

LJ ROBERTS

Zachary Small, An Artist's Portraits, Stitched Together  
on the Subway, The New York Times, 30 September 2021

LJ Roberts, an artist whose textile art weaves together queer and trans histories, in a studio in Dumbo, Brooklyn.  
Photo by Caroline Tompkins for The New York Times

After a decade of embroidering portraits of loved ones, LJ Roberts delivers a lesson on queer kinship in a new exhibition at Pioneer Works in Brooklyn.

LJ Roberts starts by stitching the faces of friends and lovers, recalling in handsewn portraits the contours of a saved photograph or deeply personal memory. For the last decade, the artist has created these pocket-size embroideries during downtime and subway rides around New York. A tapestry of queer and trans history, activism and politics has emerged, defined by the details: handmade protest signs, bumper stickers, pride flags and pet collars.

“Carry You With Me: Ten Years of Portraits” marks a turning point in Roberts’ career, as institutions and collectors start investing in L.G.B.T.Q. artists who use textiles to tell their stories. They are a dramatic departure from the billowing quilts and monumental collages that have earned the artist a following among museum curators. Would audiences accept this change of style and size?

The exhibition, on view at Pioneer Works in Brooklyn through Nov. 28, is the first in a series of upcoming shows spotlighting Roberts’s work. It includes a neon sculpture

about immigration, opening Oct. 2 in the Socrates Sculpture Park, Queens. The artist’s installations will also star in two springtime exhibitions, one celebrating American craft at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C., and another examining feminist art practices at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Connecticut.

It was a risky decision for Roberts to unveil these bite-size embroideries at the beginning of a busy arts season.

“Portraits are the last thing I ever thought I would do,” Roberts said during a preview. “When I started making them, it felt like I was acting against everything I wanted from art.”

Roberts is nonbinary, meaning that the artist doesn’t ascribe to gender labels and uses third-person pronouns. They had used abstraction in previous works to investigate the overlap between queer activism and craft traditions. Avoiding figuration was a political choice meant to critique the limiting definitions of identity. But the embroideries are an attempt to reconcile a desire for freedom with a desire to be seen.

“I’m certainly engaging in figurative representation and I’m also pushing against it,” the artist said. Just as friends respond to their images in the essays that accompany the installation, so too Roberts describes these portraits as dependent on the frenetic collision of stitches, which are displayed on the reverse side, known as the verso.

“I pay no attention to what manifests on the back of the image, and its outcome is entirely incidental. Yet the abstraction is just as important as the figures, maybe even more so because it captures the essence of my friends,” the artist said.

The embroideries are like talismans for Roberts, summoning both painful and cherished memories. The portrait of the self-taught collage artist Frederick Weston in pink, handcuffed and holding a protest sign, is particularly resonant. Roberts recalls the hours spent at the 2018 Pride March, being chained to Weston, who had been disseminating fliers about H.I.V. criminalization. A friendship sparked between the duo, who often talked about operating on the margins of the margins of the art world. Weston helped Roberts realize the importance of visibility in the art world. He received his first New York solo exhibition in 2019, when he was 72. One year later, he died from bladder cancer.

“Fred was very forthright about not getting the recognition he deserved, and he worked until the day he died,” said Roberts. “He taught me to look at the messy, chaotic parts of representation and how we construct ourselves as people.”

Becoming a fiber artist was the consequence of habit and necessity. Roberts, now 40, started knitting as a child, taking lessons from a relative. After leaving the Detroit area, the artist attended the University of Vermont, where a rebellious streak transformed into political organizing. With a collective of young activists, Roberts made work about the AIDS crisis, climbing the campus steeples to drop large, knitted banners that read “Mom Knows Now,” before eventually moving to New York. Textiles became an easy way to create art without having to pay for a studio.

“I have been nomadic by choice and necessity, but I can bring my work everywhere,” said Roberts.

The artist’s devotion to craft has recently gained traction in the art world. Earlier this month, Hales Gallery in Chelsea announced that it was adding Roberts to its roster, as one of the few fiber artists with gallery representation. The collectors David and Pamela Hornik have also taken an interest, financing a publication based on the Pioneer Works exhibition.

“The embroideries are extraordinarily personal and empathetic,” said David Hornik, a tech investor. “When you see a work by LJ, you know it is their art. That’s the hallmark of a great artist and one that I think will stand the test of time.”

Mary Savig, a curator at the Smithsonian’s Renwick Gallery, went from quoting Roberts in her own Ph.D. dissertation to putting the artist in a major survey on American studio craft, “This Present Moment: Crafting a Better World,” which opens this spring.

“The power in Roberts’s work is how it resists power,” said Savig, likening the artist’s portraits to works by Alice Neel or Harmony Hammond. “Roberts detonates hierarchies,” she added, “by lingering with needle and thread on the feminist, queer and trans trails that came before them.”

Before opening night at the Pioneer Works exhibition, Hadley Raysor Smith visited the gallery for a private viewing. Six years ago, Roberts photographed Smith holding the artist’s dogs and wearing a shirt that read: “Stop telling women to smile.” Seeing that summer day in stitches left Smith in tears. The embroidery was more than just a testament to their friendship or a happy memory, but an artifact of their existence as nonbinary people.

“It would have been important to see images of queer people like these when I was younger,” Smith, now cleareyed, said. “Queer people being visible and unapologetic.”