



Hands at Work: Patching Women's Film Histories through Sabrina Gschwandtner's Film Quilts

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This paper examines the work of artist Sabrina Gschwandtner, whose recent series of 16mm and 35mm film quilts reproduce sequences from early women directors' films and from orphaned textile-production documentaries and re-edits their narratives through spatial montage by sewing celluloid strips into traditional quilt patterns. Appropriated from film archives, each strip of film holds embedded within it a history of women's labor, and through her sewing techniques, which call attention to the connection between film's intermittent motion mechanism and the sewing machine, Gschwandtner patches women's film histories back together. By considering the techniques of colorists and editors in early cinema as originating within handcrafting and 'feminine' labor, the traces of their hands at work form new histories through Gschwandtner's quilts. In her artwork, the invisible contributions of these forgotten women become visible, foregrounding their tactile, intensive, and time-consuming labor. Gschwandtner's film quilts also suggest that, rather than digital technology marking the death of cinema, it has just liberated the celluloid strip to be used and encountered in endless new ways.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2017, in a dimly lit gallery, Sabrina Gschwandtner exhibited *Hands at Work*, a solo show comprised of eleven quilts sewed from 16mm films which showed women's hands at work — 'weaving, knitting, sewing, dyeing cloth, tying string, spinning yarn, and feeding fabric into machines.'¹ The vibrant quilts were softly illuminated from behind, exhibited in lightboxes mounted on walls like recessed television screens — though, from afar, the colorful compositions looked more like ornate stained glass windows, varying in shape and size [Fig. 1]. Only upon closer examination did the films' materiality become evident and the images legible, repeated in intricate patterns through the quilts' graphic forms.

The show served as a sort of culmination of almost a decade's work, having made several dozen quilts meticulously sewed together from strips of forgotten 16mm films — from orphaned industrial films and textile-production documentaries to student theses — which would have otherwise been discarded. Her recent series of 35mm film quilts continues to highlight forgotten films, this



Fig. 1
Sabrina Gschwandtner,
Hands at Work, solo
exhibition at Shoshana
Wayne Gallery in Los
Angeles, 3 June 2017
to 26 August 2017.
Courtesy of the Artist
and Shoshana Wayne
Gallery, Los Angeles.

time reproducing sequences by early women directors. Through both bodies of work, Gschwandtner reevaluates films that have traditionally been overlooked and underappreciated by film historians, giving them new life through her expanded cinema collages. As I hope to show in this article, each strip of film in Gschwandtner's quilts holds embedded within it a history of women's labor which is activated as she patches women's film histories back together, creating an archive of women's labor across textile crafts, fine arts, and film history.

Gschwandtner's work is part of a larger movement to revise film historical accounts of women's participation in the film industry. Maggie Henefeld has summarized the project of feminist film history as 'the ongoing rewriting of the past through the lens of gender/sexual difference and from the perspective of women, whose work is too often erased or sidelined in dominant narratives of the history of cinema'.² This project has been undertaken on various fronts internationally over the past few decades: conferences like 'Women and the Silent Screen' and 'Doing Women's Film and TV History' host biannual meetings for scholars to share current research and keep up with the field; book series like *Women and Film History International* (University of Illinois Press) and journals like *Feminist Media Histories* (University of California Press) provide outlets for scholarly publication; online platforms like the *Women Film Pioneers Project* and *Edited By: Women Film Editors*, hosted by Columbia and Princeton Universities, respectively, provide biographies of hundreds of women directors, editors, screenwriters, actresses, designers, curators, and every other occupation imaginable; and distributors like Kino Lorber help bring the restored films themselves back to audiences through boxsets like *Pioneers: First Women Filmmakers* (2018) and *Cinema's First Nasty Women* (2022). Filmmakers

and artists are also part of the conversation, making documentaries, writing historical fiction, and creating art installations showcasing the work of early and contemporary women filmmakers.

Aside from women's film history, Gschwandtner's work is also deeply engaged with the histories and traditions of textile crafts and needlework — crocheting, knitting, sewing, and quilting in particular — the objects of which have similarly been neglected and ignored as women's pastimes rather than taken seriously as art. While neither textile crafts nor film have truly been embraced by the art world, it is precisely in art galleries and museums that Gschwandtner's film quilts are exhibited, in a sense infiltrating and critiquing the very institutions that had tried to keep them both out from within. Her work proceeds as a two-pronged investigation of women filmmakers, women crafters, and the absence of these women artists in both film and art historical accounts, foregrounding questions of value and acts of valuation through her recuperative process, which rewrites both histories at once.

Gschwandtner's interests in revising film history and reevaluating textile crafts, however, meet most directly through the figure of the film 'cutter' who, leaned over a flatbed editor, labored with her hands as she carefully cut and spliced film strips together with tape or cement. As Jane Gaines, Su Friedrich, Erin Hill, and others remind us, women worked predominantly as editors or 'cutters' in the early film industry.³ Joshua Yumibe, Gregory Zinman, and others have also shown that the work of coloring films in early cinema was performed by an almost entirely female labor force — by women who painted each frame and every release print by hand.⁴ As these authors maintain, editing and coloring were among the first jobs available to women in the film industry, both because this kind of work was tedious, demanding, and time-consuming and women could be hired and exploited at lower wages than men, but also because women were believed to be innately suited to this type of detail-oriented, hands-on work thanks to their handcrafting skills and 'nimble fingers'.⁵

If we start from the conception that cinema, at its inception, was materially related to the field of textile crafts and handiwork — not only through the work of the cutter and colorist, but also through the relation of the sewing machine and the intermittent motion mechanism that advances film through cameras and projectors, as well as the use of cellulose nitrate in both film and fabric⁶ — we can then read Gschwandtner's dual engagement with film history and the history of craft as one and the same. By considering the techniques of editors and colorists as originating within handcrafting and 'feminine' labor, the traces of their hands at work form new histories through Gschwandtner's quilts, which not only directly appropriate these handcrafting techniques to produce new and revisionist histories but make the invisible contributions of these forgotten women visible, foregrounding their tactile, intensive, and time-consuming labor. This article provides a more-or-less chronological account of the artist's work, detailing how these ideas and connections between medium and material, content and form, pattern and technique are identified, referenced, developed, and refined throughout her bodies of work.

EARLY WORKS

Sabrina Gschwandtner is an American artist based in Los Angeles, and over the past two decades, her work has been centered around the relationship between handcrafting, women's undervalued labor, material culture, and cinema. She studied art and semiotics with Leslie Thornton at Brown University, from whom she learned to think about 'cinema as a mode of shared thinking',⁷ and spent a summer in Salzburg, Austria studying video with VALIE EXPORT. Gschwandtner is part of the generation that learned to edit film on Steenbecks and video on Media 100 simultaneously, and her film editing experience — working directly with the 16mm film in her hands, splicing strips of film and threading projectors — has deeply influenced the way she thinks about editing her film quilts today. She taught herself about textiles and crafts outside of school, including through her work as founder of the zine *KnitKnit*, which ran for seven issues between 2002 and 2007 and culminated in the book *KnitKnit: Profiles and Projects from Knitting's New Wave*.⁸ Central to her thinking was that the materials she was working with were embedded with histories of women's labor and creativity, and that because of this the materials — whether thread, fabric, or film — were already infused with meaning. She embraced this understanding of the materials from the get-go and worked to reinforce these meanings rather than circumvent them.

In one of her earliest works, *Sewn Film Performance* (2001), Gschwandtner sewed thread and bits of fabric onto short strips of Super8 film, cutting some of the strips in half and sewing mismatched pieces together. With a video camera trained on her hands, she fed the film strips, piled around her, into a projector with its side opened, pushing and pulling at the thick strips of film, thread, and fabric to make them go through the projector, projecting the analog, handcrafted images and the live-feed of her hands at work next to each other. Performed as part of Xander Marro's *Movies with Live Soundtracks* series, the noise of the projector — which sounds like a sewing machine — served as the soundtrack to the performance. Two years later, in the spirit of the 'mending and recycling' handcrafting ethos, Gschwandtner sewed the remains of the Super8 strips together as a 'relic' of her performance, measuring eight by sixteen inches. This became her first film quilt, although it would take several years before she made another one.

Sewn Film Performance may sound a lot like Annabel Nicolson's *Reel Time* (1973), in which Nicolson 'ran a loop of film from the ceiling, through the threadless, hand-operated sewing machine where she sat, and back into the projector',⁹ continuously taping and splicing the film as she went along until it was too damaged to be projected. The film image showed a recording of Nicolson sitting by a sewing machine, while another projector positioned behind her beamed her live shadow onto a separate screen, projecting herself caught in two acts of sewing at once to foreground her labor as the real visual spectacle of the performance, while two audience members equipped with operating

manuals for a film projector and a sewing machine read the instructions aloud.¹⁰ While documentation of Nicolson's performance is scant, five decades later it remains a seminal work in avant-garde film and expanded cinema practices.¹¹ Gschwandtner has retrospectively compared their pieces, but acknowledges that at the time of her performance she was unaware of Nicolson's earlier work, highlighting how the relationship between sewing and cinema continues to be a generative site of experimentation for artists working between textile arts and the moving image.¹²

Following *Sewn Film Performance* and the *Sewn Film Performance Relic* (2003), Gschwandtner pursued several other projects, including *Crochet Film* (2004), a site-specific installation created for the 40-foot long lower-level gallery at SculptureCenter in Long Island City, New York. For this installation, Gschwandtner shot an 80-foot long 16mm loop of herself crocheting an 80-foot yarn 'replica' of the 16mm film, continuing the motif of projecting images of herself and her hands at work. The same-sized objects were exhibited facing each other on opposite walls in the gallery — one object moving and one still — with their durations listed: two minutes and fourteen seconds for the film, marking the time it took for the looping images to transport through the 40-foot gallery and back again, and 575 minutes for the yarn object, marking the almost ten hours it took to crochet it by hand. The juxtaposition of the two objects highlighted and invited reflection on their differences — the widely divergent materialities and temporalities of the two objects — and similarities — like the film strip, which consists of an accretion of discrete images, the crocheted yarn object was an accumulation of individual stitches.

Crochet Film was followed that same year by *Phototactic Behavior in Sewn Slides*, in which Gschwandtner sewed threads onto 35mm slides with a sewing machine. The slides, which had been produced as documentation of a Super8 loop but came back blurry from the lab, were reused by the artist in the same handcrafting ethos of 'mending and recycling', a strategy that has been central to Gschwandtner's work throughout the past two decades. Phototaxis refers to the ability of organisms to move in response to light sources, and, when projected through a slide carousel, the projector fan blew on the thread, creating minute motions that, like *Crochet Film*, continue to play with the binary of movement and stillness, as the automatic slide projector struggles to keep the fluttering thread in focus.

Gschwandtner's early works showcase a sustained and sharp exploration of the dualisms of still and moving image/object, analog and digital, handcraft and fine art, amateur and professional, utilitarian and decorative, preservation and appropriation, which continue to inform her work to this day. These dualisms become even more pronounced in the film quilts, which are sewed together from strips of found films using traditional quilting techniques and exhibited in museums and art galleries, breaking down and traversing the triple barriers between the fine arts, handcrafting, and cinema.

16MM FILM QUILTS

In 2009, the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York deaccessioned its 16mm teaching film collections and donated them to Anthology Film Archive. Archivist Andrew Lampert selected a few films to keep for Anthology's permanent collections and gave away the rest of the material — the stuff that was not deemed worth preserving and archiving — to found footage filmmakers, including Gschwandtner. This collection became the core of Gschwandtner's working materials throughout the next decade, as she embarked on her first series of film quilts, although she has occasionally also acquired footage through eBay and other sources. Over time, she developed a spreadsheet where she kept track of all the information she could find about the films — titles, directors, production companies, copyright years, film stock, and edge codes — and pursued further research depending on her interests.

The films — which date from the 1950s to the 1980s, and range from sponsored industrial films and documentaries to student thesis projects — are all centered around textile production, crafts, and fashion.¹³ The collection also traces the shifting representation and appreciation of textile crafts and women's labor as the form and content of the films grow progressively feminist by each decade. One of Gschwandtner's earliest quilts, *Fibers and Civilization (1959)* (2009), features footage from Lewis Jacobs' *Fibers and Civilization* (alternately dated 1958/1959). Sponsored by Chemstrand Corp., a synthetic textiles manufacturer, the film surveys the historical use of natural fibers from ancient China and India — visualized through exotic song and dance numbers featuring women 'working' 'primitive' looms — through the late fifties, when scientists developed synthetic alternatives that 'could be produced in limitless supply and forever free the textile from the whims of nature' to meet the demands of modern society — visualized by men in lab coats with scientific instruments and industrial machinery. As Gschwandtner explains:

*In the films from the '50s there's usually an omniscient male narrator talking about, say, how dresses are important for women to wear, and by the 1981 film Quilts in Women's Lives, we are presented with women describing where they live and how they work in their own words. The film breaks from a controlling narrative about what things mean and opens itself up to embody the care, the improvisation, and the craft the women put into their quilts.*¹⁴

Fig. 2 (next page)
Sabrina Gschwandtner,
Fibers and Civilization
(1959) (2009). 16mm film
with polyamide thread.
60 1/2 x 43 in. Courtesy
of the Artist and Renwick
Gallery, Smithsonian
American Art Museum.

The colorful, oversaturated images of synthetic fibers being dipped in dyes, pulled and pressed through a series of machines, and wound and spun onto spools are sewed by Gschwandtner into six even square blocks, each made up of eight even triangles and featuring roughly twenty-eight rows of 16mm film across. The six blocks are surrounded by twelve rows of darker, black-and-white 16mm strips, creating a stark contrast between her vivid composition and the almost-black frame [Fig. 2 and Fig. 3]. While Jacobs' film places contemporary fibers



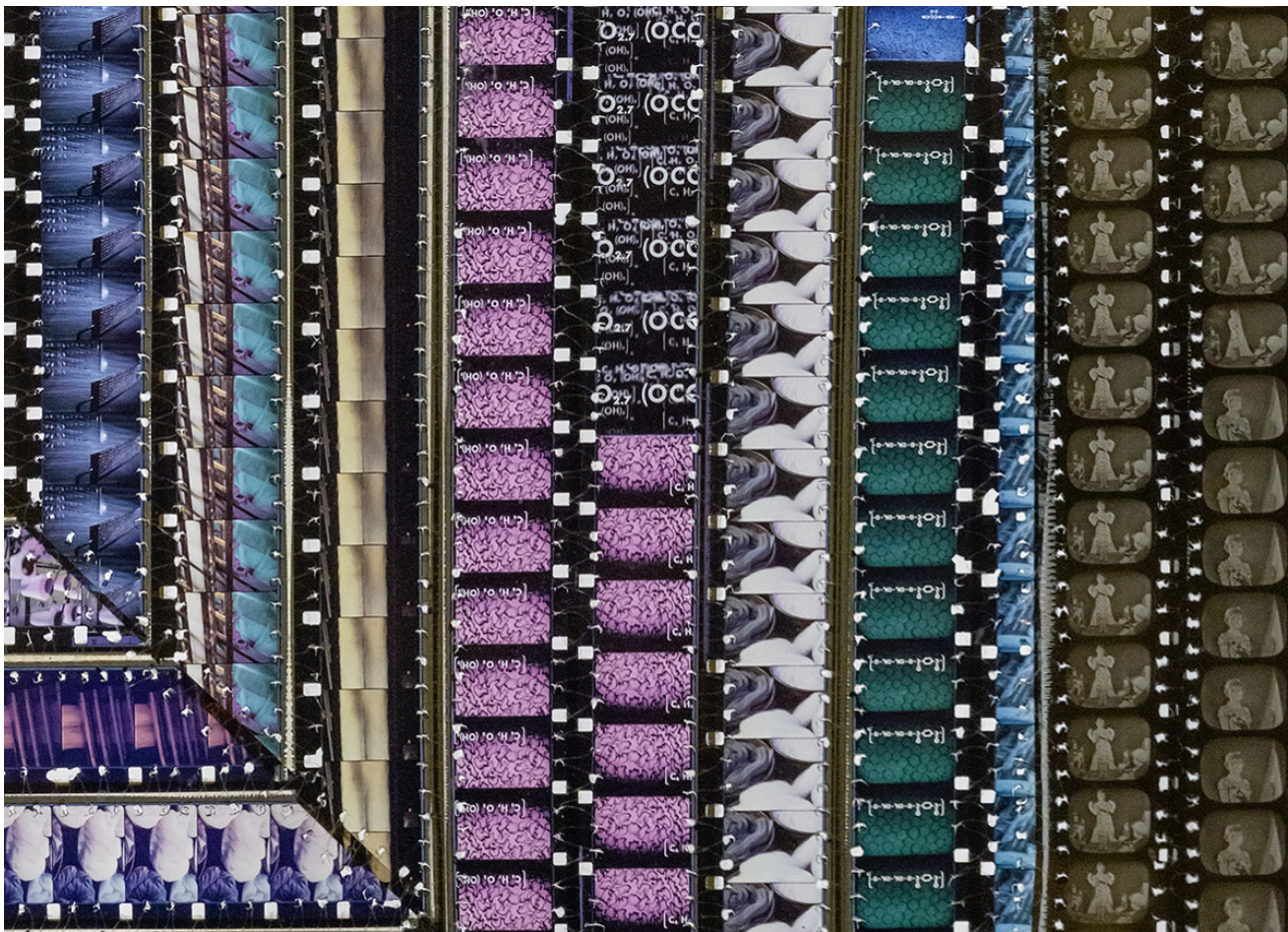


Fig. 3
 Sabrina Gschwandtner,
Fibers and Civilization
 (1959) (2009). Detail.
 Photo by Helen Betts,
 courtesy of Helen Betts.

squarely in the context of science, automation, and commodity, Gschwandtner brings them back into the realm of craft, labor, and art.

Gschwandtner has likened her quilting process to editing in three dimensions, using shots, scenes, and sequences as building blocks. After viewing and selecting specific clips, depending on what the source material is, she'll either work directly with her original prints or have clips reprinted through a film lab. Using quilting tools — a rotary cutter, quilting ruler, cutting mat, and Bernina sewing machine — she cuts the film strips into rectangles, squares, or triangles depending on the pattern she's following, and tapes the strips onto a light table, moving pieces around until she's satisfied with the composition. She arranges the strips according to the logic of a spatial rather than time-based cinematic montage, playing with the length of sequences and the similarity of image content to shape the material into graphic form, balancing color, light, and darkness, and rearranging the composition if the 'edit' is too dense and needs more breathing room. Before she sews the pieces together, she takes a photo of the quilt assemblage (the 'rough cut', so to speak) so that she can look at it on different screens and at different scales, before committing to the final composition.

The 16mm film quilts, measuring typically between fourteen by fourteen and twenty-eight by twenty-eight inches — but at their largest up to forty-eight by seventy-two inches — are composed of a range of types of footage in compositions

where the sequential film strips are primarily perceived as abstract color swatches and individual frames and images are only recognized and made legible upon close examination. These images include the aforementioned industrial textile production scenes in *Fibers and Civilization* and other films like it juxtaposed with images of women's hands at work — at sewing machines and looms or with needles in hand — as well as title sequences, countdowns, and black and clear (and tinted) leader — in other words, film scraps. These disparate materials are skillfully fashioned into arrangements that follow traditional American quilting patterns and motifs, entwining the history of the American crafts movement with film history. As Joan Mulholland argues, quilting has for the past few centuries been an important place for women's discourse to develop: at a time when women's freedoms were limited and voices restricted, quilting became a form of speech through which the materials one worked with, the patterns one created, and the care and skill with which one stitched all inscribed values and meanings into the quilts, which were displayed in homes and at fairs, exchanged with friends and family, or made to commemorate important life events.¹⁵ These forms of signification were certainly not lost on a former student of semiotics, and Gschwandtner's quilts likewise speak to us through her choices of material, content, pattern, and technique. Each strip of film she works with holds embedded within it a history of women's labor, which through Gschwandtner's quilts are rescued from their decaying reels and put on display, front and center, to 'record and preserve the motions of [women] sewing, dyeing, [and] spinning'.¹⁶

Two of the films Gschwandtner returns to most frequently for her source material are Pat Ferrero's *Hearts and Hands* (1988), a documentary surveying the role quilting played for women in the nineteenth century, and *Quilts in Women's Lives* (1981), a documentary featuring a series of portraits of seven contemporary quilters from widely different backgrounds. Footage from the films is used in pieces like *Hearts and Hands Octagonal Star* (2015 and 2017), *Hearts and Hands Black Block* (2014), *Quilts in Women's Lives III* (2012), *Quilts in Women's Lives IV* (2013), and *Quilts in Women's Lives V* (2014), all employing short strips of 16mm film — typically anywhere between half a frame and forty frames, or roughly one foot of film — sewed in alternating patterns that contrast repetition and variation, symmetry and asymmetry, light and dark, opacity and transparency, image content and clear leader, and so on. In each instance, Gschwandtner invites viewers to read the quilts closely to reflect on the photographic image content, which is often repeated due to the repetitive nature of the cinematic medium (a five-second shot generates 120 individual frames with only slight variations); on the medium and technique, which are foregrounded through the visible film frame, edge, and sprocket holes, as well as the seams and threads that hold them together; and on the quilting patterns themselves, which invoke the traditions and histories of American quilting.

Mulholland notes that the block, for example, is a distinguishing mark of American quilting, as American women settlers created lap-sized blocks — which could be completed independently, set aside, and sewn together once

all were finished — as an alternative to working from the middle outwards or from one end to another on a piece that would grow increasingly heavy and difficult to maneuver.¹⁷ The block is also a signature feature of Gschwandtner's film quilts, which are often composed of one, four, six, sixteen, or even twenty-four squares — upwards of a hundred, depending on how you count them in works like *Quilts in Women's Lives V* [Fig. 4]. *Spindle Log Cabin Square* (2014), *Hearts and Hands Log Cabin Squares* (for Susan) (2014), *Arts and Crafts* (2012), and several others also use variations on the log cabin pattern, which begins with a center square and feature strips that grow larger in size around the sides of the square, typically alternating between light and dark. *Hands at Work Crazy Quilt* (for Teresa Li) (2017) and *Hands at Work Crazy Quilt* (for Roderick Kiracofe) (2017), on the other hand, use the random 'crazy quilt' technique, which thwarts any perceptible patterns or motifs — a technique, as Mulholland explains, that historically foregrounded the 'stitchery between the pieces' rather than the patterning of pieces', which deemphasized the quilts' utility and instead showcased a woman's skill and artistry.¹⁸ Gschwandtner's choices of form are thus not random, but serve as active referents to these histories and the meanings and values conveyed through these women's work.

While Gschwandtner's work in many ways is about remembering and preserving the histories of women's labor in crafts, art, and film, her use of material — photochemical film — and technique — cutting and stitching —



Fig. 4
Sabrina Gschwandtner,
Quilts in Women's Lives
V (2014). 16mm film
with polyester thread
and lithography ink.
23 5/16 x 23 7/16 in.
Courtesy of the Artist
and Shoshana Wayne
Gallery, Los Angeles.

challenges and complicates any sense of permanence or preservation. As these materials face the very real threat of decomposition and obsolescence, as the films and their contents disappear and are forgotten, Gschwandtner's project can on the one hand be read as archival as she rescues and reuses footage from orphaned films otherwise unlikely to ever see the light of day or a projector again. On the other hand, some critics have expressed concern about her process being destructive, destroying and dismembering the original prints she acquired, though she feels confident that the prints she's working with are not unique, but that other copies exist in other archives and collections, whether on 16mm or video. Some of the films, like Ferrero's *Hearts and Hands and Quilts in Women's Lives*, are still available for rental or purchase through the original distributor,¹⁹ while *Fibers and Civilization* is preserved by, and accessible through, the National Film Preservation Foundation and Library of Congress. For some of the rarer materials she uses most frequently, she has even made her own video copies and created new negatives so that she can strike new prints if necessary. Ultimately, she thinks of her own role not as to preserve these materials as they originally existed, but to 'bring into material existence what exists as possibility' in the archive.

For Gschwandtner's first film quilt exhibition, *Watch & See* at Gustavsbergs Konsthall in Sweden in 2009, the quilts were installed hung against the gallery's windows, leaving the rest of the space empty as viewers had to view the content of the transparent film frames against the world outside the gallery, while the light from the sun shifted the legibility of the images throughout the day.²⁰ The direct sunlight also accelerated the films' decomposition, and since then the film quilts have more typically been exhibited in custom-built lightboxes mounted on walls, providing softer but more consistent illumination from behind. The lightboxes help protect the sensitive acetate material from decaying too quickly, as the photochemical material inevitably deteriorates, fades, and changes colors, while also situating her work in a particularly archival *dispositif*. This archival quality comes through most strongly in her most recent work.

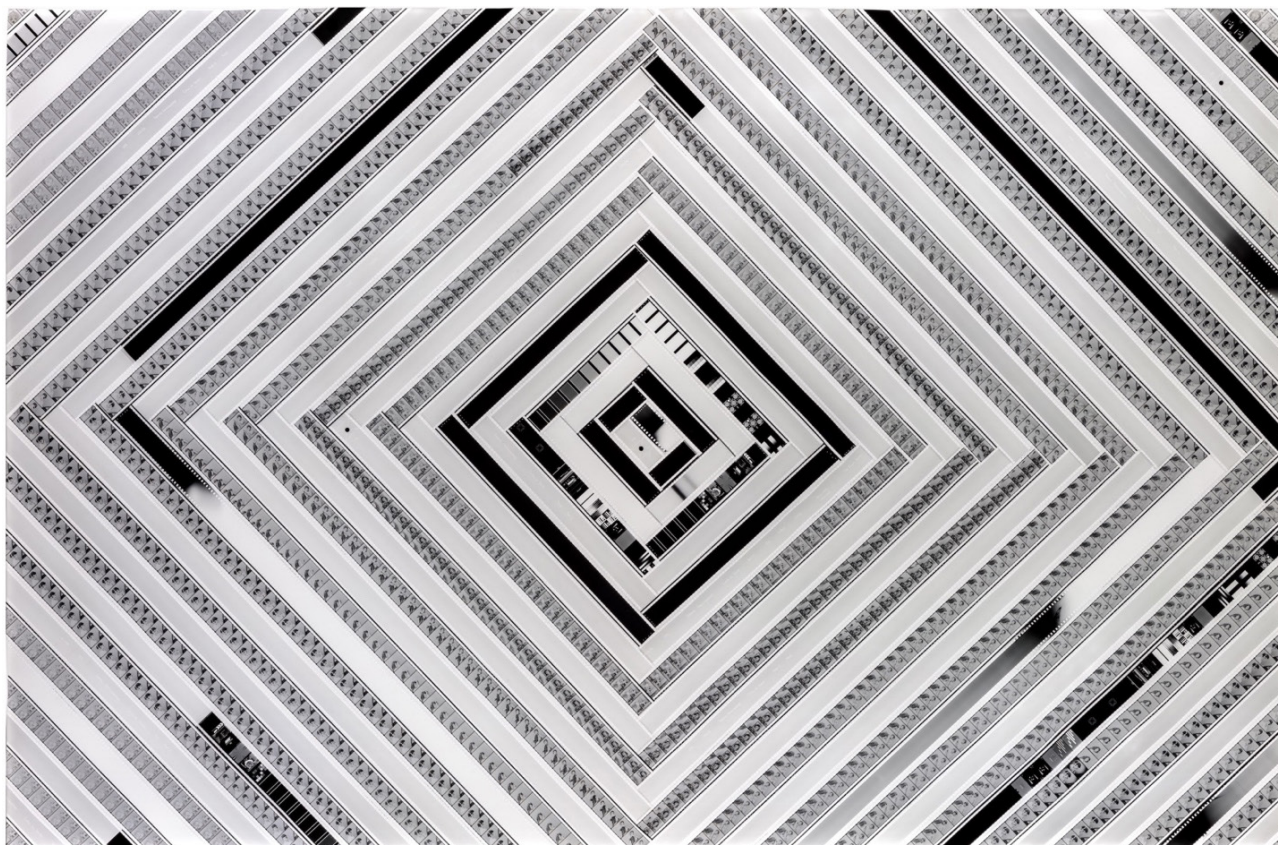
35MM FILM QUILTS AND THE CINEMA SANCTUARY

In 2019, after a decade committed to her 16mm film quilts, Gschwandtner embarked on a new series of 35mm film quilts, exploring the legacies of early women filmmakers from the silent cinema period. The four 35mm film quilts she has completed so far use footage from Marion E. Wong's *The Curse of Quon Gwon: When the Far East Mingles with the West* (1917), Alice Guy-Blaché's *Serpentine Dance by Mrs Bob Walter* (1897), Germaine Dulac's *The Seashell and the Clergyman* (1927), and Lotte Reiniger's *Cinderella* (1922). For this series, rather than using found footage from her own collection, Gschwandtner worked with film archives to access and license high-resolution video footage

of restored silent films, which she brought to a lab to create her own 35mm prints: Wong's *Curse* came from the Academy Film Library and Kino Lorber, Guy-Blaché's *Serpentine Dance* from the Gaumont-Pathé Archives in Paris, and Dulac's *Seashell* from EYE Filmmuseum in Amsterdam. This has in some ways limited which films she can work with, as she needs high-resolution footage, which is not available of films that have not been preserved, restored, and digitized yet, while some archives are also hesitant to provide a license for her unusual requests.²¹

All four filmmakers featured in Gschwandtner's 35mm film quilts — Wong, Guy-Blaché, Dulac, and Reiniger — are renowned for being film history 'firsts': Wong is often called the first Asian-American filmmaker, founder of the first Asian-American film studio (the Mandarin Film Company), and the director of the first film to feature an all-Asian-American cast²² (1917 papers called her 'the first Chinese girl to write and stage a movie'²³); Guy-Blaché is regularly claimed to be the first woman director and the first narrative filmmaker;²⁴ Dulac is alternately referred to as the first feminist and the first surrealist filmmaker;²⁵ and Reiniger is the director of what is believed to be the first feature-length animated film.²⁶ It is then fitting that their films should also be the first to be turned into quilts by Gschwandtner as she embarks on this new series of work.

The Curse of Quon Gwon tells the story of a culture clash between a young, westernized immigrant couple and their more traditional Chinese family. The film was never picked up for distribution during Wong's life, and it wasn't until after her death in 1969 that Violet Wong, Marion's sister-in-law, who starred alongside her in the film, tasked her grandson with preserving the two surviving reels — reels four and seven out of eight or nine. The extant material, a little over half an hour of footage, was restored by the Academy Film Archive in 2005, and added to the National Film Registry the following year.²⁷ Gschwandtner's quilt focuses on a scene where the villainess, played by Marion, tries to give the heroine, played by Violet, a more traditional Chinese hairdo in advance of her wedding, but the bride resists and ends up doing her own hair. The quilt, arranged as a diagonal log cabin, features black leader and technical printing images in the smaller, middle squares — including an image of a Kodak 'LAD' Lady, a white woman accompanied by a color or, in this case, grayscale bar used as a reference to ensure consistent tonal density and color balance across film prints, also commonly known as a 'China Girl'²⁸ — and alternates between clear leader and images of Violet brushing her hair, with black leader occasionally interrupting the pattern for dynamic effect. It is a striking and expansive composition, whose diagonal squares push like arrows against the edge of the frame, while the emptiness of the clear leader poignantly echoes the loss of the majority of the film [Fig. 5]. The image of the 'China Girl' — a minor detail that can easily be overlooked — further emphasizes how the photochemical film medium was originally calibrated for white skin tones and makes the reproduced frames of Violet looking at herself in the mirror while brushing her hair and fashioning her own image all the more remarkable. While the film was only screened twice during Wong's life, Gschwandtner grants Marion's film and image new life as



they are exhibited anew in museums and galleries as part of her quilt.

Based on a script by Antonin Artaud, *The Seashell and the Clergyman* portrays the erotic hallucinations of a priest. When Artaud had to step away from the project (he was originally scheduled to play the priest), Dulac subverted his vision and infused it with a feminist critique of male sexuality and patriarchal institutions.²⁹ Even though it was the first surrealist film made, *The Seashell and the Clergyman* was overshadowed by Luis Buñuel's and Salvador Dalí's *An Andalusian Dog* (1929), released the following year, which continues to be referred to as the 'quintessential' surrealist film into the present. Gschwandtner's quilt, also following a log cabin pattern, centers on a sequence from early in the film where the clergyman repeatedly pours wine from a shell into round bottom flasks and drops them on the floor, over and over, as if in a trance or dream state. The quilt's patterns, produced by alternating between dark imagery and clear leader, preserve the dizzying and disorienting effect of Dulac's film through their geometric composition. The alternations produce stair-like structures that turn upside down and bend into each other — the composition seems almost completely random, except that black (image) and white (leader) are mirrored along the vertical middle, like a surreal, inverse Rorschach inkblot. Reiniger's film is similarly turned into an abstract pattern that emphasizes the alternation between black and white, even more so as Reiniger's hand cut silhouette animation was made with black puppets against a white background, creating a higher contrast through the original imagery as well as through the geometric shapes Gschwandtner constructs. In her quilt,

Fig. 5
Sabrina Gschwandtner,
*Cinema Sanctuary Study
1: Marion E. Wong's
1917 The Curse of Quon
Gwon: When the Far East
Mingles With the West*
(2019). 35mm film with
polyester thread. 45 x 67
in. Courtesy of the Artist
and Shoshana Wayne
Gallery, Los Angeles.

Gschwandtner focuses on Reiniger's refusal of the square or rectangular frame, instead carefully cutting unique shapes with jagged lines around her animated tableau, and the result is a composition full of dots, triangles, squares, and diamonds. The Reiniger quilt's strong graphic form echoes the film's highly stylized animation, while the Dulac quilt's seeming refusal of symmetrical form — the patterns point in several directions at once — emphasize Dulac's refusal of conventional narrative and film language.

Finally, the Guy-Blaché quilt features footage of a serpentine dance performed by a Mrs. Bob Walter and filmed in 1897, based on the popular dance by Loïe Fuller that spawned dozens of imitators and became one of the most popular filmed attractions in the early years of cinema. The quilt is stitched together to mimic and replicate the circular movement of the serpentine dance and transforms the seductive spectacle into abstract square shapes and patterns. More recently, Gschwandtner has also created a series of smaller-scale, limited edition *Serpentine Dance Square* photo prints from the original quilt (the large quilt consists of six squares, each featuring eighteen rows of 35mm film across, while the prints feature one square with only eight rows across). The prints are hand painted with watercolor and photo dye to mimic the coloring that would have been used both in the lighting of the original dance performance and in its reproduction on film [Fig. 6]. Gregory Zinman reminds us that '[h]and coloring, tinting, toning, and stenciling are all labor-intensive and time-consuming processes, but they have been employed since the start of movie-making'³⁰ and were extensively used from the early 1900s until the advent of sound and later photochemical color filmmaking in the late 1920s and 1930s. Hand painted images could be used for magical tricks and illusions, to highlight important objects or create otherworldly landscapes, or, as in this case, to turn the performer's gendered body into a visual spectacle. As Zinman relays, '[t]hese films were colored by scores of young women and girls who worked slowly, frame by frame, with small brushes, aided by magnifying glasses'.³¹ Not only each frame, but every release print of a film had to be colored by hand. Joshua Yumibe, in his work on early coloring techniques, describes the labor division in these coloring labs, looking specifically at Berthe Thuillier's Paris studio, where she managed two hundred women who colored Pathé Frères and Georges Méliès films: Thuillier would sample and test the colors at night, and during the day instructed and oversaw her workers, each of whom applied a single color to a strip of film through a highly systematized division of labor.³² Gschwandtner directly evokes and appropriates this handcrafting labor through her *Serpentine Dance* prints, each being individually and uniquely colored by applying the dye to the gelatin silver prints directly, rather than reproducing them photographically, thus working in solidarity with the women colorists and editors whose work film history has overlooked and forgotten.

Instead of being installed in lightboxes on the walls, the four quilts of Wong's, Dulac's, Reiniger's, and Guy-Blaché's films are intended to hang in a circle throughout the gallery. The 'Cinema Sanctuary', as Gschwandtner calls it, is imagined as a safe space for women in film, designed to honor the creativity



Fig. 6
Sabrina Gschwandtner,
*Serpentine Dance
Square 1* (2021).
Gelatin silver print with
watercolor and photo
dye. 16 15/16 x 15 7/8
in. Courtesy of the Artist
and Shoshana Wayne
Gallery, Los Angeles.

and legacy of women filmmakers, both historical and contemporary, in the face of blatant abuse and misogyny in the film industry. The Cinema Sanctuary was designed in collaboration with architects Catherine Clark and Tughela Gino, and features mobile and modular seating, which makes it possible to reconfigure the space to allow for different types of programming to happen in the sanctuary — including screenings of films by the women whose work appears in the quilts as well as that of contemporary women filmmakers. The design of the Cinema Sanctuary is not only based on a quilt pattern but also references a quilting circle, in a way harkening back to Gschwandtner's 2007 participatory installation *Wartime Knitting Circle*, in which museumgoers were provided with a table and knitting tools and invited to work on their own or collective wartime projects. In the same ethos of participation and interaction as her earlier installation, perhaps it would not be farfetched to suggest that the Cinema Sanctuary also serve as a filmmaking circle, replete with 16mm scraps, thread, and splicing tape?

CONCLUSION

In 2017, Gschwandtner translated the quilting strategies she deployed in the film quilts into video form. *Hands at Work Video* (2017), a three-minute loop

made up of 35 small triangular shapes, is a collage of clips of close-ups of hands threading needles, sewing, weaving, and crocheting, juxtaposed with 16mm film leader and the credits from Pat Ferrero's films. Another video quilt, *Screen Credit* (2020), featuring some of the same footage and more, was commissioned by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and exhibited throughout 2020 and into 2021. Most recently, *Three Overlooked Women Filmmakers* (2022), three short videos displayed on an advertising billboard on Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles from October 2022 to January 2023, further revises and reimagines Gschwandtner's video quilt concept, this time featuring footage from Wong's, Guy-Blaché's, and Reiniger's films. It is perhaps these videos that make the politics of Gschwandtner's work most explicit, as *Screen Credit* features clips and credits from Ferrero's films, including the entire three-minute credit roll from *Hearts and Hands*, alongside credits and clips from Lotte Reiniger's *Cinderella* (1922). In Gschwandtner's words: 'Too many women artisans have gone uncredited. Too many women working in film have gone uncredited'.³³ In these videos, for once, women's work is finally recorded, recognized, and credited on screen.

Gschwandtner, through her film quilts, installations, and videos, traces the lost and ruptured lineages of women filmmakers and women crafters and, through her patchwork, recuperates and reconnects their work to film and art history. Rectifying the historical blackout that has rendered women's contributions to filmmaking in its first few decades invisible is crucial as contemporary women filmmakers look for historical influences and role models. Through her inventive, appropriative, and appreciative arts practice, and as a curator and community activist, Gschwandtner participates actively in the feminist film history movement, not only paying tribute to women filmmakers through her artwork, but also raising pressing questions about both the materiality and politics of film preservation and historiography. Ultimately, Gschwandtner honors the unrecognized material labor women performed and the marginal role they were attributed in history, and her film quilts stake a claim for women as cultural producers by finally providing credit where credit is due.

As digital cinema technology continues to render photochemical film obsolete, Gschwandtner's work also raises compelling questions about the afterlife of the cinematic medium — points to which I have only cursorily alluded due to space constraints, but which are worth pursuing further. What are educational institutions and libraries to do with their film collections that are no longer in use after having been displaced by newer technologies, from VHS tapes and DVDs to online streaming services? Is offering these collections and materials up for creative destruction and artistic appropriation better than sending them to landfills? What responsibility, if any, do found footage filmmakers have toward ensuring that they don't destroy the only extant copy of a film? And what other possibilities besides film projection could allow audiences to experience these films anew? Gschwandtner's film quilts are only one example to suggest that, rather than digital technology marking the death of cinema, it has just liberated the film strip to be used and encountered in endless new ways.

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Notes

¹ See the gallery's press release: 'Sabrina Gschwandtner – *Hands at Work* – Shoshana Wayne Gallery', <<http://shoshanawayne.com/sabrina-gschwandtner-hands-at-work>> [accessed 10 October 2022].

² Maggie Hennefeld, 'Film History', *Feminist Media Histories*, 4.2 (2018), 77–83 (77).

³ Jane Gaines, *Pink-Slipped: What Happened to Women in the Silent Film Industries?* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018); Erin Hill, *Never Done: A History of Women's Work in Media Production* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016). See also *Women Film Pioneers Project*, ed. by Jane Gaines, Radha Vatsal, and Monica Dall'Asta (New York: Columbia University Libraries), <<https://wfpp.columbia.edu/>>, and *Edited By*, ed. by Su Friedrich (Princeton: Princeton University), <<https://womenfilmeditors.princeton.edu/>>.

⁴ Joshua Yumibe, *Moving Color: Early Film, Mass Culture, Modernism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012); Gregory Zinman, 'Handmade: The Moving Image in the Artisanal Mode' (PhD diss., New York University, 2012); *Fantasia of Color in Early Cinema*, ed. by Tom Gunning and others (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015).

⁵ See Joshua Yumibe, 'French Film Colorists' and Kristen Hatch, 'Cutting Women: Margaret Booth and Hollywood's Pioneering Female Film Editors', in *Women Film Pioneers Project*, <<https://wfpp.columbia.edu/essay/french-film-colorists/>> and <<https://wfpp.columbia.edu/essay/cutting-women/>> [accessed 30 October 2021].

⁶ See Wanda Strauven, 'Sewing Machines and Weaving Looms: A Media Archaeological Encounter between Fashion and Film', *Journal of Visual Culture*, 19.3 (2020), 362–77.

⁷ Unless otherwise noted, Gschwandtner's quotes are from an interview with the author, conducted on 25 September 2019 in her Los Angeles studio. The author is grateful for Gschwandtner's hospitality and generosity.

⁸ *KnitKnit: Profiles and Projects from Knitting's New Wave*, ed. by Sabrina Gschwandtner (New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 2007); information about the zines, including tables of contents and lists of contributors, is archived at <http://www.knitknit.net/>.

⁹ Gregory Zinman, *Making Images Movie: Handcrafted Cinema and the Other Arts* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020), 139.

¹⁰ As Wanda Strauven aptly remarks, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Singer Corporation — the same brand of sewing machine Nicolson used in her performance — also manufactured film projectors. See Strauven, 368.

¹¹ Kayla Parker, 'Jamming the Machine: The Personal-Political in Annabel Nicolson's *Reel Time*', in *The Arts and Popular Culture in History: Proceedings of the Role of the Arts in History Cross-Disciplinary Conference*, ed. by Rebecca J. Emmett (Plymouth: University of Plymouth Press, 2013), 217–33.

¹² See Mary Stark, 'Film as Fabric: Connecting Textile Practice and Experimental Filmmaking through Expanded Cinema Performance' (PhD diss., Manchester Metropolitan University, 2020).

¹³ While the films in Gschwandtner's collection were primarily from the 1950s through the 1980s, Marketa Uhlirova and others have shown that fashion films have been made since the inception of early cinema. See, for example, Marketa Uhlirova, '100 Years of the Fashion Film: Frameworks and Histories', *Fashion Theory*, 17.2 (2013), 137–58.

¹⁴ Julia Bryan-Wilson, 'Tactility and Transparency: An Interview with Sabrina Gschwandtner', in *Sunshine and Shadow: Film Quilts by Sabrina Gschwandtner*, ed. Priya Bhatnagar (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Art Alliance, 2013), 39–45 (42–43).

¹⁵ Joan Mulholland, 'Patchwork: The Evolution of a Women's Genre', *Journal of American Culture*, 19.4 (1996), 57–69.

¹⁶ Leah Ollman, 'Her quilts are made of 16-mm film. Here's what they reveal, frame by frame', *Los Angeles Times*, 30 June 2017, <<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-ca-cm-sabrina-gschwandtner-review-20170630-htmstory.html>> [accessed 30 October 2021].

¹⁷ Mulholland, 64.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, 62.

¹⁹ Four of Ferrero's films are currently available through New Day Films as of 10 October 2022. See <https://www.newday.com/filmmaker/162>.

²⁰ Julia Bryan-Wilson, 43.

²¹ Gschwandtner recounts that she had intended to work with a Lois Weber film but was unable to get access to the requested footage.

²² Jenny Kwok Wah Lau, 'Marion E. Wong', in *Women Film Pioneers Project*, <<https://wfpp.columbia.edu/pioneer/ccp-marion-e-wong/>> [accessed 30 October 2021]; Cy Musiker, 'Made in Oakland in 1916, First Asian American Film Still Inspires', KQED, 7 August 2015, <<https://www.kqed.org/arts/10881796/made-in-oakland-in-1916-first-asian-american-film-still-inspires>> [accessed 30 October 2021].

²³ The syndicated news piece 'Chinese Girl is Author of Real Oriental Movie' appeared in *Bay City Times* (Michigan) on 29 May 1917, *The Day Book* (Chicago) on 31 May 1917, *The New York Call* on 6 June 1917, and *Tacoma Times* (Washington) on 6 July 1917, among others. See Alex Jay, 'Marion Wong, 1917', *Chinese American Eyes* (blog), 31 July 2015, <<http://chimericaneyes.blogspot.com/2015/07/marion-wong-1917.html>> [accessed 30 October 2021].

²⁴ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 'Alice Guy-Blaché', *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 27 June 2021, <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Alice-Guy-Blache>> [accessed 30 October 2021].

²⁵ Tami Williams, *Germaine Dulac: A Cinema of Sensations* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014).

²⁶ Frances Guerin and Anke Mebold, 'Lotte Reiniger', in *Women Film Pioneers Project*, <<https://wfpp.columbia.edu/pioneer/lotte-reiniger/>> [accessed 10 October 2022].

²⁷ Cy Musiker, 'Made in Oakland.'

²⁸ As Sarah Laskow explains, the China Girls 'were meant to show the person developing a film that everything had gone right technically; if it hadn't, the China girl's skin tone would look unnatural'. See Sarah Laskow, 'The Forgotten "China Girls" Hidden at the Beginning of Old Films', *Atlas Obscura*, 30 January 2017 <<https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/the-forgotten-china-girls-hidden-at-the-beginning-of-old-films>> [accessed 10 October 2022].

²⁹ Williams, *Germaine Dulac*.

³⁰ Zinman, 'Handmade', 54.

³¹ Ibidem, 55.

³² Joshua Yumibe, 'French Film Colorists.' These same gendered labor divisions, rather than shifting when natural photochemical coloring techniques developed, were maintained twenty years later, in the emerging cel animation studios, like Disney, where women were relegated to the Painting and Inking Department. As Elizabeth Bell explains, '[t]he hands of women, painting and transcribing the creative efforts of men, performed the tedious, repetitive, labor-intensive housework of the Disney enterprise.' See Elizabeth Bell, 'Somatexts at the Disney Shop: Constructing the Pentimentos of Women's Animated Bodies', in *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture*, ed. by Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas and Laura Sells (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 107–24 (107).

³³ Bobbye Tigerman, 'Screen Credit: Artist Sabrina Gschwandtner on Filmmaking, Quilting, and the Forgotten Labor of Women', *LACMA Unframed*, 8 March 2022, <<https://unframed.lacma.org/2022/03/08/screen-credit-artist-sabrina-gschwandtner-filmmaking-quilting-and-forgotten-labor-women>> [accessed 10 October 2022].