

## Pretty in Pink: An Exploration of Craft as a Tactile Guide Through the Grieving Process

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### Abstract

The purpose of this research is to help bring understanding, to the artist and the viewer, of what it might be like to experience the trauma of losing a child. While experiences vary from person to person it is not uncommon for many to feel immense and overwhelming feelings of guilt, fear, anger, and anxiety; as well as, resentment towards other family members. In this series, photorealistic prints depicting infant mortality are combined with soft fabrics and traditional quilt patterns to create works that encompass the pain of loss, as well as the love and care that remains after the child is gone. By combining symbolically loaded imagery with warm fabrics, these quilts work to represent the tension many families face to build and maintain strong relationships amongst themselves as well as with other loved ones. Artists such as Doris Salcedo use fabric and other items from the deceased to bring attention to the loss and hardships, as well as the fondness that is left behind when a family member passes. Artists Sara Lindsey and Elizabeth Mitchell, were also influential in the creation of this series in terms of how other artists have combatted similar emotions. Ultimately any experience shared with this body of work won't compare to the reality of losing someone so close, however it may shed some light on the trauma that many families struggle with daily.

### 1. Craft as a Tactile Guide

I was born and raised on a small cattle farm just a few hours east of Asheville. My childhood was relatively normal, living together with my parents and older brother in a large plantation style home, built just after my second birthday. Growing up in the south, it was expected that I learn many basic gendered tasks such as cooking, sewing, and cleaning; even today they're all things that I love to do. Crafting and quilting are especially where my interests remain. When I think about quilts, I think about my family and it reminds me of the generations of mothers and grandmothers that have passed down recipes, patterns, and cleaning techniques. This combined with a quilts' natural tendencies to provide comfort and safety<sup>1</sup>, for me, keeps it close to home. In my early teens, I watched as several very close family members lost their children. It's not something that I can personally say I've experienced, as I do not have children, however I know that watching their struggle to stay afloat is one the most heartbreak things that I have ever witnessed. Ultimately there is no happy ending; some made the decision to turn to drugs while others continued to keep trying, but even today after years trying to work through their grief, that loss is still the topic of almost every conversation. The constant wondering-if things had been done differently. Would their child still be alive has consumed nearly every aspect of their lives.

In truth, it's not their deaths that have impacted me so strongly, but rather the weeks and years that have followed, watching the personalities and relationships shift into something new. It's become more about what an incredible impact these children had on everyone in the family, even if indirectly, they changed those around them and in turn, effected all of us. Today their parents are shadows of the people they were. All their interactions, even those they have

with each other, are forced and strained to the breaking point. This started my thinking about the relationship between quilts and families because that's how I, personally, strongly relate to members of my family, both past and present. The immense and overwhelming sense of comfort I feel when I touch or hold something that was made or belonged to another member of my family is a satisfying and wonderful feeling for

On a very basic level fabric has the incredible ability to store memories and evoke strong feelings of comfort and satisfaction<sup>2</sup>. As babies, we probably spend more time swaddled in the comfort of fabric than we ever do in the arms of a parent or a loved one, thusly it creates a very intimate bond between an objects owner and the object itself<sup>3 4</sup>. By continuing to think about the natural, nurturing quality of fabric and how that relates back to me and my family, it made sense that quilts would be where I was able to make this strong connection. Craft is so important to my understanding of family and where I came from that I couldn't possibly think of a better way to express that. However, it became equally important for me to incorporate printmaking into my craft. I love making prints and in a lot of ways I see the printmaking process as very similar to quilting. Both require a lot of time, a lot of planning and in my mind, work almost seamlessly together. Finding a way to create one unified within the other has become not just incredibly vital for me but has also become the most central and basic idea for this body of work. Skin and touch, basic tactile qualities, can evoke a lot of different emotions<sup>5</sup>. In this instance quilting is used to represent the stability and security that comes with family. By contrasting that with extreme or unsettling images of baby dolls, a physical representation is created to mimic the loss of a child but also show how the family changes and continues to experience love after suffering something traumatic.

## 2. Methodology

The method used in creating these quilts requires several meticulous steps but begins simply with baby dolls being collected. Time is then spent with the dolls, creating an intimate relationship between the artist and the babies, after which they are torn, cut, and ripped apart to create something new and visually distressing. Once an adequate amount of time has been spent working with the dolls, a series of photographs are taken of each new figure. A variety of different light sources and angles are used until a single photo is decided on. From there the artist takes the new image and begins drawing. There is nothing about this step; all images completed are simple graphite drawings on paper. They are later used as references for copper etchings or repurposed in Adobe Photoshop to create transparencies for screen prints.

After the drawing has been completed, a printing process is decided on, depending on the needs of a specific quilt, and work begins on collecting the appropriate materials. Initially only copper etchings were used, as it is the artists preferred method of printing, but it also has a very distinct surface quality that cannot be replicated by any other printing method. However, the etching process is incredibly time consuming and, in the artist's experience, applying a simple six minute etch requires at least several hours. Etchings also allow for very little color variation and throughout this series there has been very little success in mixing colors that are not only vibrant from the start, but also remain vibrant after being run through the press<sup>6</sup>. Taking not only the time constraints but also the difficulty with color into consideration it became important to consider the different types of printing that could be used. Ultimately it was decided that incorporating screen-printing would be useful, as it is a much faster process, not only in terms of burning an image onto a screen, but the printing itself goes much more quickly. It also provides the flexibility necessary to apply color, as the ink will dry only a shade or so darker than originally mixed.<sup>7</sup>



Figure 1: Untitled (Quilt #1)<sup>8</sup>



Figure 2: Untitled (Quilt #1, detail)<sup>9</sup>

With the drawing completed and a decision made on which printing process will be used, attention is turned to working out a suitable quilt pattern. When thinking about the first quilt, *Untitled (quilt #1)* (figure 1 & 2), very little time was spent looking for patterns, as the artist had little experience quilting and was more interested in just exploring the craft. Ultimately a grid pattern was chosen, since it could be accomplished with some ease, and it seemed like a good place to begin. However, moving forward it is understood that the more time that is spent working out all the small details, the more successful the quilts will become. Keeping that in mind while planning for the second quilt, *Pretty in Pink* (Figure 3 & 4), the artist began thinking about what aspects of the original quilt, *Untitled (quilt #1)*, did and did not work. In doing this it became clear that the grid provided little movement and did little to draw the viewer in. Therefore, moving into the next quilt a more traditional pattern was chosen, the Lone Star pattern. While this pattern is still very rigid, it doesn't have the same sterile feeling that comes with a grid. The circular pattern provides constant movement as the viewer's eye moves in and back out, there is no obvious place to settle on or central imagery.



Figure 3: Pretty in Pink<sup>10</sup>



Figure 4: Pretty in Pink (detail)<sup>11</sup>

With a pattern selected planning began on which prints would be incorporated into the quilt and where they would go, as well as a general color scheme. Once a plan was made regarding which spaces in the star would contain prints, a substantial amount of time was spent in fabric stores comparing colors and fabric patterns until the right combination was chosen. After the fabric was selected and the prints were made, the long process of piecing the quilt together followed.

The process speaks, in many ways, to loss in the sense that grief and the grieving process take a long time. No one just wakes up and forgets about a loved one. They spend years accepting and moving past it<sup>12 13</sup>. Everything about both printing and quilting is incredibly laborious; nothing takes a short amount of time to accomplish in the same way that grief is a process that takes years to work through. Quilts are objects that are typically representative of comfort, they not only wrap around you but they are the true essence of being a labor of love. This labor represents not just that of the grieving process but also that of the love that parents give, and the work they do, for their children. The circular pattern of *Pretty in Pink* continues with the same sort of never ending love, the parent's way of not just showing the eternal hurt that they feel by the loss of a child but also the infinite happiness and support they have for their lost child.

### 3. Influences

In recent years, there has been a rise in interest in writing and creating works that are centered around trauma and loss<sup>14</sup>. So, it comes as no surprise that there are other artists who are making similar visual works based off traumatic memories. Whether those memories were experienced first-hand or expressed through them by a third party is irrelevant, it is more about the indirect contributions those artists have made to this series of quilts. There are three artists who were particularly influential in the making of this series. Doris Salcedo, who's work focuses on the gruesome acts of political violence experienced by the people of Columbia; Sara Lindsey, who symbolically uses weaving to create a collective of her family; and Elizabeth Mitchell, whose graveyard quilt documents death in the family.



Figure 5: Doris Salcedo, Untitled 1995<sup>15</sup>

Doris Salcedo is a Columbian born sculptor artist. Over the last three decades she has made works that address the traumatic history of Columbia<sup>16</sup>. Most her work includes installations made of broken and reconstructed domestic furnishings. Incased within the furnishings are the fragments of bone, clothing, and other traces of individuals who were either driven from their homes by violence, forcefully removed, or murdered. Salcedo uses her work to address the individual and community responses to the violence that surrounds them. She approaches their stories and their lives not as an outsider but immerses herself into their culture and community. Making long and frequent research trips into Colombia, she has spent many hours speaking with the families that witnessed these violent acts, often focusing specifically on children who were forced to watch the murder of their loved ones<sup>17</sup>. Salcedo, inspired by the stories told by the victims, has been working since the early 1990s on creating a series of household objects that are redefined to represent the horrid injustice and loss that the Columbian people have faced. Such examples of this include *Untitled*, 1995 (Figure 5), in which a wooden chest with glass doors is filled with folded clothes and petrified in concrete.

The memories are lost amongst the concrete, while the chest may hold a familiar meaning and bring the viewer back to a better time and place, it is no longer the same. The clothing it once held is no longer within reach, instead it is preserved within something that is hard and unforgiving. While the quilts may be more tactile than Salcedo's work, they both hold a familiar harshness, both objects are created to remind the viewer of the pain and suffering that comes from families that have been robbed of one of their own.



Figure 6: Sara Lindsay, *Cinnamon and Roses*, 2004<sup>18</sup>

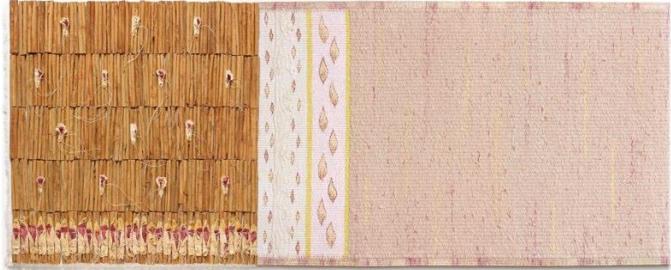


Figure 7: Sara Lindsay, *Cinnamon and Roses*, 2004 (detail)<sup>19</sup>

Sara Lindsay is a Melbourne based artist who, in general, uses weaving to establish physical relationship with her textiles<sup>20</sup>. However, one piece particularly stands out, *Cinnamon and Roses*, 2004 (Figure 6 & 7). Unlike her other works, this was created with the sole purpose of representing the collective identity of her and her family, as well as simultaneously acting as a family tree. In total this tapestry is only 380 mm in height but 4490 mm in length and is interwoven with cinnamon sticks, rose petals, linen, lace, muslin (dyed with tea and turmeric), cotton, and silk. Reading from left to right, the tapestry begins in Sri Lanka, where her grandparents lived for many years, continuing from there you can see only slight color variations as you move to the left. Every 5 mm represents a different year for her and her family<sup>21</sup>. The tapestry moves visually from past to present, using color shifts and scented fabrics to give the viewer an idea of what life was like at a specific given time. This tapestry holds family records and provides the viewer an opportunity to interact with the artist's family by seeing the specific memories, such as births, deaths and marriages, that it holds and represents.

Like the quilts, this tapestry allows for more tactile interactions by the viewer. In the same way that quilts are softer and loving, the tapestry has a very welcoming quality. While it acts more so as a continuing record of both life and death, it commemorates lives shared and loving experiences. This object defines the life experiences and the identity of an entire family, in doing so it provides the viewer with the opportunity to connect to the personal lives of the artist herself as well as her family.

Lastly, Elizabeth Mitchell and *The Graveyard Quilt* (Figure 8). Mitchell and her family lived in Ohio, in 1836, after the death of her two-year old son John, she and her two daughters began work on the quilt. Originally, they began with a smaller quilt however after the death of her nineteen-year old son, Matthias, she began work on the larger quilt. After seven years, the quilt was finally completed<sup>22</sup>. Most which consists of alternating brown, white, and calico squares, containing eight point stars. The center of the quilt contains a large square that represents the graveyard her children were buried in, the edges of the square are embroidered with a brown picket fence, except for the entry way to the graveyard which has a much more ornate passage way. A small passageway continues into a road that travels to the bottom edge, from there the road branches out in both directions and continues to wrap around the border. The picket fence continues along the outside of the road across the entire perimeter of the quilt and is wrapped with roses and other flowers. Along the road there are several coffins containing the names of family members. When the family member passes, the coffin is removed from the road and placed inside the gates of the graveyard.

Originally Mitchell and her family lived in Ohio but did eventually relocate to Kentucky where the quilt now remains<sup>23</sup>. Considering the time, they likely had little access to cameras and probably didn't have photos of the children they had lost. It seems unlikely that they would have the ability to travel back to Ohio to visit the graves of their two sons, this quilt was likely one of the few things they had to commemorate them. Like the piece by Sara Lindsay this documented both the life and death of a family and in a way also represents the collective family identity. A strong connection between her quilt and those of this series are felt, they both represent missing family members and the aftermath that follows. As well as both were made with the intent to help the grieving process.



Figure 8: Elizabeth Mitchell, The Graveyard Quilt, 1843<sup>24</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

This body of work as well as this paper just scratches the surface of understanding the intimate relationship between family and a deceased child. In *A Global History of Child Death*, Amy J. Catalino spends an extensive part of the book arguing that while it has only been in recent decades that parents have not expected their children to die at young ages, it has always had a deeply profound and harmful impact on the mothers, fathers, and siblings<sup>25</sup>. The idea that no matter how little or insignificant a child's time may have been, it will forever alter the life of those around them, has been and will continue to be deeply influential and motivational in creating this work. While I have no first-hand experience in this sort of trauma, watching other members of my family and reading the stories of those who have lost has been confusing and heartbreaking. Throughout the course of my research this series has gained much more understanding of how grief is processed, however each experience is so personalized and has so many different affects that narrowing it down into a single way of thinking seems wrong. *The Graveyard Quilt* by Elizabeth Mitchell is just one example of how quilting is and can be used to talk about the difficulties that stem from a child lost. It is my hope that this body of work will shed some light on the trauma that many families unfortunately face.

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