

Jackson, Marni, in *Barbara Todd: Security Blankets, The Southern Alberta Art Gallery, 1993*

## Uncoverings

The female world is not just about protection, warmth and security. It is heavy, mischievous, powerful and dark as well. *It covers everything*. It contains death; death is a "hidden" part of the design. But the modern perception of death continues to be dominated by the male imagery of war or military force, and the pervasive threat of the other. Death has become an isolated locus of fear, instead of a contiguous compositional element.

Barbara Todd's work makes death part of the fabric of life – everyday domestic life, the queendom. She can be funny about death at the same time that she restores dignity to the subject. The strong impact of her imagery – bombs, planes and business suit – is associated with the world of men. But her quilts suggest that female "work" (which is inextricable from female art) can subsume that imagery, and exert its own power, on its own terms. Todd's weapons are with and irony – beginning with the ironic premise of a woman using a needle and thread as a kind of anti-aircraft device, to needle the masculine powers that be.

By absorbing some of our culture's dominant imagery and placing these fear-filled, totemic shapes inside a larger pattern, the benign grid of the quilt, their menace is to some extent neutralized. They become mere vocabulary. Their beauty manifests itself. The moral here – pleasantly blatant – is that the soft, unthreatening "craft" (with a pun on craft as slyness and subversion) in the quilting has the power to absorb, contain and defuse violence – the fragmented menace associated with the shape of the bomber. It's a reverse form of voodoo. Todd takes the curse off certain objects so that we can confront them calmly, assertively.

What we see is also "doing as undoing" – the way in which the patient stitching of the shapes helps slow down our scrutiny, and unravel their meaning. Her quilts have a commanding presence in a room, and the authority of her work takes the passivity out of pacifism, replacing it with something powerfully, aggressively disarming. It first dis-arms our aesthetic notions, replacing the hegemony of painting with an object in which the making is as much the subject as the finished work. It also disarms our notions of defense and security, by reminding us that women defend and secure with as much unacknowledged power – giving birth, sustaining life – as we associate with military technology. This is art as disarmament – without the subordination of beauty and lightheartedness to propaganda.

At first glance, *Security Blanket*, 1986-88, looks like a rather simplistic feminist equation: men = death. However, there is more going on here than an editorial on the gender grid-lock of "male and female values". It is an expansive rumination on power – the conspicuous power of potential violence (bombs) vs. the traditionally anonymous, private, protective power of domestic work (quilts).

By placing male-defined imagery inside the larger field of her female-defined canvas of the quilt, Todd subverts the usual order of things – but it is subversion by inclusion, not the conquering ethos associated with technology. She helps us detect the destructive forces at work in the culture, forces so pervasive as to be a "cover". Then, by making what is cold warm, what is hard soft, and what is defended and defensive into something protective and giving, she exercises an authoritative pacifism that manages to avoid the overcharged polarizations of war and peace, life and death, male and female. The punchline is how much strength these "humble objects" radiate when transposed from the bed to the wall.

Todd insists that we see and feel the tension between the forces of life and death. She takes the dominant values of our world and mischievously reverses them in the map of her quilts: the field is female, the foreground male. Bombs are reduced to mere "decorative" elements.

In *Security Blanket: 57 Missiles*, 1989 the rain of missile shapes brings to mind medieval crosses, daggers, truncheons, or heraldic emblems (besides being famously phallic). The

pomp and ceremony of military weaponry are reduced to silhouettes of toys – childlike symbols captured inside her dark field.

This amounts to a sly guerilla attack on gender values. She shrinks these powerful male totems down and pins them inside the female frame of the quilt. The needling nurturance of the female can absorb these stereotypes of “male menace” in the same way that caring for others, in all the concrete ways that constitute domestic life, can neutralize and absorb our fear of death.

Beyond the straightforward pacifist message of Todd’s quilts lurks a subtler inquiry into what “women’s work” really means. As is often the case in feminist thought, what looks like a case of either/or turns into and/and. The integration of what have been construed as opposites (war and peace, men and women) reveals a larger pattern, a perspective that calms and contains at the same time that it encourages the energy of conflict and contradiction. There is a reassurance in her work that doesn’t suppress hard facts or anger. Nevertheless, her work exerts an almost coercive harmony and order. She imposes beauty.

As a fine example of what Rozsika Parker wrote about in *The Subversive Stitch*, Todd’s quilts turn the traditionally submissive image of needlework – the picture of a silent woman with her head bent over the quilting frame – into a form of patient subversion, a way of “pointing out” the significant shapes in our cultural landscape. They are signs. What looks, at first glance, utterly succinct and perhaps too transparent expands in meaning. The visible, patient handwork stands in for thought, reflection, for nailing down meaning. The work of nurturing is not to be confused with softheadedness, or sentiment.

Similarly, the ordinary domestic chores usually carried out by women – when considered in a different light – render up not only craft and labour, but hard thought and a daily acquaintance with life and death ... with children who can and may die, with sick people, with growing things, with the preparation of food, with the transformation of bits and pieces into something beautiful and useful.

For all its softness, a quilt is a very concrete object evoking the vulnerability of the human body. Bombs represent technological virtuosity, and are part of an abstract iconography which bleeds the meaning out of violence. A quilt is soft armour. It reminds us of both the strength and fragility of individual life, in the face of institutionalized war and violence. It is also an assertion that fear of violence is not just the provenance of war these cold war days; violence has become part of the fabric of domestic life as well, mundane as a rocking-chair – or a quilt.

In *Security Blanket: B-2 Stealth Bomber*, 1989-90 Todd borrows a design painted on the runway at the unveiling of the Stealth, the American spy plane designed to elude radar detection. In the design, five of the batwinged bombers are arranged in a wing-to-wing circle. The negative space created in the centre makes a perfect star shape. The obvious association, in this context, is with other patriotic symbols – the stars and stripes, or military medals. But the star has often been used in the designs of traditional quilts as well. Using the Stealth Bomber outline, Todd created a grid of nine stars, in the deep blues of military uniforms, against a twilight-blue background. The quilt is like a night-sky, through which the war-bats fly. The tense order and control of the design contains a threat, a joke, an optical illusion, a danger. The anchoring principle of the design is death. Taken as an isolated fragment, the bombers look deadly. Put in the context of a “larger design”, the shape still has menacing overtones, but now its function is subordinate to the beauty of the whole. Her motives for this play on camouflage are not the motives the military had in mind.

*Coffin Quilt*, 1991-92 was begun just one month after the birth of Todd’s second son, a reflection of the intimations of mortality that accompany birth. The quilt is a dark downpour of coffins (1/4 life-size), in suiting fabric of somber hues: blues, greens, greys, navy. It looks like a forest floor, or some microscopic view of cell structure. This minimalist work moves away from the text and literalness of her earlier works. A pattern of stitched spirals covers the quilt. The spirals draw the eye down into the orderly darkness of the coffins, a reminder that life and death can exist in a peaceable continuum, not only as anxious distinctions. The spiral is

gentler than the earlier rigid squared, the colours have darkened but the effect is absorbing and calming.

Once again, her work goes about fusing those two poles: a coffin is a pictograph of death, but the spiral occurs everywhere in life ... ferns, shells, embryos, finger whorls. When I first saw this quilt, it seemed aggressively dark to me, but it accepts and steadies the gaze. It lets us ruminate safely on death by giving it a shape, a pattern, a collectivity. The reassurance of order and scale along with the connotations of warmth and protection suggest that darkness can be warm, and that death has a role in life. In padding, it also says that the "decorative and domestic" do not exist merely in the margins of larger questions about life and death.

"Women's work" is a matter of life and death. Barbara Todd's quilts suggest that women's work is so inclusive that it often goes on outside the traditional hierarchies of fine art. It is part of life, not a laboratory of aesthetics or a separate pursuit cleansed of dailyness. It contains and re-orders more often than it exiles and judges, prefers binocular vision to polarization and understand the power of wit, irony and double-entendre. It circles the square.