CUT FROM THE SAME CLOTH: CURATING A MODERN HEIRLOOM

A thesis submitted to the College of the Arts of Kent State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

by
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INTRODUCTION

My thesis work aims to tell a story about generational connection between the women in my family expressed through digitally printed textiles and figural forms. The work consists of five textile sculptures and ten hanging textile panels metaphorically representing both of my grandmothers, mother, myself and soon to be daughter. Hung together their presence creates an identity that embodies each woman individually as well as the family as a whole. This installation of visual narrative serves as an example of how we can use technology to create a fusion of past and present in order to preserve our memories and kinship.

Within my family, stories and pieces have been passed down through generations, helping to give importance to our ancestry. In looking back on my own heritage, material objects in many cases have been all that are left to tell the story of the past. From an early age I was fascinated with these memoirs, heirlooms and photographs. Because I lost both grandmothers at a young age these pieces helped me feel a connection to them through the years. Especially during defining moments in life that shape us all as women: graduations, marriages, and births. I couldn’t help wondering what these women were thinking as they entered these stages in life. I contemplated how our lives and personalities had differed in many ways, but blending them together created a richness of character and meaning. Currently expecting my first child, a girl, only provoked the desire to explore this abstract bond. This drove my decision to design a body
of work entitled, “Cut from the Same Cloth: Curating a Modern Heirloom,” dedicated to this concept.

PATTERNING MEMORIES

The installation began by researching and photographing the inherited objects that had brought this idea to life. For each woman these pieces were different, but all seemed to revolve around the same basic elements: love, family and livelihood. The pieces included letters, handmade garments, jewelry, printed documents and domestic articles. Using this imagery I digitally developed textile patterns telling a story for each woman. In Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator motifs were created and then merged together. This assemblage of images translates into a collage of life crafting both individuality and connection between the women. Visually expressing this concept by using imagery of objects spanning almost a century gives new contemporary life to these pieces of the past.

Illustrating their lives, as well as my own, in fragments made me realize our shared aspirations for relationships and careers may have been closer than I had ever speculated. However, in the cases of both my grandmothers their paths deviated from achieving what they wanted due to unforeseen circumstances. They each attended college, an accomplishment that was relatively rare in the 1920’s. Both had their own career pursuits, but sadly were not able to see them into fruition in the way they imagined.

My paternal Grandma Berti fell in love and married my grandfather early after she finished school in Oberlin to become a social worker. Sadly he began getting sick and soon after their first child was born was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease. My grandmother became a caregiver for the rest of their marriage for him and my father. Although sorrowful, their devotion remains an inspiration. To visually reveal this relationship I intertwined images of love
letters written from my grandfather to my grandmother when they were in college, a brooch he
had gifted her and lace from her wedding dress. She had a wonderfully sweet, but overly prim
and almost puritanical personality. My memories of her are faded, but include her bringing me to
church, hosting elaborate dinner parties and working quietly on needlepoint. Including images in
her digital print such as the cover of a prayer book, small crystal glasses and a hand embroidered
wall hanging helped to paint a picture of these significant aspects of her life.

My maternal grandmother, Emma Kathryn, attended college at Miami University in Ohio
for two years only to be summoned back to her hometown to help take care of her ailing father.
She worked there until his death and then did not have the money to continue with her education.
Instead she married my grandfather and embarked on her proudest venture; building a family and
creating a warm and loving home. Kay, as she was called by her close friends, took homemaking
very seriously and excelled at all domestic tasks. My fondest remembrances of her were cooking
brilliant things, sewing, crocheting beautiful items and having a lovely and welcoming home,
always. Within the print that characterizes her I have photographed recipe cards, a baby blanket
she crocheted for me, a floral textile taken from one of her traditional 1940’s “house dresses” and
the house key to her and my grandfather’s first and only home.

My mother’s life and experiences are more closely intertwined with mine. She attended
nursing school at John’s Hopkins University and directly afterward uprooted her life and started
a new one in sunny San Francisco, California. Spending a good part of the 1960’s there shaped
much of her outlook on life as well as gave her the confidence and curiosity to keep traveling and
exploring. Her nursing career began at Stanford, but following her time in California she decided
to become a nurse in the Air Force and was stationed in Hawaii and Texas. She met my father
when she returned home to Ohio to accept a job with University Hospitals as a head nurse. She
was 36 when she was married and 43 when she had me; both unusual for her generation. Although her career was important she also shared a domestic spirit and excelled at the traditional skills her mother had bestowed on her.

My mother’s enthusiasm for traveling, focusing on a career and balancing love and family has always served as a catalyst for the way I approach my own ambitions. Within her print I have images of her graduation program from nursing school, maps of California and Hawaii, and Air Force and nursing pins she wore throughout various jobs. Within this print I also began pulling motifs from my grandmother’s panel that showcased the traditions of cooking, handcrafting and homemaking.

My personality and interests are a blend of these women. Traces of my Grandma Berti’s calmness, Grandma Tucker’s handcrafting and my mother’s sense of adventure all play a part in the fabric of my own story. Choosing to attend school for fashion design and moving to New York directly afterwards was a decision that forever altered the way I approach work and life. The experience was unmeasurable, but made me aware of my desire to create a harmony between career and family. I relocated back to Ohio to begin another chapter of my life in all aspects; becoming a teacher, marrying and now having my first child.

The print I created for myself showcases images of work I designed in N.Y.C, a trip I took with my husband to Portugal, letters from my grandparents and ultrasound photos of my daughter all coalesced with visual threads of my grandmothers’ and mothers patterns. The collection of motifs creates a mélange of visual information giving the viewer a sense of accumulation of time and complexity.

This creates a perfect introduction to my soon to be daughters print, an even busier set of marks holding less definition within the motif. It is a patterned synthesis of all four women
combined. The abundance of visual memoir fills the textile with possibilities that lie before her. Her life will be inherently affected by all of our stories and characteristics, but the greater part of her narrative has yet to be written. Therefore there is vagueness to the print on her panel that suggests what is yet to come.

Throughout the panels, the prints appear as unbroken circular patterns that ebb and flow differently in each piece. These are meant to symbolize the unity and connection between the women and are directly reminiscent of various DNA helixes. Certain motifs are pulled through between pieces so as to conceptually suggest the idea of inherited traits and ideas.

The collection’s color story is designed in black, white and gray to convey the feeling of past, present and future. The minimal color palette helps to focus on the content, imagery and transparency of the cloth. Reducing the amount of color also helped unite the installation as a collection of pieces.

**PROCESS AND MATERIALS**

Patterns were printed on silk organza and georgette; fabrics chosen for their physical and metaphorical properties. Their transparent qualities allowed me to use multiple layers of the print throughout the installation to represent the evolution of generations that were separated by time, yet bonded together through family history. The ability to see through the panels and figural forms is symbolic of seeing through time into a person’s unique heritage and identity.

All pieces were printed using a wide format digital printer. Choosing surface design in the form of digital textile printing was a process that allowed me to use photographs with clarity and depth unable to be achieved in using other textile mediums such as screen-printing or
dyeing. Within textiles and art there has never been such an accessible way to use technology in crafting visual character, detail and information into a piece that can be readily understood.

Along with the textile panels, female figural forms representing each of the women are hung within the installation. These forms were sculpted from tissue weight silk organza and also have a faint, less detailed version of the print on them. Using a transparent textile stiffener to mold the figure allowed the forms to retain a weightless and ethereal appearance.

Their presence supports the effeminate concept while figuratively connecting them to the women they suggest. The individual forms of my grandmothers’ are symmetrically crafted suggesting a more traditionally familiar silhouette. My mother’s and my forms transform into an asymmetric shape showing the evolution of our mindsets becoming more abstract than previous generations. Lastly, my daughters form is the most ambiguous of all; a slighter figure that hints at femininity while leaving much of its form undistinguishable.

Boning is bound within each piece to enhance the curvilinear lines of the sculpture as well as emphasize the cylindrical pattern within the prints. Suspending them as if they are weightlessly floating in air creates an allusion of the body as a second skin as opposed to its literal form.

**INSTALLATION**

The positioning of the pieces was integral in capturing the unity of the collection. Each female form hangs closely between the two textile panels that correspond directly to the woman implied. One panel portrays the DNA helix motif, the other panel is comprised of heirloom motifs. The pattern on the form in between creates a fusion of the two; merging the contour lines
of the DNA filled with the heirloom imagery. The pieces representing myself, grandmothers, and mother, are hung in an open circle with the pieces for my daughter protected in the middle.

The installation of the pieces was an integral and challenging part of the work. They required a large environment to move and breathe apart from each other while still feeling unified. I chose Rockwell Hall atrium to hang them because of its vast space, natural light and approachability for viewers. Each piece hung from a line of monofilament attached to a wiring system on the second floor. This allowed them to gently spin and twist taking on a human fragility. The movement encouraged people to walk through the installation and quietly interact with the pieces. The atrium is an open chamber to the floors above and significantly adds to the variety of viewing perspectives. This creates the ability to observe the installation from eye level on the ground floor as well as from above by standing on the upper floors looking down. The modularity of the installation allows for further experimentation of location, height and positioning of the work.

CONCLUSION

Examining the women in my family, our lives and kinship has strengthened not only our bond with each other, but also the universal connection we have to all women: past, present and future. This installation bears homage to all of them while exploring the ways we can blend technology and art to preserve our heritage and identities.
Figure 1

*Cut From the Same Cloth, 2014 (installation)*
Figure 2
Alberta, 2014 (installation from above)
Silk Organza and Georgette, set of 3 pieces
Figure 3
*Sara, 2014* (installation)
Silk Organza and Georgette, set of 3 pieces
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*Constance, 2014*
Silk Organza and Georgette, set of 3 pieces
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Silk Organza and Georgette, set of 3 pieces
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Digitally Printed Silk Organza and Georgette, panels 40”x108
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*Emma 1 & 2, 2014*

Digitally Printed Silk Organza and Georgette, panels 40”x108