



“A stitch is a mark”:

Cyrilla Mozenter's *More saints seen*

The opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* premiered at the Avery Memorial Theatre in Hartford on February 7, 1934. Gertrude Stein wrote the libretto for the composer Virgil Thompson, who set it to music. Thompson enlisted the painter Florine Stettheimer to devise the sets and costumes, which she gamely fashioned out of colorful sheets of cellophane. Frederick Ashton supplied the choreography for an African-American cast chosen by Thompson for its “rich, resonant voices essential to the singing of my music and the clear enunciation required to deliver Gertrude’s text.” After Hartford, *Four Saints in Three Acts* ran on Broadway for sixty performances. Set in sixteenth-century Spain, the opera possesses not three acts but four and a prelude. And rather than four saints, as the title also promises, there are sixteen, not counting those in the chorus, which is nothing but saints. Saints, therefore, are everywhere in Stein’s libretto, but action is scarce. As Stein once remarked, “I wrote *Four Saints in Three Acts* and they did nothing and that was everything.”

The materials that comprise Cyrilla Mozenter's series *More saints seen* (2002-05) are far from the slippery flash of cellophane; neither do they suggest the need for musical accompaniment. This is because the principle sculptural component of the series (there are drawings too) is wool felt, that great animal-derived insulator. Mozenter uses cream-colored felt, which she occasionally joins to brown or black felt pieces—dark fragments that accent an otherwise monochrome palate. Other additions include wooden ice-cream spoons, toothpicks, small, pearly buttons, and tiny, silvery beads. Binding these materials together is the act of sewing, which the artist experiences as a way of drawing. “A stitch is a mark,” she has said (with characteristic economy). It is the potent, purposeful (near) silence of stitching/drawing that the sculptures embody and emanate, a visual hum waiting for the viewer willing to look closely, to listen in.

Mozenter is drawn to Stein's writings because of what she senses as their “insistence.” The title of the series is adapted from the libretto's various references to an influx of saints, their arrivals hearkened with a surfeit of cadenced tenacity, as in this line: “Many saints seen and in between many saints seen.” Sewing a fabric as thick as felt requires a

trait akin—persistence. When Mozenter sews felt she feels as if she is “aerating it,” bringing air—or life—back into a simple, even base, textile. Another artist, Joseph Beuys, famously valued and utilized felt for its elemental qualities. Mozenter shares this attraction to the material but expresses it differently—assiduously shaping smallish, stitch-laden forms to add to a growing group of characters. It is fitting, therefore, that Mozenter also admires Stein’s writings for their “impolite” and “unmannerly” qualities, which she sees as indistinguishable from their “life-force.” Rather than being woven into an ordered pattern, felt is made by compressing wool into some semblance of contained disorder. It is this compressed energy that Mozenter partially releases, while relying on the order-giving capacities of art to hold disorder in vibrant suspension.

Although sewing for Mozenter is a way of drawing, she also draws on the felt prior to cutting it, and many of her penciled guidelines remain visible in the finished works. Yet most puckishly in evidence (in the insistent and impolite Steinian way) are the grey threads that the artist uses to sew one cutout shape to another. Constructed by means of this exposed process are objects that resemble vessels—vases slender (#10) and wide-mouthed (#29), containers

with scalloped edges (#17), forms that torque sanguinely upward (#4) or droop gently downward (#13). Some of these objects—#27 is a good example—sport slightly grotesque hairy coats of thread.

In a few instances, Mozenter's piece-by-piece approach has resulted in animal shapes—birds mostly (#22, #23)—suggesting a connection to one of the libretto's most memorable lines: "pigeons on the grass alas." A few of the sculptures are wall-mounted (#20, #23) or hang from filaments (#15). The latter works are reminiscent of the symbolic objects (birds among them) that dangle from some Yup'ik masks, one of the many types of ceremonial and religious objects, Western and non-Western, to which Mozenter feels a strong connection. Other visual sources include medieval tapestries, Cycladic figures, African divination figures, kachina dolls, and Fra Angelico's frescoes. In concert with these sources are the human- or saint-like figures amongst *More saints seen*, such as #3, which displays absurdly long and gracefully curved arms. And many of the vessels double as anthropomorphized figures, particularly those to which Mozenter has affixed ice-cream spoon appendages (#1, #5, #6, #30).

The drawings in *More saints seen* are closely allied with two of Mozenter's earlier series of works on paper. The series *Very well saint* (1999-2000), like *More saints seen*, was inspired by Stein's libretto. The series *Cuts and Occasions* (2001), which Mozenter created in collaboration with Dieu Donné Papermill, relied upon the artist's notes from a variety of Stein's books, particularly *Tender Buttons*. A work on paper by Mozenter is almost always a hybrid—part drawing, part erasure (or removal), and part collage. In *Cuts and Occasions*, Mozenter used peanuts and vegetables to instill shapes and patterns in the couched paper pulp. Although these objects were removed from the papers before pressing and drying, they left behind marks, which Mozenter responded to by affixing other objects to the dried sheet. These additions consisted of buttons, beads, beans, and toothpicks. Both the discarded objects and the remaining ones were “occasions,” or opportunities, for intuitive actions, as were the pencil drawings and scissor cuts with which the artist further altered the sheets. Yet it should be noted that Mozenter's occasions are, indeed, occasional—her drawings tend to be sparse, although she works on some of them for months and even years; other drawings she makes quickly and leaves unrevised. In either scenario, intuition calls the shots. Some of the

drawings also include words or phrases lifted from Stein's writings. These textual additions function in concert with, rather than illustrate, the drawings' other compositional components.

Mozenter's exhibition at the Aldrich Museum offers two opportunities for orchestrated actions—to install the objects and drawings as a group, and to present a selection of the objects in succession at the intimate scale of a small book. In the exhibition, the sculptures appear on a low platform, a display solution that is at once theatrical and down-to-earth. Mozenter approaches art making in a disciplined fashion, but her process captures a childlike joy in creativity. Appropriately, the low-platform provides easy viewing for all ages. And in the present volume, the sculptures form an interacting parade of humble, sturdy beings that offer themselves for hand-held contemplation. In both modes of presentation, *More saints seen* perseveringly disassembles the distance between stitching and drawing, handedly dispensing with outmoded hierarchies between the “fine arts” and “women's work.” As Gertrude Stein once observed about cloth in *Tender Buttons*, her paean to the domestic milieu and its objects, “Any occasion shows the best way.”

Vertical images from left:

*More saints seen #5* 2003

wool felt, silk thread, pencil, pearl, button, wooden ice cream spoons

18" x 13" x 5 1/2"

*More saints seen #30* 2005

wool felt, silk thread, pencil, wooden ice cream spoon

12 3/4" x 13" x 13"

*More saints seen #1* 2003

wool felt, silk thread, pencil, wooden ice cream spoon

10 1/2" x 7" x 7"

*More saints seen #10* 2004

wool felt, silk thread, pencil

10 1/2" x 7" x 3 1/2"

Horizontal images from left:

*More saints seen #13* 2004

wool felt, silk thread, pencil, bugle beads, wooden ice cream spoons

7 1/4" x 13" x 7"

*More saints seen #27* 2005

wool felt, silk thread, pencil, wooden ice cream spoons

11 1/4" x 7 1/2" x 4 1/2"

*More saints seen #29* 2005

wool felt, silk thread, pencil, wooden ice cream spoons

8 1/2" x 15 1/2" x 10 3/4"

*More saints seen #17* 2004

wool felt, silk thread, pencil, pearls, bugle beads

10 1/2" x 8 1/2" x 7"

Cyrilla Mozenter's solo exhibitions include *Very well saint* at The Drawing Center, New York, and *Secret Ears* at BAM's Majestic Theater, Brooklyn. Group exhibitions include *Pins and Needles* at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan, Wisconsin, and *Endpapers: Drawings 1890-1900 and 1990-2000* at the Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase, New York. She has been an artist-in-residence at Dieu Donn  Papermill, New York, and the Instituto Municipal de Arte e Cultura—Rioarte, Rio de Janeiro, and has received two fellowships from the New York Foundation for the Arts. Her work is in the collections of the Arkansas Arts Center, Birmingham Museum of Art, Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York Public Library—Print Collection, and University of Massachusetts, Amherst. She lives and works in New York City.

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