

FIRST PERSON

Environmental Activism Through Knitting

by Eve Jacobs-Carnahan

My narrative sculptures illustrate destabilizing weaknesses in American democracy. I illuminate factors undermining our electoral system by telling stories with birds cloaked in soft yarn. Humorous fluffy bouclé chickens, watchful herons in feather-textured green and blue garb, and elegant gulls decked out in lace stand in for human characters. They are relatable and yet, far enough removed to provide emotional distance.

A self-trained artist, knitting was my starting point as a maker. I learned to knit as a child by copying my mother.

One of my earliest projects was a pair of two-needle mittens with a twisted cable running up the back, complex for a pre-teen. After years of making sweaters with intricate Fair Isle designs and elaborate textures, I discovered art knitting through **Melanie Falick's** book *Knitting in America*. Her profile of **Katharine Cobey** captivated me. In 2003 and 2005 I made pilgrimages to Maine to study with Cobey in her studio. Her bold knitted statements on societal issues had a big impact on me.

Knitting has many associations with the domestic. I use knitting in my artwork because it is both comfortable and comforting. People can relate to the coziness of a favorite scarf or the blanket they wrapped themselves in when sick at home. Drawing on these connections, I infuse my narrative sculptures with a touchable softness and a feminist viewpoint.

An enthusiastic birdwatcher, I frequently depict birds in my sculptures. At first, the birds were subjects themselves, illustrating examples of pollution and habitat loss. "Trawling the Algae Overload" depicts a graceful American White Pelican



Eve Jacobs-Carnahan, *Trawling the Algae Overload*, 2017. Knitted and felted wool yarn, mulberry paper, rubber inner tubes, corn on the cob tray, rigid foam, canvas, wire, plywood, acrylic paint, gel medium and hardware, 13 x 28 x 22 inches. Photo: Paul Rogers Photography.



Eve Jacobs-Carnahan, *Making the Voters Chicken: Obstacles*, 2021. Knitted and collaged yarn, silk, pottery shards, pencils, map, wood, wire, rigid foam, canvas and foam board, 9 x 11.5 x 6.5 inches. Photo: Paul Carnahan.

with an empty beak searching for fish. My sculptures evolved in 2018 after I left my position as a lawyer in state government to focus on art full time. No longer exercising my justice muscles by writing legal briefs, I channeled those impulses into my artwork. The avian characters took on new meaning, becoming allegorical figures in stories about democracy. The topics which currently motivate my work include problematic forces weakening the representative government in the United States: voter suppression, gerrymandering, and the financing of electoral campaigns.

Injecting some wit with a play on words, I made a series called *Making the Voters Chicken*. The adorable fluffy fowl face one barrier after another while attempting to exercise the franchise. In “Gerrymandering the Marsh,” I incorporated maps from redistricting which manipulated boundary lines to give disproportionate power to an electoral minority. There, the Green Herons prey on the salamanders in more ways than one, controlling the imaginary wetland voting districts despite their lesser numbers. In “Lobby Disturbance” I set the scene with trappings of elegance, wealth and power. The knitted wings



Eve Jacobs-Carnahan, *Lobby Disturbance*, 2023. Knitted, sewn and assembled repurposed linen napkins, china, metal tray, and tea canisters, wool-cashmere, wool-alpaca and linen yarn, linen fabric, fused silk paper, mulberry paper, world currency, snail shells, rigid foam, canvas, wood, stone clay, acrylic paint, wire, felted wool, beads and thread, 18 x 25 x 20 inches. Photo: Paul Carnahan.

of the Laughing Gulls use luxurious wool-cashmere and wool-alpaca yarns. The money exchanged under the table for political favors upsets everything.

Knitted yarn is an ideal medium for presenting a feminist contrast to corrosive forces eroding democracy. It gently paves the way for examination of threats undermining a fair and equitable governmental system.

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—Eve Jacobs-Carnahan (she/her) is based in Montpelier, Vermont. Her narrative mixed media knitted sculptures respond to issues affecting American democracy. National Arts Strategies named her a Creative Community Fellow: New England 2022. She is the creator of *Knit Democracy Together*, demystifying the electoral process while engaging crafters in knitting circles.



Eve Jacobs-Carnahan assembling fabric and knitted elements on gull armature in studio, 2022. Photo by the artist.



Eve Jacobs-Carnahan, *Fly* (from *Gerrymandering the Marsh*), 2021. Knitted, felted, sewn and collaged linen yarn, wool felt, cotton fabric, mulberry paper, wood, rigid foam, stone clay, rocks, wire, fabric stiffener, acrylic paint, screws and washers, 15 x 23 x 27 inches. Photo: Paul Rogers Photography.

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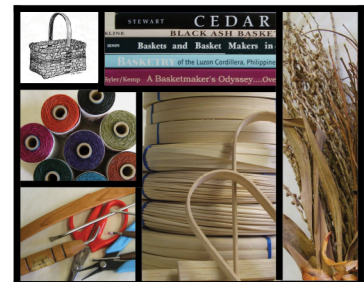


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