Angela Ellsworth: Pinning Down the Past

ANGELA ELLSWORTH uses a variety of media, in a bewildering assortment of contexts, to tackle a theme she has long been fascinated with—the female body and spirit. Paintings, drawings, embroidered images on paper napkins, collaborative performance, and sculptural fiber installations are just a few of the forms she has harnessed to deal with issues of women’s bondage, concepts of beauty, religious and cultural constraints, and contemporary societal rituals.

Most recently, Ellsworth, who is an assistant professor of Intermedia at Arizona State University’s Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts in Tempe, Arizona, has focused her work on women in the context of traditional Mormonism, her family’s religious heritage. The artist is the great-great-granddaughter of Lorenzo Snow, Mormon prophet, fifth president of the Utah-based Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS), and husband to at least nine documented wives. Snow was convicted and imprisoned for multiple counts of unlawful cohabitation in 1885, which the United States Supreme Court later ruled was “a continuing offense,” a phrase pointedly referred to in Ellsworth’s latest sculptural installation, Seer Bonnets: A Continuing Offense, created for the 17th Biennale of Sydney in Australia (May 12–August 1, 2010).

Though not a practicing Mormon, Ellsworth has always been intrigued by the mystical components of the religion. An acknowledged lesbian in a committed relationship, she is equally fascinated by the original Mormon family structure of polygamy, which is still carried on today by the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (FLDS), a breakaway Mormon sect.
The homemade sunbonnets worn by nineteenth-century Mormon women pioneers were the inspiration for *Seer Bonnets: A Continuing Offense*. The installation features several handmade fabric bonnets with exaggerated chin ties encrusted with thousands of pearl-headed corsage pins. Their sharp ends line the inside of each bonnet, embellished with monochromatic patterns. These patterns reference occult Masonic symbols adopted early on by the Mormon Church and visionary powers conferred by mystical “seer stones” on early Mormon prophets (LDS founder Joseph Smith Jr. was said to have used seer stones to translate golden plates into the Book of Mormon).

Obviously unwearable, Ellsworth’s bonnets are a potent visual metaphor describing the lives of “sister wives” ensnared in the polygamous Mormon lifestyle. On the outside, they exude a pearly, idyllic glow; on the inside, they resemble iron-maiden-like torture devices, emotionally and psychologically constricting, impaling and imprisoning their complicit wearers. Ellsworth likens recent polygamy prosecutions of FLDS members to the continuing stigmatization of same-sex marriage, which is also prohibited by law in the United States.

As part of the Sydney Biennale installation, Ellsworth mounted the performance *Meanwhile, back at the ranch* (2010). Volunteer “sister-wives,” dressed in iconic FLDS granny gowns, long braids, and athletic shoes, filtered solemnly into the museum, then broke into the “Electric Slide,” a popular communal line dance from the 1980s that is still performed at a wide variety of family celebrations in America. In between dancing, performers silently touched museum architecture, themselves and each other in an unchoreographed attempt to communicate nonverbally. Ellsworth’s performance underscores the highly fluid meaning assigned to community and communication, which can embrace the marginalized, as well as the mainstream.

Timely and unflinchingly direct, Ellsworth’s intriguing work deals head-on with the general fear of alternatives to the traditional family structure, but also with the commonality of groups on either side of restrictive social barriers.


**ABOVE:** *Seer Bonnets: A Continuing Offense* (detail), 2010. Photo: Kathleen Vanesian.