



Mary Smull: Selective Memory

THROUGH THE shrewdly conceptual and visually evocative needlepoint pieces that make up the series *Finished Works* (2008–ongoing), Philadelphia-based artist Mary Smull poses provocative questions about labor, leisure, and object making. Smull completes unfinished needlepoint projects others have abandoned, framing her practice under the absurdist umbrella of the Society for the Prevention of Unfinished Needlepoint (SPUN), an organization of her own making whose goal is the intentionally interminable task of eliminating “the global phenomenon of unfinished needlepoint.” Because she uses only white tapestry wool, Smull visually preserves the labor of the original maker—her unwitting, anonymous partner in production—while also clearly showing her own contribution to the “finished” piece. These unorthodox collaborative objects, while structurally complete, present fundamentally fragmented narratives.

Smull began working with unfinished needlepoint while a graduate student in the fiber department at Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, where she earned her MFA in 2009, after discovering a cache of uncompleted projects filling

her grandmother's attic. These canvases, despite their start as an elective leisure activity, became impatient reminders of work to be done. Spurred by the sense of discomfort that these unfinished needlepoint projects engendered, Smull began to use them to explore practical and emotional complexities related to making—and finishing—objects by hand.

Although Smull finds some of her unfinished canvases at thrift stores and church bazaars, the majority are purchased online through eBay where they are plentiful and largely inexpensive.

ABOVE: Old Man (with detail), 2009; 17½" x 23" (2008.15.1). BELOW: Mary Smull in her Philadelphia studio, 2009. Photo: Monica Breen. All works are made with found unfinished needlepoint projects, white yarn; handsewn. Original eBay listing: Lot of 15 Unfinished Needlepoint Pictures Kit Projects (purchased November 11, 2008).

Some works have barely been stitched when they arrive at the artist's studio. Only elusive hints, found in phrases such as “estate sale,” are available to explain a project's unfinished state. Smull has never had contact with a needle-



point's original maker and is not always able to gather the story of the piece from its seller. The various possibilities for abandonment thus become an endless source of fascination, ranging from the prosaic—boredom or disinterest—to the tragic—illness or death. Smull titles each fully stitched needlepoint with information that makes clear how the piece came into her hands, with an eBay listing title or purchase location and a museum-style accession number. Through this organizational structure, Smull provides each object with a second-origin story that runs parallel with, rather than usurping, its unknown first.

Old Woman (2008) and *Old Man* (2009) arrived as part of a set of unfinished gros point canvases. Colored threads mingle with Smull's white stitching, resembling a ghostly infestation on each pixelated plane. In leaving



the old man's hand incomplete, the nameless original maker inadvertently draws attention to both the literal absence of a hand and the physical presence of Smull's own. Smull notes about her handwork, "I love sitting there filling in white stitches. But I realize that I wouldn't enjoy completing these needlepoint kits the way they were supposed to be finished. Making is a complex, conditional act based on our individual attitudes about labor." ●

The artist's website is www.marysmull.com; the SPUN website is www.unfinishedneedlepoint.org. Smull's work will be on display at the Friends Gallery, Lancaster Public Library, Lancaster, Pennsylvania, May 7–29. www.lancaster.lib.pa.us.

LEFT: *Blue Boy*, 2008; 14" x 20" (2008.15.3). Images courtesy of the artist, unless otherwise noted.

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