

**Artistic Development: A Self Study**

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Art 5506: Artistic Development

Dr. Susan Livingston

December 8, 2024

## Introduction

Subject: Alex, please add me to your LinkedIn network  
From: "Katrina Perdue via LinkedIn"  
Date: 9/27/13 9:53 am

*Katrina,*

*I can't add you to my LinkedIn as I am not sure what you do, or your interests.*

*What is a fiber artist? I would update your experience since 2007 regardless of what it is. Even if you aren't working, let us know what has kept you busy, what's kept your interest? Been in jail...what have you learned? You get the idea. People want to know who you are. Just my opinion.*

*Alex*

(personal communication, September 27, 2013)

Two days before receiving this email, I had finalized my divorce, ending a thirteen-year marriage to the father of my three young children. As I prepared for this new phase of life, I needed to rebuild my professional identity after years as a stay-at-home parent. Although I held a bachelor's degree, my academic path was challenging as I struggled to find a major that aligned with my interests. While art had always been a passion of mine, I was led to believe it was not a viable career path.

Now, as a single mother, art presented an opportunity for work that would allow the flexibility necessary to care for my daughters, aged five, four, and nine months. The emotional challenges of this time left me feeling apprehensive, and receiving Alex's dismissive email might have deepened my self-doubt. Instead, it became a catalyst, inspiring me to challenge dismissive attitudes like his, and redefine my identity as a fiber artist.

## Part One

My artistic development mostly occurred outside formal educational settings through self-directed learning and creative work experiences. Growing up in a resourceful household, I was inspired by my mother, who often engaged in art and craft projects. My father was also

skilled in construction and repair and instilled an appreciation for craftsmanship and a do-it-yourself ethos in me.

At age 20, before leaving Indiana for Maryland, my mother gave me a sewing machine and taught me the basics of clothing construction. This introduction to sewing inspired a creative drive in me that felt deeply intuitive. After settling in Baltimore, I pursued formal and informal education in fashion design while working part-time at a fine fabric store. Around the same time, I taught myself to knit using instructional pamphlets and resources at local yarn shops.

Despite these accomplishments, I often hesitated to identify myself as an artist. Traditionally gendered crafts, like sewing and knitting, face broad societal challenges. Dr. Hilary Carlisle, in an interview about fiber art, emphasizes this point:

The general issues with the word craft seem to hold true for fiber art, too. The terms still hold associations with femininity which have not escaped from the historical mapping of masculine prioritization. Aside from the gender issues, which any term containing words relating to fabric, clothes, or craft will inevitably connote, it seems to be very difficult to find terms that somehow distinguish between ‘hobby’ craft and the serious designer-maker (Hemmings, 2005).

While pursuing my bachelor’s degree at Towson University, I explored elective courses in the Theater Department, applying my artistic skills to costume and makeup design. Two instructors became impactful mentors, inspiring me to pursue makeup artistry. I worked professionally in this industry until 2007, when I completed my degree, relocated to Memphis, and prepared for the birth of my first child.

## Part Two

Relocating to Memphis marked the beginning of a new chapter, learning how to be a parent while maintaining my artistic interest. Knitting became my primary creative outlet, due to its portability and ease of working with unpredictable schedules. I joined a local knitting group and developed new friendships, including a mentor that encouraged me to explore pattern design. This relationship was especially impactful as I rebuilt my professional identity after divorce.

Seeking to validate my skills, I completed the Craft Yarn Council's Knitting Instructor Program. I also began working as a Montessori assistant at my daughters' school, a role that provided stability and an opportunity to explore extra-curricular art education. During this period, I began creating public textile art installations, sold work at artist markets, and started accepting commissions. The arts community was vital in the rebuilding of my professional life.

It was during this time that I discovered mending as an emotional and artistic practice. Following the loss of my father to a swift battle with cancer, I turned to hand sewing as a form of



Figure 1 "the beginning" (own image)

healing. Repurposing his clothing to repair my own allowed me to incorporate deeply personal elements into my work. These patches became tangible expressions of memory, grief, and renewal, and they marked a profound evolution in my artistic practice.

My personal mending practice expanded to include repairing clothing for friends and family. As an experiment, I set up a mending pop-up inside the atrium of Crosstown Concourse and offered clothing repairs to the public. The response was overwhelmingly positive and gave me the motivation to expand my practice to take on commission-based repair work.

I discovered the work of UK artist Celia Pym, whose mending philosophy resonated deeply with me (Celia Pym, n.d.). After learning of her course offering at Penland School of Craft in the summer of 2019, I applied for scholarships and was selected to be her Studio Assistant for the two-week workshop. This experience marked a pivotal moment in my career as an artist and Celia has remained a friend and mentor.

Following Penland, I began working as a workshop assistant at Five in One Social Club, a local small business offering creative workshops for adults. This role allowed me to expand my teaching experience while learning new artistic skills. I also sought funding for a dedicated studio space through a local non-profit organization, Arts Memphis. After three application attempts, I received the Arts Accelerator Grant in early 2020 and rented my first studio.

Around this time, I was also invited to join the University of Memphis as an Adjunct Instructor of Textiles, beginning in the summer of 2020. However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted these plans. Five in One temporarily closed, and as schools shifted to online instruction, my studio became a private refuge. Amid this uncertainty, I started a meditative knitting project for stress relief. This culminated in the creation of a piece titled *knit cocoon (escape portal)*, a reflection on seclusion, perseverance, and slow stitching as self-soothing.

Displayed suspended from a wooden bracket with knitting needles still attached, it symbolized the infinite feeling of pandemic isolation along with the desire to feel safe and protected.



Figure 2 "knit cocoon (escape portal)" (own image)

### Part Three

As public spaces began to reopen, I resumed my teaching roles at Five in One Social Club and the University of Memphis. I also moved to a larger studio and was invited to have my first solo-exhibition at Crosstown Arts Gallery (Crosstown Arts, 2022). This milestone represented a significant achievement in my artistic career, nearly a decade after committing to the path of becoming a professional artist. My exhibition, *Mending in a State of Abundance*, filled an 1800sq ft. gallery space and showcased a body of work centered on mending and repair. As part of the exhibition, I included an interactive element titled *gallery mending piece*, inspired by my earlier mending pop-up experiment. This installation featured a simple table and chair set

up for working on a heavily damaged pair of wool military pants. During gallery hours, I sat at the table mending, inviting visitors to engage in conversations about the practice of repair or anything they felt like discussing with me.



*Figure 3 "gallery mending piece (11/18/22-3/5/23)" (photo by Bill Bangham)*

This emphasis on connecting with the public remains a central element of my work. By fostering dialogue and creating a relationship between the viewer and artist, I hope to engage in the personal and communal aspects of mending and create art and experiences that are accessible.

### **Looking Back, Moving Forward**

My personal development as an artist has not been linear or ever felt direct, but my enduring passion for the creative process has remained a consistent driving force. I have come to recognize the fundamental role that mentorship, community, and exploration play in fostering artistic growth. Al-Radaideh (2024) asserts, "Self-directed learning is practiced most efficiently when there are resources available, and guidance provided, as well as the use of community art centers and local shows." What began as a focus on my own artistic growth has transformed into a commitment to advocating for others to have access to the same opportunities I have had.

## References

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- Celia Pym. (n.d.). <http://celiapym.com/>
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