Uniform Series.

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A thesis
presented to
The faculty of the Department of Art and Design
East Tennessee State University
In partial fulfillment
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Master of Arts
by
Caroline Manheimer
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Patricia Mink, Chair
Catherine Murray
Mira Gerard

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ABSTRACT

Uniform Series

by

Caroline Manheimer

This paper supports the exhibition entitled Uniform Series, on display in Slocumb Galleries at East Tennessee State University from March 17 to March 21, 2008. The pieces in the exhibit explore the processes of dyeing, printing, and stitching on cottons and sheer silks. The imagery contained in the pieces springs from the use of the artist’s first grade school uniform which functions as a symbol of the images, memories, and themes suggested by the artist’s life review process. The redemption of the past in order to arrive in the present mirrors the repeated processes involved in dyeing, discharging, and over-dyeing the cloth. The thesis discusses artistic influences and the integrating role of life review. The author explores the culture of the “art quilt” and its relationship to the artist’s personal life.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

“Uniform Series” is an exhibit of sixteen fiber works depicting one or more images of a dress like form. At first glance a viewer might think these works are prints or paintings, but they are actually dyed and stitched fabrics hung on the wall. I am presenting mixed media fiber art, sometimes described as “art quilts.”

The title, Uniform Series, plays on various definitions of the word “uniform.” Most obviously I am using the material garment – my first grade school uniform that I wore to Notre Dame Academy across the street from Mission Dolores in San Francisco in 1950-51. I have the original uniform, a navy blue, light serge wool jumper worn with a white blouse. I have used a stylized graphic image of the jumper throughout the series to represent my “self.” As a whole, I offer the series as a metaphor or visual symbol representing the narrative of my life course, without trying to reproduce a one-to-one symmetry with specific events or people. Although the images were inspired by various memories, moods, themes, events, and people associated with my life, I have not tried to literally represent any of these.

One consistent theme in the narrative of the series is the tension between uniformity, conformity, external demands or forces, and my persistent attempts in my life to find and express an authentic self. The struggle to find my own voice and expression in the midst of social pressures and the constraints of an economic and physical reality belongs to a universal drama. As art these pieces are also engaged in a paradoxical struggle: to show uniqueness in the same, particularity in the universal, freedom amidst the constraints of necessity.
The uniform acts as a limit. It is a restraint that I struggle against. The struggle itself is energizing, and the more desperate the struggle becomes, the more the possibility of a breakthrough increases. Susan Christian, a Northwest artist, has described one aspect of the process of art as a coming up to a barrier of some sort and figuring out a way to get beyond the barrier. Sometimes what takes one beyond can be an idea, a new concept, but at other times it can be a new tool, an old tool used in a new way, a new material or technique (Christain). By working consistently, one can usually find a route beyond an impasse. Most successful writers and artists describe the necessity of attending to their work on a regular, disciplined schedule.

As I found myself repeatedly printing similar images of the school uniform, the movie “Groundhog Day” became a source of inspiration. Bill Murray is forced to repeat the same day, Groundhog Day, again and again, until he learns that he can affect the outcome by changing his actions. I wanted to free myself to experiment widely without inhibitions or fear of producing bad work. In this spirit I made prints of my uniform in the hopes of learning from the process itself. William Stafford said in a lecture that I attended, that it was important to write bad poems because regular writing of even bad poems would keep the ‘pipeline” clear so that the good poems could come through (Stafford).

Why did I decide to use the school uniform as the central form to represent my “self”? I have mentioned various themes I identify with uniforms in general. But most of all, for me, the uniform has come to represent the sense of struggle
for self-definition that I have experienced in my life. I have struggled against social and familial pressures and expectations as well as my own confusion and limitations. I confound my “external” roles (daughter, granddaughter, sister, wife, mother, grandmother, lover, friend, neighbor, student, librarian) with my internal sense of self, a self informed by dreams, myths, and fantasies. I think one can hide from one’s own authentic self in an identity defined by role just as one can hide behind a uniform. At the same time, there are advantages to uniforms and clearly defined roles. In high School I felt liberated from peer pressure surrounding dress. I focused on the internal rather than the external. In some of the pieces in this show I overlapped and misaligned the layers of the uniform to express my confusion.

I wanted to use other symbols or images to convey themes and images associated with my life and general thinking about the life review process. A silk screen designed for printed circuit boards was given to me by a friend, Randy Shull, who had bought 50 of them on ebay on a whim. For me, the printed circuit board screen becomes a significant image because of my personal association with the electronics industry and Silicon Valley. When I graduated from high school, my mother was running a small school teaching people to assemble printed circuit boards. I was expected to get a job assembling circuit boards in a factory. I worked in the factory for six weeks before I was able to get myself a job in a used bookstore.
I am also drawing on the symbols used in genograms – psychodynamic versions of a “family tree” diagram with various markings used to denote the nature of relationships as well as generational positions. Deaths, illnesses, psychological functioning, alcoholism, addictions, abusive relationships, divorces, remarriages are just some of the types of information expressed in a genogram. Bowen family systems therapy emphasizes the necessity of understanding family patterns passed down through generations and the roles played by extended family members. An understanding of the multigenerational emotional process can help an individual grow up as much as possible within that process (Kerr 309). The background in Uniform Series #4 contains a simple diagram of my family including my parents, my former husband’s parents, our children and grandchildren.

Finally, “uniform” is a cataloging concept in librarianship. As a former librarian, the double use of the word uniform appealed to me. In cataloguing, documents that appear under diverse titles or formats but that are essentially the same document are assigned a “uniform” title to prevent confusion. In this case, the term “uniform” implies underlying cohesion beneath superficial dissimilarity.
CHAPTER 2
LIFE REVIEW

In her introduction to Radka Donnell’s book *Quilts as Women’s Art: A Quilt Poetics*, Elaine Hedges describes the process of quiltmaking as a “metaphor for individual psychic integration and for female bonding….this process offers the possibility of, specifically, a symbolic re-enactment and resolution to the painful separation from and need to reconnect with the mother….this separation and need to reconnect are crucial in the formation of female identity” (x). Many of my uniform series pieces revolve around my connection with my mother. I began one piece as a large portrait of my mother based on her high school graduation picture. Dissatisfied with the portrait, I cut it up, reassembled it, dyed, discharged, and over dyed it several times before ultimately using it to form the background of yet another piece. In this situation the various hands-on processes were more meaningful to me than the product. Just as Donnell emphasizes the tactile aspect of textiles and the piecing of cloth relating them to the need for touch, touching, connection, and community, I used the physical manipulation of the cloth as a way to process emotions. Cloth holds history more than most materials. Dye it one color, change the color repeatedly by over dyeing it; remove color; print patterns or images, over dye them. The final version of the cloth will subtly reflect these many steps.

From the perspective of psychiatrist and neuroscientist Daniel Siegel, “mental well-being is created within the process of integration, the linkage of differentiated components of a system into a functional whole” (288). The integration
outlined by Siegel involves bringing to consciousness and integrating into a whole repressed memories and emotions, somatic sensations, the left and right hemispheres of the brain, implicit and explicit memories, the stories of our lives, impermanence, uncertainty, and death, conflicting states of mind, our relationships with others, and our place in the universe (292-320).

I attempted the integration, reorganization, and resolution of past experiences, including conflicts. I began by focusing on my early years. I viewed old photographs and then interviewed my father about when and where the pictures were taken. I interviewed his sister, my aunt, as well. These interviews revealed that my previous “story” of the first few years of my life had been incorrect. I painted from the old photographs in Mira Gerard’s painting class. I was surprised not only by the intensity of the emotional states this process evoked but also by the range of

Figure 4 Girl in the desert

Figure 5 Me and my half sisters
unsuspected emotions I saw when I looked at my own paintings, from pathos to humor and irony.

Recent advances in neural anatomy offer some intriguing ideas about such a visual search for self knowledge. Simplistically stated, the left side of the brain is the predominantly verbal and logical side, while the right side is the intuitive, emotional side. Implicit memory (preverbal memory) is stored in the right side of the brain, as is autobiographical consciousness. In an interesting experiment recently reported by RadioLab, Photoshop was used to blend half of a subject’s face with Bill Clinton’s face. Then alternate sides of the subject’s brain were anesthetized briefly. When the right side of the brain was conscious, the subjects had no trouble recognizing their own embedded image. When the left side of the brain was conscious, the subjects could not recognize themselves; they saw only Bill Clinton. The researchers concluded that the right side of the brain contained a visual link to self-knowledge unavailable to the left (Abumrad). So now I believe that, perhaps, by painting from these photographs I was able to gain access to childhood emotions locked in the right side of the brain and bring them to the surface in some sort of triangulating method of expression – externalizing right brain contents for the left brain to “see.”

Although not all the components of Siegel’s integration process were addressed in my life review process, I think that working visually rather than verbally allowed me more access to the emotional dimension of the life review.
CHAPTER 3

INFLUENCES

Francis Bacon

At the end of the first semester I made a piece based on the biblical story of David and the dowry Saul demanded for his eldest daughter – 100 Philistine foreskins. The pattern of the wall hanging was one I had used in the past, and in this piece I incorporated various types of oval shapes as well as the Hebrew and English text of the story. In the final critique session I became aware of my dissatisfaction with the tension between the decorative aspect of the piece and its theme - a horrific crime. This made me think of Francis Bacon, whose work expresses great anguish and pain. I started looking at his work and reading the interview with him by David Sylvester. Bacon refuses to hide from extreme emotions. His painting *Triptych, May-June 1973* is based on the suicide of one of his lovers. His paintings are shocking and painful but there is a formality about them that rescues his work from mere emotionality. Talking about his work, he states that he reveals and incorporates some of the most chaotic states – drunkenness, drugs, gambling -- into his work, as well as the accidental, such as a spill or some other sort of “mistake.”

Studying Bacon’s art made me braver about exploring colors I had feared would be considered ugly or expressing inappropriately raw emotions. My previous quilts might have been bold, but this raw quality was not present. One of the things I have been trying to do in my *Uniform* series is to express emotional conflicts and the darker sides of the human psyche. These are difficult qualities to resolve in an “artistic” way – or a presentable or communicative way. I admire Bacon’s fearlessness, his embrace of
existential horror, and his slightly out of control way of working. I am also interested in the way he worked in a responsive dialog with other artists, like his use of Velazquez’s Portrait of Pope Innocent X or his use of Picasso’s biomorphic forms.

*Fran Skiles*

Although Fran Skiles exhibits widely in the Art Quilt world, her pieces are mixed media collage, incorporating a variety of materials and techniques. She uses layers of sheer silks and cotton duck, acrylic and textile paints, oil sticks, as well as her own photographic images. Her works are tightly composed abstractions with an air of mystery and suggestion combined with obscured fragments of very specific photographic images. The viewer might take a while to notice a portion of a building structure or the image of a bird. The viewer is invited to come closer, to touch, to look carefully. Often these half images are embedded in a textured collage of darks with a bright center focus.

I am inspired by Skiles’ skillful freedom with materials and the atmospheric containment of mystery and suggestion. My first attempt to incorporate layers into my work was an imitation of one of her pieces in my visual journal. I have studied her compositions, especially her light and dark effects, as a way of improving my own designs.

*Nancy Crow*

Although I had been dyeing cloth since 1968, I had made only some tentative wall hangings and two full size bed quilts. I was focused more on batik than on the piecing process of quilt construction about which I knew very little. But by accident I
happened upon an exhibition of Nancy Crow’s work at the American Craft Museum in the winter of 1992 and found both a role model and a community of art quilters that I could identify with. I bought my first exhibition catalog. Her colors were so intense! She didn’t use templates! I shared the catalog with my friend, Pat Samuels, who took a workshop with Nancy and came home and convinced me to do the same.

I spent two weeks with Nancy at Arrowmont in 1995. I learned all I know about improvisational quilt construction at that time. Nancy introduced me to the world of the art quilt with its exhibition possibilities, professional practices, and way of working “on the wall” which involves designing on a flannel board in much the same way as a painter paints.

Nancy took me and all of her students seriously, urging us to stop talking and start working. So I begin to have a shape for my ambitions surrounding “art.” I started making quilts and thinking about myself as an “art quilter.” I was inspired by the freedom her techniques gave me to move beyond conventional quilts. In dyeing cloth, I raised my standards of intensity and saturation of color.

**Jim Dine and Susan Rothenberg**

Jim Dine and Susan Rothenberg are two artists who have created secular “iconic” images to represent the self. After beginning psychoanalysis Dine began to form a symbolic language to express his memories and explore themes of the self, the body, and memory. His *Robe* series is autobiographical as is his *Tools* series. *Tools* reference his growing up working in his father’s hardwood store. Susan Rothenberg’s abstract paintings of horses are described by Robert Hughes as “disguised self-portraits, or at least
“presences” that stood for human presence “(Hughes 588). Rothenberg selected the horse because she had earlier been a dancer and wanted something that conveyed physicality and movement. During the period of her divorce the horses were dismembered, slashed, bleeding. These two artists were both an inspiration and an affirmation of my work.
CHAPTER 5
TECHNIQUES AND MATERIALS

The pieces in this exhibition are quilted wall hangings. They meet the formal definition of a quilt as set down by “Quilt National” on their website, “The work must possess the basic structural characteristics of a quilt. It must be predominantly fabric or fabric-like material and must be composed of at least two full and distinct layers -- a face layer and a backing layer -- that are held together by hand- or machine-made functional quilting stitches or other elements that pierce all layers and are distributed throughout the surface of the work. At least some of these stitches or elements should be visible on the back of the work.” (Quilt National).

I have sewn bindings on two of the pieces from the Uniform series but most of them have the backing folded frontward with the batting (Hobbs Heirloom Premium, 80% cotton, 20% polyester) hidden by the top layer. Most of the top layers have their raw edges exposed. The layers were stitched through both for the practical purpose of connecting the all the layers as well as adding texture and line as design elements.

The images were printed, dyed, and discharged. Some or all of these processes were repeated until I was satisfied with the result. Many pieces of cloth went through a phase of being a disaster before they were over dyed, reprinted, and redeemed; others might have been beautiful for a moment until I did one thing too many and ruined them. This possibility of redemption for a piece of cloth appeals to me. It helps me overcome
the sense of preciousness that can become paralyzing. One can always start over and dye a piece black, then start discharging and dyeing it all over again.

I used Procion M dyes for immersion dyeing and Procion H dyes for printing. The H dyes need to be steam set but the shelf life of the dye paste is up to two months as opposed to much shorter time for the M dyes. Also the setting process for the M series, which involves covering the cloth in plastic and then leaving it for a day or two in a 70-80 degree room, has never given me consistent results, mostly because I lacked either sufficient space or consistent temperature.

The printing was done with silk screens using resists made of paper or plastic shelf liner, or cold wax painted on to the screen, or cold wax stamped onto the screen using simple checkerboard or other stamps from Michaels. I did use several photo screens from family photos that I manipulated in Photoshop to produce a completely black and white transparency print. I also used the screen for printing circuit boards in the electronics industry mentioned earlier.

I experimented with the Epson printer, printing directly from Photoshop onto cloth prepared with BubbleJet. I found I preferred working with dye gels, both for the colors I was able to achieve and for the processes involved. Asheville artist, Allison Dennis, had taken a workshop with Kerr Grabowski in a method called deconstructed screen printing. Allison helped me expand my screen printing techniques. I started by painting the dye gel directly onto the screen and letting it dry. Then, using the squeegee, I would print on cloth with clear gel. As the dried dyes dissolved a series of related images could be printed. At some point I quit waiting for the dye to dry. This is a workable method because the first wet gel to hit the cloth will act as an imperfect resist to any
subsequent gels screened over the cloth as long as the gel is wet. There is some smearing involved but I like the spontaneity of the process.

In many of the pieces I printed or discharged the uniform shape onto sheer silks and then glued the silks onto a cotton base layer using WonderUnder. Often the printing on the base layer had a confusion of images on it or in some cases explicit writing. By applying the sheer layer I was able to disguise or obscure some of the underlying images.
CHAPTER 6

BELONGING

I became involved with quilts after years of tie-dyeing and batik. These were serious but amateur have-fun activities that I taught in Danish evening school, the leisure education program at Evergreen State College, and in my garage. I gradually became more focused about my fiber work and started to take art classes while in the midst of a library career and raising three children. It has only been recently, through art history classes and discussions with artists and art students, that I have become more aware of the issues informing the contemporary art world. I choose to work in textiles because they are familiar to me. I grew up with my grandmother who sewed a lot of my clothes and made quilts. I have a quilt from her grandmother, my great grandmother, that has provided me with a concrete sense of connection to her and her “immortality.” This quilt outlasted its creator and reminds her descendents of her story. Her existence would have gone unnoticed except for her quilt. I would like my great grandchildren to have one of my quilts. The connective aspect of quilts is very important to me.

In the traditional world of quilts uniformity has been considered a good thing. My grandmother would count stitches at a quilt show – she admired hand stitching that had twelve stitches to the inch. Templates were used to reproduce patterns accurately. In the African-American community, however, design traditions countered with patterns that varied when repeated, straight lines broken to ward off evil (in the same spirit as jazz relates to standard music). The freedom represented by these principles has made it possible for me to make quilts.
Studio Art Quilt Associates is a professional organization that promotes art quilts through education, exhibitions, and conferences. At a recent conference, which I attended as a member, we were coached on getting our work accepted into the “high” art world. One speaker suggested that we completely change the scale of our work. As a curator, she had installed a show that included an eight foot high ball of gigantic yarn with matching knitting needles. Speaker Ellen Kochansky described her transformation from a production quilter to a conceptual artist, still using the quilt grid but now enclosing artifacts of memory in sheer fabrics (Kochansky). I find the broad horizons of the art world exciting, but I was dismayed by the gimmicky and superficial attempts to break into this arena that were in evidence at the conference attendees show of works.

After the conference we all toured FiberArt International 2007 on exhibit at the Mint Museum in Charlotte. This show of cutting edge fiber work had a few pieces in quilt format. The works ranged widely from a group of randomly placed rubber bands hanging from nails in the wall to the digitally printed and machine embroidered work of Professor Mink. These days, conversations about fiber art range from issues raised in the art magazines on display at Barnes and Noble to issues arising from the stunning reception by the world of high art to the quilts of the isolated hamlet, Gees Bend. There is no single unified forum although Quilt National and Quilt Visions remain the two major exhibitions. To participate in the “Art Quilt” conversation, artists submit their work to these shows and others.

I envision my Uniform Series participating in the Art/Quilt dialog. The quilt world offers me a community and an opportunity to display my work. I value the emotionally connective qualities inherent in fiber work. The Uniform Series works with
personal psychological issues in an art medium. I find it difficult to tell where therapy ends and art begins, but as Andrew Glasgow, director of the American Craft Council, remarked, “Does it matter?” (Glasgow).
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Above is an installation view of Uniform Series, exhibited in Slocumb Galleries at East Tennessee State University from March 17th until March 20th, 2008.
Uniform Series #1  23”(H) x 20.5” (W)
Hand dyed cotton and silk; machine quilted.

Uniform Series #2  21”(H) x 16.25”(W)
Hand dyed cotton; machine quilted.
Uniform Series #3  23”(H) x 19”(W)
Hand dyed cotton and silk; machine quilted.

Uniform Series #4  22”(H) x 24.5”(W)
Hand dyed cotton; machine quilted.
Uniform Series #5  
30.25”(H) x 21.5”(W)

Uniform Series #6,7,8  
24”(H) x 44”(W)
Hand dyed cotton and silk; machine quilted.
Uniform Series #9  23.5”(H) x 23.5”(W)
Hand dyed cotton; machine quilted

Uniform Series #10  23”(H) x 21”(W)
Hand dyed cotton and silk; machine quilted.
Uniform Series #11,12
Hand dyed cotton and silk; machine quilted.

Uniform Series #13,14
24”(H) x 36”(W)
Hand dyed cotton and silk; machine quilted.
Uniform Series #15  24.25”(H) x 20.75”(W)
Hand dyed cotton and silk; machine quilted.

Uniform Series #16  23”(H) x 15.25”(W)
Hand dyed cotton and silk; machine quilted.
Uniform Series #17  25.25(H) x 16.26(W)
Hand dyed cotton and silk; machine quilted.

Uniform Series # 18,19,20  24”(H) x 26”(W)
Hand dyed cotton; machine printed.
Uniform Series #21  26”(H) x 25”(W)
Hand dyed cotton: machine quilted.

Uniform Series #22  26”(H) x 17.5(W)
Hand dyed cotton: machine quilted.
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