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***Emotional Objects* curated by Emily Gove**

Ana Morningstar, Yasmeen Nematt Alla, Yahn Nemirovsky, Danny Welsh, Hannah Zbitnew with Lisette Markiewicz

January 17<sup>th</sup>, 2020 – February 15<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

*Emotional Objects* explores the transformative and affective potential of textiles. The works in the exhibition employ methods of construction, de-construction, and re-forming to re-imagine garments, samplers, and practical everyday items and affirm their potential to express emotions that often go unsaid. Through employing sensual experiences such as scent and touch, the works in the exhibition by Hannah Zbitnew, Danny Welsh, Yahn Nemirovsky, Yasmeen Nematt Alla, and Ana Morningstar explore witchcraft and folktales, identity, queerness, trauma, and indigenous land sovereignty.

In, “The Absence of the Witch Doesn’t Negate the Spell,” Hannah Zbitnew has designed and hand-fabricated a collection of three leather, ceramic, and woven shoes, each representing a third of the neopagan Triple Goddess: Maiden, Mother, and Crone, with each phase representing a phase of a woman’s life. The work’s title, a quote from Emily Dickenson, recalls how the “absence of of functionality does not mean a shoe is not a shoe.”<sup>1</sup> Displayed here with performative documentation by photographer Lisette Markiewicz, the shoes range in fabrication and functionality to perform their assigned role. The choice of woven uppers is deliberate as Zbitnew suggests this through the act of weaving. “You spend so long with [the cloth] before it’s actually worn that some of the energy you put into it as a

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<sup>1</sup> Zbitnew, Hannah, “The Absence of the Witch Does Not Negate the Spell,” OCAD University thesis paper, March 17, 2019, p 9

maker must carry over to the wearer.”<sup>2</sup> The Maiden shoe has an upper woven from deep green cotton, attached loosely to its raw ceramic sole. The loose threads may be tightened, or further woven, suggesting the malleability of youth: “It’s easy to slip out of, as it rests gently on the foot, open to outside influence.”<sup>3</sup> The Mother shoe features a red clay sole, affixed to a tan insole. The body of the shoe is woven from wheat-coloured cotton, and a large circular ‘buckle’ of raw ceramic wraps around the foot. To Zbitnew, this Mother represents, “the conversation between forms, industrious, multi-relational experiences.”<sup>4</sup> In practical terms, the Mother shoe is a step between the relative un-wearability of the Maiden shoe, towards the more practical Crone. The most functional of the three, the Crone shoe is a ‘babouche’ style, a flat slipper with a pointed toe; it has a flat, functional leather sole and a woven upper. The leather sole will mould to the wearer’s foot with wear, suggestive of the passage of time and a life lived. In folktales, the figure of the crone is often represented as fearsome; however, the crone also represents wisdom and repose, and “an understanding of the relationships around us.”<sup>5</sup>

In, “Behind Closed Doors,” Danny Welsh also works with the materiality of a garment, rather than its functionality. The piece consists of a dress created from used make-up wipes held together with small, formerly gold safety pins. The dress is displayed here on a theatrical, plush peach textile, alongside a photograph taken for Instagram, and an incantation. To create the garment, Welsh has saved their makeup wipes after removing that day’s ‘face,’ patterned them out into a shift dress, then, rather than sewing, held each square together with golden safety pins. The material used speaks to both public performance and private rituals of transformation that take place behind closed doors by reconstructing the physical means of private transformation for public consumption. Since its original fabrication, the gold safety pins have now oxidized to green, taking the garment through its own physical transformation. The garment also emanates the conducive scent of cosmetics as well as the artist’s own pheromones. Scholar Camilla Power speaks of “Beauty Magic,” a concept that regards the application of cosmetics not as a way to beautify one’s self or to construct a

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<sup>2</sup> Zbitnew, p 13

<sup>3</sup> Zbitnew, p 10

<sup>4</sup> Zbitnew, p 11

<sup>5</sup> Zbitnew, p 11

“fake identity,” but rather to locate one’s self “in the social cosmos.”<sup>6</sup> The piece is displayed alongside an incantation that speaks to the application and removal of make-up and its role in fashioning identity, “...a performative re-occurring ritual / secretly spiritual / heavily habitual...” It is easy to imagine Welsh performing this re-occurring ritual, instilling a habitual practice with a spirituality that is unrevealed and hidden.

Yahn Nemirovsky’s, “The Sampler in Your Pocket is a Thing Well Kept,” consists of a series of pocket-sized paper/textile samplers displayed on plinths throughout the gallery. Created before the advent of printed designs, an embroidery sampler was a personal cloth used to record and reference various stitches, designs and effects in order to recreate them later in new pieces.<sup>7</sup> Samplers commonly use as their subject matter personal stories, intended to be passed on through generations, a theme commonly seen in zine culture. The artist notes, “Both the zine and the stitching sampler are objects determined to be transitory in nature, created through processes of duplication. Both are objects known to house ‘mistakes,’ and in their housing, to celebrate them.”<sup>8</sup> Nemirovsky’s samplers have been crafted on ephemeral hand-made textiles intricately woven from paper, these each an experiment in its own right, using a variety of embroidery, drawing, dying, and painting techniques in each piece. In at least one of their samplers, Nemirovsky is inspired by a uniquely confessional text-only sampler created by Elizabeth Sharp around 1930, describing what Sharp sees as her weaknesses and sins, ending, “Be sincere, what will become of my soul.”<sup>9</sup> Nemirovsky’s personal re-interpretation reads, “Be sincere what will become of my ever-loving gender-fuck heart.” The pieces embrace ‘sloppy craft’ theory, a term first coined by artist and instructor Ann Wilson, to describe a: “critical, content-driven decision to work sloppy.”<sup>10</sup> Sloppy craft stands in opposition to the ideas of completion and skill as the benchmarks of value creation, and, according to art historians Elissa Auther and Elyse Speaks, queers the

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<sup>6</sup> Power, Camilla, “Cosmetics, Identity, and Consciousness,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 17, 7-8.

<sup>7</sup> Author unknown, “Embroidery – a history of needlework samplers,” Victoria & Albert Museum, date unknown: <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/embroidery-a-history-of-needlework-samplers>

<sup>8</sup> E-mail with artist, January 9, 2020

<sup>9</sup> “Embroidery – a history of needlework samplers,” Victoria & Albert Museum

<sup>10</sup> Wilson, Ann, “Foreword: Sloppy Craft: Origin of a Term,” *Sloppy Craft: Postdisciplinarity and the Crafts*, Cheasley Paterson, Elaine & Surette, Susan, eds. Bloomsbury, 2015

medium of craft by activating, performing and activating craft's central codes, while at the same time scrambling them.<sup>11</sup> According to Nemirovsky, "When we make--slowly, a cross stitch sampler--or--quickly, a one-off pencil crayon zine, we generate a DIY spirit of keeping which is archival in its own right."<sup>12</sup>

Yasmeen Nematt Alla's shock blankets are machine-embroidered on orange felt with text received through an exchange with others. To create this series, Alla put out a call on social media seeking participants who were willing to share stories that begin, "I wouldn't call this a traumatic experience, but..."; in exchange, Alla would share her own story with them, each story previously deemed worthy of never being told, of being deemed "worthy... in a societal hierarchy of trauma."<sup>13</sup> The resulting pieces of text have been drawn from the more than 90 stories and sewn into the weighted blankets, which viewers are invited take off of their hooks to touch and wear. Alla's interest in working with shock blankets began after seeing them used on television where she discovered, "during traumatic experiences, when our bodies experience shock, we feel cold and experience an out of body experience. A shock blanket is provided to the victim, and it is very much a weighted blanket that warms you and tethers you to the ground during your shock." As items coded with both trauma and comfort, in Alla's work shock blankets become vehicles for storytelling, and a gesture of kindness and care to the viewer, for whom the works may trigger previous traumatic experiences.

In, "I Am Buying My Land Back One Bag At A Time & I am Getting A Receipt This Time," Ana Morningstar creates a physical manifestation of a popular Facebook status-cum-meme by Jay Jay Tallbull, one of the first widely-shared indigenous memes. In seeking of indigenous meme culture specifically, writer Billy-Ray Belcourt describes the meme as "a makeshift form of connectivity. It circulates among those with shared good and bad feelings; it props up an effective infrastructure within which we hail ourselves as a part of

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<sup>11</sup> Auther, Elissa & Speaks, Elyse, "Sloppy Craft as Temporal Drag in the work of Josh Faught," *Sloppy Craft: Postdisciplinarity and the Crafts*, Cheasley Paterson, Elaine & Surette, Susan, eds. Bloomsbury, 2015

<sup>12</sup> e-mail with artist, January 9, 2020

<sup>13</sup> e-mail with artist, December 22, 2019

something...”<sup>14</sup> Utilizing four DIY tarp bags printed with slogans like, “I Can’t Believe It’s Not Rez Dirt,” and “For up to 500+ Years of Resistance!” Morningstar creates the titular bags of soil; by using four bags in total, one for each cardinal direction of North, East, South and West, and the four directions teachings, to address the many facets of the ongoing efforts of indigenous land sovereignty.<sup>15</sup> Soil is spilling out of the sacks, and on close inspection, the viewer can detect small glass trade beads mixed in with the dirt; the beads reference the historic, long-standing means of bartering and economy, legal documentation, and legal agreements referencing treaty rights.<sup>16</sup> The work uses absurdist humour to address and critique the absurdity of broken treaties, stolen land, and tokenized efforts towards reconciliation, through the farce of physically buying back one’s own land, one bag at a time.

In her own writing about her piece, Hannah Zbitnew conjures the concept of *enclothed cognition*, a term coined by researcher Adam Galinsky that speaks to, “the magic of cloth, it can carry moods and abilities that exist outside of you into your bloodstream, your brain, and change you in quiet but measurable ways.”<sup>17</sup> While Galinsky’s research was limited to garments specifically, the textile works that encompass *Emotional Objects* aims to expand the approach to the alchemy that takes place in textiles fabricated or transformed by hand; in which the body of the maker transmits knowledge, thoughts, meaning and magic.

-Emily Gove

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<sup>14</sup> Belcourt, Billy Ray, and Nixon, Lindsay, “What Do We Mean by Queer Indigenous Ethics?”, *Canadian Art* online, May 23, 2018: <https://canadianart.ca/features/what-do-we-mean-by-queerindigenousethics/>

<sup>15</sup> e-mail with artist, Jan 12, 2020

<sup>16</sup> e-mail with artist, Jan 12, 2020

<sup>17</sup> Galinsky Adam, quoted in Zbitnew, Hannah, p 1