

Genteel

Lynne Yamamoto

essay by Lucretia Knapp

Doilies are most commonly associated with grandmothers or Victoriana, refined linens placed upon furniture to beautify, protect and camouflage. In the past, they hid the soiling from hands, arms, and elbows and in some cases, the hair oils of well-groomed men. The linens signified elegance and stitched into that cloud, class. To peruse the underside then, one might loosen the threads and shake things out.

In 2009, Lynne Yamamoto purchased an antique doily and began the arduous task of stitching: needle in, push up, poke down, repeat. Curved over linen and thread, eyes intensely focused on a thin reed of steel, Yamamoto punched in and out until body, needle and material fell into syncopation. She moved along an outline stitch. Unlike traditional embroidery, after completing a stitch, she flipped the doily to the reverse side, knotted a thread and noted the building of knots and hash marks. Four or five hours later, Yamamoto stared down at a completed linen tattoo of a black mosquito punched through the white rounded surface. She turned the doily over to the knotted side, to view the area not commonly displayed. That side would be her finished work.

The mosquito and the next doily that followed, a stitching of HNL (the airport code for Honolulu), were included in Yamamoto 's 2009 installation Sweating Bone China, at The Contemporary Museum in Honolulu. Mosquitoes and baggage tags are touchstones for her. Once a year she journeys back to family, returning to the land that much of her work has centered around. As a plane approaches the islands, one can imagine how small floating forms might find their way into the artist's work. Unfortunately mosquitoes are prevalent in certain areas of Hawai'i and they can be fiercely quick to greet Yamamoto, skin markings signaling the ironies of paradise.

The ocean has been a passageway for untold immigrants, like Yamamoto's paternal and maternal grandparents. They worked on a sugar plantation established by New England missionaries. A few years after the untimely death of her husband, Yamamoto's grandmother Chiyo followed, submerging into a *furo*¹. Chiyo released herself and altered the fate of her daughters. They were taken in by relatives who also worked for a plantation, a married couple that had a child of their own but heartbreakingly, could provide more than a laboring, single mother. The couple became the parents of the little girls and later, the beloved grandparents of Yamamoto.

In 2010 Yamamoto exhibited 42 doilies in Genteel at the Greg Kucera Gallery in Seattle. No longer displayed as single objects on neighboring walls, the doilies were brought together, arranged and pinned on one central white wall, creating a quiet but thriving colony. White on white, doilies against wall, made a viewer even more mindful of the black stitching and knots. Spot lit, one was pulled in to investigate, like peering into a microscope. Subsequently, Yamamoto felt the work needed to expand even further. Now the latest instance of "Insect Immigrants, after Zimmerman (1948)" at P.P.O.W. contains 78 doilies with 78 different insects.

During early stages of her research for the project, Yamamoto came across the work of entomologist, Elwood Curtin Zimmerman (1912-2004) who, while working in Hawai'i at a

natural history museum² set out to document all the insects of the islands. Perusing the five-volume set, Lynne was struck by Zimmerman's use of "immigrants" as a defining term for some of the insects, specifically non-indigenous species unintentionally brought to Hawai'i. This curious collapsing of terms provided an opening, a mixing, and an alluring metaphor.

The insects on each doily represent a species that migrated alongside the missionaries and early explorers to a younger Hawai'i that was home to a substantial population of Polynesians. With the insects and missionaries came illness and disease and the imposition of Euro-American standards and beliefs onto a non-western culture. In the vernacular of the doily, missionaries sought to cloak and cover the morally soiled, tattooed Polynesian skins. With well-intentioned acts they suggested clothing and houses that suited themselves, New England, not fully understanding the complexities of variance, degrees and the tropics.

Skins of white linen, some yellowed, others a light brown. When outlining the insects that she adapted from Zimmerman's drawings, Yamamoto always leaves something out, like an antenna or a limb. Even in this latent state, before the stitching begins, the insects are in a moment of decay or change. Up close, the iconic forms damage the clean map of the linen. Stepping back, they are a cloud, the doily edges enlivened geometry, spiraling, and amoebic.

The doilies are raised above the wall surface by black insect pins. The insects come alive through hash marks, a bending thread or associations. A centipede's thickly knotted body evokes hair-like dimension. A few winged insects may be lifting away. Those who embroider often flip a work over to comprehend the style and skill of the maker. The smooth embroidery that one would generally display faces the wall so a viewer engages with the imperfect backside. Yamamoto doesn't do a stitch in a traditional way. She has adopted a time consuming form of knotting or thread stuttering. She uses a recognized needle form but re-crafts the process. Within it, she purposefully misaligns herself with traditional or contained needlework. There is something beautifully unhinged about this.

Yamamoto's palette is stark like a mourning cloth. The bodies embroidered are insects. They are not beloved in life, but more commonly feared and found to be repulsive. Under the lights, on wafers of white, the threaded bodies gain beauty, humor and irony. It is a mix between relics and tattoos, a cloistered tapestry. The work is open ended, not hard wired. It is quiet, inviting thought.

On a pedestal of plywood, off from the doilies, is a small white house.³ An overhead light shines down upon it and though a solid structure, there are no harsh reflections or highlights. One visitor asks another whether the house is made of sugar. Up close, mimicked in marble, are the bends and irregularities of corrugated metal siding and wood framing come loose. It is not the kind of house one expects to be immortalized. "Grandfather's Shed" is modeled from Yamamoto's memory of her grandfather's work shed, a structure like many that defined sugar and pineapple plantation architecture in Hawai'i for decades. Her grandfather Harry and his wife Kimiyo once fulfilled a mother's dying dream.

Plantations were established by missionaries from New England, and drew waves of immigrants as well as insects. They all stayed.

¹a Japanese soaking (bath) tub

²Elwood Curtin Zimmerman (1912-2004) was an entomologist for the Bishop Museum (a natural history/anthropology museum), and later the Hawaiian Sugar Planters' Association. Shortly after being hired at the Bishop Museum in 1936, Zimmerman took on the task of documenting all the insects of Hawai'i. The core of the set are the first five volumes published in 1948.

³During an interview Yamamoto pointed out that the original plantation houses were green and only the owners of the plantations had white houses. In a sense then, the plantation owners owned the color white. In Genteel the use of white is all the more significant.