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Textiles and Politics – Dishtowels and Diatribes

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How we have changed! I was born into a supportive family, a caring society, and a world of limitless opportunity provided I was interested in nursing or teaching K through 12.

Now I am reading about those recent graduates – both undergraduate and graduate, in which one half of the last 7 graduating classes have no jobs and little possibility of finding one. Interestingly, there are still jobs in various medical fields but teaching K-12 in a stable environment is not so easy to find. “No generation has suffered more from this great recession than the young. The unemployment rate for people between 18 and 29 is 12 percent in the U.S., nearly 50% above the national average. This generation also enters adulthood loaded down by a debt that spirals ever more out of control. The public debt constitutes a toxic legacy handed over to offspring who will have to pay it off.”



Figure 1: Adbuster Flag, Occupy Wall Street Protestor, Wikimedia Commons.

The flag of Adbusters (Figure 1) takes the red and white stripes of the American flag and the blue ground of the left hand square but rather than stars, this blue ground is covered in American corporate logos. Adbusters are of Canadian origin and describe themselves as a “global network of culture jammers and creatives working to change the way information flows, the way corporations wield power, and the way meaning is produced in our society.” George Soros, a billionaire liberal philanthropist, sympathizes with the Occupy Wall Street movement that articulates a widespread disillusionment with the economic inequalities stemming from capitalism in its current incarnation. Rescuing the banking system was a cost largely born by the taxpayers rather than shareholders or bondholders so people have reason to be frustrated and angry.

The image of the Supreme Court entitled “The Supreme Court Gets New Robes” shows liberal Justices Ginsburg, Breyer, Sotomayor and now retired Justice Stevens, in basic black. The rest of the court, Roberts, Scalia, Kennedy, Thomas, and Alito are festooned with corporate logos which indicate where their sympathies lay and whom their decisions support.



Figure 2 (left): This Crowded Planet; Carol Westfall; Photo by D. James Dee.

Figure 3 (right): BP Oil Spill, Editorial Cartoon, 4/20/12, New York Times.

Textile art is no exception to the rule that art both drives and documents political upheaval. In the 60s, 70s and 80s, issues of feminine empowerment were regularly depicted in art textiles by Judy Chicago, Miriam Shapiro and others. However, my talk looks not at that body of work but at textile art primarily in relationship to other international and national political issues, including war and other conflicts. Population control (Figure 2), the environment (figure 3), climate change (Figure 4) and economic inequality (Figures 5 & 6.) It illustrates and focuses on these issues through the *Arpillera* of Chile, the works of several other artists working in textiles, and my own work, which over the years, has become much more politically inspired in response to current events.

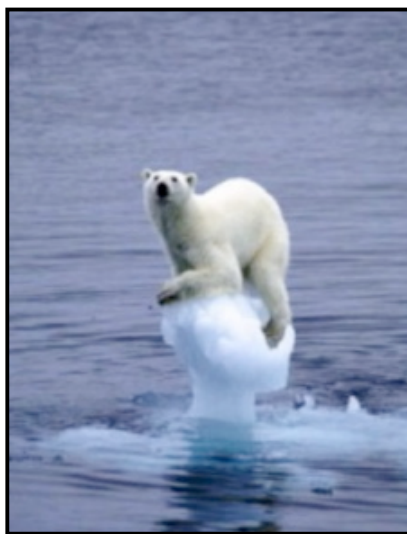


Figure 4: Polar Bear In Trouble, Climate Change, Wikimedia, Agrant 141.

After decades of international conflict, it is not surprising that war and loss are common themes in politically inspired textiles. “War textiles are an international trend scattered across three continents among more than ten ethnic, linguistic or national groups,” Ariet Zeittin observed in an unpublished essay entitled, *The Weavings of War*.



Figure 5 (Left): OWS Protestor; Los Angeles demonstration on economic inequality; Photo by Ted Soqui.
Figure 6 (right): The Protester; Cover of Time Magazine; Shepherd Fairey.

Arpilleras (Figure 7) are vibrantly colorful appliquéd traditional Chilean textiles that were used in the 1970s to illustrate the brutality of life under dictatorship. Marjorie Agosin’s *Tapestries of Hope, Threads of Love: The Arpillera Movement in Chile* chronicles the plight of the penniless peoples in Santiago after the coup that installed General Augusto Pinochet as dictator. American and other foreign owners of the copper mines in Chile did not want to see their companies nationalized. The CIA, under the direction of President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger stepped in to initiate the end of the duly elected presidency of Salvador Allende. Eleven hundred Chileans simply disappeared, and to this day, their grieving families have received no word as to their whereabouts and whether they are alive or dead. Most of the “disappeared” were either the sole or partial breadwinners for their families and it became incumbent on the women who remained to continue the search for the missing person(s) and to provide the means to support the family – thus the beginnings of the making of the *arpilleras*. Under the benevolent watch of the Catholic Church, groups of women would meet to create the *arpilleras* with the materials they had found or that were given to them by the church, which also provided the workroom space for the creation of the tapestries. A large pot of soup was provided for those who needed food. The idea of safety and sustenance, both spiritual and physical, was paramount within the interior rooms of the church. The actual making of the textiles provided a path to wellness for many of the women. According to author Roberta Bacic, “In the *arpilleras* are elements such as photos, images, and names of

the missing and sewn words and expressions such as "*¿Donde están?*" (*Where are they?*) At the time they were done they depicted what was actually happening, today they are witnesses to what cannot be forgotten and is part of our present past that needs to be dealt with." The arpilleras were only one way in which those left behind pursued their search for justice. In Chile, there has been an obsession amongst the families of the missing that there will be no rest or ability to move on without the requisite trials and imprisonment of those guilty of the torture and murder of the innocent civilians. What the families have been able to achieve, without government help, is the Memorial of the Disappeared at the Central Cemetery. It has two walls, inscribed on one side with the names of the political prisoners and on the other side with those of the disappeared.



Figure 7: ¿Donde Estan? Arpillera; Violeta Morales.

After the election of President Obama, a similar movement to hold accountable those members of the previous administration whose actions were in contravention of international law and treaties was envisioned. This movement went nowhere. President Obama effectively stopped it with his mantra that it was time to look "forward not back".

Concerns about war animate *Compound*, a recent work by Norma Minkowitz that was featured in *Stimulus: art and Its Inception*, an exhibition at browngrotta arts, in Wilton, Connecticut. *Compound* is a large panel that chronicles a nightmare scenario, the last moments of Osama Bin Laden's life. It features a tiny-mesh crocheted surface with what appears – at least in the choice of color – an innocent Paul Klee-like image. How different our world would be today if we had concentrated on locating and killing Bin Laden rather than starting two wars and numerous small conflicts. As of mid July, American casualties numbered over 6,500 killed and 49,000 wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Gyongy Laky was a student of Ed Rossbach, a most formidable textile artist and educator. Laky is a powerful advocate for the environment and regularly addresses political issues in her work. Through *Globalization IV Collateral Damage*, Laky speaks with great force and conviction – this time about the

utter, useless waste of blood and treasure that is war. Constructed of ash and commercial wood scraps the three letters spell WAR but can also be rearranged to create other vivid elucidations of the subject: MAR, ARM, RAW, and RAM.

My own life has been marked by war and it is no surprise that my past would be reflected in my art. My Dad served in the Pacific during the Second World War. My high school friends fought in the Korean War and those who returned joined me as freshmen in college. My first husband served in Vietnam and various acquaintances in my hometown of Jersey City, New Jersey, have served in the first Gulf War and some now serve in Afghanistan and Iraq. In the early 90s, a Dutch artist/curator invited my students and me to join an international group of felt makers to create colorful felt balls for peace to be sold at the Tilburg Textile Museum gift shop. I sent mine to them encased in barbed wire (Figure 8.)



Figure 8: Felt Balls with Barbed Wire; Carol Westfall; Photo by D. James Dee.

At age 4, I was so frightened by the nightly radio broadcasts about World War II that I grabbed a couple of pillows and dove under the bed in order to be safe if the Germans began to bomb Williamsburg, Virginia. Growing older, I became more circumspect about my behavior and during the Korean War I rarely sought comfort in a cloth.

Vietnam was another story. Each evening I was alone in my little kitchen in Baltimore, Maryland. Armed with my dishtowels that I angrily snapped at everything in sight, I fought many pithy, mostly verbal, but ultimately losing, battles with the likes of Spiro Agnew, Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger. I broke my share of dishes but felt much better in the process for not only did I clean my kitchen but my psyche as well. At that time I had no idea that Kissinger and Nixon were involved in the coup in Chile, but there were troubling reports that some of our POWs were being deliberately left behind in Vietnam to delay the peace talks being held in Paris. It was much later that I began to realize that Americans were not always told the truth about political situations. When we became aware of the various government and media lies and prevarications, many of us developed a cynical attitude towards the people and problems facing the country.

I spent 35 years of my life in academia. Once tenured, the ups and downs of life outside, barely affected many of us. We were responsible for particular programs and the students whose majors were affected by those programs. Beyond that, real life hardly impinged on our rarified existence. There was a very small group, where I taught who rejoiced every time Israel won a war or battle. They would hold a party in the faculty lounge. My friends in Oslo told me that a variation occurred in Norway on 9/11. The Norwegian Palestinians threw enormous parties in celebration of the destruction of the World Trade Center.



Figure 9 (Left): *The Palestinians*; Carol Westfall; Photo by D. James Dee.

Figure 10 (Right): *The Palestinians*; detail.

Like many of my fellow Americans, I knew little of the Palestinian situation. After 9/11, I began to do some reading to try to understand one of the putative underlying causes of the World Trade Center attack; this reading included Edward Said's *From Oslo to Iraq and the Road Map* and *Perceptions of Palestine* by Kathleen Christison. *The Palestinians*, created in 2007, is the work I did after I had done some reading and research (Figures 9 & 10.) Later, I became quite interested in the work of the Belgian artist, Francis Alÿs, who walked along the armistice borders of Jerusalem with a paint can steadily dripping green paint. This is known as "the green line" and was penciled on a map by Moshe Dayan at the end of the war between Israel and Jordan in 1948.

War is often a substitute for some other hidden agenda. As an artist, I have tried to use my training to raise people's awareness of the culture, mores and basic humanity of 'the other'. I do not profess to understand all that transpires between nations and peoples but I believe that there are at least two reasons why this country might go to war in the Middle East – oil and Israel – and neither one will solve anything. This is the concept behind the *Casus Belli* (Cause of War) work. Constructed of felt, small

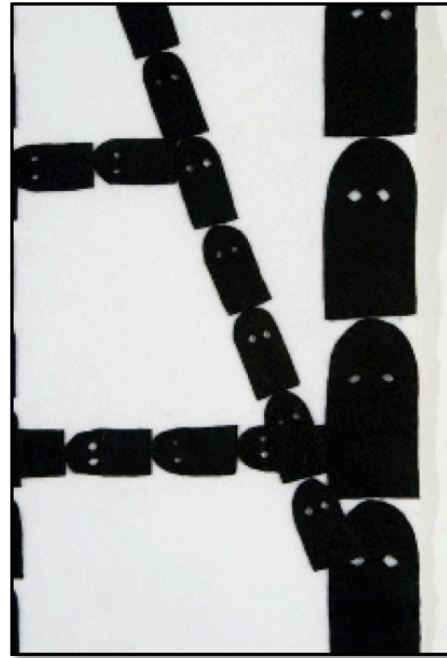
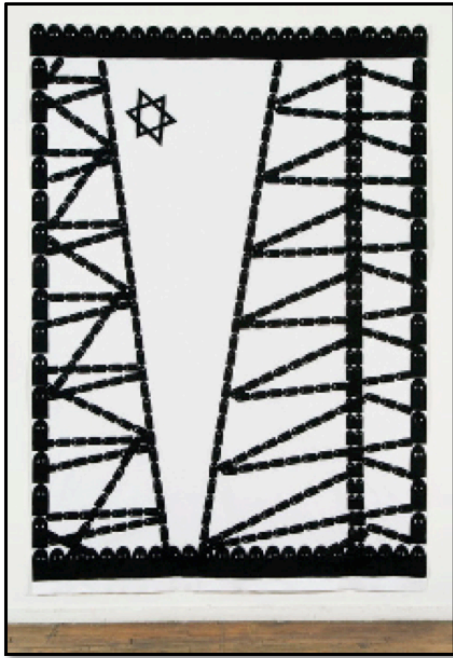


Figure 11 (Left): *Casus Belli II*; Carol Westfall; Photo by D. James Dee.
Figure 12 (Right): *Casus Belli II*; detail.

black jihad masks form the structures on the three panels (Figures 11 & 12.) The *Jihad* series actually followed the *Casus Belli* felt panels. Acrylic on fine paper is the medium and the imagery uses the symbols of the Muslim jihad to form the tile patterning – crescent moon, pineapple grenades, bullets, oil wells (Figures 13 & 14.) *The Cause of Tomorrow* is a large *shibori* and indigo-dyed Korean ramie panel with acrylic painted drones of various types crowding the sky (Figures 15 & 16.) This is a predictive statement that the U.S.’s use of drones will undoubtedly create more terrorists and cause (yet again) future blowback against our interests.

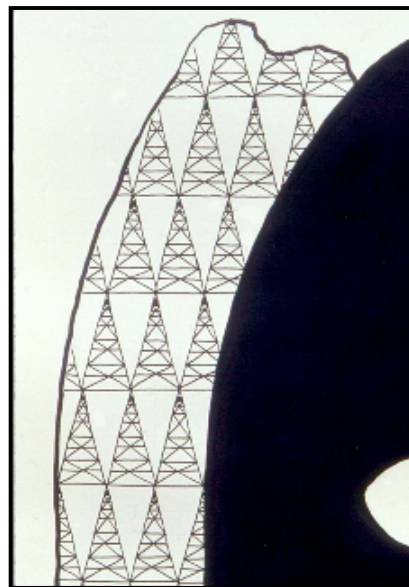
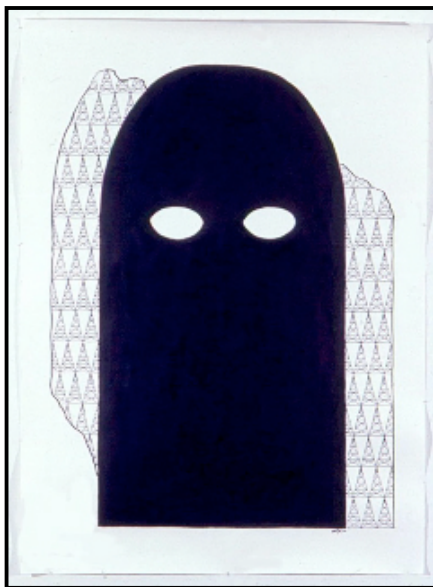


Figure 13 (Left): *Jihad 2*; Carol Westfall; Photo by D. James Dee.
Figure 14 (Right): *Jihad 2*; detail.



Figure 15 (Left): *The Cause of Tomorrow*; Carol Westfall; Photo by D. James Dee.

Figure 16 (Right): *The Cause of Tomorrow*; detail.

When we speak of cloth and politics, flags come immediately to mind. The flag can be used in lieu of other tangible objects to make a point. For instance, burning a flag can indicate anger, hate, disgust or distress. One can use flags to signal as in the maritime semaphore and here I show you one set of my handmade paper bibs with maritime flags, which spell out *What Future?* (Figure 17.)

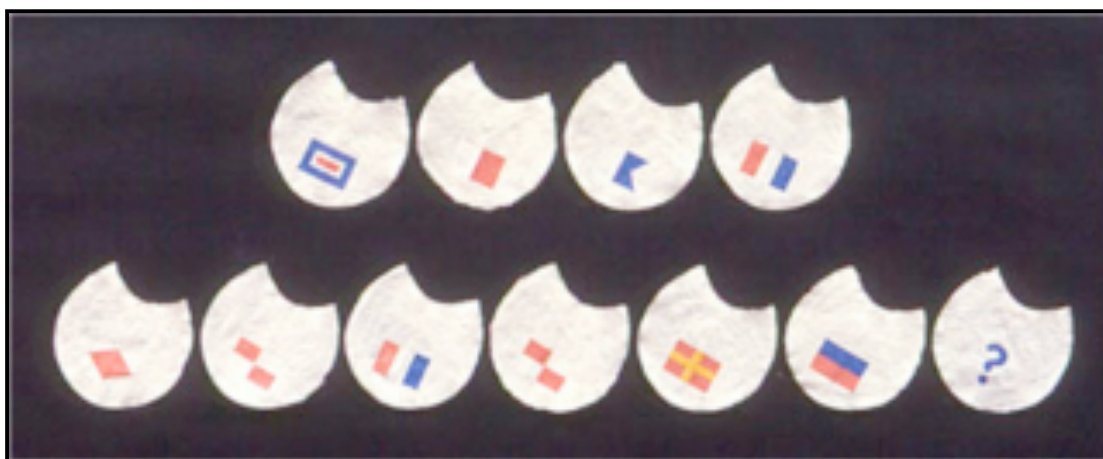


Figure 17: *What Future?* Carol Westfall; Photo by D. James Dee.

Here is an image from the artist, Paul Fusco. In his Bitter Fruits series, he depicts the grief that the family of a deceased veteran endures. Both the brother and the mother have received a flag as a gift from the government of this country (Figure 18.)



Figure 18: Mourning the death of a soldier; Image of Artist Paul Fusco; Image by Magnum.

I have made three flags as part of my artistic practice. The first was the *Bleeding Flag* made during the Vietnam War. The second was the *Clinton flag* – popcorn, softballs and little red corvettes from 1998 (Figure 19.) In hindsight, the Clinton years were a really good economic period for most of us despite the opposition’s reckless misuse of impeachment to undermine the President for a sexual indiscretion. The *Bush Flag* of 2003 is quite different in tone and consists of oilcans, fire, smoke, mayhem and violence (Figure 20.) More recently, UK artist Michael Brennand-Wood re-imagined the British Union Jack to make a similar statement about current conflicts, in his 2011 work, *A Flag of Convenience - The Sky is Crying*.



Figure 19 (Left): Clinton Flag; Carol Westfall, Photo by D. James Dee.
Figure 20: Bush Flag (Right); Carol Westfall, Photo by D. James Dee.

Current issues of economic inequality and political paralysis have inspired further reinventions of the flag. The Adbuster's *Corporate Flag* uses the logos of businesses as the field of stars and has become the flag of the Occupy Wall Street movement. The Occupy movement continues to struggle against the overwhelming power of the "corporatocracy" and its control of government. Senator Durbin of Illinois stated "And the banks -- hard to believe in a time when we're facing a banking crisis that many of the banks created -- are still the most powerful lobby on Capitol Hill. And they frankly own the place." (Congress).

Occupy's treatment in the media often demeans (when not ignoring) their objectives. But they have powerfully highlighted the rampant inequality that characterizes American society especially in the 99% versus the 1%. We should keep in mind Gandhi's advice describing the stages of a winning strategy of non-violent activism,

"First they ignore you – Then they laugh at you –
Then they fight you – Then you win! -"

The inability of the present Congress to achieve anything due to the powerful partisan politics in both houses presents a perilous time in mankind's existence on this planet. The issues of ecology, over population, war and more war, mean we have very little time to waste in attempting to make the major meaningful changes we must make.



Figure 21: ZPG, Please; Carol Westfall, Photo by D. James Dee.

I began to speak out about the environment with my art in 1972 with *ZPG, Please* (*Zero Population Growth*, Figure 21) and more recently, I created *This Crowded Planet* series about the over population issues on this earth. More recently, and perhaps somewhat belatedly, I have spoken out about the increasing need to improve our use of water with the *Cascade* series. Now I am at work on the *Gulf Blues* – a series of 12 panels focusing on the environmental damage caused by the offshore drilling and our insatiable need for oil. As an 11-year old, I lived on Grand Isle, Louisiana, which I remember was

like a Biblical Eden. The oil rigs were coming but they were then few in number and their crews more ecologically conscious. Now, I am following the ongoing efforts of BP to hide the fact that its site in the Gulf continues to leak oil. BP's environmental track record in both the Gulf of Mexico and Alaska leaves much to be desired.

My personal evolution of concern and my study and understanding of other politically inspired artists and cultures convinces me that artists have a key role to play in resisting the rapaciousness and stupidity of corporations and governments and in helping to create a more humane and sustainable world.



Figure 22: Cree Nation Prophecy.

A 19th century Cree Indian prophecy reads: "Only when the last tree has died & the last river has been poisoned & the last fish has been caught will we realize that we can not eat money." (Figure 22)

Woe!

Thank you!

Carol Westfall

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