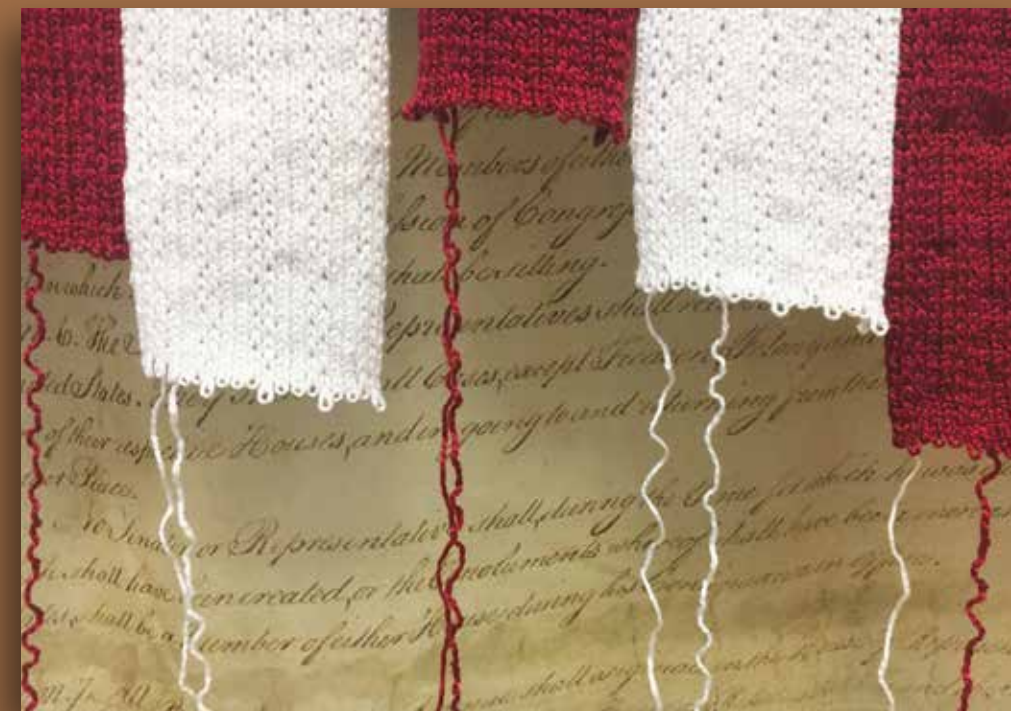


# CRAFTING UNDERSTANDING: ADDRESSING POLITICAL ISSUES THROUGH STITCH

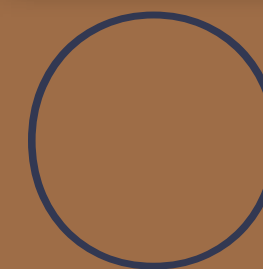
BY BETSY GREER



OPPOSITE PAGE:  
As Donald Trump's presidency continues, the yarn from Adrienne Sloane's **Unravelling** will collect on the floor revealing the text of the United States Constitution.

**The Unravelling**; 2017; cotton knit, poly and cotton fabrics; knit; 73 x 38 x 8 in.

THIS PAGE:  
**Unravelling** (detail)



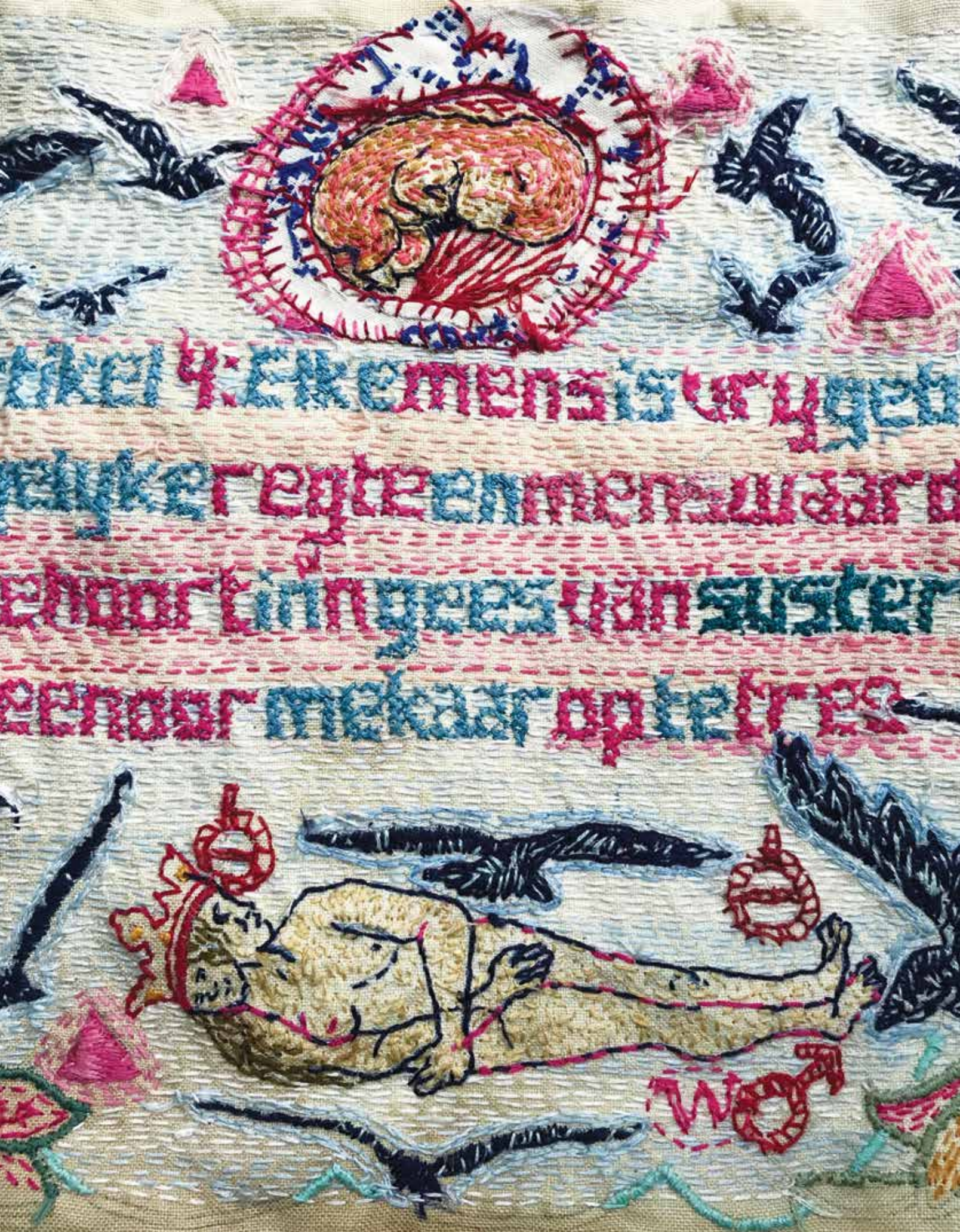
One of the greatest aspects of the fiber world is its depth, as those within it practice their crafts for myriad reasons. One of those ways has been increasingly on view over the past year: making to share one's thoughts on current political issues. With social media, we have the ability to share our work more widely with others, and to choose our audiences, as well. Using our work, we can dial up the political overtones to target pinpointed aspects of political campaigns and viewpoints or keep it to a broader theme of discourse that we want to explore and discuss. The slowness of fiber art allows us, the makers, to process ideas, feelings, and emotions as we create. Once we're done, we hand over the work for others to view, an exchange which, if we're lucky, helps others process the feelings, too.

Many view craft as merely a "hobby." What this designation leaves out, however, is how craft can be used for empowerment. How it can help us take back our emotions and work through our excitement, worries, and fears as we discuss difficult topics through needle and thread. And we are part of a long thread of makers who have had the power to do this, extending back to when time began as well as forward far into the future.

When asked why stories of politically related craft exist repeatedly in classical literature, Stephanie McCarter, an associate professor of classical languages at Sewanee: The University of the South, writes that "classical authors repeatedly imagine[d] women having recourse to a dangerously covert type of power, what the Greeks termed *metis*, 'craft' or 'cunning,' a kind of intelligence symbolized by the intricate spinning and weaving" that at the time, all women were supposed to do; therefore, textiles "represent[ed] both the proper sphere of women's activities as well as their dangerous potential to subvert." As to why politically related work continues today, McCarter adds that "power remains asymmetrical and patriarchal. Women and other marginalized groups therefore continue to craft forms of resistance that challenge and subvert state-sanctioned modes of power."

In the book *Zeros and Ones*, author Sadie Plant often references the history of weaving as she writes about computers and their advancement. She writes, "Cloths persist as records of the processes which fed into their production; how many women worked on them, the techniques they used, the skills they employed." It is in this place where I think political crafts find their power, where they turn into documents of what exists in the hopes of changing what will be.

Perhaps fueled by the fact that polls and pundits were wrong when it came to predicting the result of the United States election in 2016, there has been much work created related to the outcome. Adrienne Sloane has been working on one such piece, called *Unravelling*, that features a knitted American flag placed in front of the U.S. Constitution, which is printed on fabric made by Spoonflower. The flag, which will be on view at Fuller Craft Museum in Brockton, Massachusetts, through



OPPOSITE PAGE: Willemeine de Villers' contribution to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights quilt, a block about the declaration's Article 4; 2017; cotton embroidery thread on vintage linen; hand stitched using mainly running stitch and cross stitch; 8.3 x 11.7 in.

THIS PAGE: Joanna Barakat's contribution of Article 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; 2017; embroidery fabric, cotton DMC thread, POSCA paint pen; digital photography, iron transfer, cross stitch, stencil; 8.3 x 11.7 in.

May 20, 2018, is made to be unraveled over the course of our current president's time in office, highlighting the related worries of many about their constitutional rights. As time goes on, more of the Constitution will become visible, and through the unravelling of the flag's knitted vertical stripes, the yarn used to comprise them will ultimately lie tangled on the floor. If the presidency doesn't run four years, Sloane says the unravelling will stop wherever that point may be. She notes that such work is "a visceral response to what's going on in the atmosphere, whereas working on some of the other work is solving different kinds of problems."

Sloane is no stranger to creating political work, having made her first political piece more than 20 years ago. It was a cake that was finished on the day gay marriage was made legal in her home state of Massachusetts. She says the timing was a "wonderful coincidence that got the ball rolling." During the years since, she's made a series of flag pieces backed in a variety of themes ranging from war to rights and beyond. Sloane says that these pieces are "an expression from me [that] wells up" and if "people are touched by my work that's great. If people become active as a result of it that's also good." By sharing her personal feelings about what's happening with the country at large, she connects with the groundswell of emotion and enters the river of conversation.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, according to the United Nations "was proclaimed by the United National General Assembly in Paris on December 10, 1948, as a common standard of achievements for all people and all nations." In 30 articles, it lays out the rights to which we as humans should all have. Inspired by the document and how in 2017 it is still relevant today all around the world, Stephanie Dunlap and Tal Fitzpatrick joined forces to create a series of four quilts composed of 30 blocks each, with each quilt being a full-stitched representation of the declaration. Initially, they thought they'd get 30 stitchers to create one quilt, but the response was so great they decided to create four quilts, featuring more than 100 stitchers from more than 23 countries. Fitzpatrick says she and Dunlap made the conscious decision to not turn anyone away when the response from the callout on social media was much larger than they expected. When the quilts have been completed, Fitzpatrick says that for the next two years, "We're kind of aiming to have them go on tour. . . and because we have this amazing network of 120-plus artists in so many countries, it's going to be [a] collaborative [effort]" to get them shown.

Fitzpatrick and Dunlap asked each participant to write about how their assigned block speaks to them, to help share the story behind each individual piece. Fitzpatrick calls the blocks time capsules, as they show current human rights issues happening around the world now from makers ranging in age from 16 to someone in their 70s.

Palestinian artist Joanna Barakat is participating in the quilt project, noting that the combination of embroidery, human rights, and collaboration drew her in. "I looked at Tal and Stephanie's work and appreciated their clever and creative approach to driving social and political change through their artwork," she says. She was assigned Article 5, which starts with "no one



OPPOSITE PAGE:  
**Stay Woke** (detail)

THIS PAGE:  
Chawne Kimber,  
**Stay Woke**; 2017;  
cotton, shot cotton,  
voile, jersey knit,  
hand dyed perle  
cotton threads;  
hand quilted,  
reverse appliqué,  
hand bound;  
67 x 72 in.

*Betsy  
Green*

lives in Durham,  
North Carolina,  
and writes about  
the place where  
crafts and activism  
meet. She can  
be found online  
at [craftivism.com](http://craftivism.com)  
and on most social  
media platforms  
as [@craftivista](https://www.instagram.com/craftivista).

shall be subjected to torture.” She says her piece is about raising awareness of human rights violations in Palestine. On her block, the article “is stenciled on the separation wall representing the significance of graffiti and street art as a tool of communication in the public sphere in Palestine.”

Willemein de Villiers is another artist participating in the quilt. She decided to join in because her country, South Africa, was one of the few countries that did not sign the declaration in 1948. It was only in 1994 that all South Africans gained protection in the country’s Bill of Rights. She was assigned Article 4, which begins with “no one shall be held in slavery;” the article she was the most drawn to. She translated her block into her mother language, Afrikaans, “as a way to reclaim its beauty as a language, separated from its brutal history” as the language of the oppressor.

By working with artists from a variety of backgrounds, ages, skill levels, and experiences on pieces that speak to a common issue currently occurring in places around the globe, the UHDR quilt project inserts itself quietly into the dialogue. The host of colors, stitches, and words serve as an entry point to seeing how human rights issues have extended well beyond 1948.

Chawne Kimber started making work with a political bent in 2009 when she made a quilt based on George Carlin’s “Seven Words You Can’t Say On Television.” From there, her work has gone on to address topics around race, identity, sexual assault, and other issues. “I started out with the censorship quilts sort of challenging the language that should be allowed—are quilts sacred or can we really be free to say what we want?”

When her quilt about the death of Eric Garner—who died while police wrestled him to the ground in a chokehold—went up at *QuiltCon* in Pasadena last year, she was surprised to learn some viewers had never heard of the case. And in an environment like a quilt show, “You don’t expect to learn something new beyond some quilting technique or something, and so it was a moment, an opportunity to educate about what happens in the world.” With this, Kimber, a math professor, saw a further chance to educate. By coming at large societal problems through individual examples, her work makes the case that political stitchwork can be a vehicle to inform others on issues and events where they may either have a blind spot or prejudice.

By making artwork that promotes difficult and important conversations, stitch artists create items of record and take the pulse of what is happening around us. The skill involved allows for a way to enter the piece while the issue at hand provides a chance for introspection. Whether these works relate to the country, the world, or other issues that concern us all, they offer a way to begin conversations with ourselves as well as with others.