

A CONVERSATION WITH JOANNE HOWARD

When did you first start noticing and looking closely at tread marks?

I became interested in them about twenty years ago and since then, on and off, it's been a recurring motif in my work. Initially, I was attracted to the endless number of blown out tires along the sides of highways; they reminded me of discarded animal casings or remains. The first piece I made was composed of actual sections of old tire fragments. Later on, my focus gravitated away from tires and toward the tread patterns they leave behind.

When did you think of bringing treads and threads together?

For my first tread piece, I took a large, oval piece of industrial felt and hand-stitched a simple, circular tread mark onto it, suggesting the pattern of a braided rug. The piece was called *Donuts*, which refers to the spinning out in circles that I associate with teenage boys acting out in their cars, using skid marks as a way to leave graffiti marks on pavement. Drawings can be made with tires, and I was very attracted to that idea and wanted to capture it through another medium: stitching. I made that piece in 2005 and didn't revisit the idea again for probably 10 years.

Around that time, I noticed an old dish towel with a folksy pattern of a homespun embroidery American "Sampler" printed on it. I'd always dismissed this craft as devoid of any individuality or creativity, but I realized there's actually much to appreciate in these seemingly rigid and

predetermined compositions. Samplers were made by Colonial girls and signified not only their educational accomplishments and social standing, but, disturbingly, also their “worth” in their culture.

I saw the image on the dish towel as an invitation to respond with a mark of my own. I wanted to invade or intrude upon it with a new aggressive mark, so I put a tire tread across it. It sat in my studio for probably two years before I began making this series. I was also interested in using needle and thread—which is a slow and methodical process—to capture tire skid marks, which have a reckless connotation. This combines a sense of intense speed with something that’s very orderly. Sewing requires a certain amount of precision; it’s a very meditative activity.

How did the idea of the fringes come about?

The extra hanging threads are the residue of the sewing, just as the skid mark is the residue of the tire. Leaving the threads loose is a way to let the mark continue; it’s locked into the fabric and then the remainder can just fall away. The loose ends are the beginning and the end, and also become the evidence of the process. The sewn parts of the tire tread are very taut and orderly whereas the ends get tangled, resulting in the thread taking on an entirely different personality. They are many different lengths, so the order and care that’s in the sewn fabric comes to a halt. It’s antithetical to precision.

You've said that "like footprints and animal tracks, tire treads tell stories of movements through space." But don't they also tell stories of movements through time? Because the tread mark is a sign that someone or something has been there before you.

That's true, tread marks are inherently ephemeral. Tread marks in snow and ice melt in time and eventually disappear. Likewise, if you're walking on a beach and you see footprints, you realize that they will soon be erased by the wind or tide. Treadmarks can at times also have a foreboding quality because they are evidence of something that has already happened—perhaps something terrifying. Though the stitched marks I'm making are isolated from a larger time and place, they're imbued with a sense of potential danger.

When you said that tread marks in snow melt over time, I was reminded of an observation made by the writer and Sinologist Simon Leys about the aesthetic principles of Chinese art. Leys states that there is something more important than a finished work of art, and that is the spiritual process that preceded it and guided its execution. And Leys remarks: "The finished work is to the spiritual experience of the artist as the graph recorded by the seismograph is to an earthquake. What matters is the experience; the work itself is a mere accidental consequence, a secondary result, a visible leftover—it is nothing but 'the imprint left perchance in the snow by a wild swan.'"

That's so beautiful, and I absolutely believe that. There's rhythm, precision, and care in the making, and the evidence of the process is the piece I end up with. Like I said before, the process is meticulous, but, paradoxically, describes something that's about speed. I'm drawn to the

relationship between the muscular quality of a tire and the slow refinement of needlework, and how those two elements come together.

Picasso famously said “I don’t seek, I find.” And he explained that “seeking” starts from existing circumstances and wants to find the known, whereas “finding” is entirely new because all ways are open and what is found is unknown, and that by being in a state of uncertainty and not knowing, “one is pulled by the destination rather than determining it.” It doesn’t seem as if you yourself were seeking tread marks but in fact you found them.

Yes, the tread marks just popped into my field of vision and I realized that aside from being drawn to the associations they evoke, I was also attracted to them visually: as oversized, out-of-context, line drawings. There are a myriad of patterns and textures on tire treads, from bicycle tires to tractor tires and everything in between, from intricate patterns to very simple and blocky ones.

I’m interested in taking these patterns out of their original contexts, redefining them with needle and thread, and hanging them on a flat wall. This highlights their beautiful geometric patterns of symmetry and repetition, sometimes reminiscent of tree bark, ancient textiles, and animal skins. The patterns are so much more involved and detailed than is necessary for their function! It’s a hand-stitched process of examination and transformation—all the way from rubber to linen and thread.