



MarieVatt Blanket Stories: Receiving

Ronna and Eric Hoffman Gallery of Contemporary Art Lewis & Clark College

> January 20 to March 13, 2005 Portland, Oregon







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## **Director's Statement**

For those who have been following the work of Marie Watt over the past several years, Blanket Stories: Receiving may come as a surprise. For one thing, her past sculpture and installations have often explored sculptural materials that are physically resistant and even indurate. Her monumental, elegant, bridgelike Pedestrian (2001), originally sited at River Overlook Park near the Steel Bridge in Portland, was made of slate, stone, and structural steel. Another contrasting work—and one with an added layer of irony because of its subject matter—is Watt's 2002 installation Sleep and Sleeplessness: Blanket/Sieve, in which she crafted a bed pillow and "covering" out of milky alabaster set on the hard gallery floor. Watt's current body of work, using discarded or secondhand wool blankets, seems at first like a complete reversal of her sculptural media. In fact, the blanket series only underscores the deftness of Watt's abilities with formal qualities (i.e., materials) and her deep fascination with the quotidian elements of human nature. "I am particularly drawn to human stories and rituals implicit in everyday objects," Watt has said. Blankets—as objects and as concept—yield a deep vein of possibilities.

Watt herself would tell you that she does not sew. Her interest in blankets, specifically wool blankets, evolved out of her recognition that blankets are markers of one's life. If the average person sleeps seven and a half hours a night, or 220,000 hours in the average lifespan (that's 25 years of sleeping around the clock), then one's bedclothes take on an intimacy of significant proportions. Birth, death, and all of the human states that fall in between—dreaming, restless worry, sickness, sex, comfort, pillow talk—might somehow become imprinted onto the blankets like a lifetime chronicle of experience. Even physically, a new blanket may seem crisp and equilaterally rectangular—and years later, the same blanket takes on a shape of its own, reveal-





Top: Pedestrian, 2001, Slate, stone, structural steel, binder, 36 x 180 x 48 inches. Collection of Portland Community College, Sylvania Campus. Bottom: Sleep and Sleeplessness: Blanket/Sieve, 2002, Alabaster, Approximately 10 x 70 x 104 inches

Opposite: Flag, 2003, Reclaimed wool blankets, satin binding, thread, 126 x 132 inches

ing the bumps and tugs, stains and rips from human use.

In this exhibition, the monumental installation *Three Sisters: Six Pelts*, Cousin Rose, Sky Woman, and Relations uses approximately 200 reclaimed blankets as sculptural material. Watt folds the blankets, then stacks them from floor to ceiling, creating a column that is soft, tactile, and structurally contraindicative. Watt says that she is interested in the spaces between things, and while *Three Sisters* 



Three Sisters: Six Pelts, Cousin Rose, Sky Woman, and Relations (detail), 2004, Floor-to-ceiling folded and stacked blankets, with reclaimed red cedar bases. Variable dimensions

suggests architecture, it also suggests the space between earth and sky—a ladder as much as a column, a metaphor for the human lifetime that the blankets record.

Three Sisters is a purposeful reference to Constantin Brancusi's 98-foot-high Endless Column (1938) in Târgu Jiu, Romania. The Endless Column is made of cast iron and steel; while it looks like a contiguous zigzag into the heavens, it is built of cast-iron modules that are threaded onto a carbon-steel spine. Likewise, Watt's blanket columns appear simply stacked, but in fact they are threaded onto wires that invisibly stabilize the stacks. By the nature of the blankets, and their varying sizes, Watt's columns create a jagged edge 2 not unlike Brancusi's column, a design

element that connects Watt to makers of virtually every indigenous art form. The stacks also evoke totems of the indigenous tribes of the Northwest Coast. In some tribal traditions, a totem or totemic pole serves as a tribal signifier at the entrance to a home or village, a symbol of identification and hospitality. Likewise, Watt sees her stacks of blankets as a gesture of welcome, or receptivity.

Just as Watt considers her stacked blankets sculpture. she views her wall pieces as paintings. (In fact, the smallerscale works called Samplers: Shields, Ledgers, Fractals, and Relations serve Watt as sketches for working out larger compositions.) Over time, Watt has amassed such a collection of blankets that she has a rich and varied palette of colors in vintage wool. Watt prevailed upon friends and acquaintances to give her their discarded blankets to build her cache—another example of the theme of giving and receiving. The idea of wool blankets is potent for the artist, not only for its intrinsic metaphorical content, but also for associations with her tribal heritage. Watt is half Seneca (Iroquois), and women of that tribe traditionally wear skirts made of beaded wool. Furthermore, the exchange of blankets for other goods is a well-documented enterprise between eastern native tribes and European Americans during the 18th and 19th centuries (as is referenced in Three Sisters: Six Pelts).

Equal and opposite to the associations wool blankets have to human experience, the highly graphic imagery that Watt employs references the history of 20th-century painting. Of course, the assemblage qualities of Flow of Time, Flag, In the Garden (Corn, Beans, Squash), Edson's Flag, Water/Sky, and Braid suggest the 20th-century tradition of collage and perhaps even the boxes of Joseph Cornell. The central image of a target found in Flag and Water/Sky (and even the title Flag and the American flag sewn into Edson's Flag) reference Jasper Johns' seminal encaustic paintings, although Watt considers the image not as a bull's-eye, but as concentric circles. Watt is an

observant student of semiotics, and for her, the circle is the most elemental and rudimentary of symbols. (Again, every indigenous culture attributes a specific meaning to a circle form.) The cryptic title of *Flag* suggests not only the theme of identity, but also that the piece could be an insignia for unity.

In other wall works, Watt appropriates the bindings from blankets to create striped patterns. The edges of blankets, most often bound in a complementary color of satin, are the most vulnerable to years of use. It is here that Watt finds worn and frayed elements to attest to the blanket's own history. The stripes of *Water/Sky* and those found in several of the *Samplers* connect Watt with painters like Frank Stella, Kenneth Noland, and more recently Susan Davies. Watt also likens the blanket bindings to the concept of ledgers, another method of recording history.

The diamond-shaped elements in In the Garden (Corn, Beans, Squash) and Braid derive from the star quilt, a pattern that recalls traditional Americana as well as a history of quilt making in Native American communities (probably adopted from early missionary wives). The nascence of Braid, perhaps the most ambitious piece in Blanket Stories: Receiving, was a concept for an environment that Watt originally envisioned as a room-size installation. She wanted to create a continuous symbol of infinity—a Möbius strip in three dimensions, a huge braided rag rug that would envelop the viewer as he or she stepped inside it. Like the blanket sculptures, the Möbius strip has no beginning and no end; it could be considered a graphic symbol for the cycle of life. This image, flattened out, becomes the stunningly iconic motif of Braid, the pieced diamonds mimicking plaited rags. The bifurcated design—half in colorful rainbow hues, half in tones of black, white, and gray—is another nod to Watt's formal concerns as an artist. Students of art typically learn first to master black and white as design elements, then they experiment with color as their skills evolve and mature. There is a formal relationship, too, between Watt's wall pieces and her floor sculptures. Because of the large scale of the wall blankets, one could envision wrapping oneself in the works as a protective covering, negating the flatness of the wall works and turning them into sculptural forms as they might drape around a human body.

Along with the wall pieces and the Samplers, Watt has included eight prints that she made at Crow's Shadow Press in Pendleton during the years 2002 to 2004. As with the Samplers, the smaller format of printmaking allows Watt to explore her ideas before committing to the monumental scale of the wall pieces. The colors of the print suites echo the muted tones of the wool—the dves used to color the wool blankets seem to be consistently dusky and slightly faded. Works such as Portal correspond directly with later wall pieces. In the lithograph Portal (2002), Watt explored the notion of a dream catcher: what that might look like outside of Native American tradition and how it might affect or alter the passage of sleep time for the dreamer. The wool blanket version of Portal, titled Flow of Time (2003),<sup>3</sup> incorporates actual strands of wool that loop up and down over the surface of the piece, then droop onto the floor. Other lithographs such as Braid (2003), Star Quilt (2003), and Blankets (2004) also serve as studies for the much larger wall pieces and floor sculptures.

An overwhelmingly significant component of Watt's ambitious wall pieces is the element of community support the artist has received. She credits more than a hundred friends, family members, and total strangers who participated in sewing bees at Watt's home studio through the past year. Water/Sky was almost completely crafted at sewing bees held at the Interstate Firehouse Cultural Center in Portland during the fall of 2004. This sort of collaboration is a long-held and revered tradition among women who have come together to engage in domestic activities—most obviously quilting, but also food preparation, and rituals that commemorate life passages such as bridal or baby

showers. As much as Watt intends her work to tell stories to the viewers, the making of these works built a de facto community and allowed stories to be shared over needle and thread. This is art making at its most grassroots level, a process that connects artist to viewer in a way that is all too often absent in contemporary art.

A final component of Blanket Stories: Receiving that echoes the collaborative nature of Watt's sewing bees is her Recibe Project. In 2004, the artist Roberta Lavadour found a wool envelope in a secondhand store in Pendleton, a chance discovery that reminded her of Watt's interest in wool blankets. It was a simple blue-andwhite houndstooth, undoubtedly a remnant from someone's sewing basket. Upon opening the flap, she found a tiny message glued onto the envelope: "Put me in your purse and see, How handy recipe cards can be; As you coffee here and there, And find new recipes to share." (Plus, a quaint notation: "Fabric by Pendleton Woolen Mills.") Inside the envelope were 13 index cards; 9 of them had typed recipes: "Sour Cream Cookies, Great Grandma Zvn, 1900," "Pendleton Presbyterian Church Chicken Salad," "Huber's Cole Slaw" (attributed to the famous Huber's Restaurant in Portland, but adopted by Faith Presbyterian Chuch in Hermiston).

Watt's thrift store gift spawned another collaborative and homespun project. Watt mused about the communal spirit that launches recipe swaps, how recipes, like blankets, are mementoes for events and relationships collected in one's life—an ethnic favorite that instantly transports one to grandmother's kitchen, a certain dish that is always present at holiday gatherings, an annual birthday cake.

Watt decided to continue the tradition of exchanging recipes, and sent a request for recipes to more than 75 friends and colleagues. In part, Watt's request read: "During the course of our friendship, food has been a prominent or occasional component. I am writing to request a recipe of your favorite *comfort food* for a project I am working on.



Star Quilt, 2003, Lithograph, 20.25 x 19 inches

Please be sure to include any back-story, observations on present day use, and source (cookbook, personal invention, family, handed-down, etc.)." Recipes, like blankets, can provide nurturance and sustenance, and through the fellowship of trading recipes, the participants cross cultural boundaries and foster community.

Watt's intent was to assemble the recipes she collected and place the collections into hand-sewn woolen envelopes that would be returned to those who sent her recipes. This very practical process recalls both sculptural and printmaking works that Watt was working on concurrently. Watt's *Letter Ghost (Omphalos)*<sup>6</sup> was an actual envelope made of reclaimed wool and satin binding; her lithograph *Letter Ghost*, of the same imagery, was printed at Crow's Shadow Press in the same year, 2003.<sup>7</sup> The envelope form, again like blankets, is ripe with the sugges-

tion of giving/receiving and intimates life-marking events (a birth announcement, a wedding invitation, a love letter, sad news). But here there is the added element of anticipation and the unknown, since the nature of an envelope is to conceal its contents.

In keeping with Watt's fascination with the "in between," the issues she deals with of giving and receiving, envelopment, time passage, ritual, and memory resonate as familiar themes in any human life. In sculpture, wall works, printmaking, and installation, Watt's abilities weave beauty with concept, art making with community building, contemporary art with historic reference. *Blanket Stories: Receiving* is a gift from artist to her audience.

Linda Brady Tesner, Director Ronna and Eric Hoffman Gallery of Contemporary Art Lewis & Clark College

The majority of the work in the exhibition Blanket Stories: Receiving was in Watt's solo exhibition at the National Museum of the American Indian, the George Gustav Heye Center in New York City (September to November 2004). Watt's was part of a series of exhibitions called Continuum, which sought to illustrate how present-day Native American artists bridge the traditions of Native American art and issues of contemporary art. Blanket Stories: Receiving offers Watt's Portland audience and her cocreators the opportunity to view work that has garnered the artist national recognition. In addition to Blanket Stories: Receiving, Watt has a concurrent exhibition at the Hallie Ford Museum in Salem called Everything Is Drawing (January 8 through March 5, 2005). Watt is also the 2005 recipient of the prestigious Eiteljorg Fellowship from the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indian and Western Art in Indianapolis. Watt lives in Portland and teaches at Portland Community College.

- <sup>1</sup> Brancusi's Endless Column is part of a sculpture complex dedicated to the heroes of World War I. In concert with Endless Column, the Table of Silence and the Kiss Gate represent the span of human life from birth through marriage and adulthood to death. Endless Column references a stylization of funeral poles from southeastern Romania.
- <sup>2</sup> Interestingly, vertical zigzag lines are recognized as a present-day icon for water evaporation, or "laundry drying."
- <sup>3</sup> Flow of Time was Watt's first wool blanket wall piece. It has been acquired for the permanent collection of the Portland Art Museum.
- <sup>4</sup> I do not mean to imply that Watt's sewing bee collaborators were women only. Although the vast majority of those who helped Watt stitch her wall works were women, about a dozen men participated in the sewing bees.
- <sup>5</sup> One of Watt's most elaborate responses came from artist Melanie Yazzie, who sent her recipe in the form of a quilt—a blanket—made from Blue Bird flour sacks, scrap fabric, and photo transfers. Yazzie was raised in Arizona, but attended a boarding school on the East Coast. When she returned to visit her family, her grandparents would honor her by slaughtering a sheep and making fresh blood sausage. Her quilt illustrates this process with a written recipe and through photographs. She also stenciled the words "Spirit Food" on the quilt.
- <sup>6</sup> The omphalos is a common type of religious stone artifact or tablet; the Greek word "omphalos" means "navel." According to the ancient Greeks, Zeus sent out two eagles to fly across the world and they met at its center, the "navel" of the world. Many historic documents indicate that the omphalos stone was the holiest object at various oracle sites, including Delphi. The main characteristic of the omphalos stone was its ability to allow direct communication with the gods.
- <sup>7</sup> The title *Letter Ghosts* refers to Paul Klee's painting *Letter Ghosts* (1937, gouache on newspaper), found at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. On both of Watt's *Letter Ghosts* works, there is a small notation in the lower portion of the envelope. These drawings are considered by Watt to be "bellies." Besides the association one might make between a blanket, an envelope, and a belly, Watt delivered her first child in December.

### **Artist's Statement**

We are received in blankets, and we leave in blankets. The work in these rooms is inspired by the stories of those beginnings and endings, and the life in between. I am interested in human stories and rituals implicit in everyday objects. Currently I am exploring the history of wool blankets. I find myself attracted to the blanket's two- and three-dimensional qualities. On a wall, a blanket functions as a tapestry, but on a body it functions as a robe and living object. Blankets also serve a utilitarian function. As I fold and stack blankets they begin to form columns that have references to linen closets, architectural braces, monuments (Trajan's Column), sculpture (Brancusi for one), the great totem poles of the Northwest, and the conifer trees with which I grew up. In Native American communities, blankets are given away to honor people for being witnesses to important life events-births and comings-of-age, graduations and marriages, namings and honorings. For this reason, it is as much of a privilege to give a blanket away as it is to receive one.

Blankets hang around in our lives and families—they gain meaning through use. My work is about social and cultural histories embedded in commonplace objects. I consciously draw from indigenous design principles, oral traditions, and personal experience to shape the inner logic of the work I make.

The wool blankets I've gathered have come from family, friends, acquaintances, and secondhand stores (never over five dollars). As friends come over and witness my blanket project in progress, I am struck by how the blankets function as markers for their memories and stories. In the installation *Three Sisters: Six Pelts, Cousin Rose, Sky Woman, and Relations* (three towers of folded and stacked blankets), I suggest a few of the many stories embedded within. I pair the blanket columns with reclaimed cedar bases. Cedar is known to protect wool from moths and is used for hope chests. Cedar is a sacred natural resource for indigenous people of the Northwest. Four story summaries follow:

Six Pelts relates to a turn-of-the-century Hudson Bay trade blanket I found at a thrift store. During the settling of the West, commercially manufactured wool blankets were popular trade items. "Points" were woven directly into the woolen fabric and represented the number of full-grown beaver pelts (or equivalent goods or services)

that the blanket was worth; a six-point (or six-pelt) trade blanket was of the highest quality.

Cousin Rose is the second cousin of my friend and mentor Bob Dozono. Rose Nobuko Nigima, also an artist, contributed many blankets to the project, some of which were made by her mother before and during the family's occupation at Minidoka, a Japanese internment camp in Hunt, Idaho.

Sky Woman is a figure in the Iroquois (Seneca) creation story. She falls from an opening in the sky and tumbles toward earth. Corn seeds flung from her pouch transform into animals and organic life that assist with her rescue and life on what becomes Turtle Island. The columns' vertical form engages both sky and earth, and it is this orientation that makes the form mythic and for me, personal. In some ways I see the blanket column as a ladder for Sky Woman, linking earth with the universe. Relations speaks to the other stories archived in the color and texture, and warp and weft of these enduring objects: some are personal, and others come from the offerings and experiences of family, friends, acquaintances, and viewers.

[Note: A Blanket Stories artist book has been provided for viewers to share and elaborate upon their own blanket stories.]

I combine wool blankets to make bannerlike and samplerlike hand-stitched assemblages and canvases (I think of them as paintings) in the form of ledgers, shields, fractals, and relations. Edson's Flag includes miscellaneous wool blankets as well as the Army, Navy, and Hudson Bay (four-point) varieties. My own recollection of Army blankets is of the ones that rode around in the family station wagon; they were used for picnics, changing flat tires, and warming up after skiing. The flag was given to my grandmother, who looked after Uncle Edson Plummer for 20 years; it was his casket flag. The flag is revealed and concealed, but not desecrated. In this piece I wanted to honor veterans and particularly Great Uncle Ed, who served in the Air Force in World War II as an airplane mechanic in China and India. Uncle Ed was also one of my mom's favorite uncles. The flag was passed from my grandmother to my mom, to my brother-in-law, back to mom, and eventually to me. I think we all felt honored to have it, but also a deep sense of responsibility came with it.

Like the tradition of weaving hair, Braid is the weaving together of story, blankets, and sewers. I began with an interest in the many associations with braids: traditional native identity; a genetic marker; a ledger of passing time; and the intrusion of western educational reform (one of the first things stripped from native students in boarding schools was their long hair). Additionally, the braid's three skeins suggest various trilogies. In Seneca mythology, for example, we have the Three Sisters: Corn, Beans, and Squash. Grown together in a soil mound like a turtle's back: Corn's stalk supports Beans; Beans provide nitrogen, creating healthy soil; and Squash's broadleaf canopy protects its sisters' roots by shading them from the sun. While they are independent, the Three Sisters have more strength and vitality when they support each other. They represent the nutritional and spiritual sustenance of our community. Braid took on additional significance when friends and family came together for sewing bees to help complete the work. Watching my friends with their heads down, hands busy, stories flowing, I learned once again about the importance of community. My history is woven into these blankets along with the wool, thread, and souls of 77 friends who sat around the pieces hand-stitching and storytelling and transforming the blankets one more time. Braid is about a continuum.

# **Acknowledgments**

This project has been nurtured under amazing conditions. For the gift of time, resources, and good faith I want to thank:

- Lewis & Clark College, for this exhibition and publication
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- Oregon College of Arts and Crafts, Portland, Senior Artist Residency
- Oregon Arts Commission, Salem, Artist Fellowship
- Crow's Shadow Institute of the Arts, Pendleton, Artist Print Residency Collaboration

# **Braid Sewing Bee Participants**

*Braid* could not have been realized without the generous support of family, friends, and new acquaintances who gathered for food, conversation, and stories during regular sewing circles hosted at my home studio:

Joan Achilles, Shelly Ambuehl, Roberta Aylward, Annin Barrett, Pat Boas, Jane Beebe, Sam Beebe, Spencer Beebe, Sharon Bronzan, Dana Brown, Kristin Calhoun, Amie Champagne, Phillip Charette, Vicky McConnel, Rosemary Charley, Marilyn Couch, Anne Crumpacker, Terri Cutz, MaryAnne Deffenbaugh, Vicky Dekrey Vasey, Rebecca Dobkins, Bob Dozono, Laura Foster, Natalie Fuiara, Emily Ginsberg, Ellen George, Neil William Anderson, Abby Hall, Rachel Hibbard, Lisa Hillerns, Linda Hutchins, Junko lijima, Maria "Mitzi" Inocencio, Pat Jacobson, Joe the Manx, Alicia Johnson, Lisa Kidder, Matt Kidder, Roberta Lavadour, Horatio Law, Deborah Lee, Connor Lee Schoen, Pam Levenson, Brenda Mallory, Mariah Manners, DE May, Cheron McGuffey, Adam McIsaac, Molly Mercer, Kristin Miller, Louise Morehouse, Susan Murrell, Cynthia Nawalinski, Emily Nelson, Karla Nutt, Lisa O'Brien, Jenny O'Conner, Melody Owen, Trude Parkinson, Meg Rowe, Salena Sahme, Apolonia S. Santos, Marty Schnapf, Manya Shapiro, Rebecca Sheer, Mark Smith, Melinda Smith, Rosa Inocencio Smith, Mary Stupp-Greer, Karen Taylor, Hannah Thornby, Inara Verzemnieks, Heather Watkins, Dave Watt, Lisa Watt, Romayne Watt, and Hal Wolverton.



Sewing bee at the artist's home studio, summer 2004.



#### Works in the Exhibition

All works are courtesy of PDX Gallery except as otherwise noted.

### Sculpture

Three Sisters: Six Pelts, Cousin Rose, Sky Woman, and Relations 2004

Site-specific installation of three columns, floor-to-ceiling folded and stacked blankets, with reclaimed red cedar bases Variable dimensions

#### **Wall Works**

Braid 2004

Reclaimed wool, satin binding, thread

128 x 259 inches

This piece was completed with the help of 77 friends and family members who participated in sewing bees at the artist's home studio.

Edson's Flag 2004

Revealed and concealed American flag, Army blankets, Hudson Bay trade blankets, miscellaneous reclaimed wool blankets, satin binding, thread 132 x 79 inches

Flag 2003

Reclaimed wool blankets, satin binding, thread 126 x 132 inches

Flow of Time 2003 Reclaimed wool blankets, satin binding, thread 73 x 100 inches Courtesy of the Portland Art Museum In the Garden (Corn, Beans, Squash) 2003

Reclaimed wool, satin binding, thread

126 x 114 inches

Water/Sky 2004

Reclaimed wool blankets, satin binding, thread 115 x 126 inches
This piece was completed with the help of friends and new acquaintances in the context of open-to-the-public sewing bees at the Interstate Firehouse Cultural Center, Portland.

Samplers: Shields, Ledgers, Fractals, and Relations (Numbers 1 through 8) 2004-05

Reclaimed wool blankets, satin binding, thread, cedar frames Variable dimensions

#### **Prints**

All prints were created at Crow's Shadow Press, Pendleton, in collaboration with Frank Janzen, TMP (Tamarind Master Printer).

Blankets 2003 Lithograph 19.75 x 25.75 inches

Braid 2003 Lithograph 14.5 x 29 inches

Letter Ghost 2003 Lithograph 13 x 18.4 inches

Star Quilt 2003 Lithograph 20.25 x 19 inches Guardian 2002 Lithograph 22 x 21 inches

Omphalos 2002 Lithograph 21 x 21 inches

Portal 2002 Lithograph 22 x 21 inches

Sanctuary 2002 Lithograph 20 x 21 inches

#### **Documentation**

Study (after Endless Column) 2003 Sepia photograph 18.2 x 23.2 inches

(Adam and Dana Stacking Blankets) 2003 Sepia Photograph 24.2 x 17.2 inches

Study (Vulnerable: Adam and Dana Stacking Blankets) 2003 Sepia photograph 24.2 x 17.2 inches

#### Other

Recipe Project 2004-05 Paper, recycled wool fabric, thread Each 5 x 7 inches

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Opposite: Edson's Flag, 2004, Revealed and concealed American flag, Army blankets, Hudson Bay trade blankets, miscellaneous reclaimed wool blankets, satin binding, thread, 132 x 79 inches

Cover: *Braid*, 2004, Reclaimed wool, satin binding, thread, 128 x 259 inches

Back cover: Braid (detail)

Recycled paper