

Introduction

Shelly Zegart: Championing the Art of the Quilt

When it comes to the world of quilts, an encounter with Shelly Zegart is inspiring and exhausting. Her fierce passion for the cultures and histories of quilts continues to map and extend the borders of art in the United States and beyond in challenging and provocative ways. Her leadership produced a comprehensive statewide survey of Kentucky's quilting traditions in 1980—the first such endeavor in the United States—and the founding of The Alliance for American Quilts in 1993. Her reputation is global; her expertise and insight are unparalleled. But, even as this exhibition celebrates Shelly Zegart's accomplishments in quilt scholarship, we need to remain mindful of the larger implications her work holds for the study of art and material culture. Quilts remain a troublesome presence in prevailing histories of art—and as an intellectual provocateur Shelly Zegart has contributed significantly to that problematic presence in key ways.

As an advocate Shelly Zegart remains central to the documentation of quilts across the broadest spectrum of design, construction, and context. Her programmatic commitment to recording the history of quilting began in Kentucky and continues today through The Alliance for American Quilts programs of the Quilt Index and Quilters Save Our Stories. Several notable qualities reside at the core of these endeavors. First, they are characterized by recording cultural process through objects and spoken word. Zegart, heeding such diverse approaches like the methodologies implemented for statewide architectural surveys in the late 1960s and the oral history projects of the American Folklife Center undertaken in the 1970s, formulated a collaborative approach that emphasized thoroughness, consistency, and the voice of the maker in quilt documentation. In that gesture she liberated the quilt from limiting antiquarian and connoisseurial concerns, placing it in the realm of living aesthetic practice.

Within the context of art, however, Zegart faced the more difficult political challenge of opening histories of art to histories of the quilt. The ingrained obstacles to this enterprise included entrenched perceptions of quilts as domestic, collective, feminine, craft work—marginalizing categorizations reflecting the location of critical power in a still largely masculinist contemporary art world. Zegart's response to what might be thought of as the “four damnations of the quilt as art” has been vigorous. Her lectures, essays, and books epitomized by her 2008 article *Myth and Methodology: Shelly Zegart Unpicks African-American Quilt Scholarship* in the British art journal *Selfedge*) embrace concerns that engage collectors, curators, historians,

folklorists, and others. Her greatest public impact, however, has been her ability to get the actual objects in front of a viewing public.

Among the most notable of Shelly Zegart's exhibitions (and there are many including her role in advancing the *Quilts of Gee's Bend*) was the installation of *A Heritage of Genius: American Master Quilts Past and Present*, a three venue exhibition on Times Square seen by thousands of viewers. Two aspects of Zegart's exhibition work deserve particular note. First, these are collaborative ventures where the force of her personal vision works in concert toward larger shared goals. Second, the exhibitions constitute a form of writing with objects. Zegart lets the art of the quilt write itself, facilitating the reception of the quilt as art through thoughtful wall text. In a sense, Zegart has adopted elements from the art of the quilt into her own work: the balance of individual creativity and collective enterprise coupled with the recognition that objects can eloquent in their own right. The results are uniform: exhibitions that are aesthetically affecting and critically compelling.

The title of this exhibition, *Shelly Zegart: Passionate About Quilts - Challenging Assumptions, Creating Change, Making Connections*, recognizes the fact that effective scholarship flourishes through civic engagement. Quilts, as Shelly Zegart reminds us, are the tangible expressions of ideas about art, self, and community that range across a spectrum of self-consciousness. As the quiltmakers of Gee's Bend, Alabama, will tell you, the consideration of their work as art is new to their way of thinking. It is not a question of the ability to create and appreciate the aesthetics of their work, but one of how the contemporary art world receives and values that work. Shelly Zegart continues to demolish the divisions that inhibit the reception of the quilt as art—both in the minds of makers and viewers. Although she will be among the first to acknowledge that her task is far from complete, she surely knows her labors have made a difference for the greater good.

Bernard L. Herman
Chair and Edward & Elizabeth Rosenberg Professor
Department of Art History
University of Delaware