SUSAN HEFUNA; MADE IN NYC

Susan Hefuna is a grounded artist-practitioner committed to expanding creative relationships between art and life, further evidence of which is again prescient in a recent work that engaged with issues of homelessness in in New York. While at times Hefuna expresses herself variously in sculpture, installation art, film and photography, and performance, it is an intervention in drawing and its ancillary practices of collage that are revealed by the sentient aspects of her recent New York work here cited.[[1]](#endnote-1) In MADE IN NYC (2019) the creative approach is that of cut outs, ink, paper and thread. However, the nature of its creative development cannot be detached from the structured observations of numerous street engagements, and the production of the artist’s un-documentation films that in turn become of documentation of themselves as forms of inverted surveillance.[[2]](#endnote-2) Issues of the viewer and the viewed at chosen crucial points of crossroad location, have become foci or sites and platforms of pictorially observed social intercourse and expressive life. While the films are reminiscent of CCTV footage, images of the commonplace, they nonetheless are carefully planned and establish Hefuna’s central preoccupations with art and life. The fact that her background is both German and Egyptian places her in the category of the “other” in terms of her self-awareness, as a result the artist is acutely conscious of cultural dichotomies around identity and class.[[3]](#endnote-3)

The MADE IN NYC drawing-collages while focused on protest become an aesthetic extension of these continued art and life concerns. In taking the exclamatory words of the street protesters Hefuna has woven together textual referents with drawn and collaged material innovations. That the text uses fragmentary snatches with expressions such as “lives matter” or “Home Less” or “Lost” and “I was once like you”, serving the specific purpose of verifying an extracted sense of immediacy, and at the same time echoing the substantive sense of the elementary materials that are brought together in the drawing-collages. The words themselves are drawn directly upon the surface either with black ink, or conversely as letter cut outs that are affixed (one might say appliqued) to the interleafed surface. Hence the support for the text is that of asymmetrical paper, a base layered with in most instances superimposed transparent paper cuts outs. The drawn text and linear formations are similarly applied sometimes on top of the drawing, and at other times interlaced between the various layered paper elements. The paper is similarly bi-folded, using stitched thread interlaced upon and in between the papers. These linear stitches have the effect of affixing and optically stabilising each drawing-collage.

The drawings are similarly an evocation on several levels, that is we feel an intuitive sense of patch and palimpsest, the former echoing perhaps the patchwork make up of what is constituted within the various groups of the homeless protesters on the streets of New York.[[4]](#endnote-4) Yet it is perhaps the suggestion of the palimpsest that is seemingly the most provocative, not only in its sense of commensurate masking, but in the sense that it actively connotes feelings of hidden injustice that Hefuna has latterly brought to light.[[5]](#endnote-5) For as Derrida once suggested, the palimpsest presents the spectrality of the present moment, while containing aspects of the past hidden inside it as an inferred projective future.[[6]](#endnote-6) Put simply and as expressed by the semiotics of Kristeva it institutes a form of intertextuality, something brought about by an interpenetration of “utterances” leading to contradictory tensions and productive violence within the initially masked aspects of the palimpsest.[[7]](#endnote-7)While it may be the case that MADE IN NYC was not intended to give such an intense semiotic interpretation, the drawing-collages nonetheless reveal the expressed concerns of “productive violence.” That is to say made self-evident not only in the words that are expressed, but simultaneously in the inferred “Soul Less” response of society to the protesters homeless plight. In this respect MADE IN NYC reveals its double meaning, the work was literally made in New York (mentally and emotionally) as in response to Hefuna’s immediate and personal experience of the homeless situation, and made in New York by the materially oppressive social conditions and lack of housing and diminished life qualities so obviously expressed behind the homelessness.

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1. **ENDNOTES**

   For a descriptive analysis of the drawing practices of the artist, see *Susan Hefuna: Drawing Everything*, The Drawing Center, New York, 2020. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Surveillance has always in the Foucaultian sense been to do with power. However, surveillance as structured observation, surveillance as seeing or viewing has a much wider understanding than that for Hefuna. The visible and the hidden (masked by the *mashrabiya*) linked to cultural codes and conventions have also been a continuous sub-theme. See *Susan Hefuna, Cultural Codes*, Heidelburg, Kehrer Verlag, 2004. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 1997. This is an early publication that foresaw the current clash between the global and local inclusion, and questions of identity and otherness. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. It is worth observing in passing that a “patchwork quilt” stands in, no only for the origins of so-called pioneer American culture, but is also a common descriptive metaphor of the multi-ethnic make up of the United States. Both patterned and text quilting began in America in the 17th century, see Laurel Horton (ed.), *Quiltmaking in America: Beyond the Myths*, Nashville, Rutledge Hill Press, 1994. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Thomas de Quincy’s now famous essay *The Palimpsest* (1845) has become a major theoretical and contemporary concern of recent art and language studies, see Sarah Dillon, *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory*, New York, Continuum, 2007 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. What is a palimpsest? Originally it was a manuscript or piece of writing material on which later writing has been superimposed on effaced earlier writing, but in contemporary x-ray applications becomes revealed. Hence something reused or altered but still bearing visible traces of its earlier form. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. For “intertextuality” as it relates to ideas of the palimpsest, see Julia Kristeva and Leon S. Roudiez, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1980. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)