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Precious Lovell weaves stories into art



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Using sewing and needlecraft techniques, artist Precious Lovell shares narratives both personal and universal. **Sally Van Gorder**

BY ADRIENNE JOHNSON MARTIN
Correspondent

At first glance, it might seem comforting. The sampler, with its vibrant colors and nearly faceless dancing figures, so easily stokes thoughts of home and hearth, of old ladies embroidering family trees.

But really looking at Precious Lovell's "Southern Comfort" sampler reveals a story at odds with the gentility of the craft. Her sampler is about America's agricultural and human commodities and how the past informs the present. How the past *is* the present. And it ends with an ominously but delicately stitched coda: *Ye shall reap what ye sow*.

In her exhibit "The Ties That Bind," at CAM Raleigh until Jan. 8, Lovell uses fabric and needlework on feminine canvases to tell stories deeper than they seem. Besides the sampler, she presents 15 aprons to honor ancestors known and unknown, layering each with meaning that feels familiar even as the histories and techniques are specific. It's art that upends and redefines "women's work."

Lovell's road to this type of work was fairly direct. "I have been sewing for 51 years," says the Pilot Mountain native. It was all around her. Most of the women in her life were seamstresses.

She remembers working the pedals on her paternal great grandmother's sewing machine. She got her own at age 9. The first item she made was a skirt. She smiles at the memory of the purple fabric and the yellow thread she used for the pockets. At age 13, she made a grey winter coat with a red lining. Her aunt Lizzy taught her hand sewing.

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Artist Precious Lovell

“Stitching is meditative to me,” Lovell says. “It calms me down. Every day, I think about stitching and sewing.”

By middle school, she knew she wanted to be a fashion designer. After college, she headed to New York where, for 20 years, she made children's clothes for a Macy's private label, Healthtex and OshKosh B'Gosh.

Just when OshKosh decided to move its facilities to Wisconsin, she got a teaching offer from Virginia Commonwealth University, where she'd gotten her undergraduate degree. It was a program in the Middle East; she spent six and a half years in Qatar. Later, after a stint in New York, she would teach in South Korea as well.

Those experiences were an important imprint. She eventually was able to travel to 44 countries. And, along the way, Lovell fell in love with fibers. She loved fashion but realized she wanted to make art, and with that art, she wanted to express her thoughts.

“This is my voice, how I give my opinions of things,” Lovell says of her work.

Taking in new cultures, she says, opened her eyes in different ways, and imprinted her creativity. While in Ghana, she was introduced to the *batakari* or war shirt, a top covered with amulets and worn by military leaders for strength. Inspired, Lovell made a series of seven war shirts, using materials as disparate as brass bells and gold paint, and techniques ranging from laser cutting to tea staining. The shirts drew inspiration from powerful women from around the world.

The aprons, too, have a mix of influences. In 2008, she had returned to North Carolina to earn a master's at N.C. State. There, she first learned about modesty aprons, garments used by some African women to cover themselves. While teaching in South Korea and soaking in that culture, she wanted to somehow bridge the culture gap between Africans, African-Americans and Koreans.

There were clear points of animosity – children fathered by African-American soldiers during the Korean War were ostracized. And in New York, there were plenty of stories of problems between Korean-American business owners and their black customers.

When she discovered the story of Korea's comfort women, Lovell found a commonality. Here were colonized women kidnapped from their homeland by Japan and forced into sexual slavery. She saw echoes of American slavery, where black women also often didn't have agency over their bodies.

The modesty aprons became her canvas. She employed the patchwork and quilting techniques of African-American quilters and the *jogakbo* (patchwork), *nubi* (quilting) and *bojagi* (wrapping cloths) Korean techniques she'd learned while teaching there. Her materials include animal skins, metal, and Korean rami, hemp and silks. Together, they tell stories of the women of her ancestry.

“I wanted to find a way to give them voices in ways that were relevant to the lives they lived, rather than through constructed stories,” Lovell says.

So the quilt representing her mother Rachel Mildred Arnold Lovell has cascading quilted maple leaves and embroidery floss representing the quilt she was making when she was dying. Another off-white cotton, silk and linen apron is in memory of her great aunt Mary Elizabeth Johnson Tatum, a domestic. Lovell's dried blood is smeared on it, in places. "I wanted to show that (being a domestic is) not a clean, pristine life," Lovell says.

CAM exhibitions director Eric Gaard says another artist recommended Lovell and her work to the museum. Lovell had just moved back to the state two months before to be closer to family.

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CAM exhibitions director Eric Gaard

The CAM team was looking for a companion piece to "White Gold," an installation by artist Thomas Sayre that references the South's cotton industry.

Gaard says he was expecting Lovell to bring in a portfolio of images of her work. Instead, she came with a little bag, pulling each apron out and sharing their meaning. "We were floored," he says.

In Lovell's work, Gaard saw something beyond a textile show. He says he saw a form of living history that offered "spirit portraits" of individual people and brought the story of cotton forward.

"I see it as contemporary art," he says emphatically. "I didn't see it from a craft standpoint or a women's work standpoint. It's grounded in that kind of work but it goes far, far beyond that."

The team came up with the idea of presenting the aprons as an installation and adding audio via Scan Candy, a Raleigh-based app that allows you to take a picture of an item that prompts a short narrated video.

For Lovell, who's an adjunct professor at N.C. State, the goal is storytelling, particularly stories of black life. "I'm always interested in my heritage. Anything that can be done to humanize African-Americans is a plus."

She'll continue to mine and cross cultures to do that. Now 57, she says she'll stitch for as long as she can.

"My hands are starting to ache. I have to take breaks and massage them," she says. "I've started thinking about what happens as I get older, and I decided I'll just do looser and fewer stitches."

PRECIOUS LOVELL: THE TIES THAT BIND

On view: Through Jan. 8

Where: CAM Raleigh, 409 W Martin St., Raleigh

Hours: Monday by appointment, 11 a.m.-6:30 p.m. Wednesday-Friday, noon-5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday.

Cost: \$5 for non-members. Free for members, children 10 and under, seniors, active members of the U.S. Military and their families, first responders, teachers, area college students and NCSU College of Design students, staff and faculty.

Info: 919-261-5920 or info@camraleigh.org