

Same but Different

A Collaborative Collection of Writing

by

Svetlana Kitto

Katie Berta

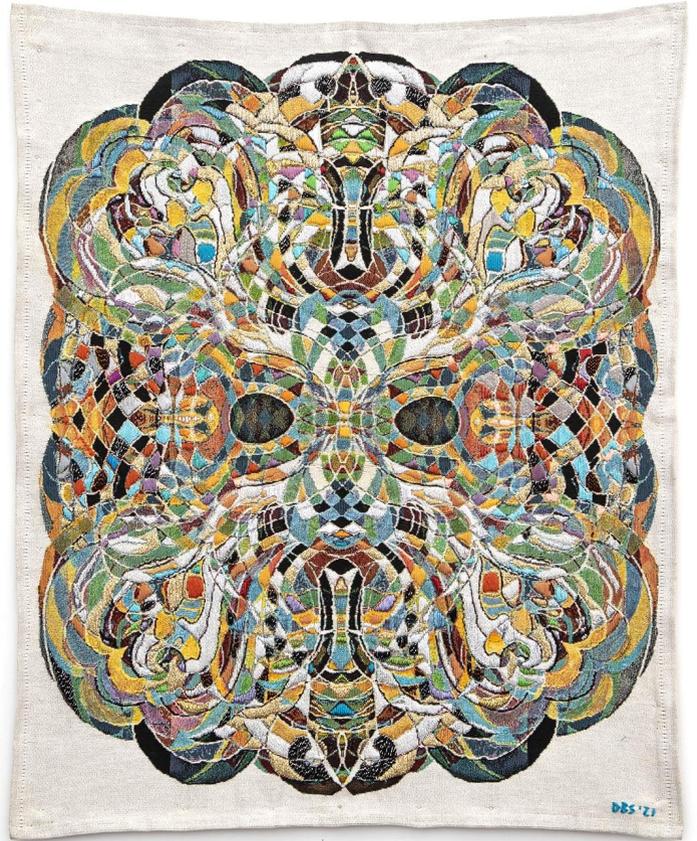
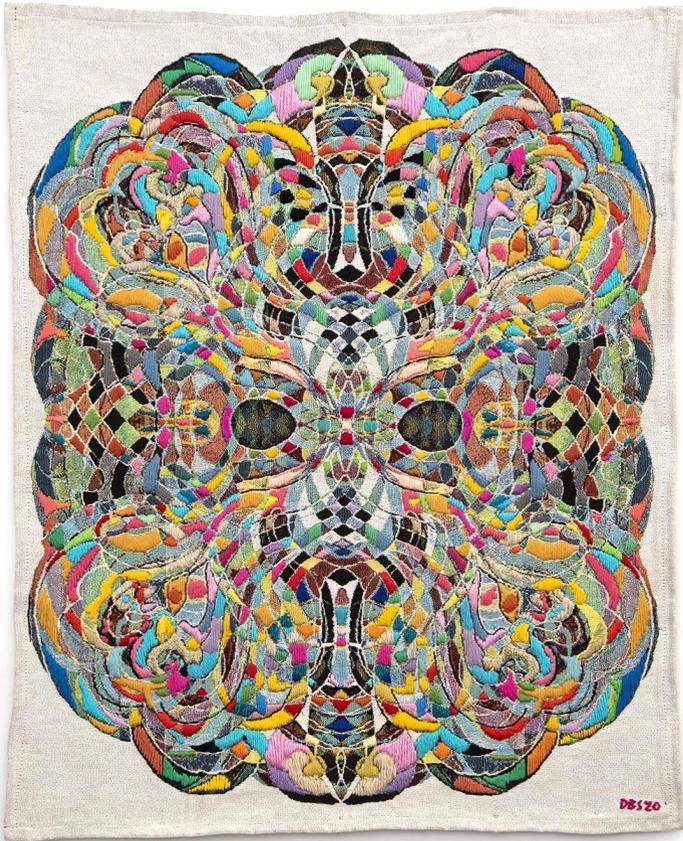
and Ayeh Bandeh-Ahmadi

Alongside textile-works and words by
David B. Smith, from his exhibition:

Same but Different

David B. Smith Gallery, Denver, CO

May 15 - June 19, 2021



I asked these three writers - whom I met and became friends with at Millay Colony in November of 2020 - to contribute a piece of writing that reflected the theme “Same but Different” to be presented alongside artworks I’ve made related to the same idea.

By presenting these works in relation to each other and to my visual work, I hope to open spaces for interdisciplinary dialogue and reflection, to diversify the community around each of our practices, and to challenge the myth that artists work alone, instead offering a space for individual, connected, and collaborative meaning-making.

David B. Smith

Svetlana Kitto

“This excerpted chapter comes from my novel-in-progress, PURVS, which means ‘swamp’ in Latvian and is the name of the country's first gay club.”

Svetlana Kitto is a writer, editor and oral historian in NYC. Her writing has been featured in *The Cut*, *New York Times*, *Hyperallergic*, *Interview*, *Guernica*, *VICE*, and *ART21*, among other publications. As an oral historian, she's contributed oral histories to archives and exhibitions at the Brooklyn Historical Society, Smithsonian Archives of American Art, Museum of Arts and Design, NYPL for Performing Arts, and the gallery Gordon Robichaux, where she is in-house writer, editor and oral historian.

To learn more, and to read more of her work, visit www.svetlanakitto.com

Excerpt from *PURVS*
Svetlana Kitto

Like the other rooms in my grandparents' Riga apartment, the bathroom holds faint glimmers of the gated community townhouse back in the East Los Angeles suburb where they live the rest of the year, which, by comparison, stands out as the seventies petty-bourgeois Versailles they always intended it to be. Here there is no gold standing toilet paper holder or similarly gilded towel racks from Home Depot, but there are fluffy towels, a satiny shower curtain, and a (gold) American-bought handrail installed into the side of the bathtub. Semi-autonomous peasants in America; moneyed emigres in Latvia.

When I was a kid, Grandpa would pick me up from school in his blue and tan Cutlass Classic and bring me to his and my grandmother's house in Santa Fe Springs, a suburb of Los Angeles, for the weekend. He listened to the news on AM radio with the trumpet jingle while I read in the back seat until my head hurt and I felt like I was going to throw up. There was always traffic on the 5, and as I stared out the window I wondered why as soon as we changed lanes the lane we had been in would speed up. From the 5 we got onto the 605, a newish freeway, and the first exit was Telegraph Road, their exit. Grandma said they had built the 605 just for us and I believed her because I could see the gated community where they lived, rows and rows of beige stucco townhouses with brown shingle roofs, from the off ramp.

Aspen Circle was a community of Chicano and white families, not a Jew in sight. My mom, who worked as a film editor, could not understand why they wouldn't move closer to us somewhere in Hollywood. "Why can't you live on Fairfax in an apartment building like all the other old Russian Jews?" she'd say. But it was very important to them to own their own home and this was a place they could afford when they bought it in 1978. It was true that they didn't seem to like their neighbors. Every time I came to stay as a kid I would resolve: This weekend I'm going to make friends with the neighborhood kids. But my grandparents made it impossible. They would take me to the pool to play but spend the whole time scowling and cursing under their breath at the tan teenagers in day-glo bikinis and swimming trunks having fun. "Hey, what you doing?" My grandfather would yell as the water splashed dangerously close. They were dunking each other, playing Marco Polo, running around the pool's edge, doing cannonballs; but apparently they didn't have teenagers in Latvia. I stayed in the shallow end and watched them, trying to find the nerve to defect from my grandparents' regime.

My grandparents' townhouse was the first when you entered through the electric gate. My grandfather would open the garage with the remote and pull into the slim space on the right, next to my grandma's spotless maroon Toyota Camry, whose seats she lined with striped gray-and-white sheets, like a bed. Grandpa's car always smelled like cigarettes and Old Spice while Grandma's car smelled like cheap leather and Russian bologna. I always dreaded getting out of the car from the garage, squeezing myself and my backpack through the space between the cars to the screen door.



As soon as my grandfather would get into the house, he'd lay himself out on his side on the rug, which was also covered with a sheet, in front of the TV with his remote and a red plastic cup of beer. My grandmother would usually be in the kitchen cooking, and watching television on a black-and-white set mounted to the wall, just like the one in the Riga apartment.

All along the top of the glass and gold fireplace in the living room were black-and-white pictures of my grandmother and grandfather when they were young and beautiful in Latvia. One was particularly stunning. Bella, with her dark tufts of cloudy hair pinned around her heart-shaped porcelain face, thin long arched brows that etched past the corner of her eyes, the color of smoke. Boris in his army uniform, hair like soft wool, lucid light eyes, long regal nose.

Just like their apartment in Riga, the furniture was all lacquered wood with glass doors locked with a fairy tale key that never worked when I tried it. China and crystal sat prized and unused behind the sliding doors in the large armoire next to the dining table, covered with a white embroidered tablecloth. The shiny dark wood pieces and their contents were meant to look like valuable heirlooms. Impossible impressions of fanciness and oldness. Impossible because my grandparents' families had been murdered in the Latvian Holocaust. There was no money or things to inherit, nor people to inherit them from.



Katie Berta

“Usually, I fit writing into whatever small spaces remain after the rest of my time is divided into editing, teaching, doing the dishes, etc. and start with a piece of language or a title that won’t leave me alone. With this poem, however, I sat down very intentionally, knowing I wanted to write a poem in two parts to mirror the way that David has paired his artwork in this exhibition.

As I considered sameness/difference, I couldn’t help but think about how these ideas are both a comfort and a threat to us (sameness is a comfort when it means we are connected; it is a threat when we are so connected that we’re absorbed)—but that both are necessary for authentic, healthy connection. This poem arises out of the tension caused by wanting both, by enacting both—its two parts represent each impulse, which can even occur simultaneously.”

To find more of Katie’s poems, check out the upcoming issues of *The Massachusetts Review*, *The Iowa Review*, or *The Rumpus*, or keep up with her at her website, www.katieberta.com.

A Poem in Two Attitudes

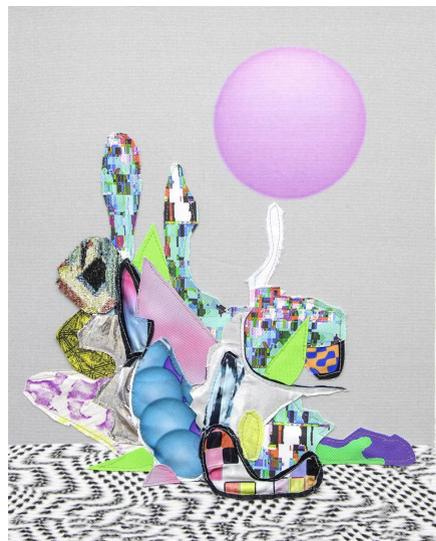
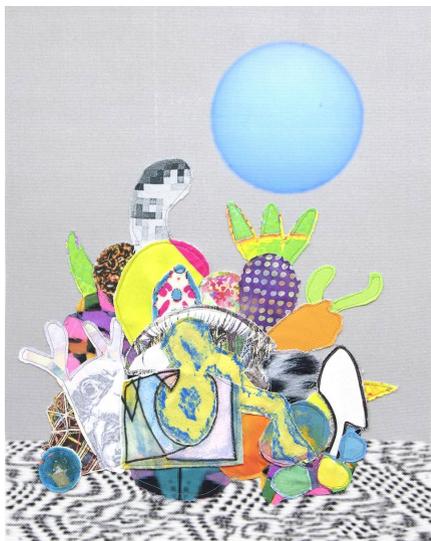
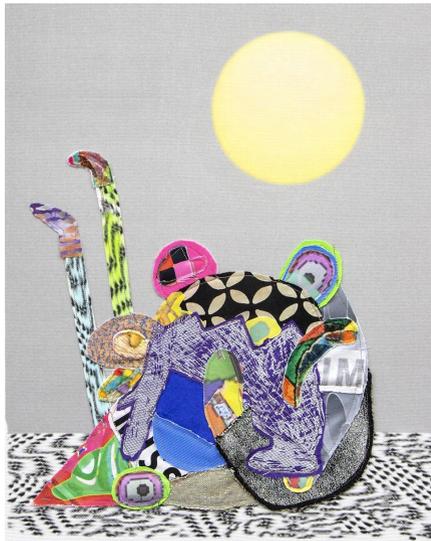
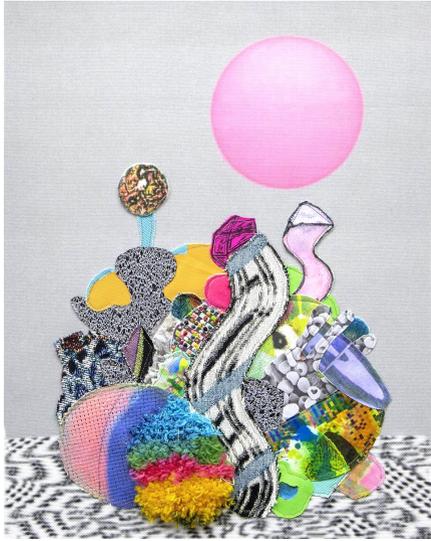
April 2021

Katie Berta

Of course there is a danger in connection of course there is a risk when one—when you—when I move my body toward and define it newly in relation to another—in relation to another, you have been so many things, in coming near another you feel—there is nothing safe about it, every opening is a wound, every wound is necessarily in need of healing, every scar a hard distorted place and every time you open yourself it invites this scarring every time your mouth opens it reminds you of the way you're wounded and—reaching toward is an invitation to wounding and reaching toward is the only invitation to healing you'll get—if this is your one chance, if this is your—it can feel like someone is pressed up against you, as they do when the lines begin to blur, as they do when they press—in entering you they examine you for a constancy, they examine whether you're up to snuff, the expectation that you'll agree the expectation that you're building (what?) together, having been entered unmasked and variously assessed I—my mother mouthing the words she expects from another as they talk, the way she's always wrong, of course, the way, when you act as a mirror for the face of another, you just reflect back what you really think of them—having been and moving away from, having tried and tired the reach toward, having touched a hot thing that seemed to burn, the hotness of which being its, being your closeness of body, having touched and not liked it, I—like a child, I stay in my room, as I did as a child—I will not see myself in you, you, keep your distance from me, keep your—

Oh how I want to relate to you, sweetie, dear friend, pseudo-beloved, oh what I'd do to relate to you, searching the face of another for some sameness, searching the face of another—the way this can be a pleasure the way this is the feeling of nearness the relief when they tell you, “yes”—can it be a wound and—? a wound even when—? and when you touch me doesn't it, don't I—? when you touch me, I think of the woman who brought her awful boyfriend around at college and of how he quoted that idiotic Ani DiFranco song (“My cunt is built like a wound that won't heal”) and the friend said “It's kind of true, like how would it feel if you covered it in salt,” and I said, is that how you talk about your eyes?—every place that's open isn't hurt, every place that's open isn't weeping, every—every place that opens deserves to be touched—put the berry in your mouth and feel the way it opens your tongue, your mouth opens and then the berry and then your throat and then the berry is you—is you, with a difference—in the way certain things are absorbed and change the very structure of your body, change the cells that make you, make the acid or stifle it, make the leptin, make the—in the way certain things are absorbed, so, too, is this certain beautiful face, this certain unbeautiful one, the same where we touch, hand on hand, hip to hip, your mouth on mine, a kind of free exchange is a kind of—or a way of expressing—freedom. Like a child, I put my hand on you unembarrassedly. Like a child, I see myself in you—see myself in your—see me.





Ayeh Bandeh-Ahmadi

“The piece below includes two excerpts from my memoir in stories, *Ayat*, which explores the ways in which we utilize patterns and similarities to carve out spaces in which others feel they can understand and trust us versus spaces in which we feel understood and seen, where we can belong and thrive.

I use the third-person point of view because it captures what it's like to come to know yourself through the eyes of various people -- strangers, teachers, friends, family and colleagues -- who judge you in a myriad of contradictory ways. *Ayat* is ultimately my way of staking claim to the story of others claiming my Iranian-American story and of finding an identity among the many others have ascribed to me.

I encourage readers to think about what stories the characters here make up about each other, how they are similar or different, and why.

Interested readers can keep up with my work at @heyayeh on Instagram and twitter or on my website, www.heyayeh.com. Two additional excerpts from *Ayat* are forthcoming in No Tokens and from Red Hen Press.”

“Six Stories” (2001)

Ayeh Bandeh-Ahmadi

“Excuse me?” a voice asks from the crowd of shoppers as Ayeh hurries down the gold-flecked sidewalks of Pasadena’s Lake Boulevard to deposit some checks in the Caltech student union’s account at Bank of America. The sandy-blond middle-aged woman gesturing at Ayeh is wearing khaki shorts and a worn pastel tee revealing her sunburned décolletage. A shorter woman, with pudgy cheeks and mouse-brown hair, wearing denim shorts and a white tank-top, accompanies her.

“Yes?” Ayeh responds. She removes her sunglasses and studies both the women to see what they might want.

“You’re not Muslim, are you?” the first woman asks.

Ayeh’s bare shoulders prickle in her grey Forever 21 tank top. She looks down at her pink flip-flops with faux flower petals and blue jeans. Her pink and white headscarf is wrapped around her head.

“Yes,” she answers.

“You’re naked! I know how you’re supposed to cover up. I’ve been over there. I’ve been to Saudi. You’re just wearing that headscarf for show! Look at you!”

While this kind of admonishment would be normal at home from her dad she’s surprised to hear it out loud from someone here, like this. Her heart starts racing. She considers telling the woman her family is from Iran but trembles with uncertainty instead.

“I almost married a sheik while I was there.” The woman continues as her friend looks on. “They all loved me there. They just love blondes!” She continues, “They have so much money, you

wouldn't believe it. It's because of you I'm not married to one now! They all want someone who wears a veil they can bring home to mom. And you're all frauds! You think that you can wear a veil and then go break all the rules."

Sensing Ayeah's disbelief, the woman adds, "I was going to put on the veil and do everything by the rules once I got married. When you marry a sheik you have to follow the rules. But I'm gonna go back and I will marry a sheik!"

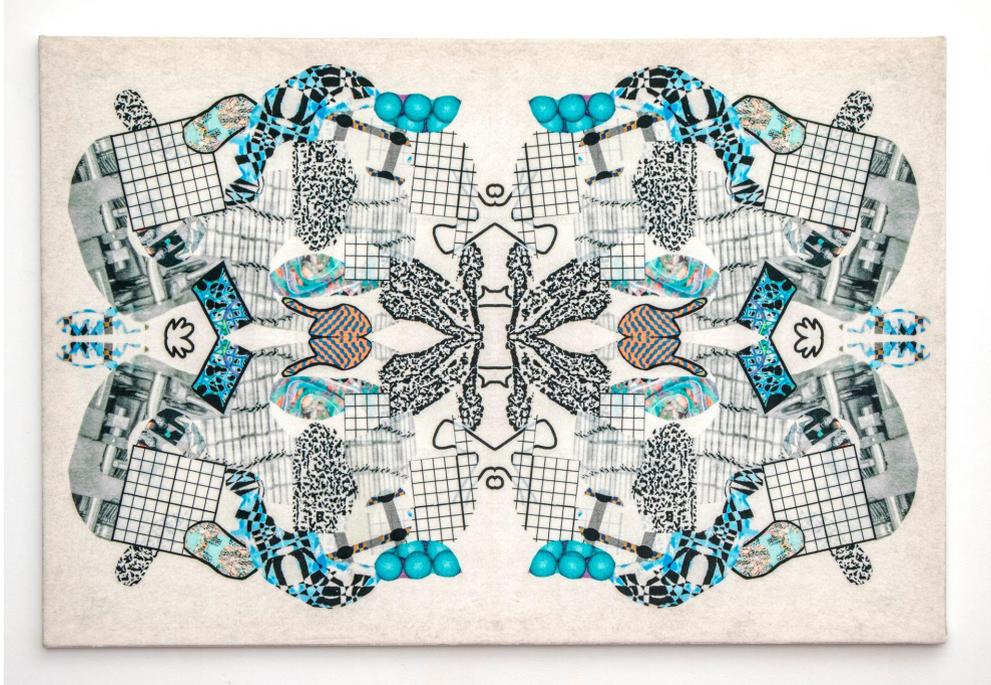
Ayeah's chest pounds visibly above the square neckline of her gray tank top. She can't imagine someone wanting to subject themselves to all the judgement of being married to a sheik.

"I'm not Saudi and I've never been to Saudi, and I don't want to marry a sheik."

"It doesn't matter. You're still a fraud!" The woman grabs at the cleavage spilling above her neckline, cupping it, raising her voice.

Ayeah considers if she really is a fraud. Why else would her outfit make people interrupt such a beautiful day to accost her? She considers suggesting that the woman is showing at least as much skin in her shorts. Each time a sensible argument comes to mind, a sickening feeling in the pit of her stomach tells her the woman won't take it well. Maybe, she thinks to herself, she miscalculated with her outfit, with her confidence in the idea that young people are supposed to be allowed to experiment in college as long they aren't hurting anyone, or who she is supposed to be with whom. Maybe the rules are different for her.

"You're like this!" the woman interrupts, her face full of rage, hands grabbing at her own cleavage.



While Ayeh searches for the right words, the woman reaches into her coral tee with both hands and grasps her left breast. An aureola appears. Then Ayeh sees a nipple.

Hearing the shouting, passersby have begun to stop and watch from a distance, she wonders if maybe someone will step in to help. She wonders if she deserves help or if the situation reads as an encounter between two tawdry characters not worth getting involved with.

She wonders if she looks cheap and desperate to all the strangers. If she looks like she is trying too hard. The passersby keep their distance.

“You’re like this!” The woman shrieks, jiggling her visible breast with both hands to emphasize the point.

“You’re the one who’s naked,” the words finally come with ease.

The statement registers first in the woman’s eyes and then in her posture. The woman’s hands press the bare breast back into the coral top.

Ayeh doesn’t wait for more questions. She walks away, maintaining her gait for almost two blocks, then glances around to see if anyone is staring at her. The world goes on about its day. Noticing this, she slips her cardigan back on.

She continues, still trembling, towards Bank of America.

(2002)

“Is that her?” asks a man’s voice on the escalator exiting the Foggy Bottom metro station.

A woman’s voice answers quietly, “It must be her. It looks just like her.”

Five stairs ahead, Ayeh overhears them and glances across at the faces coming down the opposite escalator, looking for recognizable

faces of Congresswomen who ride the D.C. metro.

“Excuse me,” the woman’s voice rises. Then a hand presses into Ayeh’s shoulder from behind. She twists around, glancing backwards.

“Is it you?” The woman asking is dressed in a white tee with bright red lipstick, and adds excitedly, “Congratulations!”

“Who?” Ayeh asks, glancing from her to the man standing next to her in a sports jacket and close-cut salt-and-pepper hair.

“Aren’t you the winner?” the woman asks.

“Which winner?” Ayeh asks.

“The winner of the contest that we just came from.”

Ayeh raises her eyebrows. “Which contest?”

“The Jackie Kennedy look-alike contest. Isn’t that where you’re coming from?”

Ayeh looks down at her red silk a-line skirt, the the oval sunglasses hanging from the boat neckline of her own white tee, and the loose ends of the same pink-and-white headscarf she had back in college that is tied around her head.

She breaks a smile. “I didn’t know there was a contest.”

“Well you should have been there. You look just exactly like the girl who won.”





By working on this show, and specifically the writing collection, I've had the opportunity to think about what it means to explain what's going on inside one's consciousness, to attempt to see from another person's perspective, to think about how the choices we make affect our realities and our impact on our ecosystems, and what makes people similar to and different from each other - and how celebrating that paradox can be the first step toward working together.

The following text came about as I tried to explain the concept for this show, to understand how it came to be, and why it is taking the form it is taking. It is an exercise in unpacking assumptions and choices and making meaning both in retrospect, but also imagining what this work could lead to. The text is aspirational, in the sense that it is evolving - it is a record of my thinking on a sunny morning in mid April, 2021, in Washington D.C., at the dining room table of my mother's house, where I grew up. We sat together, each of us on our laptops, writing.

David B. Smith

Same but Different **by David B. Smith**

Gallerist David B. Smith and I are working together for the first time to present *Same but Different*, an exhibition of my textile works exploring identity and imagined worlds, in his gallery in Denver, CO. We met 10 years ago at his booth at an art fair in Miami - I introduced myself on account of our common name. I had recently finished an MFA and was thinking about how the life-story and identity of the person behind it relates to the art they make. At a “career day” at Bard, a gallerist strongly suggested I consider changing my name in order to “stand apart” from the well-known modernist artist David Smith.

But standing apart doesn't entirely make sense to me. Being a third generation Ashkenazic Jewish immigrant of Eastern European descent, my ancestors suffered from persecution and alienation because of who we are. I subliminally learned to keep my head down, to shy away from the spotlight, and to assimilate. My father suffered from severe depression – being the son of an immigrant from Germany who escaped before the holocaust - the pressure to fulfill his “potential” was enormous. This ancestral trauma, combined with with bipolar disorder, resulted in hospitalizations and suicide attempts. In a reversal of roles, I was called to be his support with no space to step out on my own for fear of neglecting his needs. Between age 18 and 27, I acted as one of his primary caretakers, until his suicide at age 62.



A narrative of care-taking and holding space for the diversity of human identities, emotional landscapes and ways of thinking and being looms in the way I live, and the way I think about and make art. I began my exploration into art as a psychology student and moved to Art History as a more immediate way to learn the language of human emotion and internal narrative. My own artistic intention is to excavate the meeting places and imagine possibilities of the selves that are contained within and between each of us. And to do this, I consider the ways we choose to live, but also the ways to live that are chosen for us.

My work is designed to open up dialogue about a range of possible models for abundant and just futures. As large corporations, monoculture, and surveillance capitalism threatens our ability to think and choose for ourselves, I make textile images, sculptures, and installations to build an open-source language of individual and collective imagination that leans into the unknown, and serves as a reminder that world-building, and world-imagining should be for everyone, not just governments, institutions, and corporations.

I begin with the theory that reality is an evolving assemblage of codes - a layered system of properties shaped by actions and interpretations. Each of my works is the result of feeding textile-images through a series of actions - resulting in a new form, or way of being. As each piece can be defined by its internal code, it also takes its place in a larger code - a world being built one stitch at a time. This multi-directional way of seeing, inward and outward, forward and backward, complicates the binary way of seeing reality - from only one viewpoint - and opens doors for more equitable, inclusive, and richly expressive fields of being and becoming.

I acknowledge that these works were created on the unceded, ancestral, and occupied traditional lands of the Lenapehoking, the homeland of the Lenni-Lenape people; the Canarsie and Munsee Nations. My work is an offering and an act of care for the past, present and future ancestors of the Lenni-Lenape and I stand in solidarity with their rights as a sovereign nation.

