

## The Quilt on the Couch

*Listening to the structures of our quilts and our lives*

My two pastimes include quilting and reading psychoanalytic theory. I connected my intellectual interests to my work as a quilter when I encountered Jacques Lacan's notion of the *quilting point*. This phrase tied my two interests together and opened up a new world for me to write, think, and sew. I call this paired project, *A Psychoanalysis of Quilts*. You might say that I write about the *Quilt on the Couch*.

I typically write for an audience on social media. In my account @pelicanquilts on Instagram and Substack I usually avoid philosophical terms. Using technical terminology doesn't work there, but I will indulge myself here.

*The Quilting Point*. Lacan's *quilting point* is the point where change becomes possible. The chain of words, or signifiers, gives form and informs reality and our experience. The chain is both never complete but also contains points where too much is happening. These loaded words function like points, or stitches, that open up the orderly chain. The quilting point binds us but also can be worked with to create new possibilities within the chain of signification. In psychoanalysis it is through the working out of one of these *quilting points* that come up in analysis that the current order can be broken and reshuffled.

The traditional structures of the quilt provide a way for me to think about the way reality needs this signification. These mechanisms hint at how I can operate within that system to bring change. Freedom, for me, always requires work within this chain of signifiers. In my work, the space that this language provides is a generative restriction. Not only that, but it is the necessary starting point for a community to exist.

The common language of quilting within the tradition is important to me because I am interested in change. Not just individual change, but in the public space. Freedom that extends past personal expression.

Composition is my favorite aspect of quilting. Because of this I don't follow quilt patterns, nor do I make a comprehensive plan before I begin. I choose the type of quilt block, and work from there. When I first encountered the Gees Bend quilters I was astonished at their mastery of composition. The emotional impact of their work is the reason I decided to become a quilter. Later, I studied their work and I began to understand their technical genius. I gaze at their work looking for its structure and see only the living blocks of color and dancing forms. I push myself to keep looking. The Gees Bend quilters are disciplined about working within the formal language of traditional quilting structures and blocks. They forgo the norms - seam alignment, symmetry, scale, color - but they hold onto the language of the quilt. Last year I was writing about a Gees Bend quilt - Essie Bendolph Pettway's 1997 Housatop four block variation. I thought I had uncovered everything I could see when

I realized I was looking at a *log cabin quilt*. I had just spent over a year making and studying log cabin quilts. The *log cabin block* was the one I was most familiar with, yet I didn't see it in front of me. I could not believe what the quilter had done within the rigidity of that block. She spoke the language of that quilt, but she was free.

A quilt is held together by stitches. Without the stitches that bind the three layers of cloth, the batting falls through the layers leaving the textile in a structureless mass. In psychoanalysis, this is what it means to be psychotic. We need these stitches, this structure, to make meaning. But that doesn't mean we are doomed to remain insystems we are born into. Change is possible. At least, that is what I seek. I work to read the hidden structures and patterns. The ones just out of sight.

In psychoanalysis, change takes place through the process of speaking to the analyst. By speaking, the analysand creates new chains of signification, of meaning. A quilting point is identified. This translation works to unravel without unraveling our being. When a pivotal word, a quilting point, emerges into the conscious mind, it becomes malleable. The deck can be reshuffled, the stitches resewn. Change is possible. Through my writing and my quilting, I work to use structures and language to think through these ideas. The language of my mother tongue. The language of my craft. The quilt blocks handed down to me over generations. The ideas handed down through thinkers of the past.

There is something about writing into my quilting process that feels like speaking in analysis. I come to the couch. The quilt on the couch. In psychoanalysis the couch is the place I come to speak. I am working in color and shapes to wrestle with ideas.

Many quilters working in fine artists now are focused on improvisational quilting or journal quilting. It follows a trend towards an interest in personal narratives and individual expression. The autobiographical. My interest lies in communal conversation, not my own personal expression alone. For me, this requires public structures and common language. Something that my great grandmother could have read. Something that quilters will understand in five hundred years. I find this language in the traditional quilt blocks. There is no split between private expression and public, but the public structure, the public language is the context where the private life takes place. It is the starting point. I feel this need to strengthen these walls in a time where public spaces are being abandoned for personal freedoms. If we abandon these spaces, eventually there will be no room for the private.

I work with traditional quilt patterns. For me, attention to these structures is more than aesthetic, more than a nod to the past. It's a bid towards freedom.