Hybrid Language: The Interstitial Stitches of Anna Torma’s Embroideries

Anne Koval

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Anna Torma

... a space in which to stitch not only a seam, but also a self.

Heather Pristash, Inez Schaechterle, Sue Carter Wood

The Hungarian-Canadian artist Anna Torma creates elaborate, large-scale textile-work that incorporates time-honored techniques such as quilting, appliqué, and embroidery, and uses hand-dyed silks and cotton thread, and a multitude of fabrics (Plate 9.1). She explains: “Technically, I use hand embroidery, this old, time-consuming, well-known textile patterning technique. I am always fascinated by the challenge to fill this medium with contemporary meaning. Working in a large scale, I compose hangings that are rooted in this heritage, but are also equally related to other visual art mediums like painting and drawing.” Despite using these traditional approaches, her work resists normative classification and instead occupies an interstitial space—as insider and outsider, contemporary and traditionalist, feminist and post-feminist—all explored within the diverse language of stitchery. The social theorist Homi Bhabha positions the “interstitial” as the overlap and displacement of domains of difference: “These ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.” Arguably these interstitial spaces have long been a strategy employed by women...
artists, but in the case of textile artists like Torma, the chosen language of
needlework is—by its very nature—interstitial.

As an immigrant to Canada, Torma has confronted the challenges of
difference, from the displacement of family to the re-establishment of her
professional status as a contemporary artist in a new country. With her husband,
the artist Istvan Zsako, and their two young children, Torma fled socialist
Hungary for Germany, where they lived as temporary residents before their
official emigration to Canada in 1988. As part of a shifting cultural diaspora,
Torma’s identity is intimately tied to her politics and her history, to the reality of
her family’s spatial dislocation and relocation, and to migration and resettlement.

As African diaspora scholar Carole Boyce Davies writes of this renegotiation of
identity with place, “Migration creates the desire for home, which in turn
produces the rewriting of home.”

Notably, in Torma’s work, the familial remains
an integral aspect of her work and practice where the domestic has served as a
continual theme, and personal and family histories become a means for accessing
a larger cultural memory.

As the record-keeper of her family and her own life, Torma approaches
embroidery in a manner that strongly echoes the notion of “stitching the self,”
where needlework becomes an assertion of selfhood. As noted by a number of
feminist writers, including Elaine Showalter, whose essay “Piecing and Writing”
links the process of quilt piecing with the pen, comparing textile production to
textual production, a quilt can be viewed as an analogy for women’s lives.
Lucy Lippard’s well-known metaphor of quilting and women’s lives further extends
this thinking. She states that “Since the new wave of feminist art began around
1970, the quilt has become the prime visual metaphor for women’s lives, for
women’s culture,” defining the physical embodiment of quilting as “a diary of
touch.”

Lippard views the quilt not only as loaded metaphor, embodying the
“personal as the political,” but also as a material diary of women’s interrupted
lives. Pristash, Schaechterle, and Wood’s framing of the needle as a rhetorical
tool recalls this earlier feminist thinking about the relationship between writing
and textile-based practices. They argue that “the needle has been a vehicle for
women’s own construction of alternative discourses, discourses with the
potential to expand women’s discursive worlds and the power they wield over
their own lives.” In their assertion that needlework is not just an alternative
discourse but, rather, the form of discourse, they maintain that the needle itself
can serve as a “powerful rhetorical tool” to help shape identity and community.

In Torma’s art, her needle acts as both an artistic “tool,” and as a rhetorical device
to narrate the complexity of her world, as seen in the diversity and inclusivity of
her source-material from children's art, outsider art, Art Brut, folk art, history, Hungarian politics, and popular culture.

In writing this essay I am aware of the writer/quilter's task of sourcing varied and numerous materials, of cutting and piecing them together, and then inscribing/stitching them into a whole. Writing, like quilting, often takes the form of the collective with many voices shaping the final work. As Adrienne Rich suggests, "Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival." This chapter will revisit earlier feminist writers such as Elaine Showalter, Hélène Cixous, and others, as well as the theories of *l’écriture feminine*, haptic visuality, the aesthetics of excess, and collecting as a female fetish in order to connect Torma to a broader feminist discourse. Drawing on the materiality of the quilt, this chapter is shaped out of a multitude of feminist voices, pieced together to position Torma's needlework as a "space in which to stitch not only a seam, but also a self."12

Feminisms

Rozsika Parker's *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (1984) signaled a new feminist departure for examining the much-neglected history of embroidery. Drawing upon the social history of women, Parker traced how shifting notions of femininity and its construction have been ascribed to artists working within the medium. In her concluding remarks Parker stressed the importance of continuing this inquiry into how contemporary artists use the medium in new and subversive ways: "For women today, the contradictory and complex history of embroidery is important because it reveals that definitions of sexual difference, and the definitions of art and artist so weighted against women, are not fixed." Although Parker's critical examination is largely historical, her message is equally applicable to contemporary women artists, particularly those, who have struggled within patriarchal systems on both political and personal levels, such as Torma.

Born in 1952 socialist Hungary, Torma received her degree in textiles from the Budapest Hungarian University of Applied Arts in 1979. At that time Hungarians had little access to contemporary American and Western European debates on feminism as an artistic and political tool. Instead, many artists were pressured to reflect the values and belief system of the communist state. As Torma recounts:
Hungary was very closed then. We were very much longing to see even a small piece of information from the West. We were tuned into it, and tried to learn what was going on somehow. We managed to go around the official art and somehow sneak out of that little box. For this reason textile was really a good area to be working in.14

Under communism textile art was considered a “low art,” and, as a result, this medium was somewhat ignored. Consequently, Torma was mentored in an experimental and fertile atmosphere when textile art was undergoing a quiet revolution. Margit Szilvitzky, one of Torma’s art professors, was critical to the development of her art, as Torma recounts: “She gave us a broader view than official aesthetics of the late socialist state [Hungary].”15 The art historian Katalin Keserü affirms this cultural dichotomy:

It must be remembered that the textile revolution in Hungary (part of the Central and Eastern European ‘68 revolution), was, with one or two exceptions, achieved by women. Bound up with the ideas of equal status for free art, for textiles, and indeed for women artists, it started as an avant-garde movement, and later based itself on textile-making, cultural and historical traditions as a female occupation.16

The art historian and critic Edit András corroborates this history of avant-garde textile art as it emerged in early 1970’s Budapest, stating: “On the one hand it served as a valve, which enabled the unofficial art scene to pulse together with the international scene; on the other hand it provided a platform for experiencing a relative sense of creative freedom of expression, since the field was not as closely monitored as the leading genres, painting and sculpture.”17 András points to Zsuzsa Szenes’ Against the Cold in General (1978), a multi-colored, knitted guardhouse or “checkpoint,” as an example of an early feminist work that materially undermined the era’s heavy military presence, and demonstrated how politically subversive the textile revolution could be.

Torma graduated from this creative environment of the Applied Arts program in 1979 to work as a professional textile designer in Budapest. She soon became pregnant with her first son, Balint, and motherhood necessitated that she work from home. Torma speaks of a significant shift in her artistic practice at this time: “At art school I specialized in print design, but after my first son was born I realized I needed to change the way I worked. I remembered how my mother and grandmother did their embroidery when they had bits of spare time. So the ancient patterns suddenly and unexpectedly surfaced.”18 She admits that as a child, and later as a student, she had largely avoided this practice:
In Hungary, when I was a child, the women in almost every household embroidered. They embellished objects for everyday use. I did it reluctantly; I wanted to be out playing. I have very fond memories of the process, though—the mood on a quiet afternoon, usually after very hard work in the fields. It was nice to sit with clean hands and in better clothes, and stitch.19

This piecework method embraced by Torma, not only served as a coping mechanism for motherhood, but also radically changed her art.

**L’écriture féminine**

Significantly, this return to embroidery became part of Torma’s maternal inheritance, her chosen artistic dialect. She acknowledges: “I use stitches as my first language of self-expression. I feel fluent and articulate using stitches instead of trying to paint or draw. The stitching itself must be my language, the first—the cosy one—similar to my Hungarian.”20 Such embodiment of language, an inherited “mother-tongue” passed down from grandmother to mother, recalls Hélène Cixous’s theories on *l’écriture feminine*. For Cixous, “language is itself a bodily function,”21 and the physicality of embroidery echoes this theory. Cixous’s literary concept of “writing the body”—in Torma’s hands—becomes an extension of her embroidery, an embodiment of her life.

As Cixous articulates in *The Newly Born Woman*, the feminine writer, “like a mother, looks with the look that recognizes, studies, respects, doesn’t take, doesn’t claw, but attentively, with gentle relentlessness, contemplates and reads, caresses, bathes and makes the other shine. Brings back to light the life that’s been buried, fugitive, made too prudent. *Illuminates it and sings its name.*”22 Cixous’s emphasis on the role of the mother’s body in feminine writing can be applied to Torma’s diary-like motifs where, as record keeper of her children’s words and art, the mother is ever present. The cultural theorist Julia Kristeva further situates this motherly impulse as the “flow of *jouissance* into language” where the semiotic *chora* is bound with the maternal in art.23 Translated into the language of Torma’s silk embroidery, the *chora* becomes the chorus, as she allows her work to sing “the other.” Her inclusivity allows for multiple narratives where stitching becomes a physical language of self-expression. Cixous says of the writer (which I redefine here as artist): “She lets the other speak—the language of 1,000 tongues which knows neither enclosure nor death... Her language does not contain, it carries; it does not hold back, it makes possible.”24 This embodied voice is present in much of Torma’s work where she translates and rewrites her political and
domestic worlds, painstakingly transcribing the images and words of her children, her husband, of outsider artists, to give them a voice to speak.

In Torma’s *Encyclopaedia Domestica* (2012/16), a series on long cotton panels, the accumulation of these many voices, or *chora*, is made tangible in the richly embroidered and appliquéd surfaces. As a veritable encyclopedia of discarded, hand-worked textiles (many made by women), Torma has stitched together these found objects into a narrative that speaks of domestic, folk, and kitschy pop cultures. Kristy Bell, in an essay on Torma, observes, “The connection between Torma and these women of the past is carried by the fabric and by the desire to make something beautiful, so much so that Torma notes there are ‘vibrations’ in her compositions.” The musical analogy of singing “the other” becomes implicit in Torma’s practice. This work evolved from earlier pieces with musical titles such as *Blues*, *Serenade*, and *Rondo*, where she collected the textiles of anonymous amateur artists, alongside photo-transfers of art by her adult artist sons, in an intentional randomness or improvisation that speaks inherently of her inclusivity: a “singing in chorus” of these disparate voices. This attempt to sing “the other” is intrinsic to Torma’s art.

Cixous’s understanding of *l’écriture feminine* as a means of “writing the body” can be applied to a number of women artists whose work with textiles attest to this bodily inheritance of sewing, in particular the work of Louise Bourgeois and Ann Hamilton. Bourgeois has worked extensively with textiles from her childhood and claims, like Torma, a matrilineal lineage: “When I was growing up, all the women in my house were using needles. I’ve always had a fascination with the needle, the magic power of the needle. The needle is used to repair damage. It’s a claim to forgiveness.” For Bourgeois sewing facilitated a form of psychic healing, “I always had the fear of being separated and abandoned. The sewing is my attempt to keep things together and make things whole.” Although Torma’s use of stitchery is different from Bourgeois—she works largely on flat surfaces with an extensive vocabulary of embroidery and appliquéd at her fingertips—she would agree there is a sense as an artist of making whole in her own work.

This bodily link to art is equally intrinsic to Hamilton who claims: “My first hand is my sewing hand. A line of thread drawn up and down through cloth influences how I think about the confluence and rhythms of space and time.” Hamilton, like Torma, confesses to this direct line to creativity through sewing. Significantly, all three artists use text in their work, with Bourgeois and Torma employing thread to write their words, whereas Hamilton often uses a more literal text, often sourced from literature. This play of text/textile is most evident in the work of Torma who appropriates her text from a variety of sources...
including her children’s written words, school primers, textbooks, dictionaries, encyclopedias, pedagogical charts, and popular culture. This multitude of voices allows Torma to sing “the other.” Her work is not about the essential body, but towards a new conception of the body. In this way, Torma’s work embodies l’écriture feminine as an exchange, or translation of perception, operating as an extension of the notion of the interstitial, in her representation of these domains of difference.

Embodied Touch

In her essay “Castration or Decapitation,” Cixous writes that “A feminine textual body is recognized by the fact that it is always endless, without ending: there is no closure. . . . There’s tactility in the feminine text, there’s touch, and this touch passes through the ear.” In Torma’s textile work, embodiment is both in the act of viewing within the gallery and in the act of making. This privileged touch of the artist, can only be re-enacted by the viewer through a form of haptic visuality. Film theorist Laura Marks explains that: “In haptic visuality, the eyes themselves function like organs of touch.” In visual culture, if our sense of touch is deferred, we can seemingly experience the pleasure of the sensation from which it derives. Marks specifically addresses how haptic visuality operates in film where the “close-up” acts as a form of embodied spectatorship. In Torma’s work the viewers’ haptic reading replaces the sense of touch normally affiliated with fabric, either as worn against the skin as in clothing, or within the domestic realm, such as bedding. This affective-looking requires a shift of sensibility from one realm of association to another as the viewer’s sense of self becomes one with the fabricated “other” within Torma’s work.

Kristy Bell writes of this embodied or affective viewership: “When I consider Torma’s embroideries, I wonder: what would this work look like if I could lift its veils and enter it—if I could slip into this world of thread and silk that is so appealing to the senses?” She elaborates, “It is a desire both to enter the imaginative realm of the artworks and to feel the full richness of the materials that create this universe—in other words, to personally experience the beguiling worlds of lived reality and myth that Torma constructs.” On viewing the work in person, you find the need to get close to read the details, to revel in the mark-making and stitchery.

In Torma’s immersive installation of Bagatelles (Plate 9.2), this experience of embodied touch is implicit with these six richly embroidered and painted silk
panels. This work, developed during a Canada Council artists' residency in Paris in 2007, was inspired by her visit to the Bagatelles Garden in the Bois de Boulogne. The French term “bagatelle” refers to a short light-hearted piece of music and links to Torma’s earlier work with musical titles. “Bagatelle” can also mean “a thing of little importance,” as Torma acknowledges: “I advocate for small things, out of mainstream, the overlooked and fragile. I feel I can orchestrate those elements into an organic, breathing tableaux that represents a lot more than the bagatelles, the small building elements themselves.”

She draws on the rich panoply of source material from Liste de familles de la vegetation, to her “Dictionary of Fabulous Beasts,” where two mythical “Gatekeepers” act as guardians of these fantastical gardens. Many of these beasts are compiled from her inventory of her children’s drawings, those small building elements, often overlooked. The embroidered text playfully reads: “Who, may I ask is the BEAST?” Within these gardens of plenty, flowers and figures run riot alongside more historical taxonomies.

While in Paris, Torma discovered the historical color merchant Sennelier, where she sourced specialized paint for silk and began to plan Bagatelles, painting directly onto the silk, and layering this with embroidery. This painterly gesture was new to Torma’s work and suggests a French sensibility that recalls Claude Monet’s late series Les Nymphéas, as well as the Renaissance textiles in the Musée de Cluny and Parisian haute couture fashion. This interpretation is reinforced with Torma’s various installations of Bagatelles, where the six silk panels envelope the viewer, similar to Monet’s series of curved canvases depicting water lilies installed at the Musée de l’Orangerie (Paris). In both series the viewer is surrounded by the artist’s impression of a garden. We do not so much as see the garden topographically, rather we experience the garden, as an immersive act. This is something akin to jouissance—an intense pleasure all at once—as our eyes implore us to reach out to touch the richly embellished surfaces. As a gallery viewer, we can only look, yet seem to experience the pleasure of looking with all of our senses, thus enabling a haptic sensuality.

The sensuality of touch is integral to both the viewer’s interpretation of Torma’s work and the artist’s connectedness with each piece. As Bell has noted, “Torma’s contact with her art is deeply physical: touch governs each and every gesture.” As embroiderer, Torma has the privilege of “touch,” her touch is everywhere. She admits that “The work is very sensuous. When I touch silk, I think: ‘Ohh, it came from China, and they raised the silk worms; it was probably a family business.’ There are endless stories in a little piece of fabric.”

Such tactile intimacies suggest another feminist strategy where the finite needlework and richly embellished surfaces can, arguably, be coded feminine.
The feminist Naomi Schor in *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* poses a critical question: “Is the detail gendered?” To Schor the detail is both “gendered and doubly gendered as feminine,” and “rooted in the domestic sphere of social life presided over by women,” in the everyday, and the prosaic. It is this close attention to detail in Torma’s work that helps to pull us in; we need to get close to read the language of her stitches, and to delight in the multiple narratives that emerge.

Torma admits to being drawn to the aesthetic of excess in her art, as seen in her use of a multiplicity of fabrics and threads, in the abundance of texture and color, and in her rich sourcing of materials. Janis Jefferies has written that with textile art, “Once released [from the constraints of modernism], detail and pattern become excessively magnified and erupted, even exceeding the borders which once tried to contain them.” This feminist strategy of excessiveness typifies the work of a number of textile artists including Sheila Hicks and Allyson Mitchell, the latter who defines herself as a “maximalist artist.” Both Hicks and Mitchell enlarge and use multiples in their practice. Mitchell, like Torma, often appropriates found textiles to incorporate into a larger, often subversive, narrative. Art historians Bridget Elliot and Janice Helland regard the strategy of excess as implicit with textile art practices, stating, “The gendered conflation of textiles—particularly embroidery—with the feminine suggest that somewhere within the softness of fabric and the intricacy of stitching lies an inherent relationship that cannot be signified or secured: it is always ‘excess’ and therefore external to more easily and rigorously defined concepts.” As such, textile art is often without bounds, remaining on the margins and, as Jefferies also indicates, disrupts dominant discourses.

**Collecting as Female Fetish**

In keeping with excess theory is the excess of collecting. Torma describes herself as a “spiritual keeper of memories” and acknowledges that her work acts as a tangible repository for remembered moments, “as a private diary of pages on fabric, with drawings, pictures and visual fragments from my past and present.” In many of her embroideries these memories are not represented in a linear fashion, nor is there a narrative center to her work. Rather, the ordering of words, plants, objects, and lists—a kind of housekeeping—keeps her world in harmony. Motifs are often culled from her children’s drawings and interspersed with their written narratives, meticulously copied and transcribed into her colorful embroideries. Sensitive to her children’s authorship, she records their unrestrained
drawings and words with a careful accuracy. The artist reflects: “I loved that early age when they were languageless...where communication was based on signs, drawings, body language, guessing and empathy.” She comments on this impetus for borrowing from their youthful work:

I use their decaying childhood drawings because I want to steal the intensity behind them. They drew quickly and powerfully. Embroidery is very much the opposite of that way of working. But I wanted to make something powerful, not just decadent and pretty. Children draw because the desire is there. With embroidery, I can save the desire in this format; it’s forever.

This maternal appropriation of her children’s drawings (both now adult artists), and her use of embroidery as a means to embed or “save the desire” forever, evokes a form of female fetish where the mother’s desire for the child to remain in her domain is reenacted. In *Feminizing the Fetish*, Emily Apter critiques Freud’s notion of the fetish as only applied to the male and always sexual. She argues that the female fetish exists and is frequently discovered in the obsessive collecting of the mother. Mary Kelly’s early feminist series *Post-Partum Document* (1973–79) plays on this accumulative pattern where diary-like entries and child-objects—the child’s handwriting, footprints, a fragment of a diaper—become part of the mother’s fetish for remembering the child. As Apter observes in a later essay on Kelly, “Post-Partum documents the museological mania of a maternal collector/fetishist with a gently manic sympathy.” She maintains that the fetish can be visual and related directly to the sense of touch. In Torma’s work, embroidery, with its tactile fabric and thread, is a play on a doubling of making and remaking of memory through the artist’s touch.

In Torma’s *Monster Spirit* (Figure 9.1), this diary-like motif is used throughout with the artist recording in stitches her son’s punishment for talking as a boy at school. Torma recalls: “This is a found school text, from David’s early years in elementary. ‘Write down 60 times I will not talk’ type of exercise, you probably remember. When I found these school exercises, I mused, how many meanings there can be if you read it differently: poetic, sarcastic, etc.” She notes that, as an immigrant, this was particularly poignant, “Especially, if you have a different school routine than the Canadian, in English.” Throughout this work text and image play off each other. The stitching has a staccato quality, embellishing the cotton backing with energetic colors and narratives.

The theme of collecting as a form of female fetish is already present in earlier work by Torma, as seen in the companion pieces *Essential Elements* and *Man’s Island* (1996), where she appropriates found clothing to emphasize gender
differences. The discarded clothing acts as a surrogate for the feminine/masculine aspect of each work. Using a crazy-quilt aesthetic, where she combines a random pattern determined by each piece of clothing, the artist gives more value to the worn out fabrics, suggesting the trace of the body is inherently present in the work. In *Essential Elements* a nostalgic gaze rests on a delicate antique ladies’ blouse and elegant gloves, lace collars, discrete black beading, and a monogrammed “M.” Such intimate details conjure up the uncanny, where objects that are at once familiar, are somehow displaced. Art historian Carol Mavor, in her book *Becoming*, writes on this residual memory that is associated with clothing: “It is a knowingness that encourages coming closer, turning around, feeling fabric (Is it silk? Is it old?), feeling buttons, feeling beads, smelling a perfume . . . in order to take in every detail.”

Torma’s collecting activities have long included the work of her immediate family and, more recently, have extended to the work of her mother-in-law, as seen in her series *Red Fragments I* (2017). The title is both literal and conceptual in its allusion to aging, illness, and migration. For this piece, the artist sought a

Figure 9.1 Anna Torma, *Monster Spirit*, 2008. Silk thread embroidery on cotton fabric, 45.7 × 35.6 cm. Photo credit: Anna Torma.
means to connect with her mother-in-law, a gifted needlewoman, who had suffered a stroke. Torma encouraged her to make new pieces using the traditional Hungarian cross-stitch patterns in red yarn, as a means to rehabilitate her mental and emotional health. She explains:

My installation work, RED FRAGMENTS, records this collaboration and also revisits my immigrant past through my folk art heritage. I want to point out with this installation the tension between coherent designs and fragmented pieces, the beauty of unfinished works. The embroidery fragments clearly show the persistence and try-again attitude until the prepared small canvas [fabric] with the red-threaded needle runs empty, unable to be touched by her hands anymore.

As her mother-in-law gradually lost the ability to embroider these time-honored patterns, the resulting absence of stitches alludes to her vulnerability and an acute sense of loss for both artists. Torma's specific adoption of the North American quilt pattern for this work befits her cultural assimilation, which serves as a backdrop to the appliquéd patterns of her mother-in-law's traditional Hungarian embroidery. As in so much of Torma's work, family is central, both conceptually and emotionally. She has previously commented that: “As an artist I always felt that my mother and family were all behind me, a part of my life, and a part of my activities when I make art. It is a conscious thing. It is about inclusivity, about sharing and gathering from many sources, deep and large.”

Again Cixous's concept of “singing the other” is implied in this complex narrative that includes the work of her mother-in-law, Hungarian cross-stitch embroidery, a record-keeping of declining health, and Torma's overarching inclusiveness.

Stitching the Self

These multiple narratives are a continual form of discourse in Torma's work, but also contribute more specifically to the notion of stitching herself into her own work. Returning to Bhabha's concept of the “interstitial” as those “in-between” spaces that provide strategies of selfhood, nowhere is this more apparent in Torma's work than in her series Vanitas I and II (2011), where she literally sews a photo-appliqué portrait of herself as a tiger into the first silk panel.

Vanitas I (Figure 9.2) shows a humorous self-portrait of Torma surrounded by all things culturally inscribed as “feminine,” an imaginary world, drawn from her childhood. In this work she recalls her early play with handmade paper dolls
with flowery names such as Rose, Lily and Iris—a child’s world—remembered by way of stitches. The silk backing and fleshy color suggest old lingerie from the past. Viewers are drawn into the narratives, as various codes of fashion are deciphered from comic book villains to elegant fashion plates. Torma employs her needlework strategically as the subject requires, more crudely, in her childlike recollections, or with great skill as she appropriates magazine illustrations, and deliberately mixes her metaphors with multiple narratives, as though layering memory. She further complicates this reading by using what she terms a “soft collage” or appliqué technique that has roots in Miriam Schapiro’s femmages, woman-centered fabric collages. Torma has long used her own method of “soft collage” with its implications of modernism as a mode of introducing three-dimensionality to her work.

The series, created for the group exhibition Paper Doll, was inspired by Torma’s recollections of playing with paper dolls as a child. This exhibition also included an archival collection of handmade paper dolls and juvenile diaries of Sylvia Plath that served as a focal point for seven contemporary artists whose work explored the materiality of the cut-out and the ephemerality of play. Torma read Plath’s The Bell Jar as a student in the seventies and reflects that: “the voice of the book matched with my melancholy and helped me to question the
meaning of life, art, and womanhood.” This inquisitive tone is more pervasive in *Vanitas II* where a meticulously embroidered anatomical figure, sourced from an old anatomical chart, serves as an index for the body, while the skin of the silk backing acts as *momento mori*—a reminder of our human frailty. As *vanitas* we are made aware of our own histories and mortality. The work is layered with color transfers of old photographs and documents that narrate the fragmented history of her family.

Torma, as the record-keeper of family and her own life, uses her needle both as an integral part of her practice, but also as a rhetorical tool for shaping the complexity of identity, both collective and singular. In keeping with both the notion of stitching the self and the complexity of working within a practice that can be interpreted as interstitial, in its recognition of difference, Torma speaks to a multitude of feminisms that have shaped the politics of women’s lives and art. Her work is replete with imagery that navigates a complexity of themes, from the domestic to popular culture, to the politics of migration. Using well-known feminist strategies such as diary-like motifs, excess, and collectivity she continues to explore this richly embodied world and her work continues to gain recognition within the international forum of textile art.