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Connecting Thread

A Thesis  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
in the Department of Art and Art History  
The University of Mississippi

by

Christen Parker

May 2019

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## ABSTRACT

Up until about the 1960's, sculpture was dominated by work made with metal, wood, or stone. These materials would be described as "hard" or "masculine," while materials such as fabric or yarn are described as "soft" or "feminine." Fabric is known for its softness and malleability and is commonly used to cover the human body for objects such as clothing or bedding. The materials that I have selected are generally considered soft, yet protective, but are also thought of as insubstantial and fragile.

As a child, I would see quilts and hear stories about how my maternal grandmother and great-grandmother sewed. Although they were unable to teach me the process of sewing, I have found a great appreciation for it over the past two years through the manipulation of textiles to make abstract sculptures. My work has always drifted towards materials and imagery that are feminine, while maintaining an interest in increased scale and the alteration of space.

*Connecting Thread* creates a connection between textile-based sculptures and comforting memories provoked from the viewer. In this work, textiles are used to generate a connection between these two things and by linking these ideas, the work can be associated with mundane, domestic objects while also creating a deeper personal connection between myself, the viewer, and the work.

## DEDICATION

To my dad.

Your memory has powered me through this experience. Thank you.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to first thank Professor Durant Thompson for convincing me to pursue sculpture. Thank you for showing me that I could do it, even in the moments when I didn't think I could. I would like to also thank my other thesis committee members Professor Brooke White and Professor Virginia Rougon Chavis. Brooke and Ginny, your encouragement and guidance throughout my graduate school experience will remain some of my fondest memories of the last three years.

To my past and present fellow graduate students, your comradery, support, and feedback will always be appreciated. I also owe a special thank you to Professor Cliff Tresner. Cliff, thank you for pushing me to the edge and back. The biggest thank you goes to my mom for making sure I always had crayons and paper, that I always worked hard, and that I always felt loved. Without you, none of this would have been possible.

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CHAPTER I:  
FAMILY, ART, AND SEWING

Growing up in a working-class family that placed great value on objects that had more sentimental value than monetary value has had a huge impact on my creative process. My grandmother and great-grandmother learned how to sew at a time when it was a necessity rather than a hobby. However, my mother and aunt didn't continue on with this craft because their professions didn't call for the use of this skill. Therefore, my mother's generation didn't feel drawn to the craft of sewing and had no practical use for it in the way the previous generations had used it. As a result of this cultural shift for women, the tradition was lost and the younger generation of women in my family were not taught sewing. In her essay *Something from Nothing (Toward a Definition of Women's 'Hobby Art')*, Lucy Lippard noted the shift away from sewing and needlework during the late 1970's. Lippard's observation that the modern women of that era lacked "...the skills, the motive and the discipline to do the kind of handwork their foremothers did by necessity." (Lippard, 33.) Women in the late 1970's and on into the 1980's had also been turning their attention away from the home and more toward the work place. As my mother came of age in the late 1970's, she became a part of the generation when the domestic tradition of sewing was lost.

My family's homes were often adorned with framed, cross-stitched works hung on walls and handmade quilts that were draped very purposefully on the backs of chairs and couches. These objects were important parts of the interior landscape of the home for me. The women in

my family would then pass these objects on to be placed lovingly in the homes of the people they cared about.

Each year for Christmas, my brother, my cousins, and I would receive a small quilt made by my great-grandmother. She would pick a different patterned fabric for both the boys and girls and then she would stitch individual knots throughout the quilt to create a dotted pattern with the thread. These were ordinary objects and details, but through the intention of the woman who made them, they became special reminders of a grandparent's love. It wasn't until adulthood that I truly began to appreciate these handmade quilts. The skill and patience required to make these gifts came from a different time when the societal expectations for women almost required the knowledge and proficiency of sewing. Because my mother didn't learn to sew, she did not pass that knowledge down to me and, as a result, I have had to learn from friends and, in some more advanced techniques, teach myself to sew. I now have a new-found appreciation for the process. Learning this skill has allowed me to see a new relationship between the past and present. It has also given my work a sense of purpose, through my family's connection to the craft of sewing, while learning something that was important to their way of life.

As other members of my family became aware that I had picked up sewing, I was flooded with stories and memories of other previous generations of women in my family doing the same. Friends reached out to tell me how they also learned to sew and about memories of their mothers and grandmothers teaching them to sew. This newfound act of sewing created a connection between myself, my family, and even my friends. Learning these skills on my own has created a reconnection with these people that has enriched my work as an artist, allowing me to integrate the memories of my family into my work. This connection is also important because it has made me see the ability the material has to create a relatable experience for the viewer.

Growing up, having two parents who worked all week meant that fun family time was relegated to the weekend. Many of my childhood Saturdays were spent playing in the living room inside of haphazardly hung blankets in our living room with several piles of pillows from the couch and bedrooms. The memories of making these forts are some of the most vivid from my childhood. These pillow/blanket forts were comfortable, tactile experiences that gave me a way to make the ordinary objects around me become extraordinary. This also created a separate, interior environment that I could go into and feel relaxed. Little did I know, this was the first time I had any sense of my ability to alter an object in three-dimensional space and served as a critical learning tool that has shaped how I arrange textile works in a space today. When I began working with fabric, I saw the potential it had to become large enough to move the viewer through space, while also maintaining tactility to draw the viewer in to examine it, not unlike the forts. *Connecting Thread* is heavily inspired by those forts in hopes of connecting the viewer with the past. It also creates an association with childhood memories that relate to the child-like “want” to touch the objects we care for or covet, which can also be associated with the viewer’s “want” to touch soft fabrics.

Wrapping up in a favorite blanket or making a pillow fort are ways that children attempt to comfort themselves or “escape reality.” While these uses for textiles are acceptable for children, they are still sometimes practiced in adulthood in a different way. Adults will wrap up in a favorite blanket on a slow weekend morning or sleep on multiple pillows just like they did when they were little. Adults also use objects of comfort when dealing with stress or mental illness. Because childhood memories stay ingrained into our adulthood, this act of enveloping ourselves in fabric is familiar and still comforting. The use of fabric in this work is partially meant to evoke that same sense of nostalgia.

My prior work as an artist focused on two-dimensional media, but I eventually found myself interested in how two-dimensional work could break the flatness of the picture plane. I experimented with this concept for a while by creating high relief works, small conceptually related sculptures, and installations as a means of making my paintings come off the wall. Working with these three-dimensional forms gave the viewer a more physical interaction with the work and took the physical requirements from my painting background into my three-dimensional pieces that later became a key part of how this body of work was made. It has provided me with a connection between painting and sculpture through the dyeing of the fabric and how I compose the different colors together.

My appreciation for the materials and the processes related to textiles has manifested in this body of work through the lens of my visual art and my family background. Material choice within *Connecting Thread* has become a personal connection that I've made between the work and myself. What began as a link to my previous visual art background and the manipulation of a new material has grown into an individual theme about my family's relationship to that material.

## CHAPTER II: TEXTILES IN ART HISTORY AND INFLUENCES

In the art world, textiles (as a medium) have traditionally been associated with the feminine because of its history as a leisurely, domestic hobby or a means to make utilitarian articles of clothing, bedding, and home decor. Around the 1960's, sculpture began to take a sharp turn from the bronze cast and carved stone works made primarily by male artists. Female artists began to emerge in the art world working in materials like plastics, foam, and textiles. These new sculptures created a stark contrast compared to works made previously. In both the gender of the artist and their material choice, the conversations surrounding these types of work changed. More "traditional," sculptural materials became associated with the masculine artists that used them prior to the shift in the 1960's. Materials that yielded more easily to physical pressure, such as textiles, were gendered as feminine.

Textiles have the same ability to move the viewer through space as any other material, but artists working in textiles must decide whether or not to engage with its historical beginnings. In *Connecting Thread*, I have both accepted and departed from the feminine context of my materials. In some ways I am using the history of sewing and textiles as a means to relate it to the viewer, but I also subvert it by using it to create abstract sculpture. With that in mind, these pieces are still referencing their utility and the notions of "wrapping up, keeping warm, sleep and comfort..." while engaging with the viewer in a way that textiles typically don't (Maharaj, 48.). Since learning to work with fabric, I have enjoyed the contradiction of its use as a sculptural

material. These works are not simply meant to be framed or placed in the home like the needlework made by my grandmothers, but rather to transform the space they inhabit.

My choice of fabric as a material highlights an undercurrent theme about material equality throughout my work. As a female artist working in a domestic process, I find myself drawn to the works of 20th and 21st century female artists working in this medium. Sheila Hicks's large-scale weavings and fiber-based sculptures interact with gallery space in a way that almost negates their feminine material history. Her large works command attention while still expressing the nuances of their base materials and processes. Her suspended works and her use of scale have influenced my own in making large textile sculptures. Magdalena Abakanowicz's suspended weavings titled *Abakans*, like Hicks's works, have influenced how my flat pieces can suspend in space, which can be seen in *Love. Deteriorate. Repair.* [PLATE 6] and *Threadbare* [PLATE 14]. Abakanowicz's stuffed *Embryology* sculptures have also been an inspiration for my use of stacked, stuffed forms such as *Cushion Pile* [PLATE 5]. The way Abakanowicz directed the viewer through the gallery space with these large soft sculptures is a great inspiration for both how I want the viewer to interact with the larger works and how the soft material can be as impactful as traditional sculptural materials. Artists such as Hicks and Abakanowicz, along with my family's textile background, have shaped how I use fabric to explore the theme of memory.

### CHAPTER III

#### CONCEPTS AND MATERIALS

My work as a painter focused heavily on the physical act of mark making that is often seen in the works of Abstract Expressionist painters. Dyeing, sewing, and the installation of these pieces requires a similar sort of action. The hand of the artist can be visible in the sewing, dyeing, and embroidery of fabric in the same way that it can be visible in the brush strokes of a painting. Much like paint is applied to canvas, I layer hand-dyed fabrics and embroidery with materials, such as wood, to add a hard component to fabric.

The wood and concrete, within some of the pieces, is used as a contrasting “traditional” sculptural material. Wood and concrete are not typically used to make quilts or pillows, but allow there to be a dialogue between the sometimes-contrasting materials as they come together in a piece. Wood and concrete are purposefully meant to be small components to the fabric-based sculptures. The fabric is the bulk of the piece which minimizes the perceived importance of “traditional” or “masculine” quality of the harder materials.

Some of the pieces within this work have been intentionally deteriorated to mimic the way fabrics can become tattered and worn over time. This happens when we love a blanket or article of clothing so much that we use it to the point that the piece begins to fall apart. This is another layer of my work that references childhood themes like the blanket a child clings to because of its coziness and familiarity despite it having holes from being “over-loved.” One way of dealing with deteriorating fabrics is to mend them. This act can also be seen as an act of caring

through the repairing of something that has been loved into disrepair. The “mending” in these works is accentuated with thread to strongly contrast the colors of the fabric and to draw the viewer’s eye to the spots of wear and restoration. The acts of deterioration and mending are meant to act as signs that the fabric is being touched and loved through those repairs. This can be seen in the large fabric piece titled *Love. Deteriorate. Repair.* [PLATE 6] in which the thin, fragile fabric has pink thread haphazardly repairing the holes throughout the piece.

Textiles are typically infused with warm memories relating to the person that made the item or to the comfort felt when physically wrapping up in the item. While I have many good memories of my family, a rift has grown between myself and various parts of my family over time. Considering this as I made this work has imbued many of the pieces with a quality of sadness, either through gesture or the tattered quality of some of the fabrics used. Similarly to how one may try to heal their fractured family relationship, I have stitched these works as an attempt to mend some of the holes in fabric.

*Disparate Softness* [PLATE 1] uses scraps of fabric and wood together. This grouping acts as evidence of process. The thread and fabric are taken from the other pieces in this body of work. These materials are layered together to create another instance of combining dissimilar materials in way that that alters how the viewer perceives them. The way the wood is treated alongside the fabric and thread makes it appear much softer than it is normally seen. The scraps also create a reliquary of cast-off components that were used in the act of making the work. There is a sentimental quality to keeping these tiny pieces that would usually be thrown away. Much like the “loved” quality of the tattered and repaired fabric pieces, keeping these discarded materials displays a level of loving something so much that we can’t let go of it.



In *Connecting Thread*, material choice acts as a means of driving home the concepts of personal connection, material hierarchy, and the significance of memory. All of these materials and processes come together cohesively while also highlighting their perceived differences. As mentioned previously, the fabric in these works is used to illicit the memories of the viewer through atypical sculptural materials within the art historical material hierarchy. By having the fabric be the overwhelming material used, it asserts a new importance of existence throughout this body of work.

### *Disparate Softness*

One of the first works the viewer encounters upon entering the gallery is a grouping of wood, fabric, and thread wall sculptures. These are examples of the way combining materials that are considered disparate, such as wood and fabric, can alter the viewer's perception of the materials. The treatment of wood in these works and their proximity to the fabric gives the wood a soft quality not usually associated with a hard, traditional, sculptural material.



*Disparate Softness*

Wood, thread, and fabric

36" x 4" x 36"

[PLATE 1]



*Disparate Softness* (detail)

Wood, thread, and fabric

36" x 4" x 36"

[PLATE 2]

## *Woven*

The blanket in this piece has holes where the thread has been pulled out from its structure. Basket reed is woven in place of thread as an attempt to repair the blanket. This work speaks to both the use of contrasting materials within many of the other works and to the act of repairing something that has been worn into disrepair.



*Woven*

Found blanket, fabric dye, and basket reed

60" x 24" x 4"

[PLATE 3]

## *Comfort*

*Comfort* is the first piece displayed in the main room of the gallery. This sculpture is made from a found blanket with a large piece of concrete in the middle. The color and gesture of the blanket makes the work have a sad quality, which relates to the sadness one may feel experiencing a rift in their family. The title references that lack of comfort the blanket now has when combined with the concrete.



*Comfort*

found blanket, fabric dye, and concrete

36" x 36" x 6"

[PLATE 4]



### *Cushion Pile*

This work is a pile of hand-dyed and stuffed soft sculptures that references pillow forts from my childhood. *Cushion Pile* is inviting to the viewer because of its plush appearance, but its existence in the gallery creates a sense of caution around actually touching it. It contradicts the over-used quality of the works with holes and patches. Rather than being allowed to be worn and damaged, this piece creates tension due to our compulsion to touch soft objects.



*Cushion Pile*

fabric, dye, and polyfil

72" x 36" x 24"

[PLATE 5]

*Love. Deteriorate. Repair.*

This large suspended textile sculpture creates interior space that the viewer could walk into. The form has an overhang that references pillow and blanket forts from my childhood. The holes and brightly colored stitches that appear to be repairing them connect to the eventual damage that occurs in over-used or “over-loved” blankets and the act of trying to preserve them through stitching the holes. The thread used to stitch up the holes are shades of neon pink. The bright color is meant to draw the viewer’s eye to the attempts to repair the fabric.



*Love. Deteriorate. Repair.*

fabric, dye, and thread

96" x 48" x 36"

[PLATE 6]



*Love. Deteriorate. Repair. (detail)*

fabric, dye, and thread

96" x 48" x 36"

[PLATE 7]



### *Mend and Discard*

This work takes on the most literal representation of some of the themes throughout this exhibition. The blue textile-based sculpture sits on the pedestal the same way it would look if it were discarded by its owner. Similar to *Love. Deteriorate. Repair.*, this piece has brightly colored thread over some of the holes in the fabric. There is a combination of the theme of over-use and repair and the theme of neglect of previously loved blankets.



*Mend and Discard*

fabric, dye, and thread

36" x 48" x 36"

[PLATE 8]



*Mend and Discard* (detail)

fabric, dye, and thread

36" x 48" x 36"

[PLATE 9]



*At the Seams*

Loose threads and seams are common in blankets and other fabric-based objects of comfort that deteriorate over time. *At the Seams* is a wall-based sculpture that brings the viewer's eye to these spots of wear and tear in the fabric. The frays in the fabric and the sun-bleached quality of the dye imply



*At the Seams*

fabric, dye, and thread

36" x 42" x 3"

[PLATE 10]



*At the Seams*

fabric, dye, and thread

36" x 42" x 3"

[PLATE 11]

### *Blanket Bundles*

When blankets and other bed linens are not in use, they are usually folded and put away in a linen closet. These stacks of fabric and concrete reference the act of folding an overwhelming number of blankets and sheets. The concrete acts as a contrasting material, specifically as mortar for bricks. In this work, bricks are replaced by blankets. This combination of material takes the historically feminine task of folding blankets and juxtaposes it with the typically masculine job of laying bricks. While these tasks require different materials, the act of stacking and being aware of structure is used in both.





*Blanket Bundles*

fabric, found blankets and sheets, concrete, steel rod armature

48" x 36" x 36"

[PLATE 12]



*Blanket Bundles (detail)*

fabric, found blankets and sheets, concrete, steel rod armature

48" x 36" x 36"

[PLATE 13]

### *Threadbare*

Geometric patterns are common in quilting. The triangles in this piece come together the way they would be sewn for a quilt top, but do not create the traditional rectangle of a quilt. The large negative spaces between the triangles are yet another display of how a blanket or quilt can be damaged through time, use, and neglect. The use of wood within this piece is another example of contrasting materials. Like the wood in *Disparate Softness*, the wooden triangles take on more of the soft qualities of the fabric in the piece. The title of this work references the loose threads hanging from it. Much like *At the Seams*, the loose threads relate to the fraying of fabric over time.





*Threadbare*

fabric, wood, and thread

72" x 48" x 60"

[PLATE 14]





*Threadbare (detail)*

fabric, wood, and thread

72" x 48" x 60"

[PLATE 15]



*Connecting Thread* (installation view)

[PLATE 16]



*Connecting Thread* (installation view)

[PLATE 17]



*Connecting Thread* (installation view)

## CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION

*Connecting Thread* has created a relationship with my family background that I had not previously explored. Through the act of making, I have found myself engaging with my own memories of the women in my family. Learning to sew has allowed me to have discussions with them, as well as my friends' families, about the activities of previous generations of women.

While focusing on mundane, domestic processes and objects, this work explores how the viewer can connect with an ordinary object displayed outside of a domestic space. By bringing these materials into a gallery setting, they gain a new context that elevates their importance as a fine art material.

This work uses fabric and thread to discuss the link between materials and memory. As the viewers experience the work, they are asked to draw a connection to their childhood and the objects of comfort in their lives. These sculptures resonate memories of the blankets and pillows that we find comforting in all phases of our lives.

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## VITA

Christen Parker was born in Monroe, Louisiana where she received her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree with a double emphasis in Graphic Design and Painting from the University of Louisiana Monroe in December 2013. Following her BFA, she began making small sculptures and installations to compliment her two-dimensional work.

During her time as a Master of Fine Arts candidate with an emphasis in Sculpture at the University of Mississippi, Christen worked with many materials and processes including cast metals, resin, plaster, wood, and fabric. She has been featured in national juried and group exhibitions in Arizona, Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee. In the Summer of 2017 she studied abroad in Ballyvaughn, County Clare, Ireland at the Burren College of Art through the University of Colorado Denver.

Following her Master of Fine Arts, Christen plans to continue her exploration of soft materials in both sculpture and painting. She is currently living in Oxford, Mississippi with her cat Olive.