Project name: Lady Rugs

Category: Installation

Artist(s): Kit Kirby

Abstract

“There are only two types of women - goddesses and doormats.” -Pablo Picasso

The above Picasso quote is yet another poignant example of how women are valued and positioned within culture - as objects of worship or objects to stand on. This reduction of women is especially strong when they are pioneers in male-dominated fields. However, the metaphor presented by this Picasso quote creates an opportunity to visualize and call attention to the process through which great women are devalued and ignored. Lady Rugs draws attention to how women who were successful in male-dominated fields (the military, politics, video games and art) are gendered and diminished. Each rug is created as a portrait of a female pioneer and when viewers step onto the rugs, they are greeted with commentary from the public sphere that captures how these women are gendered and their accomplishments questioned.

The four women selected are Harriet Tubman the Civil War spy master, Hillary Clinton the politician, Roberta Williams the video game developer, and Gertrude Stein the art collector and Picasso supporter.

Alongside these pioneering women, soft circuits (electrical circuits created with conductive fabrics and threads) is a new field with the potential to empower women and craft. The rugs are created, stitched and painted by hand and fitted with pressure sensors made from conductive fabrics. The combination of technology and traditional female craftwork is a powerful one, especially for challenging gender expectations and technology’s role in maintaining gender divisions.

Background

The Lady Rugs series came together in the beginning of 2017 as a way of integrating historical critique and the contemporary state of gender discrimination. My practice had always been playful integrations of fine art, craft and electronics, but this work was the first to incorporate politics and history beyond recent events. This has proven to be an important transition in my practice and it is always a pleasure to create soft circuit artwork that questions how and where technology can be employed and who gets to use it.

Detailed Description

Pablo Picasso famously remarked that there were two kinds of women, goddesses and door mats. Considering art historical and societal emphasis on the female form over women themselves, this quote feels in-keeping with current misogyny and jarring at the same time. However, this quote serves as an able metaphor for a recurrent theme - female pioneers are often ignored, forgotten or demonized to ob-
secure their accomplishments and deter further women from following in their footsteps. Yet, the contributions of women move humanity, not just other women, forward - even in male dominated fields.

*Lady Rugs* began as a way of exposing the false value of Picasso’s statement and as a visual reminder that we stand on the accomplishments of great women as surely as men and if the rug is jerked out from under our feet, we will fall flat on our face. The rugs were created with various fabrics, binding techniques and paint, and then fitted with homemade fabric pressure sensors. With the commercial availability of conductive fabrics and soft circuit how-to’s it is now possible for sewing and embroidery, typical female craftwork, to merge with circuit building and robotics, a typically male and science-dominated sphere. It is quintessential to my practice that technology and female craftwork, art theory and gender theory combine in unusual and irreverent ways to draw attention to their divisions. The lady rug series began by selecting historically male-dominated fields: the military, government, video games and of course, fine art.

Harriet Tubman was the first woman and person of color in to lead a military sanctioned mission, freeing slaves and was the head of a spy-network during the Civil War. Yet her military contributions are not widely recognized - her importance is swept into historical vaguery, she was a conductor in the Underground Railroad like countless, mostly nameless others. Hillary Clinton was the first major-party female candidate for president (other women ran before, though that is an interesting and not-well-known corner of history for later exploration). The presidential election of 2016 was a stunning display of misogyny, false equality and gendered analysis - women throughout the world are still addressing and fighting the issues raised three years ago.

The world of video games is similarly a male-dominated field or so many think, but female game creators and female video gamers have been around since the advent of the media. In fact, Roberta Williams was an early game developer who wrote the incredibly popular King’s Quest game series. She also pushed for female protagonists, featuring them in the King’s Quest series and even making a mother-daughter team the protagonists of one installment. However, she is often ignored, forgotten or reduced in histories of video game development. Finally, there are many groundbreaking female artists, but to address the man who’s quote began this series there was only one who would do. Gertrude Stein. While not a visual artist herself (she was a poet of some renown), she was an influential art collector and an incredible important, early adopter of Picasso’s genius. Without Gertrude Stein’s financial and spiritual support, Pablo Picasso’s career and lofty perch in the art world may very well have been different.
The audience for this piece should encounter the art on the floor, like most of the rugs they’ve encountered in their lives, but stepping onto the mats and the faces of these important women triggers the rugs to talk. Each rug has a collection of quotes from experts, commentators and educators that demonstrates how these women or categories are spoken of in gendered terms or how their accomplishments are devalued. This is meant to connect how important, pioneering women form the foundations of our society and society ensures that they are derided and devalued at every turn.

Bio

Kit Kirby is a Los Angeles-based multidisciplinary artist. Her work takes a variety of forms, relishing unusual and humorous combinations of fine art, craft and technology. However, her subject is always gender, power and narrative. She holds a BFA in Graphic Design from Boston University, a Post-Baccalaureate in Fine Art from the Maryland Institute College of Art and is a current MFA candidate at UCLA in Design Media Arts.