

Material Message: Photographs of Fabric

Curated by Marcella Hackbardt

The history of photography abounds with images of fabric, starting with some of the first photographs ever made by William Henry Fox Talbot of lace 170 years ago, and continuing to our present day. Fabrics contain complex and symbolic messages of culture, commerce, and identity in both the photograph and in our everyday lives. Textile patterns may refer to cultures and appropriation, colors conjure powerful encoded meanings, and the surfaces and properties of fabric--it's transparency, opacity, or ability to catch and modulate light--make fabric uniquely desirable for the camera's ways of seeing and recording. From domestic textiles such as curtains, tablecloths, towels, and sheets; to clothing including veils, uniforms, undergarments, secondhand items, and those commemorating life's milestones; to yards of cut, raw fabric, photographs of fabrics demand our attention, our tactile memories, and our translation.

Various materials may evoke perceptions of modalities such as the feminine and the masculine, and as such comment on sexuality and the body as both historical and media critique. Fabrics suggest a range of choice, agency, and anxieties on the part of the human subject, while also revealing economic complications or class, global cultures, and gendered, religious, or other social or normative influences. Materials sometimes take the place of the figure entirely or seek to conceal objects, ultimately negotiating the nature of human preoccupations with what is hidden and what is revealed.

In *Material Message*, seven contemporary photographic artists mobilize fabric's aesthetic, formal and conceptual potentials. These artists use fabric in order to subvert preconceived notions of social roles and the self, as in Patty Carroll's draped female figures, and Selina Román's *Burqa Project* photographs that question power, politics, and the unreturned gaze. John Mann collapses distinctions between the literal and abstraction, and Jacinda Russell complicates performance and documentary presentation with hotel towels. Elizabeth M. Claffey's glowing, ghost-like apparitions attest to the temporality and longevity of familial devotions. Using the most delicate and barely-there fabric as a substrate for overt programming, Morgan Ford Willingham's masks whisper destructive desires. Leonard Suryajaya ignites the optical nerves with extravagant patterns, colors, and textile sources, in images of tenderness and a beautifully chaotic ethos. Each artist makes use of photography's malleability to construct messages ranging from notions of the veil to reveries on memory.

- Marcella Hackbardt