

Mending as Metaphor: Finding Community Through Slow Stitching in a Fast Paced World

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This personal account of my practice, Mending as Metaphor, has evolved over many years. The original illustrated talk was given at the Textile Society of America's symposium in Savannah Georgia in October 2016.

Mend and **amend** has evolved from the old French word amender to alter, remedy, cure, revise



There is a growing movement toward repair and mending to combat the waste and over consumption that is so toxic to our planet. The environmental damage caused by textile production is the second greatest source of pollution after the oil industry. In light of these immense issues that are complex and overwhelming I found myself asking; “what can I do to add to the repair of the world?” I realized that we need to mend what we can in our immediate life; to truly see what needs our attention and to assess what is broken and see beauty in the repair and the story it holds. Michael Meade, the mythologist, says it beautifully in his essay on Golden Mending, “Because the troubles of the world have grown so great and encompass both culture and nature, each person can find a crack nearby that can be turned into a golden seam.” This metaphor of stitching life back together is at the core of finding community through slow stitching in a fast paced world.

The search for what can be gleaned and the combining of materials was not only instinctual but nurtured early in my life. The importance of making went back to my childhood where I would spend time with my grandmother in Shreveport, Louisiana. I played for hours laying out pretend quilts and landscapes with the scraps in the bottom drawer of her chiffonier. In this treasure trove she kept a bit of fabric from everything she made, just in case it was needed for mending. The first days of my arrival always spurred a trip to the fabric store to pick out a pattern and material. It was at this time that I learned the language of textiles; seersucker, pique and gingham in the summer; flannels, corduroy and velveteen for winter. The sense that clothing is seasonal, ceremonial and holds our memories was instilled by her and influenced all spheres of my life.



Granny and her mending kit

When Granny travelled to see us, she always brought her mending kit, a small plaid case she made lined with felt that held thread, pins, needles, and a small ruler. This little case in my grandmother's skilled hands transformed our clothing, this ability to alter and fix things became transformative for me. I too wanted those skills and spent as much time as I could by her side. In her capable hands, all the household towels, sheets and aprons were monogrammed. It was my grandmother that connected the sense of text and textiles for me. I also began embroidering and marking cloth as a way of valuing and focusing on the notion that nothing should be wasted or thrown out. Later in my life I made gallery installations of mending boxes to commemorate the sense of order and the belief in the sacredness of textiles that she passed on to me. This reverence, which I thought was Granny's way, was deeply rooted in the worldwide traditions of reuse and stitching. This slow stitching connected us invisibly to the kantha makers in India, the Sind woman making ralli quilts, the Gees Bend quilters, and the boro traditions of Japan. Unknowingly I was initiated into these great traditions by this humble, unassuming woman.

It was during the stormy years of high school with the Vietnam War as the backdrop of my life that making costumes, banners, a booth and wares for the Renaissance Faire connected me to other people who loved to sew and create. This experience helped me realize more fully my direction of pursuing a life in textiles. I saw how having community was central to my life as a

maker. I went to England in pursuit of learning weaving, spinning, and dyeing, and to connect to the people who practiced these traditions. Eventually, after apprenticing, studying with various craftspeople, and travelling, I attended West Surrey College of Art and Design. It was there I began more formal training in textiles and design. Ironically, it was at art school that I began to weave with found fabrics and become more curious about outsider artists, circling back to my early love of Simon Rodia's Watts Towers and creating from the detritus of life.



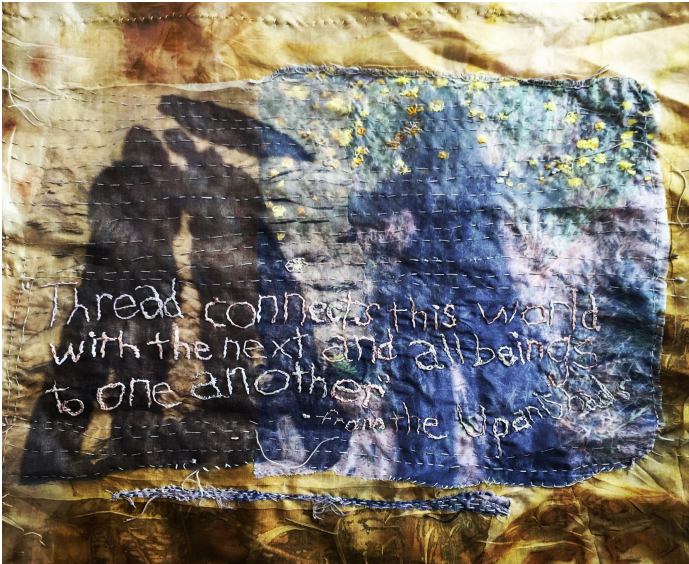
RKS collage Los Angeles, 1979

Once back in Los Angeles my life took on many new directions, but slow stitching and working with found materials was an element that kept me centered and connected to the essence of what I cared about. I made collages of stitched paper and fabrics from found ephemera which helped me piece together the bombardment of images and stimulus of the city. Once I had a studio, I began weaving large scale pieces, bags and rugs from old clothes, found and discarded materials. Even the architectural trellising company **greenscreen®**, which I helped create in the 1990's with my architect husband John Souza and his partner Richard Orne, was an attempt to connect the natural world to the built environment using an existing found screen, which was repurposed for vertical greenery.

As my life went on and we had our three children, I wanted to follow in Granny’s tradition of marking important occasions in cloth. Quilts, Christmas stockings and Halloween costumes were all home made. Although I was a busy mother of three young children and also working, I felt compelled to make flower girl dresses for my nieces and daughters for my brother’s wedding. Again through fabric, I was connected to a great tradition; the Upanishads believe that “thread connects this world to the next and all beings to one another”. In this way Granny and all the ancestors were brought into that moment of ceremony and their presence was felt. Creating memory through cloth and teaching my children to work with their hands came from my core belief in passing that gift on to the next generation.



Dupionni silk flower girl dresses 1995



The Upanishad quote embroidered 2016

In 2009 and 2011, I experienced two serious health issues which forced me to reassess how to use my time and energy more carefully. Coincidentally, at that point I had the good fortune to mentor a very special young woman. I wanted to give her work that had deep connection to my life, and so we repaired the last quilt that my grandmother and I made together. It was during those long hours in the studio when we sat together stitching and sharing stories that I realized how deeply human and part of our essential DNA this work is. I wanted to create this quality of life, slow stitching, hearing stories and connecting through the sharing of textiles, which inevitably connects to all parts of life.

In this time of reconsideration, I felt more deeply about the state of the world, the environmental issues, the catastrophe of fast food and fast fashion. It was then that the Japanese concept of Kintsugi or “Golden Mending,” which celebrates the story of repair and visible mending began to touch all aspects of my life. I saw a way to bring all the meaningful aspects together in my life through mending as metaphor. The need to address that crack closest to me became apparent, whether it is an issue, a person, or a textile.

In 2012 I began a mending circle, where we still gather to mend and tell stories, new webs are forming; ideas are growing out of the collective experience and each mender is going out into their community with a new lens. The mending has taken forms that I never would have imagined and the circle keeps widening to include people of all ages, races, genders, and backgrounds. Mending seems to touch on something mythic and ancient and yet very universal, practical and of this moment.



Mending Group Los Angeles, CA

As my awareness of the field of mending grows, I am witnessing the tremendous amount of projects, books, lectures and installations that are happening globally on the subject. There are countless artists, makers, photographers, fashion designers and craftspeople using mending and

reuse to bring awareness through exhibits and installations regarding the vast problem of waste and overproduction. Some of the projects done over the last few decades are Charles Boltanski's, "Dispersion," which was mounted in Paris at the Grande Palais, as well as in London and New York. This powerful piece which was a huge mountain of clothing illustrated the problem of over production and the loss of intimacy with our clothing and textiles. Viewers were encouraged to take from this mountain of used clothing, so in the end nothing would be left. Other installations that address this issue are numerous, including the Marks and Spencer's Schwapping installation, where the whole building in London was covered with 10,000 garments. Yuki Onodera's portraits of used clothing, gleaned from the Boltanski piece, photographed in her window in Paris convey a deep sense of reverence and also make us look at a commonplace article differently. These artists and countless others, each in their own way, are bringing attention and focus to this subject.

Some artists and activists are mending publicly in ways that promote community involvement and are bringing people together in new configurations. Metaphorical landscape mending by the artist Brooks Harris Stevens is well documented as is the work of the artist and activist Michael Swaine. He had a community practice for many years called the Free Mending Library. where he brought his treadle sewing machine into the Tenderloin district of San Francisco to mend not only the clothes of the people who sought him out, but also to hear their stories. Celia Pym, in London, has been doing interesting mending projects and one in particular called "Give a Darn", where groups of people mended sheets for the national health hospitals is particularly relevant to bring attention to the health system which needs mending on many levels. Clara Wainwright in Boston worked with children on a large sewn piece, Mending Boston, after the marathon bomb attacks, to heal through slow stitching and being together. These are just a smattering of the worldwide projects to bring attention to the healing nature of gathering and stitching. Pictured below is a project I led with young adults with cancer at Dana Farber and witnessed firsthand the community and camaraderie that transpired in just a short period of time.



Dana Farber Project 2015

There is also a growing awareness of mending and repurposing in the fashion industry. At the high fashion level we see Junya Watanabe for Comme des Garçons sending models down the runway in patched clothing. The designer Momo Wang is saying no to production of more pieces and is putting her line together from existing foraged pieces and repurposing them in very innovative ways. Alabama Channing has led the way in creating jobs for sewers in the south and is championing organic cotton and making people more aware of the environmental aspect of chemical farming of cotton. Many companies are using more sustainable practices and some have paved the way for direct change in the industry such as Patagonia. They famously made an advertisement saying “Don’t buy this jacket” with the clear message to repair the one you already have. Their “worn wear” truck journeys around the states repairing clothing and spreading the word about buying less, but purchasing better quality items that will last and be worth repairing. The deep desire to have story and history as part of our life through the textiles we choose reminds me of an idea from eco-feminist and physicist Vandana Shiva. She uses the metaphor that we vote with our fork three times a day for the kind of world we want, I feel that we also vote for the values we care about by what we choose to wear and have around us. Our collective sense of aesthetics needs to evolve to see repair as an emblem of care and beauty and as a mark of deep concern for our fragile planet and our overflowing landfills. The idea of repair in our culture is radical, to live our lives where we are slowing down enough to create and mend is part of a social rebellion against mindless consuming and a return to a deeper human connection to each other and the environment.



The Mending Box installation from Fiberlicious, Los Angeles Municipal Gallery 2015

References: Michael Mead's article on Golden Mending The Huffington Post 2014

Quote from the Upanishads "Thread connects this world to the next and all beings to one another".