

“My inspiration is usually based on textiles and garments and adornments that are part of the ritual traditions of the African diaspora and people of color.”



Betty Leacraft: I know that my people always worked with cloth

MMy maternal grandmother Sadie Artist Wills was the first to put a needle and thread in my hand. And I was about five then. Her mother, my great-grandmother Betty Artist, was a professional seamstress in Vance County, North Carolina, probably around the late 1800s. My grandmother's aunt, Laura Green—my mother told me that Aunt Laura used to hold quilting bees at her house in Henderson, North Carolina, in Vance County. And my mother's job as a kid was to separate the colors of cloth that the women would use. And she remembers my aunt saying, “Send that red down the middle.” I'm not sure whether she meant down the middle of the quilt, or down the middle of the quilt block.

And my grandmother told me that when she was a young girl,

when her mother's legs would get tired working the treadle of the sewing machine, part of my grandmother's job was to get down there and push the treadle with her hands.

I am sure that there is somebody somewhere that my great-grandmother had sewn for, in that community—because anybody who was a good dressmaker in that time used to sew for a white person who had money. And I used to wonder if there was someone, some family down there, that still had in their possession something that was sewn by my great-grandmother—say a christening gown or a wedding gown, or a garment that represented a rite of passage, the kind of heirloom that families would keep.

My grandmother told me that her father, Nathan Artist, a bar-

ber and a cane rush weaver, made chair bottoms. I remember Nanny telling me, “I am sorry that I didn't learn to do that so I could have shown you, because I know you would have done something with it.”

A female head of the household, my grandmother was good at making things that brought money into the house. She made hair pomade that she sold to local beauty parlors and jewelry accessories that I helped her make. I remember her braiding stockings and sewing them together into oval braided rugs.

I do remember my grandmother having made these little jumpers for myself and my first cousin and my sister, all trimmed with rickrack. Rickrack was something that she evidently was fond of. (In one of the pieces in the PFP show, I used

the gold rickrack because it calls up the memory of a trimming I remember Nanny using a lot.)

All of us learned how to sew, as a result of my grandmother. I remember cutting up and hand-sewing four squares, sewing two of them, and calling it a straight skirt for a doll. The other two squares, I thought were supposed to be a blouse. That's the first thing I can recall trying to make. I was around five. Actually, the first things I ever sold were potholders from a loom that my grandmother bought me, and I realized that people would actually buy them.

And I think my grandmother may have taken notice of my efforts and thinking maybe I was trying to do something, she bought me a little cross-stitch kit. That's the first thing I can remember her showing me how to do.

And my grandmother told me that when I was young, I always would find a scissors, no matter where she hid them. And that when I found scissors I would for some reason start cutting up photographs. And once I remember cutting the whole side of a bedspread fringe off.

My second grandmother, Monay Wills, who was from Trinidad, was the other person in my life who really understood that my ability to sew was more than just a passing fancy. She would tell me about different kinds of fabric. And she paid for me to go to Parsons School of Design for a summer, in the 1970s. Being from the Islands, she comes from a tradition of going to people to get their clothes made,

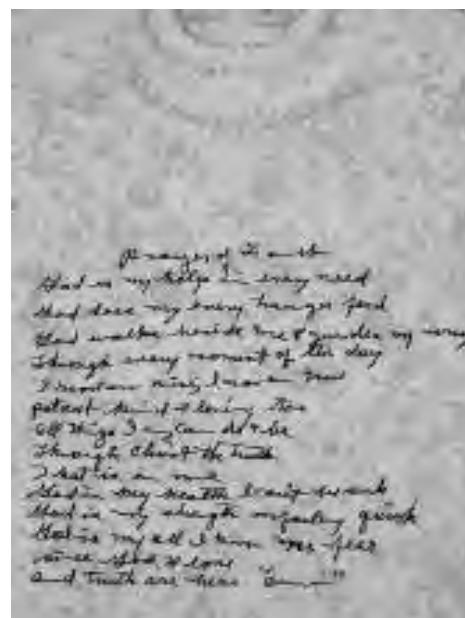
so it was something that she was very used to. It was by way of my maternal grandfather, Albert C. Wills, a native of Georgetown, Guyana, that I got my exposure to world cultures. The first Africans I ever met, a married couple from Ghana, lived on the third floor of Granddaddy's house in Camden.

My grandmother's sewing machine was a Brother, with a knee lever—the first machine I

won some trophies in national competitions of the National Association of Fashion and Accessory Designers, as a member of the Philadelphia chapter. I have learned by self-directed apprenticeship.

I like to create works that blur the lines between quilts, wall hangings, wearable arts, sculpture and installation.

My inspiration is usually based on textiles and garments and adornments that are part of



ever sewed on.

My mother didn't sew but was artistic. So that gift of sewing skipped a generation and came to me. I really feel that the ability to do this kind of creative work was there before me and it gets through to whoever has the capacity to carry it.

I have made custom clothing for many years. I worked at Fabric Workshop, as head fabric construction technician (1980-1986) facilitating the work of artists in residence. I

the ritual traditions of the African Diaspora and people of color. All those influences together helped to shape my cultural frame of reference. Much of the work I create is inspired by traditional sources and realized as contemporary expressions.

Two pieces ("Every goodbye is not gone," and "Prayer of faith") from the Ancestor series, by Betty Leacraft, 1999. Photos: Will Brown, 2006