

WALLACH ART GALLERY

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK

MODA Curates Interview with Marie Watt

Presented in conjunction with *Narrative Thread: Gina Adams and Marie Watt*

Artist: Marie Watt, painter

Interviewer: Erin Gallagher, MODA curator of *Narrative Thread: Gina Adams and Marie Watt*

(A TITLE CARD ONSCREEN WITH YELLOW AND WHITE TEXT ON A BLACK BACKGROUND THAT READS:

“PRACTICE + PROCES

MODA CURATES 2021 EDITION

MARIE WATT, ARTIST

ERIN GALLAGHER, CURATOR, NARRATIVE THREAD: GINA ADAMS AND MARIE WATT”

IN THE BOTTOM RIGHT HAND CORNER THERE IS THE WALLACH ART GALLERY LOGO IN WHITE.

AFTER A FEW SECONDS THE TITLE CARD DISAPPEARS AND VIDEO OF ERIN GALLAGHER APPEARS ONSCREEN.)

Erin Gallagher: Welcome. My name is Erin Gallagher and I'm the curator of *Narrative Thread: Gina Adams and Marie Watt*. Today I have the pleasure of introducing visual artist Marie Watt, who is featured in the exhibition. Thank you so much for joining us.

Marie Watt: Thank you, Erin. It's a pleasure to be here and I feel honored to be included in this exhibition with Gina Adams' work as well.

Erin Gallagher: Wonderful. So I'm just going to share my screen, and then I'll get started asking a few questions

Marie Watt: Okay.

(FULL IMAGE OF MARIE WATT'S PIECE *COMPANION SPECIES (AT WHAT COST?)* SETTLES ONSCREEN ALONG WITH WHITE TEXT BELOW THE IMAGE THAT READS: “MARIE WATT

COMPANION SPECIES (AT WHAT COST?), 2020
RECLAIMED WOOL BLANKETS, EMBROIDERY FLOSS, THREAD
MURZI MORGAN PRIVATE COLLECTION, COURTESY MARC STRAUS GALLERY, NEW
YORK")

Erin Gallagher: Wonderful. Great.

So in framing the conversation, I would like to highlight how you use fiber in ways that not only make visible power dynamics facilitated by the hierarchy of the art/craft divide, but also to examine craft as cultural heritage, tradition, and sovereignty.

(TIME LAPSE IN VIDEO)

How do your respective works offer consideration of the way asymmetrical power relations govern the production, reception, and circulation in the art world of craft-based practice?

Marie Watt: I guess I would actually like to... before I answer, I was wondering if I could hear yours (your answer).

Erin Gallagher: Sure. I was just thinking about how in the art world, there seems to be this difference that's kind of manufacturely put in place dividing craft from fine arts; and how that tends to be something that you're seeing in exhibitions or writing about exhibitions. And so I was just curious how you feel as mostly a craft-based artist working in fine arts, and how you're thinking about those two things being related in their reception.

Marie Watt: So, I would like to talk about this in two ways, and one is really kind of reflecting on the word production, and then also discussing the reception a little further. And for me the word production implies like a means to an end, and I would say that in my practice having open to the community sewing circles is a way of inviting people to be (the) "process" in the practice of making. And I think that in gathering people together we learn from one another, and that there's this tactile and physical memory of making (while) in community that I'm really interested in amplifying. And I think that that's a part of the work like *Companion Species (At What Cost?)* that you don't actually see, but it's imprinted into that piece.

And then in regards to reception, I think it's important to understand that in Indigenous, (in) most Indigenous languages, there's not the word "art" in our Native languages, and so there's not really a divide between the word "art" and "craft". But I do think in the mainstream reception and exhibition of work there is - this divide is more present. And I think it's especially, perhaps, a greater barrier for Native artists than other artists. And I guess what I'm thinking in this particular case is that Indigenous artists run into more barriers in the art world because art by our ancestors have historically been received and categorized by popular culture and cultural institutions, namely anthropology museums. And I think that because of that framework, our work has been siloed and not necessarily kind of included in contemporary collections at the same rate as our BIPOC peers and non-Native people.

Erin Gallagher: Great, yeah. I think that that's an excellent way to showcase this in this exhibition in particular, and to show all of these different things that you were thinking about.

In thinking about that, looking at a continental history of Indigenous women's textile production across a landscape of colonial conflict, how do you reflect on your own role as keeper of cultural knowledge and your use of communal women's textile work as a means of healing colonial trauma?

Marie Watt: One of the things that I'm most drawn to in the open to the community sewing circles is that it invites people to come as they are to a shared table. It means that there's people of all generations present. It includes cross-disciplinary conversations and also cross-cultural conversations.

One thing I'd like to share is that sewing bees historically were a way of colonizing Indigenous women and girls, and so sewing circles really work to reclaim this space and celebrate the conversations that happen when our eyes are diverted and we're working with something as familiar and intimate as cloth.

(TIME LAPSE IN VIDEO)

I'm really interested in the research by Dr. Laurie Santos, who runs "The Happiness (Lab)" podcast. And one of the things that I'm interested in is her research on finding connected - finding connection with neighbors and strangers. And I think that the sewing circles offer an opportunity for such connections.

Erin Gallagher: That's great, and that that leads right into my next question for you -

Marie Watt: Okay.

Erin Gallagher: - which is: Through collaborative actions you instigate multi-generational and cross-disciplinary conversations that might create a lens for understanding connectedness to place, one another, and the universe. In what ways are the conversations around the work table as important as the objects that grow out of them?

(TIME LAPSE IN VIDEO)

What draws you to have these conversations? You were talking about - a little bit about - reclaiming, but what drives you to really foster those, what are really like multi-generational and cross-disciplinary conversations?

Marie Watt: One of the things that happens, like when I set the table for sewing circles to happen, is that it - sewing circles take on the energy of the community sitting around that table, and so I never quite know where those conversations or connections will be made. And I'm

certain there's many that I am completely unaware of. But one of the things that I do know is that there are friendships that I've made in the context of those sewing circles, or where other people have been prompted to go on and take what they've learned from that space and then also do something similar.

So, for one example, or excuse me, one example is this artist named Melissa Blount, who is a professional psychologist, and she was at a sewing circle at the Block Museum at Northwestern (University). And during the context of - after participating in the sewing circle at the Block (Museum), then she went on to create a sewing circle to create these Black Lives Matters - sorry, Black Lives Matter quilts. And the focus of her first quilt was remembering women and girls who died in Chicago as a result of gun violence.

And so one of the things I think I'm interested in is how the sewing circles (are) a platform for people's voices, and to create relationships that they otherwise might not form if the sewing circle hadn't been the means for bringing people together.

Erin Gallagher: Well that's great. So you're not just interested in the conversations, but also the relationships that grow out of it; and then even the actions people take that are sparked during these kind(s) of settings and sessions. That's wonderful, yeah.

In your ongoing series *Companion Species*, you ask: What would the world look like if, as humans, we thought of ourselves as companion species? Can acts of creative collaboration help heal broken bonds with the environment and with each other?

Companion Species (At What Cost?), made in 2020 and featured here (onscreen), is a large red tapestry that reads "MOTHER". What can you tell us about this series, this work in particular, and how you aim to work collaboratively with the community?

Marie Watt: The term "companion species" really grows out of me thinking about the Seneca and Iroquois creation story. And in this story Sky-woman falls from this hole in the sky; she might have been pushed. As she falls, she is first helped by a motley crew of birds who help her land on what becomes Turtle Island, and then she's also taking care of (by) these four-legged animals. And as a result of the way animals help Sky-woman, we consider them our first teachers. To acknowledge this historical relationship with the animals, our clans are animals, and I'm from the turtle clan.

So I've been thinking a lot about my relatedness to animals and, by extension, the environment. And it got me thinking about what would - (what) is the entry point for people who weren't necessarily raised thinking about their relatedness to animals, like what is the entry point to have this conversation?

And so I really started thinking about our pets - at least in Western culture - and I decided to focus on dogs, although I will say I'm kind of a cat person. And I started doing some research and looking at dogs, not only in my community, but also in kind of the arc of art history, and I

found this image of Remus and Romulus, and the she-wolf. And one of the things that I love about this image of the she-wolf is that here she is, a non-biological mother, she has helped save these twins from imminent death because they were cast in the wilderness to die. Her body actually becomes this shelter for the twins, she looks emaciated because she's given them everything nutritionally she had to offer, and her eyes are just - like underneath her eyes they're tired, and kind of sagging, but you also kind of have this sense that she could become ferocious at a moment's notice.

And so I've been thinking a lot about the word "mother" and different associations that I have with this word. And so some of these associations include the fact that I am a mother (FIRST CLOSE-UP IMAGE OF *COMPANION SPECIES (AT WHAT COST?)* THAT SHOW "MOTHER" WRITTEN IN DIFFERENT LANGUAGES IN BLACK TEXT ON A RED BACKGROUND ONSCREEN) and "mother" can be a term of endearment, perhaps. But I was also interested in the non-biological construct of "mother". "Mother" is also a way of referring to the planet Earth - Mother Earth. And "mother" also is occasionally used in profanity.

And I started to make this list of word associations that reminded me of (SECOND CLOSE-UP IMAGE OF *COMPANION SPECIES (AT WHAT COST?)* THAT SHOW OTHER WORDS FOR "MOTHER", SOME IN DIFFERENT LANGUAGES, WRITTEN IN BLACK TEXT ON A RED BACKGROUND ONSCREEN) "mother-like" characteristics. And so I've been really sort of obsessed in thinking a lot about "mother" as - what are the qualities of a "mother" that we all as humans share? And it's not to say that all of those qualities are shared by everybody, but I think that if we start to reflect on some of the characteristics that we consider to be "mother-like" I - it is my hypothesis that those are characteristics that we may perhaps have (ourselves).

And so in the piece that you're sharing in this exhibition, (FULL IMAGE OF *COMPANION SPECIES (AT WHAT COST?)* ONSCREEN) I invited... it started at open to the community sewing circles while I was an artist-in-residence through this kind of social engagement residency at the Museum of Contemporary Native Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico. And the piece probably started a couple of years ago and - prior to the pandemic - and I invited, in this particular project, people to write the word "mother" in their own hand on this patterning material that was supplied to the participants. And so people wrote "mother" any way they wanted to; it could be in their own language, it could be in - it could fill the panel in whatever way they determined.

And then the piece came back to my studio and gestated for a while. And then I was invited to be an artist-in-residence at the University of New Mexico, in the Art Department. And so there again I held an open to the community sewing circle, and again students contributed to this panel by writing the word "mother" and stitching. I then brought all the panels, in their complete and incomplete states, back to the studio where they continued to be embroidered.

One of the things that I like about this piece is that (in) some of the panels the word "mother" is not necessarily reading as we might anticipate it (FIRST CLOSE-UP IMAGE OF *COMPANION SPECIES (AT WHAT COST?)* ONSCREEN) - sometimes the word is upside down and, or

backwards, (SECOND CLOSE-UP IMAGE OF *COMPANION SPECIES (AT WHAT COST?)* ONSCREEN) and I think that that also feels indicative of what the experience of “mothering” is.

Erin Gallagher: That's wonderful (FIRST CLOSE-UP IMAGE OF *COMPANION SPECIES (AT WHAT COST?)* ONSCREEN) and it's awesome to see all of the different shapes and stitches and signatures that are applied by different people (FULL IMAGE OF *COMPANION SPECIES (AT WHAT COST?)* ONSCREEN) and come together into one piece.

I'm curious, is there anything you could tell us about the shape of this work?

Marie Watt: Yeah, so the color and the shape are intentional. For me the reds, the red blankets, have this urgency and this sort of bodily feel. And then the shape actually, for me, relates to speech bubbles or a megaphone or, in my imagination, maybe the beginning of a tongue-like form.

Erin Gallagher: Nice. Well, thank you so much. I'm curious, is there anything you would like to tell us about your upcoming call online that's a continuation of *Companion Species*?

Marie Watt: I'm currently collaborating on a show with the artist Cannupa Hanska Luger that will be at the Denver Art Museum called *Each/Other*, and it is an exhibition that will present work that we've made in collaboration with others. And part of, or I should say the centerpiece of this show, is a collaboration that we've done together and this piece is called *Each/Other*. The call to participate has actually passed the deadline, although it is quite possible that people will be invited again to participate as the show travels to other institutions.

In this particular project we've invited people to embroider on a bandana, or a bandana-like piece of cloth, a word or image that they want to share in this moment. And the thing that's significant about this bandana - or, again, this kind of square piece of cloth that might be twenty by twenty-two inches (20x22in) or twenty by twenty inches (20x20in) - is that these cloths are often used, not only in this moment to cover our faces in order to protect ourselves from the COVID virus, but it also has historically been used to conceal one's identity. Sometimes we use bandanas to, you know, blow our noses or sneeze into them, and there's other ways that we've used bandanas, of course, to adorn ourselves. So the goal, though, in collecting these bandanas in which people embroider in this kind of corner - this kind of triangular corner of the bandana - is that the bandanas are going to come together to create this larger blanket and hide for a canine sculpture.

Erin Gallagher: Wonderful, and I love how you continue to use materials that are impacted by the body and retain different traces of the tactility that comes from wearing, or stitching, or holding, blankets, or other tapestry works.

Great. Is there anything else you would like to share before we close up?

Marie Watt: I... let's see. I think, I mean one thing that's very hopeful about this exhibition is that perhaps it will be something that people can actually see in person. And it's been a long year for everyone, and I am grateful in this moment to be part of this conversation that's happening both in the gallery but also in this unique space - the Internet and Zoom conversations.

So thank you, Erin.

Erin Gallagher: Yes, thank you, it was so wonderful. And I do hope everyone will come out and see the show. And thank you so much for your time today, this is really insightful.

(THE WALLACH ART GALLERY LOGO APPEARS ONSCREEN FOR A FEW SECONDS IN WHITE AGAINST A BLACK BACKGROUND BEFORE THE VIDEO ENDS.)