

Criminal Quilts, Gunnersbury Park Museum, London, 2-3 November 2019

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The exhibition's title is arresting; quilting and crime may not seem to have obvious intersections so their conjunction creates intrigue. Ruth Singer's travelling exhibition brings together selections from a body of work first developed in 2015, expanded in 2018 and is set to grow further with future collaborations and exhibitions planned for 2020.

The story began with an artistic commission Singer received from Shire Hall, Staffordshire, UK. Initially expecting to respond to the historic architecture of the site, Singer instead found herself drawn to a small display of late nineteenth century / early twentieth century photographs of female prisoners. The portraits pictured local women for the purposes of keeping bureaucratic records in the criminal justice system at a time when photography was first being deployed as a systematic form of institutional surveillance. To Singer, fourteen years an independent textile artist, but trained first as a medieval historian and later a museums studies scholar and educator, the women's humble appearance opened up multiple avenues of exploration into dress history, history of photography, Victorian crime and punishment processes, and the biographies of the women depicted.

One of Singer's first points of interest was the striking pose women assumed in early prison photographs. With their hands splayed across their torsos, intended to provide an additional level of identification, they perform gestures both dramatic and curious. The women seem to simultaneously implore mercy and express humility as their hands are open and empty. The garments the women wear – in most cases their own clothes – created another important layer of texture and interest for Singer. The convicts are arrayed in a wide mix of garments, but their lowly status and often limited means is often readable through their profoundly ragged appearance; in some cases clothes are threadbare and held together with pins. In other cases, especially in those dating from the Edwardian period, the women's frequently dirty faces contrast with huge fashionable hats trimmed with feathers and flowers.

Shawls appear in around half of all the 500-plus portraits Singer surveyed in Staffordshire record offices, dated from 1877 to 1916. The woollen shawl was a standard garment for working-class women of the period, providing warmth and coverage for the body but also, in the case of some female thieves, allowing concealment of stolen goods. As a consequence, Singer's textile responses to the portraits pay particular attention to this item. Digitally-printed portraits, drawn together into a grid formation, show the incarcerated women as a community of forgotten figures; their grouped faces are in turn stitched onto an antique shawl as both a banner of commemoration and a piece of clothing that can be worn.

Photographs – so often perceived as two-dimensional images, but here appreciated for their multiple depths and tactility – accord with textiles in other ways. Their sepia, silver and shadowy monochromes become creative points of departure, as do the floral loops of inked handwriting, the yellowing paper and the rich marbled endpapers of the archival ledgers. Singer looks at these works as both a historian and an artist; she investigates the women's crimes and their punishment and finds textiles again and again. Many women were petty criminals, sometimes stealing extremely modest quantities of clothing, boots and jewellery. The garments and textiles purloined often relate to their professions; while there is

a mix of occupations among the criminals from domestic servants to industrial workers, it is notable that dressmakers, button-makers, flower-makers and laundresses also figure regularly. Once the women were incarcerated, their personal attire was usually put into storage and they were dressed instead, for hygiene and discipline, in the wide stripes, broad arrows or gingham tunic and apron of regulation uniform. Inside prison, women were often employed in garment production or prison laundries, reproducing and reinforcing the textile associations.

Singer has studied the Victorian justice system in careful detail in order to situate these women. Her creative productions also illustrate its injustices. While some of the imprisoned women were working at a significant scale in their criminal endeavours – one, for example, was intercepted apprehending some 12 tonnes of coal – many of the others were involved in crimes of the most desperate and pathetic kind, and their sentences were excessively harsh; in one case a woman convicted of stealing a doormat received four years inside. Others purloined merely a ball of wool or a set of handkerchiefs and still served time.

Singer's fine stitches are used judiciously to add emphases and highlights. She literally and metaphorically outlines and defines individuals, locating names and biographies for those reduced to numbers. Through a slow practice of hand stitch, Singer's contemplative practice embellishes their collars and brings colour to their cheeks. She echoes their apparel in checked wool and cotton ticking, and shapes them into quilts and other forms appliqued with antique buttons and lace. This is not a celebration of crime but of a work of reparation built on hundreds of records of working-class women fallen on desperate times. Prison photography was at one level a practical means of management but it was also a system of control and dehumanisation. It might seem sentimental to say that these women look out of their prison photographs directly into our eyes but when massed together in these tactile grids with outspread hands, they become a kind of imploring chorus that asks us to reflect on the conditions of those who eked out marginal existences between prison and the workhouse. Women in the period made up a fifth of all convicts and punishment was heavy-handed and indiscriminate. Singer's stitched practice makes thousands of tiny and repetitive gestures of reparation and rehabilitation.

Criminal Quilts, in its display and book form, is deeply informed by scholarship and made with skill. It is both a beautiful set of works and a call to action. It continues to travel and to take on new forms. At Gunnersbury Park Museum in Ealing, West London, the material is modestly exhibited in a two-day temporary display. It fits with Gunnersbury's impressive historic quilt collection and the November weekend also hosted a quilting event with wares for sale and workshops as well as an artist's talk. *Criminal Quilts* continues to tour, in various iterations, to regional museums and local libraries across the country, although it would be, to my mind, much better mounted in a more substantial way in a more major gallery setting. Singer's next steps, supported by Arts Council funding, will be to increase her collaborative working methods, some of which can be seen in the show, which bring other makers' perspectives to the material, but also to bring her textile tools to contemporary women's prisons to reflect on what has changed and, notably, what has not.