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Reid, Amy

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## ***Grandmother's Garden: Artist Statement***

Amy Reid

Can a quilt block be considered a document? Like a photograph of a person, can a quilt—its stitches, patterning, and assemblage—be read to understand its maker? Furthermore, can a quilt gesture beyond the personal, revealing larger political and economic histories embedded in its very fabric?

By treating the quilt as a document, *Grandmother's Garden*<sup>1</sup> considers how we can look at what are perceived to be innocuous objects, women's quilts, to gesture toward histories such as slavery, westward expansion, and the Great Depression.

Unprocessed cotton used as batting in a quilt made by an enslaved woman in Mississippi. Wedding quilts that traveled from Missouri to Montana, family heirlooms that endured the long journey by foot for the promise of the new frontier. Feed sacks, with faint remnants of text and advertising, used because there was no money to buy cloth.

Through the components in the document, the materials that make up a quilt—fabric, thread, and cotton batting—we can see and feel histories that often remain unassociated from the lives of women in the United States. As a document, a quilt weaves wider histories within the personal stitches of its makers. Stitches become words that can be read as questions.

Was quilting an escape for her? Did this quilt bring her joy? Was she afraid, lonely, fed up? Did she know how brilliant she was?

Using the artifacts of quilting, from unfinished quilt blocks to completed quilts; *Grandmother's Garden* explores how quilts can be used as evidence to construct women's histories in the continental United States. These narratives,

from the pioneer woman working alone on her quilt on a winter's night, to the midwestern church-going woman at a quilting bee, often articulate a white, working-class, female, heterosexual quilter. Furthermore, these narratives reinforce a particular type of American citizen: a resourceful mother, a patriotic do-gooder, an industrious homemaker. While there were and continue to be women quilters who adhere to some of these identities, there are also those who fall outside the usual archetypes of an American quilter, including enslaved women creating their own quilts during the antebellum south, to Mexican American stay-at-home mothers making quilts in the 1980s.

In treating the quilt as a historical document to be questioned, *Grandmother's Garden* also interrogates the documentary form. From prompting participants to "read" a collection of quilt blocks to asking women to reflect on their associations with quilting, *Grandmother's Garden* hinges on speculative interpretations of quilts and in so doing unstitches the documentary claim to factuality and truth. *Grandmother's Garden* looks at how quilting at large has transformed from a necessity, during periods such as the Great Depression, to a leisure activity at present, requiring resources and time that are not available to all in the twenty-first century. Through interviewing quilters, and hearing snippets of conversations, *Grandmother's Garden* points to the ways in which quilting has become an activity mostly enjoyed by recently retired baby boomers, and considers how quilting as an activity and artform will change as retirement security becomes more precarious for future generations. *Grandmother's Garden* gestures toward the materiality of the moving image, fluctuating between 16 mm and video, interweaving quilts held in museum, university, and state archives filmed on 16 mm, along with video footage of contemporary quilters, working and sharing their quilts. Moving between these two mediums, *Grandmother's Garden* points to the ways 16 mm and video gesture toward nostalgia, fiction, and the lived moment of the moving image. Through these formats, *Grandmother's Garden* shows how both the past and present instantiations of quilting are intermingled in our cultural imaginary in the United States. A temporal rerouting takes place, in which previous assumptions of quilting's history shot on 16 mm are held against the enactment of quilting in the present through the medium of video. Using the document of the quilt, *Grandmother's Garden* examines women's domestic labor of the past in relation to the neoliberal economy of the present.

Probing at the document and the documentary form, *Grandmother's Garden* attempts to upend neatly defined histories of American quilting to a more realistic and complex history.

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Amy Reid is a filmmaker whose work examines the intersections between gender, national identities, and labor. By exploring observational approaches and expanding on formal cinematic notions of time, structure, and narrative, Reid's work questions how labor is constructed in the filmic form. They have participated in selected screenings nationally and internationally including in New York, Shanghai, and California. Reid received a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Cooper Union before graduating with an MFA in Visual Arts from UC San Diego. Residencies include the Whitney Independent Study Program, Snug Harbor Artist Residency, and Seniors Partnering with the Arts Citywide. Reid is currently pursuing a doctoral degree in film and digital media at the University of California, Santa Cruz where they have been awarded a multiyear fellowship through the Feminist Media Histories Initiative.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Grandmother's Garden* can be viewed at <https://escholarship.org/uc/refract>.