Stitched: Merging Photography and Textile Practices

Michaëlle Sergile Audio Tour
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Michaëlle Sergile

The textile industry's raw materials and manufacturing were central drivers of the global commodity trade and the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution. The Jacquard Loom patented near the start of the nineteenth century revolutionized the textile industry. Using paper cards perforated in accordance with the pattern design, the weaving apparatus would understand each puncture as a set of instructions for textile production. This technology was later adapted by mathematicians and engineers to form one of the first prototypes of computing hardware.

Haitian-Canadian Montreal-based artist Michaëlle Sergile uses the jacquard loom, a method in her words that is "often perceived as a medium of craftsmanship and categorized as feminine" to reproduce family photographs, particularly those of her parents' generation in Haiti. It is notable that both these methods of image production on the jacquard loom and analog photographic printing techniques now seem archaic in the supremacy of digital imaging. The most obvious difference is the speed at which the image emerges since the printing of analog photography required time for chemicals to interact and the combination of each thread to create an image on a textile takes repetitive labor to weave.

The loom is also the physical place where Sergile's family histories meet and intersect. These otherwise nondescript portraits hold multiple stories and experiences, converging on the textile plane. Like the reproduction of images in photography, Sergile adapted errors and glitches into the weave. In *Ombre Portrait (Tante Rose)*, *Ombre Portrait (Gaze)*, and *Ombre Portrait (Zanmi)*, the rows of colors distorting the bottoms of the woven pictures reproduce mechanical errors by hand so that both the machine and the human remain present.

Other than dress and names in the titles, our inability to find identifying features in Sergile's portraits reminds us of the two *Headdress* works by Dana Claxton in this exhibition. Yet both Claxton and Sergile allude to a deeper, intensely personal identity in these works if only one knew to look for beaded motifs signifying a clan or heritage in Claxton's works, or the totality of narratives and multiplicity of memories layered to create such an opacity in Sergile's portraits. Simply, the sitters of these portraits wear their identities on their bodies.