

San Jose State University

From the Selected Works of Jo Farb Hernandez

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Book Review. Weavings of War

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Weavings of War: Fabrics of Memory. Edited by Ariel Zeitlin Cooke and Marsha MacDowell. (East Lansing: Michigan State University Museum, in collaboration with City Lore, Inc. [New York City] and the Vermont Folklife Center [Middlebury], 2005. Pp. xiii + 101, acknowledgments, preface, object list, bibliography. \$19.95 paper)

Produced through an innovative consortium of three public folklore venues in three different states, this handsome little exhibition catalogue discusses a provocative subject that, regrettably, continues to be of profound relevance as we bear witness to the persistent accounts of various armed struggles, wars, and injustices worldwide. Past exhibitions, articles, and catalogues have documented culture-specific artistic responses to such disasters, but this project, according to curators Ariel Zeitlin Cooke and Marsha MacDowell, is a "landmark exhibition that brings together, for the first time, art that has arisen out of [several] distinct textile traditions" (xi). Although seemingly targeted to a general audience rather than to folklorists or art historians, this work has sufficient elements to hold the interest of scholarly readers as well. It is nicely illustrated, with portraits of the artists and some process photographs as well as images of the works themselves.

The curators focus on four significantly different cultural and textile traditions: the war rugs made by refugee weavers from Afghanistan and Pakistan; the story-cloths embroidered by Hmong villagers; the appliquéd *arpilleras* of highland Peru; and the wall hangings known as memory cloths of the South African townships. The similarities that have prompted the inclusion of these textiles—varied in technique, geography, and media—in this circulating exhibition are strikingly broad. The first similarity is that the works are made mostly by women (in an extraordinary break from tradition, some Afghani men began to weave rugs during their stays in refugee camps, yet most discontinued this endeavor upon leaving the camps). The second is that—another break from tradition—these "weavings of war" are primarily figurative and narrative even though coming from textile traditions that are primarily geometric.

In the curators' preface, the subject and conceptual premises behind the exhibition project are introduced and some of the "powerful contradictions" that these textiles convey are presented—"individual artistry versus community aesthetics; global versus local impacts of war; individual versus universal experience"—as well as, somewhat more elementarily, the "assumptions of folk arts as unchanging, rural, and complacent"

(xii). The contradictions are intriguing but not as thoroughly explored as a specialist might like; the assumptions seem heavily targeted at a general audience with little background in the field.

Perhaps to tempt the non-specialist, the text of this catalogue is presented in a variety of formats: there are short essays, selected artist profiles, and excerpts from a conversation among the exhibition planners. Each, in different ways, explores the evocative nature of these textiles: how the more universally accessible visual vocabulary of figuration helps these creators tell their story to outsiders not familiar with the traditional iconography of their cultural traditions, and how these textiles became personal memoirs of war, displacement, and injustice as well as a medium for sharing those personal stories with others: they function both as "a window and a mirror" (26). That textiles are commonly associated with images of domesticity, of home, of comfort—yet as commonly are used for martial materiel such as flags, uniforms, and bandages—underscores the inherent challenge and uneasy dissonance of these works.

Other issues, which, unfortunately, are treated rather superficially—befitting a small exhibition catalogue for general museum audiences but leaving the scholar frustrated—include the inconsistencies that are often found between "folk history" and that published by journalists about the same events or battles; the role of foreign collectors, non-governmental organizations, and marketers vis-à-vis artist choice of image or emphasis; and questions about authenticity. This latter is treated most interestingly as part of a three-way conversation between co-editor Cooke and folklorists Steve Zeitlin of City Lore and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett of New York University.

Brief artist biographies are included with a survey of contextual background pertaining to the craft (curiously, one Lebanese embroiderer is included in the artist profiles, though her works are not found on the exhibition object list, and the embroidery of Middle Easterners is not treated in the catalogue text). This exhibition catalogue skims the surface of the fascinating subject of these weavings; the short but helpful bibliography offers additional venues for more in-depth study. A well-produced introduction to these evocative "fabrics of memory," *Weavings of War* whets the appetite for further learning.

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