



by Betsy Greer

Homicide Quilt

One of the amazing things about needlework is that it can be used in so many different ways to explain a host of emotions. While often done in groups, needlework is primarily a solitary endeavor. However, the size of quilts and their unique construction methods create space for a group of quilters to work on the same project at once. Opening up a space for group work also creates a setting for dialogue to unfold between the stitches.

When the stitchwork being made brings up difficult and complicated feelings, the space between



the stitches can help participants process their thoughts. This was the case with *Untitled (Homicide Quilt)*, a 2014 project created by artist Rachel Wallis and Thelma Uranga, the founder of the Chicago stitching collective El Stitch y Bitch. Using information from reporters, the quilt names 500 individuals killed by gun violence in Chicago in 2013.

Some of the victims' families learned about the quilt and came to see it at the 2014 Craft/Work show in Chicago. Wallis met the family of one victim, a moment in which she hopes



ABOVE: RACHEL WALLIS (WITH COMMUNITY MEMBERS) *Gone But Not Forgotten* (Detail of community quilt project in progress) Fabric, thread, hand embroidery, appliqué, machine sewing, finished squares are 10" x 10", 2015.

LEFT, TOP: RACHEL WALLIS (WITH COMMUNITY MEMBERS) *Gone But Not Forgotten* (Detail of community quilt project in progress) Victim biography with picture, fabric, thread, hand embroidery, appliqué, machine sewing, finished squares are 10" x 10", 2015. Photos: Rachel Wallis.

LEFT, BOTTOM: THELMA URANGA AND RACHEL WALLIS (WITH COMMUNITY MEMBERS) *Untitled (Homicide Quilt)* Fabric, thread, hand embroidery, machine appliqué, 72" x 48", 2014. Photo: Thelma Uranga. With detail. Photo: Joe Tighe.

that "the love and care that went into [the quilt]" was clear in this stitched remembrance of their loved one.

The slowness of handwork adds to the poignancy of projects such as this. When stitching the names of people from your own city, the task becomes even more personal. Wallis embroidered the name of an individual killed on her block; other members of the collective had similar experiences. She was frustrated, however, that the related media coverage often did not highlight the project's "political framework around inequality in Chicago."

With this in mind while working on the homicide quilt, Wallis came across information that led to her next project. Using police department statistics and information from independent researchers, Wallis discovered that more than 100 people were killed by the Chicago Police Department since 2008. However, "those names [weren't] made public anywhere."

Wallis is currently working with a Chicago non-profit called We Charge Genocide, a grassroots multi-generation organization dedicated to looking into murder cases that involve the police. The non-profit is run by volunteers, and its website clearly states the ethos upon which it was created—"to end police violence relies on

two primary strategies: education and documentation." Together, Wallis and We Charge Genocide will be holding sewing circles around Chicago where participants can embroider, appliqué, and quilt panels with the name of an individual left off the list, as part of a new quilt entitled *Gone But Not Forgotten*. The aim is to involve community members, getting them to talk amongst themselves about their own experiences, as well as to "engage people in a broader dialogue" about this issue as they create a "tangible memorial" together.

Work like this gives the voiceless a mouthpiece. By inviting viewers to read victims' names spelled out in stitches, the pieces reiterate the fact that each statistic is made up of real people, not just numbers. By forcing the audience to acknowledge these names, these quilts help to highlight their importance, their existence, and the tragic loss of their shortened lives.
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*To read a review of *Craftivism*, turn to page 64.