



by debora kodish

Community fabric



Works in Community Fabric exhibition (l-r) by Rose Miller, Yekini Atanda, and Pang Xiong Sirirathasuk Sikoun. Photos by Will Brown

During a gathering of artists at the Folklore Project, Betty Leacraft commented, “I come from people who always worked with cloth.” Relatives said to have been craftspeople included her great-grandmother, a professional seamstress who sewed for wealthy white people in Vance County, North Carolina. Had some of those families preserved as treasured keepsakes any of the christening gowns or wedding dresses made by her great-grandmother? Betty wondered. If she could find some of these pieces now, having spent a lifetime finding her own way as an artist, she might be able to see what her great-grandmother had done, and how she did it. She might be able to retrieve some stitches, practices, knowledge, from the work itself.

The situation she describes relates to a key concern of PFP: how traditional arts are passed on, acquired, or reclaimed—especially where there is unequal access to resources. Not everyone has access to traditions of craft: even those who are descended from craftspeople of skill and distinction cannot count on following a path made easier by a knowing and loving mentor.

Like Betty, many other

participating artists in our new “Community Fabric” exhibition have continued to work in particular folk and traditional art forms despite daunting challenges: war and repression, silencing and opposition, personal loss and economic hardship, and the difficulties of mastering hand-made minority and alternative traditions when older mentors are gone and knowledge seemingly lost. Some artists have been able to do their work because of community support; still others have had to single-mindedly pursue their own paths, painstakingly researching specific family or regional craft traditions, or developing their own approaches to mediums to which they are drawn. And for yet others, work has been a place for pleasure, and creative expression. The small gallery contains only 29 works, yet suggests lifetimes of effort and dedication.

I knew Ayesha Rahim’s crocheted hats (“crowns,” people call them) by sight before I knew her. I saw them—distinctive, beautiful, each suited to its wearer—at ODUNDE, community festivals, neighborhood activities, on Saturday grocery shoppers at the Reading Terminal Market (where, it turns out, she had once worked at the Amazulu craft

stand). I couldn’t help myself. I’d ask total strangers, “Is that one of Ayesha Rahim’s hats?” I knew that we wanted to include her crochet work in this exhibition.

And as it turns out, some of her hats were already in our gallery: pictured in our recent exhibition of Tom Morton’s ODUNDE photos. In several photographs, Yoruba Orisha priest Bob Thompson wears one of these delicately crocheted hats. Others are in the possession of musician Omomola Iyabunmi and dancer Dottie Wilkie, also pictured in that show. It seems especially fitting that one exhibition in our new gallery flows into the next in this way, and that in tracing some of the threads of community fabric, we follow Ayesha Rahim’s work—already embraced by a community of people.

Except from interviews with Ayesha Rahim and Betty Leacraft follow. They are among 19 artists featured in “Community Fabric” at PFP through September. More information is available on our website.