Swaddled

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We (Diane Kuthy and Olivia Robinson) met through Baltimore Racial Justice Action (BRJA), an educational and activist group which has been going strong in Baltimore, Maryland, USA for over fifteen years. BRJA fights against racism and other intersecting forms of institutional oppression and works toward racial equity, justice and collective liberation. BRJA provides space to work in affinity groups by race ("caucusing") while also being accountable to a larger multi-racial group. Whereas the perspectives, experiences and analysis of people of color are central to our understanding of racism and racial equity, white people and people of color have different work to do. In the caucus model, white people bear the onus for their own learning and for teaching other white people about racism and white supremacy.

Our artistic collaboration began as a result of involvement in BRJA's white affinity group and our shared interest in arts-based research methods to investigate visual culture's role in constructing, perpetuating and disrupting white supremacy. We made our first quilt, *Swaddled,* to study visual culture of the 1940s, a time of mass consolidation of whiteness. *Swaddled* is part of an evolving series that investigates the visual culture of whiteness and the historical context that produces its meaning. Each quilt in the series is a thematic investigation that begins by focusing on images and objects in their historical context but expands to other eras as salient ideas emerge. Our intent is to set in high relief the visual culture of whiteness, gleaning insights into how ideas of whiteness are created and communicated through imagery. Through making multiple quilts we want to learn how visual culture buttresses white supremacy in various contexts. The quilts in the series incorporate fiber traditions popular in the U. S. during the historical period of the primary images examined. Each quilt is accompanied by an interpretive guide created in the form of a fabric sample book, which is a teaching tool to engage viewers in the deeper context of the work. Pictured are images of *Swaddled* juxtaposed with the pages of the interpretive guide.

Swaddled (2017) with interpretive guide, linen and cotton, 47″x 47″, Olivia Robinson and Diane Kuthy

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Swaddled focuses on the "This is America... Keep it Free" poster campaign of 1942, designed by the advertising company Sheldon-Claire, with the support of the US government. Created to support America's efforts in World War II, it propagated a vision of life in an ideal "all white" postwar period. During the war, President Roosevelt talked about "four essential human freedoms": the freedom of speech and religion, freedom from want and from fear.

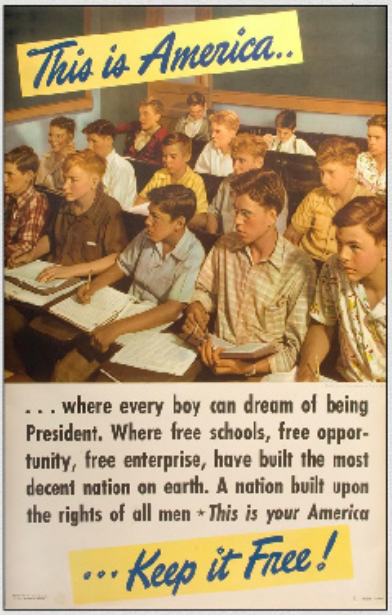
The poster imagery tied these four freedoms to ideals of the middle-class home, the nuclear family, consumerism, and free enterprise. Widely distributed in factories all over the country, the posters changed weekly and came with a illuminated frame. Employees were mailed small reproductions of the images with accompanying text. Many of the posters were created from Farm Security Administration photographs taken in the 1930s and other documentary photos. However, these photographs were manipulated through cropping, erasure and colorization to make the all-white "Americans" who were pictured look prosperous (Gray, 2006). Although the concept "American" has historically been conflated with whiteness, the campaign's strong visuals, wide distribution and messages of freedom made them particularly insidious.

The posters explicitly contrast American freedom with the "enemy" abroad and implicitly are juxtaposed with an "enemy" within. They were disseminated to factories just as thousands of Japanese Americans were sent to internment camps solely because of their ethnicity. Significantly, the "This is America..." campaign began immediately after a different campaign had attracted a national multi-racial audience, calling for victory abroad in the war and victory at home against racism. What was known as the Double V campaign began in February 1942 with a letter from James G. Thompson published in the Pittsburgh Courier, the largest black-owned newspaper in the U.S. at the time.

We used a nine-patch quilt pattern popular in the 1940s and "whitework," a traditional quilting method, incorporating white stitches on white fabric, which allows for simultaneous erasure and presence of the poster imagery. The name "whitework" is a powerful description of what the posters do: promoting a particular idea of what it means to be white and that whiteness is the supreme quality of being American. We are swaddled in white supremacy and literally white-worked. It is vitally important for us to realize this and to seek alternatives.

Gray, D. A. (2006). New Uses for Old Photos: Renovating FSA Photographs in World War II Posters. American Studies, (3/4), 5.

Page 1 of the *Swaddled* interpretive guide, providing background information for the viewer.



The poster makes use of …(ellipses). What is understood without being written?

What or who is omitted from this poster? ...from America?

Locate the quilt block that was based on this image. Why do you think the artists chose to use white stitching on white fabric to create the image?

Page 2. Featuring one of the nine "This America…Keep it Free" posters created in 1942 that we used as source material. This poster underscores the conflation of white masculinity with American citizenship.

The quilt block made from the schoolboy poster above. Only, the heads and hands were transferred to the quilt. The hidden details were stitched back in using the traditional quilting method of whitework.

How was Lewis Hine's 1908 photograph, *Climbing to the Promised Land, Ellis Island*, altered in this 1942 poster? Have the alterations changed the original meaning?

What cultures were not welcome in America in 1942? Today?

What was gained and lost by assimilating into (white) America?

What thoughts do you have about our current immigration problems as you reflect on the poster?

Page 3. Demonstrating how the "This America…Keep it Free" posters were created from repurposed old photos.

The quilt block made from the "melting pot" themed poster. It is interesting that until we cropped out everything but the faces and fists in the quilt block, I didn't notice that only men directly faced the camera.

Closely look at the text and images of these posters, both created in 1942.

Who is missing?

Who is free?

What messages does each convey about what places and people are important? Free? Dangerous? And safe?

Page 4. These two posters are juxtaposed to examine the theme of segregated spaces, one of the primary ways race has historically been constructed in America.

Page 5. It was not easy to locate the posters through image searches when we first started looking at the "This is America…" posters. Since the election of President Donald Trump, the posters have been reprinted several times and now they appear instantaneously in search engines.

Image Credits

Sheldon-Claire Company Records, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, 1942

Lewis Hines, Climbing into the Promised Land, Ellis Island, Brooklyn Museum, 1908

Sheldon-Claire Company Records, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, 1942

Sheldon-Claire Company Records, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, 1942

Lester Beall, United States Housing Authority. 1942

Page 6, last page of the interpretive guide

We created *Swaddled* in January of 2017 just after the 2016 election. The "*This is America…*" posters' contemporary relevance has sadly only increased since that time. Donald Trump (the current sitting US president) seemed to rise through the effect of these white-supremacist tropes on white men and women voters - tropes that were developed in these particular posters of 1942. When we first spent time with the posters, we couldn't get over how cliché they seemed. Then after reading about their history, it became apparent that they were one of the places where these clichés began to get traction and we began seeing the posters differently. Instead of innocent reproductions of a cliché, they seemed more ominous reproductions of old ideas (whiteness = American) with imagery that was new at the time.

Whiteness seems to eclipse other identity markers in the posters, yet it is tethered to them and garners strength from the intersection. White masculinity is one fulcrum. Whiteness obscuring class foreshadows the prosperity and consumption practices of white Americans after World War II, creating a picture of white racial solidarity. The suppression of labor-management conflicts, a reality during the war, was key to creating the illusion of a classless society (Gray, 2006). Two additional posters that we used for our quilt explicitly focused on ameliorating potential class conflicts by encouraging white worker and management cooperation. The intersection of whiteness-and-Christianity and whiteness-and-heterosexuality are two other significant threads. Unfortunately, these intersections at the service of white supremacy have been fortified in the last few years and are important to understand as factors in the continued support of President Donald Trump.

Quilts and quilting in general are rich in metaphor and have shifted in meaning and worked on many levels throughout the process of making *Swaddled*. There are many layers both to a quilt and to our project. A quilt is something one wakes up to and goes to bed with - much like the constant reinforcement of whiteness messaging. A quilt is a covering and reminds us of how we as a society cover whiteness and so create a necessity to uncover and bare the workings of white supremacy. Making our quilt child-size was a way to speak of whiteness as spoon-fed and normalized from childhood. Whitework, the traditional method we used, both obscures and reveals. It is tactile and intimate and takes scrutiny to understand. The variety of skin colors and the people's faces reproduced on the quilt are haunting; they are people we know both past and present. Particularly powerful is the way the figures' hands are grasping but are empty. It makes us think about what the world would be like without the effects of white supremacy. We try to imagine a future world where white people possess less space and participate in an equitable power distribution.

References

Gray, D. (2006). New uses for old photos: Renovating FSA photographs in World War II posters. *American Studies, 47*(3/4), 5-34.