

Stitch in time

Maggy Rozycki Hiltner reconstitutes the symbols of American quilting

by Erika Fredrickson

The story behind Maggy Rozycki Hiltner's "Requiem" begins with a quilt that was locked away for almost 100 years. At the time it was made, the quilt's swastika pattern had an entirely auspicious meaning. Based on a symbol that's as old as early cave paintings and indigenous architecture, the American frontier-era "catch me if you can" design signified friendship or fertility in marriage. But after 1920, when the hooked cross was co-opted by Adolf Hitler as a symbol of Aryan identity and German nationalist pride, quilt owners everywhere retold the design, folded up the evidence and tucked them away for good.

"The swastika has been around for thousands of years across all cultures," Hiltner says. "But nobody wants to put that on their bed anymore."

"Requiem" is one of 13 pieces in Hiltner's new exhibit, *What Lies Beneath*, which opens Friday, May 26, at the Missoula Art Museum. It's both an enactment of the swastika's death and a tribute to its former self. Hiltner got the quilt from a friend whose grandmother had made it pre-1920. Its subsequent exile left the quilt in pristine condition. Hiltner cut out the swastikas and re-sewed them into a pile at the bottom of the quilt—making them look something like a funeral pyre—and filled the space above it with a plume of flowers and birds.

"It's totally understandable why nobody wants these," Hiltner says, "but such a shame, too, because the beautiful meaning it used to have is lost. I don't think we're ever going to be able to reclaim the swastika as a peaceful symbol, so I wanted to make a memorial to it."

For the past 25 years, the Red Lodge artist has scoured thrift stores for found quilts, the unfinished or "damaged, Velvetine Rabbit kind," she says.

"I'm taking it and changing the content and, by putting them in a museum, the context," she says. "I'm looking at the traditional American patterns and working with the semantics of those and given them different meanings."

Maggy Hiltner's What Lies Beneath opens at MAM Fri., May 26, and runs through Sept. 16.

"Requiem" is made from a found cotton quilt and found and hand-stitched embroidery featuring the "catch me if you can" or "whirling log" symbol.

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-[arts]

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American quilting

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The story behind Maggy Boxycki Hiltner's "Requiem" begins with a quilt and subtext through the medium of textiles, that was locked away for almost 100 years. At the time it was made, the quilt's ing and embroidery have a swastika pattern had an entirely auspicious in American culture, an association with meaning. Based on a symbol that's as old as grandmothers and tradition and saccharine, carly cave paintings and indigenous archibanal quotes hung on kitchen walks Hill tecture, the American frontieren catch me ner's work, by contrast, is filled with skele. if you can design signified friendship or fer toes and eyes and snakes-imagery that tility in marriage. But after 1920, when the often seems sinister, but is also used to in hooked cross was co opted by Adolf Hitler dicate transformation. One piece, an instal as a symbol of Aryan identity and German lation in the museum's front lobby, uses nationalist pride, quilt owners everywhere mythological Greek imagery that's assoc retired the design, folded up the evidence ated with surveillance, observation and gos. and tucked them away for good. sip based on Argus Panoptes, Hera's "The swastka has been around for thou. many cyd guard. The pieces aren't in your sands of years across all cultures, Hiltner face political statements, but they do upend says. "But nobody wants to put that on their centuries old patterns in ways that even a bed anymore

quilting novice can see. "Requiem" is one of 13 pieces in Hiltner's interest in embroidery and ner's new exhibit, Whar Lies Beneath, quilts isn't just about disrupting the tradi. which opens Friday, May 26, at the Mis tions of the craft, though. She loves the his. soula Art Museum. It's both an enactment tory behind the patterns and the medium, of the swastika's death and a tribute to its the way the stitches provide a window into former self. Hiltner got the quilt from a the hard work that goes into making these friend whose grandmother had made it objects pre-1920. Its subsequent evile left the quilt When someone sees something stitched, in pristine condition. Hiltner cut out the they can imagine someone doing that, and swastikas and re-sewed them into a pile at the time it takes to do it," she says "It's all laid the bottom of the quilt making them look something like a funeral pyre-and filled The layers of stitching she adds to the al the space above it with a plume of flowers ready stitched work gives it an obsessive feel. and birds

It's an exercise in rebuilding and renegotiat "It's totally understandable why nobody ing the post in ways that seem a little uncom wants these, Hiltner says, "but such a fortale. For Hiltner, such discomórt is a fair

shame, too, because the beautiful meaning price for the conversations that result. it used to have is lost. I don't think we're "Swastikas were definitely part of Amer ever going to be able to reclaim the swastiksican qalt history," she says. "Now what do 25 a peaceful symbol, so I wanted to make

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them? Or put them out there and have a con For the past 25 years, the Red Lodge versatlon think that's more honest, be artist has scoured thrift stores for found cause at one point it had a peaceful quilts, the unfinished or damaged, Valveteen meaning, and I want to ask the question: Rabbit kind' she says

What can we do about itBecause I hate "I'm taking it and changing the content when the bad guys win ! and, by putting them in 2 museum, the con Maggy Hiltner's War Lies Beneath text," she says. "Im looking at the traditional opens at MAM Fri., May 26, and runs American patterns and working with these through Sept. 16. mantics of those and given them different meanings.

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