

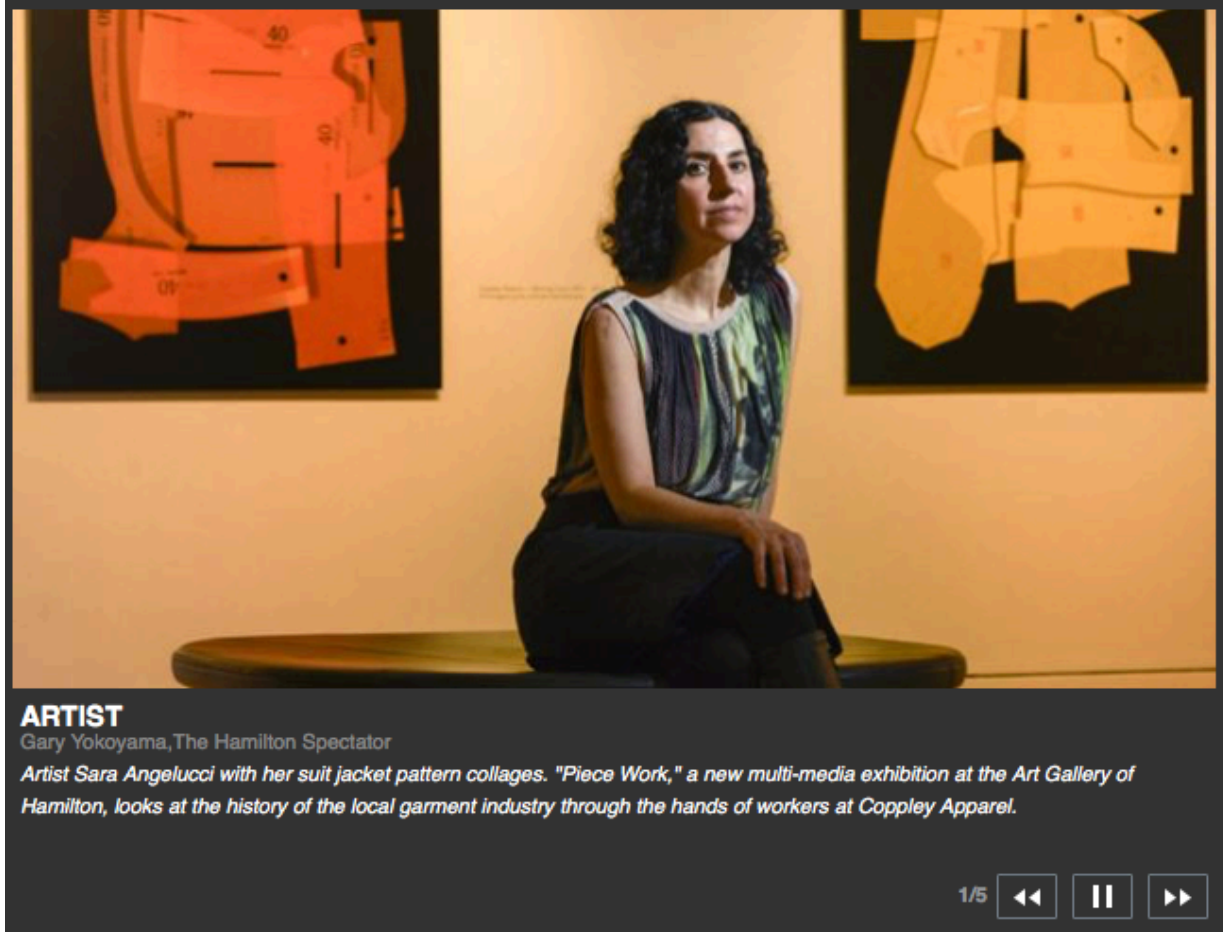
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# THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

March 9, 2017

Behind the stone walls of Copley: Lives connected by threads Multimedia artist Sara Angelucci explores the power of piece work in her new AGH exhibit, which honours the garment workers, the immigrant experience and her late mother, Nina

Hamilton Spectator By Graham Rockingham



## ARTIST

Gary Yokoyama, The Hamilton Spectator

*Artist Sara Angelucci with her suit jacket pattern collages. "Piece Work," a new multi-media exhibition at the Art Gallery of Hamilton, looks at the history of the local garment industry through the hands of workers at Copley Apparel.*

1/5 ⏪ ⏸ ⏩

Through the York Boulevard windows of Copley Apparel, you can see some of the high-end made-to-measure suits the Hamilton company has been making in the same stone building for 134 years.

You can't see, however, the 300 people sewing them together, piece by piece.

For Toronto-based multimedia artist and photographer Sara Angelucci, it was important to tell the stories of the workers who sew behind those stone walls at York and MacNab through her art.

Her late mother, Nina, was one of them. So when Angelucci was asked by the Art Gallery of Hamilton to prepare an exhibition to help mark Canada's 150th birthday, she knew she wanted to focus on that building just a couple of blocks away from the AGH.

"I really thought about my parents and how this community welcomes immigrants," Angelucci says. "I wanted to see where my mum worked."



## SUITS

Gary Yokoyama, *The Hamilton Spectator*

*Photo installation of stages of making suits.*

2/5



Angelucci's parents came to Canada from Italy in the 1950s. Her father found work in Stelco, where he worked for 27 years. Her mother found work sewing pants at Copley. She worked there for 10 years, paid piece work, according to the number of pieces she finished each day. It was her first paying job.

"She was very proud of how fast and accurate she was because the faster you sew the more money you make," recalls Angelucci, who grew up in Hamilton and Waterdown. "To do piece work, you have to be good."

Both her parents died in the early '90s, and she was never able to fully ask them about their early years together and the experience of finding a new life in a foreign land like Canada.

Angelucci spent nine months at Copley, taking photographs, formulating images, developing themes, piecing together collages, recording interviews and, most importantly, getting to know the workers. She even met an employee of more than 50 years who remembered her mother, three sewing machines away, in the pants department.

Angelucci learned that dozens of languages representing more than 35 nations are spoken in the Copley sewing rooms, most of the workers immigrants like her mother, some refugees. Syria, India, Afghanistan, Greece, Italy, the Philippines and Hong Kong — lives all connected through the threads they sew. There is even a Muslim prayer room in the factory.

When Angelucci approached Copley management, they welcomed her into the plant and gave her free rein to explore. At first the workers were suspicious, but that quickly changed. "As soon as I said that my mom had worked here, it broke down the barriers and I was like part of the family," said Angelucci.

The exhibition, which fills three rooms at the AGH, is called "Piece Work" and runs until May 14. It consists of 12 main elements, combining video, photography, voice collages, chromogenic prints, and many spools of thread.

One installation, entitled "Votive Threads," consists of a Copley sewing table and 24 spools of thread — many from her mother's own collection — each topped with a flickering electric light, transforming them into prayer candles.

"One day I came across all these thread holders organized on wooden dowels on a custom-made shelf," Angelucci explains. "On the wall directly above the threads, someone had pinned a picture of the Virgin Mary. I immediately saw the image of the threads as votive candles."



## VOTIVE

Gary Yokoyama, *The Hamilton Spectator*

*"Votive Threads" consists of a Coppely sewing table and 24 spools of thread, each topped with a flickering electric light, transforming them into prayer candles.*

4/5



The most striking part of the exhibition, "Mano D'oro," is a wall of 24 photographs, each depicting the hands of a different sewer. Only two are men. Every pair of hands offers hints to the identity or cultural makeup of the sewer. "I see them as portraits," she says about the hands. "Each one is performing for me the way they handle the fabric to guide it through the sewing machine."

For this part of the exhibition, Angelucci set up a studio in the factory. She chose the final 24 from a total of 800 different shots. A more abstract part of "Piece Work" is called "Coppely Patterns." It consists of 8 large collages photoshopped from the scanned-in life-size images of suit patterns. Each suit is made from more than 100 pieces, each with its own panel.

"I fell in love with the shapes," she says. "I thought they were beautiful objects and enigmatic. I layered them. Once I allowed myself to play, then I really had a great time."

The most haunting part of "Piece Work" is called "The Sewers' Chorus," which Angelucci calls "the heart" of the exhibition. It's a 15-minute, eight-channel audio work formed from individual interviews with the workers. The sewers talk about the nature of their work and why they came to Canada. Some of the stories of their past lives in places like Syria and Afghanistan are disturbing.

A few days after the exhibit opened in February, Coppely Apparel treated all 300 employees to lunch at the art gallery to see "Piece Work" for themselves.

"They loved it," said Angelucci. "They were in tears. We got very emotional."

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Piece Work

**What**

An exhibition by Hamilton-born artist Sara Angelucci

**Where**

Art Gallery of Hamilton

**When**

On view until May 14

**Artist's Talk**

Sara Angelucci in conversation with Alana Traficante, acting curator of contemporary art, AGH. Thursday, March 9, 6:30 p.m. Cash bar. Free admission.