

## *Side-by-Side*

Held by cloth's hand, we are swaddled at birth, covered in sleep, and wound in death. A single thread spins a myth of origin and a tale of adventure, interweaves people and webs of communication. Coat and tent are the first portable architecture for the body, a flag carries the symbol of nationality, a folded blanket is a story of trade. Like weather, however changeable, cloth envelopes experience. With cloth we cover our extremities. A glove holds my hand; a wool cap covers the top of my head; a sock, my foot; a sweater, my heart; a blanket, my lap. A coat buttons my arms and torso into one warmth. I sleep under a sheet, dry myself with a towel, hold a cotton napkin in my lap, secret a thin handkerchief in my pocket. A curtain shuts or reveals my window view. The thin white finely knitted cotton closest to my skin breaths with my heat, absorbs my moisture, is insulation between me and everything else. The first white cloth, made from woven strands of plant fibers about 7000 B.C., was found wrapped around an antler. Naked flesh is vulnerable. The thick cotton pad shielding a hand from heat on the stove is cousin to the fabric cushioning a hand from the abrasions of a bone tool thousands of years ago.

Just as the work of a weaver and a loom is to hold horizontal and vertical threads in balanced tension, cloth is exchanged as a symbol of a social agreement or bond to maintain or forge social concordance. Dowries of linens representing years of handwork were once exchanged along with marriage vows. We speak of a tightly or loosely knit social fabric, of a complex tapestry of cultures, of political and technological webs. But not all relations and not all fabrics are woven. The first exchange was with the animal whose sacrifice became our second skin and our first side by side. Our two feet for its four, its hide covering our skin, forming our architecture, making our markets. The project is the side by side of the light blue hide that remembers the cow and the raw fleece that carries the smell of the sheep, is the tough hide muffling the friction between foot and ground and the soft fleece which insulates and holds our warmth.

This project began in these origins – in the tanneries whose basins were built along the river, in the stone weights whose holes bear evidence of human hands and tools, in the blade made for separating into parts and in the needle threaded for joining and suturing into relation. Side-by-Side is the side by side of humans and animals, is objects and their images, is memory etched into stone, space and song, is the view from the library archive to the cloister garden, is the reflection of the body in the museum's reflective surface, is the silence and the stillness next to the sound and the chaos, is storage next to circulation, is the new market next to the old market, is time, is the distance we see but cannot cross, is the voice touching at a distance, is bodies side by side, is the hand holding and the hand offering. Side-by-Side is a body, a hand, a touch. From touch a tending, in tending a voice, a line drawn between our absorbing senses and resisting bones.

–Ann Hamilton