



Strange Material

STORYTELLING THROUGH TEXTILES

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co-author of Yarn Bombing: The Art of Crochet and Knit Graffiti

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KNITTING NIGHTMARES:

An Interview with Tracy Widdess

Q: How did Brutal Knitting start?

A: When I first started knitting in 1999, I knew that I wanted to focus on something bigger. I ended up being connected with a charity project in which people were knitting mask patterns from the 1970s. I saw some masks in *Threads* magazine in a 1992 article by Meg Swanson called “Snow Fooling,” and I said I’d make one because I couldn’t believe they were in a magazine—they were unbelievably strange. April Winchell, who was running the project, ended up featuring me on *Regretsy*, and my knitting got a lot of attention for it. It gave me a direction for Brutal Knitting.

The pieces are hand and machine knit. I stay up all night with my knitting machines. Once I started to get commissions, I was able to buy two. I thought they would alleviate my workload because they can create a great deal of knitted yardage, but they made my work more complex. There are a lot of pre-conceived notions of what knitting machines can do, but really, they just create more problems. You still have to bind it off. You have to rethread all of the loops onto a US 0/2 mm needle. It was a rude awakening for me, but I like a challenge—it keeps me interested. And I like the way the fabric looks too. I don’t have anything against crochet, I just like the complexity of knitting and the flat way that knit fabric looks.

When I was a student, I took a sculpture class, and I couldn’t do the first project. Making something three-dimensional for the first time was incredibly hard. That’s

TRACY WIDDESS has received international acclaim for her knitted monsters and her art practice, Brutal Knitting. A self-taught knitter who picked up her needles in response to a former roommate’s twee creations, Tracy has become a technically astute sculptor of knitted brutes, monsters, and specters. Nightmarish, comical, odd, and wildly appealing in its grotesqueness, Tracy’s knitting can cause spectacular nightmares complete with woolly horns, scales, warts, and tentacles. She lives in Port Alberni, British Columbia.



Tracy Widdess, *The Night Crawler*, 2011, yarn, 11 x 15 in (27.9 x 38.1 cm).
Photo: TracyWiddes



TracyWiddess, *Jabberwocky*, 2011, yarn, 25 x 15 x 15 in (63.5 x 38.1 x 38.1 cm). Photo: TracyWiddess

why I focused on it with my knitting, because I couldn't do it in art school. I like the challenge. I briefly had a roommate who knitted pretty hats and scarves for her friends, and I thought, How come you can knit and I can't? I had to teach myself to knit out of spite. Thirteen years later, I realize that I'm getting to be one of the best people at doing this—which is pretty fun, considering I started completely self-taught from books at the library.

Q: Your body of work consists of masks of well-known monsters and fictional characters. What is your design process?

A: I usually have a lot of leeway in terms of keeping the characters recognizable or not. The fictional characters are straight out of my head. I usually make them in the periods between my commissioned projects. A lot of times, I end up making something that doesn't work. Sometimes I mash a bunch of things together that are pieces of a failed bunch of other things, and the end result becomes something better. I never pre-plan or draw something out, as I've already done the design work in my head. I sculpt everything over a fake head. I try not to spend three weeks on something, but generally I work between fifty and 100 hours on each mask.

Q: How do you research your well-known characters? It must feel like a big responsibility to create a knitted version of a character that most of us know.

A: I'm so hungry for images that searching for them is how I relax. I use eBay and Flickr a lot for finding images. When I was researching *Krampus*, I saved everything I found. It is embarrassing; I've probably collected between twenty and forty images a day for the past four years.

I get a general sense of what the character looks like, and I make my own version out of the parts that seem the most appealing. In *Krampus*, my main goal was to create the spiraled horns. How do you knit a spiral horn? I had to figure it out. I have no problem going in and editing my work; I change it. I could care less what happens with it. Someone could put it in the compost bin; it goes out the door as fast as it can.

Q: What sort of feedback have you had about your work?

A: A lot of people say that they haven't seen anything like it. My work was in a music video for a Waters song called "For the One." The director called and asked me if I had anything he could use in a shoot the following week. I find that having my work in film and television is really appealing. I hope to do more commissions in this field because I like my work being part of a larger story.

I hope that people see the humor in what I do. It is not serious. A lot of people don't think that [the pieces] are funny, but they are supposed to be funny.



TracyWidess, *Gruß vom Krampus*, 2011, yarn, 25 x 15 x 15 in (63.5 x 38.1 x 38.1 cm). Photo: TracyWidess



Tracy Widdess (clockwise from top left): *Monetize Mint*, 2012, yarn, 27 x 11 x 11 in (68.58 x 27.9 x 27.9 cm), *Why Be Yourself When You Can Be A Decorative Ulcer*, 2012, yarn, glass beads, 20 x 15 x 15 in (50.8 x 38.1 x 38.1 cm), *Haus zum Walfisch*, 2013, yarn, 20 x 15 x 15 in (50.8 x 38.1 x 38.1 cm), *Predators*, 2011, yarn, 13 x 11 x 15 in (33.02 x 27.9 x 38.1 cm). Photos: TracyWiddess

Prompt

Fictional Characters

Bring fiction into your own textile artwork. You can imagine and invent a character or put your own spin on a character that we all know and love.

If working with an established character like Sherlock Holmes or Pippi Longstocking, ask yourself the following questions to prompt new ideas:

1. What do they look like?
2. What elements can be conjured from memory and what needs to be researched?
3. What do they sound like?
4. What is an aspect of their character that is not widely known? How can you enhance this with your design?
5. What is his or her attitude about life? What is their mood when they wake up in the morning? Can this be captured in a facial expression?
6. How might this character be misunderstood?

If you are creating a new character, ask yourself the following questions to evoke a well-rounded presence:

1. What is their temperament?
2. What do they look like?
3. What is their favorite thing to do?
4. What are they most scared of?
5. What is their best quality?
6. What materials and colors best show off their personality?

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Strange Material explores the relationship between hand-made textiles and storytelling. Through text, the act of weaving a tale or dropping a thread takes on new meaning for those who previously have seen textiles—quilts, blankets, articles of clothing, and more—only as functional objects. This book showcases crafters who take storytelling off the page and into the mediums of batik, stitching, dyeing, fabric painting, knitting, crochet, and weaving, creating objects that bear their messages proudly, from personal memoir and cultural fables to pictorial histories and wearable fictions.

Full-color throughout, the book includes chapters on various aspects of textile storytelling, from “Textiles of Protest, Politics, and Power” to “The Fabric of Remembrance”; it spotlights well-known projects, such as the profoundly moving Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, as well as poetry mittens, button blankets, and stitched travel diaries. Offbeat, poetic, and subversive, *Strange Material* will inspire readers to re-imagine the possibilities of creating through needle and fabric.



LEANNE PRAIN writes about crafts (especially textiles) and the people who make them, as well as about design, art, and urbanism. She is the co-author (with Mandy Moore) of *Yarn Bombing*, now in its third printing, and the author of *Hoopla: The Art of Unexpected Embroidery*. She lives in Vancouver. leanneprain.com