

Unit 3: XYB Studio Infrastructures²

Reading: bell hooks

Aesthetic Inheritances: History Worked by Hand

UNIT 3: WEEK 1
XYB STUDIO

“To write this piece I have relied on fragments, bits and pieces of information found here and there.” (p115)

“I know beauty when I see it.” (p116)

Not patriarchal research of thorough, complete, scientific, reasoned research. “Gathering and remembering” is enough as stated explicitly.

hooks’ Grandmothers didn’t define herself as an artist or a category, the simple statement is enough. This shows independent thought that isn’t confined by societal structures. It may be that she wasn’t trying to compete in society’s structures and felt alienated by society, as hooks’ piece is about identifying and giving name, space and place to ignored black female quiltmakers in society. Maybe this allowed her to make her own rules. Maybe not, maybe she was a strong independent thinker. This statement reminds me of my own internal method of understanding of my own practice. I know when something is right as it feels right. And I know when something isn’t there yet as I can feel it. A small bodily shift which I started to notice when working freelance, that was confirmed was “a thing” for myself when I read ‘Focusing: How To Gain Direct Access To Your Body’s Knowledge’ by Eugene T Gendlin (1981).

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“Fascinated by the work of her hands,

I wanted to know more, and she was eager to teach and instruct, to show me how one comes to know beauty and give oneself over to it. To her, quilting was a spiritual process where one learned surrender. It was a form of meditation where the self was let go. This was the way she had learned to approach quilting from her mother. To her it was an art of stillness and concentration, a work which renewed the spirit.” (p116)

“too much labor and too little time. There was always work to be done, space had to be made for stillness,” (p117)

Hands, how we use our hands, hands tell stories, hands are unique and individual, hands identify us as individuals, how we don't use our hands as much now as we did from technology and commodification.

Spiritual process, meditative process, this is what I found with weaving in Unit 2. This is really interesting to explore further, how can this process and feeling be put into magazine design and digital design, disciplines that seem so removed from this, but are equally as creative? Knowledge passed on through generations. Value and time invested in knowledge. I'm not sure any editorial designer feels renewed in spirit from their work, but could they be?

Time. Never any time, always too much to do, digital is quick and fast and suppose to save time, but actually takes up more time, there is no time, but actually there are always 24 hours in a day and 7 days a week and 52 weeks a year and years forever, this doesn't change, this is static, we have to make/take/create/ time, or quite simply just be in time?

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“These aesthetic considerations were as crucial as the material necessity that required poor rural black women to make quilts.” (p117)

The design was as important as the utility. This enables me to connect with my practice more deeply in that aesthetic can be spiritual and deep not just surface level. Also that what that connection and aesthetic is is enough if it comes from you, not what others or communities or systems expect of the work.

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“Often in contemporary capitalist society, where “folk art” is an expensive commodity in the marketplace, many art historians, curators, and collectors still assume that the folk who created this work did not fully understand and appreciate its “aesthetic value.” Yet the oral testimony of black women quiltmakers from the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, so rarely documented (yet our mothers did talk with their mothers’ mothers and had a sense of how these women saw their labor), indicates keen awareness of aesthetic dimensions.” (p117/118)

Comment on wider society and how white people made assumptions about the black womens work. Demonstrates lack of communication of not speaking to the people it came from to understand it. This reminds me of my Polish friend Dominika who stumbled across an exhibition in St Ives whilst on holiday. The exhibition was of a Polish-Roman textile artist, Małgorzata Mirga-Tas, who creates large scale collages made from materials and fabrics collected from her friends and family. Her stories depict feminist persepctives and challenges representation of Roma people, creating scenes from everyday life. She takes artworks of Roma that identify in negative ways and gives them strength and dignity through re-imagining them in vibrant ways. Dominika was able to shed light on many of the pieces that the guide didn’t know, through her lived experience of being a Polish woman.

Both of these testimonies bring into question white interpretations / presentations of other cultures work and highlight the really simple act of communication, speaking, asking, being curious in order to learn and understand. That would make a good quilt.

Małgorzata Mirga-Tas

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<https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-st-ives/magorzata-mirga-tas>

Małgorzata Mirga-Tas, *Familia / Family* 2022.
Courtesy of the artist, Frith Street Gallery, London,
Foksal Gallery Foundation, Warsaw and Karma
International, Zurich. Photo: Marek Gardulski.

Małgorzata Mirga-Tas

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ART HISTORY

There are references to historic artworks throughout Mirga-Tas's practice. She is particularly interested in how the Roma have been shown in art, almost exclusively by non-Romani artists. Key examples are *The Gypsies* c.1621–31, a series of engravings by Jacques Callot, and similar works by Auguste Raffet from the 1830s. Mirga-Tas explores how the iconography of Roma representation in art history has played a significant role in shaping, spreading and normalising stereotypical and stigmatising ideas about Romani people.

Some of Mirga-Tas's works are also inspired more generally by European 'masterpieces', reflecting a desire to introduce Roma-made representations of Romani culture into the wider history of art. These include Gentile da Fabriano's *Adoration of the Magi* 1423 as well as frescoes at the Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara, Italy, and various depictions of the daughters of the Ancient Greek god Zeus, known as *The Three Graces*. By reimagining these acclaimed compositions to show everyday Romani people, Mirga-Tas affords them an elevated status.

Words from Tate Modern, St Ives, Website, Accessed on 1th January 2025

Małgorzata Mirga-Tas, *Untitled (After Gentile da Fabriano)* 2023. © Małgorzata Mirga-Tas. From the Collection of Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi, India. Photo: Marek Gardulski.

Małgorzata Mirga-Tas

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JOURNEYS

Mirga-Tas examines how her people have been perceived and portrayed over time, particularly in artworks by non-Romani artists, who have historically had a near monopoly over Roma visual representation.

She has looked to engravings by French artists Jacques Callot and Auguste Raffet, whose depictions of Roma in transit contributed to their stigmatised representation in the popular imagination. As Wojciech Szymański writes, 'Callot depicted caravans of dangerous armed wanderers from the East, wearing spectacular costumes and feathered hats, travelling on horseback and on foot, dragging their belongings in chariots. We observe, too, the stereotypical images of Romani life, in movement and at rest: vagrancy, stealing, fortune telling, bivouacking, meals prepared in cauldrons hung over the fire.'

Many of the works in this space draw on and subvert such images. Mirga-Tas transforms Callot and Raffet's small scale studies into monumental compositions reminiscent of 17th century tapestries, elevating the status of their subjects, who are reanimated through colour and texture. In this way, historic misrepresentations of the Roma are revised and reclaimed.

Małgorzata Mirga-Tas, Out of Egypt from the series Out of Egypt 2021. © Małgorzata Mirga-Tas. Courtesy of the artist, Frith Street Gallery, London, Foksal Gallery Foundation, Warsaw and Karma International, Zurich. Photo: Marek Gardulski.a

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“Mahulda Mize... a black woman slave(s)... elaborate quilt “Princess Feathers with Oak Leave,” made of silk and other fine fibers, was completed in 1850 when she was eighteen. Preserved by the white family who owned her labor, this work was passed down from generation to generation.” (p118)

“crazy quilt”

hooks questions ownership of art. Who owns the art, the maker or the facilitator. In magazines designers are employed by the publisher, their work is never credited, but the writer and stylist and photographer is. External contributors are credited, internal contributors, the makers, are not. Is this right? Lost voices of designers who automatically lose ownership of their work through employment, just as Mahulda Mize?

A quilt made of scraps, hooks debates whether this was an aesthetic choice or one created from society. She questions the origin of the ‘crazy quilt’ - a fad for white women in the 1900s, the only option for some black slave women as they could only take the scraps from white households to create quilts for themselves. If it originated with the black women this is an example of society creating graphic design, as we are discussing in Societies XY Workshop, where circumstances and availability of materials formed the form.

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“For much of her life as a rural black woman she controlled her own time” (p119)

“During times of financial hardship which were prolonged and ongoing, quilts were made from scraps left over from dressmaking and then again after the dresses had been worn.” (p119)

Time: who controls time? Surely we are all in control of our time, but we blame other things on taking all the time, mainly capitalist priorities. How can digital magazines redress time? Can we look to other cultures to find inspiration on how to redress time. Can we look at ourselves and question time?

The quilts reflect the social, economic and cultural moment in time. A wonderful reuse of material. A cycle of material and purpose. Inherent recycling in an early form through necessity. A provocation to look at our processes and costs of making, of waste and use, of what can be made through gleaning, as Agnes Varder did in *The Gleaners and I*. Certainly something magazines should be looking at, paper use. What about digital recycling? What does that look like? How do we glean digitally? How big is the digital bin and what affects is that having on our environment? Our climatic environment but also our immediate environment, the waves we can't see that fuel our internet, our constant online lives, invisible waves that surround us, suffocate us? What if we could see those? Through textiles?

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“...fancy quilts (which were placed at the foot of beds when company came), were stored in old-fashioned chests with beautiful twisted pieces of tobacco leaves that were used to keep insects away. Baba lived all her life in Kentucky—tobacco country. It was there and accessible. It had many uses.” (p120)

“...her quiltmaking reflected both changes in the economic circumstances of rural black people and changes in the textile industry.”

Again examples of using what was available and natural to support the local environment. We so often buy things in now from other countries, products to do jobs, what is on our doorstep that can be used and utilised that we no longer know about as the generational handing down of knowledge is forgotten and replaced by replaceable products?

hooks ponders on storytelling. Her Baba's quilts were not explicit stories but implicit stories of a time (era), place, materials, time (her available time), histories of lived culture and society, of a life. A life of a black woman unrecognised for her skill, talent, creativity and artistry. A life spoken in quilts of being a necessity, a role, a creative outlet, reflected in the materials and patterns a history of making reflecting society and culture.

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“...she began to piece a quilt of little stars from scraps of cotton dresses worn by her daughters. Together we would examine this work and she would tell me about the particulars, about what my mother and her sisters were doing when they wore a particular dress. She would describe clothing styles and choice of particular colors. To her mind these quilts were maps charting the course of our lives. They were history as life lived.” (p121)

A beautiful concept. Also an interesting idea of ‘map’.

Slightly jarring in this romantic feeling of personal, social and cultural lived history, relating this to magazines I am fixated on digital being better in editorial design. This comes from a place of art, values and people being treated more fairly in the workplace. Hoping the work place can become a place of creativity, experiment and acceptance. Probably too big an ask. But I wonder if I can express the frustrations I have of the industry by charting or mapping magazines, that are also a vehicle of culture and society, a history of society and culture, in a digital tapestry that embodies sound, movement and experience? too much.

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“Emphasizing the usefulness of a quilt, she reminds us: ‘It covers people. It has the possibility of being a part of someone forever.’”
(p120)

hooks talks about how the quilt becomes an object and how that object is used. The quilt tells a history, is a beautiful piece of artistry, is a reflection of society and culture, is of utility and aesthetic, BUT also how it is used, how other people engage with and interact with quilt. How do people engage with and interact with magazine. Even if it was better culturally and socially, I am thinking very much on the making and creating side and the people and craft involved. How can it be for the audience? Although remaining aware that the audience for my project is not the audience for the magazine. Are these two different projects? Stay focused but acknowledge?

References

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