

Shelley Spector: I Live Here

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Room & Board, artist's residency and salon
153 Bedford Avenue, Williamsburg, Brooklyn

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Domestic Ecosystem

Shelley Spector

Sometimes I imagine a scenario where my studio practice and my home life – as far as materials, objects and living space go – would be completely self reliant. Imagine the ecosystem in a terrarium. In this vision, I don't buy anything new, but instead I make what I need out of what I have. It may be possible that I already have enough to live on for a very long time, if not forever. This would be the ultimate project, one that laces together my concerns about the world and my urge to make work.

But, I live with my family of four whose dream of the ideal is very different. They'd likely see this as a punishment instead of an inspiration. So instead, I work into each body of work and into each piece small moments of this idea.

There is a constant stream of beautiful post-consumer goods – like clothing, packaging, furniture and homewares. A major part of my practice is to look for and collect those materials that help me to understand the complex experience of living in my lifetime. In the throw-aways that I use, I see intangible but interpretable marks of their past owners that speak to a popular culture and possibly even universal human desires. Beyond that and rarely visible is the history of all the persons and places of their manufacture. I combine my own lived experience with what I pull from these materials and make work that is in search of communal identity.

Shelley Spector's Domestic Front

Julia Pelta Feldman

Shelley Spector doesn't live here; I do. "Here" is my apartment, as well as Room & Board, which is an artist's residency and salon I run out of it. For the past two years, I have invited artists to stay here with me and my husband for a month and, if they like, to plan an event for the salon as an intimate yet public way of sharing their work. I have worked with a several composers, a photographer, a noise musician, a digital novelist, a playwright, and a filmmaker, but *Shelley Spector: I Live Here* is Room & Board's first exhibition. This means that, instead of living with Shelley (though she did sleep on the sofa a few times during the installation), I am living with her work.

This feels fitting, as Shelley has woven so much of the stuff of home through what she makes. Embroidery, wallpaper, books, curtains; the exhibition checklist reads like a list of things one would pick up when moving into a new apartment. Yet even as they mimic and take the place of these familiar, ordinary things, Spector's works announce that they do not belong here. They are marked by their strange materiality: The curtains are made of wood, the wallpaper of old cardboard and recycled fabric. Many of Spector's objects are too decorative to fulfill their normal functions, and all are too idiosyncratic to be mistaken for mass-produced.

But even though Shelley's works more than hold their own in my living room – they are impossible to mistake for the household items they impersonate – art outside art's places always runs the risk of misinterpretation. We wanted the works to seem not like decorations for the parlor of an avid Spector collector, but instead vivid manifestations of the artist's spirit: a domestic interior through the looking glass, or perhaps through one of Shelley's peculiar *Mirrors*. The elaborately decorated canned goods, too pop to be kitsch (and vice versa), can be seen as off-kilter impostors, but even the Embroideries can, too. Hanging on the wall with their wooden frames and would-be abstractions, the Embroideries are both sincere works of craft and stealthy surrogates of paintings.

Most of Shelley's works are animated by used components, which speak eloquently of their former lives as clothing, furniture, or junk, and by the artist's handmade methods, which imbue them with a

sense of delicacy and care. Spector avoids raw materials, preferring to repurpose used and discarded things that have already taken part in others' lives. Even as she reuses, cuts, saws, collages, and embroiders what she finds in the course of making something new, Spector always demonstrates the utmost respect and tenderness for these things that have been owned and loved by strangers, and by extension, for the strangers that loved them. She likes "making things out of other people's things," wanting to rescue not only the materials themselves but the feelings and histories that attach to them.

Though no longer visible, their former lives weave a spell of history, permanence, tradition, and humanity over Shelley's works, adding to their strength, their right to exist, even if Shelley's process often transforms them from something practical – a can of food, a pair of pants, a basket – into the uselessness unique to art. Thus, even in their quiet intimacy, her works link themselves to larger webs of family, production, and consumption far beyond the confines of Room & Board's upholstered environs. These connections remind us of the value of what we already have, but they also hint at the necessity of cobbling together a home to serve as refuge from the outside world.

In particular, Shelley's works in embroidery embody the importance of home even as they figure the forces that threaten its sanctuary. One such work, *Red Flood* (2011), is at once abstract and pictorial, charming and unsettling. Its tumbled, red and white surface is a series of wave patterns that spill to the edges of its modest frame. *Red Flood* and the other embroideries distill natural disasters into delicate, graphic motifs: hurricane, fire, tornado, nuclear fallout. To make these works, the artist embellished the patterns of recycled fabrics with irregular forms suggestive of biomorphic abstraction. Hanging on the walls, Shelley's embroideries may assume the guise of paintings, but their round wooden frames suggest embroidery hoops and their frank materiality grounds them in the realm of craft. In actuality, Shelley embroidered these works by machine, lending these disasters the sharp lines of the scientific diagrams on which their shapes are based. This was hardly a push-button affair, since Shelley had to wrestle with clunky, first-generation software to trick the device into doing things it did not want to do, but the machine's precision nonetheless layers a sense of cold objectivity onto these warm, homey things. Lacking detail or data, the embroideries convey the abstract anxiety of climate change, and its potential to disrupt our domestic

routines. At once cozy and uneasy, the Embroideries – like much of Spector’s work – embody the comfort and safety of home while calling forth the impinging world outside. In so doing, they reflect Room & Board’s own project of opening up its living room to that world.

The apocalypse is one of the first things I remember talking about with Shelley, about ten years ago. We were discussing the work of another Philadelphia artist, Randall Sellers, whose precise pencil drawings mix futuristic buildings with ruins in brick that suggest the demise of our own society. Imagining myself in one of Randall’s drawings, I professed my own unfitness to survive there; my worth and utility hinge on knowledge and abilities that only have meaning within civilization as I know it. My reliance on existing infrastructures and lack of practical skills (not to mention my astigmatism) mean that, when the end of the world comes, I’ll be lucky to be among the first to go, before the dust settles on a new one.

Shelley doesn’t feel that way. She would, she thought, do okay, and even before I reflected that Shelley is an accomplished carpenter, able to attend to such utilitarian matters as shelter, her practical attitude and unflappable mien were convincing enough. I believed it, and I still do. She was both casual and serious, as if she had appraised the possibility and her readiness for it. At the time, it sounded a bit like a brag, this claim to be equal to the end of the world, but in getting to know Shelley and her art, I have come to see it as a piece of self-knowledge gained through the labor of making her own world, a place both of and for her work, herself, and her family.

The primary concern is not, after all, the end itself, but what comes after; and if the apocalypse is a state, rather than an event, then it is worth recalling that many people have lived and are now living through it. Shelley’s works in embroidery represent a decorative craft form, innocent and abstract, that has picked up and incorporated the worries that circulate in our culture – perhaps particularly in 2011, when the embroideries were made, and when pop-cultural anxiety about environmental collapse reached a fever pitch. In their figuration of disaster, impending or in process, the embroideries may remind us of Afghani “war rugs,” textiles woven during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan that incorporate tanks, machine guns, and military helicopters into the abstract motifs of flora and fauna that have long decorated the celebrated rugs of this region. (The rugs are, of course,

woven by women, traditional keepers of the crucial membrane that separates home from world.) The rugs continue to be made today, with new imagery for a new occupation: now, they feature American military vehicles, as well as the destruction of the World Trade Center, the latter adapted from images in leaflets dropped by the U.S. air force to explain the cause of the invasion. These war rugs, like Shelley's embroideries, are a sharp reminder of the meaning and relevance of those craft activities associated with women's work, with home, and only rarely with art – those practical skills that, as Shelley notes, may well come in handy when the chili with beans hits the fan.



War rug, Afghanistan.

Let me be clear, however, that Shelley, too, is a creature of civilization. She and her partner, Yvonne, a journalist, are both teachers, and their two daughters have yet to finish high school; Shelley does not romanticize the end of the world. This romance, when it surfaces in art and pop-culture (or in my breezy absconding of post-apocalyptic responsibility), seems a kind of lazy fatalism, an excuse not to recycle, or to face the depressing certainty that recycling won't save the planet. Still – and Shelley's work is proof of this – there is so much to save. Therefore, Shelley's domestic front is a bulwark not only against encroaching chaos, but also against apathy. That's why, when the apocalypse comes, I'm going to Philly.

List of works in the exhibition

Clockwise from entrance

Mirrors

Reclaimed wood, glass and metal

Dimensions variable

2016

Common

Reclaimed fabric and metal w/thread

18 x 12 x 1"

2011

Boxing Time

Reclaimed fabric, metal and wood, w/clock parts

7.5 x 7.5 x 7.5"

2012

Book Buff

Reclaimed paper w/books

Dimensions variable

2016

Like Brick

Reclaimed fabric

Dimensions variable

2012

Village

Reclaimed fabric w/thread

Dimensions variable

2015

Talklessors

Pigment print on shelf

Edition of 14

64 1/2 x 14 x 5"

2014

Hounds-tooth Winter Fan

Reclaimed fabric, wood and hardware
61 x 15 x 4"
2012

Dreck Groove
Reclaimed cardboard
Dimensions variable
2012

Plaid Curtains
Reclaimed wood w/paint
20 x 30"
2016

HairPin
Pigment Print
Edition of 120
5.5 x 40"
2009

National America
Pigment Print
Edition of 120
5.5 x 40"
2008

Man Comb
Pigment Print
Edition of 120
5.5 x 40"
2009

Chili With Beans
Canned chili with beans with reclaimed fabric and wood
4.5 x 6 x 10.5"
2016

Chicken Noodle Soup
Canned chicken noodle soup with reclaimed fabric, wood and buttons
4 x 6 x 11"
2016

Peas

Canned peas with reclaimed fabric, metal and wood
5 x 5 x 8"
2016

Screw

Pigment Print
Edition of 120
5.5 x 40"
2008

Plaid Fallout

Reclaimed fabric and wood w/thread
11.5 x 11.5 x .5"
2011

Herringbone Twister

Reclaimed fabric and wood w/thread and glass
19 x 17 x 1"
2011

Flood on Flood

Reclaimed fabric and wood w/thread
6 x 8 x .5"
2013

Average Temperatures

Reclaimed fabric and wood w/thread
11.5 x 11.5 x .5"
2011

Burgundy Rain

Reclaimed fabric and wood w/thread
6.5 x 7 x .5"
2013

Red Flood

Reclaimed fabric and wood w/thread
11 x 7.5 x .5"
2011

Girl Storms

Reclaimed fabric and wood w/thread and glass

18 x 15.5 x 1”

2011

Yellow Fire

Reclaimed fabric and wood w/thread

6.5 x 7 x .5”

2011

136

Reclaimed fabric and wood w/thread

7 x 6.5 x .5”

2011

More Weather

Reclaimed fabric and wood w/thread

5.5 x 8.5 x .5”

2013

Blue Cord Worldwide Temperatures

Reclaimed fabric and wood w/thread

6.5 x 7 x .5”

2013

Joplin

Reclaimed fabric and wood w/thread and glass

24.5 x 20 x 1”

2011

Yellow Magma

Reclaimed fabric and wood w/thread

8 x 7 x .5”

2011

Selected Illustrations



Mirrors, 2016.



Boxing Time, 2012.



Talklessers, 2014.



Curtains, 2016.



Chicken Noodle Soup, 2016.

Chili with Beans, 2016.



Peas, 2016.





Average temperatures, 2011.



136, 2011.



Herringbone Twister, 2011.



Plaid Fallout, 2011.

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Room & Board is an artist's residency and salon that takes place at my apartment here in Williamsburg. Shelley Spector's work is resident for May and June of 2016.

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