

Noelle Hamlyn

SWEETNESS OF THE WORK



Sweetness of the Work is a collection of pieces created in homage to hand work – usually completed by women. Using lace as a metaphor and employing contemporary embroidery techniques, I sought to embody the accumulated stitches, labour and hours invested in traditional women’s hand work. Many of the pieces in the collection have been washed, exposed to saline solutions and nurtured to encourage the formation of salt crystals. These crystals are like the sweat labour and salt tears of the seamstress – a gentle meditation on the loss of traditional hand skills. The intensity of the embroidery and the strength of the resulting lace spoke to me about the repetitive nature of hand work, and the density of the layers of embroidery hinted at the political importance of cloth and the social role of women.

Other pieces in the collection were created using fragile Japanese gampi tissue paper. For these pieces I used the paper to cast the ‘tools of the trade’ – scissors, buttons, irons, spools and bobbins of hand spun thread, thimbles and pins and needles hoping to create ghost like references to the hands that had long ago used and abandoned these ‘old fashioned’ methods. Accompanying the paper castings are pieces created using repurposed layers of text and paper embroidered, washed and burned out to reveal patterns of emptiness between the words. It is the work of women perhaps that holds these words together? Or is it that as the traditional hand craft of women disappear that we are left with emptiness - as if much is left unsaid? As each piece in the *Sweetness of the Work* collection emerged, I thought of the subtle differences between the words ‘craft’, ‘women’s work’, and ‘fine art’ – a subtext that seems to delineate a value difference based on the gender of the hands of artist.

In creating *Sweetness of the Work*, I looked at three women in particular – Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos – known as the Three Fates. Clotho is the spinner, creating the thread of life, and is represented by salted spools and bobbins of hand spun paper. Lachesis is responsible for the creation and measurement of the cloth and is represented in *Sweetness of the Work* by the

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tools of the trade – thimbles, needles, thread, and a paper cast iron. Finally, Atropos is the cutter of the thread and cloth and is represented by paper cast and embroidered scissors. Collectively, these three women are referred to as the Moirai in Greek mythology – inspiring the title of the embroidery and knitting works in which the spinner, measurer and cutter have come together. Fate, salt, and hand work ... the domains of women.

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In this piece, cotton thread was embroidered to create a web like structure which then was exposed to a saline solution. Watched and nurtured to encourage the formation of crystals, the evaporation rate, sun exposure, temperature, salt type and saturation of the solution were varied to create this delicate lace structure. This process, and the nature of the resulting salt crystals on the embroidered surface seems an apt metaphor for the accumulation of stitches, labour and the hours invested in traditional women's hand work. *Sweetness of the Work* is an homage to the salt tears of the seamstress, as if a gentle meditation on the loss of traditional hand skills. It also speaks to the hierarchical structures that shape our perception of 'women's work' exposing cloth and lace work as a socio political medium.



In this work, cotton thread has been embroidered into a pattern of densely formed rings which then was exposed to a saline solution. *Circumnavigate* references the path of travelling in circles, as if in a prescribed orbit, or perhaps lost in a snow storm. The

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dense crystals of the lace seem impenetrable as they encircle and enclose. Perhaps they are tracing a passage, clinging to remain together across a cold and treacherous journey; or valiantly seeking to evade as they circle to avoid contact. The intensity of the embroidery and the strength of the resulting lace also seems an apt metaphor for the repetitive intensity of hand work.

After the Icon



My understanding of self seemed to shift when I moved away from Canada to study. I became aware that there was something unique about my identity - something I knew about myself that non-Canadians did not understand. I was unsure what that ‘something’ might be, but found myself drawn to visual representations of the Canadian identity. As an expatriate, wearing a Maple Leaf or a Hudson’s Bay jacket seemed to be important – at least more important than when I lived in Canada. As an artist I reflected on symbols of my identity and became intrigued with investigating the colour, texture and even the proportions of the iconographic Hudson’s Bay stripes. HBC blankets had once defined Canada as a colony. Could their stripes represent that elusive ‘something more’ that escaped my knowing?

A Series of Lines That Intersect is part of a larger body of work - *After the Icon*, exploring the iconography of the Hudson’s Bay stripes. Work in the series explores cultural and political identities through embroidered tea bag jackets, and large hand spun, hand woven blankets of wool and monofilament. *A Series of Lines That Intersect* is a more individual consideration of identity. Each HBC band of colour has been deconstructed to reveal single lines that trace points of intersection between a thread and a surface. Considering the HBC stripes as abstract representations, these embroidered pieces worked on fragile gampi paper suggest our identity is comprised of a series of events that punctuate the present but remain as a vestige of a path we once explored. Each line of individual identity then contributes to the formation of the larger band of colour – as we are each one of a larger collective.