Connecting Threads

A Look at Contemporary Craft Artists

By:
Bernadette Lajtman

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Abstract

Textile-based craft has historically been considered women's work and has had strong ties with ideas of femininity and traditional gender roles. Artists have interacted with these associations in a variety of ways from using them in political protest for women's rights, to works challenging social norms and beyond. *Connecting Threads* explores the ways in which contemporary craft intersects with modern ideas and discourses of feminism and queerness; how contemporaries are using craft to explore these ideas if at all. This project examines this through the lens of three exhibiting artists and their work, placing them amongst other contemporary craft exhibitions and the historical backgrounds of feminist and queer art.

Connecting Threads Curatorial Essay

As a woman with only granddaughters, my grandmother revelled in being able to teach her girls the basics of sewing and knitting. I remember sitting around her kitchen table in summer with my cousins, pricking ourselves trying to sew a button onto a scrap of fabric. Most of us left the crafts at my grandmother's, not continuing to practice and leaving those scraps and three rows of knitted work unfinished. In adulthood, however, a few of us have taken up crafting practices again. One has gifted hand embroidered napkins to her mother, another started making scarves for her friends; I myself took up sewing in my teens and began crocheting as an adult. Many friends around me interestingly took up these crafts in adulthood as well, friends who are very queer and do not fall into what would be considered a traditionally female identity. Others of our group who were staunchly against things deemed traditionally feminine due to growing up with strict gendered expectations, ended up taking up various "feminine" craft hobbies on their own.

Much of what I do now was not from my grandmother's lessons but through online tutorials and message boards, mainly in overwhelmingly queer spaces. The techniques used by both of us are the same, and perhaps even the motivations are still the same – to create something functional and pretty for myself or for loved ones- but what was being expressed and how it was being shared are what differs. She expressed herself while I expressed myself, each in our own ways. My grandmother grew up in Poland in the 1940s. They did not have much, so learning to knit, sew, embroider, and darn from the women of her family was a necessity. These were important life skills for her, but as the collection of doilies, table runners, and tea placemats she has distributed to different family members shows, much of it was also a form of expression and artistic skill. The works produced by the women of my family, and many other families, were

never shown in a gallery space and often get written off by both as either frivolous feminine hobby or as tools of women's oppression, representing women's roles as homemakers and domestic labourers.[1] This dismissal is exactly what feminist and queer artists have utilized in the past to comment on social issues faced by women and the queer community. There has been a notable rise in interest towards DIY and crafting seen in the last twenty years[2] -especially in the pandemic years- and a diversity in subject matter that in some works appear to move away from feminist and queer issues. With this I wonder how the contemporary Canadian craft community is interacting with feminism and queerness- what this looks like now in their works.

Before discussing the show, *Connecting Threads*, we must establish definitions of key terms. Craft is an extremely broad term that refers to a wide range of skills and practices from metal smithing to ceramics and beyond. Craft in its most basic definition refers to an occupation, trade, or activity requiring manual dexterity or artistic skill.[3] Despite the broadness, these ideas of craft are still very limiting and frankly outdated. After all, has craft ever truly been purely about production? Without its own point of view and artistic vision? Even when looking at the work done by my female ancestors their carefully designed embellishments, the patterns in their crocheted yarn, and selections of colours suggest a vision and consideration for design. Why should that not count as art or be considered less than? Looking at a more modern idea of craft, there is an attempt to rectify the broadness, categorizing craft further into craft-as business versus craft-as-art, versus craft-as-hobby as outlined by Bruce Metcalf. For Metcalf "craft is a cultural construction,"[4] meaning what craft is considered to be (a profession, a hobby, as style) is based

[1] Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2010) xii.
[2] Valerie Cassel Oliver, *HAND + MADE* (Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 2010) 8.
[3] *Merriam-Webster,* s.v. "craft," website.
[4] Bruce Metcalf. "Contemporary Craft: A Brief Overview." In *Exploring Contemporary Craft*. (Canada: Coach House Books, 2000): 13.

on cultural perception. Craft, for the purposes of this project, refers to specifically textile-based craft: crafting practices that involve the creating or embellishing of textiles such as weaving, sewing, crocheting, knitting, or embroidering. Craft art will likewise in this discussion mean art that is made from or heavily features textile-based craft practices.

As we are looking at craft art in a feminist and queer context, we should also define what those mean. Feminism is a political and social movement and ideology centered around women's rights and combating women's oppression.[5] When speaking to periods of feminism, it is often categorized in "waves" with the first wave generally referring to activity from the late 1800's until the early 1930s with a focus on women's rights to property, education, and voting abilities.[6] The second wave of feminism started in the late 1960s and ended around the early 1980s.[7] It was part of a larger civil rights movement in North America that focused on establishing women's rights in the workplace, economic rights, and challenging social views on women's roles, sexualities, and capabilities.[8] The third wave started in the mid 1990s[9] and continues to today. It is characterized by a centering of intersectionality and a rejection of unity or universal statements in favour of personal narratives.[10] Queer refers to people who exist outside the social convention of cis-hetero society, meaning people who live, practice, and participate in gender and sexuality expressions in ways that differ from what is the majority norm.[11] Craft, Feminism, and Queer are all terms that seem simple by their first definitions but that have large histories of use and a host of differing connotations. To some "craft" denotes something to be of lesser artistic merit, lesser

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[5] "Feminism: The Second Wave," National Women's History Museum, June 18, 2020, website.
Margaret Walters, *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 1-3.
[6] "Feminism: The First Wave," National Women's History Museum, April 5, 2021, website.
[7] "Feminism: The Second Wave," National Women's History Museum, June 18, 2020, website
[8] Ibid.
[9] R. Claire Snyder, "What Is Third-Wave Feminism? A New Directions Essay." *Signs* 34, no. 1 (2008): 176.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Mimi Marinucci, *Feminism Is Queer: The Intimate Connection Between Queer and Feminist Theory* (London: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2010) xvii-xxiii.

value. Feminism or calling someone a feminist gets used as a minimizing insult to belittle women speaking about gender-based issues. Queer was and is in many spaces a derogatory slur with even some people within the community not wishing to be associated with it. All of these hold deep and complex histories as well as nuanced contemporary spaces. It is important to speak about craft in these frameworks as amongst crafts' connotations is the cultural assumption of being women's work. It is a hobby for women, it is their job as a domestic skill. These ideas place craft in an interesting spot to be used by artists. Some artists may engage with the gender roles and ideas of traditional life associated with craft to express queer themes, playing with gender presentation and expectation. Meanwhile others might use craft for its association with women to speak through feminist issues.

When I first learned to crochet, my main resources had been online video tutorials which were largely about crocheting baby blankets and baby clothes. The first sweater I made was from a pattern called "Dapper Dad Pullover," perfect for your husband, boyfriend, or even father this Father's Day.[12] The first time I used crochet in an artwork was for a sculptural series called the *Miracle of Life* (2020) that spoke to my feelings around abortion bans and forced carrying. Craft's overlap with queer and feminist discourses has been of interest for a while and *Connecting Threads* serves as a culmination of that interest and a deeper look at contemporary craft artists.

The exhibition *Connecting Threads* was shown at OCAD U's Graduate Gallery in Toronto and ran from February 22nd to the 28th. The show explored the work of contemporary Ontario based textile craft artists as they navigate current ideas surround feminism, queerness, and identity through mediums that have had strong ties to feminist and queer movements. The

[12] Michelle Moore, "Dapper Dad Pullover," Sentrybox Designs. 2020.

exhibition showcased works in weaving, embroidery, and quilting, all media that have historically had strong connotations of being women's work[13] and that conjure images of the trope of traditional family and gender roles.[14] Each of the artists featured are contemporary emerging or early-stage artists reflecting the contemporary craft scene- in Canada at least. Each artist works in their own medium and uses their art to speak on a variety of different topics: memory, addiction, domestic violence, personal health both physical and mental, community, and collective action all in addition to feminist and queer themes. *Connecting Threads* exhibited the works of Elycia SFA, Bill Stearman, and Veronica Spiljak- all three come from different backgrounds and different practices but all are contemporary craft artists. Their works provide us with some interesting perspectives to compare with other contemporary craft artists.

Craft, even narrowed down to textile-based craft, encompasses a lot of media, and with that it can be an avenue to explore a lot of meanings. This is exemplified by the diversity of the contemporary craft art scene as seen in some recent exhibitions. Ontario based exhibitions that have recently looked at contemporary craft were put on by XSPACE gallery and the Textile Museum of Canada in Toronto. *Mending the Craft: Sustainability in Contemporary Textiles* (2023), *Ascension of Abundance* (2023) and *Simone Elizabeth Saunders: u-n-i-t-y* (2022-2023) were craft-based shows that featured contemporary artists in a range of craft mediums speaking to different topics. *Mending the Craft: Sustainability in Contemporary Textiles* (2023) was a group exhibition curated by Cecily Ou where in the artists worked together to create a group study investigating contemporary art's relationship with sustainability, the works on display were the end products of their investigations.[15] *Ascension of Abundance* curated by Natalie King,

[13] Julia Bryan-Wilson, The Fray: Art + Textile Politics (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 8-9.
[14] Valerie Cassel Oliver, *HAND + MADE* (Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 2010) 6.
[15] Cecily Ou, "Mending the Craft: Sustainability in Contemporary Textiles*,"* (Toronto: XSPACE, 2023) 2. website.

featured the five artists Janine Ilya, Par Nair, Alexis Nanibush-Pamjewong, Cedar-Eve and Hau Pham who came together to showcase the ways in which they each explored speculative futures through themes of "abundance, joy, sovereignty, magic making and world-building"[16] via works that spanned embroidery, painting, and sewn mixed media works. *Simone Elizabeth Saunders: u-n-i-t-y* (2022-2023) was a solo exhibition, curated by Ryan Doherty, of Canadian artist Simone Elizabeth Saunders. The show "explored personal history, Afro-diaspora, and Black sisterhood through bold and colourful textiles."[17] Saunders' choice of hand tufted rugs as her medium is crucial to her work as she utilized the soft material not only to create contrast with the boldness of her compositions but to also challenge the "misconception of Black women as hard and angry."[18] These shows are not only displays of craft art but also show the different topics and issues that can be covered by craft. There is representation of feminist thought but also of culture, race, ecology, and social justice. One of the biggest contemporary textile craft exhibitions was *Queer Threads: Crafting, Identity and Community*, an exhibition curated by John Chaich for the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art, that looked at how queer and feminist thinking has expanded. It showcased thirty artists that each examined how important queerness is in their work, and the variety of ways that can look, and how it can intersect with other themes, similar to what we see in the Toronto shows.

On to the main show, *Connecting Threads*. Our first artist, Elycia SFA, displayed seven pieces from her series "home life/ still life," (2022) (fig 1) a collection of woven and embroidered works showing different domestic scenes. The first iteration of the series was born from the Covid-19 lockdowns during which everyone was required to isolate themselves at

[16] Natalie King, "Ascension of Abundance*,"* (Toronto: XSPACE, 2023) 1. website.
[17] Ryan Doherty, "Simone Elizabeth Sanders: U-n-i-t-y," Textile Museum of Canada, 2022, website.
[18] Ibid.

home. Elycia's initial series depicted locations around her apartment placing the work in a very clear time not just by the actual contents of the work (home life/ still life #2 depicts the masks we all had to wear)[19] but also in the way the space was shown. The peeks into aspects of Elycia's home feel almost voyeuristic and isolating given how many of the images were oriented off centre. The framing of furniture and use of lines to separate the space create little pockets, windows into Elycia's life and what would become her whole world in the lockdowns. The last few years (2020-2024) have had, and will continue to have, a massive impact on people, their mental health, physical health, and on their ability to create meaningful connection and community. In the second iteration, which was displayed in *Connecting Threads*, Elycia drew from images sent in response to a global call for submissions, this time capturing the places their senders felt safe and comforted, asking of the submitters "what space makes you feel safe?"[20] While these are images of places in different locations and cultures (some came from Melbourne, Copenhagen, Lethbridge) the domestic scenes read as strikingly familiar, with the comfort of home being translated to the viewer in the almost dream like quality of the weaving and the abstracted forms captured in the embroidery (fig 2-4). There is a commonality to be found despite the larger perceived differences. Elycia in her work explores personal narrative, memory, nostalgia, and loss[21] all things that are broadly applicable but are especially relevant to feminist and queer discussions.

For Elycia as a queer artist who creates art dealing with her personal life or that comes from a personal place, even if her work is not explicit in its queer themes and iconography it is still queer. Elycia is one of many contemporary queer artists challenging and broadening what

[19] Elycia SFA, *home life/ still life #2* (2021) website.
[20] Elycia SFA, "home life/ still life" Artist Statement (2022) website.
[21] Elycia SFA, *Artist Bio*, Connecting Threads 2023.

we see as queer art. Looking to the artists Nathan Vincent, or Shelia Pope, there are many ways queerness can be expressed in art. Vincent explores ideas of masculinity and gender in his work by taking a material first approach. His work *Locker Room* (2011) showcased a yarn locker room complete with showers, urinals, and a bench.[22] The work speaks to ideas of masculinity as contrasted with the feminine associated material. When reflecting on his work Vincent has an interest in what he makes and why it elicits the response it gets. Is it due to the medium itself or the medium's gender-based connotations combined with what he produces with it?[23] While the work itself is not necessarily specifically about being gay, it is a place and perspective he himself states he likely wouldn't have gone to had he not been a gay man.[24] Other artists like Shelia Pope speak to how craft is not necessarily inherently queer or feminist, but like any artistic avenue is "a metaphorical device that can bring history forward"[25] she discusses how crocheting is queer yes, but it also speaks to class, to race, and how those intersect.[26] Pope's inspiration comes from a class and ethnic point where she speaks of her "Italian-American mother in New Jersey who was probably sitting next to the Black, Jewish, and Armenian-American mothers, all teaching their kids how to crochet."[27] Her work *Girders and Fence* (2005) captures New York in an abstracted cityscape,[28] the abstraction is key to the work as it is what allows for Pope to speak to more than a queer or feminist viewpoint. Pope says of abstraction; "you can't represent until you learn to look abstractedly. It was important to show an abstract work in *Queer Threads* within

[22] John Chaich and Todd Oldham, *Queer Threads: Crafting Identity and Community* (Los Angeles, California: Ammo, 2017) 2.
[23] Chaich and Oldham, *Queer Threads: Crafting Identity and Community* (Los Angeles, California: Ammo, 2017) 124-125.
[24] Chaich, *Queer Threads* (2017) 124-125.
[25] Ibid. 148-149.
[26] Ibid.
[27] John Chaich and Todd Oldham, *Queer Threads: Crafting Identity and Community* (Los Angeles, California: Ammo, 2017) 149.
[28] Ibid. 66-67.

this conversation of LGBTQ people. It's a point of empowerment to simultaneously touch on local issues as well as those beyond the exhibition."[29] *Girders and Fence* (2005) is as much about the cultural and ethnic connections of New York as it is about the different classes, queer connections or about feminism, these all blur and connect together.

Even without the use of explicit iconography at its roots Elycia's work is queer. This series is a moment of cultural exchange as well as a moment of understanding. Those who submitted come from different cities, different countries, but all of their comfort places contain images of the home. Elycia's work brings the private comfort of home to the public and asks us to engage. We can put ourselves in these settings and in a way know the respective residents without even seeing them. While Elycia's work may differ from someone like Bill Stearman's projects in the lack of direct political message, Elycia's perspective on the queerness of her work falls in line with contemporary understandings and artists. While craft, queerness, and queer art mean something different to each artist, Stearman, Elycia, and the artists of *Queer Threads*- Nathan Vincent and Shelia Pope- share interest in depicting life and human connection. What makes this shared trait queer is that each artist is queer, therefore their perspective through which they are working and looking at the world is a queer one. Many of the artists use craft to intersect a wide array of topics, showing that contemporary craft is as multifaceted as ever.

The ways in which craft art is able to be integrated and expanded upon is seen in Veronica Spiljak's work *can there be softness, without comfort?* (2022) (fig 5). Spiljak, a Mississauga based artist currently completing her MFA at York University, utilized a kitchen set for two with embroidered text on two sheer curtains hung behind it. The curtains framed the video component of the work which was a window projected onto the shut curtain of the

[29] Ibid. 149.

gallery's window. The piece could be listened to and watched when sitting at the table, visitors encouraged to step in and immerse themselves in the work to see "what goes on behind closed doors."[30] Instead of the couple assumed to typically occupy this space, their words are left hung in the air, embroidered in blood red on sheer flesh toned curtains that evoke the pain these statements caused. The weight of these words are felt with tension created in the air not only by the back and forth of the stitched conversation but also further emphasized by the accompanying projection and audio as Spiljak speaks to someone who does not answer. *can there be softness, without comfort?* (2022) poignantly deals with themes of domesticity, substance abuse, religion, and violence. Spiljak is purposeful in her use of embroidery in this project, the sheer curtains allow for the front and back to be viewed with the rougher back of the stitching partially visible (fig 6). The delicate fabric is also prone to snagging, developing runs in the fabric that add to the beaten down look. Most of the text is stitched in red thread, with one line being a flesh tone similar to that of the curtain itself; the words are wounds and scars on the fabric. Additionally, the place settings host embroidered napkins with one instructing "don't eat. listen" while the other tells us "don't listen. eat." Spiljak is very conscious of the history of embroidery, specifically referencing women's roles in the domestic sphere and the work expected of them, making "the correlation between domestic life, feminist thought and paying homage to the historical practices of women's artistry and craft dating back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries"[31] embroidery being one of them.

Embroidery is a good example of craft's winding history as women's work and its use in feminist protest. Rozsika Parker traces the history of femininity and embroidery in her influential

[30] Veronica Spiljak, *can there be softness, without comfort?* Artist Statement, 2022.
[31] Spiljak, *can there be softness, without comfort?* Artist Statement, 2022.

work, *The Subversive Stitch.* Through her research of British embroidery we see how Victorian values and social norms have associated textile crafts with femininity.[32] While stitching has been a part of formal education for women for much longer, and many craft practices are simply practical skills needed to make clothes, the Victorian period is largely influential in its strong coupling of femininity with craft- particularly embroidery- that builds off of the association started in the Renaissance.[33] Speaking to a North American cultural mindset we see that not only is embroidery highly associated with femininity but the belief is strengthened by an idea that this is how it has always been.[34] In first wave feminist efforts like the suffragettes[35] or garment workers strikes we see craft being used in a direct political sense. Women have been expressing their opinions in their needle work for a long time,[36] however, the first wave of feminism is where a large organized collective effort is first seen. In the Abolitionist, Temperance and Suffragette demonstrations in Britain and North America, different needle craft techniques are employed to create marching banners, to be used to signify support and community, and to be used as part of political demonstration.[37] This is seen as well in the Chicago Garment Workers Strike of 1910 where, in order to protest for better working conditions, equal treatment, and

[32] Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2010), 17.
[33] Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2010), 5.
[34] Parker, *The Subversive Stitch* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2010), 17.
[35] Suffragettes refers specifically to a group focused on the right to women's vote, distinct from the larger suffragist movement. The suffragettes were largely made up of middle to upper class white women who demonstrated and took militant action for their beliefs. British Library Learning, "Suffragists vs Suffragettes: What's the difference?" *The Nellie McClung Foundation,* April 9, 2020. website.
[36] *The Subversive Stitch*, 12.
[37] Pristash, H., Inez Schaechterle, and Sue Carter Wood. "The Needle as the Pen: Intentionality, Needlework, and the Production of Alternative Discourses of Power," *Women and the Material Culture of Needlework & Textiles 1750-1950,* ed. Maureen Daly Goggin and Beth Fowkes Tobin. (Ashgate, 2009) 19.

better pay,[38] the girls employed as garment workers took their skills and supplies to create banners and sashes to communicate their demands.[39] Their labour and skill was to be valued.

Spiljak's interest and inspiration in feminist theory allows for a look at feminist artwork. Coming largely from the second wave, feminist art brought about discussion of exclusivity not only from the fact that women had been largely ignored and underrepresented in fine art spaces, but that art has its own hierarchy of mediums and styles that coincidentally favour male artists.[40] Artists like Judy Chicago, Faith Wilding, and Suzanne Lacy who were foundational to the feminist art movement of America's west coast, pushed for a questioning of art's role in society- was it to reflect and uphold the status quo or was it to challenge and influence societal thinking?[41] Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1974-9) is a prominent feminist work whose influence can be seen in contemporary works like Spiljak's. *The Dinner Party* (1974-9) utilized various mediums to create a large installation that physically interrupted the gallery space with domestic imagery. Around this same time the Pattern & Decoration (P&D) movement, while not explicitly about feminism, embraced aesthetics and materials from other decorative, textile craft arts like "Persian carpets, Japanese kimono designs, and American quilting traditions,"[42] and heavily featured female artists. The movement was a response in some ways to the status quo which favoured modernist,[43] minimalist,[44] and generally Eurocentric themes and aesthetics.

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[38] Mari Jo Buhle, "Socialist Women and the 'Girl Strikers,' Chicago, 1910." *Signs* 1, no. 4 (1976): 1040–41. website.
[39] Rebecca Sive-Tomashefsky, "Identifying a Lost Leader: Hannah Shapiro and the 1910 Chicago Garment Workers' Strike." *Signs* 3, no. 4 (1978): 936. website.
[40] *The Subversive Stitch*, xi, 5.
[41] Jane F. Gerhard, *The Dinner Party: Judy Chicago and the Power of Popular Feminism, 1970-2007* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013) 18.
[42] *With Pleasure: Pattern and Decoration in American Art 1972-1985*, ed. Anna Katz. (Los Angeles & New Haven: The Museum of Contemporary Art in association with Yale University Press, 2019) 18.
[43] Lynne Cooke *PATTERN RECOGNITION: LYNNE COOKE ON THE PATTERN AND DECORATION MOVEMENT*. *Artforum International*. Vol. 60. (Artforum International Magazine, Inc, 2021) 135.
[44] *With Pleasure: Pattern and Decoration in American Art 1972-1985* (2019) 20.

Pattern & Decoration artists like Miriam Shapiro and Joyce Kozloff also challenged the gallery's biases towards white male artwork. Kozloff did this through the use of non-western aesthetic inspirations like the Egyptian, Islamic, and Chinese influences in her installation "An Interior Decorated", while Shapiro's inclusion of lace, fabrics, and other items heavily associated with the domestic sphere in her collage works challenge the hierarchy of mediums.[45] *The Dinner Party* (1974-9) speaks to a goal of both of the feminist and P&D movements to up lift craft art and sculpture in the gallery as well as to diversify the gallery space which had overtly favoured white, male artists.[46] Chicago's iconic piece works as a massive sculptural installation that features prominent female historical figures with accompanying information about them (though the success of this is not without criticism).[47] While a ceramics-focused installation, Chicago's work is relevant to our discussion of textile craft as it did feature embroidered placemats at every seat. *can there be softness, without comfort?* (2022) is a contemporary work very much engaged with feminist history. Works like Chicago's serve as inspiration and a bedrock for Spiljak's piece both in formal qualities and in the theory behind it. Aspects of *The Dinner Party* (1974-9) like its references to the domestic within a gallery setting, its suggestion of and reference to figures, and of course it's use of craft in a feminist context are all seen in contemporary works like Spiljak's. Spiljak is a multimedia artist starting in performance and video work, now exploring the use of craft. As a third wave feminist artist it is interesting to see where she incorporates this second wave inspiration as it speaks to craft's continued relevance in feminist art. Her work blends together interactive installation, video and audio work, and craft. She intentionally has branched

[45] Joyce Kozloff, from "An Interior Decorated", with essays by Carrie Rickey and Peg Weiss. (New York: Tibor de Nagy Gallery, 1979) 1.
[46] Joyce Kozloff, "An Interior Decorated," (New York: Tibor de Nagy Gallery, 1979) 1.
[47] Jane F. Gerhard, *The Dinner Party: Judy Chicago and the Power of Popular Feminism, 1970-2007* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013) 11-12.

out to embroidery, because of its history with women's labour for this work while also taking it further into other discussions. The work speaks to contemporary crafts' multifaceted applicability.

The final artist of the exhibition is Bill Stearman who utilizes his quilts in his activist work as well as a form of expression. His work showcases the issues with the "hobbyist vs professional work" framework as well as how contemporary artists engage with craft's queer history. Taking up the north and east wall of the gallery space, Stearman's quilts are large, colourful, and textured each uniquely created not only in the overall design but also in the fabric choices and in the top stitching patterns. The quilts featured in *Connecting Threads* span Stearman's career and interests. The works *His Name is Clarence* (2021) (fig 7.), *Finding Comfort in Dying* (2021) (fig 8.) and *Not Drowning* (2022) (fig 9.) capture Stearman's physical and mental-health struggles and his ability to overcome them. The sharp corners and deep colours of the stripes used in *His Name is Clarence* (2021) against a soft white background, with both pointed geometric and wide curls stitched over top convey both the difficulty of Stearman's cancer diagnoses as well as his continued high spirits and playful nature through the process. Clarence is the name Stearman gave to the tumor, "it almost took over my life-and certainly did my focus. To counter that negativity, and to take away some of its power. I named my tumour Clarence."[48] *Finding Comfort in Dying* (2021) conveys its heavy subject matter through the widest variety of fabrics and textures; the smallest squares of the quilts featured used to stack on one another in square clusters. The overall dark blues of the work are cut through and intermingled with fur and feathers in oranges and olive greens, allowing for the often-horrifying subject of our own mortality to be received, not distracted from, with comfort and understanding,

[48] Bill Stearman, *His Name is Clarence,* Artist Statement (2021).

the heart shaped topstitching adding to that sense of comfort. Stearman says of this work, "I used my head and my heart to calm my emotions during the weeks that I lived with a terminal diagnosis. While calming, they also brought me to a place of comfort… I've become comfortable with the notion of dying, whenever that happens."[49] Despite a similar subject matter, *Not Drowning* (2022) is able to project a more hopeful rather than peaceful acceptance with both light and dark blue triangles dotted with gold and bronze highlights. *Not Drowning* (2022) has a much larger central bright spot than in *Finding Comfort in Dying* (2021). The effect of its pattern and the wave style stitches overlaying everything give the impression of staring up at the water's surface as you are coming up for air. "This quilt is about the feeling of NOT drowning – of floating in the light instead. I know that I will sink again. But I also know that I will again find the light and float above the darkness."[50] While both speak to difficult mental headspaces and circumstances, *Not Drowning* (2022) is able to portray action, and hope for something better where *Finding Comfort in Dying (2021)* recognizes death is inevitable, there is nothing that can really be done or fought against though in either case we don't need to fear or panic.

These deeply personal works by Stearman were book ended by *Don't Just Sit There and Take It! Make Waves!* (2023) (fig 10). and *1971: The Hanky Code…A Time When We Couldn't Ask* (2023) (fig 11) which held its own spot on the west wall. These works are directly political, *Don't Just Sit There and Take It! Make Waves!* (2023) is loud not only in its call to action but also in its design. Amongst the other quilts shown, *Don't Just Sit There and Take It! Make Waves!* (2023) has the brightest colours on a large white background. The ripples are emphasized by the radiating circles of the top stitch and the loudness of the message is best shown through its sheer size. At 78 by 68 inches, this work is the largest and is the only one displayed horizontally

[49] Bill Stearman, *Finding Comfort in Dying,* Artist Statement (2021).
[50] Bill Stearman, *Not Drowning,* Artist Statement (2022).

in landscape, setting the tone for Stearman's works and signalling a shift from Veronica Spiljak's which is displayed immediately before. This being the largest work, it appropriately has one of the biggest calls for change; "We are so far past a time when individuals can ignore what might seem to be minor social injustices. It is time for each of us to stand up and speak…
once we have spoken our truth, we can watch the waves as other follow our example and come forward to promote things that matter."[51] The work is as big and loud as we should be, with the rippled pattern showing the powerful changes that can be made even from as small an action as speaking up. *1971: The Hanky Code…A Time When We Couldn't Ask* (2023) closes both Stearman's portion as well as the show itself. It is as personal as the three quilts before it while also being deeply political like *Don't Just Sit There and Take It! Make Waves!* (2023). As a gay man, Stearman focuses his work on queerness as a public call to action and as a personal expression. The work *1971: The Hanky Code…A Time When We Couldn't Ask* (2023) is an irregular shape, the only quilt not perfectly rectangular it has the look of being slanted when hung up. It is made of recycled denim, combining multiple jeans in various washes that retain their zippers, flies, belt loops, and pockets. Spread across the quilt are five handkerchiefs in different colours. The work is about queer oppression and liberation, grounding the conversation in imagery of the hanky code iconic to the 70s and 80s queer scene.[52] At this time in Canada homosexuality was very much taboo having only been decriminalized in 1969,[53] and to safely find one another, queer people, namely gay men, developed the hanky code. The colour and placement of the hanky indicated what someone was interested in or looking for so others who were cruising would know who to approach with minimal risk. Stearman writes of the work-

[51] Bill Stearman, *Don't Just Sit There and Take It! Make Waves!* Artist Statement (2023).
[52] Andy Campbell, *Bound Together: Leather, Sex, Archives, and Contemporary Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020) 91.
[53] CBC, "TIMELINE: Same-sex rights in Canada" CBC News, 2015. website.

"The Hanky Code was invented in 1971, so that we could recognize each other and know interests.
It was a way to avoid police harassment, job loss, and public shame from names being posted in newspapers.
We can't go back.
Remembering our history will keep us moving forward.
It matters folks. It really matters."[54]

The odd shape of the quilt accentuates its queerness, queer people are perceived as other by larger heterosexual society, as wrong, especially in the time this quilt draws from.[55] The queer movement itself adopts and revels in this, proudly adopting and reclaiming the title of queer and celebrating the things that make the larger heterosexual society perceive them as abnormal.[56] In this work especially, Stearman shows how the queer tradition of quilting, of interacting with ideas of traditional family and gender roles to speak on queer issues, is still very much used by contemporary artists.

Quilting especially has its own history with queer art that Stearman shows a keen awareness of and engagement with. It is difficult to speak to crafting and queer liberation without discussing the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt. The tradition of quilting is, as with most crafts, an old one found in medieval Europe as well as India and further into East Asia.[57] Quilting is itself a varied practice with patchwork quilting being the one we most often see today. [58] Patchwork quilting is a style which involves sewing together different pieces of fabric to form a design. This style of quilting goes along with the trope of sweet grannies creating works for their children or grandchildren, showing their daughter and granddaughters how to sew

[54] Bill Stearman, *1971: The Hanky Code…A Time When We Couldn't Ask* (2023)
[55] Canadian Centre for Gender and Sexual Diversity, "Queer Canadian History Timeline- Pre-Colonization to Present," (2018) 4. website.
[56] Mimi Marinucci, *Feminism Is Queer: The Intimate Connection Between Queer and Feminist Theory* (London: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2010): 183-184.
[57] "An introduction to quilting and patchwork" (London: Victoria and Albert Museum) website.
[58] Ibid.

on practice squares.[59] Quilting is typically associated with family, tradition,[60] and particularly a matrilineal practice. Some artists have used this association to assert cultural and family roots such as Faith Ringgold. As an African American artist, Ringgold utilized the motifs and techniques of African Kuba designs to draw ties between Africa and African Americans, a familial historical lineage inaccessible for many African Americans as a result of slavery.[61] Tropes and what it means to subvert or reclaim them will look different to different communities and depend on the artist and what they are trying to achieve. Ringgold is in a way reclaiming that familial lineage association, she is asserting cultural ties, a heritage, through the idea of familial heirlooms in the form of quilting. She depicts modern African Americans and black culture in her quilts, placing them in a historical context and showcasing the deep cultural roots and histories of contemporary African Americans. Whereas for queer artists like Stearman quilting as queer art relies on that familial association in order to subvert it. Instead of asserting a lineage, it starts its own- a found family. While this matrilineal trope may not be reflective of many people's realities it has endured and its endurance lends to the subversive nature of queer quilting, as Stearman states of his practice, "these aren't your granny's quilts!"[62] That being said, in some ways they are our granny's quilts. Looking to some of the quilts made by my Nana, they are carefully designed, intricately layered with every piece of fabric considered for its colour, texture, and shape. Granny quilts tell stories, either familial stories or about the quilter themselves. In this way perhaps Stearman's quilts are like your granny's, and perhaps this allows for the messages of community, connection, and collective action in his work to resonate even deeper- we're not so different after all.

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[59] "An introduction to quilting and patchwork" (London: Victoria and Albert Museum) website.
[60] Cindy Ruskin, *The Quilt: Stories From The NAMES Project,* (New York: POCKET BOOKS, 1988) i.
[61] Faith Ringgold, *Street Story Quilt* (1985) The MET website.
[62] Bill Stearman, *Artist Bio,* Connecting Threads 2023.

The AIDS quilt is emblematic of the created family and community knowledge sharing of the queer community. The NAMES project responsible for the creation of the AIDs Quilt was developed in 1985 as a way for the queer community of San Francisco to commemorate the lives of their friends and family lost to the AIDS epidemic.[63] The project grew with thousands of people submitting their patchwork quilt designs to be finishes by the NAMES project team made up of local volunteers and community members.[64] The project was multifaceted, acting as a political demonstration in its presentation on Capitol Hill and as a means of mourning. The grave sized squares acted as headstones when many bodies could not or would not be claimed and put to rest due to the social stigma. The Quilt also served as a means of celebration, processing grief by coming together to celebrate the lives of those lost through their unique interests and experiences and ensuring they would not be forgotten or reduced to a statistic.[65] For many queer people, family and familial traditions are locked out of reach. It is not uncommon to have families unsupportive of their identities and so a commonality in queer spaces is a built family. Instead of things passed from mother to daughter, we have communal knowledge sharing. Many of the members of the NAMES project had little experience sewing, designing, or organizing but through community support the project was able to take form.[66] In many ways this continues today. With online resources people are able to learn crafting skills on their own meaning they are not dependent on traditional knowledge avenues nor are they constrained by gender roles, as stated before this was how I personally expanded my crafting abilities. The NAMES project itself has moved online via the National AIDS Memorial which still accepts panels with a step-by-step guide on how to make and send one in. There is also a digitized searchable database

[63] Cindy Ruskin, *The Quilt: Stories From The NAMES Project,* (New York: POCKET BOOKS, 1988) 5.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid. 12.
[66] Ibid. 11.

allowing for users of the site to search people by name on the quilt.[67] Stearman's work is a great example of how these associations continue to quilters today and how important this remains in the work while also highlighting how some things have changed. Stearman's works are quilts both in form and in function. While each is designed carefully, expressing a particular topic or feeling important to Stearman, another key aspect of them is their function. Stearman encourages buyers of his works to use them as quilts, the tactile nature of them being just as important as the visual. In this way Stearman's works engage very directly with notions of traditional family, his works are used as actual quilts—should the buyer choose to—as in the familial tradition often confronted by quilted art. However, they are all either deeply political or about personal struggles, key aspects of Stearman's life and identity. Stearman's work follows the traditions we see of craft artists before him utilizing works very precisely to make impactful political and social commentary. While building off of this tradition, the ways in which he blends this personal expression with political action embody the more contemporary form of protest art: craftivism.

Craftivism is unique to the third wave of feminism. Coined by Betsy Greer in 2003 and defined by her as "a way of looking at life where voicing opinions through creativity makes your voice stronger, your compassion deeper,"[68] craftivism succeeds efforts like the NAMES project in that its political activism is supported by community-based efforts that value the process and aesthetics of the project as much as the political message. Stearman is in an interesting position being 73 years old but active for 11 years. He is active with a wide range of people and communities particularly other male quilters, crafters across generations, and with the craftivist movement. As a supporter of craftivism, Stearman's quilts reflect some of the key ideas of the

[67] The National AIDS Memorial. website.
[68] Sarah Corbett, *A Little Book of Craftivism* (London: Cicada Books Limited, 2022) 3.

movement as outlined by "A Lonely Craftivist" founder Sarah Corbett. Craftivism is a form of activism that focuses on starting conversation and provoking thought through craft projects. It can be much less intrusive as Corbett instructs to not "force your work on people…inspire, don't intimidate"[69] and is very conscious of the craftivist themselves, valuing personal health and mental health with reminders to keep things tasteful but light and humorous in their work. Stearman's often lighthearted or positive attitude towards some of the darker subject matter in his quilts aligns with this aspect of craftivism, and while he is an activist in a more traditionally outspoken sense, his quilts showcase not only sociopolitical commentary but also explorations of his life and self, echoing craftivism's prioritizing of the artist. The AIDS Quilt was a protest and commemoration work first, memorializing those lost to AIDS while also planning on being unfurled in San Francisco's Lesbian and Gay Freedom Day parade, and then displayed at the National March for Lesbian and Gay Rights in Washington DC.[70] It very directly confronted quilting's association with traditional family and gender roles in the same way Stearman and other contemporary artists still subvert these associations, by focusing on community and the created family.

When considering the installation as a whole, I hoped to promote dialogue and connection between these works despite differences in formal aesthetics. Elycia's smaller and delicate seeming woven works were positioned directly across from Bill Stearman's large and more colourful quilts. While they appear opposite with Elycia's soft colour palettes and white backgrounds compared to the darker backgrounds and bolder colours of Stearman, both are queer creators. When placed across from one another they open a dialogue between different queer artists and their work. What does it mean to be a queer artist? What makes a work queer?

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[69] Corbett, *A Little Book of Craftivism.* 12.
[70] Cindy Ruskin, *The Quilt: Stories From The NAMES Project,* (New York: POCKET BOOKS, 1988) 9.

Stearman is as much an activist as he is an artist, queerness is in the very seams of his work with many of them being directly political and referencing queer activism as well as his life as a gay man. Elycia's work is not quite so direct in its queerness in the traditional sense. Elycia does not employ typical queer iconography or visual tropes however for her, the works all come from a personal place. They are queer because she is queer and that will always be a part of her point of view, the lens through which she creates her art. Spiljak is different from both by virtue of being an installation rather than a wall hanging and by her focus being based more on a feminist framework than a queer perspective. By bringing her work into the conversation I hoped to not only look at the variety in queer art but in craft as a whole. Spiljak's work has perhaps the least to do with craft due to its other components as a multimedia piece, however it is the work that most directly engages with the history of its craft-embroidery. This history of the embroidery and craft as domestic and women's labour, and overall feminist theory are vital to the themes and reading of the piece. We have three artists all engaged in different ways with craft and this comes out in their work. One heavily studied in the material techniques and using craft as an artistic medium. One starting in a hobbyist capacity and engaging not only with the medium's history but on a personal level by speaking through personal experience and observation making the work contemporary. And one being an artist choosing to work in craft because of how its history adds to the work and the specific qualities that medium brings to the piece. While only being a small sample of three artists, *Connecting Threads* displays some of the range within the contemporary craft scene. Queer and feminist rhetoric are important to the medium, and to its history, but as seen in this show and the other contemporary craft exhibitions mentioned previously, this presents in a multitude of ways.

When I think of crochet, embroidery, quilting, or knitting, the first thing that comes to mind is my grandmother, the image of the archetypal mother or grandmother. I think of someone soft, dainty, and feminine creating something for children or decorative for the home. However, my second thought is of my friends, the queer people stitching dirty patches or colourful patterns onto their jackets, the bizarre stuffed animals I crocheted for my friends, or the gruff gender staunch feminist tomboy who gifted me embroidered roses as dainty as those my grandmother made. The strong societal association of craft with femininity may never go away (it is still being interacted with by contemporary artists after all) but shifts have happened that have allowed for boundaries to be pushed further. In the third wave of feminism there has been an expanding on what constitutes feminist issues and generally a growing interest in issues outside of them. Ecology, identity, culture, race, faith, and health have all started to be further explored. We see craft art has broadened its horizons, being used to speak on this wider variety of interlocking, overlapping issues with the artists' personal experience at the centre. In Rozika Parker's 2010 rerelease of her book *The Subversive Stitch*, she writes that while feminists of the 70s campaigned that the personal is political, contemporary artists see the personal as universal,[71] that we have a celebrity culture of artists with definitive views. Parker gives the example of Tracy Emin and how her work at the time was being written about as uncovering universal truths about womanhood,[72] seeming to use her to say these universal statements appear to be the hallmark of contemporary feminist art. I'd like to push back against this idea a little as we have seen each artist tackles a variety of subjects from deeply personal places and it is not so much that the personal is universal- that people are making definitive statements about what womanhood or queerness is- but that there is an increased awareness that nothing is universal

[71] *The Subversive Stitch,* xv.
[72] *The Subversive Stitch,* xiv-xv.

and all we have is our personal. In this show I was fortunate to have many friends and family come to see my work, many of whom were not typically interested in art. My aunt took in Spiljak's installation with careful consideration, watching the video multiple times to best understand it. I got to see my sister express her appreciation of the detail in Elycia's work, pointing out to me what she liked in each despite not normally liking art or galleries. A friend was so interested in and moved by one of Stearman's works he actually connected with the artist on social media. Each artist came to be where they are by creating art that interested them in mediums they enjoyed and on topics they felt were important. Each worked from their own lives, experiences, and points of view. It is from our personal views that we take in and experience the world. The personal is universal because we put out our works from a personal place, complicated and messy from the multiple aspects of our beings. Our work may then have a universal resonance not because it speaks to all in a definitive way, but that that messiness shows us as human individuals, and this at least can be related to, it can be how we connect.

Figures

Fig 1. Elycia SFA, *home life/ still life* series (2022) photo by Bernadette Lajtman

Fig 2. Elycia SFA *toronto (5)* (2022) Photo by Bernadette Lajtman

Fig 3. Elycia SFA *toronto (5)* (2022) photo by Bernadette Lajtman

Fig 4. Elycia SFA *kitchener* (2022) photo by Bernadette Lajtman

Fig 5. Veronica Spiljak *can there be softness, without comfort?* (2022) photo by Bernadette Lajtman

Fig 6. Veronica Spiljak *can there be softness, without comfort?* (2022) detail. Photo by Bernadette Lajtman

Fig 7. Bill Stearman *His Name is Clarence* (2021) photo by Bernadette Lajtman

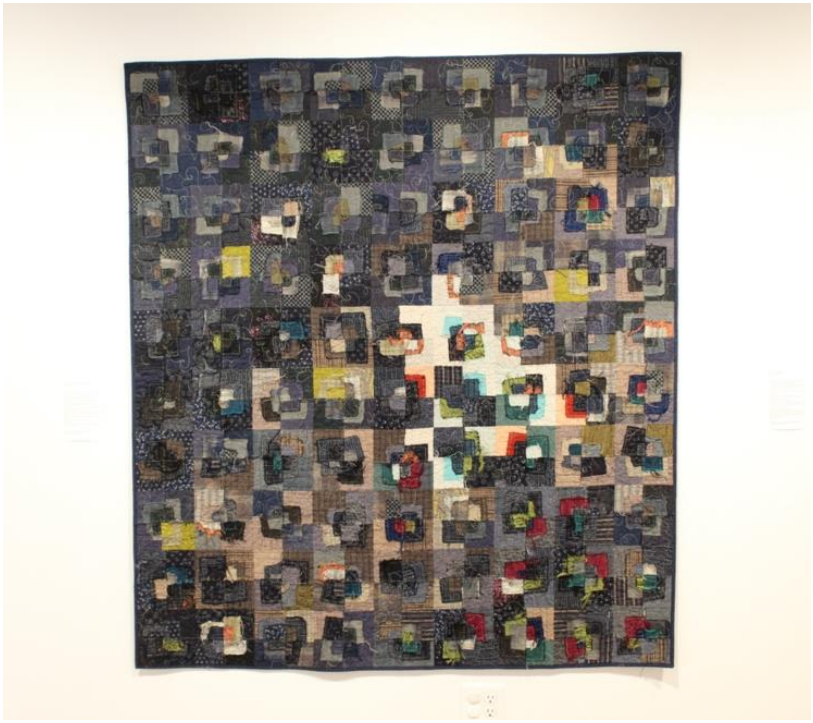

Fig 8. Bill Stearman *Finding Comfort in Dying* (2021) photo by Bernadette Lajtman

Fig 9. Bill Stearman *Not Drowning* (2022) photo by Bernadette Lajtman

Fig 10. Bill Stearman *Don't Just Sit There and Take It! Make Waves!* (2023) photo by Bernadette Lajtman

Fig 11. Bill Stearman *1971: The Hanky Code…A Time When We Couldn't Ask* (2023) photo by Bernadette Lajtman

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