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Carl Stewart's "Wholecloth" at The Arbor Gallery



Carl Stewart with *clò mòr*, 2023. Photo: David Barbour.

Excerpted from Victoria Solan's forthcoming article on the work of Carl Stewart — to read the article in its entirety, pick up Studio's Fall/Winter issue, available in October.

Wholecloth, like much of Carl Stewart's oeuvre, proposes a new role for the 21st century textile craftsperson as someone who loosens restrictions and forges new narratives, working within local and global movements. This new craftsperson is a gleaner as much as a creator. They might draw attention to thriftiness or revel in luxury — or both. They might, as Stewart does, handweave new cloth (with its much higher labour cost and craft associations) out of the cheapest discarded materials, exposing inconsistencies and contradiction in the way value is assigned.

As textile makers know, wholecloth is uncut fabric straight from the loom. By carefully unwinding discarded and unwanted textiles — such as the military tent — and then remaking them into handwoven post-consumer wholecloth, Stewart explores the expressive potential of soiled material. Stewart’s practice is exceptional for recasting aspects of textile traditions associated with revulsion and exclusion. In doing so, he forges new spaces for inclusion and acceptance in nylon, canvas and wool.

All of the materials in wholecloth began as commercially manufactured textiles: a tent, several mattresses, tea bag strings, old clothes and used sheets. Each retains an imprint of human activity, the intimacy of contact with bodies. He has made 25 pieces of recycled wholecloth since beginning the project in 2017. Each piece addresses questions central to Stewart’s exploration of social and political boundaries produced by textiles: “What if (wholecloth) is made from recycled or repurposed textiles? Does it limit the possibilities? Does it retain any vestiges of its previous life? Does it resonate in the hand, to the touch? Does it remember?”

“As I was unweaving the tent, I was thinking about the queer trope of the soldier and how we fantasize, romanticize and fetishize the man in uniform,” Stewart writes to me later in an email. “But what I feel is most significant about the tent is the fact that it is a two-man tent. And though we can never know if the tent was ever used on a battlefield or really know the nature of the relationship of the two men who shared the tent, that in the dark and in the cold and so far from home, at least they were not alone.

Carl Stewart’s work can be seen at Wholecloth, at The Arbor Gallery, Vankleek Hill, Ont., August 21-October 1, 2023, and will be exhibited as part of Thresholds at Art-Image, Maison de la Culture, Gatineau, Que., September 12-October 27, 2024.