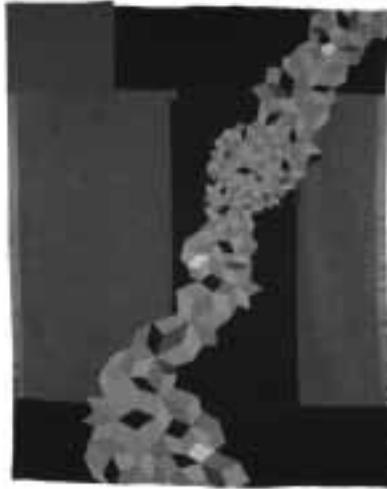


MARIE WATT



IN THE GARDEN (CORN, BEANS, SQUASH), 2003. RECLAIMED
WOOL, SATIN BINDING, AND THREAD.

SEPTEMBER 11, 2004 — JANUARY 3, 2005



MARIE WATT: A BLANKETED SPACE

PHOTO: ADAM MCISAAC

Marie Watt's work has a serene beauty. There is a sense of spaciousness and balance, and her fields of color have alluring depths. In her exhibition for *Continuum 12 Artists*, the serenity of the two-dimensional works on the walls contrasts with the towering stacks of folded blankets anchored at one end of the room. Watt's sculptural forms share some formal artistic relationships with the columns of Constantin Brancusi and George Morrison. Her two-dimensional works are related to hard-edged abstract painting. She also skillfully incorporates consideration of the intimate, cultural, and economic roles of blankets in our lives while maintaining a coherent, uncluttered aesthetic quality. The installation, *Blanket Stories*, successfully uses blankets as aesthetic objects without excising any of our capacity to relate to them as a comforting part of our daily lives.

At the other end of the gallery, soft-toned lithographs invite close inspection. *Braid*, *Star Quilt*, *Blankets*, and *Letter Ghosts* are tranquil abstractions based on the very substance of blankets. Watt's lithographed lines, like delicate threads, interweave to create an intimate examination of woven surfaces, reminding us that paper itself is composed of accumulated fibers. The artist sees both of the works titled *Braid* as a metaphor for the importance of community, which she experienced anew as family and friends gathered for sewing bees to complete these works for this exhibition. The cool abstraction of the group of lithographs is nicely balanced by sepia-toned photographs showing the vagaries of trying to manipulate a stack of floppy, unruly blankets into tidy columns. These candid photographs convey a good-humored sense of community effort.

Marie Watt, who is Seneca and lives in Oregon, creates works that reference everyday objects and experiences. Her work also has some specific meanings within Native American and First Nations cultures. Woven and quilted blankets are still important honoring gifts. All of the blankets in this installation are wool, though the blanket banners have been pieced together like the surface of a quilt. In any culture, blankets evoke safety, comfort, and warmth. Watt explains her attraction to blankets as medium and subject for art making:

One of the things that I thought was so great about blankets was how intimate our relationships are with them. I was really interested in how much of an honor it is to give a blanket away, not just receive one. I also like how people relate to blankets and how often people say, "Oh, I have a blanket like that." They are markers for memory and stories when people see them.¹

Watt calls attention to the blanket surface as a vehicle for pattern by hanging three blankets on the wall like banners. *Edson's Flag* is particularly striking because it includes an American flag completely intact beneath protective layers of wool. This particular flag is a part of the artist's family history:

I wanted to honor veterans and particularly Great Uncle Ed (Edson Plummer), who served in the Air Force in World War II as an airplane mechanic. Uncle Ed was also one of my mom's favorite uncles. The flag was passed from my grandmother, to my mom, to my brother-in-law, and back to my mom, and it eventually wound up with me. I think we all felt honored to have it, but there was also this amazing sense of responsibility that came with it.²

The large-scale wool banner titled *In the Garden (Corn, Beans, Squash)* has an abstracted vine-like form meandering across a warm-toned woolen field. The piece-work blocks have been sewn together by hand, and the design is based on a specific quilt pattern named the Morning Star, which has special meaning for the peoples of the Great Plains.³ The crisp, geometric star pattern is clearly evident in some areas, but as this star design continues outward, the angles shift and appear to slide through space. Viewed from a distance, the pattern creates a vertically spiraling movement, like the intertwining growth of the sacred plants corn, beans, and squash. A similar vertical pattern can be discerned in the stars of the American flag revealed in *Edson's Flag*.

This vertical movement is again echoed in the north end of the gallery, where two columns of blankets connect the floor and ceiling. Watt intends the stacks of blankets to mimic the architectural form of a column, a totem, or a ladder for Sky Woman,⁴ but their softness and irregularity is at odds with the solidity required of weight-bearing structures. Inevitably, blankets are associated with domesticity and comfort, and that is certainly the case here, though it is a much-handled comfort, and a worn and sometimes tattered domesticity. Many of the blankets are old and stretched out of shape. Some were given to Watt specifically for this project. Others were acquired from thrift shops:

One of the great things about the blankets is that there is no such thing as a square blanket. People have inhabited them and worn them. You put the sides together and you think they are going to match, but they don't. They are really wonderful in that way. I love how each blanket has its own personality. As a result, they also don't stack easily. They have this posture that is not really that different from the human body. The blankets have a will of their own.⁵

Watt also intends the presence of so many blankets carefully stacked together to evoke distribution and trade. Some of the blankets are old Hudson Bay "Point" blankets, a historically important item of trade between Native peoples and Europeans. These stacked blankets might also bring to mind charity blanket drives, disaster relief stockpiles, or even the absurdity of an overstuffed linen closet. As Watt observed, individual blankets in the stacks might bring back memories of a

blanket one has at home. Even the characteristic scent of so many wool blankets gathered together can trigger memories of winter nights, camp-outs, or picnics. One may be able to catch lingering scents from the former lives of these blankets, and a breath of cedar from the planks that form the base of the columns.

Marie Watt brings out the aesthetic qualities of what might ordinarily be considered a humble, utilitarian household object. The blanket banners call attention to blankets as a design surface while the lithographs bring us to the microscopic level of the interwoven fibers. The columns of blankets manage to evoke clutter and memory without disturbing the elegant minimalist aesthetics of the installation as a whole. *Blanket Stories* evokes both the subtle delicacy and the weighty history of the blankets in our lives.

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¹ Personal interview, June 25, 2004.

² Marie Watt, artist statement, August 2004.

³ See Jehanne Teilheit-Fisk, "American Indian Quilts: An Indigenous Product of the Contact Zone," in Allys Palladino-Craig, ed., *Dimensions of Native America: The Contact Zone* (Tallahassee, Florida: Florida State University Museum of Fine Arts, 1998), 58–67.

⁴ Sky Woman's fall from the Sky World leads to the creation of Turtle Island in the Iroquois creation story.

⁵ Personal interview, June 25, 2004.

