

# Kathryn Clark's *Foreclosure Quilts*

by  
Gabriel  
Craig

Many Americans know someone who has been affected by the foreclosure crisis. In the media it is presented broadly, referencing far away banks, numbers, and policies. By presenting such a pervasive problem in general terms, the real trauma is blunted. The crisis, which has directly affected millions of people (about 11 percent of the US population), is easily compartmentalized and filed away.\* This level of removal from our nation's challenges is emblematic of our epoch; the deluge of media we encounter desensitizes us. Despite our connectedness and informedness in the digital age, we remain impotent to catalyze solutions to our systemic problems. Americans today can easily recognize a gulf between our aptitude to identify problems and our ability to solve them. Enter Kathryn Clark, whose *Foreclosure Quilts* exploit the humanizing ability of textiles to ground this abstract problem in the resolutely personal realm of the domestic.



ABOVE: KATHRYN CLARK's *Cleveland Foreclosure Quilt* in the design phase. Trace paper allows her to work more abstractly layer by layer from the original map.

LEFT: Screen image of the Northeast Ohio Community and Neighborhood Data for Organizing (NEO CANDO) graphic information system (offered through Case Western Reserve University) used to create KATHRYN CLARK's *Cleveland Foreclosure Quilt*.

Clark began her creative life as an architect and urban planner, working for several years designing New Urbanist communities that sought to create more sustainable and humane suburban environments. This involved creating dense, mixed-use developments to encourage walkable and less auto-centric communities. The limiting of sprawl—or the effective management of it—is a major goal of this type of planning. For Clark, the impulse to mediate and humanize the suburban environment resonated with idealism. Sailing through her career as a planner, Clark's idealistic (even idyllic) pursuit ran aground on the financial liabilities of an architectural office and the burgeoning foreclosure crisis. She soon began to see her involvement in suburban development as contributing to a new and more pressing problem, rather than simply solving an existing one. As an industry insider, Clark could see the gathering clouds but was helpless to avert the storm. In 2004, she quit her job as an urban planner to begin a second career as an artist.

Over the past decade, Clark has used fiber and textile techniques to produce several bodies of work, both individually and collaboratively, that deal with formal, gestural, and process-based themes in a painting discourse. These works are competent and well-composed, but they are disconnected from her previous life—perhaps quite intentionally. Clark, as with many artists attracted to domestic forms of craft production, at first hesitated to fully embrace quilting as a fitting medium; the modernist bias against “low” forms of cultural expression running deep. But craft was familiar to Clark. She grew up sitting on the floor of

**RIGHT: KATHRYN CLARK *Cleveland Foreclosure Quilt*** Cotton, linen, recycled denim, embroidery thread, handstitching, 60" x 25", 2011.  
Detail **LEFT TOP**. Photos by the artist.



her mother's weaving studio watching the shuttle pass back and forth. Her father was an architect. The influence of both parent's vocations is evident in her development.

As the foreclosure crisis spiraled out of control, Clark found she could no longer sit idly by. The *Foreclosure Quilts* were born out of indignant frustration. These new works took their form from foreclosure maps that marked the disintegration of neighborhoods in Atlanta, Cleveland, Detroit, Las Vegas, Phoenix, and beyond. Instead of process, composition, and formalism playing a dominant role in the work, Clark's design decisions now reflected her socially charged subject matter through the careful introduction of potentially metaphoric materials. Tattered edges are reflective of decay, reverse appliquéd cheesecloth becomes haunting absence, and scraps of handstitched red cloth read as fragmented crisis. The very domestic nature of the quilt itself amplifies the critique embedded in the work as Clark records the crumbling of households from the inside out. With her *Foreclosure Quilts*, Clark returned to the "neighborhood" that she had spent so much time developing and caring for in her previous life as a planner. Instead of participating in the decline of a destined-to-fail suburban development, Clark's focus on presenting collapse is a compulsive and poetic ode to the deteriorating fabric of each community.

My own relationship to the American foreclosure crisis was enhanced last August by a trip to Morningside in Detroit, Michigan, to see the area from which Clark appropriated one of her foreclosure maps. I live in Detroit but I had never been to this neighborhood; sadly, many of Detroit's neighborhoods have few remaining cultural destinations. I have, however, seen much of the city—from incredible decay to wide-open prairies. I own a vacant lot that has been redeveloped as a productive garden. Unlike other struggling sections of the city filled with tract housing, Morningside is populated by pre-WWII, architect-designed homes that have long been maintained, some only recently falling into disrepair. Abandonment had crept across the neighborhood like a disease. The destruction that foreclosure had wreaked on the community over

*RIGHT TOP:* Numerous vacant lots can be seen in this 2012 map of Detroit's Morningside neighborhood, featured in KATHRYN CLARK'S *Detroit Foreclosure Quilt*. Photo: Google Earth.

*RIGHT:* Abandoned and dilapidated homes in Detroit's Morningside neighborhood, 2012. Photo: Gabriel Craig.





**KATHRYN CLARK** *Detroit Foreclosure Quilt* Cheesecloth, linen, cotton, quilting thread, handstitching, 44" x 22", 2011.

the past five years was blatant. It was very moving. I couldn't help but think how predatory lending and adjustable rate mortgages were killing this neighborhood that had survived race riots, white flight, auto-industry decline, and the 1980s crack epidemic. Here was Morningside, a meager shell of the community it once was, crippled by foreclosure, of all things. Beyond affecting individual families, foreclosure had touched everyone here even if his or her own home had not been foreclosed on.

While Clark's imagery is abstracted from neighborhoods like Morningside, one aspect of the quilts that should give pause is their idealized depiction. The undeniable attractiveness, attentive design, and material execution of the quilts make them incongruent with the physical and social decay of the neighborhoods being represented. What is Clark's responsibility to reflect the clearly negative connotation of her subject?

To expect a quilt to be something other than a quilt is, perhaps, unfair. After all, there are inherent limitations to the medium. For example, narrative quilts have long been used to record stories, but as viewers we do not expect or even demand detailed and accurate reporting from pieced cloth. It is not the cultural role of the artist to cover the foreclosure crisis in minute detail, but rather that task belongs to the news media. It falls to governments and banks to reform policy and fix the economy. The artist can simply humanize and present the phenomenon. This presentation of issues outside the normal channels of information dissemination allows viewers to encounter the world with their guard down, to see issues from an alternate perspective. Further, it is a plurality of voices speaking to a problem that creates a full cultural spectrum.

The indirectness of a work of artistic merit allows it to become palatable, as something beautiful or challenging, the content only having a latent effect. In quilting foreclosure in American cities, Clark finds a powerful wealth of authenticity reflecting her own identity as an artist, architect, planner, and cultural commentator.

\*The percentage of affected Americans was calculated using current US Population estimates (314 million), data provided by RealtyTrac (10.7 million foreclosures since 2008), and US census data from 2010 (2.59 persons per household on average).

Kathryn Clark's website is [www.kathrynclark.com](http://www.kathrynclark.com). Her *Foreclosure Quilts* will be on display at Gallery Nord ([www.gallerynord.com](http://www.gallerynord.com)) during in•ter•face, the 17th International Surface Design Association conference in San Antonio, TX (June 6–9, 2013). To read the brochure and register online, visit [www surfacedesign.org/2013conference](http://www surfacedesign.org/2013conference).

—*Gabriel Craig is a metalsmith, writer, and craft activist living and working in Detroit, MI. He has lectured throughout the country and his writing has appeared in American Craft, FiberArts, and Metalsmith magazines. [www.gabrielcraigmetalsmith.com](http://www.gabrielcraigmetalsmith.com)*