



**Contemporary
Arts Center**

UNRAVELED:

TEXTILES RECONSIDERED



“I want to give concrete visual form to the relation between destruction and new creation”

-Kari Steihaug

tional object. For *Drawings* Bjarnadottir purchased several doilies on e-bay and saturated each in shimmering graphite to draw attention to its shape and details. With this unconventional gesture Bjarnadottir employs modestly scaled pieces of cotton fabric as carriers of intense mark making and socio-cultural re-coding. The artist explains, “I am dealing with value systems of, for instance, high and low art, textiles and painting, feminine and masculine. I am questioning systems of categorization.”³

For *Legacies* Kari Steihaug gathered seventy pieces of knitted clothing from friends, family members and flea markets. She then unraveled the garments, wound all of the yarn remnants onto bobbins, and partially knitted a new sweater from them. With this action Steihaug gives the former clothes and their owners a new networked life, capturing the unstated memories of others and imagining new ones in her communal vestment. The artist states, “Worn out knitted garments are like layers of time...I want to give concrete visual form to the relation between destruction and new creation, and the transition from one form to another.” *Legacies* purposely appears unfinished. It emphasizes the process of becoming, and creates a conversation between past, present and future.



INTRODUCTION

The nine artists in *Unraveled: Textiles Reconsidered* transform the familiar into the extraordinary by re-purposing materials we seemingly know well. They deconstruct clothing, rugs, bed sheets and blankets and then rebuild them into something new. The implications are important. In a technologically and image-driven world, these artists deal with actual matter rather than its representation. They return to the materiality and labor of cloth and engender meaning from and through it.

It is tempting to root this exhibition in gender theory and its argument that gender is socially constructed. Historically women have excelled in the domestic arts in great part because it has been expected of them. But artists who stitch, knit, embroider and weave have both acknowledged and resisted these predetermined gender roles during the multiple waves of the feminist movement that have transpired since the late 1960s.¹ Plus, curators and critics have interpreted their art through feminist theory time and time again.

Instead of contributing to this existing, and rather limiting argument, this exhibition intends to forge new meaning through its focus on artists who re-

claim textiles and shift them from one state to another. A theory known as Object Oriented Ontology studies the nature of being by placing the “thing” front and center.² The animate and the inanimate are on equal footing. Both have important social roles. In this light, this theory upends hierarchies and rejects the privileging of the human over the non-human. If we look at the works in the exhibition through the lens of Object Oriented Ontology we see the primacy of the relationship between two things - one past and one present – with the artist’s insights, inventiveness and intentions as a bridge between the two. The artist respects the artwork as an autonomous entity, asserting agency and control while also honoring both the material and the process as sources of information and meaning.

MEMORY

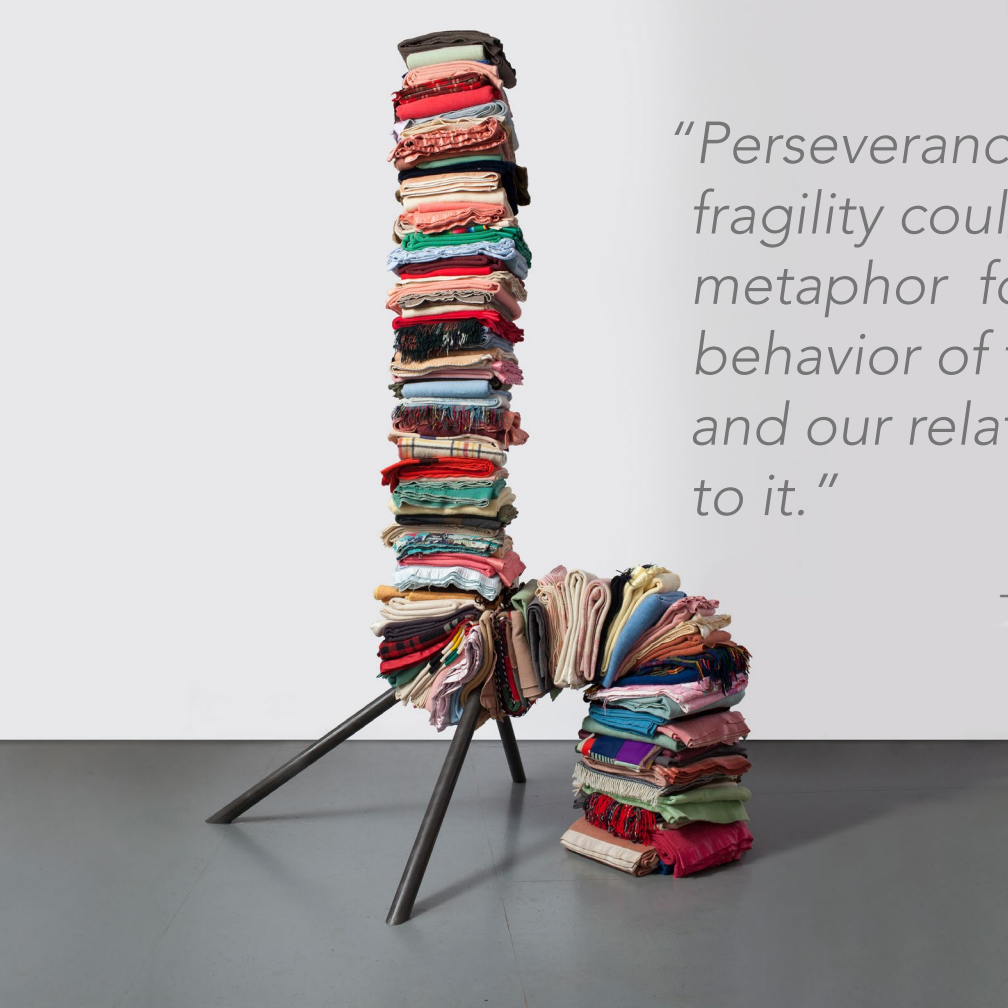
For *Trousers* Hildur Bjarnadottir unraveled her recently deceased grandmother’s pants and then rolled them into a single ball of thread. In the action of “reducing” this garment to its original material the artist remembers and memorializes her loved one. The grandmother’s clothing signifies grandmother herself; a functional item becomes a devo-

HISTORY

Adrian Esparza created *Dawn* by pulling on a single thread at one end of a blue Mexican *sarape* (blanket) and then winding that thread around a grid of partially embedded, evenly spaced nails. In this work the design creates an abstraction of a 1908 photograph of Cincinnati’s Mt. Adams Incline: a structure which was

Left: Hildur Bjarnadottir, *Trousers*, 2011.

Above: Kari Steihaug, *Arvegods / Legacies*, Trødelag Art Centre with Tina Jonsbu, 2006. Photo: Roar Øhlander.



"Perseverance and fragility could be a metaphor for the behavior of the cloth and our relationship to it."

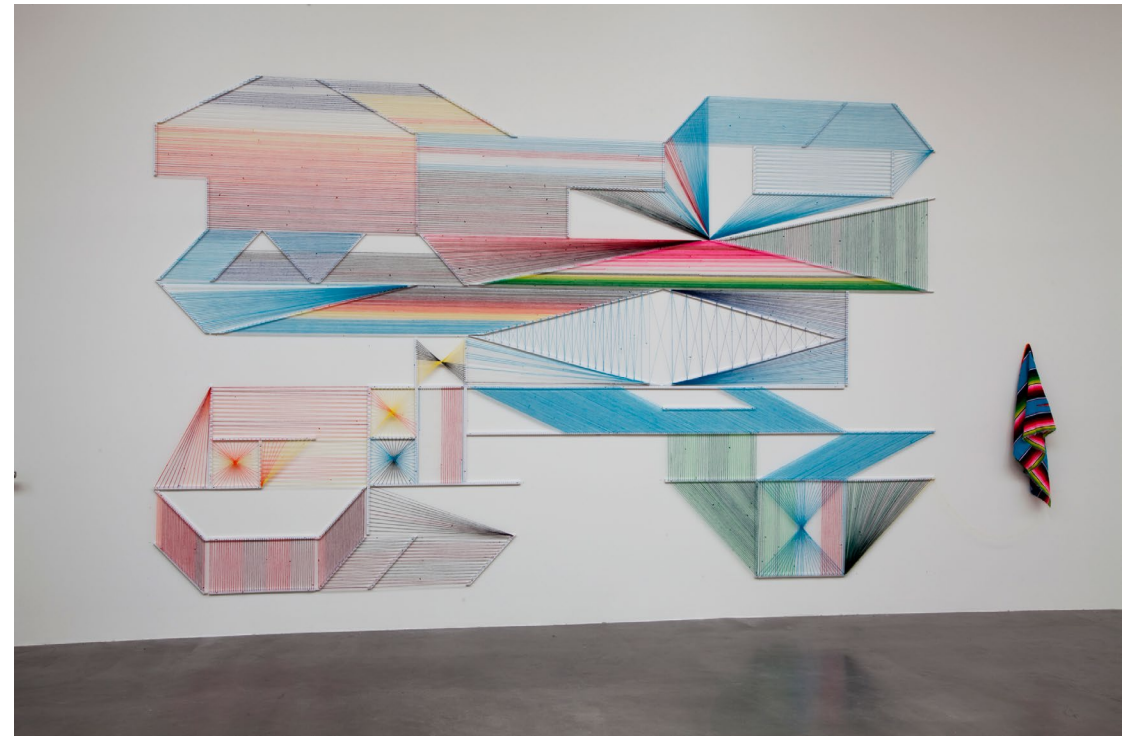
- Marie Watt

completed in 1872, closed in 1948, and has since been demolished. The artist explains, "The title refers to a beginning, but also to the actual soap product DAWN. The Procter and Gamble headquarters are located in Cincinnati and DAWN is one of its products...I have fond memories of its light blue tint.... The *sarape* pieces are about transformation—about a history that is used in order to construct a new form."

Artist Marie Watt also cites transformation as her motivation for *Blanket Stories: Beacon, Marker and Ohi-yo*. The form of the sculpture mimics the trunks of marker trees. Native Americans bend the trees when they are saplings so that the trees grow into unconventional shapes. The mature trees serve as directional markers or signposts for important places. Most of them are more than one hundred years old and convey strength, tenacity and mystery, while also seeming vulnerable due to their unusual human-engineered forms. To Watt, "this perseverance and fragility could be a metaphor for the behavior of cloth and our relationship to it." The artwork's title draws from this

connection between marker trees and textiles, and from the origins of the word "Ohio", which translates as "beautiful river" in the language of the Iroquois (and likely that of the Seneca, which is Watt's tribe).

Previously owned blankets are Watt's material. She explains, "In my tribe and other indigenous communities we gift blankets as way of honoring a person for being witness to important life events...blankets transcend cultures, generations, time." Watt continues, "Freud considered blankets as 'transitional' objects, but I consider these humble pieces of cloth to be transformational." In the post-World War II years British psychoanalyst and pediatrician Donald Winnicott believed that what we construe as meaningful is highly subjective and involves a developmental trajectory influenced by the interaction between mothers and babies. In this context he coined the term "transitional object," colloquially known as "security blanket."⁴ Watt takes this one step further. To her blankets represent complete, rather than incremental, change.



Left Page: Marie Watt *Blanket Stories: Beacon, Marker, and Ohi-yo*, 2016. Photo Credit: Aaron Johanson.
 Above Top: Adrian Esparza, *One and the Same*, 2005. Above Left: Mark R Smith, *Peninsular*, 2015.
 Above Right: Noel Anderson, *Black Past-iche (to be looked at farandaway; rug)*, 2015.

POPULISM

Mark R. Smith expands his painting practice by using pre-owned clothing (mostly T-shirts) from Goodwill as a “painterly” material. He sorts and stores the garments according to color, cuts them into atomized pieces, hardens and flattens the fragments with glue and textile restorer’s tissue, and then recombines them into tightly ordered abstract compositions. The ensuing works reference quilts in their structure; abstract paintings in their composition; and both natural and manmade phenomena in their imagery. Smith aspires to, “... make ego-less paintings...to record commitment and intense engagement, but without the marks of so-called authenticity. Textiles, and fabric as material, don’t have those associations.” Painting is traditionally thought of as the highest art form and is therefore expected to be replete with profound meaning. Textiles do not suffer the same burden of expectation, which liberates the artist to be more experimental.

Lisa Anne Auerbach practices photography as well as knitting. She identifies her artworks in *Unraveled* as tapestries but in truth, she produces them on a knitting machine from designs engineered in Photoshop. These dense constellations of text convey phrases recalled from Auerbach’s random musings. Some form Twitter-style hash tags; oth-

ers comprise knitted representations of book spines. Taken as a whole, they are a dizzying marriage of human consciousness and composition, digital rendering and mechanized execution. Tag lines are Auerbach’s moniker, as seen in the sweaters she knits that incorporate political messages to become clothing-as-bumper-sticker. The artist elaborates, “I started knitting because it was a way to make art without access to a darkroom...I was interested in the way that text worked differently when it was what made up the structure of the fabric, as opposed to being put on top of it later...text is part of ‘textile.’” Auerbach is the only artist in this exhibition who does not reuse cloth. Instead, text is the material and subject matter for her objectification of words.

POLITICS

In the series of soft sculptures known as *Space In Between*, Margarita Cabrera disassembles U.S. Border Patrol uniforms to be the fodder for politically pointed foliage. From the shreds of these imposing garments she creates sculptural renditions of various cacti that populate the American Southwest. Cabrera then invites members of Mexican migrant communities to embroider imagery that conveys their harrowing stories of passage onto the sculptures. In the process, those who are forced into silence and shadows

layer their personal history onto the clothing of those who enforce the laws that contribute to these conflicted circumstances.

The work of Ying Kit Chan carries similar political charge as his practice confronts environmental disasters associated with industry. In the words of the artist, “Textile production, when traced back in history, is intertwined with colonialism and slavery.” *Convenience* is part of Chan’s recent body of work in which he constructs abstractions of Chinese characters created from cut and torn bed sheets masked in gesso and acrylic paint. All are large scale and consequently reference signage: A bedcover reserved for privacy and intimacy becomes a public statement due to its scale, vertical orientation and open access.

Noel W. Anderson found the rug that comprises both the background and the focus of *Black Past-iche (to be looked at far and away)* in a dumpster outside of his studio. He was initially drawn to its patterns and colors and used it as an area rug for months before converting it into the material for this work. On it he has layered areas of solid pink, a page torn from a 1970s *Ebony* magazine, a silkscreen replica of another page from that same magazine, and other detritus. Because *Ebony*’s targeted readership is African-American, Anderson acknowledges people of color. He creates meaning from “castoffs,” both animate beings that suffer from rejection or exclusion due to

their race, and inanimate objects such as magazines and rugs that have been discarded. He confers value on the undervalued.

CONCLUSION

The artists in *Unraveled: Textiles Reconsidered* repurpose cloth and transform its message. They instigate an object-oriented conversation between what their material once was and what it has become; their proactive role in that conversion means that action becomes authorship. The artists identify clothing, bed sheets, floor coverings, and/or popular phrases as worthy of notice, and then reinvent them without losing the essence of their source. Through this process they explore verbal and visual language to probe memory and the past, and to create new meaning.

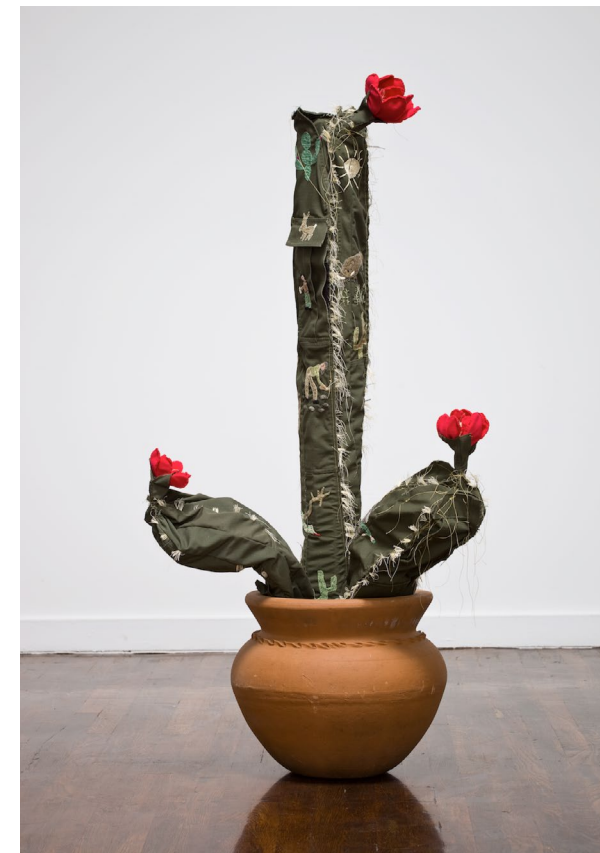
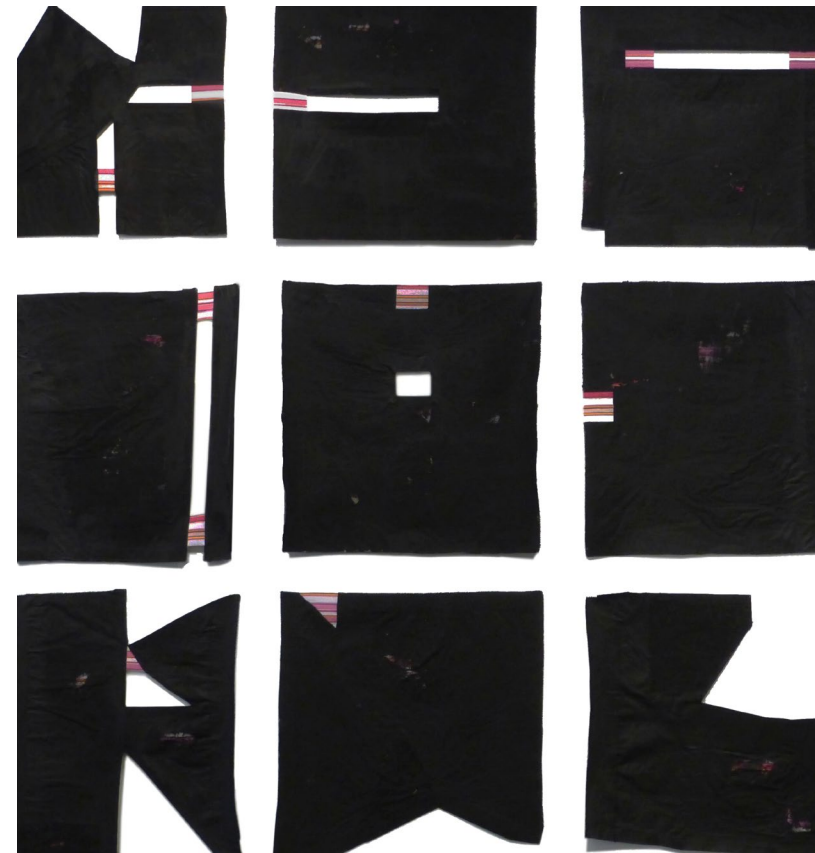
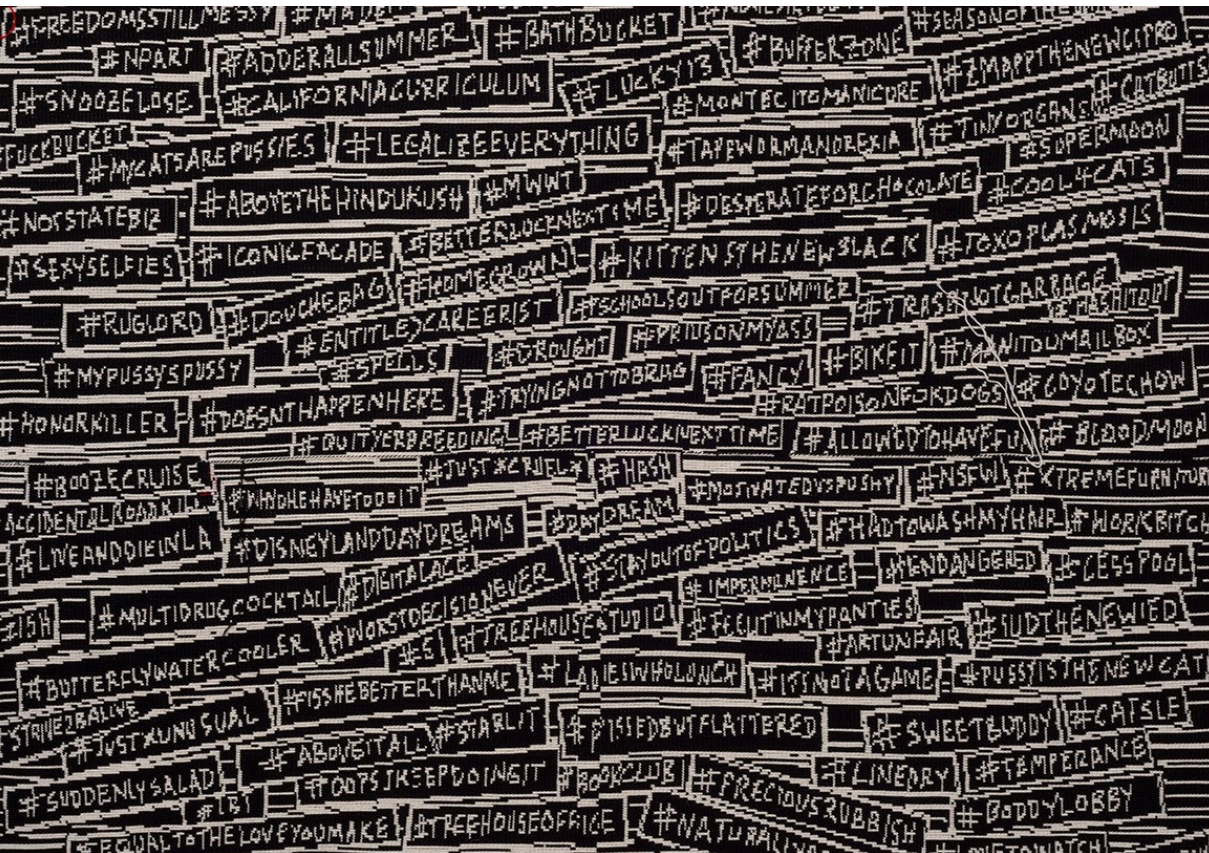
– Kate Bonansinga, April 2016

From left to right:

Lisa Anne Auerbach, #HASHINGITOUT, 2014.

Ying Kit Chan, *Convenience*, 2014.

Margarita Cabrera, *Candelaria Cabrera: Saguaro* (from series *Space in Between*), 2010. Photo Credit: Fredrik Nilsen.



CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER

UNRAVELED: TEXTILES RECONSIDERED

April 22 - August 14, 2016

Curated by Kate Bonansinga

Generously supported by
The Formica Group and Artswave
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¹ One of the most comprehensive texts on this subject is Elissa Auther, *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.

² Object Oriented Ontology began with speculative philosopher Graham Harman's 1999 treatise "Tool-Being: Elements in a Theory of Objects." <http://www.thedewlab.com/blog/2012/07/12/introduction-to-object-oriented-ontology/>

³ All artists' quotes culled from e-mail correspondence between the artists and the curator, November 1, 2015-March 15, 2016.

⁴ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/rethinking-psychology/201112/freud-and-meaning-part-2>

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Noel W. Anderson (b. 1981, Louisville, KY; resides Cincinnati, OH)

Black Past-iche (to be looked at farandaway; rug), 2015. Rug and found materials. Courtesy of the Artist.

Lisa Anne Auerbach (b. 1967, Ann Arbor, MI; resides Los Angeles, CA)

#HASHINGITOUT, 2014. Knitted wool on linen.

Spells, 2014. Merino wool stitched onto stretched linen.

Untitled, 2014. Knitted Wool on Linen.

Occult Art, 2014. Knitted wool on linen.

All works courtesy of the Artist and Gavlak Gallery, Los Angeles & Palm Beach.

Hildur Bjarnadottir (b. 1969 Reykjavík, Iceland; resides Reykjavík, Iceland)

Trousers, 2011. Thread. Courtesy of Marteinn Tausen, Hverfisgalleri, Reykjavik, Iceland.

Drawings, 2016. Graphite on found doilies. Courtesy of the Artist.

Reconstructed Canvas II, 2011. Crochet cotton (unraveled painters canvas) and canvas. Collection of Sigurður Pálmason.

Frippery, 2004. Embroidered tablecloth with velvet pile embroidery on top. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Iceland.

Margarita Cabrera (b.1973, Monterrey, Mexico; resides, El Paso, TX)

Saguaro, 2010. Embroidered border patrol uniform fabric, thread, vinyl, wire, foam and terra cotta pot. Made in collaboration with Maria Lopez.

Agave, 2010. Embroidered border patrol uniform fabric, thread, vinyl, wire, foam and terra cotta pot.

Carrizos, 2010. Border patrol uniform fabric, copper wire, thread and terra cotta pot. Made in collaboration with Teresa Sanchez Garay.

Nopal#1, 2012. Border patrol uniform fabric, copper wire, thread and terra cotta pot. All works courtesy of the Artist.

Ying Kit Chan (b. Hong Kong; resides, Louisville, KY)

Convenience, 2014. Discarded bed sheets, black gesso. Courtesy of the Artist.

Adrian Esparza (b.1970, El Paso, TX; resides, El Paso, TX)

Dawn, 2016. Sarape (blanket), wood, nails and enamel. Courtesy of the Artist.

Mark R. Smith (b. 1958, Salem, OR; resides Portland, OR)

Trundle, 2015. Textile collage on felt.

Peninsular, 2015. Textile collage on felt.

Both works courtesy of the Artist and Elizabeth Leach Gallery, Portland.

Kari Steihaug (b. 1962, Norway; resides, Oslo, Norway)

Legacies, 2006. Yarn and wood bobbins. Courtesy of the Artist.

Marie Watt (born 1967, Seattle, WA; resides Portland, OR)

Blanket Stories: Beacon, Marker and Ohi-yo, 2016. Steel armature and reclaimed blankets. Courtesy of the Artist and PDX Contemporary Art, Portland and Greg Kucera Gallery, Seattle.

Cover:

Ying Kit Chan, *Convenience* (detail), 2014.