

THESIS

LEGACY:

UNTANGLING THE LINES OF INHERITANCE

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ABSTRACT

LEGACY: UNTANGLING THE LINES OF INHERITANCE

My artwork aims to understand the nature of a legacy. From family history to material objects, to shared genes and shared obligations, I examine the intertwined threads linking people, events, and objects within my family. I seek answers to questions I have about myself and about those who have shaped me. I weave together the individual elements of my inquiry, assigning color and pattern to people, feelings, and memories. Imbued with qualities of family character and suffused with emotion, the robes are the final assembly of these components.

These robes are an incarnation of my grandfather and of his complicated interactions with his family. He was a man who struggled with his own sense of identity. He had great hopes and aspirations, but anger, desire, and self-doubt often undermined his plans and relationships. By interpreting my grandfather's personal narrative into cloth, I hope to resolve his fractured legacy. These robes are not simply a tribute to my grandfather; they are my study of who he was and of what he has passed on to me. I, too, have the desire to live an extraordinary life, but there are restraints, and responsibilities to be met.

The fibers and patterns in my weavings draw upon Viking textiles and the functional and spiritual needs they fulfilled. I seek to incorporate natural rhythms and forms, managing elements of chance as colors shift and watery patterns form. The robes are created to blend a sense of elements and the natural world, while creating parallels with human nature. I find inspiration in Norse cosmology and in the way humans try to answer questions about their lives, the world, and the universe. Like a weaving made of hundreds of fine yarns, a person is formed by what they inherit and learn from hundreds of people.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my parents Bill and Tracey, I hope that someday I can repay the love and support you've given me during this endeavor. There are not words enough.

DEDICATION

To my Grandpa Swede and my Grandma Shirl, two teachers, a Viking and a Scot; who believed in me and my ability, and this work – and they showed it in their own unique ways.

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LEGACY:
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A legacy is usually seen in terms of the quantifiable, such as the monetary or emotional value of an object collected by a family member. Sometimes these objects are white elephants, inconveniencing the inheritor. As a child, I spent considerable time with my grandfather William F. “Swede” Gunderson, Jr. [Fig. 1], a third-generation fisherman who achieved earned a college degree, became a master calligrapher, and taught high-school art. The abstracted forms of these robes arise from my perception of my grandfather’s life. Their implied narrative reflects our relationship, which shaped my intuition, sense of aesthetics, and love of land and sea.

The symbolic nature of these robes pays homage to the shape-shifting Norse god Óðinn, known as Odin. Of the Norse pantheon, Óðinn is an amalgamate figure, known as a master of magic, runes, and war, and as the patron of skalds and poets. He is a shape changer and makes many sacrifices to gain that which he desires most in trade. My grandfather also made sacrifices to gain knowledge of uncertain value and his appearance altered as his life changed. Clothing was significant to this process of alteration, as he adopted the guise he considered appropriate – his aesthetic sense suggesting the styles and colors of his wardrobe.

I investigate textile forms that have similarities to functional or recognizable objects within my heritage. In some cases, my textiles could still function as cover cloths or garments, while in others the function is more symbolic. These robes are remembrance art and are crafted through traditional techniques, but I do not seek to create pieces that feel like heirlooms. Rather than cultivating nostalgia, I aim to suspend these robes within their own place in time, outside the timelines of my grandfather and me.

These robes are not to be worn. Ghosts inhabit them; they gesture toward the simultaneous presence and absence of my grandfather in my life. Although these garments address death and

remembrance, they are not designed to be shrouds. Indeed, my grandfather and others of my family did not believe in the importance of bodily integrity and burial as essential to a peaceful afterlife, instead choosing cremation, simple family memorials, and the scattering of ashes. There are aspects of this practice in my family that mirrors what is known of early Viking-era burials¹; likewise, there are elements to my family's traditions that reflect more elaborate burials involving ships and extensive grave goods². These various traditions of handling the dead and fulfilling their needs inform the narrative of these robes. The style of the robes is deliberately simple and unadorned, modeled after garments worn during the Viking Age: tunics, cloaks, and caftans that consisted of rectangles of cloth stitched and pinned with brooches. The shorter robe calls to mind everyday work garb, while the longer robes, with their trailing hems, suggest a more ceremonial use. Equally the choice of color carries association of purpose, from a palette of faded tones to more vibrant hues. Another aspect of these robes, especially when considered as a collection, is the atmosphere that collects around them. The interlaced shadows and the hovering shapes feel akin to a conclave of ancestral spirits.

The spirit of my ancestors also comes into the storytelling function of the robes. Although Pre-Christian Scandinavia had the runic alphabet, there was greater reliance upon “an abstract language of signs”³ that could communicate tribal affiliations and imbue the wearer with the strength and cunning of animals. Instead of animalistic traits, I seek to permeate these robes with the language of my own bloodlines and heritage. Some of this is communicated by pattern and color; a subtler message is communicated by the fibers employed in the weaving.

The choice of fiber is important to the storyline of each robe. I weave linen and bamboo yarns to achieve subtle contrasts between sheen and matte, dry and soft. Below the equator, the raffia cloths of the Kuba peoples show that even within a spare palette, rich colors and textures are possible. Of the many art forms and traditions that inspire me, I most respond to those that use simple elements to create narratives and to textiles created both for visual pleasure and to fulfill a practical need.

Functional fabrics are also a source of inspiration in patterning. Stripes, in particular, have a range of connotations in Western civilization, from early negative associations with the devil and impurity⁴ to

now-ubiquitous use in commerce and advertising. For me, stripes are powerful pattern abstractions of elemental forces. People of the Viking Age (793–1066 A.D.) delineated the natural elements according to their particular climate. Northerners made distinctions between icebergs and the ice on lakes, and described nuanced differences among rivers, calm waters, and seas with strong currents. Bodies of water and magic wells are among the many elements surrounding Yggdrasil, the Tree of the World. In this realm, storytelling and supernatural abilities can be transferred through water.⁵ Genealogy can be explained in a similar parallel, analogous to water making its way to the ocean. Waters intermingle from rainfall, mountains, and groundwater, paralleling the great migrations of people and the immigration of ancestors to the United States. Within striped passages, and often using dyed and variegated yarn, I weave abstractions that embody my perceptions of nature, human nature, and degrees of control.

Stripes can run vertically to suggest rain. Horizontal stripes can depict layers, geology, and the action of sinking deeper and deeper. Stripes are “a rhythmic, dynamic, narrative surface that indicates action, the passage from one state to another.”⁶ For additional visual movement, I paint yarns with dyes prior to weaving. Color painted on weft yarns creates shifting, organic patterns that can evoke currents, eddies, or dappled sunlight. Warp yarns are painted to create ordered patterns that still might shift and jump, drawing the eye along. Woven structures combine with the variable placement of dyes to foster unplanned surprises, as patterns appear, then change.

As horizontal and vertical stripes intersect, they create grids. In my fabrics, the density of these grids varies. Transparent and opaque effects promote changing qualities of color, light, and shadow. These textiles recall the windowpane pattern of table linens and shirting of modern fabrics, but Viking-era weavers also employed these patterns. The deceptive simplicity of the pattern structure can be kept in balance with other elements. Like my grandfather’s nets set in the right fishing spots, these robes combine intuition with a sequence of technical tasks.

Fisherman

Fisherman [Fig. 3] draws upon my family’s fishing heritage, inspired by the delicate yet tough nets used to catch salmon on the Kenai River in Alaska and the Columbia River in Oregon. My

grandfather did not willingly allow women on board his fishing boats—in part, from a belief that a woman could not share an equal measure of work and thus be in the way, but also in part due to long-standing superstition among men of the sea that a woman on board brings bad luck. This attitude was at odds with his messages about my value and potential as a girl and, eventually, as a woman.

As a child, during summer visits in fishing season, I would walk along the banks of the river and in the boatyards, picking up pieces of the ropes used with the nets and buoys. They were brilliantly colored, sometimes with a multi-colored core. These, like the shimmering scales of salmon skin and the pink-red of their flesh and eggs, were part of my introduction to the beauty found in everyday life. Attached along the edges of nets were regularly spaced cork buoys, shaped like little footballs. The stripes and brass discs along the edge of the robe are my reinterpretation of these ropes and buoys, and provide a glinting and moving current through the folds of the robes, inviting the viewer to follow. Striped fabric, from seamen's shirts to sails, has long had a maritime connection. According to contemporary accounts, such as the Bayeaux Tapestry [Fig. 2], and archaeological evidence, Viking ships had a single large sail, at times dyed blood red. Due to the weaving width of the looms, these sails would have been pieced from multiple lengths of cloth. Over time, sails incorporated these stripes and other patterns.

In *Fisherman*, the natural grey of the linen is utilized for its connotations of simplicity, rusticity, and gentle strength [Fig. 3]. The washed out colors of the striped borders call to mind a garment that has been worn everyday, washed, and lain out in the sun to dry. The palette is also inspired by Danish impressionists who lived on the Skagen peninsula; particularly P. S. Krøyer, who painted fishermen, landscapes, and intimate scenes. These colors, from sunlit hues to washed out tints, contain both joy and melancholia [Fig. 4]. The palettes of these Danish artists do not disguise the tension and emotion in their paintings, which often chronicled scenes of death common in fishing communities [Fig. 5].

Shaman

Shaman meditates on the transformation of death and embodies my grandfather's own self-image as shaman-warrior-poet. The absence of color in *Shaman* is a reference to use of white, not black, as a color of mourning in many cultures. White shows the presence of all colors in the spectrum of light; in the

spectrum of pigments, white is the absence of all hues. The white cloth of the robe is ethereal, as it seeks to escape the ground to which it seems tethered [Fig. 6]. The darkness that seeps up the robe anchors it and suggests decay, a necessary process that forms the basis for new growth. The contrast between darkness and light—on a relatively larger scale—emphasizes a ceremonial character, similar to the effect achieved by Japanese Jōe robes. My grandfather had an abiding love for Japanese art and design, which he shared with his family and students.

Jōe robes (also Jo-e), usually woven of linen or silk, are voluminous garments worn by both laymen and priests for Shinto and Buddhist ceremonies. These raiment include oversized sleeves worn tied to create the effect of origami clouds. The visual purity and clarity of these un-dyed garments influenced *Shaman*, especially in the use of gathered sleeves and lack of ornament. The pure whiteness of the garment is deliberately marred because this robe represents death, and part of death is a return to the darkness of earth.

I found inspiration in the way Roz Ritter uses wedding dresses as canvases for her own personal stories [Fig. 7 & 8]. Ritter often incorporates garments worn by her or by her parents. In wedding dresses most notably, the forms are recognizable, identified by era and purpose, enhancing the intimate accounts told in her embroidery. She is a chronicler of emotions both lovely and painful, delivered in a subtle manner. The traditional white of the garments provides ideal canvases; the preservation or intentional destruction of the garments hints at messages to be read. Ritter’s work doesn’t simply memorialize the past, but “explores family relationships, personal transformation and upheaval.”⁷ My robes, too, do not abide solely as memorial markers. *Shaman*, in particular, addresses the processes of death and remembrance as enduring actions.

Our idea of ghosts traditionally involves unendurable loss, unfinished actions, or the poltergeists of books and film, along with beliefs that living energy must travel somewhere after death. I investigate genetic memory and the ways we carry within us the people and events that affect us—as part of our DNA or etched into the pathways of our mind. Considering our short lives, these individual memories are of brief duration, but the genealogy may stretch for millennia. For me, the best way to show this

conundrum of fragility and endurance is with the diaphanous yet resilient grids of the white linen. The gridlines appear straight and uncomplicated up close, but from afar the grids overlie and appear to distort and blur. Like clouds pushed by wind currents or the interlocking facets of quartz crystals, the appearance of solidity can shift within these linen grids, as they coalesce into opacity or peel away to ghostliness.

Do Ho Suh uses these contrasting-yet-compatible qualities of familiar and spectral in his silk sculptures of buildings, in which he conveys the inexactness of reminiscences [Fig. 9]. Drawn to the “ghostlike quality”⁸ of silk fabric, Do Ho Suh makes transparent sculptures in silk to recreate memories, which may not be exact—“intrinsically impossible”⁹—and which examine differences between the truth and the remembrance of the past:

“It’s an existential question of what we believe in this world—there are a lot of holes, but we try to believe it’s whole, the way a lot of people see the house [sculpture] as an exact replica. There’s a lot of rupture and gap. The role of the artist is to see those ruptures.”¹⁰

In a related manner, these robes embody my relationship with my grandfather. They recall his life, reconsider certain assumptions, and hold the certainty of never knowing the complete truth. I was part of his audience, watching the performance and not always comprehending the meaning. He was at times a solid person that I could talk with, and touch, but quite often he placed himself apart, wrapped in the cloaks of his interests and his ever-present depression.

Descent

Colors in *Descent* are chosen for symbolic reasons and allude to artifacts and events that appeared in my grandfather’s life [Fig. 10]. The faded colors or lack of colors in *Fisherman* and *Shaman* mark the emotions that underpin these works. *Fisherman* is worn, comfortable, and welcoming. *Shaman* is austere, and rich with ceremony. *Descent* is a blaze of color by comparison, reflecting the intense emotions represented: my grandfather’s anger, his fear, his sadness, and his hope. The red is drawn from the vermillion ink he stamped with his chop to sign a piece of calligraphy, a punctuating gesture that gave him an association with Asian art. Vermillion red was a symbolic color for him, and held various cultural and personal connotations. In this robe, red marks his vivid fury and harsh resentment, which disrupted the routine pathway of life. Blue hues, from indigo to turquoise, predominated his wardrobe and

possessions. The blues and greens woven into the robe color the sadness and the calm between times of rage, times of hope for resolution and peace. The deepening shades are like a slow descent through water, as light fades away.

This robe incorporates the method of hand-painting weft yarns described earlier, where color is applied to yarns that have been wound into skeins. It illustrates my favorite approach to work: with clear planning and calculation, and with an element or two left to chance. Skeins of bamboo yarn are painted with consistently spaced dots and dashes of dye, and with occasional sprays of color, as from a wind-whipped wave. Dots and dashes of color align and re-form themselves in relation to the length of skeins and the widths of warps at the loom. My strategy deliberately breaks apart the preliminary dye pattern as I weave, and little patterns shift and re-form, like ripples of sand in a stream, only to break apart again further along the woven path. Horizontal stripes, vertical stripes, dots, and chequered patterns appear and disappear, leaving me to anticipate their return as I weave.

The overlaying pattern in *Descent* is an ombré-style stripe that creates incremental transitions from one color to the next. These stripes recall layers of the earth: clay, sands, decaying vegetation. Color gradations suggest the darkening sky above a brilliant sunset or the deepening dark of open water. Ombré stripes tease the eye into seeing order, inviting closer looks at more elusive color shifts. The little patterns appear and then break further into dabs of seemingly random colors, as in Pointillism. *Descent* uses small-scale color shifts and large-scale changes of color to reflect varying views of the natural environment. These contrasts also suggest how our carefully constructed relationships can shatter in the passage of time or shift with new understanding.

The work of Elin Noble displays similar ideas of chance design combined with vibrant palettes to communicate distress, remembrance, and emotional breakthroughs. Noble uses randomness to create unexpected patterning on a large scale for her *Fugitive Pieces* series [Fig. 11]. Although our methods differ, our underlying motivation is similar. Noble's quilts start as cotton fabric folded irregularly, then clamped and dyed in shibori resist processes. The resulting patterns are unknown until fabrics are unclamped and washed, similar to my process of rewinding painted yarn skeins to break patterns and then

to see how color marks are restructured on the loom. Noble reinforces her dyed patterns with stitching to create quilted areas, adding dimension. As Noble states, “This process parallels the fractured narrative . . . and the resulting imagery suggest themes of trauma, grief, loss, memory, and discovery.”¹¹ I believe that the process of deliberately creating unforeseen patterns mirrors the natural world, providing a meditative exercise to aid in the course of healing and understanding.

These robes are the culmination of one journey that I have been on, as I mourn my grandfather and attempt to resolve some of my complex feelings of love and anger towards him. They have led me to better comprehend my own motivations as an artist. The knots and tangles have been unsnarled; my lines of thought and process more fluid. They reinforce and connect me to the intuition I have acted upon. No longer do I feel that my varied interests and pursuits exist in separate spheres. In weaving these forms, I am able to address my questions and most important topics, and to work where my legacy of myths and bloodlines intersect with the larger world.

Woven to memorialize my grandfather, and to find understanding and forgiveness for the darker elements of his legacy to me, these robes have fulfilled an unintended purpose. Made to accommodate and honor his life-force, they have become illustrative of my essence as well. Through the process of weaving and forming, I have found compassion for myself, a calming of the troubled waters within me, and greater resolution to aim both near and far for fresh targets and less familiar territory. Like the Vikings, I seek new continents.

¹ Hedeager, *Iron Age Myth and Materiality*. (New York: Routledge, 2011), 100.

² Price, "Mythic Acts," in *More than Mythology*. (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2012), 16-41.

³ Hedeager, 61.

⁴ Pastoreau, *The Devil's Cloth*. (New York: Washington Square Press, 2001), 2-3, 13-15.

⁵ Andrén, *Tracing Old Norse Cosmology*. (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2014), 27-67.

⁶ Pastoreau, 22.

⁷ Ritter, *Roz Ritter*, 2014. *Google*. Accessed 15 March 2015. <<http://www.rozritter.com>>.

⁸ Belcove, Julie L. "Artist Do Ho Suh Explores the Meaning of Home." *The Wall Street Journal*, Gerard Baker (ed.), 6 Nov. 2013. *Google*. Accessed 20 Jan. 2015. <<http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303376904579137672335638830>>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Elin Noble quoted in catalog for exhibit, *Fold Unfold: The Cloth and Quilts of Elin Noble*, Schweinfurth Art Center, 2012. *Google*. Accessed 15 March 2015. <http://www.elinnoble.com/Elin_Noble/SMACexhibition_files/CATALOG%20Fold%20Unfold.pdf>.

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