

Gina Phillips was born in 1971 in Madison County, Kentucky. Her childhood was spent living with her extended family in a rural landscape marked by an absence of modern conveniences. The family used a coal-burning stove and heated water to take baths in buckets. Her grandfather was a mechanic, and their property was basically a private junkyard filled with objects that could be repurposed in a practical or artistic way. If, as the English proverb claims, necessity is the mother of invention, then perhaps Phillips' upbringing can be credited for her unique use of materials and her boundless imagination.

The men in her family were craftsmen or mechanics. Her grandmother was a folk artist who cut images of money from magazines, and placed them in jars that lined her kitchen shelves. Her mother made hooked rugs, dolls, and even tried her hand at painting. Her entire family was musical. "My role models were my family," says Phillips. "Everyone around me was always making art, playing music or working on something. It was a great training ground."

At 18, Phillips moved to Lexington, Virginia to attend the University of Kentucky. She decided to major in Architecture, feeling that she should not allow herself to follow her passion in art, but to go into a field that is traditionally more lucrative. She wasn't initially accepted into the architecture program, so she took some art classes to fill the time. Immediately, she realized that she had been denying her true passion. She graduated in 1994 with a Bachelor of Art in Painting. It was at the University of Kentucky that she defined the trajectory of her work in both medium and subject. Drawing from the characters of her Kentucky home, including her family, she developed a tragicomic narrative style. Much of this early work combined painting with mixed media construction repurposed from her grandfather's junk yard and her grandmother's fabric collection.

In 1995, Phillips moved to New Orleans to attend Tulane University, where she received her Master of Fine Arts degree in 1997. At Tulane, she continued in her signature narrative style, but the medium became more delicate, more focused on fabric. Initially, she combined printed fabrics with painting, allowing the prints to interact with her figurative scenes. Eventually, she moved to pure fabric works for the first time.

In New Orleans, Phillips found home. The city reminded her of Kentucky with its funky landscape, open and quirky characters, and the "shackiness" of the vernacular architecture. She also became fascinated with the city's exotic difference, the richness of its history, and the inclusive, interactive nature of its traditions. She bought her first house in the Holy Cross neighborhood in the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward of New Orleans in 2004. Spending the next year renovating the house into both home and studio, she called it finished in mid-August of 2005. One week later, Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast. The Federal Levee System failed in New Orleans, and her home was flooded with four feet of water.

Like so many of the city's residents, Phillips spent ten months exiled from her adopted home. When she returned in the summer of 2006, it was to a FEMA trailer in her back yard. For the next year-and-a-half, she worked on rebuilding. Much of her fabric collection was salvaged and washed. The galvanizing effect of Hurricane Katrina created strong bonds with her neighbors. "The longer I stay here, the harder it is to imagine living anywhere else," she says. "There is a strong sense of community here. My neighbors have become my best friends." She is also fascinated with the Mississippi River. Almost every

day, she walks out of her door and onto the levee. “The river defines the city,” she says, “and here in Holy Cross you can see that relationship. There is an immediacy to seeing the connection between the river and the city.”

In December of 2005, Phillips received a grant from the Craft Emergency Relief Fund, allowing her to purchase an industrial long-arm quilting machine. It was a dream come true. No longer confined by the scale and limitations of a common sewing machine, she was free to work at any scale, and move the thread freely. With this “dream machine,” Phillips began to use thread in a way that painters use paint. “To me, making art is one half a desire to tell a story, and one half a love of the materials,” she says.

This exhibition is the culmination of a long relationship between the artist and the museum. Since the founding of the institution, Phillips has worked with the education department to teach art classes, both in the museum and in the public schools of the region. She is not only an important rising artist whose work is held in the permanent collection, but she is a dedicated supporter of our mission. *I Was Trying Hard to Think About Sweet Things* is a survey of the work of artist, Gina Phillips, including works ranging from the raw narrative works made of paint, wood, metal and fabric in her early years as an artist in Kentucky, to the sophisticated narrative fabric work created on her “free-motion thread-drawing machine” in the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward of New Orleans. It opened on October 5, 2013 in the Ogden Museum of Southern Art’s Goldring Hall.

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