



Main Space



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***Productive Discomfort* curated by Lauren Cullen**

Susan Blight, Heidi Cho, Kaythi, Seiji, Anne Rucchetto, Jessica Watkin, and James Yeboah

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If the function of a welcome mat is to greet guests with niceties, what can an unwelcome mat offer?

Productive Discomfort is a project and group exhibition encompassing seven hooked rugs made by artists, writers and researchers who predominantly work in non-rug hooking mediums. Over a series of 5 workshops, the participating artists learned the technique of rug hooking while discussing the purpose and benefits of productive discomfort. These monthly, collaborative and social workshops took place in a variety of private and public spaces, including the Textile Museum of Canada, artist studios, homes, bars, coffee shops and Ryerson University. With the generous support of Xpace Cultural Centre and Myseum, each artist was commissioned to develop and produce a rug work around the theme of an “unwelcome mat.”

Welcome mats are usually made of coarse material and placed outside of the home, in service for guests to wipe their feet off as they cross a threshold into an interior space. Hooked rugs, however, are made of softer woolen materials and other textiles, and are usually found inside private domestic spaces. In addition to collecting dirt and providing warmth through insulation, hooked welcome mats greet visitors with polite sentiments of cheer and kindness. There is much affective

potential buried in the soft pile of a hooked rug – including the ability to mark a space as respectable and as private property.

Ideas about respectability¹ are often rooted in colonialism, whiteness and privilege. In the context of Canadian hooked rugs, a strong relationship exists between this object, domestic dwellings and settler colonialism. The practice of hooking rugs in North America is attributed to the settlement of English and Scottish settlers along the eastern seaboard.² Through the occupying and stealing of land, the development of property laws and domesticated lifestyles emerged. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang crucially note that settler colonial violence is not temporally contained in the arrival of the settler but is reasserted each day of occupation.³ The practice of making hooked rugs by early settlers in need of furnishing their homes provided a tool for such expressions. Canadian hooked mats are often understood as benevolent objects greeting guests with good cheer. However, anti-racist, anti-colonial and feminist queer crip perspectives remind us that objects and spaces are never truly welcoming to all. While a hooked welcome mat might communicate polite servitude, the rugs included in *Productive Discomfort* rub up against this promise and confuse the good feelings attached to these objects. The function of an unwelcome mat helps complicate the respectability politics that are associated with a hooked rug, revealing those who have been excluded, reminding the viewing public how craft and social aspects of rug hooking serve as a disruptive force.

The relationship between makers working in the company of one another informs the process of rug hooking. Akin to quilting and knitting groups, rug hooking is a relational mode of making and grounded by social practice. The composition of group membership influences the conversation held over the creative process, and as a result conversations shared over rug work profoundly informs the object. Therefore,

¹ In *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church: 1880-1920* (1993) Evelyn Brooks Higgenbrotham defines respectability as conservative manners that uphold moral behavior, as deemed

² MacDonald, Sharon M.H. "'As the Locusts in Egypt Gathered Crops': Hooked Mat Mania and Cross Border Shopping in the Early Twentieth Century". *Material History Review* 54 (2001): 58 – 70

³ Tuck, Eve and K.W. Yang. "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor." *Decolonization: Indigeneity*, vol.1, no.1 (2012): 1 – 40.

in the case of Canadian welcome mats, there is strong possibility of maintaining settler colonial norms and values through casual conversation in the soft space of craft. The artists in *Productive Discomfort* were selected for their ability to mobilize critical conversation in the space of making. The common ideology in our rug hooking workshops was dissent.

In these workshops, basic principles of rug hooking were taught alongside the facilitation of casual discussion and lateral exchanges of knowledge. Music and silence were welcomed, along with podcasts, reality television, Raptors games and pizza. While the artists were only expected to participate in five workshops, many additional gatherings were organized. Through the process of learning how to rug hook, the artists experienced discomfort as they unlearned artistic techniques they usually use. The artists also suggested benefits of unlearning and embracing discomfort in order to make space for new growth in their respective practices.

Heidi Cho hooks an intimate list of personal themes that cultivate internal discomfort. In hooking *Recently*, Cho works to process or welcome this list in her life in order to grow, as an artist and a person. The artist's list of goals and personal challenges are connected to her existing practice, in which she addresses and makes public conversations around mental health, queerness and self care. Cho's unwelcome mat provides a personal example of an artist considering ways to harness productive discomfort through a practice of self reflection and slow growth.

In *Sankofa: The Pursuit of Ancestral Memory II* James Yeboah hooks materials into burlap that speak to his identity as a Black first-generation Canadian. Cutting by hand Kente cloth his aunt brought back from a visit to Ghana, Yeboah hooks the word Akwaaba in a background of black speckled yarn sourced from a craft store where he previously worked at. The rug is exhibited along side *Sankofa: The Pursuit of Ancestral Memory*, a sculptural piece consisting of an heirloom Oware board resting on the same piece of Kente textile used in the rug. 48 black miniature faces speckled with glitter rest in the small pits of the board. Paired together, these works highlight

how Yeboah mobilizes objects from his Ghanaian heritage to better understand them, and his identity in relationship to them.

Jessica Watkin, a blind performance artist, reflected in a workshop how “theater and galleries, like most spaces, are not built for equity.” In *This Rug Was Not Made For Your Visual Pleasure #pleasetouchme* visitors are invited to feel Watkins’ handwork, which rejects visual design to favor embodied process. Instead of visually reading the text on her rug, the statement is brailled and demands to be read in multiple ways. Watkin’s unwelcome rug builds into her larger performance practice, where she works to expose how spaces are built for the comfort and criteria of able-bodied folks.

Kaythi, a textile artist, and Seiji, a bibliographer and trans-cultural worker, place their work in relation to one-another, presenting *Our Lady of Profound Failure* and *Body 2*. Both rugs feature a female form, where the texts “Dykes Only” and “Where are you standing?” float above the two figures. Seiji's rug uses slow hooking methodology and the canonical imagery of the female nude to consider the production of the body. Their rug welcomes visitors to feel discomfort as they position themselves both physically and socially in relation to the figure. Kaythi’s rug offers viewers a meditative space to consider both failure in relation to lesbian separatist projects and the possibilities opened up by theoretical model. Together, their work welcomes critical conversations about women-only spaces and the social and physical production of gendered bodies.

Anne Rucchetto hooks an unwelcome greeting amongst a map of colours resembling meteorological features. As a public health researcher and writer, Rucchetto is deeply familiar with the collection of data demonstrating the non-medical, systemic roots of health inequity. Thinking deeply about forest fires and climate change, Rucchetto reminds the viewing public in *Heat Map* that “distraction will not save us.”

Susan Blight hooks a phrase in Anishinaabemowin and frames the words with three clan symbols; protectors of land, water and kinship, resting beside a riverbed. In *An Unwelcome Mat for these Times, Niwiji Anishinaabeg* the rug is removed from the floor, along with the gesture of welcoming, and repositioned to the wall. The wall mounting is further communicated through Blight's approach to binding her rug, which includes fringe at the bottom of the rug, adapting a technique used in grass dancing outfits. Blight's unwelcome mat signals the ability for Indigenous people in Canada to adapt and turn one thing into something new.

After examining beautiful hooked rugs in the TMC archive for one of our workshops, the group toured Lisa Myers' curated exhibition *Beads, they're sewn so tight*. Standing in front of #35, a piece by artist Olivia Whetung, Blight observed that the materials in rug hooking are akin to those in beading; while appearing the same, each bead is slightly different. You can plan out a project with a specific vision in mind however the beads nature might change the pattern and end result. The materials in rug hooking work a similar way- producing their own will and ways of relating. The rugs in *Productive Discomfort* remind us to acknowledge that while things are not always in our control, we still have the capacity and power to shape them.

- Lauren Cullen