

To the Point, with Textiles

Robbie LaFleur

Clothing, fabric, yarn – textiles in general evoke domestic, decorative, and protective associations. But what about t-shirts as a feminist statement about the art world? Blankets and guns? Norwegian national costumes and plastic pollution? Here are three contemporary Norwegians who have used everyday and traditional textiles to underscore important issues. Artworks in textile techniques can pack a political punch, partly because they work against expectations: a layer of surprise is added when the serious intent is revealed.

Veslemøy Lillengen:

T-shirts as Personal as your Genetic Code

Veslemøy Lillengen's installation of 55 indigo-dyed t-shirts filled a wall at the 2021 Høstutstillingen, a prestigious annual contemporary art exhibition in Oslo. The piece *Norsk Bauta* (Norwegian Monument) is intriguing, and the varied nuances of blue are beautiful, but what is behind the array of shirts with women's names on them?

This collection is the first part of an eleven-year project motivated by statistics and fury. Lillengen bristles at the Norwegian government statistics revealing how women artists are overlooked and underrepresented in the art world. In the secondary art market, 88% of art for sale by living artists is by male artists, and the average price of works by male artists was \$2,700 versus \$1,500 for female artists.

Lillengen grew up on Ørlandet, an island near Trondheim that was also home to Hannah Ryggen, one of Norway's most famous artists. From the 1930s to the 1960s, Ryggen wove monumental and daring tapestries on social issues and political events. She dyed her own yarn and was renowned for her striking *potteblå* [pot-blue], indigo blue that used urine as a mordant in the dyeing process. To make her intense blue yarn she requested visitors to "pee in a jar" – but she only made that request of male visitors, including Lillengen's own grandfather. Lillengen set out to prove that urine from women creates equally beautiful results. She said

in a recent radio interview, "This myth holds fast, but has no roots in reality at all. Is it true that men have magic urine? No, that's not true."¹

With this long-term project, Lillengen is drawing attention to women artists working in Norway today and to the disparity between men and women in art world. She collects urine from other women artists and uses it to make a blue shade unique to each person, a sort of genetic fingerprint in a dyepot. She dyes a t-shirt and stamps the artist's name on the front. Would an artist in her shirt be wearing her own self-portrait?

Lillengen will continue her project working county by county, recording women artists in dye. In addition to t-shirts, she is dyeing fabric for a sculpture that will grow year by year. Lillengen lives and works in Trondheim, where she can often be found transporting *Kunsthall 15*, her nomadic gallery that displays the work of local artists.

Elisabeth Haarr: Blankets Should Protect Against Cold, Not Snipers

Elisabeth Haarr has been a central figure in contemporary Norwegian fiber art during her decades-long career. She received wider recognition in the fall of 2021, when she was the chosen artist for Norway's most important annual solo exhibition, the *Festutspillutstillingen* in Bergen.

Haarr attended the College of Arts and Crafts in Oslo and early on she rebelled against the focus on conventional beauty and perfect technique in textiles, arguing that textiles could be ugly or provocative, yet meaningful and expressive. She wrote about how textiles, as traditional women's work, can be discounted by the art world. Yet they carry a power of universal language, of techniques shared across geography and cultures. "Textiles speak directly to us, and in a different way than, say, a painting. In this sense one can say that the textile is similar to music; it goes right in."²

She began working in tapestry but expanded her techniques to include appliqué, sewing, and embroidery.



Veslemøy Lilleengen, Norsk Bauta – Trøndelag (2021), installasjon.
Photo: Vegard Kleven / NBK.



Bunad by Aase Helene Fidje Ødegaard. Photo: Marianne Jakobsen / NRK.



Elisabeth Haarr, *Syria Blind*, 2013, wool, hand spun and handwoven silk, silk thread, umbrella fabric, application, W 600 cm. Photo: Eline Mugaas.

Much of Elisabeth Haarr's work has political and feminist themes. An early and well-known tapestry, *Frustrasjonsteppen* (*Frustration*, 1982), created when she had young children and little money and time to advance her career, spelled out her challenges in woven words: house, children, clean, alone, alone. With little money for materials, she incorporated twine and plastic shopping bags.

Haarr does not want to be labeled only as a political artist, but much of her work comments strongly on social issues. One critic described visiting Haarr's Festspillutstillingen exhibit as fatiguing because of the number of powerful pieces packed into the galleries, but entirely worthwhile. Her large works range from commentary on feminist struggles of the 1970s up to the refugee crises of today. One piece in the exhibit, *Syriaforheng* (*Syria Curtain*, 2013), was inspired by disturbing photographs from the besieged streets of Aleppo, Syria. Women hung flimsy barriers of blankets, sheets, or tablecloths between houses along narrow streets to block the view of snipers. Understanding the impetus behind the large, quilt-like assemblage strengthens its impact. The blanket theme recurs in her new series from 2020, *Flykningtepper* (*Refugee Blankets*), double-sided collage-like hangings made from sheets, newspapers, and other textiles.

Aase Helene Fidje Ødegaard: Bunads Bring Environmental Awareness

Each year on Norway's National Day, the 17th of May, parades of flag-waving families clad in beautiful *bunader* (regional costumes) march in every town. The finely-crafted elaborate costumes represent a love of tradition, family, and country. In 2017 there was a special collection of *bunader* on parade in Kristiansand, designed and created by Aase Helene Fidje Ødegaard. There was a rustling noise as her group of 25 women passed by. Instead of fine wool in the skirts, these dresses were fashioned of black garbage bags.

The project started with her friend's 50th birthday; Ødegaard wanted to give her a special gift. They both came

from families of national costume enthusiasts, so she made her friend a *bunad* in plastic – appropriately waterproof for a marine biologist. It was funny and creative, but also aimed at a serious cause, to comment on the increasing issue of marine plastic pollution.

The recycled plastic costume was so successful she decided to make 25 more! Two years later, the costumes were ready and her friends were enthused to show them off. Seen from a distance, the costumes looked quite authentic. As the women drew closer, you could hear the rustle of plastic and could see that the dresses were completely made of items normally cast in the garbage. The shiny bling of the "silver" included CD-rom discs and single-use coffee pods. Up close, you could pick out the bodice areas stitched of Kvik Lunsj or Twist candy wrappers.

Norwegians may be particularly appreciative of her message. Norway is a world leader in plastic recycling; 97% of plastic bottles used in 2018 made it into recycling bins.

Packing a Punch with Textile Art

The works shown here are textiles used as social commentary, with an emphasis on ideas rather than fine craftsmanship. Elisabeth Haarr referenced domestic textiles used by women as sniper barriers during a horrifying time of war. Veslemøy Lillengen celebrated women artists in her country and pointed out inequities they face in the larger art world, using traditional dye technique. And Aase Helene Fidje Ødegaard gathered a joyful community of her friends to raise environmental awareness with *bunader* made of distinctly un-precious trash. All three artists honor the power of textiles and the community of women who have made them for millennia, with unforgettable works.

Footnotes

¹ Johansen, Jon M. "Feministisk kunstner farger T-skjorter med kvinnelig urin – har samlet inn 150 liter." ("Feminist artist dyes t-shirt with women's urine—has collected 150 liters"). Resett, January 19, 2021. <https://resett.no/2021/01/19/feministisk-kunstner-farger-t-skjorter-med-kvinnelig-urin-har-samlet-inn-150-liter/>. Retrieved: 09/24/2021.

² Mugaas, Hanne. "Textiles, Women's Liberation, Ugly and Nice—An Interview with Elisabeth Haarr." Kunsthall Stavanger, May 21, 2014. <https://kunsthallstavanger.no/en/news/on-textiles-womens-liberation-ugly-and-nice-an-interview-with-elisabeth-haarr>. Retrieved: 09/24/2021.

About the Author

Robbie LaFleur has been following a thread of Scandinavian textiles since she studied weaving at Valdres Husflidskole in Fagernes, Norway, in 1977. Her projects include interpreting Edvard Munch's *Scream* painting into a variety of textile techniques, weaving tapestry portraits of her relatives, and continuing exploration of various Norwegian coverlet techniques. She is a Vesterheim Gold Medalist, coordinates the Weavers Guild of Minnesota Scandinavian Weavers Study Group, and publishes the *Norwegian Textile Letter*. In 2019 she received a fellowship from the American Scandinavian Foundation to study the transparency technique of famed Norwegian tapestry weaver Frida Hansen.