

Art

The Many Sides of Harriet Bart, From 1970s to Today

From dental hygienist to professional artist, Bart knew all along that she couldn't "just stay put."



by Sheila Regan
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Harriet Bart, "Re-Marks (Memorial)" (1988), acrylic and stitching on canvas (collection of the artist, photo by Rik Sferra, image courtesy Weisman Art Museum)

MINNEAPOLIS — The trajectory of Harriet Bart's artistic career is one of twists, turns, discoveries, and transformations. She has worked in textiles, painting, sculpture, book arts, and installation, at times dramatically switching up the materials and techniques of her practice. At the same time, certain through-lines have remained constant: precise attention to detail, intricate textures, a love of the written word, and a sense of justice. She is having her first museum retrospective [at the Weisman Art Museum](#).

Born in Duluth, Minnesota, in 1941, Bart initially followed a conventional path, beginning with her marriage at the age of 19. “I married very young and I had three children,” she said in an interview with Hyperallergic. “So that was that, for a while. I realized early on that was not going to be really good for me, to just stay put.”

Before she became a professional artist, she worked for around a decade as a dental hygienist, yet on the side she took community art and weaving classes. She didn’t know many other women artists, and had few women artists as role models. But in the 1970s, she became involved with the feminist movement, something that would thematically inform work throughout her career, even as she took on other themes, such as war, labor, the environment, and politics.



Installation view, *Harriet Bart: Abracadabra and Other Forms of Protection*, Weisman Art Museum, Minneapolis, spring and summer 2020 (photo by Rik Sferra, courtesy of Weisman Art Museum)



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Bart's involvement with communal practices in relation to women's liberation also set the groundwork for a career-long interest in collaboration, including a 20-year artistic relationship with German artist Helmut Löhr and, since 2010, collaborations with Boston-based artist Yu-Wen Wu.

“Beginning in the early '70s, we would sit around in consciousness-raising circles, and we would use [the circles] endlessly and try to wait for consensus,” she remembered. “It's really hard to do that, but it's really meaningful, and I've had very strong, significant collaborators over time.”

In 1974, Bart went back to school through a self-directed study program in fiber arts at the University of Minnesota, and by 1976 she had joined a feminist art collective called the Women's Art Registry of Minnesota (WARM). Bart's first exhibition included intricately woven black tapestries and large sculptural fiber pieces that layered sociopolitical messages into their rich textures.



Harriet Bart, "Requiem (Inscribing the Names: American Soldiers Killed in Iraq)" (2003–11), ink on paper, plumb bobs, cord, rocks (collection of the artist; photo by Rik Sferra, courtesy of Weisman Art Museum)

Later, Bart carried certain aspects of fiber arts into other mediums. For instance, the large, blood-red painting "Remarks (Memorial)" (1986) incorporates stitches made with a needle and thread through the canvas in horizontal lines that recall Maya Lin's Vietnam Memorial.

"I don't think like a painter thinks," Bart mused. "I really hesitate to call them paintings." "Convergence" (1981) exemplifies this statement: The monochromatic brick red piece features labial diagonal slits, evoking both sculpture and textiles.

Bart took a break from painting in the mid 1980s. She was working on a piece about writing and realized she could use words to make a three-dimensional language. "It was actually an epiphany, which is the only one I've ever had," she explained. "It was a moment of realizing that everything that I was interested in saying was contained somewhere in a book." She took books that she had either received or collected and painted them, transforming them into bricks that she stacked into a spiraled wall for the work "Forms of Recollection: Storied" (1989/2017).



Harriet Bart, "Abracadabra Universe" (2007), vinyl text on board, wood, gold leaf, chemistry flask, Bunsen burner, altered book (collection of the artist; photo by Rik Sferra, courtesy of Weisman Art Museum)



Harriet Bart at WARM Gallery, 1976, with the textile piece "Ascension" (included in her first show at WARM) (photo by Victor Bloomfield)

Whether she's working on large-scale pieces like her immense *Requiem* series, remembering the lives of fallen American soldiers or of garment workers killed in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of 1911, or creating her smaller, intricate art books and sculptures, there is an exquisite refinement to Bart's work, a powerful presence from which its spirit resonates.

Harriet Bart: Abracadabra and Other Forms of Protection is scheduled to continue at the Weisman Art Museum (333 East River Parkway, Minneapolis, Minnesota) through May 24.

Editor's note: Please note that physical viewing hours for this exhibition have temporarily ended in light of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. An online exhibition is planned.

Cognizant of the importance of discussions around art and culture during this time, we encourage readers to explore the exhibition virtually as many of us continue to self-isolate.

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