

Stitch in time

Maggy Rozycki Hiltner reconstitutes the symbols of American quilting

by Erika Fredrickson

The story behind Maggy Rozycki Hiltner's "Requiem" begins with a quilt that was locked away for almost 100 years. At the time it was made, the quilt's swastika pattern had an entirely auspicious meaning. Based on a symbol that's as old as early cave paintings and indigenous architecture, the American frontier-era "catch me if you can" design signified friendship or fertility in marriage. But after 1920, when the hooked cross was co-opted by Adolf Hitler as a symbol of Aryan identity and German nationalist pride, quilt owners everywhere retired the design, folded up the evidence and tucked them away for good.

"The swastika has been around for thousands of years across all cultures," Hiltner says. "But nobody wants to put that on their bed anymore."

"Requiem" is one of 13 pieces in Hiltner's new exhibit, *What Lies Beneath*, which opens Friday, May 26, at the Missoula Art Museum. It's both an enactment of the swastika's death and a tribute to its former self. Hiltner got the quilt from a friend whose grandmother had made it pre-1920. Its subsequent exile left the quilt in pristine condition. Hiltner cut out the swastikas and re-sewed them into a pile at the bottom of the quilt—making them look something like a funeral pyre—and filled the space above it with a plume of flowers and birds.

"It's totally understandable why nobody wants these," Hiltner says, "but such a shame, too, because the beautiful meaning it used to have is lost. I don't think we're ever going to be able to reclaim the swastika as a peaceful symbol, so I wanted to make a memorial to it."

For the past 25 years, the Red Lodge artist has scoured thrift stores for found quilts, the unfinished or "damaged, Velveteen Rabbit kind," she says.

"I'm taking it and changing the content and, by putting them in a museum, the context," she says. "I'm looking at the traditional American patterns and working with the semantics of those and given them different meanings."

What Lies Beneath explores symbols and subtext through the medium of textiles, and that provides an inherent tension. Quilting and embroidery have a safe connotation in American culture, an association with grandmothers and tradition and saccharine, banal quotes hung on kitchen walls. Hiltner's work, by contrast, is filled with skeletons and eyes and snakes—imagery that often seems sinister, but is also used to indicate transformation. One piece, an installation in the museum's front lobby, uses mythological Greek imagery that's associated with surveillance, observation and gossip based on Argus Panoptes, Hera's many-eyed guard. The pieces aren't in-your-face political statements, but they do upend centuries-old patterns in ways that even a quilting novice can see.

Hiltner's interest in embroidery and quilts isn't just about disrupting the traditions of the craft, though. She loves the history behind the patterns and the medium, the way the stitches provide a window into the hard work that goes into making these objects.

"When someone sees something stitched, they can imagine someone doing that, and the time it takes to do it," she says. "It's all laid out there."

The layers of stitching she adds to the already stitched work gives it an obsessive feel. It's an exercise in rebuilding and renegotiating the past in ways that seem a little uncomfortable. For Hiltner, such discomfort is a fair price for the conversations that result.

"Swastikas were definitely part of American quilt history," she says. "Now what do we do? Lock them away and not talk about them? Or put them out there and have a conversation? I think that's more honest, because at one point it had a peaceful meaning, and I want to ask the question: What can we do about it? Because I hate it when the bad guys win." ¶

Maggy Hiltner's *What Lies Beneath* opens at MAM Fri., May 26, and runs through Sept. 16.

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"Requiem" is made from a found cotton quilt and found and hand-stitched embroidery featuring the "catch me if you can" or "whirling log" symbol.

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