

FIBER IN FILM

Reviewed by *Leora Lutz*

Craft in America: QUILTS

Produced by Public Broadcasting Service (PBS)
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On December 27, 2019 PBS will premiere an engaging “Craft in America” documentary featuring interviews with contemporary art quilters and historians. Simply titled “QUILTS,” the one-hour episode is visually packed with stunning historical and modern quilts and includes Native American activist **Susan Hudson**, self-taught quilt artist **Michael A. Cummings**, designer, teacher and artist **Victoria Findlay Wolfe** and contemporary art quilter **Judith Content**. The artists are visited in their studios where they are viewed arranging works in progress, sewing and sharing their relationship with this very personal, tactile and meaningful medium.

Susan Hudson is a Native American activist and quilter. Her entry into quilting was out of necessity and survival, sewing things to sell. She is also greatly influenced by early American **Plains Indian Ledger** art which chronicles the stories of her ancestors. When she sews, Hudson is reminded of the challenges and hardships of the people who came before her and still influence her today, “reminding me of why I am here.”

Similarly, Victoria Findlay Wolfe’s mother was a quilter. Audiences are treated to some of these works in the film, as well as an intimate look at her studio practice. She works on the wall, using batting as a substrate to arrange pieces of fabric and play with color. Findlay Wolfe’s background in painting influences how she works, creating the pieces much like a painter’s mark-making.

In contrast, Michael A. Cummings likens quilting to collage. He first used fabric when he was working for the **Department of Cultural Affairs** in New York and was challenged to make a banner for an event. Renowned as one of the few male quilters, he focuses on the African-American diaspora, creating large-scale portraits with embellished surfaces.

Judith Content’s works are the most subtle of all the artists profiled. She is influenced by the fog, water and marshes of the San Francisco Bay Area where she lives—evident in the Shibori-dyed surfaces. Content marvels at the symbiosis of the senses



Susan Hudson at her sewing machine. Photo: Lissa Claffey.



Victoria Findlay Wolfe at her sewing machine. Photo: Denise Kang.



Judith Content dyeing using shibori techniques. Photo: Denise Kang.



and the materials. The texture of the Shibori pleats, the fluid sewn “drawings” in thread and the batting in between are like “two layers of sound connected by a hillside.”

Behind-the-scene moments at the **International Quilt Museum** in Lincoln, Nebraska are also included in the documentary. Historians and curators discuss preservation and take a close look at several important works from their permanent collection. Historian **Ken Burns**, an avid quilt collector, also makes an appearance. He doesn't view his collecting as “owning them, but rather protecting them.”

The notion of protection is an interesting one. Who do quilts protect? How do we protect the people who these objects might personify? Additionally, there is so much history in each

Top: **Victoria Findlay Wolfe** *A Summer's Day* 2013, quilt. Courtesy of the artist.

Bottom: **Victoria Findlay Wolfe** *Texture, Travel, and Happiness: Life of Experiences and the Responsibilities of Dreams* 2018, quilt. Courtesy of the artist.





piece that transcends the maker. The physicality of the work is the embodiment of the maker. “Their spirit, their mojo is still in there,” says **Jim Kohler**, museum volunteer, archivist and quilter. Quilts are not just objects, they are actions. Their history needs to be protected as much as the object itself, and “QUILTS” does an excellent job of reminding viewers of their importance.

michaelcummins.com

vfwquilts.com

judithcontent.com

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Top: **Michael A. Cummings** *Slave Ship Henrietta Marie* 2006, quilt. Courtesy of the artist.

Bottom: **Michael A. Cummings** at the sewing machine. Photo: Denise Kang.

