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**Marie Watt's *Forget-me-not:*  
Stitched in Wool, a More Human War Memorial**

Rebecca Head Trautmann

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In large wall tapestries, towering blanket stacks, small stitched samplers, and complex installations, Marie Watt evokes the personal and collective memories embodied in wool blankets. The artist employs old—or “reclaimed”—blankets that are worn with use, faded in color, and stretched out of shape to call forth the stories and histories these humble objects carry.<sup>1</sup>

Watt’s 2008 work *Forget-me-not: Mothers and Sons* is an installation piece memorializing soldiers killed in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Wishing to humanize the stories of soldiers from the Pacific Northwest, many of them very young, who had lost their lives, Watt created a series of memorial portraits, hand-stitched using wool blankets. In the installation, the portraits hang from a web also made from wool blankets that surrounds and envelopes the viewer. An accompanying piece titled *Forget-me-not: Blossom*, comprised of hundreds of handmade wool flowers and a large basalt stone, commemorates the civilian lives lost in the wars.



**Figure 1: Marie Watt, *Forget-me-not: Mothers and Sons* (2008), 120 in. high x 240 in. diameter, installation view, Portland Art Museum, collection of the artist. Image courtesy Marie Watt.**

In *Forget-me-not*, Watt has created a very different kind of war memorial, one that employs color, texture, and story to stir memory and emotion, that builds a sense of community and creates an intimate space for contemplation and remembrance.

<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank Marie Watt for her generosity with her time and her thoughts about her work.

## Early Blanket Works

Memory is central to Marie Watt's work: personal memory of departed loved ones, of the warmth and comfort of blankets; cultural memory grounded in oral traditions and a sense of community; and visual memory, drawing on modern and postmodern, feminist and Native American artistic practices.

Watt, who descends from the Turtle Clan of the Seneca Nation, part of the Iroquois Confederacy, on her mother's side, and from German-Scottish Wyoming ranchers on her father's, grew up immersed in the urban Indian community of the Seattle, Washington, area. She earned degrees from Willamette University and the Institute of American Indian Arts before receiving her MFA from Yale University in 1996.

Having worked for several years with materials including cornhusks and stone, Watt began a new body of work in 2002 based on wool blankets, a material richly layered with meaning, associations, and expressive possibilities that she has been mining ever since. Blankets appeal to Watt as a medium in part because of the sense of familiarity and the personal associations they hold for most people. She points out that we are received into the world in blankets and wrapped in them when we leave.<sup>2</sup> They are with us throughout our lives, providing security to small children and comfort when we are sick. Blankets are carriers of personal memories and the stories and histories passed down through families. They serve significant roles in many Native American cultures as gifts given to mark important events and rites of passage. Historically, blankets were key objects of trade between Native and non-Native people, and they carry a darker memory of their role in spreading deadly smallpox among Native communities.

Intimately linked to their capacity for stirring memory and conveying stories are the tactile qualities of wool and the satin used in blanket bindings. Watt uses wool rather than synthetic blankets, describing them as "the pelts of our animal relatives, the sheep."<sup>3</sup> She prefers used blankets over new in part because it is in their tears, stains, and worn areas that their histories are made visible.<sup>4</sup> She transforms these humble, storied objects, frayed and sometimes threadbare, into elegant, thoughtful, and evocative works of art.

In some of Watt's earliest blanket-based works, she stacked folded blankets, collected from friends and second-hand stores, from floor to near the ceiling, creating a tension between the towering sculptural forms and the soft, pliable materials of which they are made. These striking installations call to mind architectural structures, including skyscrapers and memorial columns. In some instances, the massive stacks have refused to maintain their columnar forms and have tipped at their middles, snaking through the gallery space.

When they remain vertical, the blanket stacks reference also the modernist sculpture of Constantin Brancusi and George Morrison. They recall the tall conifer trees and carved cedar totem poles of the Pacific Northwest—particularly when several were installed in a small gallery at the Institute of American Indian Arts Museum in 2005, creating the impression of a dense forest. They are suggestive of blankets stacked to be given away at a potlatch or piles of linens in an overstuffed closet. As ladder-like

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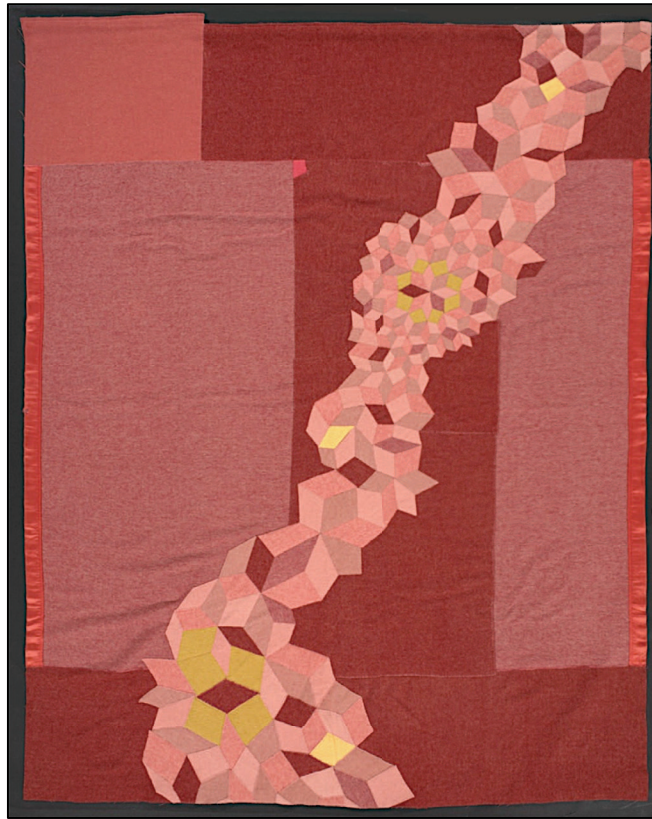
<sup>2</sup> Marie Watt, artist statement, [www.mkwatt.com](http://www.mkwatt.com), accessed November 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Marie Watt, artist statement, PDX Contemporary Art, Portland, Oregon, 2008, quoted in Rebecca Dobkins, *Marie Watt: Lodge* (Salem, OR: Hallie Ford Museum of Art, Willamette University, 2012), 72.

<sup>4</sup> Dobkins, *Marie Watt: Lodge*, 69-72.

forms connecting the earth and sky, they evoke the Iroquois creation story of the fall of Sky Woman from the heavens to what would become Turtle Island.<sup>5</sup>

Watt considers her large stitched wall works, which also employ old blankets, akin to paintings rather than textiles.<sup>6</sup> Here again the artist invokes a wide range of visual and cultural references, from hard-edge abstract painting, the target imagery of Jasper Johns, and Robert Rauschenberg's *Bed*, to Native American star quilts and Iroquois oral traditions of the Three Sisters—corn, beans, and squash—and the fall of Sky Woman.



**Figure 2: Marie Watt, *In the Garden (Corn, Beans, Squash)* (2003), 108 x 88 in, collection of the National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution. Image courtesy National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution and Marie Watt.**

Smaller hand-stitched pieces sometimes serve as sketches for large wall works and are sometimes ends in themselves. These pieces frequently incorporate the worn satin bindings from blankets' edges. As art historian Cynthia Fowler has discussed, in referring to these small works as "samplers," and in their intimate scale and delicate stitching, Watt links these pieces to the embroidery projects made by American women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as creative expression and demonstration of their needlework skills.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Marie Watt, artist talk at opening of *Marie Watt: Forget-me-not* exhibition, Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture, April 24, 2009, <http://podcast.northwestmuseum.org/tags/263/marie-watt-forget-me-not-explores-themes-of-remembrance.aspx> (accessed July 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Marie Watt, personal communication with author, summer 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Cynthia Fowler, "Materiality and Collective Experience: Sewing as Artistic Practice in Works by Marie Watt, Nadia Myre, and Bonnie Devine," *American Indian Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (2010): 344-64.

Both the blanket stacks and the large wall pieces build on notions of community grounded in Iroquois, and more broadly Native American, values. Watt began organizing sewing circles of friends and acquaintances when she was working to complete several of the labor-intensive wall pieces in time for an exhibition opening. As people stitched side by side, they began sharing memories and stories of blankets in their own lives, and new friendships and connections grew.<sup>8</sup> The sewing circles have since become an integral part of Watt's practice, and she sometimes invites the public to participate in stitching her large wall pieces—no sewing experience necessary. She appreciates the handmade quality of these community-sewn works, likening the individuality of the stitches to fingerprints or signatures, and comparing the thread to a web connecting members of the community to one another.<sup>9</sup>

For some of her works, particularly the blanket stacks, Watt collects blankets from the community where the work will be shown. Along with the blankets, she collects their stories, which are recorded on small paper tags attached to the blankets. Blank books are sometimes placed in exhibition galleries with her work so that visitors may record their own blanket stories. Watt has been struck by the intimacy and detail of the stories people have been moved to share, recalling blankets treasured by children and those that warmed and comforted sick and dying family members.<sup>10</sup>

### **Introduction of Figures and Military Themes**

While military themes have not been a primary focus of Watt's work, they first emerged in a 2004 piece titled *Edson's Flag*, in which the stars and stripes of her great uncle's American flag—still fully intact—are concealed and revealed behind an array of blankets. Edson Plummer served as an airplane mechanic in the Air Force during World War II and, following his death, his funeral flag was passed down through his family. When it eventually reached Watt, she decided to utilize it in her work as a way of honoring him, and veterans more broadly.<sup>11</sup> Some recurring themes and imagery in Watt's work are visible in *Edson's Flag*, including Native American star quilts, a vertical axis and the fall of Sky Woman from the heavens to earth.

The stories of the blankets Watt collects are sometimes quite extraordinary and unexpected. For a 2006 exhibition at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, Connecticut, she solicited donations of blankets from the community, along with the stories or memories associated with them. Hundreds of donated blankets were stacked flat rather than folded for a piece titled *Dwelling*, which suggested a large, minimalist cube. One particularly scratchy and ragged brown blanket was contributed by a man named Peter Kubicek, a Holocaust survivor who revealed that it had been issued to him in 1945 as a prisoner at the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. It had provided his only shelter from the elements when he and the other prisoners were forced to march north from the camp in advance of the approaching Allies. Kubicek carried the blanket with him when he moved to the United States as a young adult, and went on to use it to wrap and protect artworks and other treasured purchases as he transported them home in his car, in effect reclaiming the blanket and redefining its role in his life. A

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<sup>8</sup> Watt, artist talk, Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Marie Watt, artist statement, 2004, quoted in Lara M. Evans, "Marie Watt: A Blanketed Space," *Continuum: 12 Artists* exhibition brochure, National Museum of the American Indian.



collector of contemporary art and a docent at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, he saw Watt's use of the blanket in her work as "a sweet and satisfying ending" for this memento of his "previous life."<sup>12</sup>

Kubicek's continued use and reclaiming of his blanket caused Watt to reconsider military issue blankets, which she had largely avoided using in her work previously because of conflicting feelings about their emotionally loaded histories.<sup>13</sup> A group of works made in 2006 to 2007, including *Compass*, *Ledger: Tread Lightly*, and *Custodian: Belly*, utilize green military and disaster relief blankets, calling attention to the powerful memories and associations these blankets carry, and to Watt's renewed understanding of her role as a caretaker for the blankets and the stories with which she is entrusted.<sup>14</sup>

*Catastrophe*, of 2006, is the most overtly political work of this group, and marks the emergence of figurative imagery in Watt's work. *Catastrophe* was inspired by the infamous Figures of Iraqi prisoners abused by U.S. soldiers at Abu Ghraib.<sup>15</sup> The piece recalls, in the forms of the figures, its subject matter of war and torture, and its disturbing imagery, the similarly monumental paintings of American painter Leon Golub. Watt stated that the piece was "about the human impulse to console a victim after a disaster. I made a blanket for the victims, to give them shelter, to shield them, and in my own way to offer comfort or consolation."<sup>16</sup>



**Figure 3: *Forget-me-not: Mothers and Sons*. Image courtesy Marie Watt.**

### ***Forget-me-not***

Soon after this introduction of figures, Watt began to incorporate portraiture into her work. In 2008, she was asked to create a new work for the Contemporary Northwest Art Awards exhibition at the Portland Art Museum, where she was one of five artists honored. She conceived *Forget-me-not: Mothers and*

<sup>12</sup> Alison Leigh Cowan, "A Pile of Blankets, With Personal History Woven Into the Fabric," *New York Times*, August 25, 2006, and Richard Klein, *No Reservations: Native American History and Culture in Contemporary Art* (Ridgefield, CT: The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, 2006), 64.

<sup>13</sup> Watt, artist statement, [www.mkwatt.com](http://www.mkwatt.com), and Dobkins, *Marie Watt: Lodge*, 54.

<sup>14</sup> Dobkins, *Marie Watt: Lodge*, 54.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

*Sons* in response to her dissatisfaction with media coverage of the young lives lost in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.<sup>17</sup>

Watt wished to personalize and humanize the stories of those who had been killed, to learn more about the fallen soldiers and honor their memories. Her interest in the lives of the mostly young soldiers who had died in the wars stemmed in part from her own motherhood: “As a mother, I wanted to know more about the sons and daughters who were serving and making great sacrifices for community and country: where they lived, what they liked to do; their future goals; what kind of people they were.”<sup>18</sup>

The Seneca, and the Iroquois more broadly, are a matrilineal society with a broad concept of motherhood that includes grandmothers, aunts, and other female relatives, as well as Sky Woman and “mentors, friends, [and] leaders.”<sup>19</sup> To complement the images of primarily, though not exclusively, young men from northwestern states who had lost their lives to the wars, and drawing on this broad concept of motherhood, Watt asked men she knew to name women whom they admired or who had been important in their lives. The names she received included mothers, grandmothers, and other female relatives, as well as historical figures like Clara Barton, Anna Mae Pictou Aquash, Nina Simone, and Julia Child.



**Figures 4a, left, and 4b, right. *Forget-me-not: Mothers and Sons*, detail images of Clara Barton and Ken Leisten, Jr. Images courtesy Marie Watt.**

Watt gathered photographs of these mothers and sons to reproduce in a series of hand-stitched memorial portraits. She converted the images to flat areas of color using Adobe Photoshop’s posterizing tool, then

<sup>17</sup> Marie Watt, *Forget-me-not: Mothers and Sons* (Portland, OR: Marie Watt Studio, 2008), 3.

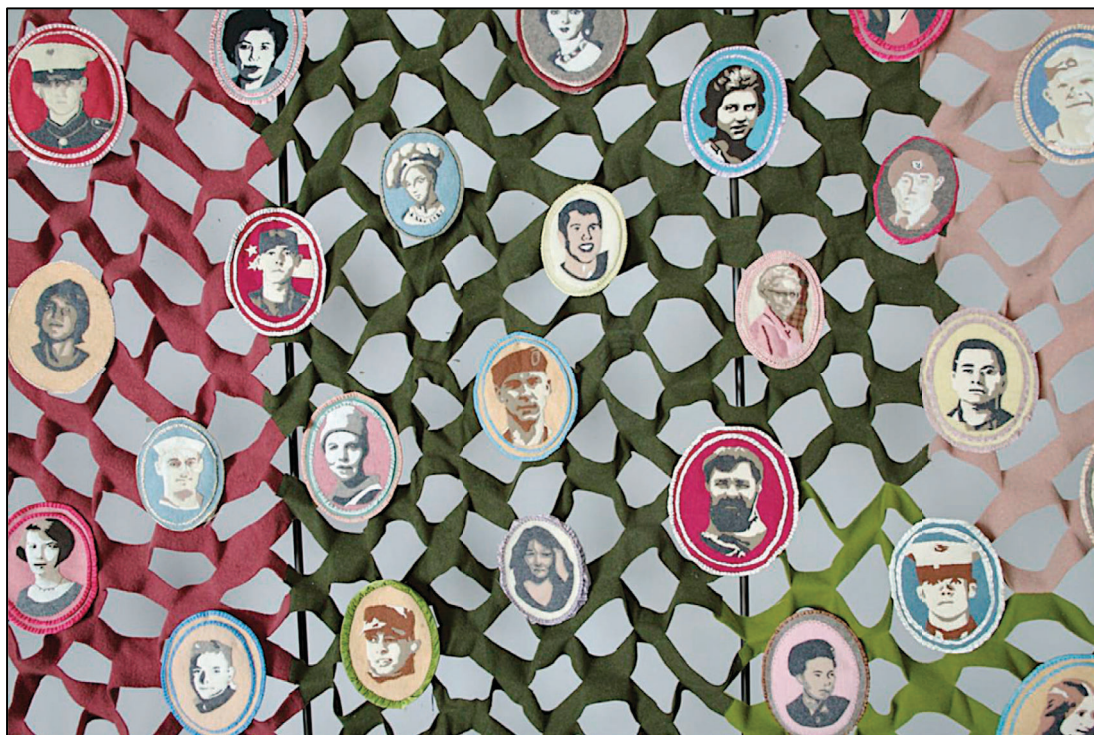
<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.



used the processed images for tracing and cutting pieces of different colored fabric, which were stitched together like puzzle pieces with the help of friends, volunteers, and studio interns.<sup>20</sup>

In the installation, the finished portraits hang from a web made from “reclaimed” wool blankets that surrounds and envelopes the viewer. The web is supported by a steel hoop framework twenty feet in diameter and ten feet high. Each portrait is approximately ten by eight inches. The portrait images have a nostalgic feel to them, like old photographs cut to fit oval picture frames. Each carefully stitched portrait is framed with colored satin binding, also salvaged from old blankets. The oval shape of the images is intended to recall cameo portraits, and to suggest the idea of an heirloom.<sup>21</sup> Attached to the back of each portrait is a tag handwritten by the artist’s mother with the name of the person depicted. An accompanying publication made available in the gallery reproduces the portraits and includes a brief passage about each individual represented.<sup>22</sup> The images and full stories are also accessible online.<sup>23</sup>



**Figure 5: *Forget-me-not: Mothers and Sons* (detail). Image courtesy Marie Watt.**

Entering the work is suggestive of stepping into an old family photo album. The piece has been compared to Richard Serra’s *Torqued Ellipse* and to a chapel,<sup>24</sup> but Watt sees it as more akin to the storytelling circles she experienced growing up in the Seattle urban Indian community.<sup>25</sup> *Forget-me-not: Mothers and Sons* creates a space, a kind of sanctuary, for contemplation and remembrance. The circular form of the piece—inclusive, equalizing, and ever-expanding—is deliberate,<sup>26</sup> and its web-like structure

<sup>20</sup> Watt, artist talk, Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture.

<sup>21</sup> Dobkins, *Marie Watt: Lodge*, 72.

<sup>22</sup> Watt, *Forget-me-not: Mothers and Sons*.

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.flickr.com/photos/marie-watt-studio/sets/72157605421387098/> (accessed November 2012).

<sup>24</sup> Jennifer Gately, 2008 *Contemporary Northwest Art Awards* (Portland, OR: Portland Art Museum, 2008), 44.

<sup>25</sup> Dobkins, *Marie Watt: Lodge*, 72.

<sup>26</sup> Watt, artist talk, Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture.



invokes the spider's association in many Native American cultures with weaving and blankets, as well as the interconnections among viewers and the individuals represented. The verticality of the piece is important also, signifying the vertical axis of the Seneca creation story (in contrast to the horizon line central to much western art).

The original focus of the piece, which includes about 250 portraits, was on soldiers from Oregon and southwestern Washington. The piece continued to grow and evolve for subsequent exhibitions: in 2009 at the Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture in Spokane, Washington, for which it was updated to include troops from eastern Washington and Idaho; and in 2010 at the Holter Museum of Art in Helena, Montana, for which she added soldiers from Montana, and the Tamastslikt Cultural Institute in Pendleton, Oregon, for which it was updated to include Native American troops.<sup>27</sup>

Accompanying and balancing *Forget-me-not: Mothers and Sons*, with its intricately stitched portraits, is a more abstract memorial piece titled *Forget-me-not: Blossom*, comprised of hundreds of handmade wool flowers in shades of blue, purple, green, and pink, representing civilians killed in the wars, and a large basalt stone suggesting a memorial stele. The flowers, meant to resemble forget-me-nots, were made by community members in blossom-making events, in acts of individual remembrance that combined to create a larger community memorial or tribute.



**Figure 6: Marie Watt, *Forget-me-not: Blossom* (foreground) with *Forget-me-not: Mothers and Sons and Compass* (2008), installation view, Portland Art Museum, collection of the artist. Image courtesy Marie Watt.**

<sup>27</sup> Marie Watt, personal communication with author, August 2012.

There is a reference in the seven layers of colored fabric, alternating with green military-issue blankets, at the base of the stone to the Iroquois teaching that we should be mindful of how our actions impact future generations,<sup>28</sup> a reminder of the lingering impact of war on injured and orphaned children and on subsequent generations left to recover and rebuild. Tiny felt ladders link the sky and ground planes, again suggesting connections between the sky and earth, the Seneca creation story of Sky Woman's fall to earth,<sup>29</sup> and perhaps the path of the deceased to an afterlife.

*Forget-me-not* contrasts sharply with more familiar war memorials, honoring the dead rather than glorifying war and military campaigns. There are significant parallels to Maya Lin's Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C. Both works personalize, humanize, and bring a sense of intimacy to a war memorial, in contrast to the grandeur, abstraction, and idealization typical of many war monuments. While both Lin's and Watt's memorials are large in scale, their emphasis on detail and on individuals encourages visitors to come close and to connect with those they honor, rather than standing back in awe. Although the two works are made of very different materials, the tactile qualities of each are essential to visitors' engagement with them. Both memorials stir conversation and reflection, inviting visitors to recall their own stories and those of the individuals they have lost.

Watt draws inspiration from German artist Joseph Beuys's concept of social sculpture, his interest in the creative potential of all people, and his belief that art can and should have a role in shaping society and the world. She asks viewers to do much more than just view, inviting them to contribute in numerous ways to her works' creation and to engage with and reflect on the individuals she represents and the issues she addresses. In *Forget-me-not*, Watt's familiar materials, her use of color and texture to evoke memories, and her emphasis on individuals and their stories foster both intimacy and community, creating a warm and embracing space for contemplation and remembrance.

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<sup>28</sup> Watt, artist talk, Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.