

QUOTEQUILT: COMFORT AND COMFORTING

Natalie Bready

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accumulated fabrics, thrifted and gifted

56 x 56 inches

The Paper Quilt Project

Central Illinois 3rd Graders

2021

construction paper, glue, markers, colored pencils, crayons

18 x 18 inches / quilt

QUOTEQUILT is a resting place for body and mind. It's a safe place to decelerate, decode, and digest. There's something very soothing and human about a quilt, composed of parts that have their own histories, just like I do. Its physical presence is affecting, but so is the process of meticulously and methodically making it real. With such sudden and widespread adoption of social distancing and the transition from real-space to digital-space, clinging to comfort is orienting: little scraps of the old familiar feel like treasures, and the wrap of a quilt like a hug.

Someone once told me that a good artist is a collector: a collector of photos, loose ribbon, t-shirts, memories, perspectives. I tend to collect words like I collect pieces of fabric. These words come in the form of habitual journaling, obsessive list making, hoarding of favorite quotes, murmuring of prayers. The structuralists say that life is lived through the shapes of language; I feel more connected to my life when I keep some of its words at arm's length. It's just another common obsession: trying to make things make sense. Hyperreal words make sense when life doesn't; that hyperreal feels safe. I can build words up like a barrier or a foundation for a castle. If a word can hold so much power, maybe the same can be said of scraps of fabric. My fabrics all began somewhere and belonged to somebody sometime, but now they're in my care to sew into my physical constructions alongside nonphysical ones. This all results in the accumulation and appropriation of material and immaterial to appeal to my body and my mind. Like my ordered words, the ordering of patterns and textures into the attempted perfection of a square grid gives me relief and new hope in human potential to find meaning from entropy. Of course, to reorder everything to a state of perfection is incomprehensible and irrational and impossible. That shortcoming nonetheless pushes me through the day to keep searching for sense, but also forces me like clockwork to stop and rest. Obviously, I can't do the work of making meaning if I am always moving – deceleration feels essential to progression. Many times, it's only by slowing down that I can unravel life's messages. We can't escape the biological cycle, and the instinct to cocoon in a blanket each night, to replay a most visceral sense of comfort, draws me to the object of a quilt.

I confirmed this project direction after a fall semester dedicated to exploring biological impulses toward sleep and self-comforting, which culminated in *Cling*, a blanket and representational collage. *QUOTEQUILT* came about from my desire to expand on these topics and also question the role that words play in my own habits of comforting. With no experience in quilting before this semester, I had to begin from scratch to build up on the basics, and it has been an enriching learning experience. Putting myself in the role of a student and delving into the internet's endless offerings of tutorial videos, DIY sites, and troubleshooting blogs required humility and patience, influencing my perspective as I enter student teaching. My research also led me into the history of quilting, including its chapter in Gee's Bend, Alabama, from which I understand better the communal and persevering aspect of the art, especially through trying times. In this respect, it was not difficult for me to make a connection to our current pandemic and social justice climate. Especially amid the varied forms of turbulence and isolation we've faced, I established a normalcy for myself in the therapeutic work of this medium. As I largely remained contained by myself in my apartment, the quilt growing before me and laid out on the bed or sitting across the couch began to declare an identity, reminiscent of human presence. This observation begged me to take the project further.

It began with asking questions of my peers over Zoom to collect their ideas of comfort – when, where, who, what it is... Discussing these questions with them has strengthened my appreciation for our small studio community. This research next spilled into my art education practice. For ARTE 301: Curriculum, Assessment, and Art Education, I've had the pleasure of working with a group of third graders on the topics of comforting and quilting. Translating my own art into a lesson plan that became *The Paper Quilt Project* has been a challenge and a joy. Working within circumstantial limitations and the huge ability and ideas of these students, we've created paper quilts, collectively built from squares designed with comforting words and images, and exchanged by each student for each student. It's an honor to present these works together with *QUOTEQUILT* and credit these artists for their big ideas and big hearts. For the rest of us, taking the time to really listen to their voices can reveal so much. Their participation in the artmaking community is their right, and the community is all the better for it. I am all the better as an artist because of it. The elevation of my isolated process to this level of sharing reminds me why I began *QUOTEQUILT* in the first place: to surround myself in what comforts, first in cloth, then in community.

Self-comforting in fabric and text may or may not be enough on its own. At twenty-four, Christopher McCandless wrote, "Happiness is only real when shared." There is sharing in the living history of quilting. To bring this concept to a community of third graders through co-constructed paper quilts during uncertain times is an act of finding comfort in each other. We each surely hold more power for others than ephemeral scraps or the shadows of words.