



ABOUT COULTER FUSSELL

Coulter Fussell is a textile artist and painter living and working in Water Valley, Mississippi, a small and isolated town in the Hill Country region of north Mississippi. Born and raised in Columbus, Georgia, Coulter got her BFA from The University of Mississippi in 2000. In 2010 she opened Yalo Studio, a painting studio and gallery, and then later, yaloRUN Textiles, an experimental textile workshop and fabric store with friends Susan Cianciolo and Kiva Motnyk. Fussell is the recipient of honors such as the Mississippi Arts Commission State Arts Grant (2015), South Art's inaugural Mississippi State Fellowship, South Art's Southern Prize Finalist (2017), and most recently she is the 2019 United States Artists Craft Fellow.

Image credits: Above: *The Raw Materials of Escape*, 2019. Mixed media.
Cover: *The Last Run* [detail], 2019. Mixed media. All images courtesy of the artist.

CORRELATING EVENTS

OPENING RECEPTION

Friday, January 17, 6:30–8:00 PM
Free for Halsey Institute members and College of Charleston community, \$5 for non-members

ARTIST TALK

Saturday, January 18, 2:00 PM
Free and open to the public

NAKED LADY SOCIETY CLOTHING SWAP

Thursday, January 23, 5:00–7:00 PM
The Halsey Institute has partnered with the Naked Lady Society for a clothing swap in the galleries.
Free and open to the public

HALSEY TALKS: ARTS & CRAFT

Tuesday, January 28, 6:30 PM
Free and open to the public

MEMBERSHIP MORNING

Friday, January 31, 9:00 AM
Free for Halsey Institute members

FAMILY DAY!

Sunday, February 9, 12:00–4:00 PM
Free for Halsey Institute members and \$5 for non-members

FILM SCREENING

The Quilts of Gee's Bend
Featuring director Matt Arnett
Thursday, February 20, 7:00 PM
School of Science and Mathematics Building
Lecture Hall
202 Calhoun Street
Free and open to the public

CURATOR-LED EXHIBITION TOUR FOR MEMBERS

Thursday, February 27, 6:00 PM
Free for Halsey Institute members

LOCATION

The Marion and Wayland H. Cato Jr. Center for the Arts
College of Charleston
161 Calhoun Street, Charleston, SC 29401
halsey.cofc.edu

PARKING

Available in the St. Philip St. and George St. garages

GALLERY HOURS

Mon.–Sat., 11:00 AM–4:00 PM during exhibitions, or by appointment
Open until 7:00 PM on Thursdays
Free admission!

CONTACT

(843) 953-4422 or halsey@cofc.edu

BLOG

Learn more about the exhibition at halsey.cofc.edu/learn

GUIDED GROUP TOURS BY APPOINTMENT

Free tours are led by knowledgeable and experienced guides and can be adapted to various time lengths, group sizes, and ages. To schedule a tour, contact halseytours@cofc.edu or call (843) 953-6885. Free, regularly-scheduled tours are offered each Saturday at 2:00 PM in the Halsey Institute galleries, unless superseded by a public program.

MISSION: The Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art at the College of Charleston School of the Arts provides a multidisciplinary laboratory for the production, presentation, interpretation, and dissemination of ideas by innovative visual artists from around the world. As a non-collecting museum, we create meaningful interactions between adventurous artists and diverse communities within a context that emphasizes the historical, social, and cultural importance of the art of our time.

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COULTER FUSSELL

THE RAW MATERIALS OF ESCAPE

January 17 - February 29, 2020





THE RAW MATERIALS OF ESCAPE

by Katie McCampbell Hirsch

Coulter Fussell hand-pieces, stitches, paints, and repurposes found textiles to create quilts that both honor and defy the quilting tradition. The title of the exhibition, *The Raw Materials of Escape*, references a quote by American iconoclast and painter William S. Burroughs: “Desperation is the raw material of drastic change. Only those who can leave behind everything they have ever believed in can hope to escape.”¹ So too do viewers need to leave behind preconceived notions of fine art versus craft and of what it means to be a quiltmaker.

Fussell learned to sew by watching her mother, Cathy Fussell, who is herself a renowned quiltmaker. She was determined to be an artist, which—in her young mind—meant that she should be a painter. All through her twenties, Fussell’s focus was painting. However, in a series of firsts, this focus shifted when the birth of her first child prompted her to create her first quilt. Fussell found the issues she had attempted to explore through painting were better addressed with fabric. For Fussell, fabric’s limitations in palette and material offered an infinite amount of freedom in their strictures. Her works, unlike traditional quilts, do not adhere to a predetermined pattern. Instead, they retain the wholeness of a quilt while utilizing techniques one would expect to find in painting. For instance, foreground and background are established with the purposeful balance of light and dark materials. In this way, Fussell’s work blurs the lines between art and craft, positing that both practices have an element of functionality and non-functionality.

Image credits: Left panel: *Washrag* [detail], 2019. Mixed media. Center panel: *The Bear* [detail], 2019. Mixed media. Right panel: *The Drift*, 2019.

The works are true quilts, which are traditionally constructed with three distinct layers—a front, a middle composed of batting, and a back—bound together with quilting stitches. Each of Fussell’s quilts are hand-pieced and hand-stitched. All are made using found materials like other quilts gifted from neighbors, fragments of friends’ waitressing aprons, t-shirts from her youth, even walnuts for dye left on the front stoop of her experimental textile studio and supply store, yaloRUN in Water Valley, Mississippi. Part of a “broader grassroots movement to reinvigorate craft in America,”² yaloRUN encourages the exchange and reuse of secondhand materials to foster creative collaboration. Accepting donations at yaloRUN has changed how Fussell views materials, with the stories and histories of each piece holding as much (if not more) significance than the quality of the textile itself. Searching for evidence of human existence in the construction and patterns of wear of her textiles, Fussell has become somewhat of an anthropologist. Many of her works employ vintage quilts, which are incorporated into the main design or utilized as backing. Fussell frequently emphasizes the work sewn by the anonymous creators of the quilts, often going over existing stitching or even spray painting a worn pattern. She exposes the process of quilting in her construction, emphasizing the endurance and physicality of a craft that was for so long relegated to women’s domestic work.

Fussell’s background in painting is clearly represented in her quilts. Their meticulous compositions recall the methodical lines and contrast of light and dark featured in the mid-century work of American painter Frank Stella. One can also find visual references to the work of Robert Rauschenberg, whose combine paintings featured prominently in art critic and historian Leo Steinberg’s definition of the “flatbed picture plane.”³ Steinberg’s flatbed picture plane described a shift in contemporary painting from work that used the vertically-oriented human body as the primary referent for the creation and reading of a work of art, from top to bottom. Conversely, the flatbed picture plane alludes to surfaces like floors or tabletops where images and information could be gathered and manipulated. Fussell’s quilts are all at once flatbed picture planes and traditionally vertical works: the artist hand-pieces the textiles and objects that make up an individual quilt on her studio floor, ultimately creating an object whose fundamental orientation and size is based on its relationship with the horizontal human body. Given this object-body relationship, Fussell’s work is naturally figurative, and the quilts are inherently sculptural, as they bend, fold, and bunch.

Recently, Fussell’s work has begun to exhibit three-dimensional components, such as a teddy bear grafted to the surface of *Washrag* (2019) and a fur piece that draws the eye to the center of *The Bear* (2019). Quilts like *The Raw Materials of Escape* (2019) break their traditional rectangular plane to include rogue textiles that shoot from the top and bottom of the work. Forming peninsulas of fabric, these components emphasize the materiality of these quilt-paintings.



Conventional quilts are anchored by the wholeness of their composition, most often achieved through geometric pattern. Fussell’s work breaks with this traditional fabrication to instead produce quilts that are painterly in composition while retaining the conceptual wholeness of a quilt. Eschewing patterns and working improvisationally, she paints in textiles, positioning small squares of silk and bolts of antique fabrics on the floor of her studio, moving and layering pieces until she is satisfied with their relationship. The result is an object that reverently heeds the quilting process that has been passed down from generation to generation in Fussell’s family and in families across the globe. Her work confronts this tradition, challenging the viewer to find room for quilts that are paintings and paintings that are quilts.

Notes:

1 William S. Burroughs, *The Western Lands* (New York: Viking, 1987), 116.

2 <http://www.yaloruntextiles.com/about>

3 Leo Steinberg, “The Flatbed Picture Plane,” from a lecture at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1968; first published as “Reflections on the State of Criticism,” *Artforum* 10:7 (March 1972), 37-49; reprinted in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 61-98.

Katie McCampbell Hirsch is Curator and Director of Strategic Partnerships at the Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art.