pointing out the allusions of the floral and fruity patterns associated as feminine. I feel if it is going to have a flower on it, you may as well put a vagina instead.

I became interested in the imagery of pomegranates. When it is cut in half laterally, the fruit inside so closely resembles the mammary glands in female breasts. Fruit imagery alluding to breasts is also related to the idea of women providing breast milk and nutrition for their offspring. It is also an allusion to Original Sin and the first woman giving in to the temptation of fruit from the forbidden tree. So, I did a web search of pomegranate images online and worked out an image in my sketchbook. From this image I made a painting on fabric and a print block (Figure 1). The image is successful because it is appealing as a drawing of fruit on a tree and at second glance; you realize that they are breasts.

Another quilt block with strong imagery has the dress on it. At first it looks like an appliquéd quilt block, like the Sunbonnet Sue pattern. But if you look closely, the dress is painted to appear as though the woman is not wearing any clothes. The piece of fabric was fitted to a doll as the front of a dress and I painted directly on the fabric. It is a statement on modesty and the idea of dressing to impress others. This idea of dressing in a certain way eliciting certain

responses, like dressing scantily to appear sexy, is absurd. Nudity is not an exclusive expression of pornography.

Making the quilt I realized how dear of a pastime it is for me personally. As I mentioned before, my grandmother and mother taught me the basics of sewing and crafts. I am a woman raised in the South. I am sensitive to the subject of age and prefer the passive aggressive route in a conflict. There is a great passage from *Gone with the Wind* wherein Mitchell (1936) describes Ellen, the matriarch of the O'Hara family. As an example of her southern charm, she never sits without her needlework in front of her. I recognize that it is unusual that I learned these skills as a child. My friends growing up never invited me over for a knitting slumber party. I was never pressured to learn to sew. However, I feel that I have an affinity for the fiber medium and quilt making. Researching crazy quilts merely fueled a flame of interest that was already there.

The research about crazy quilts was useful in that it provided inspiration for the imagery and how it could subtly be transformed into my own. The fairyland theme that Gordon (2006) shared was translated to a feminist land where visual implications were taken literally. The research about the quilt artists was inspirational. The artists wrote and spoke about their quilts as works of art. In the same way, I was able to recognize the art elements in the quilt and work out visual problems by treating and talking about it like a work of art. I constantly looked for the art elements and principles as I was working, focusing on variety and contrast. I kept in mind the voracity of Shulze's work ethic and being willing to change the artwork if something is not working (Hager, 2010). Henrion's quote about making art and the importance of showing it remained in the back of my mind throughout the process (Malarcher, 2004).

Implications for the art classroom

Because of the graphic content of my work, I don't think that I will introduce the exact theme to my students. If I worked in a school system where students were exposed to fine art outside of school I would consider it. I feel my students would not understand the concept. However, I think they will appreciate lessons teaching "craft" techniques as an option for a creative outlet. I have explored other mediums including ceramics and printmaking, but have not felt creative release equal to that of working with the medium of textiles. There may be some students who do not have self-efficacy towards drawing and painting. Perhaps they would be, like myself, more comfortable with the fiber medium. This would make including teaching textiles as an expressive medium an important aspect of a well-rounded art curriculum.

In making a quilt I have discovered that it takes a combination of creative and artistic skills to complete. Students could be able to improve these skills if presented with a similar task with the textile medium. There was a lot of planning involved in the process. I heavily relied on my sketchbook to plan visual ideas as well as keep visual and written notes. Figure 4.11 shows how I used the sketchbook to plan what colors and textures could be embellished on the image that was printed on fabric with an inkjet printer. In the sketch I was able to work out these and other visual problems before they became permanently stitched into the fabric.

Another skill I discovered while making this quilt was endurance in working towards a set goal. The process of putting the pieces of fabric together and of embroidering the quilt blocks is slow. There are innovative techniques that can diminish some of this time, for example, I could hold the needle above the fabric in my left hand and below the fabric in my right hand so I did not have to move my right arm above and below the fabric. I found that each step always

took longer than anticipated but the results were worth more visually than if I had quickly used a sewing machine or painted the fabric.

When I was embroidering the fabric I discovered that it required a great deal of hand-eye coordination. Embroidery is like drawing, but with a thread and a needle. When I make a mark with a pencil, my brain imagines what the mark will look like and the mark appears the same way on my paper as in my head after making deft movements that contact the graphite of the pencil with the paper. When I made a mark with embroidery, the mark was not as immediate and the process from visualization to outcome was slightly different. Before I made a stitch I had to know what the line should look like and what direction the thread should go in before I put the needle through the fabric. Often I was unable to see my hand or the needle until I pushed it above the fabric so I developed a good sense of where my hand was below the fabric to begin the stitches. The embroidery floss began a line every time I pulled the needle through and above the fabric. The line ended where I pulled the needle through and under. The lines could vary and change character by changing the length of the lines, the amount of threads or thickness of the floss, or the direction of the stitches. The fiber could also affect the character of the line. Wool thread is thicker and has a softer line than cotton thread. If teaching embroidery were included in an art curriculum, students could develop and strengthen similar hand-eye coordination. They could also appreciate the expressive nature of making different stitches with different types of yarn or thread, in the same way that they are encouraged to produce different characterizations of marks from a pencil.

Integrating textile arts into an art curriculum could present an opportunity for students to think critically and discuss the *big ideas* of art. Students could be able to understand the process of making art this way and they could decide individually if the tools can be used as artistic

media. As a teacher I could share images of quilt art by artists like Schulze, Henrion, and Lesch. I could start a discussion by asking questions like: Do you know anyone who has made a quilt? Can an artist make a quilt? How would you feel if someone made you a quilt? Could you express feelings and emotions with a quilt? What do you use a quilt for? Can a quilt be art and why? Is making a quilt different from making art and how is it different? Also, if students could look at a quilt as a work of art, then students can determine whether or not a quilt possesses the artistic elements and principles. With that knowledge, they could participate in using the Feldman model of art criticism when critiquing a quilt.

With such lessons, the history of textiles in art could be introduced into the curriculum. I could use the findings from my research on crazy quilts as content for a history lesson. The students could become more informed and be able to form a more informed opinion when asked to judge whether a quilt was a work of art.

Conclusion

When I began this study, the research questions I explored were:

- Can I reclaim my creative and visual process by making a crazy quilt and find that it is an expressive medium to be used beyond the purpose of craft to making art?
- How will this process help me to better understand the nuances of art versus craft?
- What ideas and implications can I derive for using textiles with my feminist designs?

Using textiles as an expressive medium strengthens the feminist designs. Quilting has been considered to be women's work because it decorated the home and because the process of stitching small pieces together to make a finished product is considered feminine. Using quilt making as an art medium empowers the textile artist in a traditionally white male dominated art

world. The designs narrow the focus of the feminist message of the medium to pointing out the implications of the fabric used in quilt-making and female forms.

The conflict of art vs. craft is an ongoing one. The defining line between the two can be clear and at other times it can appear hazy. In this study I recognized nuances that helped me become closer to defining the difference. Folk artists and skilled craftspeople usually make craft. Artists make Art. Craft has a purpose and function (including decorative). Art can be made simply for the purpose of making art. Craft usually has a set and clear process and outcome not necessarily with the intent of personal expression. The process of creating art is often considered a mystical process of combining creativity with skill to express thoughts visually and the outcome is sometimes unknown even to the artist.

At the beginning of the art-making process, I was doubtful that I would be able to revisit the concepts with the same vigor that I had been able to do in my undergraduate studies. I have been teaching for the past four years and being able to take the time to embark on a creative journey with a medium I had not practiced in the same amount of time was intimidating. As I became more involved in the process, it was fulfilling to see the step-by-step results. I made room in my purse for a sketchbook and colored pencils. I even started an artist's page on Facebook with the moniker *Tenacious Threads* to validate that I am an artist who makes art. The fear of someone looking at my work and scoffing at the medium I've chosen has diminished because I now have the tools to advocate for Textile Arts. The quilt that I made reaches beyond the realm of craft. It is not a functional quilt and, while it is beautiful, its purpose is beyond decorative. With a sense of humor and irony I have been able to express opinions about visual culture and traditional symbols that would not have been expressed the same in a traditional medium.

Creating meaningful and engaging art does not happen instantaneously. There is a process and it is the process that I am attracted to when I look at artwork. If I look at a work and I feel that the artist possessed little skill in the medium, I do not consider it to be a work of art. The task of making a quilt the past few months became a theme in all aspects of my life. Nothing happened in an instant. I had to be patient and consider the parts as I looked at the whole. Earning this degree and writing this paper even, have been much like making a quilt. After putting all of the hours and thoughts and plans together piece-by-piece, I am beginning to see the fruits of my labor.

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