

Barbara Cole

## MENDING AT THE EXPENSE OF THE SIDES & NEVERMIND, NEVERMIND, NEVERMIND

Barbara Cole: Mending at the Expense  
of the Sides (1995)

BY KAREN HENRY

Artist's Statement

BARBARA COLE



### Barbara Cole: Mending at the expense of the sides (1995)

By Karen Henry, 2001

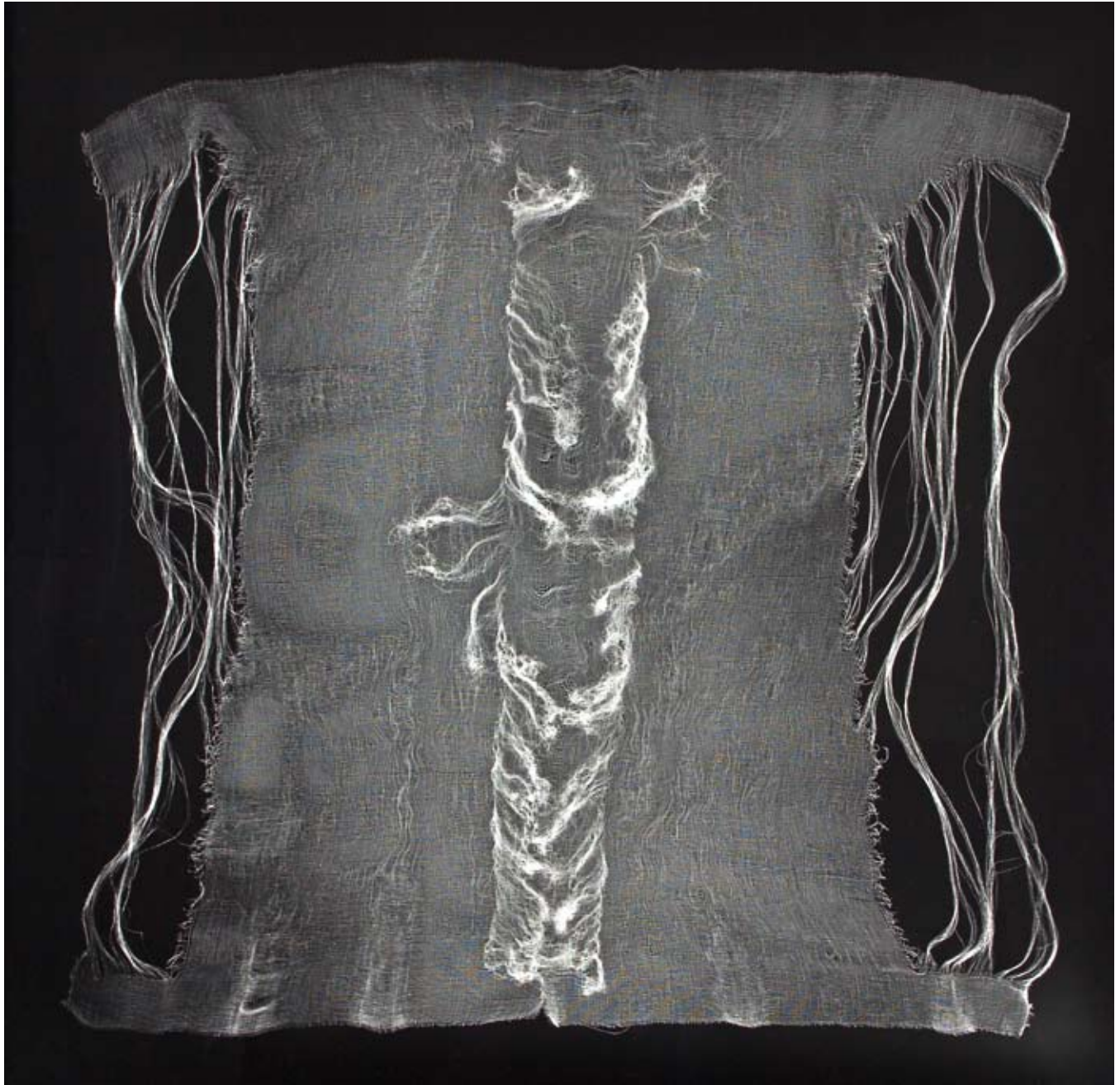
Barbara Cole received a Diploma in Visual Arts from both the Alberta College of Art and the Sheridan College in Oakville, Ontario. She began her art career doing sculptural projects that traversed the landscape in Southern California where she received her MFA from the California College of Arts and Crafts in 1982. In 1983 she produced an artwork called *Rose-Marie (or Escape Route for Pursued Buffalo)* at the Snyder Ranch in Clive, Alberta. The project used a carefully constructed wooden framework, painted pink, that

Barbara Cole  
*Mending at the expense of the sides*, 1996

photogram on paper  
(101.6 x 104.1 cm)  
SAG 1996.12.01

Acquired with the assistance of the Surrey Art  
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Photograph by Cameron Heryet



Barbara Cole *Mending at the expense of the sides*, 1996 photogram on paper (101.6 x 104.1 cm) SAG 1996.12.01  
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followed the contours of the land and down over a cliff. The piece made references to the relationship between art and nature and to labour and the history of the site. Her interest in landscape continued after moving to Vancouver. She began teaching courses at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design in 1984 and started to make a series of drawings of herself mimicking organic forms. This period of her work explored ideas of inhabiting and domesticating nature. In 1984-85 she exhibited an outdoor piece in the Tynehead Zoological Park in Surrey titled *There Was This Field* and subsequently completed two other outdoor pieces in conjunction with the Surrey Art Gallery, one in 1986, *Arboricole: In Three Forms*, and a work in a private garden for *Site-Source Collaborations* in 1988. With the birth of her daughter in 1989, Cole's practice shifted to be studio-based. In the 1990s she began to draw on her early studies in fabric arts, making pieces involving woven fabric that reflected on her domestic circumstances and her experience as a mother. Since the mid 1990s Cole has continued to work in her studio, exploring a range of mediums from small bronze sculptures to video. She has exhibited at the Stride Gallery, Calgary (1993); the Burnaby Art Gallery, BC (1995); Artspeak Gallery, Vancouver (1996) and others. She also created two collaborative projects with young people at the Vancouver Art Gallery (1988) and the Burnaby Art Gallery (1994).

Cole's work is subtle, with meticulous attention to detail so that the material seems to embody both the labour of making and the experience of memory in relation to time and the body. Her earlier works in the landscape run counter to the monumentality of well-known landscape works by conceptualists such as Robert Smithson in the 1960s, whose works explored landscape as a material for art in relation to a context of industrial use. Cole's pieces follow more

closely in lineage to those of Richard Long or Hamish Fulton who physically traverse the land as a drawing gesture. Her art works are constructed slowly over time and, unlike Fulton or Long's gestures, they leave actual impressions or sculptural forms in the landscape. Whether working with natural or industrial materials, her art works show evidence of a strong intuitive physicality and understanding of materials and form, exploring their expressiveness and sensuality and their relationship to nature and subjective experience. This relationship between form, material, and psychological affect was probably first made explicit by the Surrealists in the early part of the twentieth century. Cole's practice since 1990, including *Mending at the expense of the sides* and *Nevermind, Nevermind, Nevermind*, could be aligned with the work of these early women Surrealists such as Meret Oppenheim with her fur-lined cup and saucer (1936) or Dorothea Tanning who made strange anthropomorphic furniture (1970), though Cole is more strongly influenced by the next generation of women artists such as Eva Hesse. Though Cole's work is more understated, it participates in this tradition which explores physicality and the intimate psychology of a woman's experience. The fabric pieces fit into a context of other contemporary Canadian work in fabric arts that tends to subvert the emphasis on traditional craft in favour of critical representation, such as Ruth Scheuing's tailored and oddly smocked shirts and Barbara Todd's bomb quilts. But Cole's work is not limited to this tradition. Her work resonates with that of other contemporary Canadian artists such as Liz Magor and Irene Whittome in their interest in nature and materiality, and with the sensual representations of international artist Janine Antoni. Over time Cole's work has addressed not only issues of nature and culture, motherhood and family, but also of sexuality. The foregrounding of a specifically female subjectivity

and experience in her art also interacts with the work of prominent artist and feminist theorist Mary Kelly who made artworks about motherhood in the early 80s, and with fellow Vancouver artist Allyson Clay's explorations of the experience of women in the city.

*Mending at the expense of the sides* (1995) is part of a series of art pieces that Cole produced in the 1990s that refer to the labour of parenting, and juggling the demands of family and a career.

Mending is traditionally a woman's work, mending the family clothes to make them last longer, knitting new sweaters from the yarn of older worn ones. As a photogram, *Mending at the expense of the sides* is a trace left by the actual object on photosensitive

paper when exposed to light. As such, it is only one stage of representation of something that has another, more material, life. By association, as an artwork, it is also a trace of an experience, an image representing a painstaking process of removing threads and reweaving them into the center of the fabric. The piece alludes to a set of material relations in a discrete system. The fabric is an integral whole with a limited number of matching threads. When it becomes worn or torn in the centre, the heart of the piece, it requires mending; so threads are taken from the hem or outer edges in order to keep the piece functional. If the fabric represents a concept, or a family, it begs the question How much can those on the periphery give to keep the unit intact or to save



Barbara Cole *Nevermind, Nevermind, Nevermind*, 1995 mixed media sculpture (33.3 x 107.1 x 12.5 cm) SAG 1996.12.02  
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an idea that is past its time? At what point does the system break down? Are the sides paying too high a price to take care of the centre or embellish it and hide the fact there is nothing there? *Mending at the expense of the sides* shows evidence of loss to the point of being dysfunctional, but also of delicacy and great care in the exchange. The centre is in fact softly cushioned and adorned with the feathery threads. The sacrifice is one of love. The woman/mother/wife is traditionally romanticized as the centre of family life. Over time the situation changes. A parent may require more care from her children or become unnecessarily demanding. In this piece Cole meditates on the complexities of the psychological demands of the family and by implication, the limitations of any closed system.

The fabric's exposure to light in the photogram is another sort of energy exchange. Like its cousin the photograph, the flash of light that creates the photogram suspends the present moment in time and preserves an imprint, which can be returned to as an aid to memory. As an image it becomes an object of history that can be shared, much like family photographs. Often family photos of smiling participants gloss over the work in relationships. They preserve only the idea of family happiness and being together in harmony. Unlike family photos, *Mending at the expense of the sides* doesn't enshrine identifiable personalities. Instead it refers to a process of interacting, the labour of maintaining a family, and the beautiful but sometimes fragile result.

Heisler, Franklyn. *Soft Ground: Ann Newdigate, Leslie Sampson, Ruth Scheuing, Barbara Todd*. Exhibition Catalogue. Calgary: Muttart Art Gallery, 1991.

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*Subversive Craft*. Exhibition Catalogue, Cambridge, M.A.: MIT List Visual Art Center, 1993.

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## Artist's statement

I have been working with an eclectic variety of materials and processes in ways which record physical and psychological impact. Decisions about material selection, how these materials are manipulated, and what form these manipulations take, are intended to act as associative residue in the reading of the work.

*Mending at the Expense of the Sides* uses displaced threads from within the fabric to mend a tear. The altered fabric was used as a template for an edition of one contact print (no negative exists).

*Nevermind, Nevermind, Nevermind*, began with audio recordings of my daughter and I saying "nevermind"; one voice saying it as if to console or soothe, the other with the intention of creating distance. I was interested in overlaying the two words as a composite sound or image. As a result of experimenting with a computer program at the Video In, I made voiceprints of the two soundwaves, had them printed and subsequently transferred to silkscreens. ... I wanted to see the two images become more physically meshed so began working with an *ikat* weaving process. After taking the woven cloth off the loom, I stretched and sandwiched it between two pieces of plate glass in order to keep it under constant tension.

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### An Open Book

a catalogue of artworks from the Surrey Art Gallery's Permanent Collection  
 ISSN 1910-1392 ISBN 978-0-92018-183-6 Published 2007



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