

Motherland: Making Space for the Sacred, Creating Sacred Space

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Motherland is a 66" x 66" embroidery on Belgian linen that I am completing by hand in partial requirement of my MFA thesis in Visual Art (fig. 1). It depicts a metaphysical landscape in which humans are positioned as in relationship with, but not in control of, the earth's natural cycles of death, growth, and evolution. The title *Motherland* is first of all an homage to the philosophical and textile traditions from India--often referred to as *Bharat Mata*, or *Mother India*--that motivate both its composition, and my choice to render its composition by embroidery rather than some other means. Secondly, the project's title addresses my desire to acknowledge a feminine aspect of the divine principle in my own perception of expanded reality--not in place of a masculine aspect, but as in relationship with one. Each of the major compositional elements that articulate *Motherland's* landscape are placed along or near the central vertical axis of the cloth in resonance with the Indian anatomical theory of *chakras*, energetic centres located along the spine that govern spiritual and physical health and well-being. In doing this, cognizant that *Motherland* is intended to function in ritual as a blanket, I suggest that the body is a microcosm of the earth and that both operate under the governance of the same energetic structure, which integrates masculine and feminine principles. The narrative of transformation that *Motherland* depicts speaks to the universal condition of birth and death; its response to the existential questions arising from this condition proposes a link between seemingly opposite and disparate forces, and encourages viewers to consider the possibility of an expanded reality in their own lives.

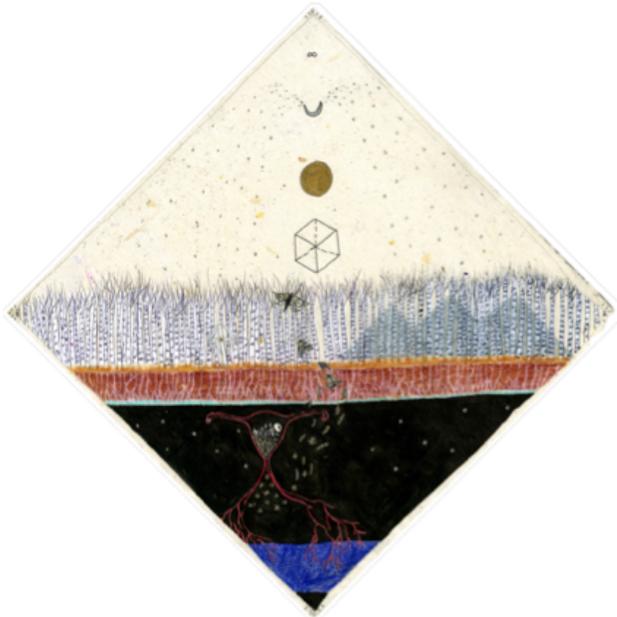


Figure 1. *Motherland* preparatory sketch. Pencil, pencil crayon, and ink on paper, 8" x 8", 2013.

While I contextualize the project variously, this paper will report on two exhibitions of *Motherland*. The first was of the work in progress in The Little Gallery, at the University of Calgary, Alberta, from April 7 - 11, 2014. The second is my MFA thesis exhibition, which runs April 8 - May 27, 2015, in the Untitled Art Society's +15 window gallery, in the Arts Commons, Calgary, Alberta. These span almost the full term of the cloth's creation, and offer opportunities for viewers to witness my process, and the spaces in which I engage that process.

Both exhibitions of the cloth have heavily relied on a performative element--my labour on the embroidery--so my first priority in both instances was to create space in which I felt comfortable and supported to work. Therefore, exhibition space came to reflect the spaces in which I worked on the cloth privately. In the first case, The Little Gallery assumed the additional identity of my studio at the university; in the second instance, the UAS +15 window took on the qualities of my bedroom (where I worked after I relinquished my studio). Because the primary intention of my work is to facilitate spiritual communion, my studio, bedroom, and chosen gallery venues are all designed to support my both artistic practice, as well as meditation and prayer.

Exhibition space takes on the qualities of sacred space not only to facilitate my process, but also to contextualize *Motherland* as a ritual object, and to speak to the affective relationship I have with it: "The cloth is a home I hold and am held by," I wrote in the journal I keep to document my progress. "I work it and it works me. Ours is a truly reciprocal partnership; at the end we both will be wholly transformed. I know (more or less) what it will look like; what predictions does it have about me?" (*The Cloth Book*, February 17, 2014). Similarly, I wrote on March 26, 2014:

This morning before I started working, I spoke out loud to the cloth.

Good morning, cloth, I said. How are you doing?

The cloth spoke back.

I am the same as I am every day, it said, which is a reflection. How are YOU doing? (*The Cloth Book*)

That the cloth assumes a kind of agency in the relation I have with it during creation, and that it is designed to affect me energetically once it is a completed object suggests, in fact, that *Motherland* is not just an object, but a *thing*. Tim Ingold (2010) proposes that a thing, "far from standing before us as a fait accompli, complete in itself, is a 'going on'--or better, a place where several goings on become entwined" (96). Exhibitions of *Motherland* therefore allow the cloth to be seen not as an object, but as a "going on"; as being, in its own way, as a thing, alive. The act of viewing, as a result, ideally becomes a dual encounter: "we may stare at [*Motherland*], but [*Motherland*] also stares back at us (Elkins 1996, 70). The nature of the exhibition space in part determines the efficacy of *Motherland's* affective gaze, and what viewers gain from the encounter.

This paper takes the form of an autoethnographic personal narrative. It will be organized in three sections: Enclosure, Metamorphosis, and Emergence, to recognize the threefold process by which Carol Lee Flinders (1998) asserts that knowledge of the divine feminine is transmitted (156-57). I begin by elaborating the solitary nature of my process, contrasted with my intention to exhibit *Motherland*. I will then move to a discussion about how I curated *Motherland's* first exhibition and what the results of that exhibition were. Following from this, I will discuss similarly the curation and proceedings of my thesis exhibition. I will also include here accounts of supplementary programming that has coincided with the exhibition, including a workshop I facilitated called The Stitched Mandala, my interactions with grade 3 and 4 Museum and City Hall School students who engaged with the project, and my contribution of a collaborative embroidery endeavour to the Arts Commons rebranding event, Happenings. All of these points aim to substantiate *Motherland's* ability to create a sacred atmosphere in built environments that can facilitate personal contemplation, social and ecological relatedness, and spiritual communion.

References

- Elkins, James. 1996. *The Object Stares Back: on the Nature of Seeing*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Flinders, Carol Lee. 1998. *At the Root of This Longing: Reconciling a Spiritual Hunger and a Feminist Thirst*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Ingold, Tim. 2010. "The Textility of Making." *Cambridge Journal of Economics* (34): 91-102.