

## **The *Birth Project*: Its Continuing Impact**

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I talked on the phone for two weeks. I felt curious. “Could you tell me where the work is now? Is it in storage? On display? And could you tell me how the work is used?” During the last part of August and the first week of September, I posed these questions to about twenty of the approximately 60 institutions who had received *Birth Project* works during the late 1980s and early 1990s. These included mostly museums and galleries, big and small, university and non-university affiliated, but also a seminary, a library, a women’s center, a university itself, and the offices of Planned Parenthood in Denver, Colorado (excluding those 30 institutions where no follow up was needed)

Two decades plus had elapsed between the gift of the *Birth Project* works and now. Through the Flower wanted to know the impact of those gifts. Who looked at these works and how often? Did evidence exist they affected the consciousness of the audience? More than half the venues surveyed indicated direct use of the work either through exhibition, and sometimes multiple exhibitions, within the last ten or more years, or through permanent display of the work. Seven of those surveyed kept their *Birth Project* pieces on view. Nearly all other of the twenty institutions were happy and willing to retrieve and prepare *Birth Project* works for those who might request an individual audience.

I warmly anticipated some stories. In 2011, for example, the Krannert Art Museum of the University of Illinois mounted *Birth Tear Embroidery 3* (needleworkers Rae Atira-Soncea, and Kate Cloudsparks) with their other premiere pieces in a six months exhibition, *At 50: Krannert Art Museum, 1961– 2011*. Other university museum/gallery spaces recounted use of *Birth Project* work by students. In 2012 the University of North Texas Art Gallery in Denton also mounted an exhibition of premiere pieces from their collection, titled *Collections, Cultures, and Collaborations: Selections from the Permanent Collection at the College of Visual Arts and Design*. Graduate students, as part of an art history class at Denton, singled out works from the exhibition for research. Cheryl Palyu focused on *All Laced Up/Golden Girl* (needleworkers Sally Babson, Pamela Nesbit), producing a paper and giving a conference presentation. In 2013 at Gettysburg College, an art history student, Francesca DeBiaso, curated a small exhibition of *Birth Project* works for their gallery, the Schmucker. She included the two textiles owned by Gettysburg, *Creation of the World Embroidery 7/9* (needleworkers Shari Knapp and Jan Kinney) and *Birth Embroidery 4/6* (needleworker Marcia Nowlan), while adding a third, *Birth Certificate* (needleworker Barbara Amelia Nace), from the collection of Muhlenberg College in Allentown. As part of this senior art history project, DeBiaso gave several talks. A catalogue was produced and classes visited the exhibition. Also within the last year, a group of students, an art history majors organization at Cornell, created an exhibition at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum under the direction of a Johnson curator to include *Birth Project* works from the three in the Johnson collection, *Creation of the World, Quilt 1* (needleworker Sally Babson), *The Crowning Needlepoint 5* (needleworkers Marion, Maria, and Jan Lo Biondo, and Sharon Lo Biondo-

Lesins), and *Birth Goddess Embroidery 4* (needleworker Candis Duncan Pomykala). The Cornell students based their exhibition on an unusual premise – “human hair.”

My own museum, the Florida State University Museum of Fine Arts, counts six *Birth Project* works in its collection: *Swaddled by Nature* (needleworker Jan Cox-Harden), *The Crowning, Needlepoint 3* (needleworker Kathryn Haas Alexander), *Creation of the World, Needlepoint 2* (needleworker Gerry Melot), *Birth Goddess Embroidery 2* (needleworker Pamella Nesbit), *Birth Embroidery* (needleworker Pamella Nesbit), and *The Crowning Quilt 5* (needleworker Jacqueline Moore). These were included in two major exhibitions, *Trials and Tributes*, 1999 and *Thread of Life*, 2012, as part of an annual university/community arts festival. The museum mounted other smaller exhibitions of the works as well, for example for the Feminist Art Project the year it was inaugurated in 2005. The museum’s education program featured the works in seminars for high school Advanced Placement art and art history students and invited university classes to see them. In 2012 the works provided a basis for a semester-long seminar on Judy Chicago and the *Birth Project* itself. In October of this year, a class titled Gendered Bodies Over the Life Course will view and discuss the works. In November the FSU Museum of Fine Arts will show pieces to a special membership of the museum, the Artists’ League.

But some stories were unexpected, even astonishing. The Dennon Museum Center at Northwestern Michigan College reported their four works, *Birth Needlepoint* (needleworkers Jerry Gilbert, Karen Telfer, Jo Chester, Peggy Patton, and Carol Strittmatter), *Creation of the World Embroidery 2/9* (needleworker Christine Hager), *Creation of the World Embroidery 6/9* (needleworker Dina Broyde), and *Birth Garment 8: Whitework Wanda* (needleworkers Deborah Carlson, Leigh Heller, Sally Babson, and Tere Jensen) have been shown in a number of exhibitions. But their Executive Director, Eugene Jenneman, wrote that the original exhibition of the *Birth Project* on campus occurred even before the building of the museum. He went on to credit the *Birth Project* with contributing to the impetus for the museum’s construction. “The *Birth Project* exhibition . . . was showcased as an example of the kind of exhibition opportunities that could be made available to the community on an ongoing basis if we had a museum. . . .” The *Birth Project* helped turn the vision of the Northwestern community into reality.

At Planned Parenthood of the Rocky Mountains in Denver, the work is on permanent display in the staff training room of the building. Angela Wells, the Vice President of Administration, reported that 90% of the staff sees this work. In 2008 Planned Parenthood moved into their present renovated, city-block sized space. At that time they designed a special display area in the wall to house and show the work, *Birth Trinity Quilt Batik* (needleworker Judith Meyers). Wells explained the *Quilt* is used to unofficially spark discussion. She felt “the more you look, the more you see and understand.” She also said the “imagery was important to their organization since midwifery was so favored” there.

The Abigail Quigley McCarthy Center for Women at St. Catherine University in St. Paul, Minnesota permanently displays *Hatching the Universal Egg Embroidery 3* (needleworker Kris Wetterlund). Dr. Sharon Doherty, Director of the Center, described the use of the work as “direct and indirect.” She observed that the work “sets the tone” in this “vibrant community space where students, faculty, staff, and other groups meet.” Thus an indirect use of the work

revolves around the context it creates, one in which “women’s work is taken seriously, where art and women are viewed as important.” The work generates questions and it generates conversations about collaboration. Dr. Doherty felt the presence of the work as an object and in association with its story of creation: 1) as a holistic encouragement to collaborate, and 2) as a support of the values associated with collaboration, values held by the University and the Center for Women. Dr. Doherty also characterized the use of the work as direct. Classes interact with the work. One class, for instance, titled Reflective Woman must visually experience the work as part of an assignment. Dr. Doherty also discussed the Birth Project piece as a symbol of resilience. She described a “decades ago” radical art program at the University that was stopped. In 2012, a new program began, a summer program for women, the Women’s Art Institute. Dr. Doherty visualized the piece as an embodiment of the principles of the past program now carried forward, or a bridge from the past program to this program. She identified this new program as honoring the program from the past.

The Women’s Center of the Hartford Seminary also permanently displays its work, Guided by the Goddess (needleworker Marjorie L. Smith). The Women’s Center is housed on the first floor of the Seminary building designed by architect, Richard Meier. Dr. Miriam Therese Winter, Professor of Liturgy, Worship, Spirituality, and Feminist Studies, described the work as “feeling at home here,” as “defining the space,” giving “pride of place,” and “testifying to the feminine aspect of the divine.” She confided the original sense of shock to many who viewed the piece but she saw an evolution of attitude, the development of a realization the work “belongs here.” Although the work hangs in a Women’s Center, many groups of various faiths and both genders meet here for “circles, prayer groups, ritual, and class.” She mentioned this “shock” at first most dramatically affected those of Muslim faith, but now Muslim men and women meet with groups in this space and accept this image of the divine as normative. Dr. Winter perceives the work as “shaping a way of being in the world.”

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Dr. Thompson Wylder volunteers for Judy Chicago and/or Through the Flower for approximately two weeks each summer.