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ARE WE STILL MAKING THE CHANGES WE WANT?

The Social Fabric: Deep Local to Pan Global

2018 Textile Society of America Symposium
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For Americans living through the contentious Trump era, progressive and picturesque Vancouver, British Columbia, seemed an ideal setting for the Textile Society of America's 16th Biennial Symposium. Founded in 1987 by museum and academia professionals, the TSA's mission is to provide "an international forum for the exchange and dissemination of information about textiles worldwide, from artistic, cultural, economic, historic, social and technical perspectives." The Social Fabric: Deep Local to Pan Global theme unfolded in the form of 15 site visits and workshops, 158 paper presentations, dozens of textile arts exhibits, 9 film screenings, a fair trade marketplace, and the TSA awards ceremony. The 415 attending artists, curators, collectors, historians, educators, and students represented scores of prestigious institutions in 20 countries.

My learning curve began with a site visit to the Musqueam Cultural Education Resource Centre led by Knowledge Keeper and textile artist Debra Sparrow. The tour featured samples and demonstrations of Coast Salish spinning, dyeing, and weaving—traditional techniques nearly lost to government tyranny until the 1980s when Sparrow and her sisters initiated their revitalization.

The opening keynote address by Northwest Coast weaver Meghann O'Brien (Haida name Jaad Kuujuus) shared the story of her transition in 2010 from professional snowboarder to traditional weaver. With mountain goat wool and cedar bark, O'Brien masterfully reinterprets ancient designs as contemporary Raven's Tail and Chilkat textiles and traditional forms of basketry. In the catalogue for *Interface: The Woven Artwork of Jaad Kuujuus*, her stunning solo exhibition at the Bill Reid Gallery of Northwest Coast Art, O'Brien writes: "In some ways a replica can be an incredibly powerful way to retrieve a historical artifact."

Other highlights included Merritt Johnson's *Fetish (object/object)* in the group exhibition *Woven Work From Near Here* at Grunt Gallery. The diminutive limbless female form, intricately handwoven from palm fibre, sits upon a sensual tuft of dark buffalo fur. In place of the head is a jarring grin/grimace of large white buffalo teeth. Mesmerizing and menacing, this vessel combines totems of ancient fertility goddesses, such as the Venus of Willendorf, with darker realities of Indigenous women persevering in the face of brutality and subjugation.

Intertwined at Emily Carr University of Art + Design presented 57 exceptional pieces of recent textile-based interdisciplinary works by the collective ECUAD community. Recent alumni Jennifer Brant's captivating geometric quilt composition *Bone Stories* is a hand-stitched chart of the artist's anxieties (in gray cottons) overlapping her mother's (in blues) with shared torments rendered in pinks. As an artist of both settler and Indigenous ancestry, she explains, "I am drawing on ideas of epigenetics and intergenerational trauma, as well as the stories my mother told me, those she didn't have to, and those she couldn't."

Metamorphoses #11 spider by Vancouver artist and TSA exhibitions coordinator Ruth Scheuing was the show stealer in *Connecting Threads*, an impressive four-decade survey of textile art pieces from the Surrey Art Gallery collection. Methodically dissecting a man's stylish suit, Scheuing reconsidered—stitch by stitch—how design, material, and construction convey patriarchal power and prestige. Splayed out like a giant pinned insect, her elegant display of parts laid bare created a wholly new pattern, as she explains, "destroying the old ones in the process." In light of the current #MeToo movement, this piece (created in 1993) read as remarkably fresh and fierce.

The variety and depth of papers presented during the symposium was impressive but hearing mostly Caucasian "experts" speak authoritatively about other cultures through a privileged Western lens reinforced the need for more voices and perspectives from people of colour. This time round, the TSA worked harder than ever to increase diversity in its programming. Lively, enlightening presentations included artist and educator Precious Lovell's "Reinterpreting European Cloth Through Afro-Brazilian Culture" and "Reawakening Choctaw Traditional Textiles" by tribe member and research assistant Jennifer Byram. In the eloquently written and respectfully delivered "Whitework: The Cloth and the Call to Action," Oregon-based artist, writer, and research associate Sonja Dahl took TSA members to task. "Choosing to engage in Whitework requires us to scrutinize with precision the roles of power, agency, and economics that we as white professionals wield in our work, domestically and as guests in others' cultures. Whitework recognizes that if we truly wish to achieve an open, inclusive, and decolonized field, major shifts must occur from within our own practice."

Leaning in to welcome this fibre future, the 2018 TSA Brandford/Elliott Award for Excellence in Fibre Art went to Los Angeles-based emerging artist and educator Diedrick Brackens, who employs hand weaving and cotton in figurative wall works that explore aspects of black identity and history in America.

The upcoming Textile Society of America Symposium "Women's Stories, Human Lives" will take place October 14–18, 2020 in Boston, Massachusetts, USA. The call for proposals will begin in May of 2019. For details and guidelines, visit: <https://textilesocietyofamerica.org>. ■

RIGHT Exhibition catalog cover image for *Interface: The Woven Artwork of Jaad Kuujuus* presented at Bill Reid Gallery of Northwest Coast Art September 19, 2018 – January 9, 2019. The artist Jaad Kuujuus/Meghann O'Brien wears her handwoven Tlingit Raven's Tail *Sky Blanket* (2014. Merino wool, cashmere, mountain goat wool, 124.46 cm x 132.08 cm) and Haida apron *The Spirit of Shape* (2015–2018. Merino wool, cashmere, cedar bark, linen, 73.66 cm x 38.1 cm). PHOTO: DAVID KOPPE. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND BILL REID GALLERY OF NORTHWEST COAST ART, VANCOUVER, BC.