

ABSTRACT

Title of Document:

FRAGMENTS OF MEMORIES

Michael Andrew Booker, Master of Fine Arts
2012

Directed By:

Associate Professor Ruth Lozner,
Department of Fine Art

Quilt making, in its' simplest form, is the taking of fragments from various sources and putting them together to form a new symbol that gives new meaning to those fragments, collectively. This thesis discusses my incorporation of the language of quilt making in my work, transforming its' ideals to reflect on issues and experiences that occur within families and communities, and to make quilt making cross the line from craft to fine art.

FRAGMENTS OF MEMORIES

By

Michael Andrew Booker

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
2012

Advisory Committee:

Associate Professor Ruth Lozner, Chair
William C. Richardson, Department of Art Chair
Associate Professor Justin Strom

© Copyright by

Michael Andrew Booker

2012

Dedication

For Mississippi

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my mother and grandmother for preserving quilt making, Mark for teaching me how to sew, Jefferson Pinder, my advisory committee, and the rest of my family, friends, fellow artists, and professors.

Table of Contents

Dedication.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
List of Figures.....	v
Chapter 1: Past.....	1
Chapter 2: Present.....	2
Chapter 3: Conclusion.....	12
Bibliography.....	13

List of Figures

Figure 1 - *Self Portrait Quilt*, 2010, My old clothes, photos, wallpaper, vinyl, food boxes and labels, laminate flooring, caution tape. 32"x 32"

Figure 2 - *Paw Paw's Waiting*, 2011, Cut doors, shutters, ruler, rosette blocks, shelf, twine, fork, hinges and misc. objects, chair, and pot. Dimensions variable.

Figure 3 – Installation shot of *Sugar Rice*, 2012, Woodcut on my family's old clothes, aprons, hot pads, oven mitts, and beatboards

Figure 4 – *Five Fifths and a Half*, 2012, Chair, window, bronze, dress shirts, twine

Figure 5 – List of Nsibidi symbols

Chapter 1: Past

Once passed down from generation to generation, quilt making is a language fading away in America. My grandmother still quilts, and has passed down her skills to my mother. My mother recalls even in grade school being taught how to make quilts. Growing up in Mississippi, quilts made by my grandmother were given to my sister and me as gifts, but it is not until recently that I developed a genuine appreciation for them.

Quilts are record keepers of our time. Usually made out of fabrics and textiles that previously existed for other reasons, quilts have stories attached to them that are told symbolically through different arrangements of patterns and color. Fragments of memories are collected and given a new life to be carried on for future generations.

The women of Gee's Bend, Alabama are some of the most well known quilters in America. Living in an impoverished area well below the poverty line, the women had a strong sense of community that propelled them to create some of the most impressive quilts in recent history. These hand-sewn quilts were made of old work clothes, feed sacks, baseball jerseys, curtains, and anything they could reuse, refusing to just throw anything away. While their quilts have been compared to modern artists, such as Sean Scully, and since the quilts are textiles instead of paint, and are functional objects, their work has fallen into the debate on whether their quilts can be considered fine art or purely craft. This dilemma is one that I continue to battle in my own work.

Chapter 2: Present

Inspired by the debate on whether quilt making is a form of art or craft, I began to look at a few fine artists who have transcended this discussion and incorporated quilt making into their work: David C. Driskell, Gwendolyn Magee, and most notably, Faith Ringgold.

Ringgold is most known for her painted story quilts, chronicling the fictional life of Willa Marie Simone, a young African American woman who leaves the United States in the 1920's for Paris where she meets many famous visual artists, authors, and historic figures ranging different periods in time, in pursuit of becoming a professional artist. In doing this, she has to leave behind her own family for the realization of her dreams to come true. Willa Marie Simone is an invented character Ringgold creates that is loosely based on her own life, including stretched truths mixed with fantasies that formed a story that was also semi-biographic for Ringgold, who dealt with the plight of being a black woman artist in America. This method of creating work that was semi-biographical with embellished details is something I have adapted in my work.

Being trained as a figure painter, I had no idea how to sew and make a quilt myself. With the help of a fellow graduate student who has experience sewing, countless phone calls to my mother, and a few quilting books, I created *Self Portrait Quilt* (2010). In my pursuit to separate my work from craft, I choose to include non-traditional materials in my quilt. Since quilts are mainly thought to be made out of fabric, I included old family photographs, Kool-Aid packets, a Jiffy cornbread



Figure 1 *Self Portrait Quilt*, 2010, My old clothes, photos, wallpaper, vinyl, food boxes and labels, laminate flooring, caution tape. 32"x 32"

box, Louisiana Hot Sauce label, Sportin' Waves hair pomade label, wallpaper, vinyl, caution tape, and laminate flooring in my quilt, along with some of my old clothes and ties. These materials serve as fragments of memories and personal histories, arranged in a traditional eight-point star-quilting pattern, collectively forming a symbolic portrait of myself.

Wanting to further abstract the idea of quilt making and separate it from craft with the use of non-traditional materials, I turned to sculpture, substituting fabric and thread for found wood and screws. The use of domestic materials, such as doors, and shutters, allowed me to expand my vocabulary of quilt making, as well as directly deal with the place where most of my work and concepts originate from: home.



Figure 2 *Paw Paw's Waiting*, 2011, Cut doors, shutters, ruler, rosette blocks, shelf, twine, fork, hinges and misc. objects, chair, and pot. Dimensions variable.

Back in Mississippi, our family would often go and visit my grandparents on weekends. My father's parents lived about three hours away in the small town of Shannon, Mississippi, located right outside of Tupelo. On arriving to my grandparents' house, I recall grandfather, or "Paw Paw," sitting outside on the porch in his baseball cap and bowl of pecans, picked from the row of pecan trees in their

backyard. This memory is used as the inspiration to create *Paw Paw's Waiting* (2011). I see this piece as a catalyst for the viewer to reflect on his or her own memories of family.

Around this time I was also researching the hidden meaning and symbolism in quilts as they were used in African cultures and on the Underground Railroad in America. The eight point star pattern is a motif I was using consistently in my work. The star is made up of diamonds, and in African traditions, the diamond is a symbol for the cycle of life. The points on the diamond represent birth, life, death, and rebirth (Wahlman 88). This cycle of life is also what I am repeating by taking these materials of doors, shutters, and other domestic materials and reappropriating them in my art, as a quilter would do with old work clothes.

In *Paw Paw's Waiting*, there also was a focus on creating an installation with separate parts that come together to make a whole. Two stars, a chair, and a pot, all serve as “members of a community” that share invisible bonds with each other to help uplift and strengthen the group. The idea of strength in numbers is something that is very important down south where survival can depend on the support of another.

After several different “wooden quilt” pieces, I wanted to continue the transformation of quilt making through non-traditional materials, but through a different form: sound. I created “Audio Quilts.”

Hip-hop music, like in quilt making, also relies heavily on taking and repurposing fragments from different sources to repurposing them to give them new meaning. In hip-hop culture, this is referred to as sampling. I had been making hip-hop beats through music production software for about eight years as a passion of

mine, but I never shared them with anyone. I started pulling audio samples from movies, historical events, political speeches, and other popular media that dealt with the concepts of family and race, and interweaving and overlaying them with my original hip-hop instrumentation.

Fear (2011) discusses the problems that minorities have faced by just being a minority, and points to a specific event in Mississippi history. In 1945, Willie McGee, a black man, was accused of the rape of a white woman, when it was later discovered that it was a consensual relationship. During his trial that lasted for six years, people like Albert Einstein, William Faulkner, and Josephine Baker all spoke out on his behalf, but he was ultimately convicted guilty and sentenced to death by electrocution. On May 8, 1951, he died in the electric chair. His electrocution was broadcasted live over the radio before, during, and after. *Fear* includes portions of that radio broadcast, with samples from a speech in *A Single Man*, a movie adapted from a novel based on a gay British professor living in California in 1962.

“A minority is only thought of as one when it constitutes some kind of threat to the majority. A real threat, or an imagined one. And there in lies the fear... And that fear is why the minority is persecuted. There always is a cause. The cause is fear. Minorities are just people. People like us...”

- An excerpt from *Fear*

The audio samples from *A Single Man* are chopped, echoed, lowered in pitch, slowed, and are playing at the same time as the radio broadcast, overlaid on a track of sweeping organs, low bass, gritty piano, and hard drums to create a dissonant, haunting sound that forms itself into a southern, bass driven hip hop track.

I continued my search for new ways to deal with the battle of art versus craft in regards to quilt making. Thinking about Faith Ringgold's painted quilts, I started to print woodcuts on top of quilts made clothes that once belonged to members of my family and me. Then, I stretched the printed quilts on stretchers like paintings, but stuffed them with batting so they could reference the worlds of printmaking, painting, and quilts.



Figure 3 Installation of Sugar Rice

The woodcut for *Sugar Rice* (2012) consists of two separate, but related memories joined together in a single image. The text and the title *Sugar Rice* is a reflection of times when my family would spend the night over my grandparents' house, and the next morning for breakfast we would often have biscuits, sausage,

bacon, and white rice. My sister, cousins, and I would all pour a little sugar in our rice and add some syrup. We would often have the same meal for breakfast back home, but we would put sugar in the rice only at our grandparents' house, as if it wouldn't taste the same for some reason if it were to be done at home. The magic of being gathered with my family at my grandparents' house transformed what seemed to be a simple gesture into a memorable breakfast, every time.

The building referenced in *Sugar Rice* also has a mystic presence about it. Located a few miles down from my parents' house behind a gravel parking lot for an auto auction house, I have no idea what this building was used for. It has been there ever since I can remember, in the exact same condition. I had to pass by this building almost everyday growing up in Mississippi, and have never seen a single person go near it.

I combined the two memories together like fabrics in a quilt to create a tangible collage of remembrance. This collage is combined with the actual fabrics of the quilt, a collage of physical history.

The fabrics that make up my quilts in *Sugar Rice* are remnants of clothes, aprons, oven mitts, and hot pads that belonged to my family. They have been cut, ripped, bleached, stained, and sewn together in various traditional quilting patterns, such as the Log Cabin, Housetop, and as before, the Eight-Point Star.

In this piece the prints are displayed in a 3x3 grid, referencing yet another quilting pattern, the Nine Patch, which is the most basic quilting pattern and is typically used to organize and showcase multiple patterns in "Sampler" quilts. Out of the nine prints, there is one print that has a frame of wooden floorboards that

separates it from the other prints and interrupts the pattern. There is a West African belief that has been continued through American quilt makers that evil spirits like to travel in straight lines, and quilts are meant to ward away evil spirits. Traditionally, when a pattern is established in a quilt, there is often a break in the pattern to confuse the evil spirits. “Randomizing the flow of paths” (Tobin and Dobard 49) is a key to stopping evil spirits from entering a home and protects those around.

In early 1977, Martin Puryear suffered a studio fire and lost almost everything in his studio - finished artworks, tools, materials, books, etc. After a period of grieving, he is quoted as saying that the loss created a sense of “incredible lightness, freedom, and mobility” (Elderfield 19). In March 2012, there was a studio fire and resulting flood from the sprinkler system that caused me to lose a lot of possessions in my own studio. After relocating to a new studio, I recall having the same feeling Puryear had, and the sense of “lightness, freedom, and mobility” was reflected in my work.

Five Fifths and a Half (2012) is inspired by the uneven relationship between the man and the woman, father and mother, husband and wife, in a family. Traditionally, a man is thought to be the head of the household, and “wear the pants” in the family, but when a man inserts his will too much, and dominates the flow of the relationship, it starts to affect the entire family. This male demonstration of power and dominance may not always be overtly shown, but rather through subtleties that would only be noticed within the family.



Figure 4 *Five Fifths and a Half*, 2012, Found chair, bronze, dress shirts, twine, thread

As in *Paw Paw's Waiting*, the chair is used as a figurative element. Its' strong lines are reminiscent of broad shoulders, hung high on the wall, standing strong.

The white dress shirts are symbols of power that occur throughout the lower, middle, and upper classes. My father is a banker, and his closet is full of nothing but suits, dress shirts and ties. With over fifty suits at his disposal, they all fall into a typical businessman palette of dark grey, dark blue, or black with a white business

shirt and tie. This “power suit” arrangement has been established as the definition of a professional man in America.

The form for this work was inspired by certain Nigerian Nsibidi symbols. The symbol for man and the symbol for woman, when combined together, represents love, unity, and strength. When separated by a line, the symbol represents hatred (Wahlman 88). I roped and braided the dress shirts together as a three dimensional representation of these symbols.

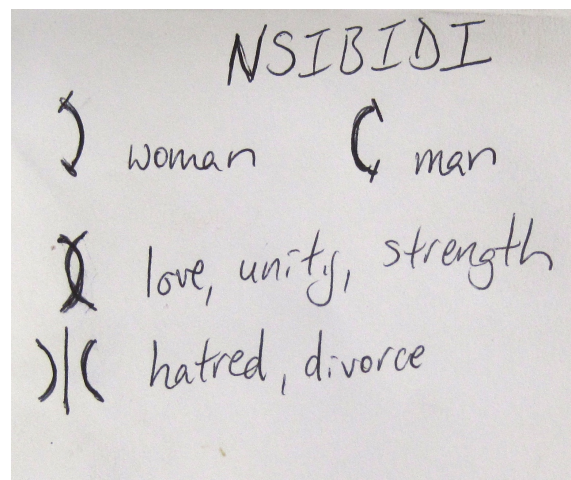


Figure 5 Nsibidi symbols that inspired *Five Fifths and a Half*

I cast an antler in bronze to further add to the idea of male dominance. Male deer have antlers to show off a physical manifestation of strength. They are used as weapons in combat with other male deer to attract the female deer. The cast bronze also adds a new element to the sculpture that separates itself from the reused up chair and the soft fabric of the dress shirts. The antler also appeals to the deer my dad hunted and had turned into taxidermy deer heads currently hanging in our garage, as a sign of his conquest.

Chapter 3: Conclusion

“Communicating secrets by using ordinary objects is very much apart of African culture, in which familiarity provides the perfect cover” (Tobin and Dobard 77). While quilts have been known to be visually stunning, they also serve the purpose of translating messages and memory in both African and American histories.

The hidden meanings in quilts are told by the collection of the fragments of memory to form a new collective symbol of all the fragments included. In my work, I have chosen to transform the language of quilt making to through the use of fabrics, wood, sound, printmaking, and sculpture. The use of these non-traditional methods to create new forms of quilts allow me to argue for the inclusion of quilt making as fine art.

Bibliography

- Elderfield, John. *Martin Puryear*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2007.
- Tobin, Jacqueline L. and Raymond G. Dobard Ph.D., *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad*. New York, NY: Doubleday. 1999.
- Wahlman, Maude. *Signs and Symbols: African Images in African-American Quilts*. New York: Studio in Association with Museum of American Folk Art, 1993.