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Inbetween

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INBETWEEN

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“Inbetween”

Master’s of Fine Arts Thesis: Written Defense

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The University of Montana
Section Title:       Page Number:
1) Opening          3
2) The “Romantic” American West       4
3) Biography       4
4) The Use of Elk       5
5) Artistic Lineage       9
Family Tree
   i. Heroines
      a. Art Mistresses and Textile Arts
      b. Gendered Spaces and Practices
      c. Women: Hunter vs. Hunted
   ii. Personal Art Influences
Sewing
     i. Naïve Uses of Sewing
        a. Sewn Composition as Fine Art
     ii. Intentionality: Sewn Surfaces & Fabric Selection
        a. The Use of Crochet & Hand Sewn Items
        b. Parameters
        c. Embroidery
6) Closing       18
7) Images       19- 25
8) References       26
“I work in the gap between art and life.”

So said Robert Rauschenberg, of his own art, decades ago. Little did I know that my experiences in graduate school, and the translation of those experiences into artworks, would be defined by “gaps”: the physical gap of 450 miles, separating me from my husband, the intellectual gap representing the types of conversation I found myself engaging in, the illusive gaps between the different “roles” I have always used to define myself.

In the past three years I developed an awareness of my social situation, during which I have found (and continue to find) myself mentally shifting from one foot to the other; always aware of what can and cannot be said, questioning which act is appropriate in which particular situation.

The past two (of the last three) years have been spent investigating that space of in-between, the area of middle ground; a place of slight and constant disquiet, both tangible and illusive. The collaged surfaces, embroidered text, drawn elk and carefully rendered forms attempt to describe my understanding of “Inbetween”.
The “Romantic” American West

The first “elk” paintings I produced were influenced strongly by personal hunting memories; although once I began painting I found myself revising thoughts and conversations that diversified beyond the realm of grass field and creek bottom. Initially I sought to pair the disenchantment I felt when watching my husband Levi’s first elk hunt with the disillusionment I experienced when being told (around the same time) that I needed to return to college to become a teacher, not an artist, and of having my actions questioned because they were at odds with the accepted post-marriage routine. I recalled being told that children were raised by grandparents and by the community, more than their own working parents. These first lessons on the “way things are” included being told that holidays and Sunday dinners took place at the farm, because that’s where they’ve always taken place. During this time I also learned that the only art worth producing was the type of art that was easy to look at: painted on canvas, involving landscape and fully rendered carefully arranged subject matter. When resolving my first paintings of elk I realized that while attempting to visually debunk the myth of the majestic bull elk, I simultaneously began to question the myth of the perfect wife, a myth that only a year prior I bought into without the slightest pause of self reflection.

Biography

Thoroughly entrenched in sappy newly-wed love, during the first year of marriage I slipped into the role of “woman, homemaker”: removing all items which referenced Levi’s previous state of bachelorhood, washing floors, bathtubs and underwear with determined zeal, cooking and baking unrelentingly, and insisting every evening after work that Levi enact the role “man, provider”: kick up his heels and relax. Ironically, I did not model my behavior on that of any other woman I had known: the women I had grown up surrounded by were strong, forthright, no-nonsense business-owners who placed a dedication to their profession alongside allegiance to family, and who had uncompromisingly followed their dreams and ambitions. Their marriages were complementary partnerships in which roles of husband and wife, father and mother, manager and secretary were interchangeable and had no basis in gender.
The role I had been enacting reflected a rustic ideology that I had been thoroughly schooled in: that of boy/girl games on the playground, man/woman “games” expressed in pages of young-ladies magazines; the realm of young-in-love bliss featured in fashion photos taken in the middle of a “hayfield”, and of country-western songs describing the romance to be achieved by riding alongside ones’ “cowboy” in the muddy pickup truck. All elements of a package designed to sell one particular ideology: that of the fulfillment to be found in “getting a man”. Of course, once having achieved the illusive man, the task shifts to “keeping a man” (through, one might assume, proper wifely conduct).

From the vantage point of a year, and the distance of four hundred and fifty miles, I reexamined the woman I had become and undeniably still was: every trip home still found me cleaning corners and cooking dinner.

Not only did I fall in love with a man and his place, but also with a social/ commercial ideology with foundations firmly planted in an era one might assume long gone. It was as if in receiving wedding linens from the women of Levi’s town, I also received subtly conveyed principles bound amongst the fabric fibers, dictating: “Femininity belongs to the home, in the home…a world to be invented and managed by women” (The Expanding Discourse).

These were not my mother’s values, which insisted on family-teamwork. These were not my mother-in-law’s values: she was a woman who relied on her husband to raise the kids while she worked late nights at the flower shop she owned. They were the values of the place, and of many other rural regional locations whose possessions, stories, and image are appropriated for the sale of cowboy boots and snuff.

Values that are an indelible part of the land. That once stripped of the sugary coating used for marketing are simultaneously more potent and subtle. So pervasive as to be consumed with the “Friendship bread” the women bake, so elusive as to be brushed behind the “Dupioni Silk Curtains”, so ruthless as to need masking in the pleasant manners of the people.

The Use of Elk

Much can be said of the preferences of a region for specific imagery: the Northeast corner of Montana has a preference for wildlife-based images. Upon first moving to Glasgow, Montana the abundance of this imagery made a vivid and lasting impression on me.

In the living room of almost every house one would find the mounted “Trophy” head of a game animal positioned to appear either in the act of “bugling” or gazing in triumphant glory towards some distant foe. And adorning at least one wall in every
professional practice in the area was an overpriced, elaborately framed commercial wildlife print. And of course there were vividly colored reproductions of wild game used on clothing, bumper stickers, lawn ornaments, fridge magnets, and window decals. All of which dripped with the romantic nuance that the hunters in the area were most fond of: animals portrayed in majestic splendor, bathed alternately in golden sunshine or soft, wet dew.

I began painting elk during my first semester of graduate work; a choice made in part by concession and that was influenced by my recent awareness of wildlife-related imagery. As I’ve always worked from images, I visited the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF) in search of photographic subjects. However, in my first paintings of elk, I struggled with the disparity between the nature of the photos I had taken (which ascribed to the prevailing “romantic” language used to illustrate elk) and the personal memories I had of observing elk during an “elk hunt”.

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The elk in the photos taken at RMEF bore little resemblance to the elk remembered from Levi’s first elk hunt. Those elk had been fleeing, in a blind panic, from the hunters that pursued them through the hills of Eastern Montana. My husband and his mother Mary were two of the many hunters trying to fill their game tags that day.

The elk-hunting season had been open to rifles for a couple weeks already; at point in time both the hunters and the animals were half crazed with lust: the hunters for the kill, the bull elk for cows. We drove for a couple hours, alternately bumping over the broken earth and stopping to gaze intently through binoculars for any sign of elk. While “glassing” over the hills, Levi spotted a cow with calves, some three hundred odd yards away. As he had a “cow/calf” tag it seemed a good opportunity.

Immediately, my father in law stopped the truck and we all piled out, with Levi doing a sort of hunched over “gallop” to the edge of the hill we were on. As I’ve come to learn, there is no “lolly gagging” in Eastern Montana, where hunters and prey spot each other at relatively the same time. Within a couple minutes Levi had fired a shot, which was immediately followed by a frustrated curse.

Although my untrained ears could not differentiate all others who heard the gunshot would have known the bullet did not find its target. Thinking that it had ricocheted off the nearby rocks, Levi quickly prepared and fired a second shot before the cow and her calves could run off: this one found its target with a satisfactorily meaty “thump”.

In the distance, the cow and one of the two calves had stood up and both were hobbling around, while the other stayed lying down. Watching through binoculars I was slightly confused by the scene, although it wasn’t long before I realized that a grievous error had been made.
Levi confirmed our suspicions when we walked over to him: he thought the first bullet must’ve found a target after all. The eager atmosphere surrounding us seemed to have acquired a bitter tang: having apparently shot two elk, while only having one tag, Levi was guilty of poaching. As we digested this information, a truck approached and two hunters got out: a husband and his wife. The young man knew Levi and was helping his wife fill her cow/calf tag. They had seen the cow and calves prior to our approach and were thinking of hiking to get a closer shot, but allowed Levi the first attempt, and in so doing had watched the entire scenario. In an act of consideration, the husband suggested that his wife “fill” her tag with the calf that had apparently been shot, rather than pursue another animal. Levi exchanged a sideways glance with the huntress, who claimed to have become “…bored with the hunt anyhow” before accepting both the offer and good-natured teasing, and beginning the hike to retrieve the animals.

A year later, analyzing the photos I had taken of RMEF’s mounted heads I saw nothing of the bewildered calf whose mother was just shot, I did not feel the discomfort of a hunt gone wrong, and I did not see anything that would reference the blood resulting from a gunshot.

When I tallied up my own hunting experiences against the representations I saw of elk, I was frustrated with the misrepresentation. At that time I determined to try and address the discrepancy through my own paintings.

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In the works that would ultimately inform the argument presented at the Pre-Candidacy (PC) Review I investigated the experiences that informed my understanding of life in Eastern Montana. The painting Agony/Ecstasy (figure 1, pg. 19) appropriated and manipulated the traditional representation of a regionally significant image. The piece likened and distanced itself from pre-existing imagery, and through it I explored the personal and social aspects of my relationship with my husband. Most particular with this work was the exploration of the duality of emotion and experience.

The works “Meet/Meat” (figure 2 & 3, pg. 19) refined the content and nature of the argument investigated, as well as the visual language particular to the series. These paintings represented the first intentional use of symbolism, especially with regards to palate choices. Red was used for its associations with pain/passion, and a vivid orange hue (referred to as either hunter’s orange or safety orange) was intended to reference usage among both hunters and laborers.

The surface for the painting “Meet” was the first where fabric choices were made based external associations. For instance, the painting surface was composed of textiles that I associated with “feminine” identity: in particular lace and floral printed linens. The reasoning behind the selection of the fabric was clumsy, but the composition was intended to subvert the typical presentation of a male elk. Primarily the painting challenged the typical idyllic portrayal of a bull elk among peers. In this work
the bull elk was the sole subject, painted atop a crazy quilt of textiles that might be construed as "feminine". The fabrics chosen for the painting "Meat" were intended to act as the antithesis of "Meet". The textiles were selected on the basis of having identifiably "masculine" presence. Obviously, to ascribe biological roles to one fabric or another is to pander to societal interests with assigning specific sexual labels. However, the initial attempts at referencing a "sexually labeled space" sought only to represent, not deconstruct, this notion. The lone subject of "Meat", rendered without either of her typical accompaniments' resulted in a presentation that was at odds with the "typical" elk portrayal. The dynamic of both paintings presented as a diptych created a platform for the arguments that arose during and following my PC Review.

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With the initial paintings the elk were used directly, their relation to the content of the artwork a foregone conclusion. However as a result of dialogue with faculty members and the questions that arose, the work developed beyond the point of straightforward answers, and traditional representational approaches were no longer sufficient. Faculty members prompted a reexamination of the use of elk; both as a point of departure and with regards to overall representation. The questions that arose during this period of reflection prompted me to consider the unintentionally conveyed symbolic context within the work. Professor Kevin Bell remarked on the "nostalgia" that was conveyed through both fabric choices and method of rendering. Also discussed were the fully rendered elk, which expressed the "Romanticism of Western America" (Bobby Tilton). Up until this point the artwork critiqued traditions, while still using them, and in the work I appropriated iconography without examining it; repeatedly, I found myself asked, "Why Elk?" And as Professor Mary Ann Bonjourni also said, "What are you trying to do with this work? What do you want me to take away from it?"

Many times over, Bonjourni also asked me what the "statement" of the work was: a single sentence that would embody the intent behind the series, the seed from which all other layers of investigation sprang. The result of reflection prompted by questioning, this "sentence" would summarize the point of departure that would re-direct my work. Eventually, I felt able to make the declaration, "Getting married is the Best/ Worst thing a woman can do." This single sentence informed the direction of my thesis argument, which began with the piece "After Expectations" (figure 4, pg. 20).

The differences in representation within this piece, when contrasted with "Agony/ Ecstasy" are obvious; the subject, rather than being rendered in oil, is portrayed with loose graphite gestures. The elk are of a much smaller scale, and seem to interact with the fabric rather than dominating and obscuring the commercially printed content.
The lone cow elk is rendered in a manner that reflects the influence of contemporary, content-laden fabric on my working methods. In previous pieces fabric patterns were obscured by paint, the fabric’s print of little import. With “After Expectations” fabric pieces were selected on the basis of content, the prints explicitly voicing the argument of the piece. As “After Expectations” was resolved, I began researching elk leading to the determination that within the rural regional context of the work, “elk” imbibed qualities that other wildlife found in northeastern Montana did not. The majority of the elk research was based on a text by Jack Ballard (2007) from which I developed several metaphorical parallels. These parallels were based on the observation that many elk “social structures” and habits are similar to social practices unwittingly observed in small “human” social circles; specifically, in rural locations. For example, when a male elk is not “in the rut” (meaning, when the male is not interested in finding a mate) most bulls are “bosom buddies…and stay in male bands” (Ballard, 2007). Likewise as I have observed in Glasgow, most men are comfortable in other male social groups, especially once these men have reached “social” maturity and have settled down with a wife. Just as bull elk return to familiar locations of congregation, I’ve observed my husband’s weekly “Meeting with the guys at Durell’s shop for ‘Thirsty Thursday’”. The research gave me an understanding of the roles within elk social groups; the first illustration of these roles materializing in the painting “B for Best?” (figure 5, pg. 20). In this work, which addresses the construct of the role “male inheritor” a spike elk is rendered metaphorically. According to Elk Hunting Montana, for male elk the “...autumn of their spike year (at which time they are a year old) is the most vulnerable time of their entire bull lives.” Just as these young males reach puberty, hunting and mating season arrives; the spikes are driven away by herd bulls “...left to wander on their own, looking for companionship...just about the only other elk that won’t drive away spikes are other spikes.” Regardless of the species “boys will be boys” and in the same way that little boys are told by their mothers to “Go play outside and leave your little sister alone!” spike elk are turned away when they become rowdy. Too old to tag along with the cow elk, not old enough to be accepted by the bull elk, they eventually find companionship amongst each other (in a quite meadow/on the baseball field). Despite being relegated to the ranks of their peers, spike elk will eventually grow “majestic” antlers, as they become bulls. Likewise boys grow into men and within farming communities the reaching of maturity is often accompanied by the handing down of an inheritance. Judy Blunt author of “Breaking Clean” writes that her older brother Kenny was “...groomed to follow in dad’s footsteps...expected to do man’s work at a very young age...Kenny was the crown prince of the ranch, responsible and honest to a fault, handsome, confident, and smart.”
However, with the passing of time rural life has changed; many farms are no longer passed down. In many ways, although young blood is still needed, the “legacy” of land inheritance is long gone. More often than not, the sons of farmers and ranchers fall prey to the siren song of the city. So when the few that have studied “agribusiness” in college return, degree in hand, to step into a role within the corporation, the entire community rejoices; proud to have the promise of one more young man farming the fields.

The painting “B for Best?” involves the first metaphorical use of an elk to illustrate the simultaneous exclusion of and expectations for a young man. The meticulous rendering of a pile of antlers (figure 6, pg. 20) represents the hopes and dreams, handed down tales, the birthright that each young man is expected to eventually claim.

Among large game hunters, antlers are a topic of interest and value; they are always appreciated and will often be passed down through generations. The audience is intended to engage with the piece through the “hook” of the carefully rendered antlers. An additional decision evident within this piece, which was also influenced by discussions, was the choice to render the elk entirely in graphite. This method resulting in content that is aggressive/passive allows the animal to function as a component of the painting, rather than the focal point.

The painting “It’s a Bitch, Being a Cow” (figure 7, pg.) also uses elk metaphorically, in this case referencing a female elk (lead cow) that has matured beyond breeding potential. Unique in several ways the lead cow acts as an auntie of sorts “…keeping an eye on the kids (calves)”. She is said to hold a position of respect because she is knowledgeable of the herd and trails, of the best locations to find ample food, water, and places to bed down.

Her knowledge is deferred to but she is often ostracized, especially during the rut. During this period she is excluded from the “harems” guarded by the bulls because she’s no longer reproductive and as such, she is said to make distinctly lonely calls. Although wise, she’s an easy picking for hunters, being both isolated and female; most cows are prized for the tender quality of their meat.

The lead cow has a dynamic relationship with the rest of herd. As a metaphor the role of the lead cow is painfully familiar: a woman who is either unable or who has chosen not to reproduce finds herself excluded from many customary social interactions; an isolation felt all the more acutely by a woman living rurally. She is no longer the “sexy young thing” and this change in status has found her demoted one of the most significant rural social groups. She overhears whispered speculations among older women who discuss her aging genes, and she no longer finds herself engaged in giggling discussions of wedding plans. She isn’t consulted for her “expertise” in child rearing, although she has noticed that she’s often asked to be a back-up babysitter. The accoutrements of feminine freedom (burnt bras, crumpled fashion magazines and splayed fake eyelashes, smashed makeup compacts and puddles of dishwashing soap) failed to set
her free, as she finds herself under-acknowledged. Occasionally deferred to, but rarely appreciated: she was not invited to be a member of the “Near and Far Club”, not asked to join the “Sorority” that all married women of status attend. With “It’s a Bitch, Being a Cow” I struggled to find a metaphorical illustration that would convey the separation experienced/represented by a lone cow elk. The scene that was ultimately rendered depicted the exclusion of a cow from a group of cow and calf pairs (figure 8, pg. 21). Within this piece the lead cow, and cow/calf pairs were intended to function as the primary layer of content. The rendered elements were painted on a scale relative to that of fabric prints; these representational constraints were intended to create interaction among the layers of content.

The painting “Non-typical Inheritor” (figure 9, pg. 22) also relies on a manipulation of scale to achieve visual balance, although rather than reducing scale I expanded it. The relationship between the carefully disheveled (obscurely gendered) outdoorsmen and the barbed wire is simultaneously derogatory, whimsical, raunchy, and brusque. The scale of the barbed wire is enlarged and rendered in explicit detail with specific attention to location. “Non-typical Inheritor” like “B for Best?” benefited from the inclusion of a carefully painted, content-specific symbolic form. With the barbed wire as with the antlers, the multi-layered associations tied to each object leads to recognition of symbolic intent. The painting “Non-typical Inheritor” sought to reference the “disenfranchised” state of a male elk (referred to as a non-typical elk) that does not/cannot engage in acts of reproduction. A non-typical bull’s antlers are mutated, signifying the animals’ inability to procreate, which results in his exclusion from the herd.

In contemporary small town America, differences in gender orientation are alternately treated with contempt, disregard and/or social acceptance. One cannot hope to describe the various attitudes used towards these individuals within specific situations and in specific locations. However, when a young man who is destined and groomed to inherit, the “crown prince” of the family, grows to maturity and chooses not to assume his role, he is sometimes treated aversion; even contempt. Perhaps he doesn’t inherit because he has other aspirations; perhaps he grows into the role he was groomed for, but doesn’t marry or have kids. In either case, he has disappointed those whose romantic ideology has been repeated in millions of country-western songs, represented in countless advertisements for blue jeans, beer, and farm equipment: he has placed himself firmly and irrevocably on the wrong side of the fence.

The relationship of the “Non-typical” bull elk with the various layers of content is both direct and implied. Similarly, the elk in the central panel of “The Candor of an Inescapable Assignation” (figure 11, pg. 23) have a relationship with content that is simultaneously direct- interwoven with barbed wire imagery, and oblique- allusions to the union of separate parts, references to painful “barbs”.
Unlike previous works where elk were used in metaphorical pairs that had a basis in nature, “The Candor of an Inescapable Assignation” didn’t use any metaphors that had basis on elk social patterns. Rather, the elk in this painting were based on metaphors that were only relevant to human social groupings. The repeating image of copulating elk in the painting “After Expectations” is a form that is brusque and subtle in its associations, although still relatively uninformed. “The Candor of Inescapable Assignation” uses the same form much more specifically: in this representation the forms were embroidered in content specific thread colors, interwoven with explicit, embroidered vocabulary. The embroidered text, rather than quoting the words of others, spoke from a strictly autobiographical voice. The use of elk was an overt reference to the content of the painting; additionally, the orientation of the elk references the structure (a full size bed) on which the dimensions of the larger thesis works were based.

The inclusion of two elk in the upper region of the painting, each rendered on the appropriately labeled pillowcase, was an expansion beyond the strictly metaphorical representation used in prior works. The visual dynamic between the elk and the commercially sewn pillowcases is important when considered within the context of the entire body of work because of the clarity of the overall metaphorical argument.

With “The Candor of an Inescapable Assignation” the barbed-wire fence, a successful symbolical used in “Non-typical Inheritor”, was reintroduced. Within “The Candor of an Inescapable Assignation” the barbed wire adds a layer of content that unifies the entire piece; its placement references both the everyday uses and the oft-overlooked form. The intertwining wires mimics that of the elk through which it has been layered, and are intended to prompt the viewer to consider the roles of a married couple.

With the painting of “The Candor of an Inescapable Assignation” the argument of the thesis work reached its full maturity. In many ways the effective use of the content was influenced by a departure from the decision to use the elk in metaphorical relationships that were entirely accurate.

The use of metaphor is quite literal in the piece “Bound in a State of Transition” (figure 10, pg. 22). This painting, more so than any of the others, is autobiographic in nature. While many of the other pieces rely on the inclusion of autobiographic text, this painting attempts to reference the transition experienced by being physically, mentally, and emotionally committed to two different geographic locations. Where other paintings convey only an emotionally loaded situation, the references within this piece seek to tell the summation of an entire experience; physical, mental, social, and emotional. The cow elk, rather than fulfilling a strictly metaphorical role, is something of a self-portrait. The radio collar painted on the elk’s neck referencing the devices’ literal uses, and symbolizing the restraining action of a wedding band.

The elk rendered in each of the disparate locations are both humorous and curt. References to physical and biological ties are
represented by the cow elk’s “rear-end”, located in the “Glasgow” region of the canvas; references to the intellectual and sociological ties are represented by the cow elk’s “head”, located in the “Missoula” region of the canvas.

Artistic Lineage: Family Tree

The concept of an artistic “family tree” is one whose significance I overlooked prior to graduate-school studies. I now consider my artistic lineage tree to have two distinct branches, one that I was unaware of until I began researching art history under the direction of Professor Rafael Chacon. This branch includes artists whose work has dealt specifically with the construct of “gender”. The other branch includes individuals I have directly known and who have had a formative influence on my approaches to art-making.

My research familiarized me with “Old Mistresses (Women, Art, and Ideology)” by Parker and Pollock (1981), “The Expanding Discourse: Feminism & Art History” (Broude & Garrard, 1992), “WACK: Art and the Feminist Revolution” (Butler & Mark, 2007), and “Visions & Difference (Femininity, Feminism & the Histories of Art)” (Pollock, 1988). The discovery of the artists and artworks in these texts created an awareness that influenced every aspect of the approach I had previously taken in my studio work.

i. Heroine(s)

The texts that I was most able to identify and from which I derived the most useful content are those whose women I refer to as “heroine(s)”. This label being used to describe individuals whose actions have in some capacity achieved accomplishments which either champion or subjugate traditions of femininity.

a) Art Mistresses & Textile Arts

In the text “Old Mistresses (Women, Art, and Ideology)” Parker and Pollack (1981) discuss the traditions and place of quilting within social customs. For example, in many communities quilting acted as a rite-of-passage: as soon as a young lady learned to sew she began creating quilts that would be included among the “Trousseau of 12 Quilts” required for marriage. According to the custom, during engagement a 13th “bridal quilt” (created with expensive materials and extravagant stitches) must be completed. The entire Trousseau was thought to demonstrate a young ladies skill with a needle, and also served to mark a pivotal point in life.

And while the traditions and social customs of quilting are discussed in the text, Parker and Pollack look at the contemporary “placement” of quilt-making as an art-form within the context of art history. In particular, Parker and Pollack (1981) discuss the significance of the “Abstract Design in American Quilts” show of 1971, prior to which “...women were
reduced to skilled hands and eyes (as if quilt-making bypasses the mind, feelings, thoughts or intentions of the maker)."

According to Parker and Pollack quilting is said to have achieved recognition only because of its disassociation from immediate means of production and purpose. Once considered outside these restrictive bounds, however, the quilts were found to involve specific color effects and symbolic meanings with suggestive titles, referencing personal, political, religious and vocal meanings with abstract forms. The women who created the quilts are said to have been experts with their needles, and as such, participated in Quilting Bees where many women gathered to sew a backing onto one woman’s quilt.

Quilting has been referred to as “the expression of the feminine spirit in art” and has alternately been labeled as decorative, dexterous, industrious, and geometric. However, while referring to quilting as a strictly “feminine” art expression may have been biologically correct in some capacity, this narrow analysis perpetuates the “...endless assertion of a feminine stereotype, a feminine sensibility, a feminine art in criticism and art history” that forces quilts to be considered within a very specific context: that as the opposite of a pre-existing ideal; not the “Old Master” but rather, the “Old Mistress” (Parker & Pollack, 1981). By this view, art defined as feminine is therefore the negative of the dominant and pre-existing masculine form.

When I decided to re-incorporate sewing in the creation of my painting surfaces it was with awareness of and appreciation for the processes used and ideals imbibed in the argument of high vs. low, art vs. craft, male vs. female. Women of the past had sewn, so too would I.

The approach I took with regards to the objects I chose to create when sewing was informed by my understanding of the terms on which quilting had been celebrated, as expressed in the “Abstract Design in American Quilts” show. These items were honored as they were: as items of use. Once the show came down, and once the quilts were taken from the wall, they resumed the functional qualities with which they had originally been imbibed; they may have been perceived as art-objects within the context of the exhibition, but quilts they remained.

The ability to view these art-objects within the context of functionality was not an attribute I desired for my work. However, after reading of the art-historical placement and having personally experienced the importance of domestic creative traditions, I sought to incorporate elements of the tradition in my own process. By using methods of feminine domestic traditions for the painting surfaces, I intentionally “claimed” and “honored” the processes of workmanship whose legacy I felt myself to be part of. Yet by stretching the fabric collage over a wooden frame, and applying gesso, I asserted the crucial differences in the work I was creating, and ultimately, in the way the work should be received: quilted surfaces: yes, functional objects: no.

This process required vast amounts of material, time and space, entailed developing familiarity with tedious historically
relevant stitches, while simultaneously engendering an assertion towards the non-functionality of the art objects. By asserting process-orientated differences the work did not conform to the usual allowances made for sewn objects, yet it drew from "domestic" processes and materials that would be familiar to any woman working in textiles.

b) Gendered Spaces & Practices

According to Anne Higonnet in “The Expanding Discourse: Feminism & Art History” (Broude & Garrard, 1992) the majority of female artists of the 19th century were considered amateur. These were women who drew or did watercolor in albums and did so as a means of pandering to social ideals; refined gentlewomen of the time were expected to engage in studio arts practices. Once married most of these ladies would abandon their artistic pursuits; if they continued with their creative endeavors, the work they produced reflected and propagated social expectations that accepted and insisted upon the domain allotted to women.

The social regulations that determined the roles associated with female artists (especially with regards to the distinctions between the titles woman and artist) are also mentioned by Parker and Pollock in “Old Mistresses”. To be a female and consider oneself an artist was to associate oneself with anti-domestic, anti-social behavior, at odds with the perception of female roles.

It seems that if women were to receive any validation artistically they must be considered “amateur artists”. Social expectations of the day decreed, “Femininity belonged to the home, in the home...a world to be invented and managed by women.” Though this observation was concerned with social attitudes of the 18th and 19th centuries I have found a persistence of opinion in certain rural regions.

In Northeastern Montana, the prevailing ideology with regards to a woman’s place reinforces the ancient belief that the interior of a home is “female” domain. In her novel “Breaking Clean” author Judy Blunt (2002) wrote of the manner in which a woman could expect to be valued, especially among women. In a description of her mother in law, a rancher’s wife, Blunt wrote, “She had no experience and little aptitude for the outside work, but she knitted and crocheted beautifully, and in a community of standard meat and potato cooks, she earned her reputation in the kitchen.” Additionally, Blunt described the “Near and Far” ladies club, whose members “…paid dues, donated to worthy projects and gave craft lessons (needlework, crocheted tissue covers, and egg carton art) to one another...typical visits were spent at the kitchen table with a pot of coffee.”

The descriptions of rural life which color the pages of “Breaking Clean” (Blunt, 2002) took place in the 1960’s, and yet, in 2006, a few months before I began Graduate work, I found myself invited to join a local married women’s “Sorority”: a group which I was told met periodically at one-another’s homes to exchange recipes, homemaking ideas, and “girl’s talk”. Apparently, Higonnet’s description of femininity, which belonged
“...to the home, in the home” (Broude & Garrard, 1992) might be aptly used to describe prevailing social ideals of the twenty-first century as well. When approaching the painting “It’s a Bitch, Being a Cow” I sought to articulate some of my experiences as a newly married woman in Northeastern Montana; experiences that reflected specific rules applied to gendered spaces. The crocheted potholders in this painting reference Faith Wildings installation “Womb Room” (Butler & Mark, 2007) and also quote the women whose hands made the articles that were included. Prior to reading of “Womb Room” (later referred to as “Crocheted Environment) I had never examined the significance of crochet as a distinctly “feminine” element of art. Yet having spent my youth in a region where women still laid out crocheted doilies in the sitting room, the stretched crochet forms in photos of the installation inspired a vague familiarity. Wilding is said to have related the sculptural installation to her research on the status of women’s work in Western Patriarchal society. In her use of the crocheted medium Wilding examined “…domestic craft’s association with femininity and high art’s association with masculinity.” With this installation work, which was said to be both delicate and massive in scale Wilding intended to “…pay homage to women’s useful economic and cultural work, while at the same time producing a piece that was non-practical to demonstrate the falseness of the traditional distinctions between art and craft” (Butler & Mark, 2007).

c) Women: Hunter vs. Hunted

In a section of the text “Woman the Hunter” Mary Zeiss Stange(1997) spoke of the goddess Artemis (one in the same as Diana) who she refers to as “…something of a divine tomboy”. The ultimate example of a “strong” woman, Stange says that “She (Artemis/Diana) represents power: female power; that, from the earliest times, was perceived to be problematic.” Stange identifies that the image of the goddess/huntress is one we have all grown up aware of, “…an image that held a special attraction perhaps for those girls who saw Barbie as a less than satisfying ideal.” Perhaps the most interesting qualities ascribed to the goddess, and ones that have particular significance for me, might be described in terms of dualities: “…she of the wild things and she of the childbed”. Stange has written “The mysteries dedicated to Artemis were specifically focused on celebrating the sacred significance of those aspects of female experience connected to the particularities of female physiology: the onset of menstruation, the loss of virginity, the discovery of one’s own sexual passion, the potential for loss of the claim to one’s body as one’s own inherent in marriage, the bodily changes associated with conception, childbirth, nursing, menopause and ultimately, with death.” Conversely, Artemis is also said to be “Goddess of the outdoor world” and the “Mistress of the animals”.
Throughout the context of time the goddess Artemis has come to hold a less revered place in the collective consciousness; an especially unfortunate truth when one acknowledges what she represents in terms of the capabilities of “female” energy. Stange has written of the role of female energy: “The unleashing of female energy impacts the patriarchal imagination like a boar tearing through fences and trampling crops. Indeed the history of the Western Patriarchy might be said to be the history of attempts to kill or bridle that energy, or trick it into submission.”

There is no better accounting of the attempt to kill/bridle/trick a female than that which is told of in the tale of Bluebeard recounted in the text “Women Who Run with the Wolves” (Clarissa Pinkola Estes, 1995). Recalling the female character who is lured into marriage with the treacherous Bluebeard, Estes wrote “Many women marry while they are yet naive about ‘predators’ and they choose someone who is destructive to their lives...they are in some way ‘playing house’...as long as a woman is forced into believing she is powerless and/or is trained to not consciously register what she knows to be true, the feminine impulses and gifts of her psyche continue to be killed off.”

In their books, Stange and Estes examine differing types of womanhood, and of the transformations/mutations that a woman might experience/be subjected to. The women figures they investigate and their experiences are examples of the experience I identified myself as being subject to (after a great deal of investigative writing prompted by Professor Mary Ann Bonjorni). When attempting to get to the root of the issue I examined the memories that I felt were prompting emotions of dislocation, loss and pain; all of which paralleled my becoming a wife, a choice that I ultimately likened to an act of violence against self. As the research came full circle I gained a more specific understanding way in which I identified marriage as being destructive to a woman: not necessarily the husband as a violent personage, rather, the organization and societal role of the mechanism of “marriage”; its purposes within the context of time, its ability to impose and subject, its celebration by patriarchal society, and its exploitation by capitalism. Through the research I became aware that by moving to rural Montana, my creative spirit; my “female power”, had been threatened. I had be tricked and lied to by the commercial entity which romanticized “marriage to a cowboy”; and had I chosen not to pursue my graduate degree in studio arts, the “feminine impulses and gifts of psyche” would have been killed off.

ii. Personal Art Influences

Many of the artists who’ve had a direct influence on my decision to pursue an arts career are not relegated to the pages of art history texts. My art making process is indebted to a lineage that was shaped in large part by several strong female fiber artists; who, owing to their practical nature, would not refer to themselves as artists at all.
Both Candace Sotropa and her husband Peter were good friends of my parents; there were many shared meals through the years prior to my family’s relocation to Las Vegas. Both Peter and Candace ran a small business, selling Candace’ renowned pies and jams and in addition to that business Candace was known for her beautiful, entirely hand-sewn quilts. As a child I was fascinated by the quilting process, especially by the large rack holding the quilt until each delicate stitch had been placed. Candace, the quilter and business-owner, was not so different from my father’s mother, who was an entrepreneur as well.

I grew up surrounded by the vestiges of my Grandmother’s sewing business; some of the earliest memories I have are of afternoons spent in her sewing closet playing in the button tin, of listening to the whir of her machine, and of taking naps beneath the polyester and rayon folds of the crazy quilts she sewed. The quilts were and have remained especially significant for me: usually pieced together of neatly cut 4”x4” squares, the grid was a combination of fabric remnants whose lineage could be traced to the fabric shop that Grandma owned and operated in the sixties and seventies.

Originally from Saskatchewan, my Grandmother’s family had relocated to Southern California when she was in her early twenties. Although she married the farmer who followed her down there, she retained an unshakable dislike of most things associated with the rural land of her birth; the narrow minds and cold winters had made quite an impression.

Her shop was both a sewing school, which housed dozens of machines, and a fabric store. The store, and the business mind of Grandma Shirley, influenced every aspect of my father’s upbringing; he sewed many of his own clothes, or wore clothes that had been sewn by either his mother or father (who helped both run the business and raising the children).

When Shirley finally closed the shop she retained several of the original Pfaff sewing machines, in the hopes that she would one day pass the “All metal–none of that plastic stuff” workhorses along to her family.

I would eventually inherit one of the machines, along with a bone-deep appreciation of the uses associated with said machine. The skills to operate the machine were learned on my mother’s own Pfaff, which being a later model, unfortunately DID have plastic components.

Initially I sewed by hand: as a little girl I attempted stitching dresses for my dolls; an effort doomed to failure as they were only loosely stitched together and did not account for three-dimensionality. However, my mother encouraged and taught me the basics: needle threading, button attachment, and how to do a loop stitch. Before long I was also sewing on her machine, although I always gravitated towards the immediacy of a needle and thread. Other than the basic introduction my mother gave me, and a few brief lessons from my Grandmother, most of my sewing has been self taught, and rudimentary. Sewing has always been a means to an end: whether working on the machine or by hand functionally was the only requirement I had of my stitches.
Sewing

I first began sewing within painting surfaces as an undergraduate student. The sewing allowed for a combination of several large swatches of fabric: usually old bed sheets, lace curtains, and tablecloths. In the earliest pieces I created a rather sloppy version of the rope stitch, executed with scrap pieces of thread. The lines of gathered fabric in those paintings were often encircled by various random colors of string, and invariably had several frazzled knots along the way. I continued sewing as a graduate student, the method only slightly more refined than the earliest process I developed: the thread choices were every bit as haphazard, although the stitches had become somewhat more regulated with practice.

i. Naive Uses of Sewing

The early uses of sewing were entirely instinctual, especially on a compositional level. The selection of fabrics was varied; usually the choices were based on whatever reaction was inspired by second-hand pillowcases and linens seen at thrift stores. The sizes and shapes of the fabric pieces were also random; the only control ever exerted involved ripping long swatches of each fabric. The resultant canvas collages were grid-like, and as professor Kevin Bell would later describe them: undeniably “Nostalgic”. In retrospect, I believe I gravitated towards fabrics of a specific era because of their familiarity: most of them were reminiscent of the linens I grew up surrounded by. The first formal changes within the collaged canvases began when Professor Mary Ann Papanek-Miller encouraged an attempt at creating a piece that was strictly abstract, titled “So...Sew” (figure 12, pg. 23). Not having any content to consider besides the media forced a re-evaluation of the decisions typically made within the surface of the piece. For the first time the stitches were viewed as something other than functional, the fabric choices something other than instinctual, the fabric scraps able to be cut in organic shapes rather than torn in geometric strips. The sewing machine was used to create zigzag stitches which lent the fabric a much smoother appearance than the standard rope stitch. The use of a particular stitch for its perceived line quality was a concept that, although obvious, I had never considered. It was within this piece that I discovered the opportunity presented by using stitches in this way; for formal rather than functional reasons. After the creation of “So...Sew” the newfound processes were adopted into the approach taken in the construction of all canvases. Of the several pieces that followed, many were sewn by both machine and hand; however, the only factor which influenced the selection of one process over another was based on convenience. It was not until reading in “Old Mistresses (Women, Art and Ideology)” (Parker & Pollock, 1981) of the significance of workmanship traditions among 18th and 19th century women that I
came to consider sewing as a fine art form. The quilts made by these women were complex in the different values they embodied: the usefulness of the product, with the aestheticism involved in combining the fabric pieces.

a) Sewn Composition as Fine Art

In the 1970’s the artist Miriam Schapiro would produce work that embraced textiles as symbolic of feminine labor (Butler & Mark, 2007). An admiration for the dedication, skill and artistry involved in the creation of quilts by her female predecessors led Schapiro to coin the word “femmage” which she used to describe the hand-sewn work of female laborers (including quilting, embroidery and cross-stitching). Femmage was a term Schapiro also used to describe her own work, which during this time used large “heart” and “fan” shaped canvases. She has said, “I felt that by making a large canvas magnificent in color, design, and proportion, filling it with fabrics and quilt blocks, I could raise a housewife’s lowered consciousness” (Butler & Mark, 2007). Many of these works used “feminist” materials and imagery to give credence to the lives of by-gone women, to “…validate the traditional activities of women, to (create) a connection (with) the unknown women artists who had made quilts, who had done the invisible ‘women’s work’ of civilization.” Schapiro’s “femmages” inspired a new awareness of, and appreciation for, the processes one works through when “sewing”. Specifically, the text led to a re-evaluation my own relationship with sewing; this evaluation became a forced issue when one of the faculty members I have worked with, Mary Ann Bonjorni, encouraged experimentation with welding. I cannot claim to have any particular affinity for metal work, although the physicality of the metal, and the “masculinity” usually ascribed to welding in particular were intriguing. A few dozen hours spent beneath the welder’s mask led to an understanding of the expertise required in creating metal surfaces that were anything other than aesthetically unpleasant. In the time spent away from fabric, I experienced dislocation, and a keen longing for the methods of workmanship which had come to permeate every corner of my studio. The ultimate implications of having embraced metal-work would have been pleasing but was once the process was abandoned, I returned to textiles with a renewed sense of appreciation. In addition to gaining an understanding of my own affinity for cloth, I also felt empowered in the “choosing” of it for its role within the context of “feminine” history.

ii. Intentionality: Sewn Surfaces & Fabric Selection

The choices made with regards to workmanship shifted drastically at this point. The sewing machine was abandoned; instead I chose to work the fabrics by hand. Cumbersome, painstaking and precious, came to regard the care involved in hand sewing the painting surface as the reflection of a commitment to fabric as a surface valuable in its own right.
Around this time a re-examination of the fabric pieces used in the collaged surfaces of the paintings began; a re-evaluation of cloth selection which Professor Kevin Bell prompted me to consider. During the critique of several different paintings, the label “nostalgic” would invariably surface; partiality for linens of 70’s and 80’s had become a prop referred to and relied on with each piece. As a possible solution to the work’s lack of divergence, Bell encouraged altering the process typically used when looking for fabric: contemporary prints would be found in places other than the thrift store. Initially the idea of visiting a fabric store to purchase cloth for paintings was intimidating, although the fabric store itself was not unfamiliar ground: much of my childhood was spent playing amongst bolts of cloth, whiling away minutes that seemed like hours while mom searched for the perfect pattern. Any reticence felt in visiting the fabric store melted away while looking through the first bolts. Not having had specific expectations for the initial perusal, the first foray into the realm of “content specific fabric” was a pleasant surprise. Many of the prints selected were used in the piece “After Expectations” (figure 4, pg. 20). The fabric patterns did not have any aesthetic lure. Rather, the affinity experienced was one brought on by recognition: the content expressed different components of the key issues that were driving the direction the studio work had begun to take. I was repelled and attracted to the print featuring a cozy social scene involving a family of bears (two adults, several “cuddly” cubs) complete with soaring eagles, cleverly perched squirrels, and a slightly abstracted bear rendered into the snow-covered mountain. This particular fabric expresses a density of content that I came to recognize as the exception amongst hundreds of bolts of cloth. It is an example of the type of design that I refer to as a “cornerstone” print; meaning that it depicts a particular component of the argument I wish to make so concisely that I can build the remainder of the “canvas” around it. The painting “After Expectations” is unique in that it uses two different “keystone” prints simultaneously: the cozy bear family and the print of a saccharin- sweet bride, bouquet in hand, parading through imagery that loosely suggests recognizable classical buildings. In this painting, the simultaneous usage of such content-laden prints resulted in the presentation of an overwhelming amount of visual information. However, having discovered new tools with which to address the subject-area, I had exuberantly introduced them all simultaneously. With practice, I would become more adept at “editing” the fabric selections; such that each painting made thereafter might be said to rely on only one or two keystone patterns, which have been chosen for their ability to voice one component of the larger thesis argument within each specific piece. Another of the decisions made after having introduced the element in “After Expectations” was the choice of thread color for specific content. In this painting a commitment was made to using “pink” thread (figure 13, pg. 24) to attach sections of fabric
which were deemed to have “feminine” qualities or specific “female” significance. In the paintings that would follow this language was built upon, each hue of thread equated with a particular definition. The influences of these decisions, and of the discoveries made among the bolts of fabric, affected all the work following “After Expectations”. Once discovering the multitude of prints available and the specific elements that could be used to illustrate a particular argument, I was quite literally “on the hunt”. Two of the first fabric prints I happened upon were “John Deer” patterns, one pink checked and one tan checked. These become the foundation for the argument in the pieces “B for Best?” (figure 5, pg. 20) and “Sugar and Spice (Not so Nice)” (figure 14, pg. 24). The two types of fabric were concise illustrations of a central component in the argument. Both prints used all of the same elements of content, but with specific “gendered” deviations. Awareness of the fabric’s content was influenced by Judy Blunt’s novel “Breaking Clean” which recounted the thirty-plus years the novelist spent growing up and living in Eastern Montana. In her novel Blunt recalled phrases like “We don’t need any more girl cats…” and “someone to make the mess, someone to clean it up”. The phrases reflected a mentality I was painfully familiar with, and while combing through bolts of cloth, I began translating these phrases into recognizable parallels. The surface for “Sugar and Spice (Not so Nice)” was the first of the canvases among the thesis works to be completed, followed shortly thereafter by “B for Best?” Following the completion of these works I began imposing limitations that would control the direction thesis argument, regulations that on the whole had a disciplinary effect. As anyone who has walked into a fabric store knows, there are hundreds of prints to choose from, in many variations of color and theme. Narrowing down the range of prints for consideration (as in: “Today I will look for patterns that illustrate stories told to little girls” from the larger group of “little girl prints”) saved time and would be reflected in the intentionality of the work. Discovery of the various John Deere fabrics informed the decision to create a pair of canvases that illustrated the gendered, stereotypical “identity” assigned to all children. Fabrics were selected on the basis of offering the starkest visual representation of gendered identity. The assembled surfaces of these paintings “B for Best?” and “Sugar and Spice (Not so Nice)” reflects the socially biased illustration of single-sided gendered identity. Notable within these works was the decision to reference the significance of pairs. The collection of fabrics used in these works was influenced by the eager application of this new sorting method: Pink/ Blue, Girl/ Boy, Lace/ Striped Pillowcases, Fairy-tale Frog/ Legendary Western Landscapes, etc.

a) The Use of Crochet & Hand-Sewn Items
The photos in of the installation “Crocheted Environment (originally titled “Womb Room”)” created by artist Faith Wilding (Butler & Mark, 2007 made a strong impression on the thesis work. The installation, part of the collaborative art environment titled “Womanhouse” (1971-1972) was a sculptural work that Wilding related to her research on “…the status of woman’s work in western patriarchal society.” Wilding’s selection of crochet, usually relegated to the realm of “craft”, was in an effort to “…pay homage to women’s useful economic and cultural work, while simultaneously producing a piece that was useless to demonstrate the falseness of the traditional distinctions between art and craft.”

In many ways, reflecting specifically on Wilding’s work led to a re-examination of the articles I had spent my life surrounded by, yet whose “function” I had become blind to. The painting “After Expectations” referenced crochet through the articles’ inclusion and also through representational means (figure 13, pg. 24); rendered in graphite. The choice to use a crocheted article in this painting, the first intentional usage of this type of object, was in obeisance to the articles’ maker. Details of several crocheted items were rendered throughout the painting, calling attention to, and honoring the traditions that produced the intricate pieces. However, the choice to render the items in graphite, rather than reproduce them in crochet, subjugates the aspects of tradition that have treated women ignobly.

The painting “It’s a Bitch, Being a Cow” (figure 7, pg. 21) employs a degree of specificity that was not present in earlier works: the fabrics selected were not overly inclusive, as they were with the piece “After Expectations” (figure 4, pg. 20). The incorporation of contemporary prints allowed the work to address specific facets of the larger argument within each piece. And the inclusion of unique, explicitly chosen second hand pieces (linens with the embroidered text “Hot Rolls”, and the embroidered form of a teapot) balanced the busy contemporary prints with sections of fabric in shades of white.

The use of second-hand and antique items in the collaged surfaces present a unique set of challenges. In particular the collaged surface experiences a degree of unpredictable distortion and stretching; this deformation occurring most pointedly in the painting “It’s a Bitch, Being a Cow” when the potholders were stretched around the structure bar. However, the unpredictable distortion came to represent a poignant component of the argument of this piece: the stretching, straining shapes are explicit in their colors and literal in their representation of the differing interests (internal and external) that wrench women in opposing directions.

An additional example of the deformation when handcrafted/antique items are stretched occurred in the piece “Non-typical Inheritor” (figure 15, pg. 24). The symbolism attributed to the rendered barbed wire fence, intended to reference division/demarcation, pain and unity, is echoed in the severance that occurred when a linen tore during the stretching of the painting surface. The tearing action created a gulf between the two
halves of a hand-embroidered table linen, presenting the opportunity of an additional layer of content within the piece.

b) Parameters

A commitment was made to presenting the majority of the content in paintings that were the same size. The fully realized Thesis Exhibition came to include seven large paintings, all of which are seventy-five by fifty-four inches: the dimensions of a full size bed. These dimensions are intended to reference the size of bed typically owned by a husband and wife in a rural farming communities until the twenty-first century. However, the same lifestyle which has turned farming into a multi-million dollar co-operation has influenced the marriage bed: farmers who drive eighty thousand dollar tractors do not sleep in full-size beds any longer; they can now afford the extravagant queen or king size mattress. The trappings of a farming lifestyle have changed in many tangible ways; however, there are many intangible decrees of rural society that persist and stubbornly reflect the ideologies of the previous generations. Take for instance the experience which informed the piece “With (dis)Regard for the Orthodoxy of Gender” (figure 16, pg. 25): my husband asked me to prepare and bring a meal to the guys weekly “Thirsty Thursday” get together. I cooked and hauled the requested “Indian Tacos” to the shop (furnished with old couches, banged up coffee tables, and a beer fridge). After putting the food out I told the guys the food was ready. I was completely unacknowledged; a slip of etiquette that I chose to overlook. The food cooled for another few minutes and then I mentioned, in a slightly louder voice, that the food was ready to be eaten. After the second request the owner of the shop came over to me with a grin on his face. Smiling broadly he spoke in a conspiratorial tone “You know hun, I think they heard ya the first time. Why don’t you just quiet down, and they’ll come and get it when they’re good and ready.” Everything about his expression and tone engendered trust and camaraderie, but I felt as if I had just been slapped. His words made it clear that I was allowed in their domain only because of what I’d brought, that I was still a woman in a man’s cave and that I was subject to their “rules”. Contrary to what one might assume, the bread and butter people of rural towns are not unaware of the insular nature of their beliefs. Yet these beliefs exist as substrata to the cadence of everyday life, resulting in jokes rooted in cruelty, insolent actions that are masked with a friendly embrace. The size of the bed may have changed, but the thoughts of those who climb between the 450 thread count sheets every night are rooted in the principles of a by-gone era. Using a full-size bed’s dimensions for the larger thesis work references the principles of many rural Montanans. Referencing this item also examines the vulnerability of acts occurring in or
on a bed. A place of simultaneous freedom and oppression, of beginnings and endings, a bed is the nucleus of the house, a neutral location where all rules may be set aside, or where roles may be retained; by referencing the bed many simultaneous allusions are made.

Additionally, there are associations within the context of art history that are referenced in the selection of a full-size bed. Even in the most reductive terminology, a huge painting might alternately be described as: grandiose, ostentatious, excessive, and “macho”. These large artworks claim a visual space that has been owned by American male painters. Simultaneously, the artworks honor oft-neglected traditions of feminine domesticity, thereby “claiming” this visual territory for the women who preceded me.

c) Embroidery

The discovery of embroidery’s process led to the addition of an extremely direct layer of visual information. Primarily the artwork benefited from the content inferred by my choosing to work in a way that honored female domestic artistic processes. This choice, coupled with the scale of the larger pieces, allowed the work to engage in dialogue with “heroic” large-scale works produced by American male painters. The first uses of embroidery were expressed within the pieces “B for Best?” and “Sugar and Spice (Not So Nice)” resulted in attempts that were both tentative and ungainly. The embroidered lines within the paintings that followed were also clumsy, although the information conveyed was much more intentional. Embroidered vocabulary in thick thread came to supplement lines that would otherwise have been drawn. As the uses of embroidered line evolved through the series embroidery also came to supplement and interweave lines drawn in graphite. In some instances the thick graphic threads would be used to distinguish the form of a figure expressed in one of the fabric patterns. In other situations the vividly sewn lines were used to “converse” with pre-existing forms that were part of reused articles. For example, in the painting “It’s a Bitch, Being a Cow” a “crack” was sewn into the teapot whose form had been embroidered by my predecessor.

The decisions to make these small alterations to the pre-existing forms reflected an ideology was specific to the series. By asserting my own hand, and my own “voice” over and amongst the pre-existing lines of another woman/era, I felt able to simultaneously accept and reject a set of social expectations. The acknowledgement of grace, beauty, and truth within an object and simultaneous challenge of those same objects’ and traditions’ “beauty”, “truth” and “strength” allowed me to gain ownership.

The use of embroidery within the piece “It’s a Bitch, Being a Cow” (figure) was successful in ways that it had not been with
previous works. The intentional selection of thread colors, in this case either red or white, became more refined with particular attention paid to the location of each hue. The use of red was reserved for connective locations laden with content considered as being painful/ harmful/ beautiful/ sexual. The specific manipulation of the thread became, for the first time ever, an opportunity to build further layers of meaning: the stitches simultaneously “combined” and perforated the “cornerstone” fabrics (which in this piece were both the “Cowgirl” and “Bride” prints). The content derived from the color of thread, and the process used to link the contemporary re-prints of nostalgic designs with worn yarn threads of hand-me-down potholders was particularly successful. White thread was used to link fabric selections whose perceived relationship was not as “active”: as in the juxtaposition of a delicate white dotted fabric alongside the print of a marching bride. Once asserting a possession of the process I came to use it often, usually as alternative to the tedious rendering involved in painting or drawing the specific sections of each larger piece. As confidence in the process of embroidery developed the work became more aggressive in the sentiments conveyed. Often specific thread colors were relied upon to convey an added layer of meaning or depth beyond that which was already communicated through text. In many cases, the threads used for embroidered elements within the artworks were the same threads used in the sewing of the piece. The specific colors chosen for thread have remained the same although as the work has progressed the thread colors selected have gradually become more vivid. And although the embroidered content is more assertive and intentional, it remained an illegitimate process adopted. One learned as a means to an end, that is both practical and purposeful, yet when shown alongside the embroidery of others is lacking in refinement.
Closing

The process that resulted in works hung in the show “Inbetween” reduced my level comfort to the realm of canvas craftsmanship. Within the context of time that relationship, too, would change, resulting in the perceived loss of direction, and a sense of desperate dislocation. Writing throughout the entire process, and facing the difficult questions asked, forced the recognition of a series of falsehoods. During the various stages worked through there was a realization that occurred: that the understanding of lineage, definition of self, studio processes used, and sense of location were all indebted to romantic fallacies. The lies that are coated in truths are every bit as lovely/ugly, although their veneer is now tangible, whereas before it was allusive. This work attempts to define the painful space existing between opposites, an area of shifting middle ground, of slight and constant disquiet existing between truth/lies, mind/body, civilization/wilderness, aggression/passivity, dominator/victim, male/female, interior/exterior, kitchen/tool-shed, gauzy lace/sturdy denim, married woman/spinster, blushing bride/deflowered virgin. The series examines a place that is painful, and simultaneously quite powerful, both of these qualities allowing the work to be honest.
Figure 1: “Agony/Ecstasy” (Oil Paint, Fabric Collage, 2007)

Figure 2: “Meat” (Oil Paint, Fabric)

Figure 3: “Meet” (Oil Paint, Fabric Collage, 2008)
Figure 4: “After Expectations”  
(Oil Paint, Graphite, Embroidery, Fabric Collage, 2009)

Figure 5: “B for Best?”  
(Oil Paint, Graphite, Embroidery, Fabric Collage, 2009)

Figure 6: “B for Best?” (detail 1)  
(Oil Paint, Graphite, Embroidery, Fabric Collage, 2009)
Figure 7: “It’s a Bitch, Being a Cow” (Oil Paint, Graphite, Embroidery, on Fabric Collage, 2009)

Figure 8: “It’s a Bitch, Being a Cow” (detail 1)
Figure 9: “Non-typical Inheritor” (Oil Paint, Graphite, Embroidery, and Fabric Collage, 2009)

Figure 10: “Bound in a State of Transition” (Oil Paint, Graphite, Embroidery, on Fabric Collage, 2010)
Figure 11: “The Candor of an Inescapable assignation” (detail 1) (Oil Paint, Graphite, Embroidery, and Fabric Collage, 2010)

Figure 12: “Sew...So?” (Multi-Media Fabric Collage, 2007)
Figure 13: “After Expectations” (detail 1: View of thread color selection, Graphite Drawing)

Figure 14: “Sugar and Spice (Not so Nice)” (Oil Paint, Graphite, Embroidery on Fabric Collage 2010)

Figure 15: “Non-typical Inheritor” (detail 1: View of torn material, multiple layers of content)
Figure 16: “With (dis)Regard for the Orthodoxy of Gender” (Oil Paint, Graphite, Embroidery, on Fabric Collage) 2010
References


