

**S**titching, knotting, and piercing are marks of labor rooted in the need for warmth, protection, and the social signaling of dress. "STITCH: Syntax/Action/Reaction," curated by Jessica Burko and Samantha Fields at the New Art Center, embraces the breadth of meaning and social history encoded in textiles.

Regular demonstrations and performances activate the works and evoke the ties of a quilting bee. A panel discussion led by Trevor Smith, curator of the present tense at the Peabody Essex Museum, takes place March 3.

Fields's "Under Primping" is a sculptural petticoat that morphs during participatory performances, when visitors don gauzy uniforms and add whatever stitchery they're inclined to. The lacy, mostly white piece is as frothy and celebratory as an over-the-top wedding cake, but also vaguely monstrous, like the ghost of weddings past.

Destiny Palmer's sobering installation "70 of 454, 1788" takes inspiration from a diagram of a slave ship that marks narrow slots to accommodate enslaved Africans. Palmer is sewing together swaths of cloth to match those slots, enough to cover the area of the ship's cargo hold. On occasion, she will sew in the gallery.

The piece is a study in contrasts: the confined spaces, the large ship, the innumerable tiny stitches. Palmer's repetitive labor and the sheer scope of her project reflect on the slaves' plight; her materials retroactively wrap them in her care.

Andrew Mowbray's Tyvek quilt and Bob Oppenheim's sewn paintings wittily commandeer feminine crafts to upend traditionally masculine endeavors. Noël Puélló grapples with the imprisonment and deportation of her father in "Papi Café," an effigy made from pants, shirts, and coffee. Sarah Meyers Brent's totemic sculpture "Beautiful Mess II," overflowing with children's clothes and artist's supplies, contends with motherhood.

It all hums with the particular intimacy of a medium made by hand, perhaps with a mother's love. That, too, can be freighted, as Merrill Comeau's "Foundational Garments," made of her late mother's shirts, attests. Textile art may appear warm and fuzzy, but it often has a sharp point.

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NEW ART CENTER PHOTOS

## A 'STITCH' in time

Exhibit embraces textiles' meaning, social history



**STITCH: Syntax/Action/Reaction**

At New Art Center, 61 Washington Park, Newton, through March 24. 617-964-3424, [www.newartcenter.org](http://www.newartcenter.org)



Andrew Mowbray's "Falsetto" (above) and Sarah Meyers Brent's "Beautiful Mess II." Top: Samantha Fields's "Under Primping."