

ELAINE BRADFORD

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*FREAKS OF NURTURE*



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

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FEBRUARY 24 - MARCH 31, 2007

AUSTIN, TEXAS

ELAINE BRADFORD  
*Freaks of Nurture*

Elaine Bradford likes to crochet. Her grandmother taught her the technique, looping yarn with a thick hook. On September 11th, 2001, her first day of graduate school, she found that the repetitive and rhythmic motions suddenly soothed her anxiety as the world seemed to be unraveling on her television. It was in this moment that the artist realized the activity did not just provide a feeling of comfort, but the material offered something exciting to her sculptural practice. Fuzzy and soft, and signifying gifts of snuggly scarves, blankets and sweaters lovingly made by hand, it could powerfully address a cultural preoccupation with concern and support in a very specific moment. In her very first crochet project, she made little sweaters for all of the food in her refrigerator. Harboring the adolescent fantasy of imagining the life of inanimate objects, she thought it was funny to dress up veggies, eggs and milk cartons for the frosty dance parties that might happen when she closed the door. She also thought that the baby carrots looked cold.

A reinvestigation of craft and the handmade in an uncertain political climate has been one defining aspect of contemporary art. Related to the hip do-it-yourself craft culture that promotes a bohemian alternative to technology and consumption, the mood has been defined as a swing back to the basics. Debbie Stoller, the author of the best-selling “Stitch ‘n Bitch” series of knitter’s handbooks, explains this preoccupation with craft’s claims for authenticity to the *New York Times*. “You know where it’s made, and you know what goes into making it.”<sup>1</sup> This sentiment also informs formal strategies in the visual arts. Los Angeles-based artist, Lisa Anne Auerbach, for example, captures the seemingly ironic relationship of craft and politics by knitting sweaters with slogans about the war on terror on them. She also makes body count mittens, incorporating the number of American soldiers killed in Iraq

into the wool designs.<sup>2</sup> A subversive notion or a dissenting voice, wrapped in the comfort of a material associated with providing physical comfort, is an uneasy reconciliation, and a perfect paradox through which to frame Bradford’s sculptural practice.



*Animal/Minimal*, 2006. Taxidermy deer hooves, crocheted yarn. Dimensions variable.

While she does not tackle politics with as much denotative force as others, Bradford’s intent to nurture by literally making something warm for someone or something that looks cold epitomizes this national trend. Mainly consisting of taxidermy animals sheathed in colorful crochet skins, the work in “Freaks of Nurture” is a culmination of the artist’s ongoing critical and playful investigation of how her craft-based technique can ask larger questions about the nature of the world. It is through the use of crocheting as a confrontational artistic strategy, underscored by a yearning for genuine personal connection that gives life to the sculptures in this exhibition.

Before she began this new body of work, Bradford responded to the nurturing instinct of crocheting by making blue and green striped sweaters inspired by that season’s latest Gap and J.Crew patterns for rocks outside of an art center. She created camouflaged knit-wear for tree trunks that she found growing in rather bleak locations, like the forlorn islands in the middle of concrete parking lots. She buttoned up truncated tree stubs that she found in scrap heaps whose pathetic, small appendages vaguely resembled chopped-off limbs. The absurd garments were small gestures of comfort. Taxidermy came next. Bradford says it was a natural progression. Raised in a family of deer hunters in south Texas, the artist grew up with hunting trophies of mounted heads on wooden crests in her living room. She recognized that her own personal relationship to what she saw as familiar interior décor could confront a more complex set of cultural and political associations attached to the objects. For this reason, she thought they would be ideal objects upon which to continue her earnest and perhaps impossible effort of offering comfort despite a ridiculously sad state of affairs. Thus, like the fantastical and absurd daydreams of the frolicking anthropomorphic fridge food, Bradford dresses up animal heads in striped sweaters, offering a magical portal to absurd landscapes. Dotted by prancing deer protected from the elements by cute

cardis and crewnecks, Bradford's silly animal kingdom is a redemptive escape.

At the same time, by dressing up decapitated beasts and retrofitting them for domestic display, she complicates the distance between an imaginary space and a quotidian environment. Suddenly, both spheres seem just as ridiculous and improbable. Does the dead animal's new crocheted membrane ease the melancholy *memento mori* by allowing the macabre object to slip into the world of fine arts? Or, does the hope to offer escape into a fairy book scenario only accentuate the reality of what is clearly a hopeless situation? It is as if she is trying to soften the blow with yarn and humor. By refusing to let us buy the masquerade as a convincing solution, Bradford draws attention to a helpless reality. The real fur, bristly eyelashes, and glass-ball eyes that peak out of the colorful cloth remind us what is still behind it. Bradford also employed a similar technique on her friend Seth's car. Deciding that his beat-up Chevy pick-up needed some attention, the artist crocheted a snug green and pink bumper-cozy fastened with white buttons. It was a last-ditch effort to console very dented and dirty metal.

Bradford has since been gradually extending and pushing her covered animals into a more ambiguous conceptual space. In *Untitled (For Mel)*, 2006, at her exhibition at Okay Mountain in Austin, she elongated the antlers of three wall-mounted taxidermy deer heads. Extending in curling red crocheted tubes across the gallery, the antlers morph into veins of tangled webs and are conjoined as they loop around the rafters. The labor-intensive process takes over with so much of its own compulsive energy, Bradford's beasts are no longer cute critters from a magical land.

At first glance, the show at *Women & Their Work* is a playground of funny animals with glassy eyes, hooves and furry tips of tails poking out of their garments of love. While some are attached to the wall, others have

become free standing objects, free to romp around. Yet, as in her most recent work, cancerous-like crocheted growths, twisted torsos, and hybrid assemblages defy whimsy. Now victims of craft or freaks of nurture, something uncanny has happened, and the result is hysterically funny but profoundly disquieting. In *Divided Attention*, a gallery-white crocheted skin, accentuated by round pearl buttons, covers a ram's head. Stretching over the animal's curves, the sweater extends the tips of the horns into curling appendages that gradually swell into concentric scarlet circles that seem to suction to the wall. No longer anatomical parts, the appendages become formal elements, recalling the eccentric abstract shapes of Eva Hesse's soft sculpture. Equally transgressive is the torso of *Mongolian Knotted Deer*, that is twisted into a pretzel, and the singular horn of the beast of *Non-Typical Antler Growth*. Emerging from the head, the horn falls to the floor, where it sprouts spidery branches.

The manipulation and distortion of anatomy also turns the animals into pathetic creatures; the sweaters seem to contribute to their agony rather than console their misery. *Longneck* is a wall-mounted antelope head. The neck, covered in handsome brown, blue, and yellow crocheted bands, is so grotesquely elongated that it can't support the animal's head, which has mournfully fallen to the ground. It seems to have suffocated under the weight of the excess yarn. In *Snarl*, Bradford's Carnaby-striped cover drapes over the muzzle of a small coyote. Twisting and curling in a mess of material, the head and paws tangle around the body and meet the tail, trapping the animal in the confusion of a tail-chasing nightmare.

Bradford's simple act of providing material comfort has thus become increasingly more complex; it is complicated by the technique's demands to more prominently exert itself, and perhaps by the political issues that inevitably surface from the works' form and content. The use of craft techniques as

"high" art, for instance, cannot be ripped from the rich history of the women's art movement of the 1970s. At this moment, categories of artistic production that women have historically practiced in the home were radically used to reveal how fine art's hidden formal hierarchies systematically excluded women artists from the art historical canon. In this spirit, Bradford continues to question gender roles and the division of labor by looking at materials and subjects that are linked to masculine and feminine binaries: nurture and nature, hunt and home. It is not unlike the conflation of spheres that groups of guerilla knitters are currently exploring by taking "women's work" out on the street. The Houston-based "Knittas," for example, tag street posts and stop signs with patches and wraps of knitted yarn. Blurring the political division of space – the public and the private – like Bradford, they offer a rebellious aesthetic confutation in the spirit of activist craft in the 1970s.

At the same time, Bradford proves "craft" is no longer just a feminist word. In a post 9-11 world, her crocheting offers a way for the method to be put in the service of another discussion. Imagine the artist sitting on her sofa, compulsively and methodically interlocking looped stitches around a furry head on her lap while watching the evening news. Far beyond a hipster fad, it is an urgent, anxious and genuine activity, and a compelling metaphor for a tentative moment; you just have to pull one thread for a very elaborate creation to unravel.

Michelle White  
Curatorial Assistant,  
The Menil Collection, Houston

<sup>1</sup> Melena Ryzik, "A New Wave Now Knits for the Rebellion of It," *New York Times*, January 27, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Lisa Anne Auerbach, "Body Count Mittens" *Knit Knit* 6 (Winter 2005) p. 18.

## ELAINE BRADFORD

Born in Taft, TX 1977

Lives in Houston, TX

### EDUCATION

- |      |   |      |
|------|---|------|
| 2003 | Masters of Fine Arts, California Institute of the Arts.               |      |
| 2000 | Bachelor of Fine Arts, Studio Art, The University of Texas at Austin. | 2005 |

### SOLO/TWO PERSON EXHIBITIONS

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|------|--|------|
| 2007 | <i>Freaks of Nurture</i> , Women & Their Work, Austin, TX.               |      |
|      | <i>Locked Horns and Shed Antlers</i> , Lawndale Art Center, Houston, TX. |      |
| 2006 | <i>Outside In</i> , Okay Mountain, Austin, TX.                           |      |
| 2005 | <i>Rear Bumper Sweater</i> , Seth's Bumper Gallery, Houston, TX.         |      |
| 2004 | <i>Domestic Camouflage</i> , Cirrus Gallery, Los Angeles, CA.            |      |
| 2003 | <i>Small Comforts, Other Worlds</i> , East Gallery, Fullerton, CA.       | 2003 |
| 2000 | <i>Comfort Show</i> , New Gallery, Austin, TX.                           |      |

### SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

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|------|---|--|
| 2007 | <i>New Works</i> , Hardin Simmons University, Abilene, TX.  |  |
| 2006 | <i>Fall Show</i> , Silas Marder Gallery, Bridgehampton, NY.   |  |
|      | <i>Embroidered Stories/Knitted Tales</i> , Bedford Gallery, Walnut Creek, CA.   |  |
|      | <i>Sculpture Now</i> , Williams Tower Gallery, Houston, TX.   |  |
|      | <i>BEAST</i> , Finesilver Gallery, Houston, TX.   |  |
|      | <i>Crafty</i> , MassArt, Boston, MA.  |  |
|      | <i>Summer Sucks</i> , Commerce Street Artist Warehouse, Houston, TX.  |  |
|      | <i>Femme xx v I.O.</i> , Revolution Gallery, Dallas, TX.  |  |
|      | <i>Quiver</i> , Cirrus Gallery, Los Angeles, CA.  |  |
|      | <i>BMG Artists' Annual</i> , BLK/MRKT Gallery, Culver City, CA.   |  |
| 2005 | <i>Hanging by a Thread</i> , The Moore Space, Miami, FL.  |  |
|      | <i>The Big Show</i> , Lawndale Art Center, Houston, TX.   |  |
|      | <i>Texas Biennial</i> , Austin, TX. Juror's Choice Award.   |  |
| 2004 | <i>Incognito</i> , Santa Monica Museum of Art, Santa Monica, CA.  |  |
|      | <i>Empty Nest</i> , Sweetboy Projects Home Base, Los Angeles, CA.   |  |
|      | <i>Arboretum</i> , Cirrus Gallery, Los Angeles, CA.   |  |
|      | <i>BID Show</i> , Guaranteed Vacuum, Arroyo Arts Collective, Highland Park, CA.   |  |
|      | <i>Pleasure Garden</i> , Barnsdall Art Park, Hollywood, CA.   |  |
|      | <i>Girls Who Wear Glasses</i> , Crazy Space, Santa Monica, CA.  |  |
| 2003 | <i>Trail Mix: A Mile of Art</i> , Hahamongna Watershed Park, Pasadena, CA.  |  |
|      | <i>In the Nursery</i> , Armory Northwest, Pasadena, CA.   |  |
|      | <i>We've Moved</i> , The Armory, Pasadena, CA.  |  |
|      | <i>Armory Outdoor Sculpture Installational</i> , Armory Northwest, Pasadena, CA.  |  |
|      | <i>Space Invaders</i> , Six Months, Los Angeles, CA.  |  |
|      | <i>Emergence</i> , Track 16, Santa Monica, CA.  |  |
| 2002 | <i>Old Town Newhall Art Walk</i> , Jazmin's Bakery, Newhall, CA.  |  |
|      | <i>Soft</i> , Time & Place Gallery, Gorman, CA.   |  |
| 2000 | <i>Passing Through Walls: An Art Exhibition Inside an Architecture Building</i> , Sutton Hall, The University of Texas, Austin, TX. |  |
|      | <i>Revelation, Texas</i> , International Sculpture Conference, Houston, TX.   |  |
| 1999 | <i>Surface Tension: An Art Exhibition Inside a Swimming Center</i> , The Texas Swimming Center, Austin, TX.                         |  |
|      | <i>New Works Exhibit</i> , Performing Arts Center, Austin, TX.  |  |

### SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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|------|--|--|
| 2007 | French, Christopher. "Beast: Houston." ArtPapers. January/February 2007.   |  |
| 2006 | Klaasmeyer, Kelly. "Kingdom Come: Finesilver showcases a menagerie of art." Houston Press. October 26- November 1, 2006. |  |
|      | Pruitt, Nichole. "Gallery Reviews: Finesilver, Houston." Artshouston. Oct. 2006.   |  |
|      | Wood, Tria. "New Yarns to Tell: Houston contemporary artists reinterpret crochet." Artshouston. Oct. 2006.               |  |
|      | Klaasmeyer, Kelly. "Artbeat: Sculpture Now." Houston Press. Oct 12-18, 2006.   |  |

Cook, Greg. "Providences 'Wunderground' and MassArt's 'Crafty' The Phoenix. Sept. 28, 2006.

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Wiseheart, Sandi. "Hook into the web." Interweave Crochet. Spring 2006.

"BLK/MRKT ONE." Exhibition catalog. Jana DesForges, ed. June 2006.

Gordon, Margery. "Hanging by a Thread: The Moore Space: Miami." ArtNews, Dec. 2005.

"Hanging By a Thread." Exhibition catalog. Nina Arias and Jose Dias, curators. 2005.

Bly, Brittany. "Word on the Street: D.I.Y., Alternative Spaces, and Young Artists." Free Press Houston, May 1st- 15th 2005.

Cohen, Rebecca S. "Texas Biennial 2005." Artlies. Issue 46, Spring 2005.

Wolff, Elaine. "Digital-induced angst and sensory overload." San Antonio Current. March 10, 2005.

Maddaus, Gene. "A Mile of Smiles: NewTown art show on trail draws a variety of reactions." Pasadena Star News. November 9, 2003.

Scoenkopf, Rebecca. "More Tampons, Please! Sometimes whimsy is its own reason for being." Orange County Weekly. Sept. 5-11, 2003.

Myers, Holly. "Empty lot, blank canvas; At Armory Northwest, 15 sculptors try to find life in the banal: a parking area. Some do."

Los Angeles Times. Aug. 14, 2003.



*Non-Typical Antler Growth*, 2006. Mounted antelope head, elk antler, crocheted yarn, buttons, wire, batting. 72" x 30" x 84".



This Panel: *Longneck*, 2007. Mounted antelope head, crocheted yarn, buttons, wood plaque, fabric, batting. Dimensions variable.

Cover Panel: *Conjoined*, 2007. Mounted deer heads, custom wood plaque, crocheted yarn, buttons. 36" x 23" x 22".



*Snarl*, 2006. Taxidermy coyote, crocheted yarn, buttons, wire, batting. 36" x 20" x 32".

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WOMEN & THEIR WORK

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