



BABY BLANKET

Drunell Levinson (b. 1951)

New York; 1996

Aluminum-wrapped condoms with embroidery thread; 44 × 33"

Gift of the artist, 1998.3.1

Photo by Gavin Ashworth, New York

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

“I began using condoms in my quilts because quilts are seen as feminine objects, and I was seeking a method whereby I might degender quilts. I selected the Gold Coin brand of condoms because of the shape and color,” says the artist Drunell Levinson about her textile, *Baby Blanket*.

Interested in updating the art of quilting, Levinson uses idiosyncratic materials for her artworks. She has other motives as well: in this case, she wanted to honor the technique in quilting of using three layers (a packaged condom does this). The artist also wanted to explore unusual material in response to the then-current dialogue about material in contemporary art, made especially vibrant with the exhibition “Sensation” presented by the Brooklyn Museum of Art, which included a work using elephant dung by the British artist Chris Ofili.

By the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, condoms became a mainstay in contemporary sexual practices, not only as a birth-control device but to protect against the AIDS virus. This quilt is loaded with the symbolism of the cycle of life (birth, life, death) that condoms represent to us today.

RESOURCES

American Folk Art Museum:

www.folkartmuseum.org

Cerny, Charlene, and Suzanne Seriff, eds. *Recycled, Re-Seen: Folk Art from the Global Scrap Heap*. New York: Harry N. Abrams with Museum of International Folk Art, 1996.

Chase, Pattie, with Mimi Dolbier. *The Contemporary Quilt: New American Quilts and Fabric Art*. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1978.

International Quilt Study Center at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln: www.quiltstudy.org

National Museum of American History, Washington, D.C., “Quilts, Counterpanes & Throws: A Selection from the National Collection”: www.americanhistory.si.edu/collections/quilts

The Quilt Index: www.quiltindex.org

Warren, Elizabeth V., and Sharon L. Eisenstat. *Glorious American Quilts: The Quilt Collection of the Museum of American Folk Art*. New York: Penguin Studio in association with Museum of American Folk Art, 1996.

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QUESTIONS FOR CAREFUL LOOKING

- What is happening here?
- What can we say about the way this object was made?
- How does this quilt compare with other quilts you have encountered?

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

- Artist Drunell Levinson has said that she began using condoms in her work as a way to degender quilts. In doing so, how does she challenge notions of traditional gender roles?
- Levinson chose condoms as her material in part to mirror traditional quilt construction. How do these condoms relate to traditional quilting techniques? What other conceptual relationships do the object and the materials used to construct it have to each other?
- What roles do the themes of birth, life, and death play in *Baby Blanket*?
- Do you think that a baby blanket is a strong or appropriate symbol for the AIDS epidemic? Does this piece symbolize any other issues?

QUESTIONS FOR CONTEXT

- How are traditional quilts constructed?
- Can you think of other artistic responses to the AIDS epidemic? What do you know about these projects?
- What can you say about how the issue of AIDS is treated in different countries? Who has access to treatment and who does not?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

- Have students choose social topics about which they feel strongly, and ask them to create posters or video-based Public Service Announcements stating their positions on their chosen issues.
- Ask students to explore the idea of metaphor by creating their own “quilts” or sculptures, combining found objects to make something with new or unexpected meanings.
- Ask students to explore the effect AIDS has had on the arts, considering works that address the crisis and artists who have lived with the illness.