

ACCESS DENIED

The use of commodities as medium to drive narrative in art

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MFA Thesis Exhibition

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Statement and Objective

The foundation of my current art practice is rooted in a deep desire to utilize fabric waste in the creation of functional, utilitarian objects – commodities – in order to extend the life of mass produced textiles and prevent unnecessary and premature disposal of useable fabric into landfill. Once created, I propose that these utilitarian objects, functionally unaltered, can be used as media in the creation of art forms that convey complex narrative information while adhering to formal aesthetic requirements.

Drawing on my personal history, my thesis exhibition uses objects commonly found in a domestic environment to address the relationships between family members, particularly parent and child, in a dysfunctional, traditionally patriarchal family structure, where access to inflowing commodities was strictly regulated by the adults and meted out on the basis of deservedness; deservedness being calculated on material contribution to familial wealth.

While this story is pointedly focused, containing narrative and referents that cannot be widely known or understood by the average viewer, I believe that the forms lend themselves to a variety of interpretations. Each viewer, utilizing their own experience with commodities, such as blankets and chairs, along with their experience of concepts such as “home” and “family”, may analyze and understand the installation, and each separate artwork within the installation, on their own level even without prior knowledge of the artist’s specific intentions.

Introduction

When I began my graduate studies at the University of Georgia in the fall of 2015 I had grandiose ideas about utilizing waste and alternative materials in the design and manufacture of fabrics for home furnishing applications. I quickly discovered that there is a great variety of waste material available with which to work. I spent my first semester experimenting with paper, rubber, plastic, textiles and even kudzu that I harvested and hand processed into useable fiber for weaving. During my first semester, I realized that there were more types and ways of using waste material than there were

days in my graduate studies program and decided that I needed to focus on one material to explore its full potential. This way I would have a template for moving into other materials as time allowed.

As a working textile designer, I am well aware of the enormous amount of waste generated by the industry. It is estimated that fully 85% of all textiles manufactured are disposed of in landfill¹. Likewise, I am familiar with the many ways that my industry is attempting to create less waste and reutilize the waste it does create. There are several companies, such as Ferre Hickory² and Jimtex³ that collect scrap fabric from t-shirt manufacturers, shred the scrap, mix it with a small amount of virgin fiber and spin into yarn suitable for apparel and home furnishings. Unifi makes a polyester yarn, Repreve⁴, from recycled plastic bottles and Interface uses reclaimed fishing nets, sourced globally, to create a line of carpet tile⁵. It is unclear whether any of these industrial reclamation projects are contributing positively to textile waste reduction or further exacerbating the situation⁶.

The main problem I recognize in these ventures is that they require a great deal of energy and equipment to reduce an existing material, such as textile scrap or plastic bottles, into smaller components that can be used to create new products – e.g. plastic bottles to polyester pellets to extruded yarn. The specialized equipment and energy required for this sort of transformation is not available to an individual. I required different methods to recycle on a personal scale, using easily accessible waste, as close to its original state as possible, while using as much as possible. Within these

¹ Council for Textile Recycling, “*The Facts About Textile Waste.*” www.weardonaterecycle.org/about/issue.html (accessed March 17, 2018)

² Hickory Throwing Company, “*Eco Friendly Recycled Yarns.*” www.hickorythrowing.com/Ferre-Hickory/home.htm (accessed March 17, 2018)

³ Jimtex Yarns, “*Zero Landfill.*” <http://www.jimtexpyarns.com/our-pledges/> (accessed March 17, 2018)

⁴ Repreve, “*27 Million Plastic Bottles.*” <http://repreve.com/news/video-leading-brands-partner-with-repreve> (accessed March 17, 2018)

⁵ Interface, “*In a Blue State of Mind – Net Effect.*” <http://www.interface.com/US/en-US/about/index> <http://www.interface.com/US/en-US/about/modular-carpet-tile/Net-Effect> (accessed March 17, 2018)

⁶ Chere di Boscio, “*Can recycled Plastic Clothing Do More Harm Than Good.*” www.eluxemagazine.com/magazine/recycled-plastic-clothing/ (accessed March 17, 2018)

guidelines, I had to consider material types and transformative processes as well as finished product styles that would appeal to the consumer market.

Materials

Over the past twenty-five years, I have personally collected a great deal of the waste that made its way to my office as competitor samples and sampling waste. This is fabric that is cut into small pieces in order to send samples to customers and/or fabric that is produced strictly for the purpose of checking pattern, color, scale etc. after which it is almost immediately discarded.

Although I am a designer of woven fabrics, one of my favorite fabrics is the cotton upholstery print. This fabric base is usually white or neutral, 100% cotton, medium to heavy weight with moderate drape. While it can be digitally printed it is most often screen printed. The fabric is available from a wide variety of sources, domestic and foreign, and comes in an unlimited range of patterns and colors. This is the waste that I chose to work with most often during my graduate studies.

My decision relied heavily on the fact that I already possessed a large amount of this waste. I also work with a manufacturer that produces and allows me to use this waste in my research practice. Because of the innate flame retardant nature of cotton, this type of fabric is not usually back or top coated with any treatment other than a light spray of Scotch Gard⁷ which is easily eliminated through laundering. Consequently this type of waste is one of the few that can be removed from used furniture or drapery, laundered and reused without any significant change to the quality of the fabric. This material can be easily cut, sewn, dyed and printed using low tech and non-toxic methods that are environmentally friendly. Since cotton cultivation also has a negative impact on the environment, due to high water and pesticide usage, reusing/recycling existing cotton

⁷ Scotchgard “How often should Scotchgard Fabric and Upholstery Protector be reapplied?”, https://www.scotchgard.com/3M/en_US/scotchgard/
https://www.scotchgard.com/3M/en_US/scotchgard/frequently-asked-questions/ (accessed March 17, 2018)

fabric can reduce environmental stress at both the beginning and the end of the cotton lifecycle. The cotton upholstery print fabric provides a great deal of design flexibility while maintaining my ecologically driven goals.

Methods and Processes

After a thorough analysis of traditional handcraft methods such as Japanese sakiori (rag weaving) and zanshi (leftover thread weaving) as well as traditional western rag weaving, I was initially most drawn to the idea of reutilizing this fabric waste in woven fabrics. I experimented with cutting the fabric into strips and weaving them such that I was keeping the original printed pattern intact. I then cut the strips narrower and let them fall randomly while weaving. This created a pleasing speckled effect in the woven fabric. I broke the cloth down further into the component threads, tied the threads back together and wove them. Again a pleasant pale, random speckling effect with a knotted texture. These fabrics dyed well and could be significantly altered from their original appearance.

After breaking down and weaving the waste fabric, I researched manipulating the fabric itself through pleating, tucking, ruching, layering, etc., using both hand and machine stitching to secure it. Utilizing ideas from traditional quilting and Japanese Boro, along with more contemporary techniques, I produced the samples from which I began my studies. The hand manipulation of the fabric required a great deal of marking in order to map out where to fold the fabric and place stitches. Due to this, I began using the back side of the fabric as the face because it was easier to see the markings on the reverse side than it was on the face side where the print obstructed the markings. As I planned on dyeing and possibly printing on these samples, I also thought that the dye would penetrate better and be more cohesive on the reverse side than on the printed side of the fabric. This proved to be the case.

During this experimentation, however, the reverse side of the fabric came to have a great deal of significance for me. It was not completely white. Depending on the quality

of the print on the other side, the ink bled through to the back side of the cloth to varying degrees, creating anything from a ghost image of what was on the face to random marbling/marking effects. I found this bleed-through compelling, not just for the quiet, naturalistic aesthetic it imparted, but because it was an indicator of what the fabric had previously been, proof that the fabric had a previous life that continued to effect the new object created from it. It seemed appropriate to me that objects created from the remnant of other objects maintained a material connection to the previous items and that the previous state was not completely destroyed by the new object.

Many people reviewing my work at that time were not convinced of the viability of the reverse side of the fabric, either woven or manipulated, as a practical design element. I began to doubt the utility of these experiments as viable commercial fabrics and turned my attention from design to art. The first two completed artworks I made with this waste – “*Hungry Ghosts*” (Fig. 1) and “*Lonely Hunter*” – were over dyed to minimize the bleed through, completely obliterating the effect that I found so compelling. Unsatisfied with either the art or design experiments using the cotton textile waste, I spent much of my second year exploring paper, metal and ceramics. I would not return to the fabric waste in earnest until the summer of 2017.



Fig. 1 - Erin A. Geagon “*Hungry Ghosts*” 2017 65”x48”

Cotton/linen fabric, machine stitched, Procion dye, acrylic paint

Art or Design?

Since beginning my graduate studies at the University of Georgia, I have been following two parallel but separate paths – one concerned with design and the functional object, one directed at pure art forms. While I respect the pursuit of fine art for its own sake, I have more of an affinity for the functional object. I have been a designer of functional fabric for twenty-five years and a maker of functional objects since childhood. This is where my true interest lies. Furthermore, my belief that textile waste can be transformed into viable commercial product can be reliably tested in this arena. A commodity product can be manufactured quickly, modified to conform to market trends and sold at a reasonable price, thus achieving the goal of reintroducing textile waste into the consumer mainstream as a value added product. The more popular the product, the more waste that can be utilized.

By contrast, art made from textile waste has to travel a lengthy and unsure path from maker, to viewing public, to buyer, to permanent home in museum, gallery or residence. In addition to the fact that a single piece of textile art does not consume a great deal of waste, the likelihood of the artwork being purchased and/or displayed for any significant length of time is low. The higher probability is that the artwork may be shown in several exhibitions, never purchased, returned to the artist for storage and eventually sent to landfill, fulfilling few of the desired goals. In my opinion, the best outcome is that a work of art created from recycled textile waste could inform the viewing public of the problem of textile waste and present the aesthetic possibilities inherent to the medium. As I certainly did not want to enter the realm of the “functional art object” – highly ornate, decorative and commensurately expensive objects intended for some small amount of careful usage – I struggled with how to marry my two practices, art and design, into a cohesive single practice that utilized the best of both to create objects that were functional, useful *and* art.

While attempting to resolve this problem, I discovered the work of the Arte Povera movement, most specifically Jannis Kounellis⁸. As a collage artist routinely using found

⁸ Wikipedia, “*Jannis Kounellis*.” www.wikipedia.org

objects in my own work, I was acquainted with the many uses for found objects and the ready-made in art. From the Dadaists, through Schwitters and Picasso, to contemporary artists, functional objects have a long history as art medium. But instead of simply using the found object/ready-made for its color, shape, line or textural value, it appeared to me that Kounellis carefully selected the objects he worked with to suggest people, places and situations that would be *automatically* associated with the specific objects used. For example, in some pieces, he utilized dark grey military style coats (Fig. 2), in some installations he used bedframes wrapped in fabric (Fig. 3).



Fig. 2 – Jannis Kounellis “Untitled” 1998 74.0” x 86.6”

Mixed Media - Iron slabs with iron beams covered with coats in turn wrapped in wire. Collection Cardi Gallery, Hong Kong 2018

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jannis_Kounellis (accessed March 17, 2018)

With his focus directly on the utilitarian object, the question was no longer how the object functioned aesthetically within the art piece, but what significant information was being introduced into the artwork through the meaning supplied by the functional object through form, process and material? This research helped solidify the concept that functional utilitarian objects contain an intrinsic symbolism that can be used to provide content and narrative when used as the medium from which to create art. In so doing, the narrative and meaning of the art is suggested and driven by the objects and materials chosen to create it.



Fig. 3 – Jannis Kounellis “*Untitled*” 2006 190”x90”x30”

Mixed Media - Three bedframes, wrapped fabric painted red

Can the utilitarian object be made into art, but still maintain its own identity as a functional object?

There are two main concepts that intrigued me in this research. The first is the idea that functional utilitarian objects intrinsically possess a language and system of symbols that are easily recognizable to the vast majority of viewers. By this I mean that people possess, and recognize, functional objects and the purpose of a functional object creates the symbolism associated with it. For example, most people are familiar with a blanket and the common understanding that a blanket is used for warmth and protection from the elements. Similarly a chair is used for sitting. Different types of chairs indicate different types of sitting environments, perhaps even different types of people who would sit in those environments. For any common functional utilitarian object, the average person can make a connection between the form, the function and the possible symbolic associations generated by the routine ownership and usage of such items. Blankets protect, pillows provide comfort, scarves keep us warm, and bags are vessels that hold endless items of importance, both real and imaginary.

The second concept that interested me in this line of inquiry is the fact that the configuration in which a group of utilitarian objects is presented – the way they are arranged and displayed – can enhance or completely alter the ideas and emotions intrinsic to the individual objects. A grouping of utilitarian objects, displayed in a particular way alludes not only to their functionality, but can tell a story of who owns/owned them and how, where, when and why the objects are/were used. In this way, I thought it possible to use accumulated functional utilitarian objects as the medium by which to convey universally recognizable statements of the human condition – a universal language that I had been striving for, but not finding, in my previous artworks.

However, unlike artists who have used utilitarian objects in the past, in part or in whole, as the media with which to create art, my problem was how to use functional objects in such a way that they would not be permanently altered. I had no desire to utilize commercially made ready-made objects. Using commercially available objects would

defeat the purpose of consuming existing textile waste. My intention was to create art with the commodity objects that I created from my waste material.

Much time would be invested in manufacturing the objects used in my art practice. However, the primary purpose in creating the functional objects was to create a line of commodity goods that could be sold to a mass market consumer in order to extend the life of the textile waste. As such, the object, during the lifespan of the art piece, must remain essentially unaltered and/or easily returned to its previous, functional state. This eliminated gluing, painting, tearing, nailing and every sort of manipulation that was irreversible and/or damaging to the object. I developed a general idea that my fabric based art would depend largely on draping and/or hanging suitably embellished objects within spaces, possibly over armatures, to create environments. With this strategy charted, I devoted the summer of 2017 to producing commodity objects with the goal that the objects would be dyed, printed, painted and/or embellished prior to being made into art.

Minor Adjustments, Major Consequences

While engaged in the making of the commodities with which I planned to create my art, I proceeded in a highly organized, production line manner. Instead of weaving or sewing an object, then stopping to color and embellish it before proceeding to the next object, I decided to manufacture all of the raw commodities first, then, once all the items were made and my art installation concept solidified, I could finish the products as necessary. As a consequence, I rapidly accumulated a stockpile of raw, undifferentiated commodity items obviously made from textile waste. Blankets, rugs, scarves, handbags, upholstery fabric, table napkins and tea towels, in neutral shades of off white tinted with a wide variety of random colors in varying densities and patterns ranging from highly visible to barely detectable.

After several experiments in dyeing some of these items, recognizing the power of color, texture and pattern to suggest ownership and narrative, I again became intrigued

by the lack of purposeful color in the raw, unfinished objects. The random, neutral value of the color, the nondescript speckling or marbling effect, gave the objects a generic quality that defied classification. I found that objects made with this fabric were not evocative of any specific gender, age, race or socio-economic class (Fig. 4).

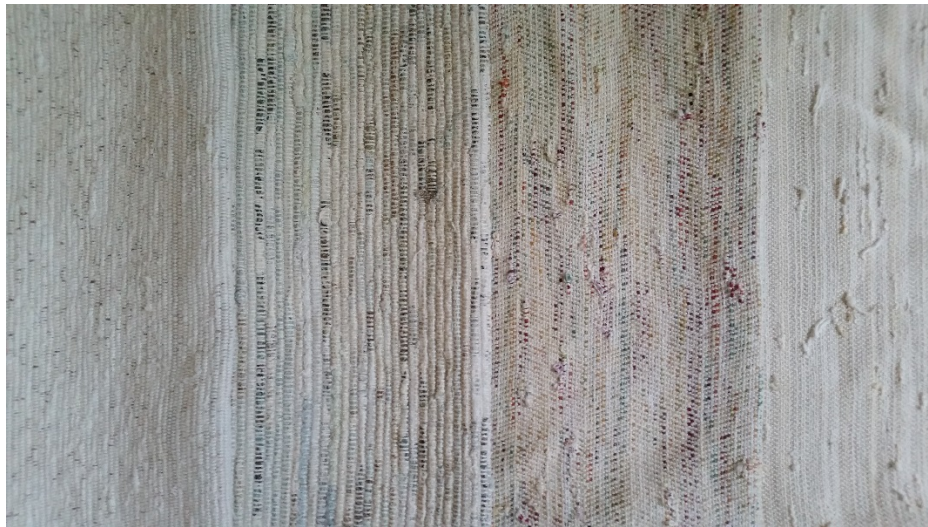


Fig. 4 – Erin A. Geagon *Fabric samples* 2016-2018

Cotton warp, fabric strips, reutilized thread

Because of this the narrative value of the object was increased, as the object could speak as itself, regarding its form and functionality, to *anybody* and not as the property of someone in particular. A generic object, lacking any indicators referencing specific ownership, lends itself more readily to be interpreted through its inherent symbolism. This symbolism being predominantly defined by its function and secondarily defined by how it is displayed within an environment.

Recognizing this solved two problems for me. First, the raw, neutral colored objects provided the generic quality that allows for a more universal concept to be conveyed – e.g. a generic blanket speaks not to the specificity of adult or child, man or woman, rich or poor, but relies solely on the overarching concepts of what a blanket does, what it

provides – protection from the elements, warmth, cover and security. In the same way a generic bag does not give any information regarding the type of person who may carry it, but speaks more to the concept of “bag” – a place to store items of importance that an individual may wish to keep nearby and within reach. The underlying meaning is that we carry items with us that we find important, and which provide a feeling of safety, comfort and fulfilment.

In addition to enhancing the artwork, leaving the utilitarian objects unembellished (or applying a completely reversible manipulation) allowed for future manipulation of the object. Such manipulation to be determined by consumer trend requirements and salability, instead of the requirements of the temporary artwork created with them. The production of utilitarian objects using the reverse side of the fabric allowed me to fabricate the objects themselves, generating an inventory of raw merchandise for sale that also acted as a suitably generic medium with which to create my art. This provided a clear and workable path to unification of my art and design practices.

The Objects

As with any media, the objects that can be created with it are limited by the qualities inherent to the medium. Cotton upholstery print cloth, being of substantial weight with a tight weave, even when cut into strips or threads, remains a bulky material that is unsuitable for most apparel applications. Considering that the original purpose of the fabric was in home furnishing, there is a long tradition of textile recycling for use in home interiors and I have worked in the home furnishing industry for many years, manufacturing home décor items was an obvious choice.

There are, however, other items that have wide commercial appeal, but are not subject to the swift turnover of the apparel fashion cycle. Accessories such as scarves and handbags last several seasons before becoming outdated. I explored the production of handbags as a commodity line while producing the vessels used for the untitled

installation in the “*Undermined*” exhibition⁹. The fabric worked as well for this purpose as it had for the home furnishings product (Fig. 5).

When I completed the manufacturing phase, my commodity arsenal included blankets, rugs, upholstered chairs, napkins, tea towels, scarves and handbags. Because I had dyed most of the scarves for retail sale, and they no longer retained the generic, off-white coloration, these items were removed from my thesis work. I had also dyed, printed and embroidered the upholstery on the chairs, but this was remedied by slipcovering the chairs in order to conceal the upholstery, returning them to a generic state. With this collection of nondescript consumer goods and my thesis mapped out, the only question remaining was: What message could these objects convey?



Fig. 5 – Erin A. Geagon and YeonSoo Kim “*Untitled*” 2017 36”x 120”x 18”

Porcelain and fabric (stiffened with wheat paste and tempera)

UGA Lamar Dodd School of Art, “*Undermined*” October 12-November 9, 2017, www.art.uga.edu
<https://art.uga.edu/galleries/undermined> (accessed march 17, 2018)

The Art

Without any specific narrative chosen, the first artworks created from my utilitarian objects materialized serendipitously and under duress. Having spent an inordinate amount of time creating just the commodities, I had no artwork to present at a mandated interdisciplinary critique that occurred October 19, 2017. I quickly produced five artworks from a variety of raw and finished objects – chairs, blankets, scarves and bags. Three of these pieces were not well received. The artworks created with objects that had been dyed/painted/embellished were largely misunderstood, with most viewers confused as to whether the artistic significance existed in the arrangement of the objects or the color/patterning of the objects (Fig.6). Many viewers found the fabric patterning distracting.



Fig. 6 – Erin A. Geagon “*Untitled*” 2017 120”x 36”x 50”

Dining chairs with custom upholstery

One work, created using the raw rag woven blankets was generally received as having some merit, but still lacking, while the last piece was widely regarded as successful. It was at this critique that I realized the full utility of the generic quality of the unembellished objects.

The successful piece was the work now titled “*Warmth*” (Fig. 8, pg. 20). It consists of 13 hand woven rag (Catalogne¹⁰) blankets, neatly folded, stacked and tied tightly with fabric tape in order to prevent access to the commodities. This study was a reaction to a news story I had seen in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria that devastated Puerto Rico in September, 2017. On the newscast, images of the destruction were interrupted by an account that some government officials were keeping donated commodities, such as water, warehoused instead of releasing the necessary goods to the community. I found this highly offensive. The possessors of such items, while being charged with the care and distribution of them, do not retain ownership rights. Their possession of the object is merely one of temporary stewardship before final distribution. “*Warmth*”, though accumulation, stacking and tying, succeeded in evoking in the viewer the feeling of being denied access.

This modest composition was the catalyst for my internal discussion of the relationships people have with commodities. How and why do we acquire commodities? What is the significance of this acquisition? What value do we place on commodities? How does the value of the commodities people own reflect the value of the people who own them? Why, when and how do we share the commodities we own? With whom do we share them? What do we do with commodities when we no longer find them valuable? This is the point at which my general, vague thesis question finally acquired a well-conceived and specific focus.

¹⁰ Narrative Threads. “*Crafting the Canadian Quilt.*” www.narrativethreads.ca
http://www.narrativethreads.ca/explorer-explore/tapis_catalogne-rug_catalogne.html (accessed March 31, 2018)

Narrative – My Story

"Home is where the heart is

Home is so remote

Home is just emotion

Sticking in my throat

*Let's go to your place"*¹¹



Fig. 7 – Erin A. Geagon *"Access Denied"* 14'x10'

Installed Georgia Museum of Art, April 7-May 20, 2018

¹¹ Lene Lovitch, Les Chappell *"Home"*, from the album *Stateless*, Stiff Records, 1978
Lyrics from <https://genius.com/Lene-lovich-home-lyrics> (accessed March 17, 2017)

As my supply of commodities were predominantly items used in a domestic environment, the human community I chose to explore was the family – the community found inside a home. And what better than my own dysfunctional family whose members have always had a questionable relationship to and with the objects they own.

The basis of the narrative behind the installation “*Access Denied*” (Fig. 7) lies in a particular period of my life – the time during which my parents were building their perfect dream home, mostly with their own hands, during their spare time outside of normal working hours. Throughout this time period (approx. 1974-1979), my parents (father and step-mother) both worked as teachers. My father was a high school manual arts teacher at a public school forty five minutes away from home. My step-mother was a sixth grade teacher at a nearby Catholic girls’ school I attended from sixth through tenth grades.

My father was a strict parent, former Marine, who expected his children to behave as adults; apply themselves in school, perform all the household chores, work on the new house when possible, care for themselves and “act right” when our parents were away from home – which was often. My step-mother was meek, though self-reliant, and willing to follow the example and orders of her husband. We were all expected to be a good reflection of my father’s excellent parenting skills and unassailable moral character.

Meals were strictly regulated – a fixed amount of food, no more, no less, offered at specific times only. No snacking, no candy, no dessert. Time was strictly regulated – school, outdoors *always* during daylight hours except for when chores were done, homework after dinner. No television. No friends inside the house. My father was often angry and abusive to my brothers. I received less harsh treatment by virtue of removing myself from view, under the radar and in my own world.

Interaction between parents and children was strictly limited. My parents taught all day, worked on new house-related tasks weekends and weekdays until dinner, then relaxed either inside or away from the house after dinner. There were very few moments of family togetherness either inside or outside the home. Discussion of anything was not encouraged outside of an accounting for one’s day during the evening meal. Other

interaction largely revolved around the circumstances of getting into trouble and receiving the punishment for those transgressions.

Commodities in this household were stringently regulated. While both parents had excellent jobs, both holding well-paid positions at a time when most of our friends' mothers did not work, money was a chronic source of tension between our parents as well as between parents and children. The youngest brother always wore the elder brother's castoff clothing. I was allowed to make my own clothes and/or adjust the length of old clothing through letting down of hems or adding decorative material to extend the length. The new house consumed all financial resources that were not earmarked for parental use or absolutely required for the survival of the children. Aside from our school uniforms, the children wore the cheapest clothing, ate the cheapest food and had use of only what we needed to survive or perform our chores. Christmas and birthdays were for acquiring items that we needed – e.g. new clothes, bedding, and school supplies - and outside of those holidays we received goods only if necessary. My parents, however, had access to new clothing as they saw fit, ate higher quality food, including candy and snack items, attended movies and parties, purchased books and magazines as well as items required for pursuing hobbies and personal interests. There was a distinct and purposeful demarcation between those who had access to commodities and those who did not. Those who contributed to the wealth and functioning of the household deserved and were allowed commensurate access to the commodities the family could afford to acquire.

Children, as non-producing members of the family were, by default, unfairly disadvantaged under that arrangement. Without the ability to earn income or perform higher order tasks, the exchange of menial labor was the only means by which the child could achieve deservedness. And this only according to the age and abilities of the child. This quid pro quo represented the physical manifestation of a miserliness of emotional and spiritual support within a defective social structure that outwardly pretended to be perfectly normal.

The dysfunctional nature of this family structure would have been readily apparent to any outsider with access to the interior of the home, the family and its daily workings. As with everything else, however, outsider access was strictly limited. Outsiders, including friends and relatives, visited rarely, under tightly controlled conditions for extremely short periods of time. Because of this my parents were able to maintain an aura of respectability within the larger community that was solely based on the personas they cultivated outside of the home, negating the value and authenticity of the conditions under which their children lived and the child's ability to communicate that to the outside world.

The installation, "*Access Denied*", seeks to create in the viewer a normalized emotional response to that situation – powerlessness, neglect, separation and denial of access to physical and emotional needs. While each separate piece can and does create a singular narrative, it is the complete installation that communicates the oppressive psychological effect that denied access to commodities can have on an individual and the community in which he/she lives.

Thesis Exhibition

“Warmth”



Fig. 8 – Erin A. Geagon *“Warmth”* 2017 20”x16”x60”

13 handwoven cotton/linen blankets, fabric tape

As stated previously, this piece provided the impetus to explore the flow of commodities through communities, from national populations to families. *“Warmth”* (Fig. 8) examines how access, or lack of access, to commodities is largely dependent on an individual’s place within a social hierarchy. Our personal beliefs about how and why commodities can, should and do flow through a community structure is rooted in the foundation of

how we are taught to appreciate and interact with commodities – what they represent, who should have access and why they should or should not have access.

These are not *just* objects, they are objects that hold specific meaning and perform specific duties that can effectively indicate the status of the owner and the relative status of everyone surrounding the owner. Accordingly, the meaning of “*Warmth*” (Fig. 6) was, for me, transformed from the global to the personal in reference to the fact that my own parents, like the aforementioned Puerto Rican government officials, kept tight control of all commodities that entered the household. They distributed goods only when and if they perceived there was a specific need without any regard to actual need, physical or emotional.

The concept of “blankets”, items used for warmth and protection, symbols of hope and resilience after catastrophe, exudes inclusiveness and gathering together. Blankets bound the point of uselessness present a powerful dichotomy that challenges the viewer to dissect the meaning according to their own relationship with the restricted commodity. Is this an innocuous bundling of personal belongings for transport or the purposeful and personal restriction of access to necessary goods?

“*Comfort*”

“*Comfort*” (Fig. 9) is a companion piece to “*Warmth*”. While they function effectively as separate pieces, I prefer them to be viewed together, because warmth and comfort are such primal requirements for a nurturing home environment. The ambiguity of the individual pillows from which the piece is comprised – the white fabric tinged with the color printed on the other side - suggests that warmth and comfort are both physical and emotional attributes. Without reference to gender, age, race or social status, even the most meager of commodities can convey warmth and comfort in an environment where access to emotional support is readily available.



Fig. 9 – Erin A. Geagon “*Comfort*” 2018 22”x18”x62” and “*Warmth*” 2017 20”x16”x60”

“*Comfort*” - 13 feather and/or fiberfill pillows, cotton covers, fabric tape

The stacking and fastening of this bundle into a hard, austere lump, negating all of the comforting attributes of soft, luxurious pillows again invites the viewer to question the purpose of these items and why that purpose has been so completely negated? Who would do this and why?

“***Waste Not, Want Not***”

This is one of two pieces comprised of commodity goods that I did not manufacture by hand. “*Waste Not, Want Not*” (Fig. 10) consists of 60 cotton/linen table napkins that I designed and wove at a textile mill for future sale. The color is temporarily applied through the use of pigment powder and hairspray for easy removal.

The piece references when my stepmother, always frugal, made cloth napkins for the family to use at mealtimes, discontinuing the use of expensive, disposable paper napkins. The family received clean, color coded napkins on Saturday night and used them for the entire week. The napkins were collected on the following Saturday morning for laundering, after which they were replaced on the table for the next week's use.

While this may have seemed admirable as a cost saving and environmentally friendly measure, in reality it was absurd. Adults had little trouble keeping their napkins serviceable, but children, untidy by nature, were quite inept at doing so. By the end of the week, it was impossible to find a clean square inch on the fabric. It was a relief to get a clean napkin on laundry day.



Fig. 10 - Erin A. Geagon "*Waste Not, Want Not*" 2018 12"x12"x 50"

60 cotton/linen table napkins, fabric tape, pigment powder, hairspray

The transition from plain, clean fabric at the top of the stack to crusty, black pigment encrustation at the bottom suggests the occurrence of deterioration over time. A deterioration that was not acknowledged by my parents as they were not forced to use the decrepit objects, theirs seeing far less real usage than their children's. The bundling of the objects in this configuration implies the strict regulation of the goods. There were a finite number of napkins, they were dispensed at a specific time, they were collected at a specific time, and they were used only for a specific purpose. Each person was allowed their item for the intended use and in the event of "misuse" had to endure the contaminated item until the next regulated dispersal of the laundered commodity.

Without the explicit personal backstory, a viewer would have difficulty comprehending the express meaning of the piece. However, relying on the generic nature of the functional objects used, the controlled bundling and securing of them, and the color change from top to bottom, the perception of excessive, unyielding regimentation and the time-based sensation of deterioration is achieved. As such, this piece also effectively indicates the familial deterioration transpiring at the dining table.

"Quid Pro Quo"

This is the second work that is not comprised of handmade objects. "*Quid Pro Quo*" (Fig. 11) was created from 110 cotton/linen tea towels (of my own design and woven at a textile mill) stacked within a cage of metal rods, wrapped with fabric tape. A small opening is cut in the fabric straps on one side. This is the only piece in the installation that allows access to the commodities inside the structure. The purpose of the access alludes to the requirement for menial labor - one of the few ways in which children acquired access to goods in my father's house.

Most of the chores were done by the children in exchange for a small monetary allowance. Children were permitted unregulated access to the commodities necessary to complete their duties. Brooms, mops, sponges, scrubbing brushes, dish towels, cleaning solutions etc. were at our disposal when housework was required. As we grew

older, lawn and outdoor equipment such as mower, rakes and shovels were also made available.



Fig. 11 – Erin A. Geagon “*Quid Pro Quo*” 2018 12”x10”x50”

110 cotton/linen tea towels, steels rods, fabric tape

Chores were expected to be completed by the children while the adults were elsewhere. While performing our duties, we were allowed to be in the house, with time to interact with each other and the objects in the house. For instance, children washing the dishes could talk quietly while performing the task. This interaction provided the only

autonomous moments that children were permitted inside the house. This was the time in which we forged our authentic family relationships – beyond parental earshot and before the enforced silence and solitude of homework.

This imposing tower of tea towels suggests the outward appearance of unyielding structure and regimentation. However, the narrow access to the commodities, for the purpose of performing the tasks that earned our keep, furnished the pathway to the only meaningful familial community the children had – each other.

“The Keepers”

People make, use, disburse and control commodities. “*The Keepers*” (Fig. 12) is the first piece that considers the relationship between people and commodities directly. In a household comprised of parents and offspring, the people controlling the flow of commodities throughout the domestic community are the adults. While the parents, as the controllers of the commodities, are inferred by the commodities they control, they can also be depicted as separate from the commodities.

In our house, there were four chairs around the dining table and two lawn chairs in the living room. In our bedrooms each child had a stool at his/her desk. My stepmother had a bench for her piano, and there was a fifth dining chair that my parents used at a desk in their quarters after the eldest sibling left home. That was the full extent of household seating. The dining area was only used for dining and the lawn chairs were only used by my parents when watching television. Hence chairs are equated with parental activities and/or the parents themselves. This is how they are approached in this composition – chairs equal parents. The two chairs tied together imply both parents acting as one, with the same goals, the same rules and the same authority.

The chairs hold a stack of neatly folded blankets; the whole mass bound in a regimented grid of knots and secured to the wall indicating the importance of their possessions and their reluctance to part with them. Whether it was food, clothing or housing, my parents were the keepers of everything, distributing items only when

absolutely necessary. They were not only this way with commodities, but also with their time, knowledge, sympathy and understanding.



Fig. 12 – Erin A. Geagon “*The Keepers*” 2018 44”x28”x48”

2 slipcovered chairs, 15 handwoven blankets, fabric tape

It was a self-imposed austerity for the sake of austerity. This piece elicits the miserliness of spirit that came to represent the stingy domestic atmosphere engendered by my parents’ excessive economy. This configuration of objects addresses rigidity of structure, relentless pursuit of order and lack of generosity.

“Empty Bags, Empty Bellies”

“Empty Bags, Empty Bellies” (Fig. 13) confronts the destructive results of parental rigidity. Children in this family were required to earn their keep through the proper performance of their duties – good grades, chores and maintaining a certain level of invisibility. Invisibility by far being the most desirable accomplishment. Complaints were not well tolerated. Pointing out the flaw in any parental rule was met with silence or punishment. In particular, rules concerning food were not to be questioned. In our household, my father, as the primary breadwinner, was allowed to eat whatever he liked, whenever he liked, in unrestricted quantities. My stepmother was expected to arrange the food budget accordingly.

Due to this, access to food was extremely limited to the children. Breakfast, lunch and dinner were meagerly portioned out. As growing children, this allotment of food, had it been fully consumed, would have left us hungry, but lunchtime sandwiches were of such low quality they were completely inedible. We did not eat them, and as a result, they remained in our school bags until we could dispose of them without our parents’ knowledge.

The rationing of food, and the types of food we were permitted, had little to do with the amount of food we actually needed, and everything to do with what our father thought was appropriate. For years we were served liver and onions every Friday night. None of the children would eat liver and onions. The Friday evening ritual consisted of repeated unsuccessful attempts by my father to cajole, coerce or force us to eat, after which we were required to sit at the table until he gave us permission to do our chores and go to our rooms.

Any normal parent would have fed the children something of commensurate nutritional value after realizing what was being served was not going to be eaten. Not my father. The underlying principal was that he was right, he was always right and matters would be handled his way or not at all. His excessive regulation of food was key to understanding the underlying pathology of his regimented thought processes.

It never occurred to him that his children were hungry even though we were all noticeably much thinner than our peers. In his mind, the amount of food children required was nothing more or less than the amount of food he was willing to give, regardless of nutritional needs. Despite taking on additional chores as we grew older, helping with heavy manual labor such as digging ditches, fetching water and wood or mixing concrete all day, the amount of food we received never changed. Because of this we were often depleted and exhausted from overwork and lack of nourishment.



Fig. 13 – Erin A. Geagon “*Empty Bags, Empty Bellies*” 2018 36”x36”x36” (variable)

18 handmade handbags, wheat paste, tempera

This is the response I wish to evoke in the viewer. Whether it be the children of neglectful parents or third world sweatshop workers, the feeling of being undernourished, purposefully denied access to food, despite the labor one is performing, leaves people emptied.

“Veneer (Pillars of the Community)”



Fig. 14 – Erin A. Geagon “Veneer (Pillars of the Community)” 2018 25”x25”x75”

9 handwoven blankets, fabric tape, pigment powder, hairspray

As teachers, both of my parents were well respected by their peers and beloved by their students. It was an awkward situation for me particularly, attending the school where my stepmother taught, surrounded by students who had been in her class. It was impossible for me to confide the nature and depth of the family dysfunction and be believed by my peers who knew my stepmother as such a caring, compassionate, fun teacher. The two-headed beast that was my parents had a distinct and disparate social appearance that was completely opposite to their family/home personas.

This veneer of respectability allowed them to behave the way they did without recourse, never acknowledging their shortcomings or the effect it had on their children. Only once

in the fifteen years I lived with my father did a neighbor see his true nature when my father physically attacked my older brother in the backyard, disrupting the afternoon peace. By the time the police arrived, however, my brother had fled and my father was able to pretend that nothing unusual had taken place.

The underlying context of *“Veneer” (Pillars of the Community)* (Fig. 14) is probably the most accessible, since most people have knowledge of someone who displays duplicitous personalities – a public face and a private face – in order to advance within communities such as the workplace or political arena. The blankets comprising each parent are rolled tightly then secured in an almost impenetrable network of knots that demonstrates their rigid, single minded household dispositions. This unity of purpose and action presented a singular force within the house even though they had separate external lives. The piece is coated in brown and black pigment suggesting decay and corrosion, partially overlaid with a gold veneer that represents the sparkling outward persona of people who are less attractive and accessible in private than they appear to be in public.

“Be Careful What You Wish For”

The last piece in the installation (Fig. 15) represents my father. From what I learned of him through my grandfather, after I left home, my father held some very explicit and unattainable ideals. For him, the pinnacle of success was a good job, a good family, social acceptance and respect, and all the trappings that went along with that – a beautiful house, new cars, fine clothes and the financial security necessary for extensive leisure activity after his work was completed.

His model of family life was exemplified in *“The Donna Reed Show”* – a 1950s-60s television situation comedy where the father held a lucrative, respectable career that never interfered with his leisure activities, the mother was fashionable and subservient and the children were untroubled and self-sustaining, rarely requiring any sort of parental help or guidance. The thirty minute stories revolved around inane family foibles

that required little to no concerted effort or intelligence to resolve. With this fictional family as his example, my father spent most of his time attaining all the physical trappings of familial success while completely ignoring the essential work associated with the creation and nurturing of a highly functional, interdependent family that could act as a support community throughout his life.



Fig. 15 – Erin A. Geagon “*Be Careful What You Wish For*” 2018 72”x54”x40”

12 handwoven rugs, slipcovered chair, fabric tape

This piece is a cautionary tale that addresses the problems that arise when we acquire everything we think we want only to find that it was not what we wanted after all. Commodities, like houses and furniture, fine clothes and cars, are of little comfort or use to a person who has no human community with which to share their wealth and no one who cares about their physical, emotional and intellectual wellbeing. Being exclusively bound to such objects can restrict a person’s ability to engage in more meaningful pursuits that foster close, committed and caring relationships. The result being a lonely existence, surrounded by objects, but devoid of any meaning or purpose.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that there is a great deal of personal backstory attached to this work, I do not consider it necessary for the viewer to know or understand it. That people are routinely denied access to consumer goods, and such denial creates communal tension, is the heart of the work. Whether denied access is perceived as being perpetrated through family, friends, neighbors, work, government etc. is more relevant than the personal story of the artist. The very generic-ness of the utilitarian objects used, along with the ambiguity of the artworks created with the objects, allows for a varied and personal interpretation that I find functionally useful. *My story* may not be universal, but a story that is easily adaptable to any individual familiar with these items certainly is.

I am satisfied that the work has effectively addressed the concept of the commodity as a medium through which to present and drive narrative in art. Working with this medium creates connections and communication between people and objects that I had previously not considered. My goal is to continue manufacturing functional objects for the mass market with textile waste, and I am certain that I will maintain this art practice alongside my design practice. This will provide ample opportunity to expand upon and solidify the concepts further.

My time at the University of Georgia, pursuing my graduate studies, has enabled me to expand my perception of what art is and what art can be. It has taught me how to utilize all of my expertise, whether it be in art or design, learning or teaching. I no longer feel compelled to automatically compartmentalize ideas and abilities and restrict them to specific aspects of my creative practice. My practice, like my thesis work, can be fluid and changing, culling ideas from many sources and re-presenting them for multiple purposes. Successes in one area may result in failures in another and vice versa, but the attempt at creating leads to further creating which, over time, will produce a better understanding and awareness of my values and skills that can be focused on and through my artwork.

In the end, my time at the University of Georgia has been well spent. The community here, professors and students, fostering an atmosphere of learning and growing from which I was encouraged to find my own creative voice and release it into the world with the ability to explain it effectively when called upon to do so. I look forward to a rewarding future in both art and design.

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