

FIBER ARTISTS CHALLENGE HISTORY & CONVENTIONAL THINKING

BY JANET MENDELSON

When the curator of historic Fruitlands Museum in Harvard, Massachusetts, sought fresh perspectives on America's past and present, she turned to four fiber artists. The resulting exhibition, *Piecework: Resistance and Healing in Contemporary Textile Art* (April–August 2021) presented new works by Gina Adams, Alicia Henry, Andrew Mowbray, and Leslie Schomp who examined Indigenous land rights, representations of Black people in American culture, corporate collaboration and gender stereotypes, and human connections to nature, respectively. Using traditional needlework and quilting techniques and materials as diverse as human hair, antique quilts, leather, and Tyvek industrial wrap, the artists express viewpoints rooted in their own histories.



JULIA FEATHERS/ILLU



AARON PADEN

OPPOSITE PAGE: Gina Adams, **Broken Treaty Quilts**; antique quilts with hand sewn calico letters; (variable dimensions with installation)

THIS PAGE: Gina Adams, **Blanket Chest of Heart Filled Gratitude / Waabooyan Wiikobijigan inaadiziwin inde minwashkine miigwe chiwendan**; 2018; antique quilt and quilt panels with hand sewn calico letters, five encaustic and oil scribe paintings on Baltic birch panels, ash wood blanket chest, Baltic wood sticks; hand stitched, painted, assembled; (installation); blanket: 39 x 27.5 in., chest: 18 x 25.5 x 16 in.

Shaker, Hudson River School landscapes, and folk art collections. But until recently, the scope has been limited by the thinking of bygone times. For *Piecework*, curator Shana Dumont Garr asked Adams, Henry, Mowbray, and Schomp to create works that dialogue with some aspect of the property or its stories.

"*Piecework* is our first major contemporary art exhibition," said Garr. "It prominently advocates for the role of fiber arts as an innovative medium to critique and restore society in equal measure. These artists were selected because they take what is useful from the past and use mending, repairing, and integrating found materials to respond to current social and political pressures, self-reflection, and conventional thinking."

GINA ADAMS (Ojibwe-Lakota, Irish-Lithuanian) brings together two seemingly different cultures, said Garr. Adams is a fourth-generation quilt maker and a descendant of both Native people and Colonial Americans. Three quilts in the show are from her ongoing *Broken Treaty Quilts Series*, each made for her own or another tribe to help members reconcile with their own particular history. Each is an antique quilt by anonymous makers onto which Adams machine-stitched passages from treaties that have been broken repeatedly since the early 1600s.

Quilts are closely associated with Colonial America, Adams observes. Quilting bees symbolize community, groups working together on a major endeavor to create an object

Fruitlands was a short-lived agrarian utopian community founded in 1843 by Transcendentalists Charles Lane and Bronson Alcott, the father of author Louisa May Alcott. Their experiment failed after only seven months. The land later became a summer estate whose owner established a museum in 1912 to preserve the movement's history and gradually expanded it to include art and other histories. Since 2016, the 210-acre property has been managed by The Trustees of Reservations, the nation's oldest land conservation nonprofit.

Textiles and embroidery are well-represented in the museum which concentrates on Native American,



of comfort and warmth. She uses calico because it was a fabric the Colonists exported to Europe, making white men of that era wealthy. During the same time, agents of the United States and Canadian governments wrote treaties that promised money and power in exchange for the tribes' ancestral land. Despite signing the treaties, they subsequently forced Indigenous nations to resettle on reservations and took many Native American children to boarding schools for assimilation, never to return.

"Adams intentionally overlays the traditional quilt patterns with text appliques that can be literally difficult to read," said Garr. "In so doing, she echoes the experience of Indigenous chiefs who were compelled to sign treaties written in English, whether or not they understood the words." Fruitlands was founded on land that had belonged to the Nipmuc Nation.

Adams lives in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, where she is an Assistant Professor at Emily Carr University of Art + Design. She received a BFA from the Maine College of Art and MFA from the University of Kansas. ginaadamsartist.com

ALICIA HENRY uses textiles to create two-dimensional sculptural portraits representing the experiences of Black people. Henry has said that as a Black artist her wall hangings begin with the personal, then radiate to the cultural, historical, social, and political.

Henry works with cotton, linen, burlap, leather, and canvas, among other textiles, that she dyes, distresses, and hand embroiders. She begins with a sketch then duplicates the drawn lines on fabric with thread or yarn to intentionally direct the eye or evoke emotions, such as the pain suggested by a scar. As a Peace Corps volunteer in Ghana, she began collecting masks. Inspired by the way they convey spirit or power, she sometimes incorporates mask-like imagery in her wall hangings to convey qualities such as strength and confidence.



The Walk covers most of a blank gallery wall. A life-size Black woman in a red patterned dress is linked by a fabric line to a generic individual with missing limbs and to a distant, foreboding tree. The powerful work's simplicity suggests family bonds, lynchings, and ongoing violence.

OPPOSITE PAGE:
Alicia Henry,
The Walk; 2009;
acrylic, dye, wood,
linen, cotton, silk,
thread, yarn; hand
stitched, assembled;
(installation)

THIS PAGE
LEFT: Alicia Henry,
Untitled; 2021; paper,
paint, cloth; hand
stitched, assembled;
91 x 60 in.

RIGHT: Andrew
Mowbray, **Apothecary
Roses**; 2021; Tyvek®
HomeWrap®, thread;
machine stitched;
83 x 53.5 in.

"Alicia Henry brings together collage, painting, and textile methods with sophisticated use of negative space," said Garr. "She doesn't spell things out for us. Her work elicits an emotional response rather than being a portrait of a specific person."

Henry lives in Nashville, Tennessee, where she is a Professor of Art at Fisk University. She received a BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and MFA from Yale University School of Art and studied at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. zeitgeist-art.com/aliciahenry

ANDREW MOWBRAY saw houses under construction and thought the synthetic waterproofing material, Tyvek® HomeWrap®, looked like quilts wrapping the structures. Made by DuPont, Tyvek is sometimes printed with repetitive company logos. Mowbray is primarily a sculptor, but he dismisses conventional boundaries of art, craft, and architecture. His designs encompass all kinds of repurposed materials. He began making framed quilts out of Tyvek, manipulating the stiff, non-woven material into origami-like folds.

Variants is his series of Tyvek quilts reworking the orange and blue Home Depot logo nine ways. For *Piecerwork*, he created *Apothecary Roses*, inspired by Fruitlands's origins, his love of gardening, and by Shaker "gift" or "spirit" drawings made during the 1840s by Shaker Sisters experiencing ecstatic spiritual states.



ABOVE: Andrew Mowbray, **Variants**; 2018–2020; Tyvek® HomeWrap®, thread; machine stitched; 30 x 30 in. (framed)

BELOW: Leslie Schomp, **I Am Not Alone: A Conversation Between Bronson Alcott, Charles Lane, and David Wallace Wells**; 2020; silk thread, linen; satin stitched; 11 x 22 in.

OPPOSITE PAGE TOP: Leslie Schomp, **Self-Portrait with Snake and Mouse**; 2015; bundles of cloth; stitched to slowly build a form; 14 x 14 x 21 in.

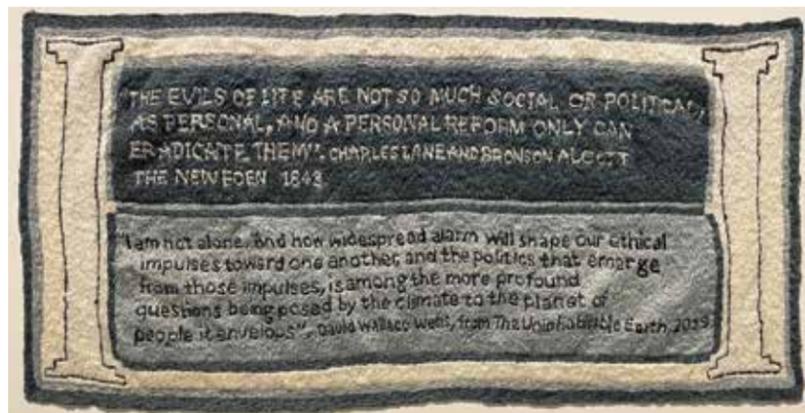
BOTTOM: Leslie Schomp, **Stratocumulus Clouds, Eye, Personal Coat of Arms, Snake, and Venus Fly Trap**; 2012–2021; hair on cloth, found frames; hand stitched; 19 x 27 in. (installation)

“People associate quilts and traditional needlework techniques with a particular gender,” said Mowbray. “As a male artist making Tyvek quilts, I marry the two, challenging gender identity expectations and disrupting corporate monoculture.”

Mowbray is based in Boston. He is a lecturer in art and director of 3D arts at Wellesley College. He received a BFA from Maryland Institute College of Art and MFA from Cranbrook Academy of Art. andrewmowbray.com

LESLIE SCHOMP was raised in Ireland where nuns at the convent school she attended taught needlework as an important part of education, and she made lots of rag dolls. Those skills now are the tools she uses to explore self-portraiture and how human behavior corresponds to that of animals.

Working from her own mirrored reflection, she painstakingly embroiders miniature self-portraits using her own hair, or that of her husband and son, as thread. The portraits are displayed in dollhouse frames. “For a while, I didn’t cut my hair because I needed long pieces, but mostly I use what comes off in my brush,” said Schomp. “Natural variations in hair color allow me to create value. I add and subtract strands to create 2D and 3D lines that genetically tie me to the work.”



White-on-white stitched cloth sculptures express personality traits in the forms of symbolic animals. A bear claw signifies hands. A snake wraps her shoulders in *Self-Portrait with Snake and Mouse*, a self-reflection on how to respond to fear.

Schomp embroidered a sampler in silk on linen honoring Bronson Alcott, an abolitionist who was opposed to cotton because of its connection to slavery. The work contains two quotes on where responsibility lies for social, political, and environmental reform. One from Alcott and Lane in 1843 contrasts with the other from environmentalist author David Wallace-Wells.

JANET MENDELSON, a freelance writer and author of *Maine’s Museums: Art, Oddities & Artifacts* (Countryman Press), especially enjoys writing about travel and the arts. She welcomes readers’ story ideas. janetmendelson.com

Schomp lives in Rutland, Massachusetts. She is a senior lecturer in visual arts at College of the Holy Cross. She received a BFA from Florida State University and MFA from Massachusetts College of Art. leslieschomp.com

For more information on Fruitlands Museum, visit thetrustees.org

