Keeping Busy
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Five Artists Respond to Henrietta Lambie’s
Mourning Quilt c.1884

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Featuring work by: Angela Zammarelli, Anna Slezak, Annie Sollinger, Kat Howard, and Lucy Trainor

Curated by Esther S White

Historic Northampton Museum
46 Bridge Street, Northampton, MA
At the end of the 19th century, American quilt design was turned on its head by women making wildly embroidered, richly textured, and shockingly asymmetrical “crazy quilts” made from velvet, silk, and plush fabrics. Henrietta Bryan Lambie (1852–1932), a Northampton resident, started a crazy quilt in 1884, at the height of the American crazy quilt craze. Her quilt was made as a memorial to the two young children she lost in 1884, the first before she started the quilt and the second soon after. The quilt’s densely embroidered blocks are made up of 946 patches cut from her family’s wardrobe, including ribbon and silk cape lining belonging to the two daughters commemorated in the quilt, and silk ties in mourning colors belonging to her husband. Some of the blocks were made by friends, and many are embellished with painted flowers in addition to thread. Many of the motifs have symbolic meaning, for instance: children playing, pansies for “thoughts” (meaning sympathy in the Victorian language of flowers), and a hen and chicks for motherhood. Every seam is embellished with hand embroidery. Almost every corner disguised by an appliqué or stumpwork patch.

Like many crazy quilts made with both fragile and thick, fancy fabrics, Lambie’s quilt has no batting because the top is too difficult to quilt through. Despite being over 130 years old, the quilt is in amazing condition. The fabrics are neither faded nor worn. This suggests that

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Above: Card written by Henrietta Lambie and included when the quilt was donated to the Historic Northampton Museum by her daughter, Margaret Lambie
Lambie’s quilt was hardly ever used. It is likely that the quilt was kept safe in a trunk or cabinet before it was donated to the museum for preservation. Lambie’s quilt was identified by the Massachusetts Quilt Documentation Project and included in the book *Massachusetts Quilts, Our Common Wealth* (2009). It is a fine example of a design trend in American quilting and a unique view into the life of a middle class Massachusetts woman in the late 19th century.

This exhibition includes Lambie’s quilt alongside the artwork of five contemporary artists who have varied approaches to textile art and a shared interest in history and women’s stories. Each artist has created a new piece in response to Lambie’s mourning quilt, investigating themes as diverse as the Victorian language of flowers, personal loss, Reproductive Justice, Victorian and contemporary American mourning practices, popular images of childhood, family textiles, and making do. The invited artists have taken inspiration from the historical context of Lambie’s quilt, her personal story, and the materials she used. They have employed a wide range of methods, including hand embroidery, darning and recycling textiles, piecing and quilting, bookbinding, printmaking, weaving, digital collage, and image transfer.

As part of an artist’s studio practice, textiles can fit in nicely with the rest of life – for many of the same reasons needlework was a popular pastime for Victorian women. Much of the work that goes into textile art is repetitive, and there is a calming comfort in repetitious work. Victorian women were encouraged to keep themselves busy with time-consuming craft projects to decorate their homes; to make “fancy-work.” Work itself could be considered a cure for boredom, nervousness, and “Women’s complaints.” The editors of *Peterson’s*, a popular women’s magazine, shared this exhortation in 1882:

> *Always be doing something.* —The cheerful people are the industrious ones. It is the idle who are most subject to fits of melancholy. In this respect, women have a great advantage over men, in their love for fancy-work. Embroidery, for instance, just occupies the mind and body sufficiently without overtasking either. Men, when they have nothing to do, take to smoking, sometimes even drinking. Severe, exhausting labor is not to be desired by anybody, as a rule. But occupation, and constant occupation, is healthiest for both mind and body. It is the industrious who are the happiest and best-tempered.

However condescending, silly, and dated the editors’ claim may be, the repetition and rhythm of sewing, weaving, quilting, and embroidery is also useful. It leaves the artist free to consider the conceptual ramifications of a work or simply the freedom to daydream.

Today, the options for a woman’s self-expression are much broader, but the methods and materials that Lambie used in 1884 are still relevant. Combined with contemporary materials and techniques, these traditional skills can be used to create expressive, complex work that benefits from its connection to the past. As viewers, we are reminded of our own histories and the women we have known who knit, crochet, weave, hook rugs, embroider, or quilt. The work is labor-intensive, intimate, and evocative.

Esther S White
Northampton, Massachusetts

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1. During Henrietta Lambie’s lifetime, a quilt, even one that of little practical use, was not considered artwork. In the last few decades, quilts and textiles have gained recognition as art objects, especially when they are hung on the wall.
Kat Howard

The Topography of Bound Grief, 2016
Woven wall hanging: yarn, human hair, jet beads, sonogram, ribbon, crepe paper, lace, satin, veil netting, chiffon, alpaca locks, sari silk, hand-painted oak dowel; 30”x40”

This tapestry interrogates restrictions imposed on women in the 19th century and in the present, and how their expression has been controlled even in the intimacy of loss within the context of pregnancy and birth. Where Mrs. Lambie’s quilt was the channel through which she could express the joy and light from her brief relationships with her lost children that society did not want her to show, I have made a piece in response that represents the mourning I was forbidden, because my rape and abortion were forced to be kept secret. When our emotions are beaten into submission and buried alive, they don’t die, but can come forth in uglier ways like this dark, woven mass.

This piece is made from an abundance of materials that were deemed traditionally acceptable for women in mourning during the Victorian era. It measures 30x40 inches, the dimensions of a standard infant hospital blanket.
Anna Slezak

Light into dark / Life into death, 2016
Quilt: recycled and family textiles; 65”×75”

It takes courage to make a mourning quilt, acknowledging one's loss and turning it into a source of comfort during a time of sadness. The colors, imagery, and repurposed fabrics Henrietta Lambie chose speak directly to her grief. It was common to use the clothing of the deceased as quilt material out of necessity. I am intrigued by the idea that those items and materials can be mourned as something more than just old clothes or linens. We can believe that they are sacred, that they embody feelings and memories.

In designing my quilt in response to Lambie’s, I researched other mourning quilts from the same period. One well-known design, widely known as the Graveyard Quilt or Kentucky Coffin Quilt, used a grid and center medallion design with an appliquéd and embroidered image of a cemetery with tiny coffins named for each of the deceased. While the design of Lambie’s crazy quilt can be interpreted as a wild, uncontrolled outpouring of grief, I am more comforted by structure, making order from the mental chaos of loss. My quilt neatly divides this world from the next, and makes use of the center appliquéd motif found in the Graveyard Quilt. I have selected my second-hand fabrics from family, loved ones, and strangers alike; a reminder to myself that the step beyond this life is a shared destination.

Detail of Graveyard Quilt made by Elizabeth Roseberry Mitchell, 1843
Quilt: cotton and paper, 85”×81”
Image courtesy of the Kentucky Historical Society
Foundation pieced, embroidered, and painted crazy quilt, made by Henrietta Lambie, 1884. Silk, 66”×57”. Photograph by David Stansbury. Courtesy of the Massachusetts Quilt Documentation Project.
This Will Not Keep You Warm, 2016
Book: Intaglio and digitally printed cotton, machine embroidery and quilting; 15"×14"×1.25", 28"–54"×13.5" when open

This Will Not Keep You Warm is a meditation on motherhood and homemaking. The book is made up of intaglio and digital images printed on new cotton cloth. Unlike Henrietta Lambie’s quilt, which uses her and her family’s clothing, not a single piece of mine, or anybody else’s, clothing was used in the production of the book. The work is pieced together and quilted by machine. The stitches that Mrs. Lambie and her friends did by hand have been photographed and digitally printed. I had a desire to think about Mrs. Lambie and have compassion for her loss, but also to keep that at bay. Fretful worries about my own child and her mortality were heightened. Magical thinking and obsessive thoughts abounded while I was working on this book.

Along with being a mourning quilt, Lambie’s crazy quilt uses imagery typical of the time it was made: Japanese-inspired fans and vases, insects, and Kate Greenaway illustrations appear throughout. Painted and embroidered flowers, an American flag, a horseshoe, and a Jacob’s Ladder all come together to tell a story about who the Lambie family was and how their home was kept. The imagery chosen for this book all comes from the Lambie’s quilt — except for the wooden floors. I use wooden floors in my regular studio vernacular and in the book as a grounding element.
Lucy Trainor

*Mend*, 2016
Quilt: Cotton, silk, and wool fabrics, natural plant dyes, hand embroidery, 24”×16”

I am drawn to the elaborate embroidery in the Lambie quilt, and the use of Victorian symbolism to express grief and mourning. In *Mend*, I explore abstract embroidery as a way to meditate on grief and loss. The repetitious action of drawing the needle through layers of fabric, without a pattern, is a way to “keep busy.” Similarly, the quilted blocks that surround the embroidered pieces are abstract and pieced together largely at random. In my quilting practice, I often reflect on the ways in which many types of women’s work, including quiltmaking, are simultaneously a useful pursuit and an outlet for artistic expression — a sanctioned way for women to create art within the confines of domesticity and gender roles. I was struck by the way Lambie’s mourning quilt expresses deep and profound sadness, hidden in the rigid format of the Victorian crazy quilt.

As a contrast to the vibrant colors of the fabrics Lambie included in her quilt, I chose to limit my fabric palette to neutrals and a series of fabrics all dyed with woad grown from seed in my garden. Working with this plant dye required a lot of waiting — for seeds to sprout, until time to harvest, and finally while the cloth steeped in the dyebath. I enjoy the slowness of quilting, and wanted my process and materials to reflect the patience I saw in the Lambie quilt, with its detailed, hand-painted fabric and precise and elaborate embroidery.
Annie Sollinger

Battle Vest, 2015–2016
Manufactured cotton vest with hand embroidery, appliqué, and quilting in cotton, found objects; dimensions variable

In examining the distance between Henrietta Lambie and myself, I have been tempted to regard her as representing a certain kind of well-to-do woman, typical of 1884. Henrietta lived during a time when society regarded the upper-class female body as incapable of regulating itself, when women were by and large discouraged from physical autonomy. I live during a time when a woman may choose to remain childless, but her rights still need to be protected.

Child mortality, much more pressing in the Victorian era than today, fits into the greater complex of women’s health. Henrietta experienced a great loss in a short time, and I can only imagine how she felt, let alone how she was made to feel by those around her. Considering this, I have found myself thinking about my own childhood and my own traumas, and looked for ways to heal. Battle Vest is a modern garment, its concept borrowed from the punk and metal scenes I have known and loved. At the same time, these communities are perpetually male-dominated and aggressive, in turn alienating the female, the feminine, and the fragile. The vest gives me a chance to protect myself while declaring my belief in a woman’s right to autonomy.

I have also considered the practice of crazy quilting as an expression of technical skill, practiced mostly by women of leisure. Henrietta herself lived comfortably, largely due to the success of her husband’s dry goods store. This shop also gave her easy access to materials. Of course, that does not lessen the effect her losses had on her making. But my own upbringing and thrift cause me to struggle against the surface themes of crazy quilting, with its feigned randomness and extravagant materials. I have used fabric scraps given to me by my family, and other materials I have saved since I was small, to patch and hide rips and tears.

Taking this woman at this time as my starting point, I am investigating the tension between female autonomy and Victorian regimentation of mourning and of the female body. This tension is embodied in symbols that carry multiple meanings. For example, Pennyroyal, an abortifacient that means flee away in the Victorian language of flowers; spiders and webs that needleworkers regard as lucky talismans, but which are also associated with the macabre and with neglect. The language of flowers also points to the Victorian interest in horticulture and gardening, practices that are generally feminized, and which I admire.

The central theme of this work is mending: mending hurt feelings, reinforcing beliefs, and patching literal holes in a store-bought garment. Mending is a way of extending the life of a fabric, of keeping up appearances; it’s an expression of pride. It is an economical practice, and a meditative one. Mending is practical, but I have also used it as a path to adornment and self-expression. To that end, this is perhaps the most personal work I have made to date.
**About the Artists**

**Angela Zammarelli** received her BFA from the University of Massachusetts Amherst and MFA from the Minneapolis College of Art and Design in Minneapolis, MN. Her work explores the intersections of fantasy and reality, where the interior and exterior worlds meet up, and how that meeting is perceived in the larger narrative happening in society and the expectations held within. She has attended residency programs at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts in Omaha, NE, Elsewhere Artist Collaborative in Greensboro, NC, and Three Walls in Chicago, IL. In 2011, she was named one of the Massachusetts Cultural Council’s fellowship recipients in sculpture/installation. Angela lives in Easthampton, MA.

www.angela.zammarelli.com

**Anna Slezak** got her start as a painter, but as a perpetual explorer and collector, her unbounded creativity has found many outlets since. The tactile and versatile nature of textiles and weaving have captivated her full attention. Anna has recently been guest curator at Flying Object in Hadley, MA and part of “Related Matters,” a month-long exhibition at A.P.E. in Northampton, MA. She lives and works in Easthampton, MA.

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**Annie Sollinger** is a librarian and artist. She earned her BA in Art History from NYU, and her MSIS from UT Austin. Her practice centers around photography, collage, zines, and fiber. She is interested in ecology, intersectional feminism, and appropriation. Annie lives in Easthampton, MA.

www.anniesollinger.net

**Kat Howard** is a poet, book artist, and fiber artist. She earned a BA in Creative Writing from Brandeis University, and an MFA in Book Art & Creative Writing from Mills College. Kat founded Book Meat Studio in 2009. Kat was an artist-in-residence at Kala Art Institute in 2013. Her work was featured in *500 Handmade Books: Volume 2* (Lark Crafts, 2013) and the Siberian Self-Publishing Festival, Tomsk, Russia. She lives and works in Kingston, NY.

www.kat-howard.com

**Lucy Trainor** is a reproductive justice activist and quilt-maker. She is a staff member at the Civil Liberties and Public Policy program at Hampshire College, an organization that trains and supports new activists and leadership to secure reproductive freedom for everyone. She also serves as co-chair of the Prison Birth Project’s fundraising committee. Lucy has previously worked as a sexual health educator and a birth doula. She holds a BA in Women’s, Gender & Sexuality Studies from Barnard College. Lucy lives in Easthampton, MA.

**Esther S White** is an artist and arts organizer. Her curatorial practice is collaborative, with a focus on promoting the work of emerging artists and experimental art. Esther earned a BA in Studio Art/Art History from Barnard College, and has studied at the International Center of Photography. She is an instructor at Zea Mays Printmaking and Snow Farm. Esther is a member of the Northampton Arts Council as well as Boston Printmakers, the Monotype Guild of New England, and the Surface Design Association. Esther’s work in printmaking and textiles explore women’s work and the decorative arts, examining connections between textiles and printmaking. Esther lives and works in Northampton, MA.

www.estherswhite.net
Quilts and Textiles


Women’s Health and Mourning in the 19th Century and Earlier


Primary Sources


