

## Unsettling "women's work"

Lisa Vinebaum

Almost sixty years ago, artists began pushing the boundaries and conceptual possibilities of fiber materials and techniques, exploding the medium to create radical new sculptural forms. Yet male art critics dismissed the groundbreaking fiber works as decorative, domestic craft and "women's work", despite the fact that fiber artists of the 1960s and 1970s were largely unconcerned with such matters. Much has since changed, and fiber and craft are increasingly celebrated and embraced at the highest levels of the art world. Yet questions of "women's work" continue to preoccupy curators, artists, and scholars of contemporary fiber, in part because they continue to be deployed to degrade and devalue art works in the medium of fiber.

There is nothing inherently female about fiber or textiles. Fibrous materials have been grown and harvested, plaited, spun, knotted, netted, felted, woven, knit, sewn, dyed, printed and painted, by men and women alike, across every part of the globe, extending thousands of years back in time. Historian Elizabeth Wayland Barber observes that with the rise of more sedentary societies, men played an important role in textile production. In the Near East and across Mesopotamia for example, men tended to goats and sheep, prepared raw fibers, dyed wool, and made felt. In ancient Egypt, they planted, raised, and harvested flax; with the introduction of the vertical loom in Egypt around 1500 BCE, men also began to weave cloth. Today, men continue to do textile work in large numbers, as weavers, dyers, and printers, and they also tend to animals and plants that produce raw fibers and dyestuffs like wool, flax, cotton, bark, piña, silk, cochineal, and indigo. This begs the question: how *did* textiles and fiber come to be gendered as "women's work"?

History shows that Europeans *feminized* textile work as part of larger economic shifts that enabled men to harness and profit from women's work. Male control of female labor played an essential role in shaping conceptions of women's work and the conditions under which it is performed. Legal scholar Francisco Valdez and the late transgender historian and activist Leslie Feinberg observe that male/female binaries as we know them today did not exist until the rise of the Athenian city-state during the Greek Classical era, around 600 BCE. It was there that patriarchy was established as the organizing principle of a new gender hierarchy. Women were considered the weaker, subservient sex under Athenian rule. Gendered, hierarchical divisions of labor were established, together with the separation of the public (male) and private (female) spheres. Women were sequestered from public spaces and confined to their homes except for major rituals and festivals. Athenian rulers categorized weaving as feminine labor, to be performed exclusively in the home. With women sequestered, the development of commercial textiles was taken up and controlled by men. This was a pivotal time in the emergence and institutionalization of patriarchy in the Western world. Barber notes that women lost enormous social and economic ground during this time.



*Installation view: Through Her Eye at Mana Contemporary Chicago, September 23, 2018–February 16, 2019. Photo: Michael Sullivan / On The Real Film*

Previously, women managed textile workshops, ran state textile establishments, and wielded economic control over raw materials and woven cloth together with the proceeds and profits of textile trading. But men began to take over profitability of women's labor, in part owing to new patriarchal ideals, and in part because they controlled new technological developments, like tools and larger looms. Valdez and Feinberg observe that with the conquest of Greece by the Romans, Athenian ideals of male superiority were subsumed into the Roman Empire and spread through Europe and the Mediterranean region. Christianity introduced heteronormativity and gender normativity as key elements of Western gender ideology, spurring the violent suppression and elimination of same-sex desire and gender variant people and societies. Heteropatriarchy emerged as the dominant Euro-American sex/gender system that persists to this day.

Heteropatriarchy was imposed across Europe's colonies through what queer and decolonial scholar Scott Lauria Morgensen calls terrorizing sexual colonization, a process that systematically destroyed matrilineal, non-binary and non-hierarchical societies and systems of governance. Morgensen further observes that

colonial settlement and control were made possible through a murderous combination of indigenous elimination and the colonial regulation of sexual relations, gender identities, reproduction, and genealogy — a process that continues today — while Native scholars Maile Arvin, Eve Tuck, Angie Morrill assert that the management and enforcement of Indigenous peoples' "proper" gender roles and sexuality are entangled in settler nations' attempts to limit and manage Indigenous claims to land. Sociologist and feminist philosopher María Lugones writes of the coloniality of gender, a brutal and violent process through which colonized peoples were forced to become women or men, and she emphasizes that the European gender system is not only hierarchical but also racially differentiated.

For philosopher J. Moufawad-Paul, settler colonialism and colonization must also be understood as systems of European economic domination that prepared the world for global capitalism. Textiles played a substantial role in the emergence and imposition of capitalist markets. Colonial domination produced unprecedented shifts in textiles across Asia, Africa, and the Americas, as European colonists seized control of highly advanced indigenous, local, and regional textile systems of production, raw materials, trade routes, and expertise, reconfiguring them to align with European proto-capitalist trade and commodity systems. Colonists destroyed more equitable and sustainable forms of production, imposing European dress, tools, looms, materials, and proto-industrial systems of mass production. Colonial rulers also imposed European divisions of labor, feminizing weaving and spinning by relegating them to the realm of female domestic labor, and banishing men from textile work.

Cultural theorist Lisa Lowe observes that colonialism, settler colonialism and slavery are very different, yet operated simultaneously to transform lands, raw materials, and human labor into commodities for the profit and wealth of European men. She and scholar, activist and writer William Edward Burghardt Du Bois observe that the global slave trade provided the assets for Euro-American industrialization, which began in textiles. African American scholars of textiles like Karen Hampton and Jean M. West detail the coerced labors of women, men and children of African descent on cotton and indigo plantations, while cultural theorists Hortense Spillers and Saidiya Hartman remind us that the dehumanization of chattel slavery reduced black men, women and children alike to commodities, thereby rendering the role of gender and sexual differentiation in the constitution of labor especially complex in the context of slavery. Lowe further observes that chattel slavery in the United States was inextricably connected to the exploitation of workers on plantations in Asia, Pacific Islands, India, Indian Ocean, Africa, and Latin America.

Capitalism has always aimed to subordinate and control women's labor in an effort to exploit it. Today most sewing work is done by women of color, immigrant women, and women in the global south. Professor of gender and Asian American studies Grace Kyungwon Hong observes that racialized populations are specifically targeted for exploitation by capitalism, further noting that women of color disproportionately occupy the lowest positions on the economic ladder under late capitalism.



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Yet issues of race and histories of colonization and enslavement are largely absent from investigations of "women's work" in most canonical texts on fiber, considered here as published scholarship that serves to theorize, define, and shape the field of fiber and its material, formal, aesthetic, conceptual, and thematic concerns. Many canonical discussions of sewing — the medium emphasized in *Through Her Eye* — focus almost exclusively on leisured, domestic, ornamental embroidery performed in the home by women of European descent. Yet this was a luxury that few women could afford. In reality, tens of thousands of women continued to do paid needlework both inside and outside of their homes, often for low wages and under highly exploitative conditions. A problem arises when canonical scholarship claims to represent "women" and embroidery, rather than a specific subset of women's experiences. As a result, many prevalent understandings of "women's work" have been defined through Eurocentric, classed- and white-privileged perspectives — yet presented as universal experiences. The problem of elision and exclusion is exacerbated because crucial

scholarship by women of color remains marginal in the field. Notions of "women's work" in fiber cannot truly be understood without attention to the work of fiber scholars and artists including Cuesta Benberry, Gladys-Marie Fry, Roland A. Freeman, Carolyn Mazloomi, Floris Barnett Cash, Kyra E. Hicks, Karen Hampton, Eli Bartra, Jasleen Dhamija, Tina Sherwell, Carol Tulloch, Christine Checinska, Ana María Presta, Davina Gregory, Grace S. Fong, Margaret A. Villanueva, Sarah Cheang, and Michelle Maskiel. "Women's work" cannot be conceived of without regard for how gender inextricably operates in relation to race, place, sexuality, religion, class, economics, resource possession, and profit.

Dominant scholarship in fiber may have shaped conceptions of women's work, but it was European men who invented and implemented the gender and racial hierarchies through which textile work was feminized and exploited. Art historians Jenni Sorkin and Elissa Auther remind us that fiber artists and curators of the 1960s and 1970s were forced to contend with the hostile and sexist responses of male art critics. This is not surprising given the overwhelming misogyny of Western art history. Fiber and textiles were constructed as "women's work" by patriarchal forces operating both inside and outside art and art history.



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Artists, curators, critics, and scholars continue to grapple with questions of gendered labor, and *Through Her Eye* attests to the ongoing challenges and possibilities for exploring this territory. The artists in *Through Her Eye* are mobilizing fiber to explore and explode persistent ideas of sewing as a female, domestic, privileged, leisure activity. Working across a range of public and private sites, in solo, collaborative, and participatory projects, the artists are exploring a plethora of related concerns, including death and mourning, immigration justice, globalization, migration, new technologies, pop culture, mass media, community and social relationships, pleasure, and sex. They are doing so from decolonial, intersectional, non-binary, migrant, international, queer, and cross-disciplinary perspectives, drawing as much on fibrous materials as on the conflicted and often violent histories that textiles embody.

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