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HON 499 Creative Thesis

Ann Bartges and Kristen Case

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“Our world goes to pieces; we have to rebuild our world. We have to find our strength rather than our weakness. Out of the chaos of collapse we can save the lasting: we still have our ‘right’ or ‘wrong,’ the absolute of our inner voice. We still know beauty, freedom, happiness—unexplained and unquestioned.”

—Anni Albers *One Aspect of Art Work* 1944

Thank you to my wonderful advisors Ann Bartges and Kristen Case for their selfless work on helping me bring this vision to life. Thank you for taking a chance on this idea and on me.

Thank you to all of those who have influenced me, those who know and do not know, their role in this project and my life over the last 21 years.

All of my gratitude to my grandmother who passed on the invaluable gift of fiber arts, and the need to create woven into my bone marrow.

Introduction: In this paper I will outline the process and inspiration behind my creation of a quartet of quilts, each one based on one season which serves as a reflection of my life growing up in Maine in those seasons. I will begin by examining the societal and personal experiences that have influenced my relationship with quilt making, before moving into discussing how the COVID-19 Pandemic changed these perspectives. Next I will examine the work of fiber artist Anni Albers and how her work was influenced by WW1 and her contribution to the feminist presence in the modernist movement, how her work inspired mine, and I will draw parallels between the rebuilding of Europe in a post WW1 world, and the aftermath of Covid-19. Finally I will discuss my own work and analyze my quilts.

In the early 2000s, as I tried to escape the world around me through a rapacious consumption of the young adult (YA) literature, I quickly became indoctrinated into the ideology of *not like other girls*. We all know her hallmark traits: she doesn't use special conditioner/shampoo or style her hair but somehow always has perfect effortless waves. If you ask her if she wears mascara, she'll respond with, "what's that?" She's shy and quiet and yet without having an experience talking to boys, wows and enthralls the most desired man on the market with just one look. She is the anti-hero to the stereotypical commercially-hyper-feminine villain in these stories; a girl who cares about her makeup and hair and therefore must be self centered. A girl who is too outgoing and loud and repulses men. A girl who's sexuality is weaponized against her. The characterization of *not like other girls* may have been once sold as an empowerment of young girls, telling them that they didn't have to fit in and could break the mold. But in doing so it pushed the image of a shy, submissive, virginal girl who was easily manipulated into the spotlight and villainized anyone who acted differently. It was, essentially, a multi-billion dollar ad campaign for the male gaze that left an entire generation of young girls confused about their relationship to their own femininity.

While ensnared in these concepts growing up, I remember distinctly feeling repulsed by the very idea of being feminine. The thought of sewing my own quilt felt like a betrayal to my identity. I would much rather be like Kelsey Hayes in *The Tiger's Curse* who let her millionaire boyfriend hold and cuddle her by wrapping her up in a quilt (that she did not make herself) on his lap, while she wore hand-me-down pajamas and flipped about her hair that hadn't been washed in a week but somehow was "the most beautiful thing he had ever seen." That was the real idea of femininity I wanted. That was the only one that made sense to me. It was until 2020 when I began to dismantle these ideas.

Like most people in the world, I do not consider myself the same person I was before the global Covid-19 Pandemic hit. While in lockdown in Portland, Maine I was living with my family which included my maternal grandmother, who had moved in with us just prior to the start of the pandemic. There are many things I remember about my grandmother growing up. Many little snapshots that stick out to me. I didn't want to be girly, but I wanted to be like her—this big powerful figure who has given life to an entire generation of human beings. Six people on this planet came from one woman. I would ask her to wear her make-up and she would refuse until my hair was neat and tidy. I remember sitting on the edge of her big four poster mahogany bed while she ripped a hair brush through my knotty hair. I never brushed my hair. I rejected all societal and hierarchical attempts to force my conformity into the role of a presentable lady. But being a presentable lady was something my grandmother preached often and vehemently. At the time I was too young to see the ways in which she was teaching me good life skills and respect for myself as a person. I only saw an old woman, beaten down by an oppressive system, who insisted on playing a kept role in the patriarchal system that had hurt her so deeply. I saw my grandmother as weak.

Then I moved back into my home halfway through my freshman year of college, and was locked inside for eight straight weeks with her. During this time I got to know my grandmother on a level I previously had not. She was not weak. She had survived the Great Depression on a farm in Ohio, and at a time when her womanhood meant no one thought she was deserving of a secondary education, she fought and put herself through college. She would go on to be at the front lines of feminists movements for the next thirty years. During these long conversations I felt a little nick at the tapestry of my inner beliefs that I had made, and suddenly the threads holding together my paper thin conceptions of my identity began to unravel. For the first time in

my life, I saw my grandmother as an artist. A creator. The possessor of an unfathomable imagination, with the discipline to make her ideas come to life.

I embarked on making my first quilt. Under her tutelage and hawk-like eyes for perfection, I got the feel of fabric under the pads of my fingers, the tempo and pulse of a sure foot on the sewing pedal. I started seeing everyday items in grid-like patterns that could be transferred to a quilt template. For all of the metaphorical ways that Covid changed the way I looked at the world, this was a literal shift in my perception that manifested in a very real ability to create something new.

My first quilt was a simple square pattern that I stitched together using different scraps of fabric my grandmother had stored in our basement and one Frida Khalo print that I had found at a local store. If I was going to physically and mentally embark on dismantling my internal misogyny, I wanted Frida by my side. I was enthralled with the process of creating a quilt. I got sucked into the motion of feeding my pieces under the needle, ironing repetitively, with carefully up and studying edges. And then the world began to slowly reopen, and I went back to work, and quilt making took a back seat to my other interests. But my new ability to see things around me in grid patterns and my fascination with textile arts was always right at the edge of my peripheral vision.

When I came across the history of Black Mountain College, and the works of Anni and Joseph Albers, as well as other revolutionary modernist thinkers and creators, I started to more intentionally revisit the idea of quilt making, not just on an intellectual level, but also from a desire to create something that pushed my understanding of quilting to a new sphere. This discovery coincided with the start of my senior year of my undergraduate studies.

As I come to the end of this period of my life, and stand on the edge of the chasm of what comes next, I have found myself looking back on my life up until now. My life up until I step out of school for the first time in 18 years.

At first glance my childhood might look to an outsider like a promotional picture for the Common Ground Fair. After my parent's divorce, my father purchased a bright pumpkin orange VW van (lovingly named the Pumpkin Van) and we lived in the middle of the woods far away from neighbors. Some of my earliest memories in school are of my first grade teacher making a sticker chart for my father because we were always late when we stayed with him the night before. To hear him tell it, there were just too many important things to learn outside of the classroom to let it dictate our entire lives. My father's parenting techniques embodied the transcendentalist mindset. My parents met as Maine guides for kayaking and I lived on the coast of Maine until I went inland for college. Now-a-days I put salt on everything I eat and I am convinced it is because my body is so deprived of salt water. The connecting themes of my life became clear as I latched onto key memories. Maine. Water. Nature. Reflecting on these influences, and the way I took to nature so young and continue to find refuge, inspiration, and joy in it, I knew I wanted this project to be based heavily in the natural world, both in images and metaphors. Instantly I thought of the four seasons and my 21 years of cyclical movement through them. I knew that I wanted to use all four together as a backdrop for my project. Just as my life is made up of tiny separate moments that can be viewed individually but come together to create a larger experience, I wanted my project to be made up of individual pieces that tell a story on their own but come together to tell a wholly larger story when combined. Using the backdrop of the four seasons seemed like the perfect way to achieve this and express the deep influence of nature on my life. And so the loose outline of this project was born; I would create 4 quilts, one for each

season in Maine, that would depict a reflection of my life growing up in that season. Each quilt would tell its own story while simultaneously working toward telling the story of my life at large. But inspired by Anni Albers, I also wanted to push my thinking and my artistic abilities to new levels.

In this endeavor I found solace in the past. In the arms of artists who came before me. In the ways my creative predecessors found meaning in rebuilding a world that was stripped down to studs. In the rubble of World War I, Walter Gropius founded the art school and community, Bauhaus, in Germany. It was here that Anni Albers, the daughter of a rich family, began to carve out her own life and identity separate from her family. While she went to Bauhaus under the promise of a new age community that embraced all artists regardless of sex as equal, she was met with institutionalized sexism and confined to the weaving department, which later became known as the “Women’s Workshop.” Instead of running from the work thrust upon her by a narrow minded patriarchal society, Albers embraced it head on and set about transforming not only the textile community, but the way the world viewed textiles all-together (Danilowitz).

In her Essay *Work With Materials* Albers explores at length the views that textile art, specifically weaving, serves a function and therefore is inherently void of artistic meaning in a post Industrial Revolution world. She juxtaposes this against the idea that because art is created with materials and materials serve a function, then by nature all art must serve a function. Before the Industrial Revolution it was understood that functional things, tools for example, held an artistic value and appreciation based on the nature of their creation. If one person or a small group of people had to make one item by hand, then the intentionality and decisions that went into its birth made it an artistic piece. After the Industrial Revolution when many functional things began to be mass produced, those items lost their artistic value and became purely

functional in the eyes of the users. In post war Europe many thinkers and creators were interested in going back to the most basic units of their materials. At Bauhaus this took the form of artists rallying around the goal of creating practical and functional things that would physically help rebuild Germany while ushering the broken country into a new era of expression. How could these artists make beautiful but practical work? Unfortunately, while there was a textile studio at Bauhaus, most people who took up the space of experts in the field, an expectedly male dominated field, did not value textiles as art (Danilowitz).

Albers did not accept being shoved into this box. Contrary to what I believe is a popular thought in modern day culture, Albers did not set about to revolutionize the field. She did not set out to contribute to a new way of thinking, what would later be known as the modernist revolution. She simply endeavored to explore the world around her with a curious and open mind that led her to new heights. In order to do this Albers, like many of her colleagues at the Bauhaus, went first to the material. She went to the very bones of the craft where she studied, and manipulated and innovated the very fibers and substance she was working with. In a country rebuilding the very substance of its homeland, artists of this time were influenced to look at the materials they were working with. In studying the materials and questioning how they could be combined to make interesting pieces she stumbled across a process of weaving fabric in an abstract way. Her techniques and her tutelage of her peers at Bauhaus contributed to the modernist movement that brought a new energy to creating for the sake of creating, and a breakdown of obedience to structural masters. Albers' writing provided the philosophical bedrock for my practice of thinking about the creating process and how I wanted to situate my work in the large context of quilt art. With Albers' writings forming the bedrock of my philosophical engagement with the experience of creating quilts, I was ready to embark on a

more robust project that tested multiple facets of my creative capabilities. Knowing that I wanted to approach this project with the open-eyed curiosity of the modernist movement, the next step was to map out my projects.

When contemplating how to convey these foundational experiences that were sewn into my childhood, I became stuck. Creating a traditional piece quilt felt like it wouldn't capture explicitly enough my experiences. And depiction of the strictly literal, like a pumpkin orange VW van for example, seemed to leave my examination on the surface and go no deeper. It was in this tension that I realized the most sincere way to approach the artwork of the quilts would be through an abstract approach. Because my grandmother exposed me to very traditional quilts and other textiles that were interpreted and explained to me as being pretty wall pieces or functional household objects, this idea of abstracting a material that is conventionally believed to be understood as plain was something I had begun pondering while observing the world around me. Where I had been looking at a tree through this new lens of quilting patterns, I was now taking that a step further and contemplating how I could break that tree down into the abstract. Much like I create abstracted works of writing that function by defamiliarizing concepts and words to tell stories, I began to think about how I could use defamiliarizing and unexpected fabric units to build a story that portrayed my experiences growing up in Maine, centered around the unified theme of nature. Arguments about quilts being seen as visual texts as outlined by Marcia Inzer Bost's work *Quilt's as Visual Texts* aided me in conceptualizing how to tell abstract but also very concrete stories through my quilts. Bost writes, "As a text, quilts contain units of meaning much like words(Bost)." Just as Albers had explored the very units of the materials she worked with when weaving, Bost proposes that those units can be equated to words. Following this idea, less explicit textile manipulations can be interpreted as more individualistic words, strung together to

tell a larger story. I felt confident that I could play with the line between abstraction and the literal and create something at once separate and cohesive.

I turned to Ali Smith's quartet of fiction, *Summer*, *Spring*, *Winter*, and *Fall*, four independent books that connect to each other through themes, imagery, location, and the seasons, for inspiration on how to effectively achieve this goal. Reading these pieces helped focus my mind onto the repetitive images or ideas that have been consistent throughout my life. The pattern that emerged was that of flow. Ideas flowing, moments flowing, life flowing, and, having been raised on the coast, water flowing. I decided that I would use the individual units of flowing patterns to tell the story of the themes of fluidity in my life. A consistent feeling throughout my childhood, which in part put me on the track to becoming a teacher, was that of overflowing, overfilling, too much; both mentally and literally as people in my life repeatedly tried to contain me in a demure and quiet skin that was more appropriate for a girl. I decided to depict this as a flow of either water or light from up high, symbolizing my life fascination and philosophical pursuit of a higher purpose that has permeated all aspects of my life, and have that substance move into a contained area. In some of my quilts the water overflows, and sometimes it is contained, symbolizing the polarity of feeling free and alive but also constrained in the pressure put on me to be put together neatly.

I knew before I started the project that my winter quilt would draw inspiration from the tradition of the Crazy Quilt. A Crazy Quilt is a quilt whose fabric is found from scraps of other projects in order to not waste valuable fabric. It was often a technique used by poor women who did not have the monetary luxury of buying new fabric, especially not for the sole purpose of art. As Laura Balbo writes in *Crazy quilts: rethinking the welfare state debate from a woman's point of view* from *Women and the State*, "[the] debate about the welfare state is inadequate and

misleading because it has ignored women and their location in late capitalist society. The techniques of quilt-making developed, initially, from economic conditions of extreme scarcity(Balbo).” As a Mainer who grew up in a low income household, I knew first hand what scarcity during the harsh winter months could look like. I wanted to create my winter quilt using as many found fabrics as I could to explore this style. I hoped to cut up the Christmas stockings my family had used for twenty years, and an old raggedy fleece blanket that I spent many a brittle winter night wrapped up in. I took as much fabric from my grandmother’s stash as I could, which not only allowed me to mimic this style, but it also served as a full circle moment for my family. My grandmother who grew up on a farm in Ohio during the Great Depression in extreme scarcity, and had to create with scraps, grew up to be able to collect fabric and pass it on to me.

At this point I knew that I wanted to make four quilts, each one based on one season, I wanted them to lean more abstract than literal, I did not want to do traditional square pieced quilts and instead would use the style of applique (which is when you layer pieces of fabric on top of each other and sew them flat) and that I wanted to use as many found materials as I could, especially from my grandmother's stash of fabric.

As a multi-media artist my process is often outside of the dimension of the primary material I am using. For this project I first went to my sketchbook and sketched out different images that came to mind when I thought of each season, and used watercolor paints to experiment with color palettes. What I found was that I did not think of the color orange when I thought of fall but instead greens and browns. I did not think of reds or greens when I thought of winter but a myriad of blues and whites. Very intentionally I chose the colors for these quilts based on the feelings I associate with the seasons and the first images that come to my mind’s

eye when I think of them. And with this scaffolding, I went back to the conceptual to begin sketching my quilts.

Every one of the most significant deaths in my life has occurred in the springtime. There are nods to this in my spring quilt in the fairy wings that hold afloat a pitcher of water from which a river flows, just as their memories and contributions to my life continue to flow. One of my most important memories that I can trace a lot of who I am today back to, happened on a winter's night. There are nods to that in the colors and landscape in my winter quilt. I often remember my love for change and stillness in the fall and there are nods to that in the greens, yellows, and body of water in my autumn quilt. Summer is the time when I escape the most into fantastical worlds and creativity, and there are nods to this in my summer quilt. When I look at these quilts, I see concrete and metaphorical moments from my life. I see things that are easy for the viewer to understand and things that are withheld and personal to me. I am happy with the way this balance and how it represents my life thus far.

As Anni Albers wrote in *One Aspect of Art Work*, “Our world goes to pieces; we have to rebuild our world. We have to find our strength rather than our weakness. Out of the chaos of collapse we can save the lasting: we still have our ‘right’ or ‘wrong,’ the absolute of our inner voice. We still know beauty, freedom, happiness—unexplained and unquestioned (Albers).” I never expected to find my lasting in the chaos and collapse of Covid-19 or my final year of undergrad in quilts, but the “beauty, freedom, and happiness—unexplained and unquestioned,” that quilting opened my eyes too, was in many ways a spontaneous rebuilding of my world.

Appendix





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