



reimagining

the

distaff

toolkit

*"Portrait of a young Negro Woman
surrounded by laundry in Newport, RI"*

Gertrude Käsebier

1902

Courtesy of the

Library of Congress



Front Cover

Distaff

Larry Ruhl

4.5" x 16.5" x 5"

2008

preface : rickie solinger : curator

Each work of art in *Reimagining the Distaff Toolkit* has, at its visible core, a tool that was important for women's domestic labor in the past. The old tool becomes the fulcrum for a contemporary work of art.

Betye Saar's work—one of her iconic washboard pieces—perfectly conveys a trajectory of this exhibition: the impulse to transform an implement of domestic drudgery and degradation into a thing of beauty and a vehicle for representing and honoring the past, in this case, African American history. Flo Oy Wong has made a piece constructed in part out of kitchen implements and images from her immigrant family's 1940's Chinese restaurant in Oakland, CA. Lisa Alvarado in Chicago has made a small installation illuminating the cultural life of Mexican immigrant domestics in the World War II era. Alvarado expects the audience to rifle through the maid's tote bag, demonstrating the thin claim such a person had to privacy as she toiled for wages in someone else's household.

Oregon artist Marie Watt has contributed one of her acclaimed "blanket columns" to the exhibition, along with two smaller wall pieces. Watt describes her project this way: "My work is about social and cultural histories embedded in commonplace objects. I consciously draw from indigenous design principles, oral tradi-

tions and personal experience to shape the inner logic of the work I make." Watt adds, I like how Indigenous Creation Stories connect us to soil and sky. Like the blankets, this vertical orientation (up and down) is easy to take for granted. But it is also the space where smoke rises, winged creatures fly, prayers are offered and water collects and releases."

Distaff artists have placed these objects and others at the center of their work: a washboard, a dressmaker's figure, graters, dollys, an advice book, cooking pans, a basket, a garden hoe, dress patterns, a rolling pin, buckets, darning eggs, a work glove, a needle-threader, rug-beaters, ironing boards, mason jars, a telephone.

Part of the point of *Distaff* is to explore the idea of seeing-as-context. Many of these old tools facilitated very hard and repetitive labor and evoke the various histories (European American, African American, Asian American, Native American, Mexican American) of women's unpaid, often diminished and disrespected status within the household and society. But in the 21st century, at a moment when "old tools" have become aestheticized and expensive, we can look again, and see costly beauty.

The artists have put utility in conversation with art, the past in conversation with the present.

Reimagining the distaff toolkit for the purposes of this exhibition can include (overlapping) encounters in any of the following directions—or others: history / memory / gender / labor / material culture / household objects / family relations / power and powerlessness / drudgery / craft and beauty.

At several points in this catalogue (but not in the exhibition) I have placed a beautiful old photograph illustrating the original use of a tool like those in *Distaff Toolkit*, now altered for the contemporary eye.

The distaff is a tool attached to a spinning wheel, designed to hold unspun fibers. Over time, "distaff" came to refer to matters and objects in the domestic or women's sphere, and then, to women, generally.

Telephone

Karen Hendrickson &
Barbara Leoff Burge

8" x 5.75" x 5"

2008



reimagining the distaff toolkit : susan strasser

For centuries the distaff, a tool women used in the ancient process of making yarn or thread with their fingers, has been obsolete. Over time the distaff became an element of the more complicated tool called the spinning wheel, which was itself supplanted beginning in the 1760s by the first inventions of the Industrial Revolution. Spinning, and then weaving, were soon mechanized. Water power superseded human power, and machine-made perfection replaced the irregular products of hand production. For a while, the word “distaff” persisted symbolically, referring to women, the work they did, and the domestic sphere. The phrase “distaff side” hung on even longer, having to do with the women of a family,

“Rubbing”

The Lawrence Company

1905

Courtesy of the Library of Congress



or the female line. But by the time even the oldest of us were children, it was an expression some uncle might have uttered as a bit of a joke.

Some of the tools reimagined by these artists – frying pans, graters, and even canning jars and ironing boards – are still used by millions of Americans, though they and the domestic work they represent are not as common as they once were. Others, like washboards and darning eggs, are historical artifacts, often displayed in history museums even without having been transformed by art. Everyday objects are all historical phenomena; literally, they come and they go. Old ones inspire us to take a historical perspective on change and transition in daily life. They tell us that there was a time before this when things were different; they help us to understand that culture isn’t fixed, that institutions and artifacts are transitory, that things do change. Like art, history offers the possibility of a critical stance on the present, a place to hang out from which we can look at the way we live now.

The pieces in this exhibit suggest that everyday life – the daily, the “trivial”, the private sphere – is worth paying attention to. They suggest that we reconsider our own household work and the joys it does and doesn’t provide, that we take a look at

our relationships with our mothers, with the people we live with, with those who clean up after us, with those we clean up after. These are intimate topics, but the implements of daily life also encourage cultural inquiry. I once saw in an anthropology museum a display of portable food containers, from leaves to lunch boxes, from bento boxes to Big Mac clamshells. Each raised questions about the culture that produced it, its technologies, and the relationships among people who worked with and for each other. This art, too, raises those kinds of questions. Who has used the distaff toolkit, and what work have they done? Have all these tasks always been done by women, and what does it mean for a tool to be gendered? Have these tools saved labor – or structured it, or even created it? Whose labor? Were they working for their families, or did they use these tools to make money? (Few women could afford dressmakers’ forms, for example; for those who made money sewing, the mannequins were trophies of success as well as tools.)

Industrialization, and later, global consumer culture have brought both losses and gains. Grueling labor, a lack of privacy, and the oppression of women went along with craft satisfaction, intimacy, and community. We live, on the whole, longer and healthier lives now, and it is hard to imagine ourselves as

ourselves, without electricity and running water. Women once took for granted a staggering burden of household work, scrubbing laundry on washboards and weaving patches in socks stretched over darning eggs. Some tasks were literally creative: making clothes or doilies that might last for awhile, or pies that would soon be eaten. Other chores, like ironing and scrubbing, have never garnered much respect, and they were the first to be jettisoned by women with the money to hire help.

Buying cloth and soap and candles, Americans during the nineteenth century began to purchase the tools and raw materials of daily life from distant factories instead of making them or buying from local craftspeople. But well into the twentieth century, many women still made house dresses and children's clothes. Now we buy our clothes; we eat at restaurants whether or not we like cooking; even childcare has taken on market overtones. Everyone is defined as a consumer. Consumption is why we work, and equal opportunity to consume is entangled with our concepts of citizenship. Yet our consumption is shaped by persistent indoctrination, carefully crafted so others can make money. For more than a century, advertisers, marketers, and the developers of retail space have diverted consumers from

that reality by associating the act of buying with leisure, pleasure and fantasy.

In that framework, art serves as a space where the culture can be reimagined. Artists have made and thought about making art by appropriating mass-produced objects for nearly a hundred years. In a consumer culture, with its focus on the new, it takes a special eye to see the possibilities in old things, and both folk artists and gallery artists have recycled the industrially produced refuse of daily life in innovative ways. Some of the reimaginings of women's traditional tools in this exhibit fall into that category. Others comment on handwork itself, and on traditional methods. Here artists appropriate tools that were originally and beautifully handmade by local blacksmiths and brush makers; they employ computerized machines to make intricate doilies, once the province of women needleworkers, or weave traditional baskets from high-tech materials. In a culture dominated by mechanically produced objects, artists make unique ones, usually by hand. Listen to what they have to say about our everyday lives.

Susan Strasser is the author of *Never Done: A History of American Housework*, and *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash*. She is a professor of history at the University of Delaware.



*"Delores Harris with food
prepared by her mother"*

Dameron, Maryland

Jack Delano

August, 1940

Courtesy of the
Library of Congress



Mirror, Mirror

Alison Saar

11.5" x 8.25" x 2"

2007

Courtesy of the

Phyllis Kind Gallery



Forgotten Garden

Eliška Smiley

20" x 6" x 7"

1998



Conversation: Plow

Marie Watt

13.25" x 15.75"

2007



Battle Ax
Tom Cohen
22" x 24" x 4"
2007



Cavity/Strainer

Tracy Krumm

52" x 9" x 13"

2003



Mattoon 8
Debra Priestly
18" x 24"
2008



Trophy Wife No. 3 of 8

Dave Cole

44" x 16" x 16"

2006

Courtesy of the

Judi Rotenberg Gallery

and the artist



National Racism:
We Was Mostly 'Bout Survival
Betye Saar
24" x 12.5" x 1.25"
1997
Courtesy of the
Michael Rosenfeld Gallery



Grater Woman

Judith Hoyt

25" x 9" x 1.5"

2007

exhibition checklist

Lisa Alvarado

Mexican Maid's Toolkit: Sin Fronteras
2008
Mixed media, found objects

Kim Anno

Day's Hours
2007
Tray and enamel paint

Tiffany Besonen

Mini-Ambiotic
2007
Sewing pattern paper, wax, wire, artist's hair, vintage children's ironing board

Mary Jo Bole

nobody darns socks anymore
2007
watercolor, wood, vintage frames, monument plaques: enamel on copper
(photogenic drawings)

Barbara Leoff Burge

Needlethreader
2007
Acrylic on paper, metal and cotton thread

Carol Ann Carter

Glovework
2007
Goatskin, ink, paper

Colin Chase

Heddle
2007
Wood, steel, paint, resin

Tom Cohen

Battle Ax
2007
Digital print, wood

Tom Cohen

Feeding Time
2008
Digital print, wood, metal, cloth, rubber, paper, ceramic, tea, graphite

Dave Cole

Trophy Wife No. 3 of 8
2006
Found dress form and antlers with mixed media
Courtesy of the Judi Rotenberg Gallery and the artist

Leonie Guyer

Untitled
1989
Oil on found object

Karen Hendrickson & Barbara Leoff Burge

Telephone
2008
Bakelite, cord, and color xerox

Judy Hoyt

Bucket Woman
2007
Found metal, plywood, oil paint

Judy Hoyt

Grater Woman
2007
Found metal, plywood, oil paint

Mildred Johnson

Shredded Joy
2007
Mixed media assemblage

Mildred Johnson

What a Young Girl Ought to Know
2007
Mixed media assemblage

Tatana Kellner

Iron (the book)
2008
Silkscreen on paper
Supported in part with funds from the Strategic Opportunity Stipends Program through NYSCA and the Puffin Foundation.

Tatana Kellner

Ironing
2008
Mixed media: ironing board, iron, silkscreen on fabric

Tracy Krumm

Yoke/Folded
2003
Crocheted copper, fabricated metal, found yoke, patina

Tracy Krumm

Cavity/Strainer
2003
Crocheted found metal wire, found floor drain and chain, fabricated metal, patina

Lisa Link

Cook
2007
Inkjet print on paper

Sallie McCorkle

Beating the Storm
2008
Metal wire, photograph, vintage wooden frame, paint, wood, cast iron

Debra Priestly

Mattoon 8
2007
Mixed media on board

Larry Ruhl

Distaff
2008
Wood and twine

Larry Ruhl

Whiskbroom
2008
Reed and wire

Betye Saar

National Racism: We Was Mostly 'Bout Survival
1997
Mixed media on vintage washboard
Courtesy of the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery

Alison Saar

Mirror Mirror
2005
Cast bronze
Courtesy of the Phyllis Kind Gallery

Alison Saar

Mirror Mirror
2007
Cast bronze
Courtesy of the Phyllis Kind Gallery

Eliška Smiley

Forgotten Garden
1998
Glass and steel

Laura Splan

Dollies series (HIV, Hepadna, Herpes, SARS, Influenza)
2004
Freestanding machine embroidered lace mounted on cotton velvet

Allen C. Topolski

Sensitive Equipment
2001
Found materials

Gail Tremblay

Indian Princess in a White Dress
2006
16mm film, metallic braid
Courtesy of the Froelick Gallery

Marie Watt

Conversation: Staff
2007
Wool blankets, satin binding, thread, hand sewn

Marie Watt

Conversation: Plow
2007
Wool blankets, satin binding, thread, hand sewn

Marie Watt

Blanket Column
2007
Wool blankets, satin binding, paper tags, pins, cedar

Flo Oy Wong

Ai Joong Wah: Great China
2007
Mixed media



"Her First Embroidery Lesson"

1902

Courtesy of the

Library of Congress