

Bettina Matzkuhn
THE MAGIC QUILT

Bettina Matzkuhn: *The Magic Quilt*

BY AMY GOGARTY

Artist's Statement (2008)

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Bettina Matzkuhn brings a diversity of experience to her practice as a visual artist. Prior to studies in Visual Arts and Liberal Studies at Simon Fraser University (BFA 2000; MA 2005), she spent much of her youth travelling with her parents on a sailboat. She learned to read nautical charts, mastering the art of distinguishing dangerous rocks and reefs from safe harbours. Her mother taught her to piece fabric, embroider and mend, skills she continues to use in her work today. She has exhibited in numerous solo shows, most recently *Inundation* (2003) and *Navigating* (2007), and group shows in British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario and Korea. As a young woman, she proposed

Bettina Matzkuhn
The Magic Quilt, 1983

fabric, thread and buttons
(243.8 x 335.3 cm)
SAG 2003.06.01
gift of the Artist

Photograph by Cameron Heryet

storyboards for three animated films to the National Film Board. Not only were her proposals accepted, her short films, *The Hometown* (1979), *Distant Islands* (1981) and *The Magic Quilt* (1985), all won prestigious awards.¹ Directed under her married name Maylone, the films combine animation with appliqué and sewing techniques, creating richly textured and engaging narratives that bring childhood memories to life. A passion for geography and mapmaking drives much of her current work. In *Navigating* (2007), she explores language, metaphor and the visual

attractions of historical maps to create a series of “improbable” maps of psychological and emotional territories. As discussed by Nadeane Trowse, works such as *Bike Spool*, which narrates a bicycle journey made solo from Vancouver to Atlin, British Columbia, or *Underneath*, which cleverly reconfigures the emotional tenor of the London Underground, reveal “a highly personalized geography.”² The artist pieced, dyed and painted her fabric, later “drawing” on it with lusciously vibrant embroidery floss. The floss creates linear elements and text, and, worked through a series



Bettina Matzkuhn, *The Magic Quilt*, 1983, fabric, thread and buttons (243.8 x 335.3 cm) SAG 2003.06.01 Gift of the Artist. Photograph by Cameron Heryet.

of tightly spaced chain stitches, it generates dense, palpable forms. That much of the pleasure of these works derives from their play of language comes as no surprise; Matzkuhn is an accomplished writer, and she works part-time in a public library. Books have been central to her life since early childhood. Terms such as “art quilt” or “fibre art” do not quite capture the sophistication, variety or technical virtuosity of these works, but they indicate the general area of practice to which they belong.

Art quilts, defined loosely as fabric constructions intended to be hung on the wall rather than spread on a bed, developed in the 1960s and 70s in response to a range of influences and historical conditions.³ Feminist critics Lucy Lippard, Linda Nochlin, Griselda Pollock and others have attacked the hierarchy of materials championed by Fine Art, claiming that the focus on painting, sculpture and architecture consistently undervalues or disqualifies women’s domestic creativity. As a challenge to Modernism’s obsession with painting and purity, American artist Miriam Schapiro combined patterned fabric into exuberant collages, which she called “Femmage.”⁴ In addition to feminist critique, interest in artistic production by world artists, outsider artists, artists working with a range of recycled materials, new media and contemporary craft gradually opened the art world to a broader concept of artistic activity. In this new critical environment, quilting as an art form came into its own. Differences among practitioners in matters of tradition, skill, materials and intent ensure that contemporary art quilts do not form a unified entity. Rather, the particular purposes and expressions of individual artists require examination.⁵

Owing to its usefulness, quilting has been used in many parts of the world for millennia. It was known in ancient Egypt and likely brought back from the

Middle East to Europe, where it developed a variety of indigenous forms. By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, wealthy people collected quilts sewn from new and expensive cotton fabrics, many of which served as elaborate gifts to mark special occasions.⁶ Meaning and artistic value are not limited to luxurious materials; indeed, the opposite is often the case. In Gee’s Bend, Alabama, rural African-Americans pieced discarded work clothes and other reclaimed fabrics to produce distinct and visually arresting compositions. Major museums compete to exhibit these quilts, which have garnered high critical praise as “culturally informed and emotionally evocative formal objects.”⁷ Visual style and aesthetic purpose have long vied with practicality, creating conditions for quilts to emerge in the twentieth century as art forms in their own right. By the 1970s, quilt-making began to attract more art school-trained practitioners. Today, there exists a large network of professional organizations, exhibitions, conferences and quilters, who incorporate a wide range of techniques, aesthetics, politics and critical aims into their work.⁸

In Canada, Joyce Wieland (1931-1998) stands as one of the most passionate and accomplished artists to use the quilt form in a way that perfectly melds material and content. Taking inspiration from the soft-form sculptures of Claes Oldenburg, Wieland created quilts with stuffed, oversized texts expressing patriotic, ecological or personal sentiments.⁹ Working with skilled craftswomen, whom she always acknowledged and paid, Wieland produced a significant and innovative body of work. She saw her collaborative craft work as “symbolic of a way for the country to work and draw together.”¹⁰ Her solo exhibition at the National Gallery of Canada, *True Patriot Love, Véritable amour patriotique*, opened on Canada Day, 1971. Through the use of specifically Canadian icons such as beavers and snow geese, patriotic songs and

historical references, she proclaimed her unabashed love for Canada. The exhibition's thirty-six works were installed across an entire floor in the gallery; twenty featured fabric components including quilting, embroidery and domestic craft.¹¹ Embroidered texts of the last letters written by Generals Wolfe and Montcalm made tantalizing connections between the arts of writing, drawing and embroidering. Relevant to Bettina Matzkuhn's *The Magic Quilt* is the fact that much of Wieland's work grew out of her experience with independent cinema, cinematic storyboards and narrative.¹²



Bettina Matzkuhn, *The Magic Quilt*, detail

Matzkuhn's artwork *The Magic Quilt* (1983) marks a significant point in the artist's history as well as in the history of Canada. The work measures eleven by eight feet (3.3 x 2.4 metres) and reproduces a subjective yet recognizable map of Canada. Its ambitious scale and theme make an immediate impression on viewers, who often spend a great deal of time musing over its many details.¹³ The quilt originated as the central prop in Matzkuhn's National Film Board film of the

same title, and yet it now exists as a work in itself. As the artist describes it, both quilt and film developed out of her experience of moving from Vancouver to Québec in 1981. The cross-country journey was made at a time when multiculturalism was becoming established as public policy and the separation of Québec seemed a distinct possibility.¹⁴ The vastness and beauty of the Canadian landscape affected her deeply. She found confirmation of her experience in the National Film Board picture book *Canada: A Year of the Land*,¹⁵ published to celebrate the Canadian centennial. This impressive tome pairs stunning photographs with poetic texts that describe Canada's changing seasons. Together, they present a bucolic image of the country as a peaceable kingdom with hard-working farmers and fishermen, abundant crops and resources, and atmospheric vistas of prairie, mountain, lake and forest. Cities, when shown, feature brightly lit buildings silhouetted against the evening sky, shining images of progress untouched by urban blight. Human beings appear rarely and generally at a distance. While clearly moved by the photographs, Matzkuhn renders her image of Canada through its people. She embroidered group portraits of Canada's diverse population onto a series of red doors that scatter across the surface of the quilt. For her, the drama of nationhood unfolds through relationships between the many communities that call Canada home.

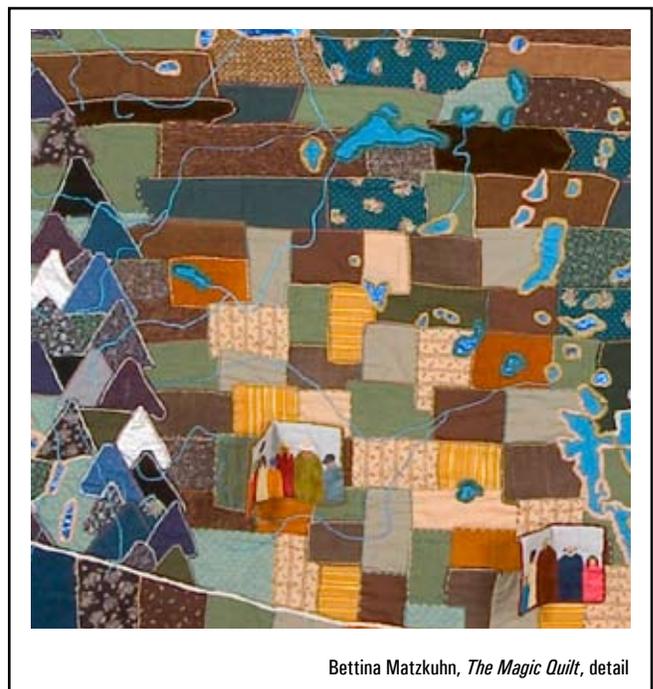
In the film, children find and play with the quilt, which has magical properties. The doors serve as portals to animated, narrative sequences. For example, when a door in Québec is opened, a family is shown having breakfast, while one in Vancouver reveals passersby caught in a sudden rain shower. At one point, the children begin to fight and tear at the quilt, which then loses its magic power. The quilt must be carefully mended through collaborative

action in order for its powers to be restored. The simple metaphor of mending is given greater weight as viewers contemplate the potential for disaster balanced against the power to make whole. In the context of Canadian politics in the 1980s, the lesson is gentle if profound. Canada survives and prospers through its diversity, generosity, tolerance and spirit of cooperation, qualities we must vigilantly protect.

A vernacular aesthetic governs the design, reinforced by the use of tactile and familiar fabrics such as corduroy, satin and tweed. Colour overall is bright and cheerful yet keyed to geographical regions. The arctic is rendered in pale shades of apricot and pink, the Canadian Shield in forest greens and brown, and the prairies are patterned with gold and green squares. The Rocky Mountain spine to the west is suggested by overlapping triangles of flowered fabric, and oceans and lakes by sparkling blue strips. A similar colour scheme with less detail continues down into the United States, implying that the land continues even if a political border intervenes. The quilt is bordered by alternating hearts and standing figures who reach out across the country and to lands beyond. The choice of aesthetic is appropriate to the Film Board's mandate to appeal to a general audience,¹⁶ and it balances the particular icons of different geographical regions with a more general consensus about the importance of geography to Canadian identity.¹⁷

Looking back at this early work, the artist notes concerns that have remained constant with her practice. She retains a fierce love for her country, which is strengthened and given context by her being the daughter of immigrants. She is now more conscious of environmental threats facing Canada and more aware of the cultural and ethnic diversity that defines our country today. Optimistic

hopes for national consensus are now shadowed by her awareness of how difficult it is to negotiate shared terrain. She remains committed to textiles and the practice of mending in its widest sense as a "necessary contribution to sustainable living."¹⁸ While often using the most simple and direct of techniques, she expands beyond those to incorporate fabric painting, block printing and digital imagery. Her attraction to geography and maps, honed in her youth, continues to inspire further research and discovery. If anything, her work now is more inward-looking, personal and self-reflective. She now bends the science and objectivity of cartography to map an internal landscape, one that resists set coordinates or global positioning.¹⁹



Bettina Matzkuhn, *The Magic Quilt*, detail

Notes:

- 1 National Film Board. <http://www.nfb.ca/collection/films/resultat.php?type=credit&pid=10949&nom=Bettina+Maylone> Accessed August 31, 2008.

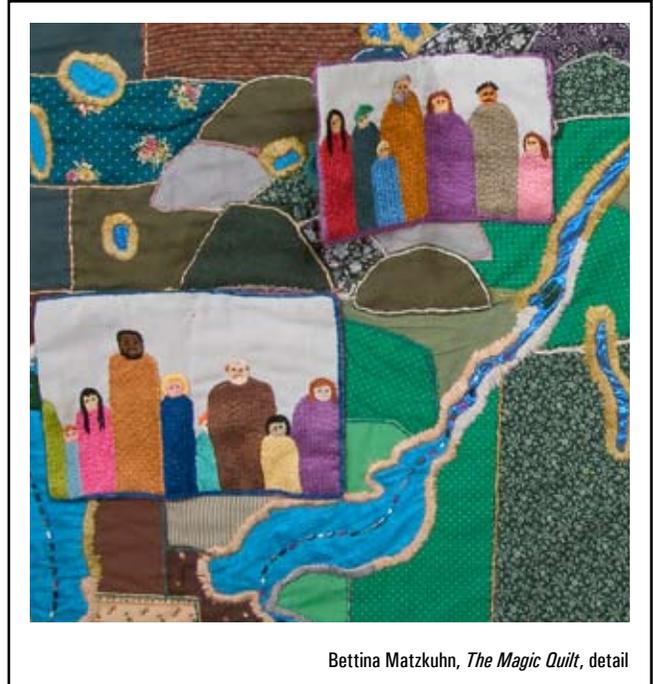
- 2 Trowse, Nadeane. "Navigating a Textured Trajectory." *Navigating*. North Vancouver: Seymour Art Gallery, October 16 - November 11, 2007.
- 3 For an excellent account of this development in the United States, see Pritchard, Gayle A. *Uncommon Threads: Ohio's Art Quilt Revolution*, Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006.
- 4 Sider, Sandra. "Femmage: The Timeless Fabric Collage of Miriam Schapiro," *Fiberarts* Volume 32 Number 1, Summer, 2005, page 40.
- 5 Patterson, Sunita. "The Art Quilt in 2003," Interview with Robert Shaw, *Fiberarts* Volume 30 Number 3, 2003, page 41.
- 6 *ibid.* page 37.
- 7 Kalina, Richard. "Gee's Bend Modern." *Art in America* Volume 91 Number 10, 2003, pages 107-8.
- 8 Sunita Patterson's interview with Robert Shaw includes links to workshops, museums, organizations and other websites, giving some indication of the extent of this network. See Patterson, Sunita. "The Art Quilt in 2003," Interview with Robert Shaw, *Fiberarts* Volume 30 Number 3, 2003.
- 9 Fleming, Marie. "Joyce Wieland: A Perspective," *Joyce Wieland*, Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1987, page 61.
- 10 *ibid.* page 81.
- 11 *ibid.* page 82.
- 12 *ibid.* page 53.
- 13 Matzkuhn, Bettina. "Cartography, Cloth and the Embroidered Tale." *Textile Narratives and Conversations*, Proceedings of the Textile Society of America Tenth Biennial Symposium, October 11-14, Toronto, Ontario, 2006.
- 14 "In 1971, Canada was the first country in the world to adopt multiculturalism as an official policy. By so doing, Canada affirmed the value and dignity of all Canadian citizens regardless of their racial or ethnic origins, their language, or their religious affiliation. The 1971 Multiculturalism Policy of Canada also confirmed the rights of Aboriginal peoples and the status of Canada's two official languages." Canadian Multiculturalism: An Inclusive Citizenship. http://canadianheritage.gc.ca/progs/multi/inclusive_e.cfm Accessed August 31, 2008. In 1980, the first Quebec referendum was held to determine the place of Québec within Canada and to explore support for Québec sovereignty. Although the secessionists were defeated by nearly a 60 to 40% margin, support for sovereignty remained a powerful and divisive force in the country and public consciousness.
- 15 Monk, Lorraine. *Canada: A Year of the Land*, Ottawa: Queen's Printer/National Film Board, 1967.
- 16 Personal communication with Bettina Matzkuhn, June 26, 2008.
- 17 Osborne, Brian S. "The Iconography of Nationhood in Canadian Art," in *The Iconography of Landscape*, Cosgrove, Denis and Stephen Daniels, eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, page 175.
- 18 Matzkuhn, Bettina. "Artist's Statement." *The Magic Quilt*. Surrey, B.C.: Surrey Art Gallery, 2008.

Artist's Statement (2008)

The Magic Quilt

In 1981 I began thinking about making the film that eventually featured this quilt as its centerpiece. I had recently moved to Quebec. Two things seemed very closely tied together in my mind at that time: the variety, expanse and beauty of the land I had just driven across, and the political turmoil around the separatist movement in Quebec. I met delightful and extraordinary people there who favoured separation from Canada. While I understood their viewpoints much better after living in French-speaking Quebec for two years, I still had/have the hope that the quilt that is Canada could be mended and somehow reworked to keep it intact.

The metaphor of mending is central to this piece and continues to interest me. Although the quilt itself does not show overt signs of wear and/or repair, its role in the film opened a discussion about this process. In the film my focus was on mending differences between people. Now I see mending as a much wider, indeed necessary contribution to sustainable living. Like my parents, I generally mend clothes, appliances, furniture; keeping things in good repair is simply how I live. The deliberate, careful process of mending is not gendered in my mind. The decimation of the fisheries, the ecological wastelands of the tar sands, the extensive clear-cutting of forests all call for ongoing mending. The idea of mending one's ways in relation to the environment is now more firmly on private and political agendas than it was at the beginning of the 1980s. *The Magic Quilt* attempts to celebrate the texture and diversity of Canada; in my mind, it now extends beyond its peopled borders to include the entire globe.



Bettina Matzkuhn, *The Magic Quilt*, detail

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