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Textiles from the Canadian Front

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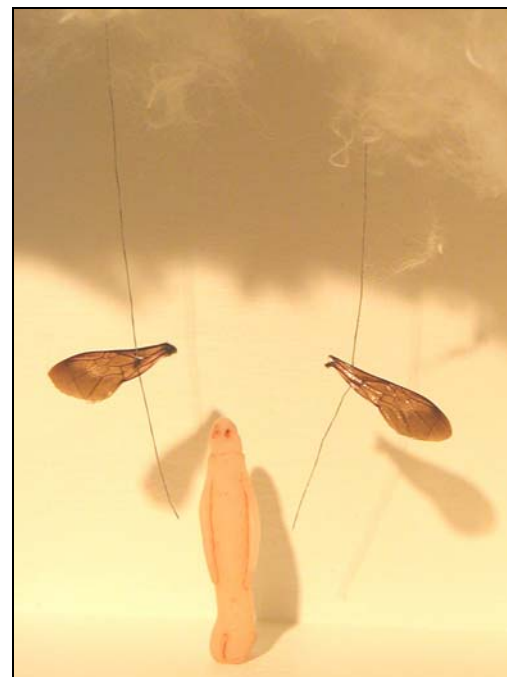


Figure 1 (left). *Draw Me a Rose*, 2004 – 2006. Artist: Anna Torma. 130 cm x 155 cm. Photo Credit: David Zsako

Figure 2 (right). *Bee Wings Diorama*, 2005. Artist: Candice Tarnowski. 9.5 cm x 9.5 cm x 5 cm.

Photo Credit: Candice Tarnowski

The craft of storytelling has all but disappeared from the Western cultural context, and there remain few peoples for whom oral traditions are still a prominent part of their everyday lives. Fiber artists and their work are frequently discussed by craft historians, critics, curators and connoisseurs, but aside from infrequent interviews in monographs and craft journals, their own voices are rarely heard. This is being somewhat addressed with the practice of conducting oral history interviews with leaders in the craft and textile field in the US, through the Smithsonian Institute, with the Nanette L. Laitman Project for Craft and the Decorative Arts¹, and in the UK at the Constance Howard Resource and Research Center in Textiles at Goldsmiths University², to mention but a few. In Canada, however, there have been no steps taken to mine this rich and valuable resource and to provide necessary and pertinent primary research material. I will begin to address this deficiency by presenting the voices and experiences of Canadian fiber artists very briefly in this paper.

I conducted in-depth interviews with both Anna Torma and Candice Tarnowski in order to find out more about the life of the professional fiber artist today. The point of this paper is to share their own voices as they talk about their lives and the influences that their experiences have

¹ Riedel, Mija and Liza Kirwin. "Vision and Voice: The Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project." Catalogue Essays, from the SOFA 2005 website. <http://www.sofaexpo.com/NY/2005/>.

² Constance Howard Resource and Research Center in Textiles, , "Site Map, Publications and Enterprise", Goldsmiths, University of London, <http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/constance-howard/>.

had upon their work. Therefore, this paper is academically focused in a non-traditional way, as I present primary research material derived from the interviews. I have chosen to present the cultural history, the personal choice of materials and medium, the sense of place experienced and the role of narrative and textiles themselves in the work of these two artists, as these are topical issues facing the fiber artist today. From this point forward in this paper, all of the information about Anna Torma was obtained from the personal interview I conducted with her on March 23, 2006.³ Similarly, all of the information about Candice Tarnowski was obtained from a personal interview with the author on September 24, 2006.⁴

Anna Torma immigrated to Canada from Hungary in 1988. Prior to this, she studied at the Hungarian University of Applied Arts, graduating with a degree in textile art and design. She was a practicing artist when she came to Canada with her family, showing in exhibitions and galleries in Europe prior to moving to Ontario. Torma has shown her work in 11 gallery shows in the past two years, including *Draw Me a Garden*, a solo show at the Spin Gallery in Toronto, and *Just My Imagination*, a group show that traveled to the Art Gallery of Windsor, the Museum Of Contemporary Canadian Art in Toronto and to the Dalhousie Art Gallery in Halifax. She is currently represented by the Snyderman Works Gallery in Philadelphia, and by the Spin Gallery in Toronto. Torma was chosen as a Saidye Bronfman award finalist in 2005.



Figure 3. *Playground 8*, 2005. Artist: Anna Torma. 85 cm x 85 cm. Photo Credit: David Zsako.

³ Anna Torma. Interview by author. Montreal, Quebec, 23 March 2006.

⁴ Candice Tarnowski. Interview by author. Montreal, Quebec, 24 September 2006.

Candice Tarnowski was born and raised in Calgary, Alberta, where she spent her formative years. She received her Bachelor of Fine arts from the Alberta College of Art and Design (ACAD), and is currently in her final year of her Master of Fine arts at Concordia University in Montreal. Aside from her time at ACAD and Concordia, Tarnowski has spent much time at the Penland School of Craft. She has done residencies all around the world, including Dawson City, Yukon, Calgary, the Struts Gallery in Sackville, New Brunswick and she just recently completed a summer residency and solo show in Holland. Residencies are an important part of a contemporary artist's development. Of her time in residencies, Tarnowski stated:

I would say I have met some of my closest friends and colleagues, and made some of the most valuable connections, in every way, doing residencies ~ being able to just get more of a sense of the kind of world we live in, connections that exist and a sense of how things are done in all kinds of places, which has always been valuable to me.

An important consideration for contemporary working artists is their cultural heritage and ancestral history. When discussing this issue with Torma, she related that she comes from a long line of textile makers. She states that living in Hungary:

I was born into a culture where they made their own material, like bed sheets and kitchen stuff, and even the clothing. The beautiful 3-D things like embroidery and weaving, and those kind of traditional textile making methods. It was happening all the time and they were interested to learn it, my mother and my grandmother

Torma went on to describe that heirlooms were passed down in her family, for instance:

The wearables, because in my family, some parts came from Transylvania ~ came from this little village, making beautiful clothes for the bride, and the brides clothing is really, really remarkable and well known in all of Hungary because it really stands out from all parts of the clothing ~ I have the silken one, from within the family.

Aside from her mother and grandmother, art in general was promoted in her family:

My father was a painter, a master painter of course, probably my talent came from that side, and I was encouraged to do whatever I really want to or what I am happy with, you know, there was a difference between boys and girls in that time.

In terms of her cultural history, Tarnowski's childhood also exposed her to much textile work. Growing up in Alberta, with most of her immediate relatives close by gave her a sense of family that stays with her today. She shared that:

My grandmother and my mother were all knitters and crocheters, embroiderers, menders and quilters, they were always making things. My mom sewed pretty much everything my sister and I wore, when we were little, as well as things for herself ~ and things for my brother and my dad, pajamas mainly, she wasn't tailoring suits or that kind of thing, but she was making lovely dresses and coats, tablecloths, napkins, aprons, curtains, bed coverings, and things like that.

Speaking further about her family background, Tarnowski continues:

My grandfather was a tailor, and I see how that lineage has affected me but also other members of my family, but a lot of it was just born out of necessity. As for cultural heritage, it's so hard to pinpoint ~ we don't, in comparison to what we understand to be a really pronounced cultural heritage. I started studying at university, and I started making art that my own personal history became something that was actually of interest, like this was something that I could talk about that maybe had some weight to it, or maybe was fascinating on some level, beyond my own sense of myself.

The materials used are often of great significance to artists who work in textile processes. Both Tarnowski and Torma frequently use found objects in their work. These vary from embroideries or textiles that other women have made, to everyday household materials. Torma finds incorporating the forgotten creations of others into her contemporary textile pieces allows her to give these objects new life. She relates that:

Those kinds of kitschy objects show up, you know, a kind of aesthetic which is not mine, really not mine, but it tickles me. I always need to grab and put it somewhere and make a quotation mark around it, you know, its there! And this is my medium and sometimes secret techniques, you need to mix the two, because you see some kind of intricate embroideries that if I took the time to embroider may be a little bit cozier, and you know, the aesthetic of these objects are not right, but the emotion of these things, they want something better ~ something nicer, and I can see that notion behind it, they want to do something.



Figure 4. *Pom-Pom Diorama*, 2005. Artist: Candice Tarnowski. 9.5 cm x 9.5 cm x 5 cm.
Photo Credit: Candice Tarnowski

On the other hand, learning from the past in terms of techniques, and beginning your own project starting from scratch can also be a part of the artistic process. Torma states that:

Sometimes I still feel like using, you know, the sheet of fabric, plain, and I draw on it and embroider it because I find the embroidery preserving the line and the drawing really, really beautifully and I really engage with that process and project. Technically, I like the textiles because you need to think for the technique. I examined 1700 linen tablecloths in Hungary, these are beautiful, beautiful things, and if you use linen fabric for your base, for the embroidery base, it gives you a really different result than when you choose the cotton fabric in the very same material, the very same sense in the very same color. The linen can stand the stretching of many, many stitches a lot better, even if you find a good material with right colors, then it gives you an excellent, excellent embroidery. Technically, you can learn from those hundreds of pure textile making makers so sometimes its really fruitful or good to go back and see ancient techniques that they did, its good for that sometimes.

Although much of her current work would not traditionally be considered as being textile-based, Tarnowski still finds herself returning to her roots in terms of materials. She relates:

I do use a lot of fabric, and notions, threads and little fasteners, and things that are very familiar to me, you know, from sewing. I think my first instinct is still when I put something together, is to do it in a way that's related to sewing, like that's how I feel most comfortable ~

attaching something, or securing something, because I know it can work and I know that with most materials, its strong and that's really, really important to me. Also, there's an opportunity to modulate things, in other words to take them apart and put them back together, because you know, the practical consideration of creating, its something that I have to consider ~ as in planning something and going through the procedure of making it, so, I use a lot of kind of textile based materials.

Tarnowski references the domestic in most of her work. She usually works from home, and her materials are often very simple and a result of everyday activities:

I have been collecting all kinds of fodder from my kitchen, like the ends of carrots and the tips of radishes, and celery hearts and lettuce roots and the tips and toes of beans, eyes of potatoes, and drying all these things and using them in my work.

A sense of place is often present in the work of artists who relate very deeply with their environment. Torma's move to Canada came about in 1988. Although she was already an established artist in Hungary, she and her husband felt the need to move their family to a country without war. She shares the thought behind this move:

The immediate reason was the fear of the communist system collapsing and we had several people, including my husband, who would be an officer in the Hungarian work army, and we didn't want to die. And 1988 looked very, very bloody, because the Soviet Union was just about collapsing, and it showed signs it will be bloody, and we didn't want to die for it. And that was the immediate reason why we came, but after that, I discovered the culture and then made ourselves a home in Canada.

After being in Hamilton, Ontario for several years, Torma and her husband relocated to Baie Verte New Brunswick. Going from a small city to a very small town was a welcome change. She relates the benefits of this move:

Mostly, its quietness that I like, you know, and that kind of isolation, which I really needed. I don't mind that its very quiet, because my social life, it goes where it can ~ and really, my friends in Baie Verte are really sweet and nice and understanding people, they like to help me in every way when they can, they water my flowers if I'm away. They are quiet, decent and the best people that I've met, really. I travel a lot, and if I need some interruption, I need to go away somewhere to see cities and then that's my interruption, but otherwise, I can work up to 14 hours a day without interruption, without a need to go out.

Coming from the Alberta has had a huge influence on Tarnowski's work. There was a sense of relating to the land there that continues to influence her daily life. She explains that:

My first understanding of connection with the natural world, with plants and animals is really embedded in those landscapes, in Alberta, you know, like gopher holes and brome grass, and barn swallows and farm dogs and snow pants, experiences that are really linked inextricably to my family, who are all still there ~ So from early on, I think that that really gave me an interest, an ongoing interest with the first people who were succeeding in that landscape, of course, the Cree people and the pioneers. I always felt, if anything, that I was born in the wrong time, and their ways of existing on that land are endlessly interesting to me, and I think that they have resonance in my work that I see over and over. So the details of their existences and then mine and the threads that I can see ~ with the landscape and the colors and the everyday kind of experience of the textures, you know, that were there physically and kind of ceremoniously and ritually ~ from momentous occasions to really banal events, and non-events, like whether it was part of religious practice, or eating, or other domestic activities. I was raised catholic and so

these kinds of moments, you know, both extremely simple, and like I said, momentous, their weight is really part of my existence.

Tarnowski feels that the sense of place discovered while in her childhood in the prairies is evident in all of her work, regardless of where she is physically as she creates her work.

I think that that kind of, those details make up this rhythm or cadence of daily life, in childhood, that I don't think have changed that much for me. They have really kind of carried into my adulthood and make their way into my practice, into the objects that I make and the things that I'm producing, over and over again. You know, like when I think about scale in my work, which is something I use to help the viewer, the participant, have a relationship with my work, it makes perfect sense to me why I'm doing this ~ the experience that I had as a child with the weight and the envelopment of the snow in Alberta, which now rarely ever happens, unless you are in the mountains, but these piles and piles of snow that were six feet high, you had to clear a path just to the house. On the sidewalk, they loomed above you, and not to mention the landscape, like the hoodoos and their kind of magic, and spookiness of them, and the mountains, we used to call them the mountains, but they are these Rockies, these massive structures that kind of just, you know, there's the foothills that appear before them, but they are just kind of, boom, all of a sudden they are there, on the prairie ~ as well as this great expanse of land that has canola, bright yellow canola, or wheat, like this golden softness of this wheat, and the movement of it, these textures and colors made up my experiences. These are all clichéd ideas of the prairie, but every one of them is real, every one of them is a true experience. I think that they appear again and again, I think that I'm always trying to create some kind of vista, in my work, and a way of being enveloped and experiencing these small details that for me make up, you know these tiny moments are momentous...they are grand in my life.

Since moving to Montreal, to do her MFA, her physical location has greatly changed. Habituated to a more rural environment, Tarnowski has been affected by the move to an urban locale. Still, she finds nature and natural materials to use in her work wherever she can. She states:

I don't think I really have a sense of Quebec as of yet, which is of course the case because I've only been here for two years, and I think I say that mainly because I don't really have a connection with the natural environment here that much ~ I live near the canal, and I spend a lot of time there, mainly because I have always had a dog, so we're there almost every day. In the city, besides the parks which are lovely, in Montreal, that's the closest I can get to nature and being in some kind of natural expanse....so there's this one plant that struck me when I first moved here, which is the shining sumac, and it grows along the canal. It produces these pods that look like internal organs, they look like hearts or lungs, and they of course change from the time they come out in the spring from these small kind of green clusters to these bright red, fuzzy, nappy things that are just spectacular ~ they grow upward from the tree and then the leaves turn eventually this bright, bright, bright, bright red, this scarlet, so striking, and I started collecting those pods as I have been collecting all kinds of fodder.

In terms of choosing a medium, it seems that fiber has always had a special draw for Torna. Despite being trained in interdisciplinary art practices, including drawing and design, she chooses to work with cloth and thread. She continues to find that:

Its very pleasing for me, and interesting for something, if I see some fabric, it interests me ~ yeah, its a very sensual thing, sensual, and my personality is very taken to that, and besides my nature is quite quiet, and I can stay sitting for a day, or more, and I need that, you know, I'm not racing horses. I don't need to be frantically searching for something. If I find a small thing I can make be there, or a detail ~ I have a patient nature to put myself into something, that's a

natural thing, you know, and probably fit for my personality very well, that's why I'm here and I can produce things in a large volume.

Tarnowski, on the other hand, has a very broad art practice that incorporates drawing, sculpture and mixed media installation work along with her fiber art works. She took classes after high school in drawing, ceramics, jewelry and more. However, she always stayed true to her textile inclinations. She acknowledges that at that time:

I would say the main thing that I was doing was sewing, I loved to do that, and I would have my machine with me when I would go somewhere, or move or have access to one. What was I making?? Stuff for the house I lived in, clothes for myself, I sewed most of the things that I made. I dressed like a pioneer, its true, I wore these big boots, like combat boots, and long johns and these long skirts, and petticoats, and wool jackets, and toques, you know, like I said, aesthetically, I always said I was born at the wrong time.

As oral traditions have waned in our culture, there remains a strong need for some sort of storytelling. Television and movies have taken the lead in this area, however, it is felt by many that one of the roles of the artist in society is to provide narratives in and through their work, which comment directly on what is going on around them. In discussing the role of textiles as a storytelling medium, Torma sees it as evident in her work:

It happens to be very personal, my art, if you see it on the wall, you can feel it, this woman is talking about her personal life. That vehicle was so important to me because when I came to Canada I had no English at all, and the drawing and the picture it's a very powerful communication form. I just learned when my young boys were small, and they used their drawings and after that they begin to speak, and my family, the speaking is always the second language, because the pictures and the body language and everything is there and not very verbal ~ and my objects are just statements of this kind of lifestyle that we have at home and that observation I did when I had children. I just discovered how the pictures are so important, the drawings.

Similarly, in discussing the narrative content in both her own work, and in textiles in general, Tarnowski shares that:

These things that we carry with us are used, over time, which we think of textiles as doing or being, whether its tea towel or a weaving, that even just sits on the wall, or whatever, is used as a shawl ~ or a stitch that keeps something together, I think that definitely, these things can tell a story. I think that all things made can tell a story and have the capacity for narrative, and I think memory, I mean, it doesn't have to be tangible or physical, but of course, textiles are so related to storytelling. Maybe because I guess that we connect these processes that we think of as mainly being performed by women, as being related somehow to mainly sitting around and talking, like sitting, stitching and talking, telling stories so there are all of those connections, which are very real and very valuable. There is definitely a narrative that occurs on many levels, and I think the first one that is apparent when people approach my work is the time or the investment of time, but as it relates to the gesture that they see has gone into the process of making. So, these kind of tedious, repetitive activities that they know have taken place in order to make this thing that's sitting in front of them, its apparent, right off the bat, and I think that its still quite curious to people, which is surprising to me. I keep expecting at some point, they are going to just say, oh yeah, you know, I've seen that so many times before, but it fascinates people, it still kind of hits them in this way ~ it's a whole other economy of time, you know, when its about spending time instead of saving it, or hoarding it, withholding time, you know being so careful about it, yeah, its more and more precious, and I certainly relate to that.

Textiles are said by some to be evidence of a life lived. In discussing this concept, both of these artists had a similar perspective. Torma stated that:

You know, its really my life, and I like the history - not the textile history, but the actual piece that I am working with, because if you read well that piece, and even if you put it into other things, then it says something, because the history of that or the part of that can be a broader picture, like a picture which is like a collage in other mediums. And I have a big ambition to use these found objects and make my own statement, even if I just make up some collages from other wools, or I have my small little pieces of textiles, technically I will put all those things, really two or three, you need to put them together. My main medium was the hand embroidery and that's why it's limited and a very, very strict medium to do. Now it's that I need to use different things because the things that I want to see go beyond that technique, you know, and you don't need to stop all the time, just for mediums sake.

Tarnowski states:

Well, I think that for me, my work is evidence of a life lived, and I mean textiles of course are, because textiles are used in every area of life. When we think of textiles, we think of wearable textiles and so that's so much a part of our daily life, but for my work, its so connected to daily living and daily domestic practices, and I think that in some ways, my work is kind of evidence of trying to transgress the separations between the domestic and the professional, or the private and the public, the two ~ more like the domestic and the professional lives not just of women, but I think of people, and not just of people, but of people and animals, and not even just people and animals, but like the spiritual and the material, and in that way, its really, to what extent is it possible to take a small gesture, a tiny little moment of, I don't know, anything, from setting the table to folding the laundry and make that, recognize that as an opportunity for something more. I think that my work is evidence of this constant process of living, and of experiencing the daily, in all its kind of banality, and relentlessness, which it is, and in its frustration and tediousness and then its delight and wonder.

I have presented the work of these two women in order to share some of the inner thoughts and details behind their lives and their work. Hopefully sometime in the near future, it will be possible to have access to written and oral histories of the pioneers of the textile movement in Canada, as well as the contemporary fiber artists that continue to tell our stories.

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