

Special Section Editorial

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Works of art made from or involving textiles or cloth (or works that are sewn or woven) often depict events and histories of significance. These may be occurrences with social and political import to communities, groups or countries, but they may also be incidents or experiences only of consequence to those who made the works concerned. While many works in cloth represent events directly, others allude to public or personal histories through their inclusion of motifs with symbolic or metaphoric associations. And while they may involve activism or offer socio-political commentary, often with feminist underpinnings, the act of narrating histories and representing events via cloth is also on many occasions a vehicle for self-reflection or the exploration of identities.

In a conference entitled ‘Material narratives: Public and private histories in cloth’ that was held at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa, on 18-20 November 2019, participants sought to develop papers in light of these observations. The focus of the conference was on the multiple and varied ways in which textiles or fabric (or weaving or the use of embroidery, collage, printing, and other techniques to work into cloth) have served as a way of representing events and histories with public or personal significance. Delegates were invited to consider examples from any geography, made between the mid-twentieth century and the present.

Six of the articles included here have been developed from papers presented at that conference, while a further two have been authored specifically for this special issue. As a group, they emphasise the varied ways in which textiles and cloth have been used for narrative purposes. Indicating that such narrations may be found in artworks by individuals, as well as by those working in groups, they also reveal a use of cloth for articulating public and private histories in not only works exhibited in art galleries or museums, or commissioned for public buildings, but also objects sold via retailers or informal markets – and sometimes as novelties or décor rather than necessarily with the idea of it being “art”.

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Themed section on Material narratives: Public and private histories in cloth

The issue begins with three articles on community arts initiatives. In ‘Self-representation in the works of Busisiwe Nzama: An analysis of the Frida “little travellers” and more’, the first of these, Khaya Mchunu, discusses works termed “little travellers” by a bead artist in the Woza Moya project in Hillcrest in KwaZulu-Natal. Normally made in partnership with Paula Thomson, who runs the project, the “little travellers” are small beaded figures with a cloth core that represent various “characters”, but might simultaneously be understood in light of a history of producing beaded dolls in this region. Mchunu’s focus is on a series of “little travellers” by Busisiwe Nzama that, while inspired by the self-portraits of Frida Kahlo, are also – he indicates – representations of self. In making reference to her own relationships through representations which allude to those of the Mexican artist, these images of Kahlo also become a forum for Nzama to explore her own identity.

Begun as an income-generating project under the ambit of the Hillcrest Aids Centre Trust in the late 1990s, Woza Moya started as a project to enable patients to earn an income. My own article, ‘A contemporary Madonna from the Eastern Cape: Female agency in the Keiskamma Art Project’s *Rose Altarpiece*¹’ is on a work by a project that explored responses to HIV/AIDS on the part of people in Hamburg in the Eastern Cape. As with Nzama’s reference to works by Kahlo, the *Rose Altarpiece* by the Keiskamma Art Project was modelled after an existent work – in this instance, Martin Schongauer’s *Virgin of the Rose Bower* in Colmar, France. In my exploration of the history of the source, as well as the circumstances shaping its parody by the Keiskamma Art Project, I suggest that the *Rose Altarpiece* substitutes a European iconography, that was problematical in terms of the empowerment of women, with an African one that gives form and shape to the concept of “feminist *ubuntu*”.

In ‘*The Blood-Sucker Bird*: A woven narrative of exploitation and dependency’, Philippa Hobbs explores a tapestry from a little-known weaving project called Thabana li Mele – one that was set up by Ulla and Peder Gowenius, the same Swedish couple who had founded the Evangelical Lutheran Church Art and Craft Centre at Rorke’s Drift in 1963. But whereas the Rorke’s Drift initiative would have long-term impact, Thabana li Mele existed only between 1968 and 1970, when it was forced to close by the Leabua Jonathan regime. Unpacking how *The Blood-Sucker Bird* is loaded with political inferences, Hobbs simultaneously reveals that the weaving project itself did more than offer a vehicle for income generation: it also provided a forum in which makers were able to draw on oral narratives to produce statements underpinned by political transgression and opposition.

The Blood-Sucker Bird, made in 1969, was sent to Sweden for exhibition, but its whereabouts are now unknown. The weaving explored in the fourth article in this special issue was designed for permanent display in another Scandinavian country – Denmark.

In ‘Other stories: Asger Jorn’s and Pierre Wemaëre’s *Le Long Voyage*, 1959-1960’, Ruth Baumeister explores a collaboration between a Danish artist (Jorn) and a French artist (Wemaëre) for the Statsgymnasium in Aarhus, a work which represents the development of humankind from the ice age to the time of Christopher Columbus. But, as Baumeister reveals, the work has another narrative – its own backstory. While the two collaborators attempted to challenge hierarchical boundaries between their own roles as “artists” and those who undertook the actual task of weaving, the story of the work’s production – which Baumeister reconstructs through comments by those who worked on the initiative – reveals that they in fact continuously compromised these intentions to get the work completed satisfactorily on time.

Le Long Voyage can be interpreted in the context of a revival of interest in the tapestry tradition in France that was underway when both artists were studying in Paris in the 1930s. In ‘The material of mourning: Paul Emmanuel’s *Lost Men* as counter-memorials’, Karen von Veh explores works in fabric that respond to another tradition – that of the public war memorial. A series of installations, including semi-transparent cloth banners representing the body of the artist imprinted with the names of men lost in major conflicts, Emmanuel’s *Lost Men* are also characterised by ephemerality. If historical memorials, which are made from media such as bronze and marble, are attempts to secure remembrance despite its impossibility, these fragile banners that disintegrate and that are at odds with tradition underscore how memories of war are inevitably lost when they are no longer part of lived experience.

Emmanuel’s subversion of the usual ways in which soldiers are memorialised involves an engagement with the gender politics of memorialisation. Gender politics are key also to Irene Bronner’s chapter, ‘Stitching and unpicking ambivalence toward womanhood and maternity in works by Ilené Bothma’. As she reveals, Bothma’s art – which has not been the subject of prior sustained engagement – comprises works of art made via knitting and stitching as well as paintings of embroidered, knitted or crocheted objects. Through her focus on knitting and sewing, Bothma speaks of constructs of appropriate femininity while also articulating her ambivalence about gendered roles and identities. But, Bronner suggests, Bothma’s works have gendered resonance and meanings in a further sense. Invoking, but rarely directly representing the body, the works – which often involve stained and soiled fabrics – can be interpreted in the light of Kristeva’s ideas about abjection.

Bronner undertakes a feminist analysis of a contemporary artist whose works engage critically with the domestic arts. In ‘Quilts: Unfolding personal and public histories in South Africa and the United States’, Marsha MacDowell focuses instead on a category of those domestic arts – namely, quilts. Pointing out that quilt-making practices can be

found in communities and cultures around the world, but have constituted a particularly strong material culture tradition in countries whose histories are intertwined with those of the British Empire, she provides an overview of quilt-making and quilt studies in two such geographies – the United States and South Africa. Through selected examples, she reveals how quilts offer potential insight into personal and public histories via their material or physical characteristics and form – that is, through the techniques used to produce them as well as the materials from which they are made – as well as via narratives (oral and written) about them. MacDowell also suggests that historical examples not only had resonance and meaning within the contexts and times in which they were made, but can also reveal insights about human interactions for viewers examining them today.

In the final article in this special issue, titled ‘*Sedition à la mode? The transfiguration of Steve Biko in post-apartheid fashion and décor design*’, Annemi Conradie turns her attention to more recent uses of cloth in home décor as well as in dress – to objects such as cushion covers and garments representing Black Consciousness leader and martyr to the Struggle, Steve Biko. Looking at the way in which Biko’s image shifted in the years since he first appeared on activist T-shirts shortly after his death, to his reincarnation in embellishment for the home and in fashion some forty years later, she unpacks whether or not these objects divest him of subversive power.

As a group, then, the eight articles in this special issue attest to the many and varied ways in which fabrics, as well as techniques such as weaving, or sewing or beading onto cloth, have narrated stories and histories with public and private significance. More particularly, in titling this special issue (and the conference that inspired it) ‘Material narratives’, it is hoped that the articles included here convey a sense that these narrations are indeed not only *in* material but also of material *importance* in understanding histories and identities.

Notes

1. I thank Irene Bronner for organising double-blind peer reviews of my article.