

# Hyde Park**ART**CENTER Gallery 4

January 20 - March 30, 2008

## Soft Life

Work by  
Aviva Alter, Danny Mansmith,  
Dutes Miller and Stan Shellabarger,  
and Rebecca Ringquist

curated by Frank Connett and Allison Peters



Installation view. Upstage: *Between the Sheets* by Dutes Miller and Stan Shellabarger, courtesy of Western Exhibitions. Back wall (left): Aviva Alter (right) Miller and Shellabarger.

Rebecca Ringquist also interrogates gender politics of same-sex relationships that permeate the bedroom in her frenzied and vibrant soft drawings and collages. The source imagery of her artwork come from commercial vintage patterns of bonneted girls, tomatoes and hens typically found on tea towels, pillow cases, and other retro-style household decor. In *Gate*, Ringquist visualizes a saying she discovered in her grandmother's auto-graph book, "Don't Make Love Over The Garden Gate, Love is Blind but The Neighbors Ain't." The central icon is a billowing bed surrounded by fire and singing birds. At the bottom of the bed, there is a pair of eyes that make what goes on in the bedroom public observation. Ringquist appropriates symbols of innocence and purity found in traditional decorative craftwork often made by women and turns them into sexually charged erotic entities.

In the end, the title *Soft Life* refers to both the material employed by Aviva Alter, Danny Mansmith, Dutes Miller and Stan Shellabarger, and Rebecca Ringquist in expressing their experiences in love as well as the mushy way we all feel for those we care for deeply. By incorporating found and lived-with objects, embroidery, fabric appliqué and paper, each with a distinct history, these works weave together new stories from the various narratives that become fused together. Orphan Annie sang about the "hard-knock" life as being love-less, lonely and tough. Although the soft life is the opposite in that it is life of someone who is well-loved, it is often just as difficult and messy.

Allison Peters  
Director of Exhibitions

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## Hyde Park**ART**CENTER

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The Hyde Park Art Center is a not-for-profit organization that presents innovative exhibitions, primarily work by Chicago-area artists, and educational programs in the visual arts for children and adults of diverse backgrounds. The Center is funded in part by the Alphawood Foundation; The Chicago Community Trust; a City Arts III grant from the City of Chicago's Department of Cultural Affairs and the Illinois Arts Council; The Lloyd A. Fry Foundation; The Leo S. Guthman Fund; The Irving Harris Foundation; The Illinois Arts Council, a state agency; The Joyce Foundation; JPMorgan Chase Foundation; The Mayer & Morris Kaplan Family Foundation; The MacArthur Foundation; The MacArthur Fund for Arts and Culture at Prince; The Orbit Fund; Polk Bros. Foundation; The Clinton Family Fund; The Sara Lee Foundation; South East Chicago Commission; The Wallace Foundation; and the generosity of its members and friends.

## Love is blind

Neurologists recently proved that romantic love and maternal love activate the brain in the same manner, causing us to suppress negative judgment of those to whom we feel the closest in order to build stronger bonds.<sup>1</sup> If indeed love is blind because nobody is perfect, then something tactile could help guide us through the intense emotions experienced in relationships. The exhibition *Soft Life* features textured artworks by five local artists that address the endurance of both the romantic and maternal love by incorporating certain fabrics with a lived-in past into their work. Whether it is a bed sheet, table linen, seat cover, garment or dishtowel, the domestic material references a prior life, which the artists here appropriate into new meaning. Having the ability to turn autobiographical references into universal experience of love and loss, these works allow us to reflect on our own deeply personal relationships.

The history of these textiles is as much a medium of these artworks as paint is to painting. Aviva Alter has spent the past year making work out of her uncle's World War II army uniforms and blankets. Buttons, shirt collars, or pockets collaged into boxy compositions emphasize the function of the dated fabric once used for protection, warmth and cover during a time of battle. Similar to the way that that contemporary artist Jenny Holtzer illuminates altruisms and moral beliefs in scrolling LED light signs, Alter's fiery

orange embroidered script streams down and across these olive green canvases causing her lucid thoughts on the process of living to pulsate. In her newest body of work, the *Rent Garment Series*, Alter recreates the pattern of her late mother's vest out of found post-WWII wool blankets. The neckline is torn as an act of sitting shiva, the Jewish period of mourning. The text solemnly guides us back to reality after life has been dismantled by the death of a loved one. Ghostly white-on-white text whispers the word "release" making such emotional exhaustion barely visible. With a similar sentiment and color

scheme, the duvet cover sized work *How Do We Keep Warm* states "exhale one last time" written over a grid of uniform squares cut from the artist's mattress pad. At a closer glance, red thread peeks through the seams of the grid accenting the corporeal connotation of the fabric. The subtle beige tones in this haunting work are the result of bodies at rest over a lifetime while also symbolizing the emotional residue we leave behind in those closest to us.



Aviva Alter, *Rent Garment Series #1*, 2007.  
Wool army blankets and cotton floss.

The correlation between fabric and the body is clearly stated and wildly celebrated in the installation *Thread in My Veins* by Danny Mansmith. The human-sized diorama invites us to step into the artist's memory. Drawings applied directly on the wall illustrate glimpses into Mansmith's life: his mom before she went on her first date with his dad, his grandmother's house and singer sewing machine, and him as a child sitting at the kitchen table. A sketch artist at heart, Mansmith swapped ink for thread and draws on unlikely shapes of bunched fabric, paper, and any other permeable material. His art objects are a way to preserve the small residual scraps that define everyday experience. For example, the cube sculptures placed on the wooden ironing board contain old birthday cards from his mom, receipts from meals with friends, photos and other tidbits that might appear as visual minutiae, but mark a time, place, conversation or event that made him feel loved. For Mansmith, thread is the line that comfortably connects all of the dots of his life.



Danny Mansmith, *Thread in My Veins*, 2008.  
Fiber and mixed-media installation. 15 x 16 feet.

Physical and emotional connection is a central theme in the collaborative work of the artistic/romantic couple Dutes Miller and Stan Shellabarger. Heavily rooted in performance, the material outcome is as much a tender record of an ephemeral moment as a trial of patience and perseverance typical in a intimate relationship. Other projects include sewing their clothes together on a city street, then walking until it became too difficult to move and the seams broke and knitting a large tube with pink yarn, each artist at opposite ends, reminiscent of an exaggerated, ever-growing umbilical cord (an ongoing performance). In *Soft Life*, the velvety cut-paper silhouettes illustrate the two artists in a variety of postures with their beards woven together. The index of the performance - cut braids of hair preserved in a wooden frame - recalls the Victorian trend to keep a locket of loved one's hair as jewelry, never to be forgotten. Most dramatically, the video installation *Between the Sheets* temporarily relocates the couple's iron bed frame and sheets from their bedroom in Logan Square to the gallery floor for a performance of sewing themselves into the bed together, which then becomes a digital projection for the duration of the exhibition. Like an adult-sized ultrasound, glowing shadows swish and poke across the sheet-turned-screen, sealing the couple back into the safety, warmth and privacy of their own bed.