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“Weavings of War, Fabric of Memory,” an exhibit review

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Exhibit Review

Weavings of War, Fabrics of Memory. Produced through the collaboration of City Lore, the Michigan State University Museum, and the Vermont Folklife Center. Curated by Ariel Zeitlin Cooke, with consulting curators Marsha MacDowell and Steve Zeitlin. This traveling exhibit appeared at the Vermont Folklife Center, Middlebury, VT (March 4–June 4, 2005); Erie Art Museum, Erie, PA, (June 18–September 18, 2005); Design Gallery, University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI (October 8–December 11, 2005); Michigan State University Museum, East Lansing, MI (January 22–August 13, 2006); Puffin Gallery, New York, NY (September 5–October 15, 2006); Institute for Community Research, Hartford, CT (October 27, 2006–January 15, 2007); University Galleries, Dorothy P. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, FL, (February 9–April 11, 2007); San Jose Museum of Quilts and Textiles, San Jose, CA, (July 17–September 23, 2007); Alliance for Varied Arts, Thatcher-Young Mansion, Logan, UT (October 5–December 1, 2007). A Web site documenting the exhibit is now available on the Internet at <http://www.citylore.org/wow/index.html>.

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Weavings of War, Fabrics of Memory is an exhibition of international textiles spanning a number of countries and ethnic/linguistic groups. Bound together by the themes of war, armed conflict, displacement, and rupture, works in the exhibit include post-apartheid South African memory cloths, Hmong story cloths, *arpilleras* from Chile and Peru, and war rugs from Central Asia. I brought the exhibit to Logan, Utah, in the fall of 2007 and organized lectures and films around it. It was displayed at the Thatcher-Young Mansion, the final stop on its three-year tour. An exhibit catalogue of the same title was edited by Ariel Zeitlin Cooke and

Marsha MacDowell (Michigan State University Press, 2005) and contains essays by Zeitlin Cooke, MacDowell, James E. Young, and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, as well as artist profiles.

What makes the pieces in this exhibit unique is that their iconography features modern warfare and violence particular to their regions of origin. Scenes of executions and ethnic cleansings, as well as military motifs such as tanks, grenades, and helicopters are woven, stitched, or embroidered into fabric. Hmong-embroidered textiles, for example, illustrate in brightly colored threads villagers being massacred by Pathét Lao soldiers. One portion of a South African memory cloth shows a person being “necklaced”—that is, set on fire by placing a burning tire around the neck. In U.S. contexts, perhaps the most politically charged objects are the 9/11 rugs, although they are not the exhibit’s primary focus. 9/11 rugs are usually made in Afghanistan or Pakistan and depict the 2001 attack on the World Trade Center. As Zeitlin Cooke observes in the exhibition catalogue, the rugs emerged on the international market only a few months after the World Trade Center was destroyed (p. 61). One rug displayed in the exhibit is set in red, white, and blue colors and shows each Twin Tower with an airplane crashing into it, sending out dust or flames. A helicopter rests atop one building. The U.S. and Afghanistan flags are depicted side by side in the middle; a dove of peace rests along the bottom by the letters “USA.” At the top is woven “11 September in 2001.” The other rug is similar, but specifically identifies the airplanes as “American” and “USA.” It also includes the words, “The Terrors were in America.” All of the displayed items draw on traditional textile methods to illustrate modern theaters of terror.

The exhibit demonstrates how the textiles function as documentaries to record the experiences of ordinary people. The curators smartly

frame the objects as survivor stories, rendered in pictures instead of words. They do not represent the perspective of the military, social elites, or the literati but rather the perspective of a sector of society that otherwise is denied access to public forums—displaced, largely poor, semiliterate or nonliterate women and men. The 9/11 rugs are not strictly documentary, but they also can be understood as survivor stories. According to collector Kevin Sudeith (personal communication), the sources for these rugs are not direct experiences but rather U.S. military propaganda. During the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, pamphlets were airdropped onto the countryside, and images were used to explain the reasons for the attack. As Sudeith documents on his Web site (<http://warrug.com/>), some of the images were then incorporated into an older tradition of war rugs that had been in existence since the Soviet invasion (see also the exhibit catalogue). The new, post-9/11 rugs draw on internationally mediated, militarized images, allowing the Afghani people to tell their own version of global events and recontextualize 9/11 from the perspective of those living in its aftermath in the Middle East.

Many war textiles were created at the urging of international relief workers by people living in refugee camps. Following Western impulses to document and record refugee experiences, workers encouraged those displaced by war to record their stories in cloth. By suggesting that women document atrocities in a public form, workers introduced a discourse of international human rights into textile making. This is particularly true for South African memory cloths, which flourished under the post-apartheid government. Whereas war textiles from other regions reflect conflict between nations or groups, the memory cloths depict the “individual and community struggles of those living under apartheid and their ongoing battle for equal rights,” MacDowell and Marit Dewhurst observe in their chapter in the catalogue (pp. 80–1), and the cloths are usually part of organized governmental or relief efforts by outsiders.

Relief workers also introduced an economic component into textile making by encouraging refugees to sell war textiles for cash. Textiles have always been made for sale, but relief work-

ers aided women by making their work available in the international marketplace, transforming documentary records into global commodities. As Cook observes in her chapter in the catalogue (pp. 59–62; see also Angelica Pence, “War’s Warp and Weft: Afghan Weavers Incorporate Battle Scenes, World Trade Center Attacks into Tribal Rugs,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 12, 2004), many weavers are less interested in making a political statement than a product. The curators, for example, interviewed Afghan weaver Michgan Hozain, who learned to weave war rugs in a refugee camp in Northern Pakistan. She weaves war rugs—including 9/11 rugs—because they sell. In the catalogue, she is quoted as saying that “We sold the [war] rugs in the bazaar to the people, commanders, for example, who were coming from foreign countries at that time” (p. 61). Hence, personal narratives rendered in cloth become embedded in transnational contexts of commodification and consumption, of human rights discourses, and of the media, complicating these survivor stories and rendering the personal as global.

In addition to the individual pieces, the exhibit itself also is an example of what Jack Santino would call an “assemblage,” a product in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts (*Signs of War and Peace: Social Conflict and the Use of Public Symbols in Northern Ireland*, Palgrave, 2001). There are, of course, no “natural” connections between the objects, which come from all corners of the world. Rather, by drawing together geographically and temporally disparate works within a single framework, the exhibit suggests relationships and produces new meanings. A first meaning produced is a global sense of belonging, based on gender, violence, and economics. Not all the textiles are made by women, but many of the pieces in the exhibit are. Many of the exhibit organizers were women as well, linking women to war and terror through the visual arts. Further, the pieces are made to be sold, suggesting a transnational and gendered sense of collectivity based on a twin relationship of violence and economic need.

The *Weavings of War* exhibit rekeys experiences of terror. It groups objects according to national and ethnic identities, but each conflict

is linked contiguously to the next within the exhibit space. This is particularly important for the 9/11 rugs, which are but one of a series of items depicting terror and which resituate the attacks from a national issue to a transnational one. Here, the World Trade Center events become recontextualized as a single episode in a global experience of terror that takes many forms and in which everyone is a potential participant.

The exhibit is also about art, and this should not be overlooked. The pieces are not merely documents, traditional ethnic items, or simple commodities; they are aesthetic, tactile objects meant to be touched. Further, the focus on textiles establishes gender as a theme of the exhibit. As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett discusses in the catalogue, cloth is normally associated with women; it also is associated with safety and comfort, bringing forth images of softness, warmth, and even love. The exhibit rekeys these associations, linking narratives of violence to media that, because they are gendered female, normally signify the safety and comforts of home: embroidery, appliqué, and weaving.

Perhaps most importantly, the exhibit provoked powerful responses from the audience. Meanings differ from place to place and from individual to individual; yet, the exhibit also was shown during the mounting crisis in Iraq. As a result, it must also be understood not only as a reflection of the global nature of warfare but also as an example of the use of the arts to comment on and reframe U.S. military engagement by encouraging Americans to rethink their country's own position on the war on ter-

ror. By viewing the exhibit, the audience is drawn into a relationship with artists they have never met and events they have never experienced to construct new affiliations and contexts of belonging. In Logan, Utah, the audience's reaction was overwhelming. Below are some of the responses written in the guest book by people who had viewed the show:

"Thought provoking—it makes you admire the ability of people to continue on and rebuild their lives."

"A wonderfully moving exhibit. Thank you."

"Powerful, awe-inspiring, extremely thought-provoking."

"What an amazing and sad story these people tell through their art. Thank you."

"Beauty and sadness. Great exhibition."

Weavings of War, Fabrics of Memory is a difficult, complex exhibit that touches on important themes and operates at a number of differing levels to connect object and consumer—as well as artist, curator, and audience—through narratives based on displacement, uprootedness, violence, and terror. The issues of displacement and belonging intersect with the global market and consumerism, international rights and social justice, the mass media, and the subjectivity of gender. The exhibit makes clear that art is not something added onto "real" or "everyday" life but rather an essential act and practice. *Weavings of War, Fabrics of Memory* is one of the finest examples of the kind of work that our discipline can accomplish, and its organizers should be proud. The rest of us should consider it a model work.