

Patchwork: Emma Balder's Community Cloth

By Lauren Moya Ford

Whether it's on our bodies, around our homes, or out in the world, fabric matters to the Houston artist Emma Balder. "Textiles are everywhere. We wear them everyday, and we're surrounded by them," she said. "But more often than not, we don't really give them a second thought."

Balder's art practice moves against that tendency. In her fiber paintings, thin threads sprawl into compact but energetic designs on paper, and in her sculptural paintings or "pinglets," the artist's colorful abstract canvases are cut up, spliced with found fabric objects, and reassembled into vibrant, three-dimensional forms.

For years, textiles have been the material and thematic center of Balder's work, and they continue to be a rich source of inspiration. But the artist doesn't just want to explore fabric according to her own personal and creative impulses. She also wants to, in her words, make her viewers "rethink the textiles in their lives that are important to them and why."

Textiles have long been a part of Balder's life. Her grandmother, aunt, and mother all made their own clothing and costumes, and the artist and her sisters learned to knit and sew as children. Crucially, Balder remembers her mother using her sewing machine as a productive and creative outlet, fusing functional craft projects with personal expression.

"As a kid, I was always attracted to textiles and different patterns," Balder recalled. "I'd collect them and cut up my own clothes and try to make things out of them." This interest led to courses at the School of Fashion Design in Balder's native Boston while the artist was still in high school. A degree from the Savannah College of Art and Design developed Balder's taste for painting without erasing her original connection to textiles. In fact, her work still combines elements of fashion's fabric on bodies and fine art's canvas on walls.

One of the most formative points in Balder's trajectory was a year-long artist residency at the Vermont Studio Center between 2014 and 2015. There, she incorporated discarded material remnants and scraps left by other artists-in-residence into her own experimental artworks. This inclination to bring in others' voices through their personal effects – and to collage together a sense of shared community, creativity, and time – echoes in Balder's latest project, "Beyond the Surface."

Because Balder utilizes textile waste in her work, she has often wondered about the hidden stories behind the found fabrics that she transforms in her studio. She also wanted to find a more collaborative mode of making that could include others in her art practice more directly. "As artists, we spend so much time focusing on the internal," Balder noted. "I didn't want the work to be just my view of other people's experiences; I wanted it to be a combination of others' truths, to really soak up people's lives, stories, and emotions."

A Houston Arts Alliance Support for Artists and Creative Individuals grant provided Balder with an opportunity to expand her scope. She decided to use her work as a platform for exploring other people's connection to textiles. "The idea came as I was thinking about how our relationship to textiles can be indicative not only of our experiences, our memories, and the stories that we

associate with them, but also how they can reflect our relationship with other beings, even with ourselves,” the artist explained.

Using email, social media and word of mouth, Balder gathered 22 members of the Houston community from a range of backgrounds for two in-person collaborative sessions held at Box13 ArtSpace in March 2022. Participants were asked to bring one textile that held a special resonance for them, which they would share with the group and then cut and affix to a larger sewn painting that the artist had produced in her studio. At the sessions, participants presented clothing, blankets, and other personal items that often carried a strong sense of history and intimacy, as their recorded statements in the following publication show.

Curiously, the process behind Balder’s painted and collaged pieces for the sessions also evoked an intimate, even familiar sensibility. She worked on three large canvases simultaneously, moving each around the studio as she painted, cut, rearranged, then sewed them back together. “They were on the floor acting like carpets at one point, then like wall hangings, then like quilted blankets,” Balder said. “It started to feel like I was in a home while I was making them.”

Balder’s bright colors and gestural strokes produce bold abstractions that are further obscured once the painted canvases are chopped, remixed, and reassembled. As in her previous works, the artist has to let go of any attachment to her original painted design in order to create her sculpted paintings. In the collaborative work for “Beyond the Surface,” participants had to do an even more profound act of letting go: no matter how much their object symbolized or how long it had been a part of their lives, they had to relinquish their attachment to its physical form.

Despite the challenge, the participants moved forward. “They found themselves really letting go, and able to give this material a new life,” Balder said. “Many were also realizing that whatever memory they had with this item and with the people they were associating it with was still there.” The sessions left Balder with a lasting message. “The object doesn’t always hold as much meaning and power as the memories do,” the artist stated.

The sessions, with their deep emotional exposure and release, opened a space of empathy among participants. As community members retold the stories of joy, strength, and loss that their objects represented, they forged new relationships with their lived experiences, and with one another. However small or worn, their textiles came together to form something new. The resulting creations bring to mind the concept of a patchwork, where a small scrap of fabric can mend or strengthen the torn or weakened point of a larger whole.

It’s an experience that Balder will carry into her future work. “I’ve been making art for well over 10 years,” she said, “but this project truly allowed me to see the capacity that art has in healing our souls. There’s so much power in vulnerability, in baring our souls to each other. By revealing those vulnerabilities, we reveal our shared humanity.” With its mixture of materials and moments, the artist’s collaborative project in “Beyond the Surface” reminds us that art can help us see just how much our lives are part of a collective tapestry.