

SURFACE DESIGN



SPONTANEITY AND PLAY
IN FIBER ART

innovation in fiber, art, + design

Summer 2021 / \$20.00





DOUBLE PLAY: ANGELIKA WERTH AND AMANDA MCCAVOUR

by D Wood

Eley Williams’ delightful novel, “The Liar’s Dictionary,” is a story about two lexicographers—one in the nineteenth century and another in the twenty-first. The former is one of a hundred devoted to the creation of “Swansby’s New Encyclopaedic Dictionary.” As a social outcast in this environment, he sees his task as filling the gaps in the dictionary by inventing words. The latter, in a great grandson’s misguided effort, is tasked with eliminating the misnomers to put the dictionary online. I confess to laughing out loud at Williams’ wit and inventiveness.

“Swansby’s New Encyclopaedic Dictionary,” had it been published, would have rivalled what Williams calls “those sleek dark blue hearses”: the “Oxford English Dictionary” and “Encyclopaedia Britannica” [whose covers were/are

blue]. Fortunately, the OED *does* exist online and provides definitions of “play” that suit two Canadian artists embracing *SDJ*’s summer theme. “The activity of playing a sport or game” literally applies to major works by **Angelika Werth** in addition to general “jest, fun”; and “senses relating to recreation, pleasure, and enjoyment” is appropriate for **Amanda McCavour**. Like Eley Williams’ fiction, their textiles embrace levity in an unsettling world.

Playing on a Pedestal

Angelika Werth is serious, and not. As a young woman, she did an apprenticeship in dressmaking in her homeland, Germany, then went to France to study literature. Through serendipitous circumstances, she instead accepted a position in the studio

The sense of Werth’s work is very much “tongue-in-cheek.”

of **Yves St Laurent** where she worked for two years. Although Werth considers YSL to be the best and brightest of all couturier designers, she knew that in order to advance from being an intern she needed more skills. She returned to Germany and completed a Master Dressmaker’s degree (1973). Next, possessed with a thorough knowledge of tailoring, Werth travelled to and within Australia, teaching classes and making garments. Despite loving the country, Australia’s blistering heat wasn’t conducive to settling, and when Canadian friends suggested she try their “home and native land,”¹ she moved to Vancouver in the mid-1980s. After four years, Werth relocated to Nelson, British Columbia, where she was based for 35 years and taught in the textiles department at the **Kootenay School of the Arts**. It was in Nelson that the serious became the enlightened.

The sense of Werth’s work is very much “tongue-in-cheek.” While a subject might be solemn—e.g. “Ashes to Ashes Matilda”, dedicated to Queen Matilda, the purported embroiderer of the Bayeux Tapestry—the design and materials (horsehair interfacings from deconstructed Harris Tweed jackets; vintage linens, lacrosse armor and gloves; mother-of-pearl buttons; deconstructed paintings) belie the back story. The viewer’s tricky quest to figure out what-the-heck-is-this-made-of turns the topic from sober to teasing.

Werth says she always works in series, an understandable strategy since the making process generates the next idea. For instance, “twelve quilts” combines deconstructed brassieres with hand-painted and/or hand-printed silk, antique lace and vintage leather, paper and buttons. The series, motivated by breast cancer, reflects women’s lives with titles like “One in Nine,” “Midlife,” “Equality,” “Climbing the Ladder” and “Boxed Laced and Interwoven.”

Left page: **Angelika Werth** *Ashes to Ashes Matilda* (detail) 2017, horsehair interfacings from deconstructed Harris tweed jackets, vintage Lacrosse protective gear, vintage linen, silk, vintage lace, mother of pearl buttons, vintage corset hardware. Photo by the Artist.

Top: **Angelika Werth** *Ode to Marilyn Monroe* 2004, hand dyed and hand felted merino wool and silk, silk velvet, vintage corset hardware, boxing gloves. Photo: Jeremy Addington.

Bottom: **Angelika Werth** *Ode to Marie Antoinette* 2003, dyed and hand felted merino wool and silk, silk, vintage lace, vintage silk, velvet, vintage corset hardware, boxing gloves. Photo: Jeremy Addington.





Angelika Werth *Home Sweet Home* 2010, Tyvek, silk, antique hardware. Photo: Jeremy Addington.

“The Madeleines,” Werth’s most well-known grouping, comprises thirteen dresses that enable their wearers to participate in sports from which they were barred. They were inspired by an exhibition in Banff, Alberta, about female mountain climbers in the 1880s. Photographs showed voluminous dresses with outsized hats, leather booties and coiffed hair. Werth recalls: “I thought it was so fantastic and that image never left me.” She confesses that she doesn’t participate in games with regulations. Thus, the series of dresses conform to the rules of exquisite tailoring, yet do not adhere to what’s legal during the sports of baseball, rugby, boxing or fencing. For example, to highlight ice hockey, “I found some old hockey goalie pads, and hockey gloves and I deconstructed them and integrated these pads into a hockey dress.” The major portion of the outfits is Merino wool that Werth often felted with her feet, with some panels extending 12 meters. There are two dresses for each sport to create team partners; the thirteenth is the



Angelika Werth *Ode to Queen Bodica* 2006, hand dyed silk and merino wool, hand felted silk and merino wool, silk taffeta, vintage lace fragments, vintage lace, vintage rugby ball, vintage silk gloves. Photo: Jeremy Addington.

referee. For hockey: the artist references **Isobel Stanley** (1875–1963), who contributed to the popularization of hockey and may have been the first woman to play the game; and **Hayley Wickenheiser** who was on the Canadian women’s hockey team, winning four gold (2002, 2006, 2010, 2014) and one silver medal (1998) at the Winter Olympics.

Setting aside the interpretation that Werth places on “Madeleine,” the funning in “The Madeleines” is multifold. Madeleines are small rich cakes as well as being evocative of memory or nostalgia. Each of the gowns is created in homage to a significant woman in history while the detail and imaginative juxtapositions of couture and game paraphernalia are tasty confections. Another series, “Ladies in Tents,” plays with the idea of clothing as shelter. Werth’s tent dresses are made of deconstructed canvas tents or Tyvek house wrap, embellished, of course, with embroidery, beads, silk and found objects

gleaned from thrift shops. Werth declares, “it’s just for the fun,” and it is evident from meeting her that the fun is as much for her as the audience.

Instilling/Installing Amusement

When asked if her work is invested with play or light-heartedness, Amanda McCavour responds: “I think about play and experimentation a lot.” She believes the variety and color in her embroidered line-scapes contribute to raising a viewer’s spirits, and adds: “I do think playfulness is a big part of what I want to communicate in the work, especially in the larger installations like “Neon Clouds” or “Pink Field Blue Fog.” I want people to enter into a space that feels dream-like. I want them to walk through it, to blow on the pieces and see them move, I want them to lay underneath.” This kind of fun is very different from **Gertrude Stein** and **Queen Bodica** (Boadicea) dressed for a rugby scrum!²

McCavour did a BFA in Visual Arts at Toronto’s **York University** where a class entitled “Drawing Writ Large” allayed any stigma that might have been attached to using thread as line. The



Bottom: **Amanda McCavour Poppies** 2018 (Ongoing), thread, machine embroidery, 12’ x 40” x 30”. Gallery Stratford, Ontario. Photo: Cheryl Rondeau. Top: detail.





instructor didn't raise an eyebrow. His laissez-faire permitted her to experiment with a sewing machine, water soluble fabric and McCall's "Learn to Sew," creating machine-stitched body parts, particularly hands. A subsequent residency at Harbourfront Craft Studios (Toronto) extended her repertoire to the whole body and then a body in an architectural setting like a door frame. At this point McCavour realized, "my interest wasn't really the figure, it was the atmosphere or the space," resulting in room installations that increased the size of the embroideries. She was pleased with the consequent movement and access to the front and back of a work but began to ask questions. For example, "What if it was more of an environment and there was no front and back? What if walking was a way to experience the work? What about not having one primary viewpoint, but multiple viewpoints that you could discover?" The Harbourfront residency provided the basis for the work McCavour is doing today.

Not coming from a craft background and feeling limited by a lack of fiber skills like weaving and felting, McCavour attended the MFA program at Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia. In addition to getting up to speed with textile techniques, the

Tyler degree opened doors to American museums. The artist is currently making an installation for a three-story atrium at the **Chazen Museum of Art** at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Research trips to the campus herbarium prompted work that will feature plants specific to the prairies and Wisconsin. And because a viewer can see the work from the first, second and third floors, McCavour's process had to change: "I'm embroidering the plants on a one-to-one scale. Then I'm scanning those embroideries at a high resolution and having them digitally printed onto chiffon. Instead of them being 10 inches high, they'll be 10 to 20 feet high." Once the background is burnt out, the stitching will be fused to tulle that will hang and move in space.

Another commission for **Harbourfront Centre** will be suspended from the ceiling throughout the lobby that leads to the theatre, gift shop, galleries and studio. This is the first time McCavour has made a permanent work and it is part of a City of Toronto public art initiative. The piece will consist

Amanda McCavour *Pink Field, Blue Fog* 2016, thread, machine embroidery, 14' x 40" x 80". Photo: Rebekah Hogan.

of powder-coated wire configured in botanicals and radial patterns that will move in response to air currents.

The re-creation of play, pleasure, smiles and laughter are gifts from the heads and hearts of artists like Angelika Werth, Amanda McCavour and Eley Williams. Their work makes a huge difference in our lives, by enhancing our cultural knowledge, enriching our visual experience and pushing the boundaries of what's possible within the realm of art in Western culture.

¹From the national anthem, "O Canada! Our home and native land!"

²The rugby pair were inspired by Werth's daughter's visit to New Zealand.

angelikawerth.ca
amandamccavour.com

—D Wood earned a Diploma in Crafts and Design in Canada and an MFA at the Rhode Island School of Design (2000). Her PhD addressed studio furniture and the contemporary craft movement in New Zealand. D has given presentations at international conferences and published extensively. She edited and contributed to *Craft is Political* (Bloomsbury 2021).

Amanda McCavour arranging work at the Chazen Museum of Art. Photo by the artist.

