

HYPERALLERGIC

The Subversive Power of Quilting

As "Radical Tradition" affirms, the act of creating whole cloth from scraps is not just a matter of making ends meet, but an empowering act of reclamation.

by Sarah Rose Sharp December 21, 2020



LJ Roberts, "VanDykesTransDykesTransVanTransGrandmxDykesTransAmDentalDamDamn" (2014-20), mixed media.

In terms of the fine art world, one of the first major hurdles for quilters was to be seen as artists, rather than (or at least in addition to) craftspeople. Now fiber art has come a long way from fringe practice to becoming part of the natural weft of the mainstream art world, but it is still perhaps rare to see shows of quilt works that are not solely themed around the medium as common thread. But at the Toledo Museum of Art, a new group show, *Radical Tradition: American Quilts and Social Change*, recognizes that quilts are an art form that has always been concerned with identity, recognition, labor, communication, and human connection.



Artist unidentified; initialed "J.F.R.," "Cleveland-Hendricks Crazy Quilt," (1885-1890), lithographed silk ribbons, silk, and wool with cotton fringe and silk and metallic embroidery, 75 x 77 inches, American Folk Art Museum.



Unknown Maker, Dachau 1945, 1945, Wool, 69 1/2 x 77 in., Michigan State University Museum Collection, 2015:66.2.

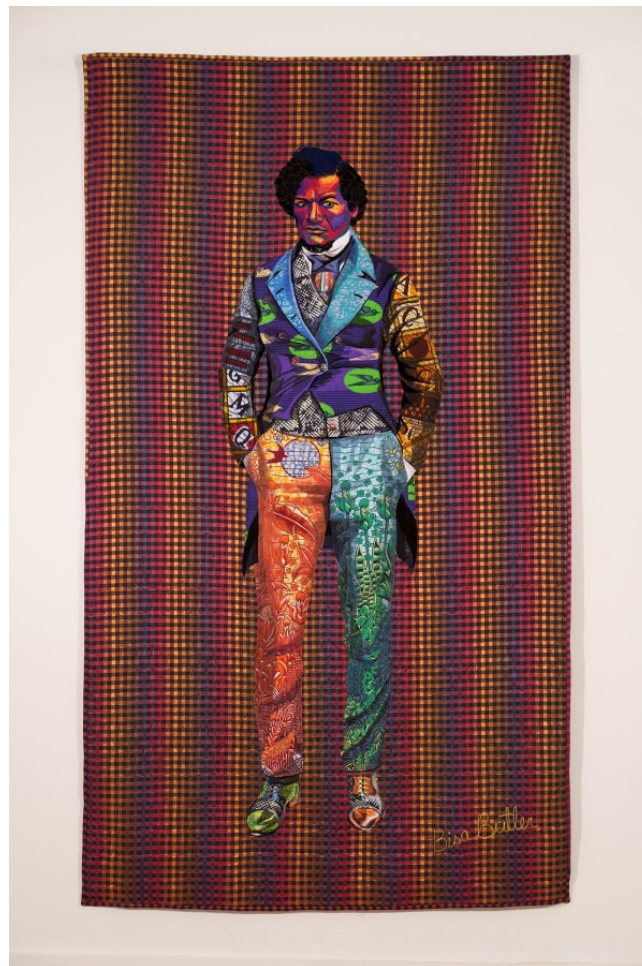


Judy Chicago, International Honor Quilt (IHQ), initiated by Judy Chicago in 1980, Created in response to The Dinner Party. Hite Art Institute, University of Louisville.



Maker unknown, "Nine Patch" (probably made in Detroit, MI), 1864. Hand and machine appliqued cotton, hand inked, 93 x 58 inches, International Quilt Museum, University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

The show features some 30 works that run the gamut from historical and traditional quilting to ultra-contemporary and mixed media works, even pushing into virtual and non-fiber-based forms of quilting. Quilts have been famously adopted to tout modern causes, such as the AIDS Memorial Quilt (a selection from which is included in the show); it is perhaps less generally recognized that quilts have always offered a subversive avenue for self-expression to people who have been historically marginalized due to their gender, education, financial independence, and access to materials. The act of creating whole cloth from scraps and dregs is not just a matter of making ends meet, but a statement on the nature of what (and who) is discarded, as well as an empowering act of reclaiming that refuse in the name of something transformative and beautiful.



Bisa Butler, "The Storm, the Whirlwind, and the Earthquake" (2020) Cotton, silk, wool, and velvet quilted and appliquéd, 50 x 88 x 2 inches.

This is seen throughout *Radical Tradition*, from the literal transformation of suit fabrics hoarded at Dachau into a stark remembrance piece by survivors of the concentration camp; to tribute works like Faith Ringgold's "Ben" (circa 1978), a soft sculpture that adorns the titular "unhoused man" in a narrative mélange of pins and patches. Likewise, "The Storm, the Whirlwind, and the Earthquake" (2019-20), by Bisa Butler, is a stunning quilted portrait of influential social reformer Frederick Douglass. Although historically, the majority of quilting as a domestic art

was done by women, contemporary participants in the show include men like Hank Willis Thomas, Aaron McIntosh, Anthony Sonnenberg, and Sanford Biggers. It also features a huge work by genderqueer artist LJ Roberts, whose massive, playful TransVan RV, with LiteBrite taillights and a radiant aura of stuffed rainbow yarn worms, dominates an entire wall and truly stands out, even in a show with so many dynamic ideas and participants.



Aaron McIntosh, small section from “Invasive Queer Kudzu” Project, 2015-2020, Social sculpture; vine: digital prints on cotton, screen-printed fabric, fabric markers, craft felt, thread, vinyl tubing, wire; inscribed stories from LGBTQIA2+ community participation and archival documents.

There is, among many themes, an idea of invisible labor — something which fiber artists can readily understand, but those unacquainted with the back-bending work of hand- or machine-sewing perhaps cannot fully appreciate. This notion is illustrated impactfully by Terese Agnew, in “Portrait of a Textile Worker” (2005), which renders a large-scale image of sari-clad women at rows of sewing machine in detailed greyscale that is revealed, upon close approach, to be comprised of brand-name manufacturing labels like the ones that are found on basically every consumer item we wear.



Terese Agnew, "Portrait of a Textile Worker" (2002) clothing labels, thread, fabric backing. 94 1/2 x 109 3/4 in. Museum of Arts and Design, New York

Though art has often been concerned with politics throughout the ages, *Radical Tradition* successfully underscores how through quilts, such agendas can be inserted into a quotidian and domestic setting, inviting us to wrap ourselves in these messages and really sleep on them (or under them) — and that is one of the most potentially radical things about them.