

Leisure Lady, 2001, three fiberglass ocelots, Dutch wax-printed cotton textile, life-size mannequin; woman approx. 63 x 31 1/2 x 31 1/2 in., ocelots approx. 15 3/4 x 23 1/2 x 8 in. each.



Gay Victorians, 1999, wax-printed cotton textile, 65 x 25 x 42 in. and 65 x 29 x 43 in. Collection of Kent and Vicki Logan. Fractional and promised gift to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.



The origins of the fabrics are important because this kind of cloth is not indigenous to Africa at all. It is based on Indonesian printed batik designs, which were industrially manufactured in Holland and England and then sold to the West African market. Initially, when the Dutch went to Indonesia, one of their colonies, they adopted local batik printing, but to facilitate trade they produced the fabrics industrially. They tried to sell them in Indonesia, but such industrially produced fabrics were not popular there. So the Dutch tried them in West Africa, where they were extremely well liked. At this stage, as Africa was being colonized, people were being educated and moving into administrative types of work. So spending time hand weaving their fabrics on looms was not practical. It was faster and cheaper to buy something manufactured. Of course, now the printing technique has been adopted by Africans as well, but the origins of the designs are Indonesian. And, to add another layer of complexity, I purchased these culturally hybrid "African" fabrics from Brixton market in London, where they are popular with African-Europeans and black British people who want to identify with an idealized, invented homeland. Personally, I tend to prefer the fabrics now printed in Africa that include Western images, such as televisions and radios, things that express desires and aspirations. If you can't really afford these items, you can own the fabrics.

Yinka Shonibare, MBE



Big Boy, 2002, wax-printed cotton textile, fiberglass, 85 x 67 x 55 in.; plinth 86 in., diameter 5 in.



Still from *Cities on the Move*
– 2727 Kilometers Bottari
Truck, 1997, single-channel
projection, silent, 7 min.
30 sec. loop.



Cities on the Move – 2727
Kilometers Bottari Truck, 1997,
photograph of eleven-day
performance throughout Korea.



Cities on the Move – Bottari
Truck, 2000, 2.5-ton truck,
used Korean bedcovers, and
clothes. Installation view from
Rodin Gallery of Samsung
Museum, Seoul.

Cities on the Move is a globally conceived and constantly widening project by Korean artist Kimsooja realized in different media and contexts. From November 4-14, 1997, Kimsooja traveled throughout Korean cities to which she has a direct personal relationship, crisscrossing her homeland from north to south and east to west. The videos of this performance show the small *bottari* truck, on the bed of which a mountain of cloth bundles (*bottari*) is lashed together, as it slowly makes its way through town and country. In one video, Kimsooja sits atop the pile loaded onto the truck, traveling through the changing landscape.

The cloth bundles are an essential component of the performance. Classical *bottari* designate a bundle in which unbreakable objects like pieces of clothing, bed linens, household utensils, and books can be kept. In Korea, especially where people have often been forced to leave their homes in order to flee war or famine or to look for work, the bundles are historically charged and emblematic objects. They were used both by refugees and merchants who transported their wares in them. On a metaphorical level, the *bottari* also function as signifiers of mobility in unbound space, and thus are, at the same time, containers that include their own contents.

Yilmaz Dziewior

MATERIAL MEMORY

With a

"The fabric of society." Why is this weaving metaphor everywhere, even though the act of weaving is far from our everyday experience? Arthur Danto wrote that Plato used the weaving metaphor because "each move made by the weaver has the whole fabric in view . . . The aim of state-making is justice, which means, in effect, weaving together the various social virtues without allowing one more than the other to dominate. And it is that which makes weaving so apt a metaphor for statesmanship."¹ Is it? Does weaving have a wide enough view to encompass culture in ways that, say, painting cannot? Paintings are paint turned into illusion, but in weaving, cloth is actual—material and meaning in one. Cloth, in practical and metaphorical ways, has played a key role both in daily life and in establishing social structures in diverse cultures for centuries.² Cloth is a mode of communication within and between civilizations, hence it was at the center of colonial trade. And, like language and art that have been records of history, cloth is a way of remembering.³ But in today's Westernized, commercial, and technological world, cloth is no longer a medium of politics nor an instrument of social definition and imposition. Yet because of its long historical role and inherited references, cloth persists as a medium of

personal meaning-making and cultural memory. Applying the critical, perceptual tools provided by postmodernism, it can become a fertile site of embedded social meaning; as a critique in art's terms, it can provoke shifts in our perception of culture.

The three artists around whose work this discussion of cloth is based—Yinka Shonibare, MBE, J. Morgan Puett, and Kimsooja—are second-generation postmodernists who deconstruct dominant modes of thinking, asserting the specific histories of those forgotten in order to reconstruct universal ways of being. While their work exists between traditions of the past and critical practices of contemporary art making, they each employ cloth because of its fluidity to literally change shape and take on different meanings. They use the historical associations of cloth to point to power relationships and, as Sarat Maharaj puts it, their work "begins to map out an inside/outside space, an 'edginess.'"⁴ By revealing meanings deep within the sources of their making, each artist moves between disparate terrains of culture and history to create a credible weave of place and time.

These artists are also driven by ideals of social justice and, with their work, aim to enlarge our view of cultural history and our place in it. Their critical practices are among those evoked by Lewis Hyde when he compares the artist with the trickster: that pan-cultural, legendary boundary-crosser.⁵ Like Maharaj, who perceives that the aim of today's progressive textile practices is to throw "out of joint the received orders of difference of the arts,"⁶ Hyde views the artist as a joint worker who "shifts the patterns in relations to one another, and by that redefines the patterns themselves."⁷ For Hyde, this is axiomatic since he believes the very possibility of art is "the possibility of playing with the joints of creation."⁸

The projects by Shonibare, Puett, and Kimsooja that are the focus of this essay were all created at the same moment and place for the 2002 Spoleto Festival USA in Charleston, South Carolina,⁹ an annual performing arts event. For over a decade, Spoleto has also served as a periodic forum for the critical practices of visual artists inspired by the deeply rooted stories of the people and places in this poetic landscape. A colonial capital of global reach, the ethos of Charleston is intrinsically bound to its role in history as the entry point of nearly forty percent of all African-Americans today, the so-called capital of slavery in North America. The site of the first shot of the Civil War, it was a political and economic power leading the state to be the first in the Union to secede. Other aspects of its past seem inconsistent with this history: Charleston had more free blacks before the Civil War than any other Southern city, and centuries-old familial bonds between blacks and whites live on.

2. See Annette B. Weiner and Jane Schneider, eds., *Cloth and Human Experience* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989). This is an essential anthology in the field of material studies that examines "the properties of cloth that underlie its social and political contributions, the ritual and social domains in which people acknowledge these properties and give them meaning, and the transformations of meaning over time," p. 1.

3. It has been theorized by critic Gerry Craig that textile processes, like writing as we know it thousands of years later, "were no less than the structural and imagistic model by which humans developed linguistically." Gerry Craig, "Imagination and Sensation," *Fiberarts* (November-December 1995), p. 55.

4. Sarat Maharaj, "The Congo is Flooding the Acropolis: Black Art, Orders of Difference, Textiles," in *Interrogating Identity* (New York: Grey Art Gallery and Study Center, New York University, 1991), p. 38.

1. Arthur Danto, "The Tapestry and the Loincloth," 1996, an unpublished essay commissioned by The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, citing Plato, *The Republic*, V, 466a, p. 705. Danto goes on to talk about weaving's other metaphorical uses: "The metaphor of weaving is itself so woven into our conceptual schemes that it must constitute one of the *Ur*-metaphors we acquire with our language, and though weaving as such is an activity with which, in its original sense, very few of us have had much direct experience, it is difficult to see how, no matter how modern or even postmodern our form of life, we could imagine getting on without the metaphor . . ."

Space Walk

Yinka Shonibare, MBE, has looked to the massive social changes during the period of colonial trade and industrialization, examining the complex cultural interchange of textile production and exchange, and its formative role in shaping our expectations of black identity. Born in 1962 in England of Nigerian parents, he has benefited

from living in both countries; being no less British than Nigerian, his work navigates between cultures. For his critique, he has developed a signature vocabulary of bold, image-laden batiks, referencing his own experience of migration, as well as the historic passage of peoples and goods. His use of batik satisfies his practice as an avant-garde artist participating in the redefinition of art by upsetting existing cultural hierarchies. Batik has been called "painted cloth" because of its elaborate hand-dyed process. By rejecting painting in lieu of painted cloth, Shonibare denies the preeminence of Western art history, with its pantheon of white male painters, in favor of identification with cultural production by so-called Third World artists and artisans left nameless in history.

Batik has been subject to a rich interweaving of tradition and a curious conflation of influences throughout the centuries. Dye-resist patterns can be traced back over 1,500 years, with evidences in the East, Middle East, and Africa, but it is generally held that it was on the island of Java, in Indonesia, that this handcraft reached its apex (nonetheless dependent on trade with India for cotton cloth). In local culture and through trading with surrounding countries and colonial companies, cloth served as a standard of currency and a means of amassing wealth. Dutch colonists began to export batik to Europe in the 1600s, replicated it back in Holland for sale in Indonesia where, under political control, they could restrict local production in favor of the sale of their own imported goods. But in a cultural and political reversal, Indonesians reclaimed local manufacture (along with the local cultivation of cotton) in the early 1800s, eventually

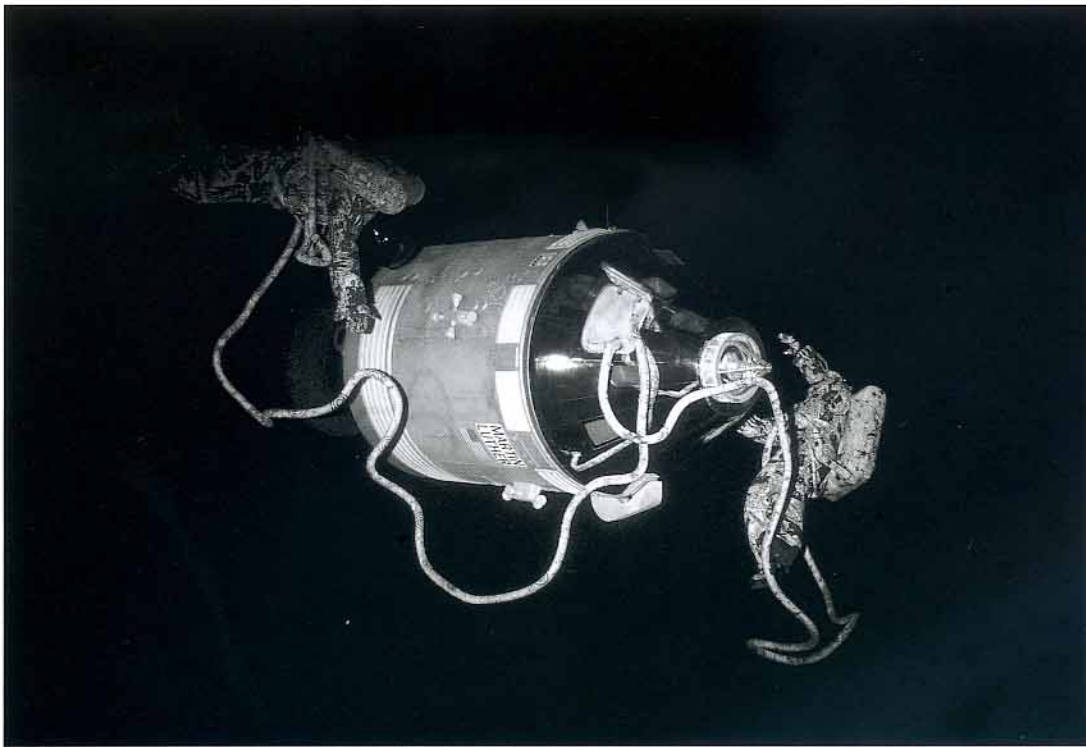


Yinka Shonibare, MBE, *Space Walk*, 2002, batik-printed cloth and mixed media shuttle. From the *Evoking History: The Memory of Water* exhibition at the 2002 Spoleto Festival USA.

While the use of fiber was not part of the artistic mandate for the exhibition in which they all took part, it is telling that each of these artists—in the context of this place—sought out cloth as their primary medium, finding it an appropriate and powerfully articulate means of addressing a complex historical and cultural story. But their attraction to cloth has links beyond Charleston, stretching through time and around the globe. In today's world, where fabrics are plentiful and various, it is difficult to imagine cloth as a scarce or rare commodity that was valued so much that it became a medium of value itself. But in preindustrialized eras, meaning accrued with making as family and cultural ties were literally woven into cloth and dependent upon its preservation. Cloth gained power through association with ancestors, and this power was transferred through ceremonies of investiture in which woven objects became vehicles for succession of authority. Prestige, another order of power, came with the oldest, most treasured cloths which, as today, may be highly regarded for their material attraction, novelty, or richness of threads. Possessing value in these significant, social ways contributed to the status of cloth as culture and currency.

With the rise of a capitalist system of industrially produced textiles, the symbolic potential of cloth moved to the esoteric or nostalgic reaches of Western culture, becoming identified with underdeveloped, nonindustrialized countries. A sequential system of producers—spinners, dyers, weavers, lace makers, seamstresses, and other craftspersons—became distanced from the product as their labor became harnessed to factory production. More available and removed from the family center, spiritual meaning evaporated and cloth lost value. The emergent meanings of cloth were, instead, a reflection of the system of power manifested in commerce and, with this, cloth was transformed from a medium of cultural preservation into a tool of cultural perversion.

5. Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998). Hyde states: "My own position, in any event, is not that the artists I write about are tricksters but that there are moments when the practice of art and this myth coincide," p. 14. He also traces an etymological lineage through words of the ancient *-ar root; from the Latin *artculus* he assembles a large group of related terms whose original meaning encompassed "to join," "to fit," "to make." The Greek word *harmós*, for instance, meant not only a joint in the body but more often joints made by artisans (artisan itself is an *-ar word meaning a joiner or maker of things). The Latin noun *ars*, from the same root, means arts in the sense of skill, artifice, craft, and crafty action; also a liberal art, a trade, a performance, and a work of art. And again from that root, *articulate* meant joining bones together or, as today, words well joined, p. 254.
6. Maharaj, p. 39.
7. Hyde, p. 257. Thus, Hyde adds, the trickster-artist seeks to change "the manner in which nature, community, and spirit are joined to one another."
8. *Ibid.*, p. 280.
9. I commissioned these artists to create new works for the exhibition *Evoking History: The Memory of Water*, part of the program of the 2002 Spoleto Festival USA. Other participating artists were Marc Latamie and Nari Ward. For more information, see *2002 Spoleto Festival USA Program Book*.



Yinka Shonibare, *Space Walk* (detail).

overtaking Dutch manufacturing monopoly and then Dutch rule. Thus, batik making was a political act, a reassertion of indigenous traditions and voice.

After the Industrial Revolution, machine-printed batiks were also manufactured in factories in Manchester, England. In response to the decline of the Asian market, ships made port along the coast of West Africa seeking buyers. There they found a lucrative market and, over time, these European batiks incorporated vernacular images and local designs to appeal to and stay in tune with the desires of a clientele of another culture. With its great popularity, batik was dubbed “African cloth.” Moreover, it became so closely identified with African cultures that during the mid-twentieth-century period of anti-colonist revolution, it was a symbol of African independence. Today, it is still the “Dutch wax-printed fabric” that holds the greatest prestige, thus Nigerian companies immediately copy the Dutch products.¹⁰ This practice colored the everyday landscape of the country in which Shonibare was, in part, raised.

Shonibare looks to the many meanings that batik has taken on through its long history, evolving across cultures, from its role as a colonial weapon of power and subjugation and, conversely, to its use as a site of resistance

and as an icon of freedom. Perhaps the keenest figure in history to adopt cloth and clothing as a means to reposition political power was Gandhi.¹¹ Indian society, under British colonial rule until 1947, had become dependent on Manchester-produced cloth, enslaved by the forces of trade and fashion, and restricted from the use of local manufacture. Gandhi equated home production with home rule and, in his campaign, his choice to wear a loincloth was a powerful symbol to unite the populace and bring about social change. Shonibare’s batik shares in this colonial story. But whereas for Gandhi, Indian-produced cotton was aimed at establishing national identity, Shonibare purposefully uses batik cloth for its cultural ambiguity. Rather than seeking social transformation through the expulsion of the oppressor (albeit, for Gandhi, in the quintessential nonviolent revolution), Shonibare looks toward cultural reconciliation and coexistence.

In the earliest work that brought Shonibare to international attention, he employed this painted cloth in the form of historic clothing worn by specially fabricated mannequins whose demeanor (even when headless) had an upper-class air. In Victorian ensembles and hunt scenes, figures flamboyantly attired in colorful batik were a mixed metaphor—a conflation of British elite and those subjugated by the Empire. He has carried his unlikely, unsettling characterization of blacks into grand-scale installations and into large-scale narrative photo series starring himself.

In *Space Walk*, Shonibare clothes two full-scale astronauts in batik, each poised at work on the Gemini space shuttle to which they are tethered. These present-day colonizers, who pursue scientific advances and serve the goals of private corporations in the name of national space programs, are the direct descendants of those who traveled the open-seas era under the employ of international trading companies or for the crown of governments. The astronauts’ batik-covered lifelines are umbilical cords that connect many histories and cultures (Asian, European, African, American). Like the continuous cloths of Indonesia or Yoruba that wrap the dead to bind the past to the present and future, Shonibare’s works are symbols of continuity across centuries and continents, then threaded into outer space.¹²

Like its African-made counterparts, the batik of the astronauts’ spacesuits is printed (a faux version of the original, more labor-intensive dyed cloth); it was fabricated to the artist’s specifications at the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia. In acknowledgement of this collaboration and added layer of cultural migration, the design imagery is drawn from album covers of 1960s Philadelphia soul music. Once it was printed, the cloth was shipped to London where it was fabricated into costumes, then

11. See Danto, “The Tapestry and the Loincloth,” n.p.

12. Weiner and Schneider, pp. 15-16. In some Indonesian bridal customs there is a cloth of endless warp that represents “the continuous threads of kinship and descent,” and in Yoruban traditions of Nigeria, the Egungan cult depend on “tied, bound, or wrapped” fabrics to play a symbolic role in rituals where lineage of ancestry and solidarity are celebrated.

10. The printed legend on the highest quality products still bear the name “Veritable Wax Hollandais,” produced by Vlisco, founded in 1846 and based in Helmond, The Netherlands, of which there are Nigerian-made “copies showing up eight days” after a new product line appeared on the continent. See Matt Steinglass, “Out of Amsterdam: How a Dutch Company’s Batik Textiles Became the Basis of ‘Traditional’ West African Culture,” *MetropolisMag.com* (December 2000), pp. 2-3.

transported complete to Charleston. Thus, it made a kind of triangular passage, just as cotton harvested by African and African-American slaves in the South was sent to the North or England to be woven, returning as fabric or fashions.

Charleston's role in the story of slavery provided a rootedness for *Space Walk*. Here, too, Shonibare's reference to Philadelphia serves him for it was the Philadelphia Quakers—among the most active abolitionists—who established the first school for free blacks, the Penn Center in Beauford, South Carolina, just south of Charleston, in 1862. Moreover, evoking cloth as a colonial medium of exchange or merchandise, this work *remembers* that the story of slavery is one of global trade in human lives. Yet this artist's approach expunges a binary, quick-read along lines of black and white, oppressed and oppressor. Northern states, as well as those of the South, participated and profited in the slave trade. Northerners held slaves and their textile factories depended on slave-cultivated cotton; then, they set up their own systems of virtual enslavement in their treatment of mill women and children.

Out of this postcolonial critique emerges a future of possibility, born out by another iconographical element in the work. On the shuttle's exterior, the American flag bears the words "Martin Luther" (in place of "United States"), a reference to both the Reformation theologian and the Civil Rights leader, each of whom was led by their religious beliefs to bring about political and social change. Both historical figures placed great value on the role of the individual in determining their own fate. For Shonibare, this belief supports his claim that one's future is not culturally predetermined. The artist's choice of a fantastic image—astronauts in outer space—is a means of transgressing self and social stigma, extending in egalitarian spirit to both genders as Shonibare's crew is made up of one male and one female.

In this message of hope, Shonibare departs from the deconstructivist and damning stance of the 1980s postmodernist artists who sought to expose the evils and modern-day vestiges of colonialism. Instead, he responds to the painful experiences of Africans as objects of colonial trade by using "African cloth" to create an optimistic image of a race on the frontier of positive change, as well as a metaphor for all human aspiration. Thus, Shonibare puts back into cloth not only layers of meaning, but also spiritual power. As in ceremonies of investiture, he uses cloth as a call for universal fulfillment. With faith in the future, this work celebrates the personal enrichment that comes from cross-cultural experiences in a world of global interdependence.

J. Morgan Puett's

Cottage Industry

Like Shonibare, J. Morgan Puett uses clothing to counter conventional hierarchies, but her critique is not one of colonialism (although the subject of slavery did enter her work in Charleston). Rather, it lays in the cultural domain of another underclass—women. Bound through industry if not by institution, women have consistently been the main workforce of industrialized textile production and the subject of abusive practices of sweatshops that still exist today. The relationship of women to cloth and clothing is an ironic one: just as women have been subjugated in the factory, they are also intimately associated with the endearing domain of the home, where comfort comes through cloth (soft baby blankets, lovingly made clothes, handcrafted toys). Additionally, women are identified with fashion and dress as expressions of the feminine. Cloth and women, like cloth and slavery, exist in an uncomfortable relationship. This story extends from antebellum times to present day where Latina and African-American domestics in Charleston tend to the details of other people's home life or change the sheets of the many tourist hotel beds—rituals replicated each day the world over by Third-World women. Like Shonibare, Puett keenly insists on making evident the social realities embedded in cloth and clothing, as well as the systems of manufacture that perpetuate power relationships and human inequities. She carries this out through the garments of the working class and their relationship to everyday life. Her art—in material and mission—seeks to give representation to those whose histories are categorically left out. Her earliest product line (beyond the art world, Puett is a recognized high-fashion clothing designer) was based on the unfashionable garments of an uncelebrated constituency—the American Depression-era clothes of Appalachian women—picturing them in photo shoots in the manner of photographers of the era, such as Walker Evans, Lewis Hine, and Dorothea Lange. Continuing to create clothing for the market (introduced

J. Morgan Puett, *Cottage Industry*, 2002, installation view. *From the Evoking History: The Memory of Water* exhibition at the 2002 Spoleto Festival USA.



13. This practice has included:

J. Morgan Puett, Inc., a small women's clothing business in New York's SoHo (1993-1997); a chameleon company called Shack, Inc., formed around concepts of installation art and process-based public art in order to undertake hybrid projects; and a collaborative venture on a New York-based experimental, retail-clothing manufacturing project (1998-2001).

in runway shows, sold in brochures and shops), she has created a reputation and clientele in both the fashion industry and in the art world.¹³

Cottage Industry, Puett's project for Spoleto, posited a rereading of social history by reasserting missing chapters of women's history, black and white. To carry out her revisionist undertaking, she undertook the creation of garments from all social strata. Her sources ranged from the luxury clothing of those women whose names are secure in history books to women who are forgotten, unknown, and for whom few traces remain. Both defining and dividing us along lines of difference, clothing is our outer skin; it is the interface between our private selves and the public realms we negotiate individually, with our bodies, and collectively, as a social body. Social messages are carried out through clothing because it is an accessible, nondidactic medium, open to interpretation. With our deep and intimate familiarity with cloth, multiple readings and associations emerge that engage, in subtle yet penetrating ways, our cultural consciousness. Like Shonibare's work, Puett's art embraces ambiguity, at once referencing the fashions of three centuries in Charleston and the South, and evoking a universal story of female power to transmit culture.

Scrupulously rooting her revisionist fashions in documented examples, Puett began by looking at the canon of history as told in museum collections of Southern states, then deconstructed garment artifacts into salient, component parts, translating them in extraordinary ways. Her garment references included: a sleeve from Eliza Lucas Pinckney's eighteenth-century silk dress, for which she raised the silk worms in the Lowcountry, took the fibers to England and had the cloth woven and three dresses made; a series of stomachers, each uniquely embroidered (one with a map of Charleston, ca. 1750); an eighteenth-century pocket, an accessory tied around the waist and used by all classes and races of women; a slave apron; and an early-eighteenth-century crotchless undergarment ("Bonney breeches") named for a female pirate of local lore. Producing each element in multiple fabrics, Puett multiplied meaning. One cloth, an early-nineteenth-century coverlet of wandering vine motif in the collection of the Charleston Museum, was even commissioned. One of the few extant slave-made and slave-used examples, it served as the source for Charleston-based artist-weaver Leigh Alexander's remarkable indigo-dyed homespun of wool-and-linen (linsey-woolsey).

Clothing—in this artist's formal language, communal processes of making, and social actions of dress—serves to animate history and make it live again. While her garments in the street-side room of the house, suspended midair from hooks or lining walls, seemed inhabited by ghosts, they came alive when worn. Puett built her fashion line and, thusly, a new history in

layers. An eighteenth-century undergarment, constituted of pieced strips of cloth and supplied with buttons all around, provided the foundation and a means by which one could attach other garment elements. The wearer was free to individualize an outfit in improbable, even unconceivable ways, not obligated to the fashions of the past. And as she consciously or unconsciously reconstructed history, fabric became the fluid medium of time.

This became most evident in the artist's fashion show/performance that was a part of *Cottage Industry*. Two models were clothed and unclothed in a continuously evolving motion by the seamstress-artists who were, themselves, clothed in the dressmaker's "muslins"—mere shadows of the finished garments. The reverie of the moment floated between states of individual identity and historic enactment. In suggesting the garments intended use and the wearer's options of mix-and-match, the artist not only pointed to our complicity in history, but also through palpable means, she offered a creative act of reestablishing continuity with the past.

Cottage Industry functions on a larger scale too. It was not just the individual garments or ensembles that were the works of art, but the entire commercial-artistic enterprise. Puett's practice transgresses art and nonart, traversing the otherwise exclusive territories of commercial fashion, fine arts, and architecture. She does not obscure or blur these distinctions to make clothing "art," but rather asserts the difference. Thus, *Cottage Industry* existed in many realms at once. The garments were fabricated and displayed in a house originally from 1852, although the house itself became an element of the work as the installation spread throughout six rooms. It was a home-based workshop; a temporary, small, clothing manufacturing business—a cottage industry—and a performance with other artists and skilled persons creating clothing in public view. It was a vision of Puett, as well as a collaboration of many artists working toward a common end and a group exhibition of works by those who contributed elements to the project (hats and patterns for sale, small works of art and artifacts also on display, a musical soundtrack, a Web site, fashion photographs).¹⁴ It was a store and a history-museum display and a heritage center and a living archive and a family reunion site and a temporary public artwork and a local artists' space for gatherings and exchange. It was a carefully crafted representation and an open, generous act upon which others could inscribe their ideas and impressions.

The site of this project—a nineteenth-century house permeated by a rich layering of imagery and an aura of nostalgia—compelled us to remember while, with each step taken through these spaces, challenged viewers to place themselves in this unfolding story. Located near the shipping docks in historic

J. Morgan Puett, *Cottage Industry*, 2002, installation view (opposite).

14. See also the artist's Web site www.jmorganpuett.com for full documentation of this and other projects.



downtown Charleston, the house is one of only two surviving residencies of the once-thriving African-American community of Ansonborough (which former residents called “The Borough”). The homes at #35 Calhoun and its twin at #35-1/2 (dubbed “The Borough Houses” at the 2002 Spoleto Festival), are sites of resistance to never-ending waves of change, progress, and

gentrification. They are also sentinels to the memory of the past from which emanates a local history of longshoremen, laborers, artisans, and their families. Deeper still are their roots in slavery.

Puett, a Southerner herself from Hahira in southern Georgia, takes as her protagonists for *Cottage Industry* Southern women of both black and white races. They have the power to make and weave, to retell and sustain history. It is fortuitous but, perhaps, not coincidental that Puett’s first collaborators in this work were women—Rebecca Campbell and Catherine Braxton, the owners of “The Borough Houses.” Along with Puett, they gave birth to this project, nurtured it, providing volumes of material (quilts, clothes, family belongings) through which they evoked memories as they aimed to reconstruct history and heal.

Cloth has a regenerative power. Dyeing or weaving in some cultures has been described as an analog to women’s reproductive powers. Before the industrial period, lore had it that spirits imparted “socially binding protective powers to cloth,” but such positive intent was twisted to a “malevolent message implicit in such a devil-pact,” as in tales such as Rumpelstiltskin, the story of a woman’s bondage in which she gives up her first child, that “pits the goals of production against the goals of reproduction.”¹⁵ With *Cottage Industry*, Puett aims to acknowledge and revitalize women’s contributions as keepers of culture, and her use of cloth acknowledges its role in the transmission of sacred ancestry. Thus, Puett reaffirms the archetypal power of cloth in culture as a regenerative life force, imbued with social and spiritual meaning. The disenchantment of cloth making brought about by the shift from cultural to corporate systems of production that stripped it of its spiritual force may, with the work of Puett, become *reenchanted*.¹⁶

Puett dissects aspects of history, then pieces it back together to make a cultural story of whole cloth again. In cultures where cloth was a source of cultural or actual wealth, cloth was maintained in continuous lengths. Continuity transmitted a spiritual force, making sacred connections with the past, binding the present members of the society to their ancestral lineage, and strengthening the core of cultural history. By contrast, cut cloth is an operational practice of fashion which, by definition, is about style and the rapid overturns of identities. Fashion is the antithesis of continuity; it discards the old and disrupts memory in favor of the new. Cut cloth finds its equivalent, in production terms, in cottage-industry practices: the historical condition of nonorganized textile workers based in their own homes, paid by the piece, cut off from larger profit-making structures and industrial history, working on fragments in fragmentary ways, remaining unnamed, at unmarked locations, and invisible in the identity of the product. This system offers no spiritual connection to cloth and disempowers women.

Puett’s *Cottage Industry* refutes, in physical and political terms, the severing of history. It makes its mode of production transparent with all stages of manufacture in full view, and it reveals the hidden value of the textile worker’s labor. A shoe purchased at Nike for \$100 bears no relation to the pay received by the Asian worker; garments bought for throw-away prices indicate just how low the price can go and still ensure a profit margin—even lower are the wages of the makers. By contrast, Puett asked her “workers,” the artists and artisans with whom she collaborated on production, to record their actual labor in hours and in anecdotes of pleasure and frustration. Their journal entries recording daily activities hung from clipboards, and from these the “real price” of making a garment was calculated. In its breadth and complexity, *Cottage Industry* reassembled these facts and other parts of lived history. But this work was much more. It had an uncommon vitality indebted to cloth, with its meanings in substance and form. And it was from cloth that Puett created garments to *remember* and allowed for other meanings to accrue.

J. Morgan Puett, *Cottage Industry*, 2002, installation view.



15. Weiner and Schneider, p. 13. In this same volume, see also the essay, “Rumpelstiltskin’s Bargain: Folklore and the Merchant Capitalist Intensification of Linen Manufacture in Early Modern Europe,” pp. 177-214. For a study of the relationship of indigo dyeing and concepts around menstruation, conception, and childbirth among the Kodi of rural Indonesia see Janet Hoskins, “Why Do Ladies Sing the Blues? Indigo Dyeing, Cloth Production, and Gender Symbolism in Kodi,” pp. 141-273.

16. Weiner and Schneider, p. 13. Here we can contrast what Weiner and Schneider call “the ‘disenchantment’ of cloth manufacture under capitalism” with what Suzi Gablik develops as the thesis and paradigm shift of the “re-enchantment of art,” which is a reconstructive rather than deconstructive form of postmodernism. See Suzi Gablik, *The Reenchantment of Art* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1991).

Planted Names

For Kimsooja, cloth and time are inextricably connected. Her art taps into the archetypal images and meanings of cloth as a force of creation and continuity, beginning with her work using colorful bedcovers from her native South Korea. Given to newly married couples as a promise of long life, happiness, love, and

wealth, these quotidian fabrics are replete with meaning. They are sites of intimacy and sleep, newborn babies are swaddled in them, the dead wrapped in them. In the artist's words, they are the "frames of our bodies and our lives."¹⁷ They have a memory. In her installations, she spreads them on the floor, hangs them like laundry, or ties them up to make *bottari* or bundles as one might to carry life's belongings. In *Cities on the Move* (1997), for example, she sat atop *bottari* piled high on a truck that followed a path through her homeland. It is also in the act of sewing, connecting fabrics together, that Kimsooja expresses human existence. Her video installation *Needle Woman* (1999-2001) placed the artist as the eye of a needle through which passed crowds of people in eight metropolises around the world.

Important to Kimsooja's Charleston project—a work in two parts—was cloth's ability to translate between generations over time, to transgress the realms of the living and the dead, and to mediate between the domains of past and present.¹⁸ A continuous thread exists between family members and ancestors, and cloth can bestow a vitalizing power on the living or, invested with authority, be the means of passing on heritage through lineage.¹⁹ Like the lifelines of Shonibare's astronauts or Puett's enfolding layers of women's history, Kimsooja attempts to evoke spirits across continents and centuries. She uses cloth, and allusions to it, to connect to the land and water, and to the stories these places tell of pride and pain. And while her background, geographically and historically, is more remote from Charleston than the other two artists, it is Kimsooja who knows best the pain of displacement. Her *bottari* had emerged as a reflection of growing up along South Korea's Demilitarized Zone, "always between danger and peace." It is she, as a South Korean, who actually lived through civil war.

One aspect of Kimsooja's Spoleto project was at Drayton Hall, a former rice plantation and a masterpiece of Georgian Palladian architecture, and a place "beautiful and humble," in the artist's words, where "I can feel the souls and spirits in this house." The Drayton family history is a continuous line from before 1742, when the structure was completed, to today. So, too, is the history of other resident families who labored there. Some are buried up the road, most in unmarked graves; some are the ancestors of Rebecca

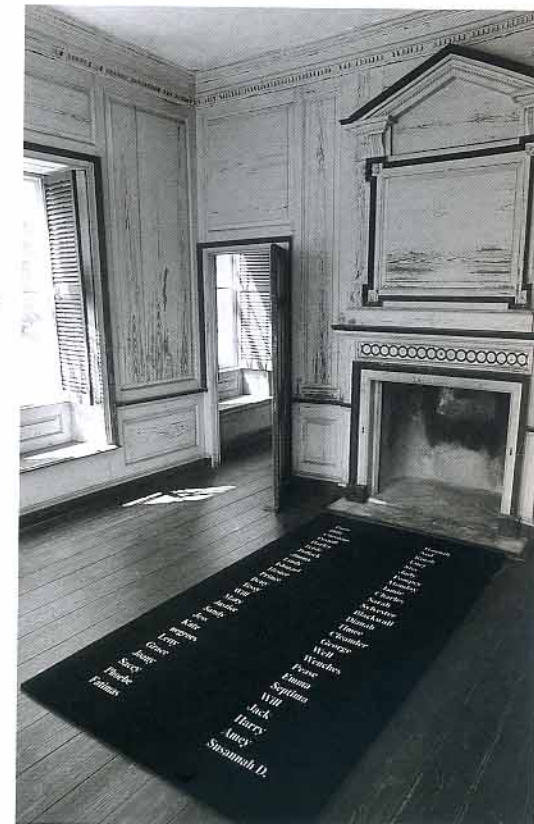
Campbell and Catherine Braxton, owners of "The Borough Houses" that housed Puett's project.

At the plantation, Kimsooja sited *Planted Names*, four unique woven wool carpets. Each bears its own set of African and African-American names tied to this land: the two smaller carpets draw from the earliest extant inventories of the 1700s, while the larger pair form a single, continuous alphabetical listing of names from the eighteenth through twentieth centuries. White text on black creates a stark, simple presentation, signifying the interweaving of black and white cultures. Placed at one's feet, they are like grave markers to *remember* the names, in most cases, made public here for the first time. Situated in the symmetrical spaces surrounding the Great Hall, the artist transformed these rooms into places of meditation. As the names filled these areas, they also filled the imagination of visitors.

Creating a continuous line in history where records are scant is a process of interpretation and joint meaning-making. Initially, Kimsooja's story was to end with the Civil War, but dialogue with Drayton Hall's director George McDaniel raised other issues of pressing import. Taking the concept beyond:

Commemoration of those who lived outside freedom and who left home not by choice, maybe it's easier for us to think only of slavery. I hesitate to do so because that omits those who came after emancipation and who lived through the harshness and violence of the segregated South of the post-Civil War and onwards, and who had to leave in search of a better life elsewhere. Most of the depressions in the ground in the cemetery are probably the graves of those people. They, too, lived outside the officially recorded history . . . In regard to slaves, there's little to be done about hearing the story and passing it on, because most of the evidence has either been recorded or not. Ending about 135 years ago, the history of slaves is either in archives or not. But with those born later, there're still opportunities to hear stories and pass them on, so that they don't remain "outside history." I guess that's what concerns me about stopping at 1865. I want commemoration and action.²⁰

In her past work, Kimsooja has used existing cloths, translating *objets-trouvés* into art. But here, for the first time in her *oeuvre*, it was necessary to make the material new. Just as Puett discovered in her research of slave



Kimsooja, *Planted Names*, 2002, one of four wool carpets. From the Evoking History: The Memory of Water exhibition at the 2002 Spoleto Festival USA.

20. George McDaniel in an email to the author, February 13, 2002.

17. This and following quotes are from a conversation with the author, June 2002.

18. Weiner and Schneider, pp. 6-7. The Sakalava people of Madagascar wrap their dead royalty in cotton cloth. They can return as spirits possessing the living and, in doing so, demand being wrapped in cloths appropriate to their status. The possessed person, thus clothed, becomes the reincarnation of the deceased through the power of these fabrics, *tamba*; they speak to the living, intervene in current events, make prophecies, and play a political role.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8. In the funerals of the Kuba, in Zaire, cloth of sufficient quality and quantity is required for "peaceful transition to the afterlife" or else the dead will "interfere malevolently in the lives of the living."

artifacts in museums, so devalued were the lives of those in this class that little if anything remains. Out of this necessity, the literal act of weaving the carpets became intrinsic to the concept of the work. Their making became tied to the very sense of Drayton Hall as a place of production, a working plantation. It was echoed, too, in the artist's memories of houses in the Korean landscape where life was interwoven with nature through agriculture. Thus, the carpets, made on the loom, methodically row-after-row, were likened to the land cultivated row-by-row. Each movement of yarn through the warp was like the planting of a seed in the soil, each shoot of wool piling like a blade of the rice plant—a process that finally resulted in a woven carpet, a planted field. These carpets, planted on the floor, grounded the remembrance of others as they became a memorial to their labor, the forced labor that built this house and plantation.

Planted Names was deeply motivated by empathy arising from the artist's experience a few years back when she stood at the shore of Lagos and looked out from the other side of the Atlantic, and was overwhelmed by the image of the Middle Passage crossing. This tie across the ocean was consummated with a companion work, *A Lighthouse Woman*, that extended the metaphorical and historic line from Drayton Hall, past "The Borough Houses," into Charleston Harbor, and out to sea. Sited at the point where the Ashley meets the Atlantic, Kimsooja used a 60-minute computer

program of changing, saturated-colored lights to transform this silent, solitary tower into a rhythmically breathing woman's body, inhaling and exhaling, moving with the tides. Like a needle through which lives have passed traveling to and from these shores, the lighthouse also became a memorial to the peoples of Africa and Europe who came to America, and to all their losses sustained through time. Yet while pain is evoked in the carpets and lighthouse, Kimsooja's personal and artistic response is not one of anger but compassion. Thus, in their solemnity *Planted Names* and *A Lighthouse Woman* are joined in spirit: one a witness to slave passage from the Old World to the new, the other a monument to slaves and others who have contributed to the low country and who all call Charleston "home."

The value of these works by Shonibare, Puett, and Kimsooja is transgression of place and time. While not from Charleston, these artists evoke powerful emotions of particular resonance there. At this juncture in art and cultural history, and with works such as those discussed, perhaps we have reached a maturation of the postmodern critique that allows for the coexistence of ostensibly contradictory states: the culturally specific and the universal.²¹ In this endeavor, cloth has an extraordinary articulate quality to speak across borders, to be both local and universal. Hyde points to "a category of art, that occupies the field between polarities"—past and present, black and white, here and there—"and by that articulates them, simultaneously making and bridging their differences."²² It is within this realm that these artists work, not so much to unify and resolve cultural differences, but to mediate them, serving as translators where there is little communication. Here, too, cloth is a powerful medium, possessed with a malleability to be both an expression of multiple, even conflicted meanings, and to bind us together in an expression of the universality of experience. In their common role as cultural translators, Shonibare, Puett, and Kimsooja use cloth as communication, fashioning material with memory.

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21. Stephen Batchelor, *Buddhism Without Beliefs: A Contemporary Guide to Awakening* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1997), p. 20. From a Buddhist point of view, Batchelor writes: "The challenge now is to imagine and create a culture of awakening that both supports individual dharma practice and addresses the dilemmas of an agnostic and pluralist world."

22. Hyde, p. 268. Hyde remarks: "The image could also be translated into political terms, in which case trickster becomes the agent of polycultural situations, those in which groups have a kind of commerce between them that neither turns to conflict nor brings unity, so that they may have separate identities without ever becoming wholly separated from one another. Most debates over 'multiculturalism' split into two camps: those who argue for unity (we have to be one nation!), and those who argue for separation (we must preserve our identity!), and thus fail to find the third position (*e pluribus unum*)," p. 267.



Kimsooja, *Planted Names* (detail).