



Who's Who In Crochet

A focus of interest on those that have inspired crochet

Jerry Bleem

Jerry Bleem, an artist, teacher, writer, Franciscan Friar and Catholic priest, earned his MFA at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAI) and his MDiv from the Catholic Theological Union at Chicago. During 2019, he served as the Director of a program for recently professed friars, of which there are 19. He has taught in the Department of Fiber and Material Studies at the SAI since 2000. His interests span historic and ethnographic textiles, the dynamics of collecting, and material culture expressive of popular religious practices. Bleem investigates the intersection of art and religion in a monthly column for U. S. Catholic magazine.



“Actively crocheting, Jerry was immersed in making a large piece called *Oil Waves* in 2019. ‘Materials engage me. I work out of the context of our Franciscan fraternity. My life as an artist evolved out of my community life, ministries, and talents. I am a Friar first; my work as an artist originates from the same place as my faith. My art addresses spiritual rather than overtly religious themes.’

Between 1984 and 1993, Jerry worked as a liturgical consultant as a designer of worship spaces. ‘I had studied the visual components of liturgy, but I hadn’t figured out the artistry in me’, explains Jerry. ‘During graduate studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, I learned how much I didn’t know!’

He describes the commonalities between his previous and the new direction his work began to take in 2006. ‘The direction I have gone with my crochet work happened gradually; I was also exploring other incremental ways of building through collage and then drawing.



Who's Who In Crochet

A focus of interest on those that have inspired crochet

'I'm enamored by the fact that the crochet in our lives is most often done by an individual rather than by a machine,' Jerry chuckles. 'It is versatile and intuitive and doesn't require a lot of study to learn the technique. The implication is that it is a stereotypical feminine activity, which separates it from the public (masculine) realm. Crochet offers a field of sensation into which people are drawn.'

When he initially worked in crochet, Jerry used ecclesiastical textiles that had been cut into strips; and then he turned to national flags. 'I feel that these tattered, faded icons are charged objects,' he expresses. 'I have always been interested in the power of materials to carry information. Ordinary materials and our detritus engage me. When the viewers' recognition of the material occurs, I hope they also see a manifestation of time.'

The involvement of our nation in Iraq was the catalyst that urged Jerry to begin crocheting flags. He noticed the dichotomy between the public reports of our national policies, and the private reports about losses and maiming of our nation's young people. He comments, 'The product of my slicing and crocheting was created as I thought about the intersection of these two realities.'



After cutting the nation's banner into thin strips, I rely upon crochet to reconfigure the familiar surface into a less familiar, abstracted one. The flags themselves are faded and worn. No longer crisp icons, these tattered banners have been displayed in the classic gesture of patriotism. No longer generalized symbols, they bear the history of a time and place. Ironically, being used to signify national allegiance depreciated the fabric.

The basic structure of the technique of crochet is the loop. Loops locate or hold time for me. They show the time I have given the work and the time I have spent thinking. I am interested in what we dispose of because it is revelatory about ourselves more so than what we keep.'

Jerry Bleem: Incremental Meditations, was displayed at the Chicago Cultural Center. Lanny Silverman, curator, described Jerry's art as 'about process, both of discovery and in construction. He demonstrates how much we create the meaning of the world around



Who's Who In Crochet

A focus of interest on those that have inspired crochet

us and subsequently he lets us in on his vision, an empowering one that enlarges our view of the humble objects around us.

In his work, *Remind me again why we're depleting the earth's resources and burying them in landfills*, Jerry used plastic bags of many colors. Plastic bags are everywhere, like the flag. 'Because they're so widespread, we don't see them anymore,' he says. This large afghan-like work turned out to be the first of a series of pieces which he calls *Oil Products* made of post-consumer plastic bags.



Like the *Nationalism* series, the *Oil Products* works are made of familiar material that the artist has reconfigured to make less recognizable without eliminating its identity. Because amassing the material is an important part of his process, his work begins when he finds a direction and begins enlisting assistance to gather the quantity of everyday items needed. He explains, 'In asking people to save their trash for me, I'm asking them to change the disposal patterns they have developed, to become more conscious of simple daily acts.'

In writing about a 2012 exhibition of Jerry's plastic work entitled *In Lieu of Other Forms of Aggression* for the Packer Schopf Gallery, Anna Hill comments 'Bright flowers, colorful placemats, and intricate wall pieces appear humorously impressive. However, upon closer examination, the vibrant forms take on a garish, aggressive quality, as the



Who's Who In Crochet

A focus of interest on those that have inspired crochet

materials of their creation—post-consumer plastic bags—reveal a darker underlying significance. By creating flowers, he addresses the ecological concerns associated with the material; that is, he has fashioned nature from the very object that threatens it.



Bleem approaches the domestic sphere the same as the environmental. By fashioning everyday items, he shows the depth to which these harmful objects have permeated daily life. Plastic—oil—is literally woven into the fabric of the home; and Bleem aggressively urges viewers to take notice of the products of their own lives.”

Images:

1-2019: *Oil Waves*, detail: crochet

2-*Unruly & Unplanned; Filet Crochet* 2012

3-*Oil Flowers*, installation

4-*Camouflaged Nationalism – Select Your Allegiance Carefully*

Resources:

[Artprize.org.jerrybleem](http://artprize.org/jerrybleem)

Blakley Kinsler, Gwen. *The Fine Art of Crochet*. Bloomington, Indiana: Author House, 2013.