

The Back Page: Absence and Presence: Disembodied Clothing as Relic by Jennifer Smith-Windsor

Jennifer Smith-Windsor: Fragment: wool, lace, ribbon, embroidery floss, paper, cotton Nina Felshin considers in her article *Clothing as Subject* that, 'Clothing more than any other object or possession is closely identified with the body of the absent wearer. Clothing acts as a surrogate by suggesting his or her presence' and is 'seen as a densely coded system of signification that transmits psychological, sexual and cultural messages' (Felshin p. 20). Juliet Ash writes of the universality of clothing. 'Even if people are dispossessed of all other things', she observes 'they usually have some form of clothing to wear' (Ash p.131). Clothing is unique to the human race and excludes no one. It transcends borders, class, gender and race. Garments protect us, conceal us, and define us. They are as necessary to our existence as breathing and yet so much a part of our daily lives that we often dismiss them. We are inseparable from them. Clothes become our second skin; our shield, our physical defense against the elements but also act as a psychological safeguard against others and the outside world. They are at once both bridge and barrier.

As we dress ourselves, each layer builds our confidence; the underwear lying next to our skin is intimate and reassuring. The shirt, the blouse, the trousers, the skirt enables us to move into our domestic space where we can interact with ones close to us. And finally, the donning of the overcoat, the scarf and hat, this final layer buffers our 'self' from the outside world. Each article has a strict hierarchy which must be followed so that we can remain feeling secure and at ease. We would never dream of going to work in our underwear or going to sleep in an overcoat. Clothing communicates to us on so many levels and can elicit intense emotional responses. It is meant to be worn and acts as an extension of the living body. We become acutely aware of the wearer's absence when the garment is abandoned. Clothes without a wearer can have an unsettling effect on us (Wilson p.1). Disembodied clothing represents both presence and absence (Ash p.135). It is this complex relationship between clothing and the wearer which deserves further consideration.

Susan Stewart's book *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, examines in detail the significance of the souvenir/relic and the fetish. She writes in her chapter on 'Objects of Desire: The Souvenir: The Selfish' of man's search for the 'authentic experience' and subsequently the search for an object that will embody this 'authentic experience' (p.133). Stewart contends that the souvenir or relic fulfils this need (p.134). The attribution of significance to inanimate objects is a basic human characteristic. Properly defined, the relic is 'an object having interest, because of its age or associations with the past; a keepsake; a souvenir' (Gage Canadian Dictionary p. 951). A fetish is a material object believed to contain a spirit or have magical powers, or anything regarded with unreasoning reverence or devotion (GCD p.438). In either case, the relic and fetish seek to capture the essence of an experience, a person or in some instances both.

Stewart clarifies:

'...the memory of the body is replaced by the memory of the object, a memory standing outside the self and thus presenting both a surplus and lack of significance- it is saturated with meanings that can never be fully revealed to us (p.133).

An article of clothing selected as souvenir; as relic, evokes the presence of the absent wearer and the experience of the absent wearer. However, not all and not every piece of clothing has this capacity. It is only items that represent an unrepeatable experience that warrant our memorializing (Stewart. 135). Once the function or usefulness ceases and the object is removed from its normal context does the object gain significance. Only upon graduation does the school jacket become a covetable object. Only after a child takes her first step do her knitted booties get wrapped in tissue and placed in a special box. Only on the death of a loved one does their favourite cardigan assume a reverential place in the closet. [this article will be printed in its entirety in Volume 6 Issue 2 "Comfort Zone" Summer 2010]

Jennifer Smith-Windsor, November 30th, 2009 Jennifer Smith-Windsor Sleeve Paper, lace, silk, cotton, embroidery floss, paint
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Jennifer Smith-Windsor Bio :

Jennifer is currently enrolled in the Fine Contemporary Crafts program at the Ottawa School of Art specializing in textiles. She recently repatriated to Canada, after having lived in England for the past twelve years. Her work explores the capacity of cloth to evoke memory.