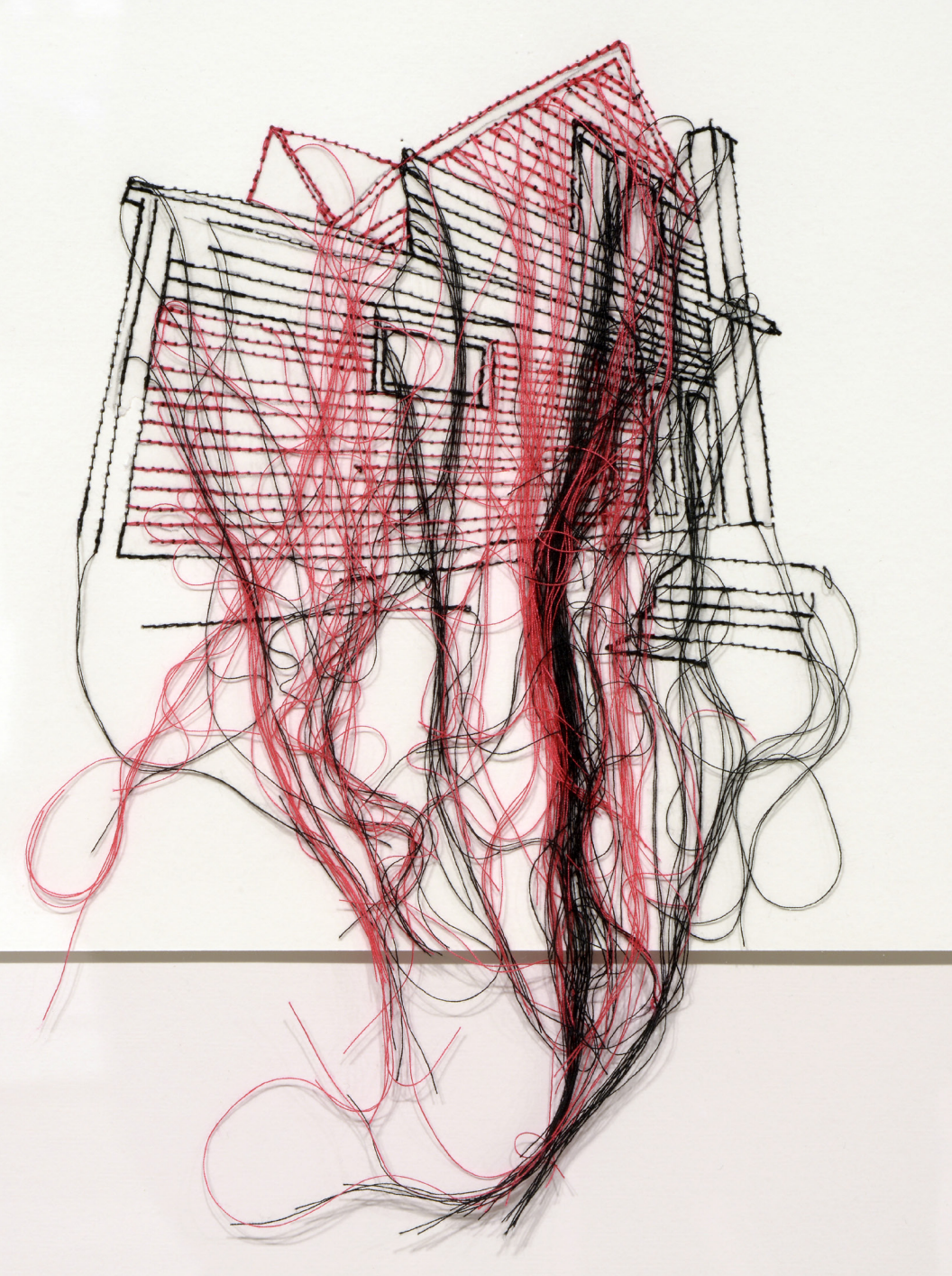


SPRING 2016

Brette Gabel: Home Is Where You're Happy

Brette Gabel, *Not How I Remembered It*, 2015, hand dyed cotton muslin, kitchen table, air. Photo: Don Hall.

EXHIBITION ESSAY
HOME IS WHERE YOU'RE HAPPY

APRIL 2 TO JUNE 1, 2016

CURATED BY BLAIR FORNWALD, ASSISTANT CURATOR

The Haunted Homemade

BY BLAIR FORNWALD, ASSISTANT CURATOR

Brette Gabel uses textile-craft techniques learned from her mother, grandmother, and other significant women to explore the subtle emotional spaces between comfort and discomfort – the domain of nostalgia and the uncanny. The primary site of Gabel's investigation is domestic, concerned with distinctions between ideas of "house" and "home," and more obliquely, how these ideas prompt feelings related to family, love, obligation, history, memory, and narrative.

These ideas are inherent to Gabel's chosen media: textiles convey intimacy, security and warmth; they cover and comfort us. The handmade textile is a particularly tangible reminder of the maker's love and care for the recipient. Sewing and needlework address a specifically feminine history, once part of a necessary domestic skillset passed on from mother to daughter. Today these practices are situated within a matriarchal lineage that may also include feminist artists and DIY activists who have sought to revalue domestic labour craft practice. The handmade textile is significant because it is made by a hand – each stitch is a trace of a body, the work is a conduit for communication with an absent other, a conversation with a ghost.

Borrowing its title from two folk songs – a tender declaration of love by Willie Nelson and a celebration of home and freedom wrought inadvertently macabre by Charles Manson, *Home Is Where You're Happy* contains numerous drawn-from-memory renderings of Gabel's childhood home. The 1910 Eaton's catalogue kit house still stands on the now-sold Gabel family farm outside Abernathy, Saskatchewan. Popular in early twentieth century Western Canada, the Eaton's house is perhaps the quintessential Prairie

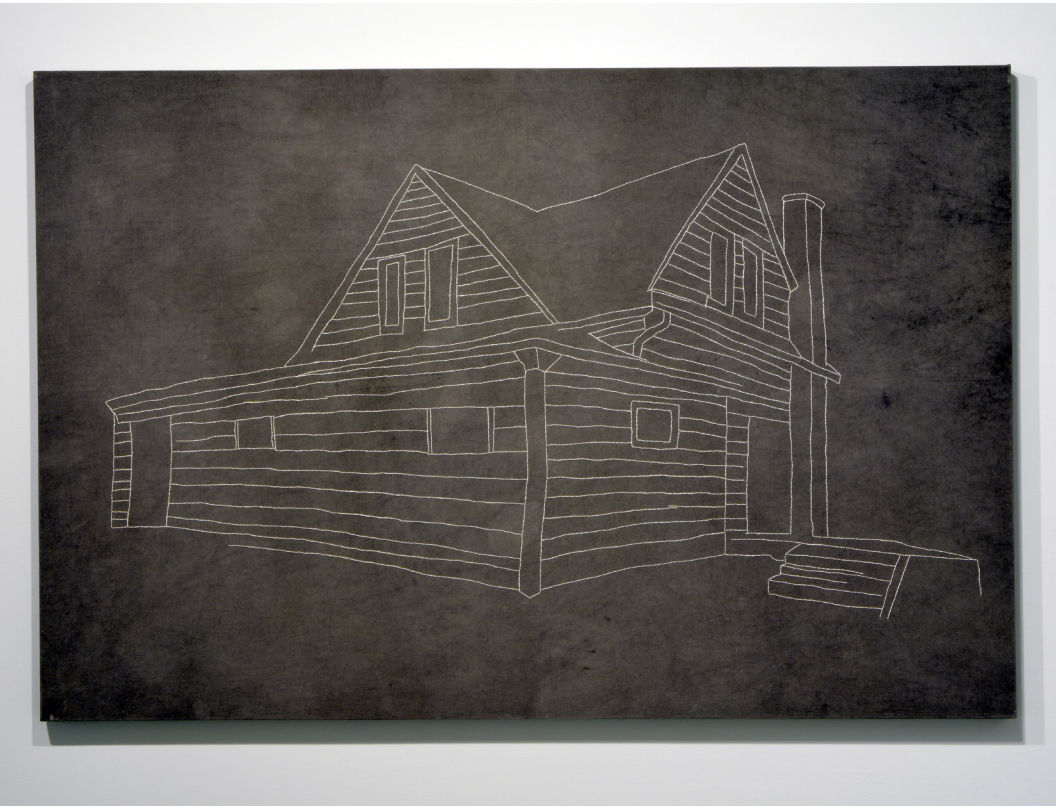
farmhome, humble yet iconic. Gabel began working with kit house imagery while on residence in Wassaic, a hamlet in upstate New York. There, she found a kit house similar to the one she grew up in, but left abandoned in a state of disrepair. "Ruins embody a set of temporal and historical paradoxes," writes Brian Dillon. A persistent reminder of the passage of time, the ruined building also, he notes, "casts us forward in time…predicts a future in which our present will slump into similar disrepair."[1] Gabel's experience of the ruined house in Wassaic was that of uncanny doubling: she had found the "house" to her childhood "home," a melancholic reminder of her own home's past and future.

In *Not How I Remembered It*, the house has been rendered as three-dimensional model, constructed of cotton muslin which has been hand-dyed with locally sourced plant matter, block-quilted, and inflated with air. It sits, wobbly, imperfect, and unreal, on a sturdy wooden kitchen table. In the anthropomorphically-titled diptych, *Sisters*, the lines and contours of the house are embroidered in fine white thread on dark grey dyed cotton muslin. The house is presented from two different perspectives: from the front it appears as tidy as an architectural rendering, while the back of the house is obscured by a tangled filigree of loose threads. Hazy clouds of thread also obscure the small *House Study* works as if the house is a sitter in a Victorian spiritualist portrait, heaving up ropey strands of ectoplasm.

These are somber, perhaps even macabre renderings of one's childhood home as empty house. Devoid of furnishings, figures, or a surrounding landscape that would mark it a specific home, it is a house ready to be inhabited by the viewer's own thoughts. Though the work does not address specific family narratives, it conjures complex emotion, alluding to the complexity of familial relationships, the fallibility of memory, and the tendency to build narratives on the shaky foundation of the remembered past.

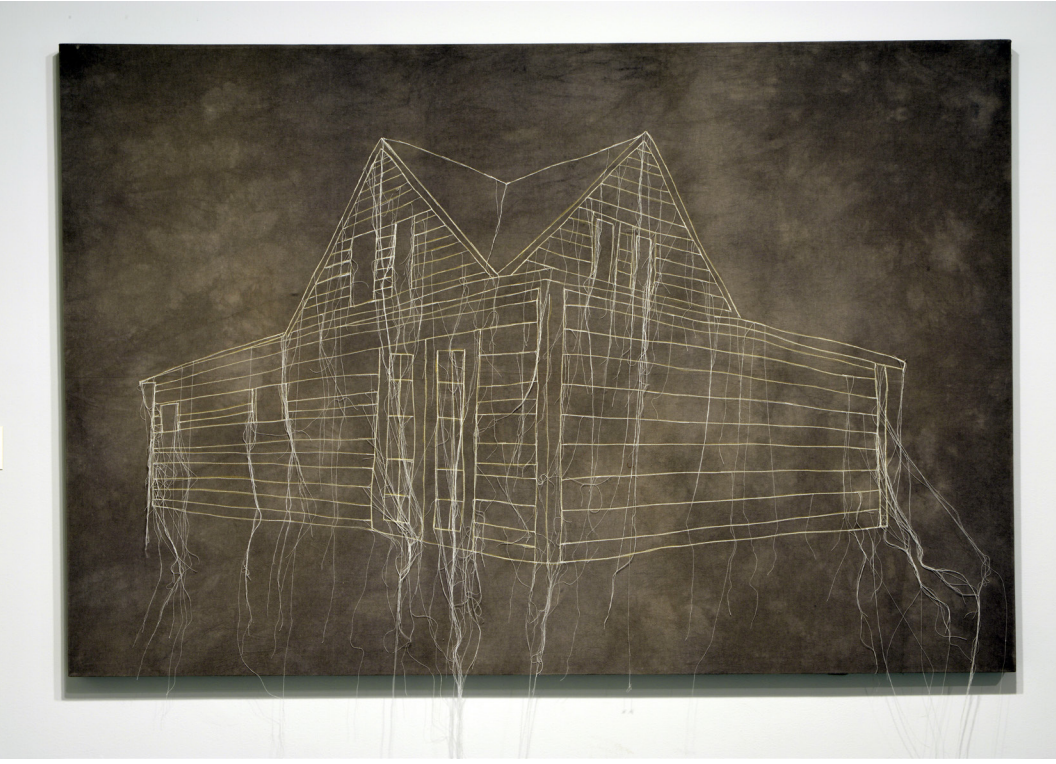
Gabel also addresses her current family life, specifically her transition to motherhood. *Distress Call* is a series of baby blankets constructed with quilted patterns based on international maritime signal flags. These flags are used by sailors to communicate, with each pattern conveying a specific message and a letter that can be used to spell out alphabetic phrases. Together, the quilts spell out the international distress signal MAYDAY. Gabel's silent plea for help is rendered as a lovingly handmade gift for her son, expressing the simultaneous joy and agony of caring for him.

Working in a muted colour palette and addressing personal subjects with composure, eloquence and understated humour, Gabel's work avoids sentimentality. Simultaneously beautiful and unnerving, nostalgic and reflective, Gabel articulates the ways that memory and biography haunt the present, imbuing the handmade object with particular significance.



Brette Gabel, *Sisters* (diptych, 1 of 2), 2015, embroidered hand dyed cotton muslin. Photo: Don Hall.

Brette Gabel, *Distress Call*, 2016, hand dyed cotton baby quilts. Photo: Don Hall.



Brette Gabel, *Sisters* (diptych, 2 of 2) 2015, embroidered hand dyed cotton muslin. Photo: Don Hall.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Brette Gabel is a Toronto-based interdisciplinary artist and a recent MFA graduate from OCADU. She has exhibited and attended residencies across Canada and internationally.

[1] Brian Dillon, "A Short History of Decay" in *Ruins* (London: Whitechapel Gallery and Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011), 11.

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COVER IMAGE

Brette Gabel, *House Study (East)*, 2016, Embroidery on paper. Photo: Don Hall.

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