Stitched: Merging Photography and Textile Practices

Barbara Astman Audio Tour
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Barbara Astman

The three works by Toronto-based artist and professor emerita, Barbara Astman, are an ode to the fast and the slow of creative production. Astman, whose biography highlights her commitment to "defining new ways of seeing" since the 1970s through "[radicalizing] visual culture," challenges us to negotiate the speed of the familiar image with the slower process of textiles on which these iconographies emerge.

Stuck at home during the COVID-19 pandemic, Astman returned to her creative output by experimenting with materials she had handy: the newspaper. Using packing tape, she transferred the proliferation of the female form in the papers' advertisements to the adhesive, with much clarity lost in this process. Then she experimented with printing these vestiges on paper which then led to the idea of literally weaving them onto fabric. Outsourcing this part of the process to a facility in India due to so many local businesses halting operations during the pandemic in Canada, Astman had to learn the digital tools necessary to collaborate across continents so that the tiles could be produced and put together into the final tapestries we see in front of us.

Parts of these anonymous figures are geometrically assembled, a torso, magnified eyelashes, patterns of fashions, the glare of a supermodel, create a homunculus of signifiers we immediately decode as relating to the feminine. A century ago, Georg Simmel pronounced modernity in terms of the speed of stimuli that propels urban life. Postmodernism proved an even greater acceleration of capitalist images of consumption demanding instantaneous visual literacy and recognition of gender and beauty. Even the isolation of the pandemic could not obstruct the porosity of the screens on which these images continue to flow: via the news print we flip or the Instagram tiles we scroll.

Yet, up close, the images blur to an effervescent static. Astman's process of peeling the image off onto adhesive only accentuated the nature of print and photographic images composed of dots or pixels. That these images take shape relative to the distance of the viewer also alludes to an earlier revolution in seeing that radicalized visual culture: the neo-Impressionist theory and technique of pointillism where images are not produced through continuous linear shapes but rather innumerable dots or points and their distance and colour relations that together make concrete shapes.

To have all of these considerations on a textile, woven together via cotton and nylon threads, provides us a novel screen to project our understanding of the permanence of images and to balance the speeds of the shutter and the loom.