

A Material Memoir: Gerry Trilling's Narrative Atlas



Installation, Gerry Trilling 2016, Dimensions Variable. Image courtesy of the artist.

When I first encountered Gerry Trilling's artwork in her studio at Studios, Inc., I came face to face with a fuzzy pink rug that you would expect to find in the dorm of an art student, the proper setting for this material is definitely not in an art gallery. Or is it? Trilling's work exemplifies her fascination with piecing together narratives through material culture. Her newest show, "Narrative Atlas," presented viewers with the personal story of her family's struggle assimilating into American culture after fleeing the Holocaust, winding up in St. Louis by way of Vienna. Using individual covered panels, she created large, multifaceted fabric paintings of unlike materials. Her investigation of people through looking at interiors from their personal spaces created a conversation about the role of material in personal identity.

Upon entering the show, the presentation caught my attention. Beside each installation, a snippet of Gerry's personal family memories gave viewers insight into each of her relatives' personalities. As I walked through the space, it felt as though I knew her relatives personally through both the stories

being presented and the materials being incorporated. From the story of Aunt Erna's food hoarding habits to the broken wind up clock her parents has received as a wedding gift, I felt as though I was at my own family get-together overhearing my relatives talk about their own experiences growing up. I grew to understand the narrative through the presented materials, assigning personalities to them the same as I do people. The fuzzy pink rug began to become more than just a rug, it became my crazy Aunt Kathy who loves drinking copious amounts of wine and playing *Battle of the Sexes* at family gatherings, and materials such as wire act as a stand in for my grandpa who was in the Vietnam war.



Activated Shelter, Gerry Trilling, 2017, 58×48. Image Courtesy of the Artist

I started to treat the gaps between artwork as a pause to process the story and the roles of the

artwork that Trilling set them up to perform. Her use of multiple square and rectangular panels carefully placed in relation to each other function as visual poetry through the use of pauses and moments of reflection, while Trilling takes on a curator's role through her specific arrangement of the panels. Taking on both of these positions, what she leaves for viewers to decipher is a complex, personal conversation between her artwork and the text. She questions how materials function as stand-ins for memories and draws connections between the life that the used material once had, while considering the aesthetic function it is serving in her artwork.

From these relationships, each one of the works can be thought about as a portrait of a person in Trilling's life, or rather, a self portrait of a facet of her life. As I think about the characters from the text on the walls, I feel Gerry's artwork manifesting into a portrait of every family member mentioned. I start to decipher the embellishment to her narrative the further and further I get through the show, providing comedic comments which give insight into her journey of establishing a life in America and giving an account of her assimilation into American culture. The psychological link she has created between her life and the gaudy materials she chooses becomes fetishized as she takes into consideration the purpose of the materials outside her personal associations. Using materials that would more than likely be found in the clearance section of Boca Bargoons, she chooses one-of-a-kind elements that people don't normally go out of their way to pick out. Instead of curating groups of panels that already fit together due to their color palettes or textures, she chooses to rework them into a separate piece of artwork that incorporates multiple aesthetics from uncommon fabrics. Choosing the materials carefully, she is rewriting her family's history through her own eyes, using textiles to be reminiscent of her own family biases. Like a family, none of the materials Trilling picks out are meant to fit together perfectly, making for a relatable view of family through the histories of the textiles used.



Installation image from Gerry Trilling's Narrative Atlas. Photo Courtesy of the Artist.