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Bordar la ausencia. Crónica de un duelo bordado

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IN THE FRAY: MAKING AND MEANING IN JENNY BOWKER'S MEMORIAL QUILT *AFTER THE LAST SKY*

*En la refriega:*¹ La creación y el significado en el edredón conmemorativo
After the Last Sky [Después del último cielo] de Jenny Bowker

Na luta: fatura e significação em *After the Last Sky*, a colcha
antiguerra de Jenny Bowker

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ABSTRACT:

This essay explores meaning and materiality in the monumental memorial quilt *After the Last Sky* by Australian art-quiltmaker Jenny Bowker, which memorialises the suffering of protesters during the Rabaa Square Massacre in Cairo on 14 August 2013. The essay shows how Bowker's migration of the photographic image to quilt form, as well as the quilt's meaningful, strategic use of medium and relevance to current artistic developments challenge the limits placed on textiles as art.

KEYWORDS:

Violence, art, quilt, memorialisation, Egypt, Arab Spring.

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1. El término *fray* puede entenderse aquí según dos significados: *refriega* y *deshilacharse*.

RESUMEN:

Este ensayo explora el significado y la materialidad en el monumental edredón conmemorativo *After the Last Sky* de la artista australiana Jenny Bowker, que conmemora el sufrimiento de los manifestantes durante la Masacre de la Plaza de Rabaa en El Cairo el 14 de agosto de 2013. El ensayo muestra como el trabajo de Bowker pone a prueba los límites impuestos al textil en cuanto medio artístico a través del traslado de la fotografía a la forma de edredón, haciendo también un uso estratégico de este medio que le da relevancia en el marco de los desarrollos artísticos actuales.

PALABRAS CLAVES:

Violencia, arte, edredón, memorialización, Egipto, primavera árabe

RESUMO:

O artigo explora a significação e a materialidade na grande colcha comemorativa *After the Last Sky* da artista australiana Jenny Bowker, que memora o sofrimento dos manifestantes da Masacre da Plaza de Rabaa no Cairo, o 14 de agosto de 2013. O texto analisa como o trabalho Bowker põe à prova os limites do têxtil como meio artístico através do traslado da fotografia à colcha, ao tempo que faz um uso estratégico do meio para dar relevância ao sucesso no marco dos desenvolvimentos artísticos atuais.

PALAVRAS CHAVE:

violência, arte, colcha, lembrança, Egipto, primavera árabe.

"Where will the birds fly / after the last sky?"

Mahmood Darwish

After the Last Sky (Img. 1) by Australian art-quiltmaker Jenny Bowker is a memorial to the victims of the Rabaa Square Massacre of 14 August 2013 in Cairo, when the military and police moved into Rabaa el-Adaweya Square and Nahda Square and opened fire on a crowd of demonstrators. The artist envisioned the quilt as a tribute to those who died in the massacre, and to "salute the bravery and honesty of photojournalists."² Monumental in scale, its affective, percipient memorialisation of a deeply traumatic event in contemporary Egypt works on several levels to query the limitations placed upon quilting as an artistic medium.

Bowker's urge to create a work that referenced the massacre stemmed from her personal connections to the Middle East (having lived in Damascus, Amman, Jerusalem, and Cairo) and its people. She lived in Egypt from 2005 to 2009, during part of which time her husband Robert Bowker was Australian Ambassador to Egypt. She established close relationships with the Tentmakers of Cairo and other Egyptians, illustrated by her *Men of Egypt* quilt series.³ She left Egypt before the Revolution of 25 January 2011, which culminated in Hosni Mubarak's deposition. As she watched international news reports from her home

2. "After the Last Sky," *Jenny Bowker*, 18 June 2018, <http://www.jennybowker.com/postcards/2018/6/18/after-the-last-sky.html>.

3. The Tentmakers of Cairo, skilled in traditional Egyptian appliqué, make quilt-like wall hangings and pavilion-scale tents (*suradeq*) for public and private events across Egypt. Their unique hand-made textiles, known as *khayamiya*, are internationally celebrated.



Image 1. Jenny Bowker, *After the Last Sky*, 2018. Textile, 2.325 × 2.05 metres. Private collection (photograph courtesy of Jenny Bowker).

in Australia, Bowker recalls feeling a certain degree of envy as she saw crowds gathering in Tahrir Square: "It was a fascinating time to see change in a country I loved. People talked excitedly about the Arab Spring and its potential to capture the energy and talents of the younger generation of Egyptians."⁴ But the sense of exuberance was short-lived. Egypt's new president, the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi, failed to unite the people and by July 2013 he too was deposed. General Abdel Fatah el-Sisi, appointed Minister of Defence and head of the Egyptian Armed Forces by Morsi, became president. Morsi's supporters argued that he had been wrongfully dismissed and almost immediately began sit-ins at two locations in Cairo, Rabaa el-Adaweya Square, the larger of the two sit-ins, and Nahda Square, where they refused to disperse. On 14 August 2013, following Sisi's orders, the military and police opened fire on them. The raids were described by Human Rights Watch as "one of the world's largest killings of demonstrators in a single day in recent history." Figures for the toll of dead and injured, according to the Egyptian Ministry of Health, were 638 and 2104 respectively. But other estimates, consistently higher, indicate that between 817 and 1583 died, while it is widely accepted that over 3000 people were injured. Human Rights Watch counts at least 817 dead from Rabaa and 87 dead from al-Nahda, including women and children.⁵

Bowker's quilt is based on a photograph by Mosa'ab Elshamy, a young Egyptian photojournalist. Elshamy's courage as a photojournalist as well as his remarkable photographs were an important motivator for Bowker. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, there were four journalists among those killed during the massacre, while several others were injured.⁶ Twenty-three-year old Elshamy was shot at while he attempted to record the actions of security forces and the army as they raided a camp site at Rabaa Square (another person sharing the same name was killed). Elshamy now lives outside Egypt, unable to return, but his photographs of the massacre register his resilience and defiance. Bowker contacted him before he left Egypt and after numerous discussions by email, they finally met in Zamelek, Gezira Island, Cairo, on 24 February 2016. There, Bowker purchased permission from him for the right to use one of his photographs; they recall the terror of the day as well as Elshamy's determination to expose what government officials attempted to play down:

Five years on, I remember it all, even when I try not to. The public applause and approval of a coup. The hysteric calls for blood and the loss of rationality and moderation. And then the violent dispersal of two long-held pro-Morsi sit-ins [...]. In the early hours of August 14, I was trying to make my way into Rabaa Square with my camera, unaware of the violence I was about to witness. The sun had just become visible on the horizon when a block of

4. "After the Last Sky."

5. Omar Shakir, "All According to Plan. The Rabaa Massacre and Mass Killings of Protesters in Egypt," *Human Rights Watch*, 1 February 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/08/12/all-according-plan/raba-massacre-and-mass-killings-protesters-egypt>.

6. "Journalists Killed, Attacked as Clashes Erupt in Egypt," *Committee to Protect Journalists*, 1 February 2019, <https://cpj.org/x/5694>.

armoured military vehicles jammed the square—one of Cairo’s busiest thoroughfares—shutting down all major exits to the sit-in. Police and military soldiers advanced to clear the sit-in using live ammunition, armoured vehicles and snipers. Around 800 people were killed in fewer than twelve hours. A huge fire engulfed the sit-in, burning down tents and the nearby Rabaa al-Adawiya Mosque. The next morning, an eerie silence hung over Cairo, and the government released a statement that was apathetic towards the huge death toll, unnecessary force and brutal injuries of the dispersal. But I knew. I had documented it with my photography.⁷

7. Mosa’ab Elshamy, “Five Years Ago, I Witnessed a Massacre. Here’s How It Changed Me,” *Time*, 1 February 2019, <http://time.com/longform/rabaa-square-massacre-legacy/>

8. Jenny Bowker, e-mail to author, 14 July 2018.

After returning to Australia, Bowker continued to correspond with Elshamy as she developed her ideas. She finally chose to base her quilt on a photograph of an anguished young demonstrator with the demonstrators’ camp burning behind him (Img. 2), which reminded her of a tweet she had received while the massacre was happening, advising those caught up in the violence to write their phone numbers on their arms as “we cannot identify bodies.” As she developed her drawings of the hands from Elshamy’s photograph, Bowker realised that this instruction, both poignant and chilling, was visible in the photograph. While working on the final composition she altered the phone number on the demonstrator’s arm to protect his identity (Img. 3).⁸



Image 2: Mosa’ab Elshamy, *Untitled* (The Fall of Rabaa), 2013. © Mosa’ab Elshamy. Photograph courtesy of Mosa’ab Elshamy.

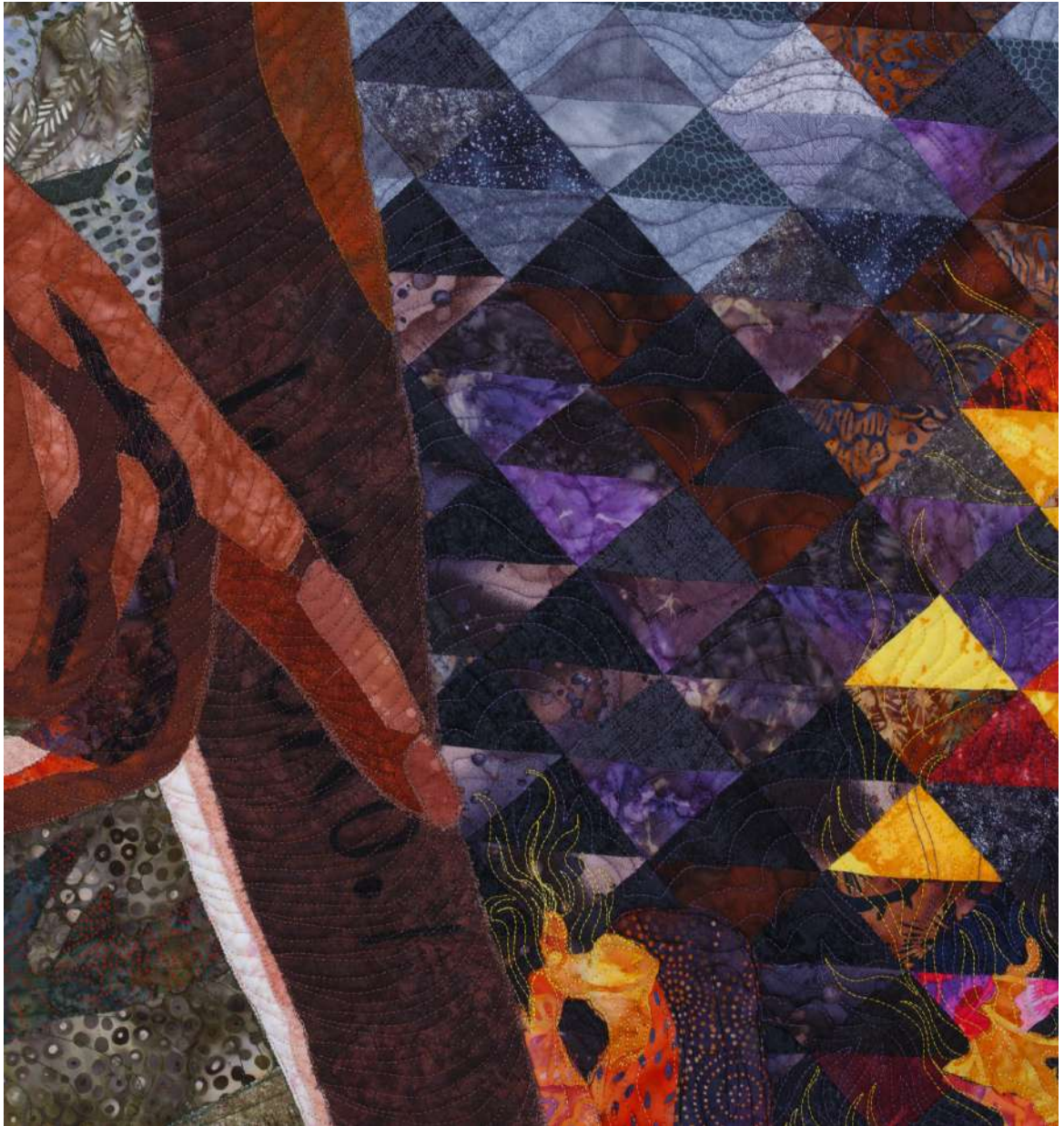


Image 3. Jenny Bowker, *After the Last Sky*, detail of arm with phone number. Photograph courtesy of Jenny Bowker.

Elshamy's work embodies Alex Danchev's reflections on contemporary war photographers as successors of the old war poets, who "sought the whites of the eyes and tried to fathom what they found there."⁹ War photographers prod our conscience. We know through their photographs that they are in the thick of things, amidst the violence as it happens—and that they are usually there voluntarily. One of Elshamy's heroes is Don McCullin, whose work he knew

9. Alex Danchev, *On Art and War and Terror* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 34.

before he became a photojournalist. McCullin and James Nachtwey's work "specifically shaped what I wanted to be—I didn't want to be just a photographer but someone who finds in photojournalism an extra message [...] and [...] signs of humanity or the lack of [it] in the work they make."¹⁰ What is most present in Elshamy's work, as in that of McCullin and Nachtwey, is what we cannot see—the photographer's body deliberately placed at risk, in the thick of things, as an active witness, determinedly recording individuals in the worst and best of actions. While agency cannot always be determined, a stringent moral underlay prevails in Elshamy's work. Where the dead are visible, they are, crucially, almost always accompanied by survivors, discouraging tendencies on the part of viewers to indulge in trite preoccupation with horrific spectacle. These living faces are what truly command our attention and our empathy with traumatised survivors, and it is this empathy that forms the foundation for *After the Last Sky*.¹¹ In acknowledgment of Elshamy's courage and his role in providing a starting point for Bowker, on exhibition labels the quilt is described as "By Jenny Bowker after Mosa'ab Elshamy."

Bowker was aware of possible criticisms, within the art-quilting world, of closely reproducing a source image—and indeed most of her work to date is either abstract or semi-abstract. But having considered other ways to approach the theme, she felt that "nothing I could imagine would have the 'punch to the gut' of this image."¹² It was extremely important to the artist to faithfully reproduce the central motif of the young man: "I made his face last as I was nervous about it. I wanted every trace of that anguish."¹³ Yet, there were important creative decisions that informed the quilt's final composition and which radically transformed and extended the photograph's communicative import in various ways, all of which Bowker had carefully dwelt upon. To begin with, the quilt's size and heavily worked-upon surface of painstakingly chosen and pieced-together fabrics that indicate the weeks and months invested in its creation, imbue the root image with a monumentality and permanence not generally available to the digital photograph. Bowker was aware of the wide circulation of Elshamy's photographs in the press and social media in the days following the massacre, during which time he was interviewed repeatedly by various agencies. But in a visual world where the pervasiveness of images has never been greater, the photographs would soon be resigned to float in an impossibly vast digital archive. Thus, by transforming the photographic root image into a large-scale tactile work intended for continuous exhibition time in a gallery space and in relative isolation, the eye is encouraged to engage in a sustained manner and give precedence to the image's significance. Moreover, as Bowker notes, her work goes to locations that photography cannot access and attracts a different audience. For example, *After the Last Sky* was exhibited at the 2018 and 2019 editions

10. Mosa'ab Elshamy, interviewed by the author, 10 June 2019.

11. See Elshamy's website, <http://www.mosaa-belshamy.com>.

12. "After the Last Sky."

13. "After the Last Sky."

of the Houston Quilt Festival, which, according to the Festival website, draws around 55,000 visitors from across thirty-five countries, suggesting a varied international audience.¹⁴ Bowker was present for the first three days of the 2019 show, and her observation of visitors' reactions and remarks provide some insight as to the quilt's impact. Often, the quilt harnessed the attention of visitors as they walked the long exhibition aisle, whereby they stopped in front of it and expressed surprise at its content. Some, after reading the written label with its tribute to Elshamy, were visibly moved as they looked at the quilt, a response that confirms the quilt's power as an emotive work. Others were almost hostile in their responses, like an American visitor who asked "why would you do anything about those people? They all want to kill us!" Alongside such politically charged reactions, other comments, indicative of the quilt's subversive qualities, included: "Why would you want to make a quilt about that? That's horrible!" or "I thought quilts were supposed to be lovely things." Additionally, the quilt was received with great acclaim at the well-established 2018 Sydney Quilt show, where it was the Best of Show winner and filmed as part of an interview with Bowker for the morning show Studio 10, aired on Sydney-based channel Network 10. During the interview, the presenters telephoned Mosa'ab Elshamy and displayed other photographs he had taken of the massacre while talking to him, thus drawing renewed attention to his photographs.¹⁵

Bowker's quilt reflects the time-honoured relationship between art and photography, where the artist engages aspects of the photograph to create a unique work that both preserves the power of the photographic image and carries additional meaning through the artistic process. Among many examples in contemporary practice, Bowker's work may be compared to Franco-Chinese artist Yan Pei Ming's many translations of photographs, including Eddie Adams's famous *Saigon Execution* in the painting *Quartier chinois, Saigon* (2004).¹⁶ As much as Yan Pei Ming's large painting imbues Adam's photograph with a sense of timelessness that also pays tribute to its importance among twentieth century images, so too does Bowker's dramatic distillation of chromatic features, use of scale and textured, tactile surface extend the import of Elshamy's photograph. This transformation was not lost on Elshamy: "Textiles—quilts, embroidery—was something I was very aware of but not [as] something that people consume as art. [...] So I naturally found it a little strange at first and then had to actually see [Jenny's] work. And I thought wait, this is not usually where this is coming from. It was like some new window that suddenly opened into another form of art."¹⁷

Further meaning is embedded through incorporating features that have been peculiar to Egyptian textile art for thousands of years and which remain an important means of expression. For example, a carved ivory figure of an Egyptian

14. *Houston Quilt Show*, 12 February 2020, <https://www.apqs.com/event/houston-quilt-festival-houston-tx-2/>.

15. The interview can be viewed on the Quilt NSW Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/QuiltNSW/videos/1411622002273319/?v=1411622002273319>. The exposure on Facebook has led to further engagement with the quilt on social media.

16. Yan Pei-Ming, *Quartier chinois, Saigon*, 2004. Oil on canvas, 30 × 200 cm. Private collection. Eddie Adams, *Saigon Execution*, 1968. Black and white photograph, 130 × 40 cm. New York, Associated Press Images. For a discussion of *Quartier chinois*, see Xavier Douroux, "Yan-Pei Ming, *Quartier chinois, Saigon, 2004*," in *Les Désastres de la Guerre 1800-2014*, edited by Laurence Bertrand Dorléac (Paris: Somogy, 2014), pp. 316-317.

17. Mosa'ab Elshamy, interviewed by the author, 10 June 2019.

pharaoh dating from c. 3000 BCE wears what appears to be a quilted robe with a repeating pattern of diamond shapes bordered by two bands of guilloche (Img. 4). A piece of clothing discovered in the c. 3000-year-old tomb of Tutankhamun (Img. 5) contains appliquéd woven panels of blue-green, brown, and natural linen with intricate geometric patterns as well as a large embroidered panel. Bowker deliberately uses a comparable Egyptian element for the background of *After the Last Sky*, which is similar to the commonly used pattern that quilters call a “half square triangle on point” (Img. 6).

This is a square divided diagonally from top to bottom, then tipped onto one of the other corners so that it is standing on its ‘point,’ creating a horizontal



Image 4. *The Ivory King*, c. 3000 BCE. Ivory, height 8.8 cm. British Museum (photograph © The Trustees of the British Museum).



Image 5. Detail of an appliqué and embroidered panel, from a linen garment found in the tomb of Tutankhamun, early 14th century BC (photograph by Nino Monastra). Accessed 4 February 2019. Textile Research Centre, Leiden, <https://trc-leiden.nl/trc-needles/regional-traditions/middle-east-and-north-africa/ancient-middle-east-and-north-africa/tutankhamun-and-decorative-needlework-egypt>



Image 6. *After the Last Sky*, detail of the sky in the background in construction. Photograph courtesy of Jenny Bowker.

dividing line. While she was researching Elshamy's photographs, Bowker saw a news report on the "Day of the Camels" on 2 February 2011 and noticed this pattern on a camel bag. It immediately struck her as highly unusual that people from the pyramids at Giza would take camels right across Cairo, and she later discovered that the camels (and horses) had been sent by government officials to disperse the week-long sit-in at Tahrir Square calling for Mubarak's resignation, degenerating into the day-long "Battle of the Camel," in which eleven people were killed, and over 600 injured as protesters fought Mubarak loyalists. This event effectively turned the tide against Mubarak's government, and for Bowker, "using *that* pattern was a small way to put an ironical element into the quilt," rather than something she thought people would actually pick up on. But she was very aware of the pattern's ubiquity and readability. While, as she remarks, the pattern is often used among quilters, she was inspired by the fact that "it linked Egypt and the Middle East in general as it is used everywhere [there]."¹⁸ Additionally, Bowker varied the size of the units rather than employing a regular pattern, because, as she remarks, it added strength and a sense of the disruption of the day. She also indicated the quilt's purpose as memorial by including at least one triangle to represent each victim and by using floral fabrics in the flames.¹⁹ By using a familiar quilting pattern that doubles as a native element of Egyptian textile making, she establishes a meaning in the quilt that is both personal and universal, subtly intensifying its resonance as affective memorialisation of conflict in the Middle East. The photographic image is not simply copied but transformed and reinterpreted. Even the use of cloth, a powerful carrier of memory due to its pervasiveness in human experience, is a significant contributor to the quilt's power as memorialisation of a traumatic event, bearing in mind that military uniforms, tents, flags and bandages are central to the experience of politically-motivated violence.²⁰

The quilt's complex surface also summons the long historical connection between decorative textiles and female domestic experience in Western culture. From at least the medieval age onward, middle-class and aristocratic women invested much time—sometimes years—in the creation of textile pieces for the home. Rozsika Parker recalls English aristocrat Sir Walter Calverly's 1716 diary entry, where he recorded that his wife had spent three and a half years creating a six-leafed drawing room screen (each leaf: 176.6 × 52 cm).²¹ Yet, the content of most such work indicated the moral boundaries, if not passivity, expected of the women who created them in past centuries and which to some extent still shape our expectations regarding textile objects produced by women. By purposefully supplanting her medium's anodyne associations, knowing her audience and the likely incongruity of *After the Last Sky* among the generally decorative—and decorous—examples exhibited even at so-called art quilt shows, Bowker urges fellow creatives to reconsider the potential of the medium.

18. Jenny Bowker, e-mail to author, 14 August 2018.

19. As the death toll is disputed, the numerous triangles indicate the scale of the massacre rather than the exact number of victims.

20. For a discussion of war textiles, see for example Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Ties that Bind: A Conversation about Heritage, Authenticity, and War Textiles," in *Weavings of War. Fabrics of Memory*, edited by Ariel Zeitlin Cooke and Marsha MacDowell (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press), 47-58.

21. Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch. Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: IB Tauris, 2010), 110. Interestingly, Lady Calverly's screen also contained imagery of war—the English Civil War (1642-51).

After the Last Sky's subversive use of medium recalls the work of the Chilean Arpilleristas—(primarily) women who created *arpilleras* to protest the horrific injustices of the Pinochet Regime.²² Composed of pieces of fabric stitched onto a burlap (Spanish: *arpillera*) support, the bright colours of traditional handicrafts in the cultures of the Andes are here used to depict traumatic events in the lives of the women who made them.²³ In the context of contemporary art quilts, Bowker's work follows in the footsteps of Faith Ringgold's pioneering quilts, which draw attention to the vicissitudes of African American experience.²⁴ Among other media, Bowker's quilt shares the unconventionality of Beirut-born artist Raed Yassin's *China* series (2012), which memorialises another Middle Eastern conflict, the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990). To question the "absence of historical narrative [...] in order to keep a brittle peace," Yassin created seven porcelain vases where he reconfigured the traditional designs found on Chinese blue and white porcelain (Img. 7), choosing this unorthodox and innovative way of attempting to represent—"frieze" as it were—important historical events of Lebanese contemporary history.²⁵ It is the utilization of the unexpected – where

22. The creation of *arpilleras* with political themes became popular in Chile during the Pinochet years (1973-90) and have inspired creators in other countries. For example, Peruvian *arpilleristas* have told their personal stories of suffering during the civil war between the Shining Path and the military police in the 1990s. Peruvian women, however, generally refer to *arpilleras* as *cuadros* (pictures). See Olga Gonzalez, "Juana Huaytalla Mendez, Peruvian Arpillerista," in *Weavings of War: Fabrics of Memory*, 69-74. Workshops run by Roberta Bacic, the Chilean human rights researcher who collected *arpilleras* during the Pinochet years and who now lives in Northern Ireland, have helped inspire the creation of *arpilleras*, quilts and other textile pieces documenting the events of The Troubles. See *Conflict Textiles* (University of Ulster), 24 April 2020, <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttextiles/>

23. See for example Eliana Moya-Raggio, "Arpilleras': Chilean Culture of Resistance," *Feminist Studies* 10, n.º 2 (1984): 277-290.

24. See for example Faith Ringgold, *Woman on a Bridge* #1 of 5: *Tar Beach* (1988). "Artwork 3719," *Guggenheim Museum*, 30 January 2020, <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/3719>.

25. Raed Yassin, 4 June 2019, <http://raedyassin.info/works.10>.



Image 7. Raed Yassin, *The Liberation War*, from the series *China*, 2012. Photograph courtesy of Abraaj Group Art Prize.

the viewer encounters confrontational or discomfiting social or political truths meaningful to or experienced by the artist, in place of the innocuous or pleasurable — that transforms these pieces into transmitters of activism.

The title of Bowker's quilt must also be noted. By invoking Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish's poem *The Earth is Narrowing on Us* (1984) Bowker purposefully broadens the quilt's relevance from Egypt to the troubled history of the Middle East more generally. The title both acknowledges the legacy of the poet (who consented to Bowker's breaking a single line from his poem to form the titles of two related quilts) and draws together both Darwish's and Bowker's respective experiences of and reflections on life in the Middle East.²⁶ Though Darwish's poetry charts most closely the oppression endured by Palestinians, it contributes to a human awareness of war experience at the global level, including displacement, disempowerment, and questions of renewal after tragic loss. He was six years old when his village (al-Birwa, Western Galilee, then within the British Mandate of Palestine) was razed to the ground by the Israeli Army to prevent the villagers from returning to their homes, on land that is now claimed as part of the Jewish state. Darwish's political affiliations—he was editor and translator for Rakah (the Israeli Communist Party)'s newspaper *Al-Ittihad* (Unity)—led to his being harassed and imprisoned on several occasions by the Israeli authorities. After years of hardship, he went into exile in 1971 and was forbidden from re-entering Israel in 1973 after he joined the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). His work is marked by imagery of the forced exoduses of the Palestinian people and their aftermath, as Palestinians have come to find themselves with no place on earth:

We saw the faces of these who'll throw our children
Out of the windows of this last space: Our star will hang up mirrors.
Where should we go after the last frontiers? Where should the birds fly
after the last sky?²⁷

Bowker is among a growing body of artists and art historians who are challenging the perception of textiles as exclusively skills-based—associated with repetition rather than originality, a functional purpose, and the maintenance of a handmaking tradition. The exhibitions *The Art of Survival: International and Irish Quilts*, which led to the founding of Conflict Textiles in Northern Ireland, and *We Will Walk – Art and Resistance in the American South* at Turner Contemporary both offered provocative and inspiring examples.²⁸ Yet, despite the artistic merit of work such as Bowker's, quilts still struggle to find their place in major art exhibitions, regardless of the originality of the ideas that form them. The problem is compounded by the practice of some quilters, who make kitschy, literal copies of famous works of art or found imagery with no originality of idea

26. At the time of writing, the artist is working on a related quilt titled *Where should the birds fly*, which references the first part of the line from Darwish's poem.

27. Mahmoud Darwish, "The Earth is Narrowing on Us," in *Index on Censorship* 13 (1984): 32.

28. *The Art of Survival* was held in nine venues across Derry, 8 March – 19 April 2008. See *Conflict Textiles*, 24 April 2020, <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttextiles/about-2/>. *We will Walk* (opened 7 February 2020) included numerous quilts made by women in Gee's Bend (now Boykin), Alabama. The quilts were influenced by the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. *Turner Contemporary*, 24 April 2020, <https://turnercontemporary.org/whats-on/we-will-walk/>.

29. "After the Last Sky;" Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 1, 3.

in what is represented. Such works are commonly seen at major craft fairs or quilt shows, even in categories described as "art quilts." Unlike Bowker's practice, where each piece is unique and based on her own developing ideas, many quilts are reproductions based on or adapted from quilting patterns published in dedicated periodicals and social media. Such practice has meant that artists who work in the medium must fight harder for recognition and a place in the art exhibition circuit, many of whose curators seem suspicious of the medium as "art." Beyond exceptions for major exhibitions such as those at the Victoria and Albert Museum and the International Quilt Museum in Nebraska, or of historic quilts such as the Changi Quilts, quilts do not feature prominently in the capacious Venn diagrams of contemporary art.

Nonetheless, Bowker has harnessed the medium's benign image to powerful effect. Its omnipresence in everyday life and the lingering image of quilting as an activity for "ladies," are precisely what give quilting such a potential for prodding consciousness and stoking activism. Bowker's remark about the feeling of "stitching through a man's face" (Img. 8) while making the quilt has a



Image 8. *After the Last Sky* (detail) in progress. Photograph courtesy of Jenny Bowker.

mischievousness about it that recalls Julia Bryan-Wilson's reflections on female collective textile making as an activist process, where "the joke relies upon assumptions about the very impotence of textiles and the assumed absurdity of decorous 'ladies'—not 'women,' but their more dainty or polite counterparts—fostering political unrest." It is a lesson that the term "*textiles* is not equivalent to craft, or vice versa."²⁹ The discordance produced by *After the Last Sky* lingers between the tactile seduction of layered, textured fabric and the discomfiting image; the work is memorable because of its subversiveness.

To conclude, *After the Last Sky* is a powerful visual statement that challenges the prevailing, reductive assumptions placed on textiles as art, engaging productively with contemporary artistic practice and Egyptian visual culture. As a work spurred by tragedy and conceived in empathy, it alludes to events far beyond the Rabaa massacre, embedding other layers of meaning in its composition and structure, where the artist's many years of living in the Middle East, the sacrifice of the protestors, the bravery of the photojournalist, and the thoughtful reconsideration of a traditionally craft-based medium are drawn together to form a unique monument to the resilience of humanity under crisis.



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