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Matthew Cox: *Foot with Seeded Grass*, 2010. Embroidered X-Ray, 10" high. Courtesy of Jonathan Ferrara Gallery.



Gina Phillips: *Heroes and Villains*. Installation, 2011. Courtesy of Jonathan Ferrara Gallery.

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## *Sewn It Up*

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BY KATHY RODRIGUEZ

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MATTHEW COX  
*Refresh, Reconstitute, Embellish*  
GINA PHILLIPS  
*Heroes and Villains*  
Jonathan Ferrara Gallery  
New Orleans, LA

SINCE AT LEAST the 1970s, fiber artists have consciously blurred the distinction between fine art and craft. This deep but debatable line is still tread through the endeavors of the artists who continue to work in the medium. Fabric itself connotes warmth and wrapping, of enclosing the human form within it. Its tactile and sensual qualities evoke vessels, feelings of cocooning, storing,

and protecting. To some, its inherent functionality negates its fine art status. Contrarily, throughout time, fabric has acted much like portraiture or history paintings. Fabrics narrate history, from as many perspectives as are embroidered into the Bayeux tapestry to the intimate and familiar genealogies pieced together in family quilts. It might seem difficult to manage the apparent disparity among these qualities of the fabric medium, but both Matthew Cox and Gina Phillips attempt to do so in their work. These artists explored content of the familiar, intimate, and narrative qualities conveyed by the medium in two simultaneous shows at Jonathan Ferrara Gallery.

Phillips' *Heroes and Villains* is at first glance a history. In previous series, she has explored the mash-up of sometimes incongruous imagery in historical painting. Several works about



Gina Phillips: *Let's Split*, 2011. Fabric, thread, ink, paint, 21" high. Courtesy of Jonathan Ferrara Gallery.

Fats Domino impossibly placed the musician in various historical settings such as the Battle of New Orleans, using the medium of appliquéd thread to create epic fabric “paintings.” But, in *Heroes and Villains* she breaks the figures and landscapes from the traditional rectangular format, allowing her narratives to flow over the walls of the gallery. *Adam and Eve* fills the wall to the left of the gallery entrance with monumental appliqués. A male and female figure each sit on either side of a fire beneath a canopy of tree boughs, which stretch just slightly over the corner of an adjacent wall. The shift is odd – the piece seems site-specific, but it fails to fit within its designated space. The branches are physically crooked, and a vulture with outstretched wings lurks above it, ready to swoop down from its disfigured perch. Differences in the flesh tones of the figures suggest different races, and the woman, rather than the man, tends the fire. All this seems to point to a reinterpretation of roles in the biblical story and leaves the players’ ultimate fate undetermined – the facial expressions of the figures indicate their unawareness of the pending death and consumption that waits, literally around a corner.

Phillips says in her statement that although her “players,” the individual human and bird figures released from the confines of the picture plane, may seem cruel and characterized by folly, hope

is inherent in the narrative. To convey this, Phillips lined figures along the two parallel walls of the main gallery space who brutally chopped weapons into each others’ heads, which spewed bright fountains of blood and chased each other with swords. Eagles carried away their dismembered body parts.

Individually, the figures are silk paintings outlined with black thread, recalling historical prints and paintings that relate to local history and the struggle between American Indian and colonial cultures. Each of these figures also resembles a large-scale patch that might be sewn to some kind of uniform as a marker of achievement – a sign of a historical event. But, the pins that affixed them to the wall evoke the idea of specimens, meticulously arranged to show a moment in life frozen in death. It is the “Convocation of Eagles” that, according to Phillips, represents the cathartic and restorative power of nature. The swooping motion of these birds trumps the static nature of the pinned and immobilized figures. The eagles carried the disembodied parts, severed during their ritualistic violence, off into other areas of the installation. But these limbs and hands reached and linked together, seeming to gravitate toward an undefined ground. Though nature will eventually remove man’s mess, there seems to be a chance for man to renew and restore his presence through the community.



Matthew Cox; *Foot with Seeded Grass*, 2010. Embroidered X-Ray, 10" high. Courtesy of Jonathan Ferrara Gallery.

much like Phillips' own neighborhood in the Ninth Ward.

Matthew Cox's embroidered x-rays comprised the show *Refresh, Reconstitute, Embellish* in the next room of the gallery. Like Phillips, Cox approaches fabric from a background in painting. Each artist maps color and texture to create representations of the human form. But Cox's use of fabric strays from Phillips' inherently painterly methods and into photography and the sculptural object. By modifying x-ray film with embroidery thread, Cox simultaneously obscures the fine art context of fabric and elevates the medium above one which is inherently scientific. However, both embroideries and x-rays are images subject to analysis and communicate meaning – they are objects meant to be seen to be appreciated. In a way, he may be debasing and elevating both kinds of materials.

The combination of thread and film results in a push and pull between concealing and revealing, inside and outside, warmth and coldness. The representation of toes woven into *Foot with Seeded Grass* gently step onto soft green threads that form a pastoral scene in the right half of the composition, but they are merely one-third of a foot whose bones are revealed in the attached film. The fleshiness of the foot stretches out of the empirical form of the x-ray and into the interpretive form of the embroidery, creating an abrupt division between cold observation and warm interactivity. Taken another way, the x-ray is the more intimate of the two halves. The viewer is privy to the inside of this anonymous subject, the most private view of the physical self, which in turn

could suggest inner thoughts and imaginings. It seems almost like reading the diary of a dead person. Still, its basis is in science and evidence; it has a black-and-whiteness that is emotionless compared to the color and gesture of the embroidery.

Each of the embroidered x-rays was pinned to the wall like a specimen. But, unlike Phillips, the hanging hardware seemed more intentional in the context of Cox's pieces. He stabbed each film with enormous sewing needles like spikes to the wall, allowing for several inches of space between the work and the support. While the work itself suggests a play between gentle nurture in healing and comfort, the needles were violent in contrast, emphasizing the coldness of the x-ray and the brutality that care can sometimes entail. The delicacy of the needle work is betrayed by the repetitive stabbing that is necessary to its process. There is uncomfortable tension between these opposites – how pain can lead to health – perhaps in the same way that Phillips' work suggests reconstitution via violence.

The work of these two artists uses fabric in a painterly way, linked to the history of tapestry and embroidery. They continue in a tradition of painterly fabrics to record and narrate facts, which, of course, are subject to interpretation. They reconsider and interpret information as they are passed along through time, creating fabrics that are metaphors for the aggregation of experiences from preceding generations. It is this new accumulation of the ways the fabric medium can be employed that informs future interpretation. □