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NIGHT WATCH: Barbara Todd's quilts protect against the chill of the post-Cold War dawn

For the unveiling of the B-2 stealth bomber in 1989, a design painted on the runway of a United States Air Force base celebrated the invention of the high-tech war plane capable of evading radar to deliver its payload of nuclear bombs. The design was a five-pointed star, its empty body a negative space outlined by the silhouettes of five tailless, bat-shaped wings facing into a circle, seen from above. It was a symbol – the star of *The Star-Spangled Banner* defined by war planes – that inescapably wed an ideal of nationhood to military power.

Barbara Todd came across an aerial photograph of this ceremonial runway in the May/June 1989 issue of *Technology Review*, at her home in Banff. Within a week, she had worked out the design of a new quilt. The stealth bomber star is repeated nine times in three rows of three, following a design that reaches back into the eighteenth century. From the colonial period onwards, quilt design in North America has been a vehicle for expressions of patriotism and political sentiments aroused by events. Todd's *Security Blanket: B-2 Stealth Bomber* (1989-90) followed closely on the heels of the war plane's unveiling. It too is commemorative in a sense, but one that does no honour to its subject.

To commemorate is to remind. The irony of Todd's work is its commemoration of the nether-world of military security – death, destruction, terrible privation and chaos – framed in the context of a handmade object associated with physical protection, warmth and comfort, family history, thrift and individual creativity. Todd says the quilts speak to "The unresolvable irony at the heart of current social and political life," the conflict between power and human values. To bring this into focus, Todd cut appliqués shaped like stealth bombers from dark, woolen men's suiting and sewed them to a field of blue-grey wool the colour of half-light. Thus the fabric she chose for this military symbol was taken from the civilian attribute of power, the business suit, with its pin stripes, chalk stripes, herringbone patterns and plaids. *Security Blanket* is a black pun. Todd makes us mindful of the obfuscating double talk of bureaucrats, of the secrecy and deception that shroud the manufacture and sale of nuclear arms, of the fallacious argument that the nuclear death machine can be a deterrent to war. The Cold War may now be consigned to history, but the heated race for nuclear weaponry is not over.

Todd began to think about the links between authority, power and nuclear weapons after the birth of her first child, Louis, in 1985. Todd who is forty and was trained in the modernist traditions of painting, had at that point made only one quilt. *Cover/Undercover* (1982) is a self-portrait in which she represented herself as a serial image, thirty appliqués of outfits she wore during her twenties. That quilt led her to consider the function of clothing as a mask. Five years later, conscious of the vulnerability of her son's new life, she conceived the first *Security Blanket* (1986-88), which she appliquéd with business suits, war planes and a Fat Man bomb, and surrounded with a border of missiles. The very process of quilt-making became a metaphor. With her hands, she was sewing a blanket that protected her son by giving voice and reason to her fears.

Todd's paradoxical Security Blanket series now contains ten appliquéd quilts. It is impossible to look at any one of them and not think of the vulnerability of the body. This is even more true of her most recent quilt. With her own consciousness of mortality heightened by the birth of her second child, Adam, in 1989, Todd turned to a more philosophical contemplation of death, as though it were necessary to make a place for it in a society so bent on denying its presence. This work germinated for more than two years. *Coffin Quilt* (1992) bears an almost abstract, metaphysical image. It is a pieced quilt, queen-size, with an overall geometric pattern made from the interlocking silhouettes of nineteenth-century coffins. These hexagonal figures have an anthropomorphic shape – a flat top and angled shoulders below which the sides taper towards a narrow bottom. Like the bomber appliqués, the coffin pieces were cut from dark men's suiting. But over the coffins, Todd has quilted another pattern, an ancient spiral motif derived from the quilted spirals and scrolls at the centre of a Scytho-Siberian funerary carpet, and spirals carved into stone at prehistoric sites such as the Great Barrow Cemetery in Ireland. The spiral symbolizes many things to many cultures, among them the revolutions of the heavens, the cycles of the seasons, the creative life force and continuity. In the spiral, death meets with its opposite.

There is one other source for the *Coffin Quilt*: a bedcover made by an American woman, Elizabeth Mitchell, who made coffin appliqués embroidered with the names of her family, and moved them from the quilt's border to its centre – a garden-like representation of the family plot – whenever someone died. Mitchell slept under the quilt, feeling a closeness to her family, living and dead. Todd's *Coffin Quilt* evokes a larger kinship – with the nameless, faceless nation of the dead. Yet, in the cool nocturnal light shed by the *Coffin Quilt's* dark, rich colours, one feels the weight and significance of an individual human life.

Nancy Tousley