

THE SACRED TRANSFIGURED

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by

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Every stitch and every piece are made within a community of support and love.

INTRODUCTION

sa·cred

adjective

1. connected with God (or the gods) or dedicated to a religious purpose and so deserving veneration.

"sacred rites"

trans·fig·ure

verb

1. transform into something more beautiful or elevated.

"the world is made luminous and is transfigured"

Why are textiles special? How can material like wool and linen be transfigured into precious artifacts? What about this construction process is sacred? What is the role of the artist in that process? Textiles are connective, protective, comforting, containing and portable. These unique characteristics provide a solid foundation of meaning that enhance my textile art. Building on these notions, I make work that is visually engaging with colors, textures, and materials that add specific content to resonate with the viewer. Textiles have a universal magic to them. As Louise Bourgeois said,

I've always had a fascination with the needle, the magic power of the needle. The needle is used to repair damage. It's a claim to forgiveness. It is never aggressive, it's not a pin.

In this sentiment, the needle is imbued with healing powers, a quality that lends a sacred power to the user of that needle. The user, more clearly defined as the maker or the artist can apply that same belief to other tools, or even the body in the transformation process. For me, these processes are primarily felting, weaving and stitching. Whenever I am felting, weaving or stitching I am able to tap into a rhythm found through the repetitive motion of my hands, limbs, feet, torso - every part of my body engaged with the material. This transports my mind and spirit into a state of timeless meditation where I have space to seek the sublime. These making processes are thus transfigured to sacred rituals and the artefacts created are the results of that spiritual and physical engagement.

I delve further into the idea of process as ritual by exploring the role of the artist as shaman. Over the duration of the ritual, I use tools to transform and embed material with that same magic as described by Bourgeois. It is my role to orchestrate that transformation and present the results to the audience members, or the participants engaged with the artifacts. As Steven M. Leuthold says in Cross-Cultural Issues in Art,

A renewal of the social role of the artist as shaman seems to provide an antidote to the distance between artist and audience that emerged from the 'art for art's sake' theories of the early twentieth century.

- Leuthold, p. 115

I have placed myself in this role of artist as shaman in order to expand the experience audience members can have with my textile work, instead of solely appreciating it through viewing. The pieces I construct are distinctly participatory. I want to communicate the magic qualities of textiles through an experiential manner. From my own personal experiences of

moving, living abroad and solo travel, I have made many exciting discoveries. There always came a time when living in a new place got lonely. I found that I wanted to feel connected – to a memory, a person, a place or something greater than myself. There were times when I was so far away from what and who was familiar that I just needed to feel protected and comforted. Even surrounded by new friends, there were also times when I wanted to be isolated and contained in myself with my thoughts and memories. *Connective, Protective, Comforting, Containing, Portable*. All of these are adjectives that reflect human needs as well as describe the inherent characteristics of textiles. With this realization, I forged a foundation upon which I could conduct my ritual processes to craft textile artifacts that respond to these human needs and invite participants to satisfy their own similar interests through engaging with the results of my efforts.

These artifacts have been intentionally designed and crafted to function as wearable garments. But they are more than that; they are layered with theatrical wonder and mystery to heighten the senses of the viewer and create an aura of magic around the wearer. This provides the opportunity for us both to take on new roles and more easily connect to the rituals with which the garment was created. The clothes that we wear act like a second skin. They give indication of our personality, our status, cultural identity, how we view ourselves and how we ask others to see us. We have an intimate relationship with our clothes simply because they are worn on the body. We carry our memories through their tactility and ability to absorb scent. They travel with us everywhere and offer the means to reconnect to time, place and peoples. Wouldn't you say it's like magic?

I, LAND

I, Land is a hand felted and embellished multi-functional piece which I use to examine memory, comfort and protection. The development of the piece evolved over several months and cumulated to an ensemble of forms used to provide isolation and privacy. In the way that rushing water cuts through and shapes the land, I was able to combine water, soap and wool with the physical movement of my own body to felt, shape and assemble these landscape inspired forms. The ritual of laying out layers of wool fleece, applying soapy water, and then applying the pressure and friction required to felt was physically challenging and demanded my full physical and mental presence. Within this process I found rhythm through the exertion. What resulted was a garment that softly envelops and contains the body when worn (figure 1) as well as totally hides the body when used as a cover during rest or deep meditation (figure 2).

Protective Comfort Land Cape (PCLC) is the largest piece of the ensemble. It was felted to have pockets that were later stuffed with bits and ends of old weaving projects. These small remnants were then scented with various essential oils (figures 4-6). This is to recognize the connection to place, person and time through scent, with the carrier of the memory being the textile. These areas were carefully embellished to reflect their preciousness – like the iridescent shell of a beetle or the dazzling reflective scales on a fish. The *PCLC* is also able to be taken off the body and laid down on the ground in any location (figure 2, 3). Once arranged – a soft bed of wool can be used either for meditation (used with the *Portable Nostalgia-Curing Meditation Seat (PNCMS)*, figures 7, 8) or rest. The *PNCMS* can be placed directly on the ground, with the

Protective Comfort Land Cape then being draped over a horizontal body and used for sleep or deep rest (figure 3).

Introspective Thought and Memory Sourcing Headpiece (ITMSH) is meant to cover the head when worn and to shield against sight and sound when lying in meditation. Visually, this is where the beading and sequin embellishments (figures 4-6) seem to originate. This is because those pockets of memory scattered around the body are all sourced in the mind. The *ITMSH* covers the most active part of the body: the head. Having the head contained allows for sight and sound to be restricted to the outside world, giving the opportunity to focus inward. The *ITMSH* is best utilized during meditation or deep rest (figure 2, 3).

Camouflage Light-Step Producing Shin Guards are two distinctive felted leg coverings that help the wearer become mindful of their step, giving them the intuitive mind power to walk lightly. They also serve to aid in camouflage when in the natural world. They lastly function to protect the knee and shin when the wearer must kneel to spread out the *Protective Comfort Land Cape* on the ground.

The final and typically hidden piece of the ensemble is the *Portable Nostalgia-Curing Meditation Seat (PNCMS)* (figures 7, 8). The front of the *PNCMS* is a felted mosaic of abstracted tree silhouettes. The back consists of dreamy symbols including a two-headed snake and a leaf surrounded by web like streaks. This imagery is in homage of where I come from, my dreams and fears— these things serve as foundation for development of my own identity. This *PNCMS* can function as a meditation seat when placed on top of the *Protective Comfort Land Cape*, and also has two attached ropes that can be used to tie around the waist – thus making the cushion a wearable and portable object. The interior contains three scented sachet bags filled with

chunks of pink salt, pine needles and lavender essential oil. These are fragrances reminiscent of the tall trees and open skies I remember from home. These scents promote relaxation and comfort, indicated to help bring the body into a relaxed and introspective state. Its other use is a pillow for the head, in which the wearer is fully horizontal with their head on the *Portable Nostalgia-Curing Meditation Cushion* and their body covered by the *Protective Comfort Land Cape* (figure 2).

The complete *I, Land* ensemble is fully portable, allowing these states of isolated meditation, protection from the outside elements and memory provoking scent to be carried with the wearer. This assures that there will always be the space and tools for such acts while immersed in a beautiful, imaginative environment.



figure 1, *I, Land* fully worn



figure 2, *I, Land* used in deep rest/meditation



figure 3, *I, Land* used in deep rest/meditation



figure 4, *Protective Comfort Land Cape* detail



figure 5, *Protective Comfort Land Cape* detail



figure 6, *Protective Comfort Land Cape* detail



figure 7, *Nostalgia Curing Meditation Cushion* (front)



figure 8, *Nostalgia Curing Meditation Cushion* (back)

THE ARTIST IS EATING

In Textiles: The Whole Story, Gordon asserts that “textiles also play a significant role in bringing groups of people together; they concretize group relationships.” (p.124) She also discusses the creation of textiles in the form of heirlooms to connect to family.

...textiles often serve as family heirlooms. Cloth is portable and easily stored, so it is a possession likely to be passed down, especially because it seems to hold ancestors’ energy... The cloth was a stand-in, an embodiment of the relationship between individuals.

- Gordon, p.118-120

This idea is central to the creation of my next collection of artifacts: *The Artist is Eating*. *The Artist is Eating* is another multi-functional piece composed of several parts. This piece was a result of the ritual of weaving. Like felting, weaving is inherently repetitive, requires the use of the entire body, and becomes a meditative act. While felting consists of a microscopic transformation of wool fibers into cloth, weaving consists of multiple linear elements coming together to form a larger stronger whole. It is the transformation of threads into this new system that create the resulting cloth.

The Artist is Eating is most essentially a table setting: a stage for the meal, where people share food, stories, experiences and moments that become lasting memories. The meal itself has always been very important with my family and friends. Whether sharing a daily dinner with my parents and brother, hosting weekly homemade breakfasts with friends, or celebrating holiday feasts with extended family, meals are times when individuals come

together to unite and become whole. Because of its frequent occurrence and repetitive nature, the meal becomes a ritual carried out by its participants. With this project, I assert myself as the leader in this ritual with my artifacts aiding in its enactment. *The Artist is Eating* is a series of objects that provide a place for this ritual to occur and new memories to be formed. Once complete, the setting can be packed up and stored, ready to be relocated and used again.

The Artist is Eating is composed of distinctly designed and hand dyed tablecloth, table runner and six placemats. The works were woven using linen, which is in homage to my Lithuanian heritage and weaving traditions. To enhance this connection, I chose to employ food as an actual medium for coloring the yarns. The linen was dyed with red cabbage, beets and yellow onion skins. I chose these foods based on their familiarity and how well they could create a range of colors. The tablecloth and table runner were woven with striped warps that are composed of soft rosy pinks, deep gray purples and bold mustard yellows. During the weaving process, I intersected these yarns with yarns of the same colors in corresponding colored stripes. This created a series of different sized and colored squares, similar to a plaid pattern. These squares, through their size and positioning, became placeholders for the dishes and placemats. Although there is a quality of regularity and repetition to the color relationships, I introduced several textural variations to break from the predictability (image 9). These variations within the system reflect the unpredictable moments that occur during a shared meal. Mealtimes have a set menu and traditional arrangement of dishes and utensils. The deviation within this system is the organic conversation and interactions that happen between the participants. Thus, both weaving and mealtimes are a beautiful combination of order and serendipity.

The last component in the collection is the placemats, with a new element not included in the tablecloth or runner. Using a striped warp with the same palette I inserted strips of text cut from letters and cards into the weaving that were chosen from letters written to me over the years (figures 10, 11). I included content from all four of my grandparents, my parents, two of my aunts, and some of my closest and dearest friends. These lines of text become part of the weaving that serve as embedded memory in each place setting at the table. These correspondents instilled in me the sacredness of the mealtime ritual. From that foundation, I am able to propel that sacred energy into each new group of participants I include in subsequent acts.

Before and after the meal, the table setting transfigures into a wearable and portable garment (figures 12-16). When I removed the placemats from the loom, I methodically stitched buttons and twisted yarn loops to the corners of each placemat, so that once each loop is snug around a button of another placemat, a circular skirt is formed that sits at the waist (figures 12-14). The table runner is designed to be draped around the neck at the middle (like a scarf), crisscrossed across the chest so that two loops attached to the runner can hook around buttons on the back of the placemat skirt (figures 12-14). Once these are in place, the tablecloth which contains a central slit created on the loom, fits over the head, sitting on top, and making the entire set up portable so that travel is effortless (figures 15,16). I finally crafted a large tote bag with fabric and the remaining dyed linen in order to carry the food. As a supplement to this, I intend to construct two tall cylindrical baskets out of coiled and stitched cotton rope with handles at the top. This would allow me to stack packed food and carry them easily to the intended location. With all of these elements combined, I can bring and share the ritual of a

meal with anyone and anywhere I choose. This freedom allows the ritual to continue indefinitely and be passed on to new communities.

The original performance for *The Artist is Eating* was set to take place on April 3rd, 2020 in the Payto Gallery at Kent State University School of Art. Due to the current global situation in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, this was unable to occur. I have adapted this performance to our shelter-in-place and quarantine situation by inviting my boyfriend, with whom I am quarantined, to share a meal ritual with me in a nearby park. I chose to make dishes with the three ingredients that were used to dye the linen: onions, beets and red cabbage. Each of the three dishes I made represent a personal connection. First is onion miso soup, inspired by my time in Japan. Second is warm cooked beets and sour cream as a tribute to my mother and Lithuanian heritage. Third and final is red cabbage coleslaw that is an homage to my Texan roots.

Once the food was ready, we packed up the bag, I donned my tablecloth and off we went. Once we reached our location, a picnic table underneath a large cascading tree, we set the table. First, is the tablecloth – lovingly spread onto the table. Next we unrolled the table runner that intentionally covers the slit in the cloth. Lastly is each placemat, imbued with the energy of people that have helped make this event happen. We toasted to life and love, grateful for each other, for family, friends, some sunshine and to knowing we would all make it out of this hard time. We ate, we shared, and made new memories.

For documentation purposes I took pictures using a Fujifilm Instax Mini camera where there were just 10 film images at my disposal (figure 17). This performative event, like all mealtime rituals, is unable to be reproduced in the same way ever again. This performance, this

ritual, was temporal, just like the food we consumed and the conversation we shared. The resulting images are now precious objects just like the cards and letters that are embedded in the placemats. These images and all future images will be utilized and combined into hand crafted nets. The nets will be designed with an opening for the head so it may be worn. These nets will be laid on top of the tablecloth when set out to be used for a meal. The runner and placemats will sit on top of this new documentative layer. This allows for these precious memories to be conserved, carried and shared with all future participants. In this way – oral tradition is established, and a recorded history can emerge. There is no end date for these proposed future meals and in that case this project will go on indefinitely over my life. The magic will be kept alive and moving.

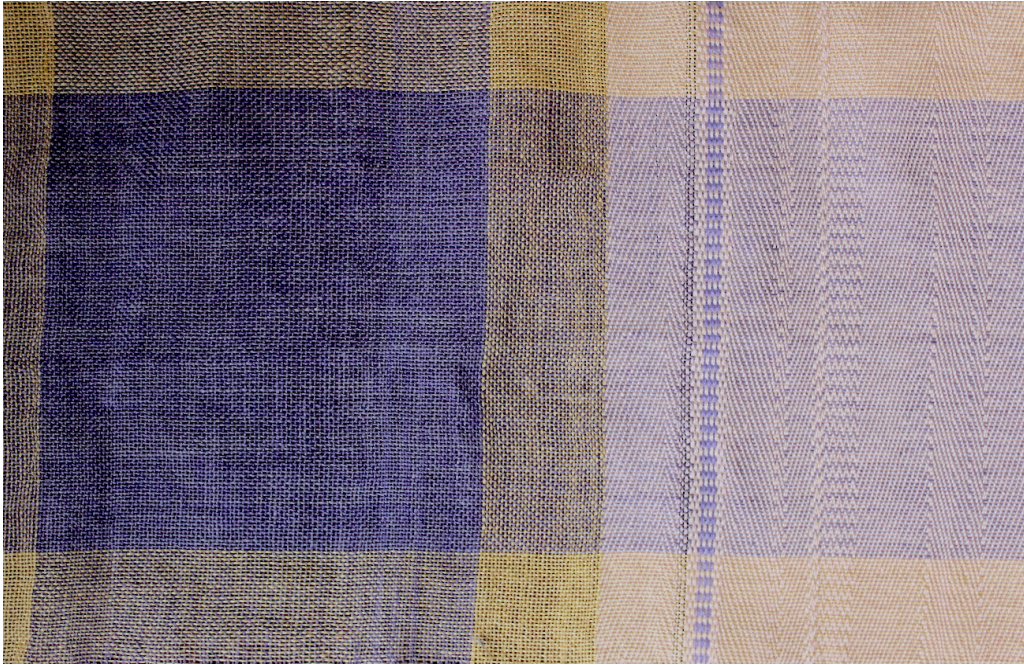


figure 9, table runner detail

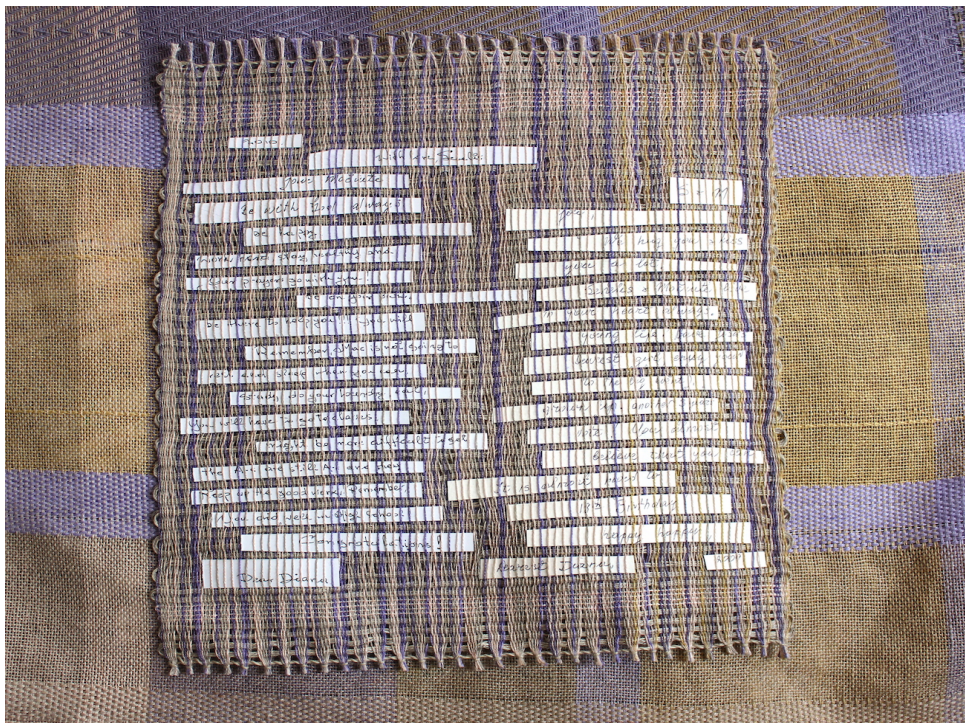


figure 10, placemat



figure 11, placemat detail



figure 12, table runner and placemat as wearables



figure 13, table runner and placemat as wearables view 2



figure 14, table runner and placemat as wearables back view



figure 15, *The Artist is Eating* full ensemble (front)



figure 16, *The Artist is Eating* full ensemble (back)



figure 17, selection of polaroid images detail

CONCLUSION

Like many textiles throughout history, my pieces are heirloom quality artifacts that have been created through the historical and sacred acts of felting, weaving and stitching. These artifacts transform into theatrical garments helping to create an artist shaman aura around myself and heighten the senses of those viewing and participating. As an artist I play a role to share the discoveries about life I have found while on my journey. To do that I must engage with the magic of making. Through experiential interaction with my work, the viewer can engage with this magic too.

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