A Stunning Red Dress

British artist Kirstie Macleod conceived the Red Dress Embroidery Project as a platform for women around the world to tell their personal stories through embroidery. Fourteen years in the making, the dress, recently on view at the Frick, Pittsburgh, continues its journey to the Fuller Craft Museum in Brockton, Massachusetts through May 19, 2024. Functioning as both an aesthetic object and a garment, it features the contributions of three hundred eighty artists from fifty-one countries and although eleven contributors were men and two were non-binary, the dress has become a representation of trans-national unity and women’s self-expression.

In a recent telephone interview from London, England, Macleod had just settled her two young boys in front of the television, giving this single mom a quiet moment to provide the backstory on the birth and evolution of the Red Dress project. “I spent most of my childhood living in different countries. I was fascinated with people and experienced a wide range of cultures. I became aware of women’s rights and vast inequalities early on. I also always knew I was an artist.”

Macleod’s work is grounded in fine arts with a focus on textiles and costume. Her earliest important commissions, starting in 2008, were installations involving her textile work combined with photography, film, and painting. Her ideas of identity, inequality, and the subconscious took a distinctly feminist approach. It was a commission in 2009 funded by the British Council, Dubai, that triggered the start of the Red Dress project. Macleod went to a café to think about what form this new project would take. She started drawing and the concept came to her very quickly. “I realized this project could weave all the elements of my life together—my interest in cross-cultural collaboration—while celebrating women’s identity, bringing my art and theirs, out of the gallery into the world.”

The dress is comprised of many panels of burgundy silk dupioni. Initially, separate panels were sent to one hundred forty-one commissioned embroiderers, many of whom came from impoverished circumstances in Egypt, Mexico, and South Africa—including refugees from Palestine, Syria, and Ukraine, among others. Each textile artist was told to use their skills in whatever way they desired. There were no restrictions regarding color, design, or imagery. Some of the embroiderers were established professionals, while others used needle and thread for the first time to tell their stories. The complexity of the designs varies widely, yet it is the elegant design of the dress, sparking comparisons to Renaissance finery, that holts these visual elements together creating an encyclopedia of stitchery to explore. All the commissioned embroiderers were compensated for their work, and continue to receive a share of the earnings from exhibition fees and sales via an Etsy shop for Red Dress merchandise.

Initially, Macleod would wear the dress as an installation piece. It served as an extension of her own art practice. In 2015 she removed herself from the public presentation of the dress. On the Red Dress website, photos of women from the U.K. to Kosovo, to Chiapas, Mexico, along with short
videos highlighting the contributors—a third of whom were survivors of war or living in impoverished circumstances—are shown seeing the dress as a completed garment for the first time and in some cases wearing the dress. Now a mannequin displays the dress on its journey around the world. This is a case where a garment has become a symbol of empowerment, transcending borders both geographical and cultural and has come to represent much more than the sum of its parts.

Beth McLaughlin, artistic director and chief curator at the Fuller Craft Museum first heard about the Red Dress three years ago on social media. She approached Macleod about working on a U.S. tour and discovered that the timing was perfect since the artist had decided that in 2023, the dress would be complete. Prior to that, panels had continually been added and Macleod had been managing the project full-time for fourteen years. The dress first came to the U.S. in July 2023 via the Southern Vermont Arts Center prior to its engagement at the Frick and is supported through a partnership with the Fuller. McLaughlin had heard from curators at other institutions that had shown the dress that “people were weeping in the galleries” due to the emotional impact of seeing the work of so many women united in one iconic garment.

Continuing the process of community engagement which is an integral aspect of the project, each venue designs their own “calico dress,” made of panels of a white cotton/muslin fabric. Brockton volunteer Denise DeMore has been instrumental in organizing this outreach aspect of the exhibition. Anya Fairbairn (Fuller Craft Museum employee and artist) stenciled a design on some of the fabric that will be available for painting as well as quilted and stitched. Gateway Arts in Brookline, MA, as of this writing, tentatively accepted the invitation to do one of the panels and Fuller Craft Museum educators/docents will work on the other sections. Members of the community will be invited to create their own embroidered or painted stories on three panels during a Community Day Event. The Fuller has decided, rather than display the calico dress as a garment, that the panels will hang separately on the wall like textile art.

McLaughlin commented, “Kirstie is so intrepid, she usually travels with the dress in a suitcase on the plane.” Yet McLaughlin is equally intrepid. She is flying to Pittsburgh, picking up the dress, renting a car, and driving back nine hours to Brockton. That’s the way women get things done. Playing their handiwork that is now a part of this inspiring project, it seems Macleod’s goal to “shine a light” on women’s accomplishments in some of the darkest regions of the world has been met. Macleod has shown her colorful, stitchery-based, multimedia abstract work in galleries and museums around the world, with many pieces held in notable private and public collections. She recently has been elected an ambassador for the Textile Society for her “...sustained commitment to the Red Dress as a global community project, the outcome of which has become an icon of contemporary world textiles.” A fitting title to add to the accolades of this indomitable artist. There are plans to have Kirstie Macleod available at the Fuller for a closing event on May 19.

Cynthia Close is contributing editor for Documentary Magazine and writes regularly for Art New England and several other publications.

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