

DECEMBER 31, 2014

the  
CRAFT  
of  
ART



Dear Friends,

Tossed out scraps, scraped and scrapped back together, gathered and stitched, a gathering of thoughtlets, droplets harvested from past snippets, dialogues] fragmentary \*(non-linear) circuitous piecings, circular clamborings of bits and scraps, gathered and sewn over time, stretched over hours, into past tenses, present imperfect years tumbling now into next, happy new hand-made, hand held hope for a funky '15.

(Above, my first successful crocheted lamp...to begin the dialogue, or triologue, between CRAFT and ART and the HANDMADE).

The last time I pieced a version of this *letter*-quilt, I had just seen Xenobia Bailey's exhibit in Seattle.

**Xenobia Bailey: The Aesthetics of Funk, at the Northwest African American Museum Oct 29, 2011- May 6, 2012.** I wrote, "Such a joy to see the work "in the flesh." Many of her pieces, though, should be worn. Her hats should be viewed adorning a noble personage. I totally reject the division of craft and art based on usefulness, the hierarchy of uselessness over *usefulness*. Museums place "art" behind glass, signifying its uselessness. I think more often than not, the surface of the glass vitrine denudes art of its soul." Here's a link to a story about that show. <http://rainiervalleypost.com/naam-presents-xenobia-bailey-the-aesthetics-of-funk/> and here's her blog <http://xenba.blogspot.com/>.

Just before the New Year, I took the train up to Boston with Mica to see some handmade things at the Institute of Contemporary Art. "Fiber Sculpture 1960 – Present" was a sensuous, delectable exhibit for fiber enthusiasts like myself. And Xenobia Bailey's suspended house, *Sistah Paradise's Great Wall of Fire Tent* (previous page) made a huge impression again, as well as a remounting of Faith Wilding's iconic *Crocheted Environment*. Sheila Hick's cascade of twinings, *Tower of Inquiry/Subtle Column* is breathtaking. Across from Bailey's piece was *Soundway* by Ernesto Neto, a piece not only to be seen, but to be touched and tinkled, walked through and felt. The exhibit has inspired me to get going on the crocheted homage to Faith Wilding and Bailey that has been lingering in my daydreams for years. Many of the works are large—monumental, even—yet they are all created with modest gestures; twist, twine, repeat; stitch, knot, repeat. I left feeling encouraged to start small, with the crocheted lamp on the previous page.

As I surfed the web for good images for this letter, I came across an excellent review in WBUR's *The Artery*. I agree very much with Greg [Cook's critique](http://artery.wbur.org/2014/10/01/fiber-ica) (<http://artery.wbur.org/2014/10/01/fiber-ica>) of the curator's bias for the less political, individualist aesthetic that perpetuates the craft-art, artisan-artist division the exhibit attempts to dismantle.

Porter leaves out the crafty revolution of the past couple decades exemplified by the Bazaar Bizarre hipster craft fair launched in Boston in 2001, the 2003 book "Stitch'n Bitch," the establishment of the online craft powerhouse Etsy in 2005, and the founding of "Make" magazine in 2005 and its first Maker Faire in the Bay Area in 2006.

A hitch is that in doing so, the exhibit seems to again endorse the old—and mistaken— notion that craft is not as good, not as serious, not as important as fine art. How can Porter really revise entrenched histories if she buys into these dusty, exclusionary aesthetic hierarchies? (Cook 2014)

You can find more beautiful images here on the Textile Arts Center blog: <http://textileartscenter.com/blog/ica-fiber-sculpture-1960-present/>

**Colonialism, Appropriation, Androphagy.** Another exhibit at the ICA that really took me by surprise was a solo show of Brazilian artist, Adriana Varejão. I entered the exhibit from the back end, so was struggling at first to make meaning of the painted objects, partial walls with surfaces painted to mimic bath tiling—but spilling out from the insides of the wall were meat-like, bodily shapes. Further in the show, the beautifully rendered images reminiscent of Dutch porcelain revealed scenes of colonial brutality. I was drawn in, enthralled and repulsed in equal measure.



*Linda do Rosário*, 2004, oil on aluminum and polyurethane  
<http://poemargens.blogspot.com/2011/06/carlos-drummond-de-andrade-iii.html>



*Proposal for a Catechesis—Plate (Proposta para uma catequese—Prato)*, 2014, oil on fiberglass  
<http://www.adrianavarejao.net/>

Finally I got to the text panel that articulated Varejão's influences, one being Oswald de Andrade who appropriated the term, **anthropophagy** in the 1920's. His manifesto elaborated the concept of cultural cannibalism, or anthropophagy, and encouraged Brazilian's to absorb and devour the cultures of their colonizers and transform it into a new hybrid culture (more historical perspective and links to digital poetry in this article by Chris Funkhouser: <http://www.lehman.cuny.edu/ciberletras/v17/funkhauser.htm>). Varejão engaged in deep historical research of Brazil's colonization and synthesized her analysis. I'm still dizzy from the wild juxtapositions of beauty and the grotesque, passion and cool logic, colonialism, imperialism, appropriation and counter-appropriation. Is this work about subverting colonial aesthetics? Exorcism? Cultural critique? Reversal of cultural genocide? I think all of the above. And to relate this to the “craft of art,” this woman's dedication to craft and technique is awe-inspiring, even more so because at the same time that she raises up the fineness of object-making craft, she slashes through canvases and pushes a visceral aesthetic that verges on kitsch, while she lures viewers in with engrossing spectacle. I couldn't look away; and the more I looked, the longer I gazed, the more I felt **history** tumbling into the present. I felt pierced by a searing revelation, as if I could see, with exposed eyeball like the one in *Eye witnesses X, Y and Z*, into the hearts of perpetrators of cultural genocide. Here's an interview of Varejão. <http://www.crane.tv/adriana-varejao>. I'll certainly include her work in the presentation about cultural appropriation for the MFAIA Vermont residency in a couple weeks.