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Button Box: An Exploration of Matriarchy and Material

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Button Box: An Exploration of Matriarchy and Material

Rozlin M. Opolka

Bachelor of Fine Arts Candidate

Lee Honors College Thesis

November 2020

Overview

Rozlin Opolka's Lee Honors College Thesis was completed in November 2020. Committee consisted of Vince Torano (thesis chair), Cat Crotchett, and Patrick Wilson. The thesis took form in a visual arts exhibition exploring the relationship of the artmaking material to the concept of matriarchy. The specific material explored in this exhibition is buttons. When the rich historical connotation of buttons paired with the personal aspect of the collection process of buttons in the artists own family the thesis came about in three large scale artworks. The following artist statement will detail the process and conceptual importance of combining buttons as a material with the concept of matriarchy. The exhibition entitled *Button Box* took place in person on November 16th-20th in the Richmond Center for Visual arts DeVries student art gallery. The complete exhibition can also be found at Rozlinopolka.com.

Below: The three artworks of Rozlin Opolka's show *Button Box*



The Matriarch
11' x 11'
Five Paneled Portrait
Buttons, Oil Paint, House Paint,
& Charcoal on Canvas



Button Quilt
4' x 7'
Hanging Sculpture
Buttons & Copper Wire



History Wall
Various Dimensions

About the Artist & Social Media

Rozlin Opolka graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Art with an emphasis in painting and a minor in Entrepreneurship. She hails from a small town in southeast Michigan and has shown her work in several local exhibitions. These include the *Collegiate Art Exhibition* at Lansing Art Gallery, *West Michigan Area Art Show* at the Kalamazoo Institute for Arts, and *Hot off the Press* at the Kalamazoo Book Arts Center, as well as a feature in the student slideshow for the Society of North American Goldsmiths.

In her time at Western Michigan University she was involved with the Kalamazoo Book Arts Center as an intern, office of Student Engagement as a LeadCorp intern, and a student employee in the galleries of the Richmond Center for Visual Arts. She plans to continue her path in higher education to one day become an art professor. You can find Rozlin Opolka on Instagram @rozlinopolka or her website at rozlinopolka.com

YouTube Links for Artists Talks

Rozlin's Artist Talk:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rpay8a3Y5u8&feature=emb_logo

Mandy's Artist Talk:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oZZyyzEUDEU&t=71s>

Discussion on Collaboration:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n8N1ikD21SE&feature=emb_logo

Show Tour:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zc5F9hBQcJY>

Artist Statement

From the conception of the button (c. 500 BCE) to the “golden age of buttons” in the early-mid 1800s the button can be defined as a decoration, artifact, collectible, social identifier, or a fastener. The button today is part of a specific tradition in many families, most often passed down through the women of the family as a collection of material in a box, jar, or tin—these buttons might become a source of play for children or stockpile for projects. Buttons hold an unassuming power, much like the matriarchs of a family. As buttons hold together two sides of a garment, matriarchal ties hold together a family or community.

Several women have donated their button boxes to this exhibition, the majority of which were collected in the 1930s during the great depression when little was wasted or thrown away. Nowadays, buttons are collected but rarely used for their original purpose. Nevertheless, the tradition of button collecting remains. The relationship has changed from survival to sentimentality; button boxes now hold memories. Memory of clothing worn by family members, times of sacrifice in the service, or of sewing at the kitchen table on a sunny afternoon.

During my own childhood the button box was simple, but magical entertainment. Stringing buttons with my chubby fingers to make necklaces for my sister, I would hear stories about abstract relatives, what articles of clothing the buttons came from, and their lives. I created these works to capture the collections and their relationship to their matriarchs. Buttons have been woven together in the hanging piece reminiscent of a communal quilt. Each button collection makes up one square that was woven by myself or someone close to me. This new collection created connections between myself and matriarchs of other families and gave me access to personal histories I otherwise would not be privy to. These histories are often remembered because of a specific button, making the button box an important part of memory keeping.

The portraits on the wall are of matriarchs past and present, some I have met in person and some only through the stories told when a button from their house dress is found in the button box. Just as buttons build up a narrative of the button box owner each woman had a hand in building up my family, community, and me. This buildup of material and memory brings me to my own matriarchy, illustrated in the large-scale portrait. This homage depicts a likeness of my Meme, but because of the strong genes in my family all of us ladies look similar. This portrait is representative of my matriarchs of the past, present and future and their contribution to the button box.

Donors

Button Donors - *Thank you for sharing your material and memories of matriarchy*

Jesse Morris, Barbara Pierce,
Marsha DeGroot,
& Amanda Bonnville

Hazel Allen, Hilda Helverson,
Lillian Cutting,
& Lillian VanHouten

Renay Kohler

Anne Allen

Arielle Riggins

Virginia Platte, Jean Porter,
& Katie Platte

Donna Bainbridge

Vicki Cook

Darlene Zdral, Marlene Zdral,
Nichole, Natalie & Jax Stroh

Cathleen Ann Haight,
Lori Ann Todd,
& Melina Ann Wilcox

Sally Barr

Gail Woodowski

Kate Bates

Ruthanne Dean

Bessie Kelly, Katherine Priesman, & Penny Pierce

Irene Goforth

Carol Stanton

Madelyn Lulich

Niki Vastis, Dimitra Vastis,
& Kristen Theys

Dessie DeGroot
& LuAnn DeGroot

Maria Opolka

Adriane Little

Jane Malenski & Amanda Hardies

Lucy Reese, Elise Dingman,
Velma Jean Dingman,
& Diane Kelley

Diane Wilcox

Bernice Schuchaskie, Edith Harris, & Billy
Vanamberg

Mary McIssac

Carol Stuck

Danielle Brown

Katherine Cornwell,
Ruth Beech, Elenaor Hesch,
& Christine Hesch

Barbara Wassner, Joan Grindel,
& Susan Grindel

Kelly Vincent

Ethel Britton, Arline BanEck,
& LoriAnn Swails

Cat Crotchett

Katie Arana & Caro Arana

Barbara Kowalski

Special thank you to the makers who helped create the button quilt

Marsha DeGroot, Amanda Bonnville, Aliza Opolka, Melina Wilcox, Camille Day, Tay Thorpe, Katie Mumby,
& Emma Cunningham