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**Employing Handicrafts to Communicate the Course of Trauma:  
A Test in Using Handicrafts as an Explanatory Method**

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**Employing Handicrafts to Communicate the Course of Trauma:  
A Test in Using Handicrafts as an Explanatory Method**

by

**Lisa Anne Willman, B.A.; B. Arch.**

**Report**

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## Dedication

To my grandmother, Doris Reed, for stocking her house with scraps of this and tidbits of that – and allowing me free reign to create with anything I could find.

Also, to the countless victims and survivors who suffer in their search for answers and to those who support them in their journeys.

Everyone has a story. Please listen.

## Acknowledgements

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The faculty and staff at the University of Texas at Austin's Design Division within the Department of Art and Art History. Namely, hearty thanks go out to Dan Olsen, Peter Hall, Kate Catterall, Gloria Lee, and Riley Triggs. This group encouraged me to pursue what began as a vague line of thought by recognizing the emotional intensity behind the cause. Their insights and support have been invaluable.

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To the students of these courses, the Reclaiming Our Voices group at the University's Counseling and Mental Health Center, and others who have shared their stories with me and listened to my own concerns with open ears and hearts.

To Colleen Basler, PT; Deena Goodman, PT; and Sheila Martel, LPC; for sharing their professional expertise and insights on treatment options for trauma victims and suggestions for improving overall quality of life by alleviating physical and emotional distress.

And finally, my words cannot express the gratitude that I owe my family. All that I can say is thank you. For everything.

May 3, 2010

## **Abstract**

### **Employing Handicrafts to Communicate the Course of Trauma: A Test in Using Handicrafts as an Explanatory Method**

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2010

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This report contains discussion of four design projects aimed to investigate the ability of handicrafts to communicate complicated subject matter. In this exploration, handicrafts are used to present the experience of recovering from a traumatic experience by challenging commonly held stereotypes about handicrafts. By breaking the trauma and recovery process into four distinct stages, each stage can be discussed in detail via the corresponding design piece. Consequently, each stage also allows for new opportunities to apply handicraft practices in new ways. Through this line of questioning, the four pieces expand upon the imagery, materiality, subject matter, and formal creation techniques typically used in handicraft projects. This collection adds to a greater body of work that intersects traumatic experiences with art and design and that explores the power of design as a communication tool. It opens the door for further investigation into the application's potential as a teaching tool for trauma victims, nontraditional applications of the craft, its ability to aid in the recovery process, and the potential risk and benefit victims have from such work being done and from creating such pieces themselves.

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## INTRODUCTION

The body of work discussed in this thesis delves into the underbelly of trauma and communicates the distinct views and experiences of victims through handicrafts. The handicrafts are used to provide a medium with which to probe the unique complexities of trauma and trauma victims. When a traumatic event occurs, the level of quality in a person's life often comes crashing down. My method has been to explore means of expressing the experience of a trauma victim in order to provide a potential methodology for recovery through the use of handicrafts, and in doing so, to challenge the expectations of the content of handicrafts.

When I received the acceptance letter to the University of Texas at Austin, I was in the hellish depths of my own traumatic experiences of sexual, emotional, and physical abuse at the hands of a fellow student at my undergraduate university. I will admit that I accepted the offer from Texas because, in addition to its great reputation and impressive curricula, it was also the furthest school away from my abuser that I had been accepted to. I moved to Austin with the intention of putting the past behind me and concentrating my graduate studies on architectural graphics. Throughout the first few assignments that we completed in the program, however, I repeatedly found myself completing the tasks using not architectural graphics, but my faithful pastime of sewing. The professors were intrigued and encouraged me to proceed with my study of the handicrafts.

I believe it was some mixture of being in a new, safe place where I was removed from the everyday threat of trauma and simply having more time to process the events of where I had come from that led me to use my craft projects to reflect on my abusive history, to begin to heal and sort out the details of the events, and to deal with the larger concept of trauma and the experiences of trauma victims. At times therapeutic and at times heart wrenching, this work represents the body of knowledge that I have disseminated on trauma and handicrafts from both academic rigor and personal experience.

One thing I have learned through this process is that, despite how it may have felt at times, I am absolutely not alone in dealing with the things that I have dealt with. According to the National Organization for Women, three women are murdered by an intimate partner every day in the United States. Nearly five million intimate partner-related physical assaults and rapes occur every year. More than 600 women are raped or sexually assaulted every day. In addition to these estimates, the majority of traumatic experiences go undocumented.<sup>1</sup> These numbers, while overwhelming, are just the tip of the iceberg. They do not represent the traumatic experiences of men or children, nor do they include other forms of traumas. While the list of types of traumas is endless, most traumas can generally be classified as fitting into one (or more) of the following categories:

- Community and School Violence
- Complex Trauma
- Domestic Violence
- Early Childhood Trauma
- Medical Trauma

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<sup>1</sup> “Violence Against Women in the United States: Statistics,” National Organization for Women, <http://www.now.org/issues/violence/stats.html>.

- Natural Disasters
- Neglect
- Physical Abuse
- Refugee and War Zone Trauma
- Sexual Abuse
- Terrorism
- Traumatic Grief<sup>2</sup>
- Elder Abuse
- Secondary Trauma<sup>3</sup>

Undoubtedly, there are many people in the world who are dealing with or who have experienced trauma in their lives. This means that there is also a plethora of people who could potentially benefit from learning ways to cope with their experiences and move past them to lead healthy, fulfilling lives. This is one way, and the most traditional way, in which handicrafts can help the trauma victim. In forms of art therapy, the victim gains control over a medium as a means to express his or her personal emotions or the ability to retell a story that may be unfit for words. Therapists often use art therapy as a way to gain valuable information that they can use to help their clients. Art therapy can be beneficial for the victim who is not seeing a therapist as well. Many victims have expressed a feeling of power they get from throwing clay, banging metal, or hammering nails. These are just a few of the many ways that the creation of art can be beneficial to a trauma victim.

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<sup>2</sup> “Types of Traumatic Stress,” The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, [http://www.nctsn.org/nctsn/nav.do?pid=typ\\_main](http://www.nctsn.org/nctsn/nav.do?pid=typ_main).

<sup>3</sup> Center for Trauma Studies, “Types of Trauma – Secondary Trauma,” Regents University, <http://www.regent.edu/acad/schcou/trauma/support/types/secondary.htm>.

The body of work shown here tackles the ideas of art therapy, but it also goes further into the realm of handicrafts and how the craft can be combined with trauma. This practice expands our understanding of handicrafts themselves as well. While dealing with the traumatic experiences that are the subject of these pieces, the pieces in this collection also identify key limitations and restrictive stereotypes of the mediums used and challenge them in carefully constructed ways. Needlecrafts are often thought of as the solitary creation of finely crafted artifacts. These objects are stereotypically perceived as being antiquated in nature, that take a long time to produce, and that are more valuable than mass-produced items. In undertaking a craft project, one assumes total control over the materials and the design of the piece at hand. The finished work generally reflects the imperfections and hand-made quality. In needlecrafts in particular, there is a definite sense that this is a craft form reserved for a certain type of user to create a certain type of piece. The sewer is generally a woman, middle-aged or older, and she is creating a decorative piece of art for her home that has innocent and wholesome imagery. Throughout my studies, I could find no legitimate reason for why these limitations have to be maintained. As you will see, the handicrafts used in this body of work are created in untraditional ways on untraditional mediums and depict untraditional imagery.

This Master's Report will consider four pieces created as a Masters of Fine Arts of Design student. A look at the precedent work that has been done in these fields that has merged trauma and handicrafts will reveal the widely varying and sparse work that has been done on the subject thus far. I will then present four projects, each of which reflects a core stage of trauma: the initial trauma, the realization and vocalization of one's experience, balancing the healing process with ongoing threat or fear, and the delicate recovery process where a victim's experience ceases to be a controlling element in their everyday activities (although the victim may still grapple with memories and triggers in their everyday life). More explanation on these four stages will follow. Each

project will be considered for how it represents and disseminates information of its particular stage of the traumatic experience, how it develops upon the traditional qualities of the craft being used, and what the implications of this particular method of joining handicrafts and trauma can add to the larger body of knowledge. And finally, a conclusion will set up a trajectory for further research opportunities in this field and summarize what can be learned from the four projects shown here.

## A NOTE ON LANGUAGE

Texts on trauma often debate the appropriate terminology to be used for those who have undergone traumatic events.

If the traumatic event led to the person's death, they are typically referred to as a "victim". If the traumatic event did not cause them to die, however, authors often debate on whether it is more appropriate to refer to them as "victims" or "survivors". Those who argue in favor of "victims" claim that it better refers to the intensely negative circumstances that they endured. Those who err on the side of "survivors" speak to its ability to focus on the positive connotations and that the persons have not only made it out alive but are now working to thrive.

Others claim that the two terms fall along a continuum. At the immediate onset of the traumatic event, one becomes a "victim". It is only once the person makes a conscious effort to take control over their healing and recovery process that they become a "survivor."<sup>4</sup>

In this report, I will be using the terms "victim" and "survivor" interchangeably. Please note that this choice is to acknowledge the intensity of the traumatic event, the fact that the person lived to talk about it, and the potential for a positive future ahead.

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<sup>4</sup> "From Victim To Survivor – A Conscious Choice," Soul Expressions Abuse Recovery, <http://www.soul-expressions-abuse-recovery.com/Victim-to-Survivor.html>.

## PRECEDENTS

The application of handicrafts to the discourse on traumatic experiences necessitates gathering insights from the multiple and widely varying areas of psychology, art history, women's studies, material investigations, history, and personal expression. Indeed, the fields of trauma and handicrafts usually fall along disparate trajectories, allowing for new and insightful connections to be made when compared side-by-side.

Art can be therapeutic in structured ways. Handicrafts are often applied in art therapy sessions with counselors (this application is by far the most common connection between handicrafts and trauma) and even in annual awareness-building events such as The Clothesline Project, where survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault decorate t-shirts with reminders of their experiences. The shirts are color-coded according to the particular circumstances of the violence that took place. White represents women who died because of violence; yellow or beige represents battered or assaulted women; red, pink, and orange are for survivors of rape and sexual assault; blue and green represent survivors of incest and sexual abuse; purple and lavender represent women attacked because of their sexual orientation; and black is for women who were attacked for political reasons.<sup>5</sup> The shirts are then hung out to dry in a public space on makeshift clotheslines. The inherent symbolism here represents the airing out of secrets

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<sup>5</sup> "About Clothesline Project T-Shirts," The Clothesline Project, [http://www.clotheslineproject.org/About\\_Shirts.htm](http://www.clotheslineproject.org/About_Shirts.htm).

in the traditionally female-dominated activity of doing laundry. In the days before washing machines and electric clothes-dryers, women often exchanged stories over backyard fences with neighbors while hanging the clothes out to dry.



Figure 1: T-shirts on display at a Clothesline Project installation

Another example of the public voicing of stories that are generally kept hush-hush is The Birth Project, a traveling embroidery exhibition directed by Judy Chicago. Although childbirth is an activity inherent to human life, it is rarely depicted in artwork. Breaking the confines of the traditional imagery shown in embroidered pieces, The Birth Project displays graphic representations of childbirth in gruesome detail. Like some of the stories on the t-shirts in The Clothesline Project, the subject matter is one that deserves to be discussed, yet is disturbing to some viewers. Chicago also designed this exhibit in an effort to bring public awareness to the women-centered view commonly held surrounding embroidery and needle arts. Says Chicago, "Needlework in all its forms was 'women's work,' and as long as I was compelled to deny my identity as

a woman in my life and in my work, I never considered it as a medium for art-making. It would have been humiliating to me if a male artist or dealer discovered me sewing a button on my artist husband's shirt or sitting at the embroidery machine or a loom. It would have confirmed the already taken-for-granted idea that my place in life was either supporting my husband's aspiration or working in the 'minor arts'.<sup>6</sup> In this way, The Birth Project has both brought awareness to an event that typically goes unseen and given legitimacy to a woman-centered craft.



Figure 2: An embroidered piece from The Birth Project exhibition

In most cases of trauma victims who use art as a component of their healing, handicrafts give them an opportunity to express themselves through media. Pen and ink artist Nick Blinko found doodling horrific and highly detailed images to be therapeutic as he fought bouts of schizo-affective disorder. When Blinko refused to take medication for his condition because of its negative side effects, he needed another way

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<sup>6</sup> "Birth Project," Through the Flower, <http://www.throughtheflower.org/page.php?p=12&n=2>.

to calm himself. His images feature infinite microscopic lines that form interconnected faces, characters, and gothic imagery. This artwork gave him an outlet to deal with his psychological condition, yet came with the price of being completely transparent about his diagnosis.<sup>7</sup> In the end, these drawings also landed him a lucrative career drawing album covers for punk rock and heavy metal bands.



**Figure 3: Example of pen and ink work by Nick Blinko**

Illustrator Louis Wain also drew throughout his diagnosis and hospitalization. A prominent newspaper comic illustrator and children’s book artist, Wain specialized in drawing images of cats with human abilities – cats playing golf, cats playing musical

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<sup>7</sup> Rhodes, Colin, “Henry Boxer Gallery presents Nick Blinko,” Henry Boxer Gallery, <http://www.outsideart.co.uk/blinko.htm>.

instruments, even dancing at Christmas parties. After the passing of his wife and mother, which accompanied a slow decline in public interest in his cat drawings, the normally mild-mannered Wain became increasingly more hostile and difficult to understand. He would spend the rest of his life in mental wards, where he continued to draw pictures of his cats. Theories differ regarding his condition. The majority of biographers claim that he suffered from schizophrenia, while others claim basis in toxoplasmosis (a parasitic infection that can be transmitted through cats), Asperger Syndrome, or visual agnosia. The drawings done by Wain while in the hospitals show a slow progression of his mental illness. As his dementia and mental instability worsened, Wain lost the ability to accurately view the world around him. What were once drawings of cute, cuddly kittens, his drawings grew progressively more abstracted, frightening, and aloof of reality. As Wain himself became more suspicious and hostile, his cats adopted menacing and fearful expressions. The cats' bodies became distorted and fragmented. Wain claimed that images of his 'kaleidoscope cats' looked no different from the illustrations he had done during his career as an illustrator.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Cardoso, Silvia Helena, "Cats Painted in the Progression of Psychosis of a Schizophrenic Artist", Neuroscience Art Gallery, [http://www.cerebromente.org.br/gallery/gall\\_leonardo/fig1-a.htm](http://www.cerebromente.org.br/gallery/gall_leonardo/fig1-a.htm).



**Figure 4: Example of early cat drawing by Louis Wain**



**Figure 5: Example of Louis Wain's cat drawings during his psychotic period**

In the wake of the religious compound standoff in Waco, Texas, in 1993, Dr. Bruce Perry exemplified yet another way that art could be of assistance in trauma therapy.

The child trauma specialist assigned to work with the 21 children who had been released from David Koresh's compound, Perry quickly learned that the children had been ingrained with a distrust for outsiders and were severely reluctant to speak to him. Through crayon drawings, Perry asked the children to illustrate how they thought their family members still remaining within the compound were spending their time. The result: every single one of the children, in separate sessions, drew images of the compound engulfed in flames with their families rising up to heaven with David Koresh. When Perry asked one child, Jaunessa, what the image represented, she answered simply, "You'll find out." The event that the children had drawn was a planned event that had been well-rehearsed within the compound in the event that their religious settlement would be challenged or in the case of Jesus Christ returning to Earth.<sup>9</sup> However, the event was one that had not yet taken place. Perry was able to warn the FBI of the impending disaster. Here, the artwork was used as a tool to gain trust and break down communication barriers during a trauma.

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<sup>9</sup> Ross, Rick, "The Children of Waco: 1993 Siege Survivors Grapple with Parents' Deaths", ABC News, <http://www.rickross.com/reference/waco/waco315.html>.



**Figure 6: Waco children being escorted from the compound**

It seems that art, and handicrafts in particular, lends itself well to the concealment and revealing of secret messages. As in Perry's therapeutic approach with the children-victims, the piece Dirt Poster by Roland Reiner Tiangco also has an underlying message to tell. The paper has a key sentence written in clear varnish on one side, while the reverse side is covered in layers of sooty dirt. Tiangco's objective is for the handler to rub the dirt off of the backside of the paper and onto their hands and then transfer the dirt onto the front side where it adheres to the varnish. When enough dirt has been applied, the poster reveals the phrase "THE FUTURE BELONGS TO THE FEW OF US STILL WILLING TO GET OUR HANDS DIRTY".<sup>10</sup> In dealing with trauma victims, each victim will have an underlying story to tell. However, in order for that story to reveal itself or to be told, the victim will typically have to deal with the mess and discomfort that comes along with it. The process of uncovering that story often takes much emotional work and strength.

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<sup>10</sup> Roth Eisenberg, Tina, "Dirt-Poster", Swiss Miss Studio, <http://www.swiss-miss.com/2009/12/dirt-poster.html>.



Figure 7: "Dirt Poster" by Roland Reiner Tiangco

In another example of encoded messages, historians have debated at great length the interpretation of secret messages encoded in the quilts that were exchanged along the route of the Underground Railroad before the abolition of slavery. As it was illegal for slaves to read or write, southern slaves relied on codified ways of communication. They developed elaborate phrases, songs, dances, and so forth to pass along messages that would escape the attention of their owners or other white persons. Along the Underground Railroad, quilts were hung out to dry over fences or along clotheslines that revealed directions for slaves attempting to find safety up north. The patterns of the patchwork blocks each represented a short phrase (e.g., 'man in canoe'), which, when strung together,

would provide the escapee with directions to safety (e.g., ‘Go out’ ‘when the moon is in the sky.’ ‘Follow the North Star’ ‘to water’ where you will find ‘a man in a canoe.’). Some individual blocks carried more elaborate translations. For example, the block “Drunkard’s Path” signaled the escapee to follow a rambling route so as to make him or herself harder to find. Walking south, if even for a little while, was also used to trick slave hunters. As an interesting side note, the quilt block concept came from the tradition of quilting in Africa, which the slaves brought with them to America. In Africa, however, quilting was done primarily by men. It wasn’t until the slaves reached North America that women took over the pastime.<sup>11</sup> In this example, the crafted quilts are used to avert the potential trauma of being captured and returned to slavery.



**Figure 8: Emancipation-era quilt made of coded quilt blocks**

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<sup>11</sup> “Underground Railroad Quilt Code,” Owen Sound’s Black History, <http://www.osblackhistory.com/quilts.php>.

The common thread of the artwork mentioned thus far is that each case is far removed from the delicate, demure pastime qualities generally afforded the traditional, subservient crafter. Each in its own way breaks certain stereotypes associated with the medium or method being used. A designer who has changed the ways that we look at handicrafts is Hella Jongerius, whose rigorous materials and handicrafts studies are manifest in projects such as the design of ceramic dinnerware. By punching holes in or placing intricate statues in the middle of a dinnerplate, Jongerius catches the user off-guard and makes them rethink their approach to how to use the product. The craft of each of her pieces is a deliberate attempt to break the rules.



**Figure 9: One of Hella Jongerius's dinnerplate experiments**

The Subversive Cross-Stitch Company also prides itself on breaking with tradition. Says owner Julie Jackson, “Subversive Cross Stitch began in the spring of 2003 as a form of

anger management therapy when I was dealing with a mean...boss.”<sup>12</sup> In the company’s cross-stitch patterns and books, it bends the rules of traditional samplers and border designs in cross-stitch to reveal profanity, pornography, and other morally questionable content where one would expect to see stitched “Home Sweet Home” or “Bless this House”. Subversive also combats the realm of a woman-centered hobby by giving the demure act of cross-stitch a rebellious voice. While the creators of these pieces may still be predominantly women, Subversive is giving them new material with which to work and express themselves freely.



Figure 10: Subversive Cross Stitch’s “Go Fuck Yourself” kit

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<sup>12</sup> Jackson, Julie, “Subversive Cross Stitch: Info”, Subversive Cross Stitch, <http://www.subversivecrossstitch.com/info.htm#etsy>.

In New York City, one group of such crafters who were tired of being limited to cutesy patterns and creations hit the streets with their work. The Guerilla Knitters practice their knitting by decorating street signs, statues, public icons, street poles, and the like in the dark of night. They've labeled their urban knitting endeavor as "the world's most inoffensive graffiti". While the Subversive Cross-Stitch Company's aim is to be offensive and rambunctious, the Guerilla Knitters remain family-friendly.



Figure 11: Examples of the Guerilla Knitters' tree graffiti

Other crafters who are searching for ways to practice crafts in non-traditional ways are gaining literary support via books such as Ellen Lupton's D.I.Y., where she instructs readers on how to make a vast array of items so that they will no longer have to rely on others, and

Stitch 'N Bitch Nation, a collection of knitting and sewing patterns for alternative pieces. The idea of both of these books is one of self-empowerment and self-reliance. No longer will readers of these texts be limited to the traditional confines of their medium. Both books provide the reader with ample ideas for expressing him or herself as they wish – a concept that is endlessly important in using handicrafts with trauma victims.

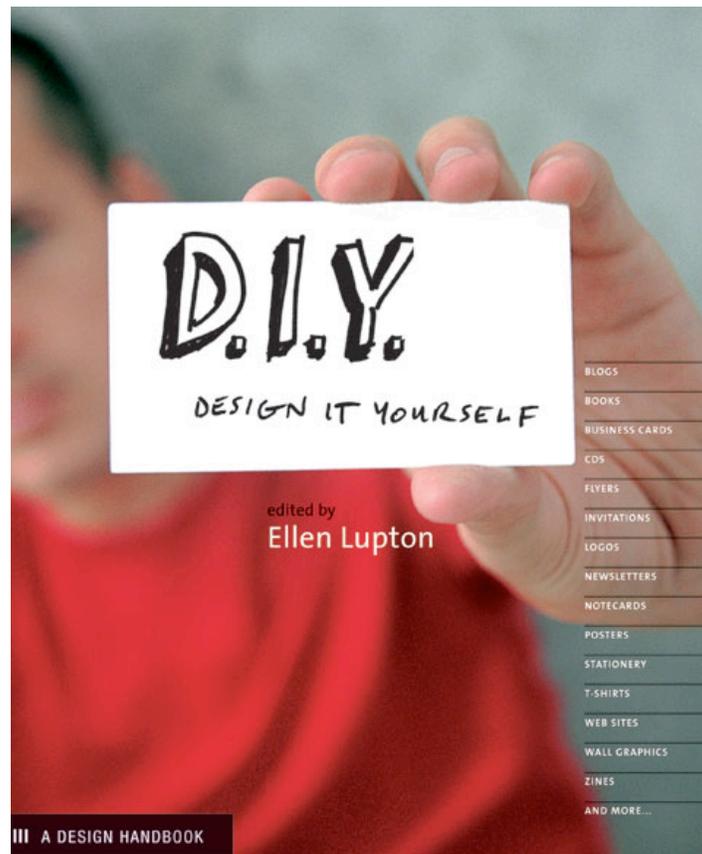
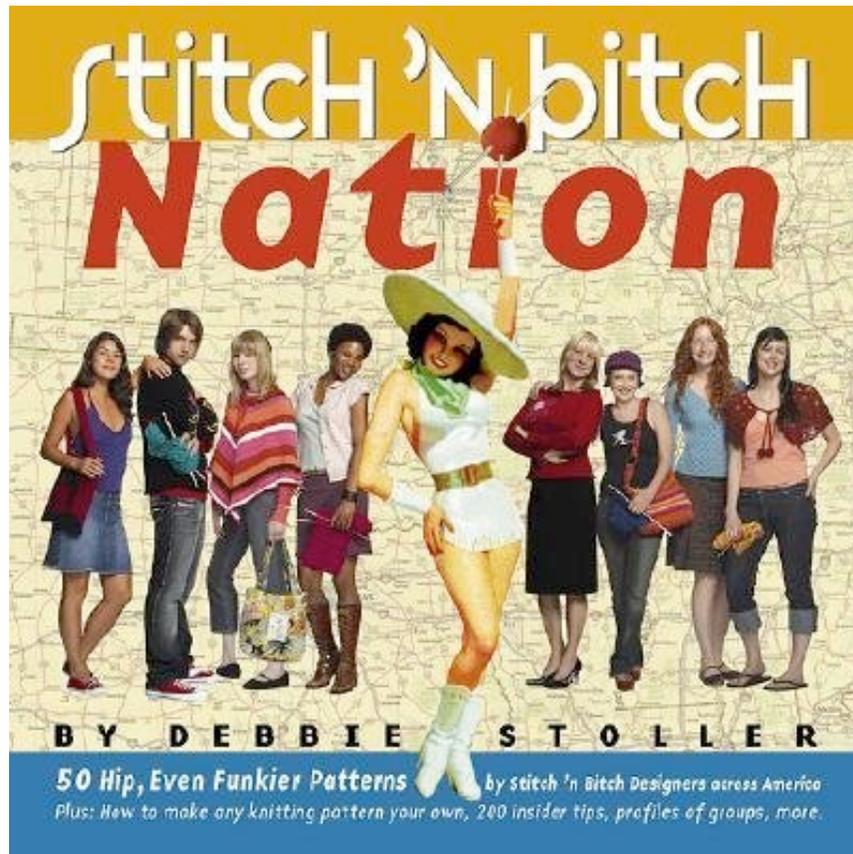


Figure 12: *D.I.Y.* front cover



**Figure 13: *Stitch 'N Bitch Nation* front cover**

Once persons have survived whatever traumatic event(s) have haunted their lives and they have been given the insight and precedent examples of how to express themselves using handicraft mediums, there are limitless possibilities as to what can be created. Like Seet Van Haut's "Embroidered Diary", they may choose to use a handicraft to illustrate their own personal story, a way to document the events of their trauma and post-trauma experiences. They may use it as a way to raise public awareness about a societal problem, as in the t-shirts of The Clothesline Project. They may use handicrafts as a form of self-empowerment by gaining a sense of self-control by controlling the medium with which they're working. They may bring the intense energy of their traumatic experiences into the

handicraft to give the medium a sense of rare power, as did Chiharu Shiota in “Trauma/Altag”.



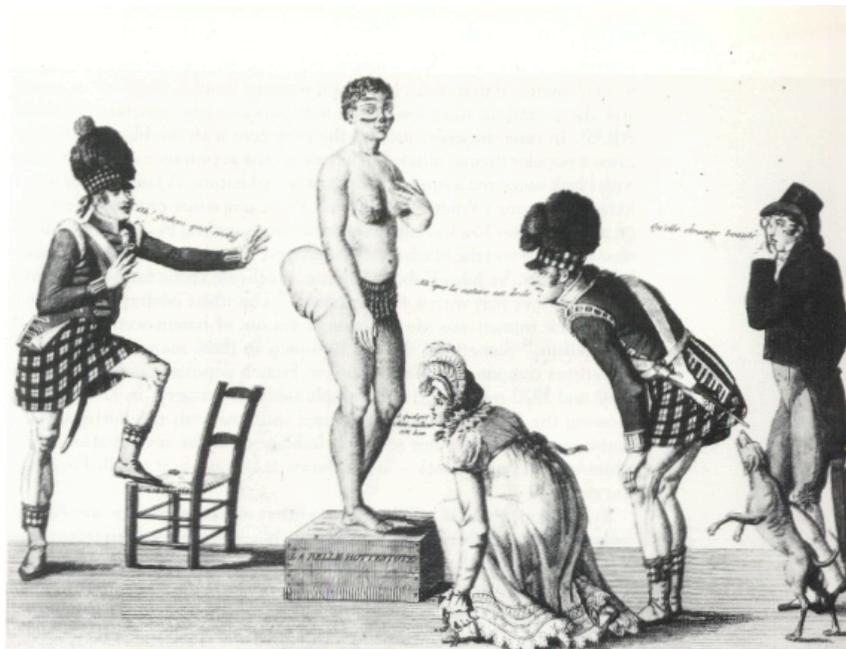
**Figure 14: A page from Seet Van Haut's "Embroidered Diary"**



**Figure 15: A piece from Chiharu Shiota's "Traum/Altag" collection**

So far, we have considered several works that have shown how handicrafts and art can be used to benefit trauma victims. Any comprehensive analysis of these two fields, however, must also take into account how art can be used for maleficent purposes. Take, for example, the case of Sarah Baartman, a.k.a. "The Hottentot Venus", one of the rarest overlaps that exists between the studies of trauma and art. A Khoisian African woman who suffered from staetopygia, a medical condition common among the women of her village, which caused her to develop unusually large buttocks and elongated labia. Sarah was captured and exhibited around Europe as a freak show side attraction. In nineteenth century Europe, it was indeed common to display non-white persons as public spectacles in circuses, zoos, and museums. Her body was the constant source of invasive inquiry and

artists abound flocked to capture her anatomy in their drawings and paintings. According to her peers, Baartman was an intelligent, learned woman who was genuinely kind and spoke fluent Dutch. After public interest died down, Baartman, unable to return to Africa with no money or ability to speak the local language, turned to prostitution and alcohol. When she died of syphilis, her body was put on display at Paris' Musée de l'Homme. In the face of public scrutiny, the body was returned to Africa, but not before the museum keepers had made wax molds of her genitalia. The molds remained on display until President Nelson Mandela formally requested that the exhibit be extinguished.<sup>13</sup> In the life of Sarah Baartman, it was art that traumatized an otherwise well-adjusted individual.



**Figure 16: “The Hottentot Venus”, drawing depicting people ogling Baartman’s body**

The potential herein lies for traumatic experiences to be communicated in powerful and therapeutic ways that aid mental stability, create awareness of societal unrest, create a

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<sup>13</sup> Thompson, Krista, “Exhibiting ‘Others’ in the West”, Human Exhibition, <http://english.emory.edu/Bahri/Exhibition.html>.

record of personal experiences, and that expand upon the confines of the medium. By bringing together the rarely coupled fields of trauma and handicrafts, we as researchers, designers, artists, and therapists have much to learn. Let these examples serve as merely a cursory introduction to the many ways in which the two fields can overlap and let us look forward to realizing countless more in the years to come.

## **BREAKDOWN OF TRAUMA STAGES**

Authors and therapists Ellen Bass and Laura Davis, in their classic text *The Courage to Heal*, present readers with a series of no less than fourteen stages that a victim goes through during the healing process. While their model was designed specifically in response to their central focus on helping victims of childhood sexual abuse, the stages in the system are relevant to victims of almost all types of traumatic experience. Their stages, adapted linguistically to fit traumatic events in general, are as follows:

1. The Decision to Heal
2. The Emergency Stage
3. Remembering
4. Believing it Happened
5. Breaking Silence
6. Understanding That It Wasn't Your Fault
7. Making Contact With the Child Within
8. Trusting Oneself
9. Grieving and Mourning
10. Anger – The Backbone of Healing
11. Disclosures and Confrontations

12. Forgiveness

13. Spirituality

14. Resolution and Moving On<sup>14</sup>

For this Master's Report, I have created my own series of trauma stages which groups together the stages outlined in the Bass and Davis model into four unique stages. These four stages will then be used to test the methodology of handicrafts as a communication tool. Each investigation correlates to one of the four stages. Investigating the methodology in four distinct settings allows for greater insight on its applicability to other subject matter.

The first stage, The Heart of the Traumatic Experience, is not covered in the Bass and Davis model. Their series of stages represents how the victim "heals" from the trauma; the first stage as I have defined it, however, is the traumatic event itself. As this event is tantamount to the entire discussion of trauma and sets the tone for the future healing process, it is necessary to acknowledge it as its own stage.

The second stage, Sorting Through the Rubble, reflects stages one through five of the Bass and Davis model. It incorporates the victim's process of recognizing what has taken place, learning how to acknowledge its reality and the consequences it has had in one's life, and learning how to verbalize this tale to others.

The third stage, Balancing Therapy and Safety Needs, can incorporate any number of Ellen and Bass's stages six through twelve. During this stage, the victim will be undergoing the crux of their time in therapy or self-directed healing process, through which they may confront the realities of the intensity of their traumatic past. This process can look very different for different people, but tends to be highly emotionally intense.

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<sup>14</sup> Ellen Bass and Laura Davis, *The Courage to Heal* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).

The fourth stage, Healing and Maintenance, correlates with Ellen and Bass's stages thirteen and fourteen. In this stage, the heaviest emotional work has already taken place and now the victim regains a sense of calm and resolution.

Whichever model is followed, it is most important to realize that, as every individual is unique, each individual's healing process will be unique to them and their situation. In general, persons recovering from particular sub-groups of trauma may follow similar trajectories, but still no two recovery processes will be identical. In working with trauma victims, it is incredibly important to recognize their unique set of circumstances and to work with them to develop a recovery process that works for them. Whether or not their process reflects a standard discipline of trauma recovery is of secondary importance. Please read on for more in-depth descriptions of the four stages that will be addressed in this body of work.

## STAGE ONE EXPERIMENT

### *The Heart of the Traumatic Experience*

“I was part of the American invasion of El Salvador when I had my first kill. I had a defending peasant in my rifle sights, but I didn’t want to pull the trigger on an impoverished farmer. He was fearfully protecting his home. Meanwhile, the sergeant screamed in my ear, ‘Shoot, shoot, kill the bastard or I’ll have you court-martialed!’ I pulled the trigger. As I vomited and cried, Sarge slapped me on the back and said, ‘Don’t worry. The first one is always the hardest. It’ll never be so hard again.’ He was wrong.”

- war veteran with PTSD<sup>15</sup>

The first stage of a traumatic experience is the initial trauma itself. This is the event or series of events that initiates the entire course of the trauma and its subsequent emotional and physical hardships and eventual recovery process. In this stage, the victim is often blindsided by something they ‘never saw coming’. Whether an attacker, illness, loss of a loved one, or other tragic experience, the victim is generally caught off guard by something that is out of their control. The victim may rationalize that they were capable of doing something to control the tragedy, but that they failed to do so. The very nature of a

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<sup>15</sup> Tick, Edward, *War and the Soul: Healing our Nation’s Veterans from Post-traumatic Stress Disorder* (Wheaton, IL: Quest, 2005).

trauma, however, denotes that at that particular point in time the victim was unable to react in a way to stop the trauma from taking place. Perhaps they were too confused or overwhelmed by the event to be able to think straight, perhaps they didn't know that they had resources available to them that would enable them to fight back, perhaps things were happening too quickly (or slowly) to be able to be processed correctly, or perhaps their mind and body got caught up in the classic fight-or-flight dilemma and neither knew what to react to first or how. The experience is traumatic for the victim because of this inherent lack of control over what's going on around them. The exact details of the initial trauma are relatively unimportant. It is far more informative to gauge how the person reacted both physically and psychologically to the trauma than it is to learn the details of the trauma itself.

Since the first stage of the trauma experience is the initial traumatic experience itself, the first design piece had the task of illustrating the impact of being within that traumatic experience in the here and now. It needed to convey a sense of overwhelm, a lack of control, and a certain amount of fear.

For this project, my first inclination was to create it in cross-stitch, a medium that I had much experience with and with which I was comfortable. However, the concept of a piece being extremely impactful doesn't fall in line with typical cross-stitch designs. Most designs that are available in cross-stitch kits and books show idealized or cartoonified creatures and scenery. The level of detail within the image is dependent upon the level of difficulty the pattern is advertised at. At any level, however, the colors (which naturally vary throughout an image based on depth, light, and shadow) are simplified into larger blocks of uniform color. This tactic is based not just on simplicity, but also the practical limitation that embroidery threads only come in a limited number of shades. The result is that as the number of colors diminishes, the intensity of the image is also simplified and dulled down. The pattern may take short cuts to increase the level of intricacy by using outline stitches,

French knots, or including an airbrushed background already painted onto the even-weave cloth.

In order for this piece to have the most impact, it would be necessary to use both intense imagery and high detail definition. I began by searching for an image that depicted someone in the midst of experiencing a traumatic event, and one that also had a sense of intensity to it.

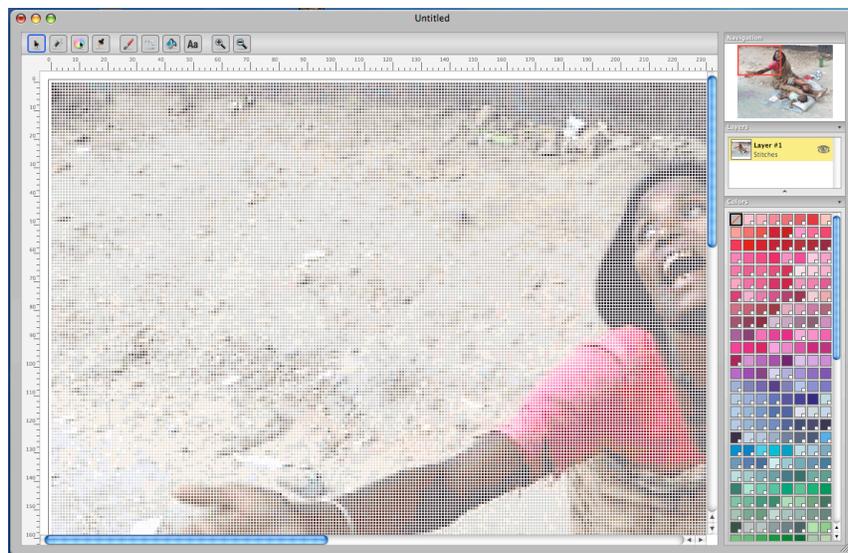


**Figure 17: Base photograph to be used in test for Stage One**

This image was selected because it shows a woman who seems desperate for assistance. The source photograph selected as the base image for this project shows a woman in a traumatic situation. From what can be interpreted from the photo, it looks as if she is a beggar living on the side of the road with two small children. Their belongings are inadequate, and she is looking for handouts from passers-by. A fear of being able to provide for one's children can easily be deemed a traumatic experience. This photograph fulfilled the first step of my investigation: to use handicrafts to portray an unexpected,

disturbing subject. The next step was to find a way to create the piece using unexpected materials and processes.

In order to stitch this image as photo-realistically as possible, I would need to create a pattern using the colors of the original pixels from the photograph. This photograph has 205,785 pixels within it and approximately 15,000 different colors. DMC, the leading manufacturer of embroidery floss, only produces (at the time of this publication) 600 individual thread colors. Therefore, any image I cross-stitched of this photograph would automatically be dulled down by 1/30. Using a computer pattern-making program called Stitches, I made a pattern of the photograph using 576 individual colors of pixels. Because the size of a standard cross-stitch on even-weave cloth is much greater than the average size of an individual pixels in a photograph, the finish dimensions of the cross-stitched piece would be approximately four feet wide by three feet tall, whereas the photograph itself was only 5"x7".



**Figure 18: Pattern being made of photograph using Stitches software**

Knowing from experience that it takes me approximately fifteen minutes to complete one strand of thread, to create the entire 3'x4' piece would take well over a year to finish.

That simply wasn't feasible given the time constraints of the project. This situation opened up doors to focus in on another design component – the art of cropping.



**Figure 19: The printed pattern to be used for the cross-stitch piece**

Cropping is commonly used as a reparative tool to eliminate distracting background elements, improve the framing of the subject of interest, standardize the dimensions of the finished image, or to help balance an unbalanced image. It is most commonly used in photography, but the skill of cropping can be used in a variety of mediums. As we've already discussed, for example, cross-stitch patterns typically crop the color differentiation in their pieces. Another way that cross-stitch lends itself to cropping is that, in cropping a photograph one typically cuts off rectangular prisms of content. In cross-stitch, you can also eliminate individual stitches. The resultant effect is more staggered and less rigid than traditional block cropping.

Cropping is also something that we practice internally, especially in the face of a trauma. Integrated Body Psychotherapy is a field of study that practices physical therapy

exercises for improving or repairing the mind-body interaction. Highly interconnected, the body controls the mind just as much as the mind controls the body. Trauma that is imposed on either of these areas (either physical or psychological) can be incredibly influential not just locally, but to the other realm as well. For example, when the body undergoes extreme amounts of physical pain (e.g., after a car accident), the brain will release pleasure-inducing hormones and chemical to ease the physical pain. It is essentially removing (or *cropping*) the physical pain from the victim's conscious awareness. In this way, the mind is used to reduce the extreme impact of the physical condition so that the body can do what it needs to do to survive.

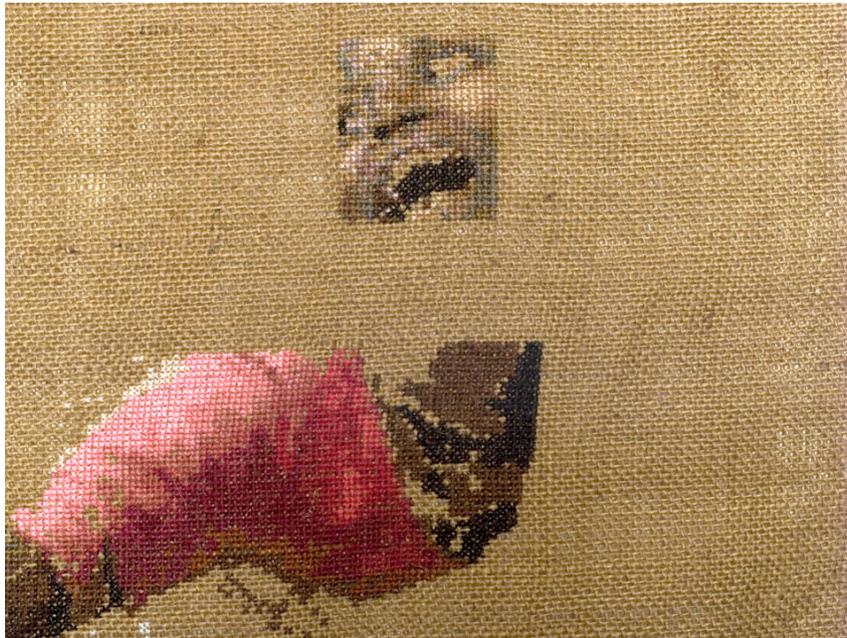
In the cross-stitch piece of the beggar woman, I experimented with different levels of cropping the original image. The preferred method was to eliminate any material that didn't help convey an impression of 'desperation' – how I had labeled the overall emotion the woman in the photograph seemed to have. Eliminating ephemeral components of the photograph like the empty pop bottle were easy, but decisions about whether to keep her children in the photo (or both or just one) were more complicated, as any decision could potentially change the interpretation of the piece. If she was shown without any children, for example, she might just look like she wanted money, which some may interpret as her being greedy. If she were shown with two children, then it would be clear that she was looking for handouts to help her children. The child that seems to be lying peacefully appears better off than the child who is shielding himself from the camera. A final decision was made to only include the older child, because it furthered the argument for desperation, signified that the woman needed money for her children, and his positioning (hiding himself from view) made him appear more desperate and helpless than the other child.

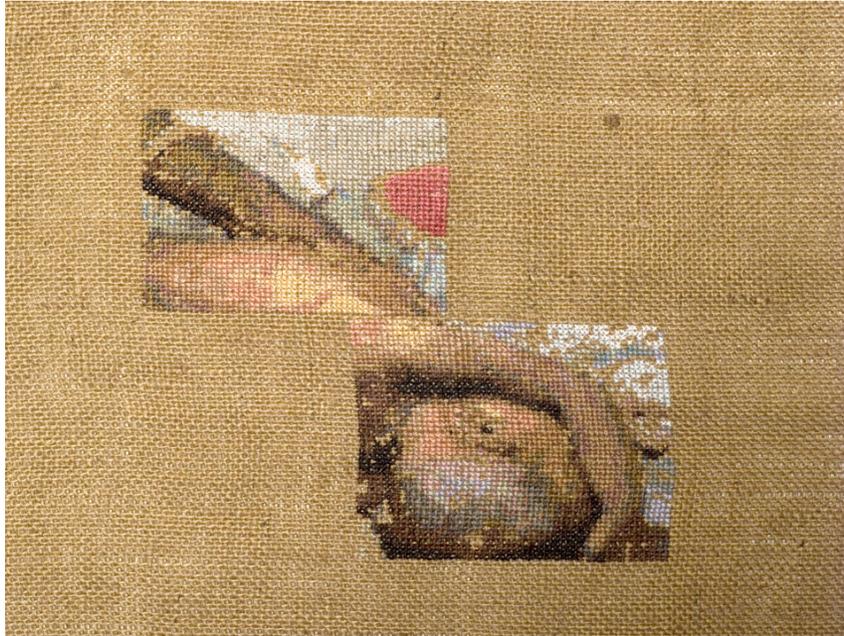
This cropping of irrelevant information was necessary to let the final design communicate and accomplish the message that it needed to. It also challenges the assumption that handicrafts pieces need to strive for completion or perfection.

The piece was sewn onto rough burlap, mimicking the woman's dress and reflecting the dirty, rough circumstances in which she and her family live. The act of sewing onto burlap was a challenge in itself. The more one handles burlap, the drier and more irritated one's skin becomes. It works much in the same way that handling fiberglass insulation irritates human skin. The skin becomes very dry and itchy. In order to handle the fabric for the extended period of time necessary to make this piece, I sewed sitting down, covered in blankets, then placed an old towel on top of the blankets, and at times wore gloves. The experience of sewing in this manner is quite distant from the comfortable act of sewing, as most needlepoint artists do their work on couches, in rocking chairs, or other soft and relaxing environments.

The fragmented result reflects the memories that trauma victims often have of their traumatic experience. When looking back on the event or series of events that traumatized them, victims will often remember only minute bits and pieces of what took place. As they continue through the following stages, they will begin to reassemble these fragmented pieces of their memories in their quest for emotional stability.







**Figures 20-24: Images of the finished piece**

## STAGE TWO EXPERIMENT

### *Sorting Through the Rubble*

When the truth came to me,  
slipped into my house in its white  
robes, its face open as my face,  
its heart obvious and trusting,  
I stood calmly in the front hall  
and did not move to bar the door.

When the truth laid its cool hand  
on my sleeve and said,  
*Come with me, it's time*, I went  
quietly. She led me into the past,  
through the backyards I once  
knew, bedrooms and kitchens;  
we sat in my father's car and talked.

I was shivering in my thin skin  
and crying readily by this time: terrified,  
furious. She offered her own consolation—

no false pats on the hand and no shoulder  
to lean on, I had to learn to stand upright  
or bend on my own. In her clear voice  
the truth offered all she has to give us:  
Herself, and the stern comfort  
of belonging to this world.

- "Surrender" by Molly Fisk<sup>16</sup>

After the initial trauma has run its course (this can take anywhere from seconds up to a year or more, depending on the circumstances), the victim will be faced with the task of making sense out of what has happened. Many victims will not be ready for this sort of reflection for quite some time after the initial trauma. They may initially try to deal with the onslaught of emotions by adopting other control-based behaviors such as hoarding, numbing behaviors such as drug or alcohol addiction, or trying to pretend that nothing out of the ordinary has taken place.

Eventually the trauma will catch up to them, however, and they will then have to sort through the pieces. The victim may be initially at a loss for words for how to describe the event or their emotional state. They may struggle to remember the details of the event, especially if it was a particularly traumatic experience that has largely been blocked from memory or if the trauma was long and drawn-out with many complicated twists and turns along the way. They may struggle to communicate the details of their experience when it comes time to share with friends, family, doctors, or legal aides.

For many victims, the intensity of their traumatic experience may be too great to bear consciously. In fact, many completely block out the memories of their abuse from conscious memory, only to have components of the trauma resurface decades later. This

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<sup>16</sup> Ellen Bass and Laura Davis, *The Courage to Heal* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).

process will often take place after the victim is in a safe environment and feels secure enough to begin to look at some of these issues. They may begin to wonder what happened to them based on irrational behaviors that they exhibit presently. They may learn of their trauma through the stories of others. Whatever serves as the impetus for remembering one's trauma, the history generally resurfaces in a fragmented style. They may remember obscure, less-threatening details before they remember the big picture of what took place. For example, a victim may remember watching a tire roll down the road before they remember the horrific car accident that they were in where their body was thrown from the vehicle.

When the victim begins to speak about the incident, it tends to come out in layers. One day, he or she may remember a certain amount of information. Later, they may add to that information or clarify it based on other components that they now remember. The nature of remembering one's trauma in layers often causes outsiders to doubt what they're saying. It sounds as though they are making up the story as they go along. This can often cause trouble with police investigations of a crime that took place.

This piece represents the struggle to sort through the experience that the victim undergoes at this time. It is a mixed-media piece that evolved by altering a hooded sweatshirt. A hooded sweatshirt was selected because it offers the wearer a sense of comfort. Sweatshirts are typically soft, baggy, comfortable, and, those with hoods especially, allow the wearer to hide from the outside world. In this piece, however, the sanctity of the comfortable sweatshirt is starting to break down and leak the story of the trauma. Similarly, it may feel most comfortable for the victim to keep his or her story to himself. It can be very frightening to share such intimate details with others and to wonder how they will react or what they will think of you as a result of knowing the story. There will come a time, however when the victim will start leaking bits and pieces of their story, which is what is depicted in this sweatshirt.

On the inside of the sweatshirt are snippets – single words – taken from the wearer’s traumatic experience. The words were applied to the jacket using black acrylic paint and rubber stamps. The font is ragged and raw, and the paint bleeds the letters together. In order to convey the sense of overwhelm and confusion, the words and phrases are written without any punctuation or spaces between the letters. The letters are applied somewhat haphazardly, with little attention given to maintain straight lines or the like. Significant words like “sex” and “hurt” are highlighted (embroidered around their edges in orange embroidery floss) to give the viewer the most basic glimpse into the trauma that took place.



**Image 25: The front flap peeled back to reveal the scrambled text of the back interior**

On the exterior of the jacket, the words are beginning to work their way through the seams to the outside. This is representative of the point at which the victim begins to communicate their experience with the outside world. While some may begin to own their experience and speak openly about it, many more will face this stage with reluctance and fear over how others may react to their story. They may even begin to elicit clues to their past without consciously deciding yet to speak out. Some may, for example, unwittingly shy away from those who remind them of the person that broke into their house or

mugged them on the street. The knee-jerk reaction to something that poses no real threat is a clue that there is more under the surface than meets the eye.

Each of these methods walks the fine line between exposure and clarity. While enough information is written on the jacket for the viewer to discern the victim's story, the way that those words are presented makes it difficult and frustrating to read. There is a manipulation of the text via its modes of presentation that screens the exposed information to make it unclear. The ways in which text and imagery can be obscured is infinite. Common methods include blurring an image, deleting key bits of information, using filters or screens that distort the imagery, and so on.

For survivors, releasing information is a very delicate process. Depending on the nature of their traumatic experience, they must take into consideration the potential for further harm or victimization as a result of releasing the details of their story. (This component will be discussed further in the investigation for the third stage.)

The breast of the jacket is embedded with a plastic mesh to represent a hardening of the heart and emotions, especially towards others. As the victim begins to face the reality of their past, they often will feel a striking disconnect with their peers. They come to realize that what happened to them was not the norm for others, and they fear that others will not be able to understand their experience or their resultant emotions. At this stage, it is much easier for the victim to block out others than to connect. Trust can become a very troubling concept. The face stitched atop this area has an X over the mouth, denoting the sensed need to remain silent about one's story.



**Image 26: Close-up detail of the cross-stitched face on temporary cloth**

The same process that was used in creating the pattern for the burlap cross-stitch of the homeless woman was applied here. In this instance, I took a photograph of myself and uploaded that photograph into the Stitches pattern-making program. The face I stitched is at ‘true resolution’, or one color of thread for each color of pixel in the photograph. The result is a highly photorealistic cross-stitched image. The clarity of the image becomes greater when viewed from a distance, as the human mind automatically fills in the blanks and bridges the gaps between the colors seen in the image. Because the sweatshirt fleece that the shirt was made out of is not an even-weave cloth, I stitched through the sweatshirt and a piece of even-weave removable fabric. Once the piece is stitched in place, the individual strands of the fabric can be pulled through the stitches and disposed of, leaving just the cross-stitch on the sweatshirt.

Stamping an X over the mouth of the face goes directly against the notion of handicrafts being ‘perfect’ or ‘delicate’. They are generally thought to be revered and handled with care. To damage a piece of handwork such as by painting over the top of a carefully-stitched artifact is to reverse one’s thinking about how to treat handicrafts in

general. In this case, painting the X over the mouth of the cross-stitched face did not diminish the quality of the piece, but instead added another layer of symbolism to the finished work.

The inside of the jacket is lined in black to denote the darkness in which the wearer is immersed. The sleeves are tattered and the jacket's zipper is broken. The protective outer layer is beginning to wear away to reveal the horrifying truth that lies underneath. At the bottom of the inside of the jacket is a key phrase that reads "Speak Out. Speak Now." The edge of the hood includes the key phrase that reminds viewers "Everyone has a story. Please listen."





**Images 27 and 28: Photographs of the finished sweatshirt on display**

## **STAGE THREE EXPERIMENT**

### ***Balancing Therapy and Safety Needs***

“I am drawing my mom. My mom died. She loved me and my sister so much that she wanted to take us with her... She shot me and she shot my sister and I peeked and saw my mom shoot herself. I felt really sad... My mom and my sister turned into ashes and now they are in heaven... I’m drawing my bed and that’s me and that’s my mom. I’m not going to draw the gun because I don’t know what it looks like. That’s my sister and she got shot.”

- Julie, age 4<sup>17</sup>

As this quote depicts, the power of art that is made based on trauma can be extremely powerful, personal, and a therapeutic way of communicating one’s story. While the artist in this example was just a child, there is great potential for adults to create pieces based on their own traumas. As adults, we often have a wider range of mediums and skill sets to tap into when creating such pieces. The project for this stage will aid a victim in the creation of such work.

Once the victim has begun to come to terms with their experience, they will inevitably ask themselves at some point what they’re supposed to do next. How does one get over a

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<sup>17</sup> Carey, Lois J., *Expressive and Creative Arts Methods for Trauma Survivors* (Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2006), 119.

trauma? How does one channel the emotional energy (anger, fear, betrayal, etc.) into something productive? How can one regain control over their experience and stop allowing this emotional energy to control their everyday actions?

These are all legitimate questions and the answers to them will be different for every person in every particular circumstance. The healthiest ways to deal with one's experiences do not cause harm to oneself or others. Traditional methods that people employ include seeking a therapist or counselor, anti-anxiety or anti-depressant medications, support from loved ones, keeping a journal, destroying mementos that remind them of the experience, and reaching out to others who can relate to their experiences.



**Image 29: The workbook as hidden inside the modified sweater**

The project for this stage aims to provide victims with another tool to cope with their traumatic pasts. Much like in how the sweatshirt piece for Stage Two dealt with the creation of a piece that reflected one's emotional state, this project will walk victims through constructive ways to channel their experiences into a creative work that represents their story and their personal struggle. While some victims may seek solace in painting or sculpting, most will not turn to these methods of coping unless they have previous experience in art and consider themselves skilled in these areas. This project is a step-by-step guide for those who would not traditionally feel comfortable using art as a means of self-expression.

The basic piece shown here is a workbook that takes the victim through steps of defining their personal goals of completing such a project, recognizing how the trauma has impacted their life and health, considering the techniques used in precedent trauma-based art projects, assessing the amount of information that is safe for them to present in the piece, learning how to select a medium, how to select a target audience and mode for presenting one's creation, etc. Each chapter of the workbook is interactive, inviting the victim to play an active role in the process.

For most trauma victims, especially those who were victims of interpersonal violence, they must continue to consider their personal safety, even after the initial trauma is over. Revealing intimate details of one's experience could become problematic if that information got into the wrong hands.

Examples of the personal and professional ramifications of going public with one's story in published accounts of personal trauma. The inclusion of personal anecdotes (such as the quotes included at the beginning of the discussion of each stage of trauma in this report) allow the reader to more easily acquiesce a more detailed perspective of what violence is like through the eyes of the victim, his or her loved ones and, in some cases, even the perpetrator. For this reason, detailed personal narratives are excellent tools for the

researchers, counselor, and reader. However, one must understand that the writing of these stories often comes with a price. By going public with their stories, victims are often putting themselves at risk. In order to minimize this potential risk, victims who choose to write their stories weigh carefully any foreseen consequences against the potential for therapeutic relief. The more public the method of sharing one's story, coupled with the greatest amount of self-disclosure, the greater both the potential risks and benefits to the victim/author.

The workbook and all other materials designed for this project are intentionally made to be easily concealed in the user's home. The workbook is stored away inside a sweater whose edges have been sewn to create a pocket. The sweater was selected for its thickness, density, and high neck – all of which allow for better concealment both visually and via touch. Other sweaters on the market feature open-knit patterns and low necklines that would easily reveal portions of the workbook.

The book is printed on thin cotton with a staggered, ripped edge. This was done using a process of ripping sheets of bleached muslin into standard letter-sized pieces, spraying them lightly with adhesive, and sealing the adhered side to a sheet of paper. The paper/fabric sheets were then run through a standard laser printer. Once the ink was dry, the paper was peeled off from the fabric. By printing the book onto fabric, if an intruder, especially someone who played a part in the initial trauma, were to search through the victim's dresser drawers, they would be unlikely to find this book and the important information written inside. When rifling through the clothes in the drawer, the book feels like just another piece of fabric.

The workbook also invites the victim to keep a journal throughout the recovery process. The pages of this journal come in three standard book page sizes and are in hard-back form so that the user can apply an existing dust jacket cover to the new book so that it will blend in seamlessly on their bookcase. The pages of each size are printed on regular copy paper and perfect bound, then fit with solid-colored hardback covers. By providing these blank

books at three standard sizes, they can be applied just as easily to a reader of romance novels as they can to the bookcase of someone who prefers textbook-sized literature.

In designing artifacts or systems for trauma victims, it is important to remind oneself that anyone can be a victim. As a user group, victims have few if any unifying details. Traumatic experiences do not play favorites, and members of every age, social, racial, and demographic strata are equally eligible to be victimized. Therefore, any article that is designed for such a diverse group needs to reflect the ambiguity of the nature of the events that traumatized them and the vast ways they may approach such a product.

## STAGE FOUR EXPERIMENT

### *Healing and Maintenance*

“I feel lighter, like a real burden has come off me. I literally feel less pressure in my chest and in my shoulders. I felt like I’d been walking around with twenty pounds of cement on my chest... If I had run away from the pain, I don’t think I’d ever have been able to shed that weight. I would still be destroying myself in some way.

It’s a small thing, but I never had plants before. It’s just my way of trying to keep something other than me alive. It gives me a lot of pleasure. I grew up where there weren’t too many flowers, right in the middle of the damn city.... It’s a reason to live, really. I was scared about it at first. But now I know I can nurture them and keep them healthy. I make sure they don’t have bugs. After I’ve been so rough in my life, I can still take care of something so delicate. Even though I’ve been knocked around, I can still keep them alive.”

- “I’ve come out of my shell stronger than I’ve ever been” by Soledad<sup>18</sup>

The fourth and final stage of the traumatic experience is unlike the previous three in that it can last indefinitely. In this stage, the trauma victim has already completed much

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<sup>18</sup> Ellen Bass and Laura Davis, *The Courage to Heal* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).

work to sort through their experience, make sense of its complexities, and has experimented with ways to channel the negative emotions of their trauma into something positive.

After all of these steps have been completed, the victim should begin to feel some sense of closure about the traumatic event. He or she will now learn how to let the trauma fade into the background to the point where the event no longer dictates their daily activities and thought patterns. This is not to say that the fourth stage is going to be spotless. Quite the contrary, in fact. The fourth stage is likely to be littered with good days and bad days, days of greater functioning mixed among days of greater depression or anxiety, flashbacks, or nightmares.

The victim must also now learn how to balance their everyday lives with the inevitable 'triggers' that will come up. A 'trigger' is defined as any event, person, place or thing that reminds the victim of their experience and conjures up an intense emotional or physical response in the individual. To borrow a classic example, a veteran who was traumatized in combat may be 'triggered' by the sound of fireworks going off at a Fourth of July celebration. Even though the fireworks pose no direct threat to the veteran, the noise and intensity may remind him of the artillery explosions of his traumatic days in war. As a result, he may exhibit an increased heart rate, sweaty palms, tightness in the chest or stomach, or emotional symptoms such as fear or anxiety. Each person will develop their own set of distinct physical and emotional reactions to deal with such triggers.

The piece made to test handicrafts' ability to communicate this stage uses a form of handicrafts called whitework. Traditionally, whitework is a form of sewing done by hand to create intricate and delicate lace patterns. Embroiderers Tracy Franklin and Nicola Jarvis have traced the roots of whitework starting over two thousand years ago. As they explain in their book *Contemporary Whitework*, "Whitework is a general term given to many types of embroidery that were originally worked in white, using natural fabrics and materials.... Much of the whitework made throughout history decorated garments and adorned furnishings in the domestic environment. Religious establishments also commissioned

whitework for ecclesiastical vestments and linens. In many Western cultures, white embroidery was used on clothing worn in key life rituals, for example on the collars, cuffs and hems of christening gowns, wedding dresses and funeral shrouds. All embroidery, including whitework, became associated with comfort, wealth and status. White embroideries, in particular, were used to embellish underclothes and nightwear.” Traditional whitework stitches vary considerably and include everything from the raised stitches of the Irish Mountmellick to the intricate Ayrshire laces from Scotland.<sup>19</sup>



**Image 30: Image of traditional whitework stitching on a dress hem**

Today, the definition has extended to incorporate any white or natural-colored material or texture that can be sewn to a piece of cloth. Embroiderers such as Amanda Clayton, Jennifer Goodwin, Clare Hanham, and Owen Davies are experimenting with new materials, techniques, and designs. The craft continues to be only rarely practiced, but the

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<sup>19</sup> Tracy A. Franklin and Nicola Jarvis, *Contemporary Whitework* (New York: Sterling Publishing, 2005).

results of such efforts are both delicate and enchanting. Organizations such as the United Kingdom's Royal School of Needlework are working hard to keep the craft alive.

The fourth and final piece was inspired in part by Owen Davies's piece "The Old Oak Bark", in which he recreated a close-up photograph of the gnarled bark of an oak tree using whitework. He combined trim, fabric, thread-covered buttons, and fine handwork to mimic the interesting textures of the bark.



**Image 31: The base photograph used by Owen Davies in his piece "The Old Oak Bark"**



**Image 32: “The Old Oak Bark” by Owen Davies**

The technique used in this piece appeals to the central focus of healing that takes place in the fourth and final stage of trauma. As stated earlier, the main objective of the healing stage is that the trauma begins to take a backseat in the victim’s daily activities and decision-making processes. The Davies technique works similarly in that it is based on a photograph but has been transformed into something that can easily stand on its own. The photograph of the tree bark that the piece was based on provides the inspiration for the whitework, but it fades away to the point where it is no longer recognizable unless by visually prompting the viewer by placing it alongside the finished piece.

In recovering from a trauma, this is precisely what survivors are attempting to do. While the traumatic experience will never completely “go away”, it can be a major relief to

feel the intensity of the trauma begin to lessen. The trauma will always remain a piece of the victim's history – this part is unchangeable – but, in healing, the victim can learn to no longer let that trauma guide his or her present or future. It is possible to build upon that history with new, positive experiences that can lead to a more prosperous lifestyle.

The source image that I selected for this piece needed to represent the dark, ugly nature of trauma. The photograph selected for this piece is of a girl after she has been brutally raped and beaten. This image was originally used to illustrate a news article about a raping spree that was taking place in Oslo, Norway. Among the many victims the assailants claimed, one was a fourteen-year-old girl raped on the grounds of her school.



**Image 33: The base image for the whiteworked sheet**

This image is significant for several reasons. First, it shows the immense physical wounds inflicted on the young girl. In many traumatic situations, the abuse done is mainly psychological or emotional. For visual purposes, it was important to show the physical aspect of one particular type of abuse. Secondly, the girl is shown perched on the side of a bed. In the wake of a trauma such as rape, sexual molestation, or sexual abuse, objects such as beds can take on entirely new meanings to a victim. Depending on the particulars of one's experience, items, events, sounds, smells, feelings, temperatures, etc. can all serve to remind a victim of what took place the last time they encountered that particular cue. For victims of sexual crimes, it is not uncommon for things such as bedrooms, beds, sheets, blankets, pillows, underwear, probing fingers, the sound of heavy breathing, a feeling of being trapped and unable to move, or the feeling of having a heavy weight on one's chest can all bring back frightening memories of the trauma. Such items and situations are referred to as "triggers".

According to Wendy Maltz, author of *The Sexual Healing Journey: A Guide for Survivors of Sexual Abuse*, "Triggers can be anything in your present-day reality that reminds you, either consciously or unconsciously, of past sexual abuse. Many survivors feel as if they're in a minefield, braced for an explosion at any step. But it is possible for survivors to learn to anticipate these automatic reactions and to gain control of their responses and even defuse the trigger."<sup>20</sup> In order to incorporate this factor of the fourth stage (the ongoing maintenance of triggers and one's reaction to them), the final piece was created in whitework onto a white bed sheet. Please note that the concept of triggers is not unique to sexual traumas. Persons who have been traumatized in almost any situation can still be affected by harmless reminders later in life that are particular to the memories they have of their unique traumatic experience.

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<sup>20</sup> Maltz, Wendy, *The Sexual Healing Journey: A Guide for Survivors of Sexual Abuse* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2001).

“I grew up with a strong revulsion about white handkerchiefs. I hated being around them. When I’d see adults use them, I became sick to my stomach. Handkerchiefs had a sexual connotation to me, and I didn’t realize why. Recently I remember my father having orgasms on top of me when I was a little girl. He’d use a handkerchief to clean up afterward.”

-Anonymous<sup>21</sup>

The image was translated into outlined sections that were then transferred to a sheet. Each section was traced onto the sheet in pencil, and then sewn using a tight buttonhole stitch. Once the sheet was washed to remove the pencil marks, I relied on the stitched outlines as a guide for my work. Each sector was to be filled in using a different white material, texture, technique, or stitch. After gathering together dozens of materials and threads to choose from, I delineated those that were pure white from those that were more off-white, cream, or naturally yellowed. Those that had darker coloring were used to fill in the sections of the sheet that correlated with the girl’s bruises. While the color white represents purity, cleanliness, and virginity; I felt it fitting to leave these particular sectors less “clean” as they represented the physical portions of the girl that were most damaged.

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<sup>21</sup> Maltz, Wendy, *The Sexual Healing Journey: A Guide for Survivors of Sexual Abuse* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2001).



Image 34: Outlines created of the base photograph



Image 35: The pattern ready to be transferred to the sheet for stitching

The materials used to fill in the sectors of the sheet ranged from fine silks to lace window sheers to dryer sheets. White objects like plastic buttons and circles cut from seashells accented the fabric-heavy piece. In some areas, one fabric would be used in one sector and then repeated upside-down in another. The textures of the front and back of the fabric each show a different dimension and quality. Fabrics such as the white shimmering organza were used once as a flat, unaltered fabric, and again in strips that had been melted over an open flame, a process that causes the fibers to pucker and gather in unique patterns. Some fabrics are clean-cut at the edges, and others are fraying with long tangled masses of threads hanging off of their edges. For each piece that was sewn on, the ends of the thread were left dangling to symbolize the imperfect nature of the fourth stage and also to show that things can unravel at any time (both figuratively and literally).

Once the piece was completely filled in, it became nearly impossible to recognize the photograph of the girl whose profile structured the design of the piece. Instead of focusing on the traumatic image of the girl, the viewer finds him or herself more closely attending to the unique fabrics, textures, and composition. The finished piece looks anything but harrowing, and instead conjures up notions of purity and formality. The sheet was displayed at its showing at the Creative Research Lab on a clothesline. As in the precedent work of *The Clothesline Project*, the clothesline is representative of the cleansing and airing out of ones past.







**Images 36-44: Photographs of the finished whiteworked sheet on display**

## CONCLUSIONS

This report has investigated the methodology of using handicrafts as a medium for communication by testing its ability to communicate the very complex and multifaceted world of trauma and the experience of trauma victims. The course of traumatic experience and the recovery process has been broken down into four succinct stages that encompass the major psychological and practical steps victims undertake during each phase. The experiments undertaken in this body of work reveal that, for as complicated and as multifaceted as trauma discourse may be, the practice of handicrafts is equally as encompassing.

Furthermore, traditional practices of handicrafts can be altered to fit contemporary applications. By intentionally mis-using the craft and breaking with tradition, one discovers that handicrafts need not replicate the antiquated and often-replicated pieces that create the basis for craft pieces being old-fashioned. As we have seen in this report, handicraft pieces need not be 'finished', 'perfect', or 'delicate'. The subject is limitless and the methods and materials can be combined in response to the requirements of the project at hand. These concepts of 'ability' and 'flexibility' can also be therapeutic to practitioners and trauma victims alike who feel stuck in unpleasant circumstances and limited by the tools they have at hand.

In sum, by viewing the flexibility of handicrafts in communicating the discourse of trauma, one can safely assume that the notion that handicrafts are out of style and limited is an outdated assumption. If handicrafts can fulfill the requirements of communicating trauma, then it is likely that they could also be successfully applied to communicating other matters, no matter the complexity of the subject matter being used.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The four projects presented here present preliminary studies into a realm of different areas. Any of these could be investigated further for more in-depth research.

The experiment for Stage One, the cross-stitch piece of a homeless woman on burlap calls into question the ability for embroidery to achieve photo-realism, alternative methods for cropping images, the selection of non-traditional materials in the practice of a traditional craft, and the use of intensely emotional subject matter. The experiment for Stage Two, the sweatshirt piece, touches upon issues of obscuring text/information/imagery, the manipulation of a found object, the defacement of labor-intensive handwork, and the communication of emotional subject matter in a three-dimensional format. The experiment for Stage Three, the trauma therapy workbook, leads to further investigation in the concealment of objects, the implications for sharing personal information via artwork, product design for wide ranges of user groups, and designing artifacts based primarily on how they feel (or, in this case, *don't* feel) rather than what they look like.

As a group, these projects all deal with the emotional state of persons who are troubled with their pasts. The practice of taking control over traditional mediums and practices to be able to make them work for one's own objectives has much potential as a method of teaching people ways to take control. As trauma victims often feel a lack of control in their pasts and their resultant mental and physical conditions, teaching them to take control over a medium or material can open doors to their regaining control over

other areas of their life. In this way, handicrafts can be used as a starting point in relearning basic wellness skills.

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