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## Unraveling the CAFAM Yarn Bomb (<http://www.kcet.org/arts/artbound/counties/los-angeles/yarn-bombing-los-angeles-cafam-granny-squared.html>)

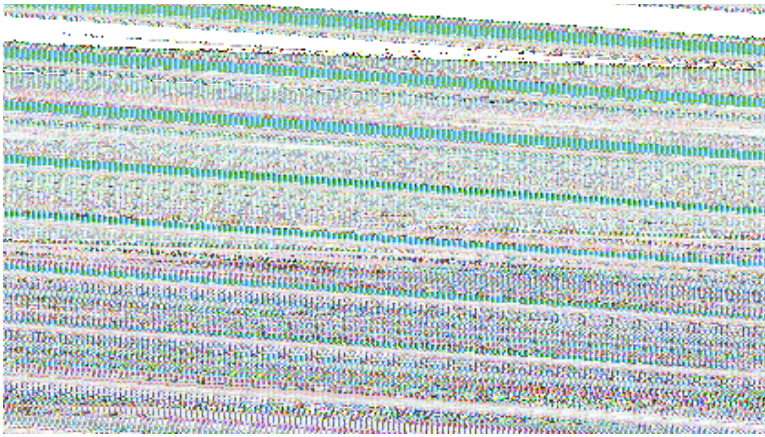
Janet Owen Driggs (<http://www.kcet.org/arts/artbound/columnists/janet-owen-driggs-1/>)



Have you seen the [Craft and Folk Art Museum \(http://www.cafam.org/\)](http://www.cafam.org/) recently? Its red brick walls and white chimneys always offer a contrast to the Miracle Mile's streamline modern architecture, but now the frontage is covered in fifteen thousand handmade "granny squares." Stitched together, they dress the building in the kind of vibrant but nuanced color blocks that one might expect had Paul Klee and Andy Warhol ever produced woolly offspring.

The result of a local call for crocheted squares that went international, "[CAFAM Granny Squared](http://cafamgrannysquared.weebly.com/)" (<http://cafamgrannysquared.weebly.com/>) is the work of "knit graffiti collective" [Yarn Bombing Los Angeles \(http://www.yarnbombinglosangeles.com/\)](http://www.yarnbombinglosangeles.com/) (YBLA) and square-makers from 25 countries internationally, as well as 49 of the United States. ([Whatever happened to Wyoming? \(http://cafamgrannysquared.weebly.com/participants.html\)](http://cafamgrannysquared.weebly.com/participants.html)) The work will remain *in situ* at CAFAM until September.

Like



When looking at the museum's façade, covered in neon yarn, Pop Art immediately comes to mind. This is partly because of YBLA's bold, jolly graphics; but the main similarity lies in its statement. Just as Pop Art used the imagery and aesthetics of popular culture to challenge the traditions of fine art, YBLA is using the materials and methodologies of popular craft to mount a similar assault.

It's a David and Goliath situation, as the relative scale and status of tiny CAFAM and its behemoth neighbor-across-the-street, the [Los Angeles County Museum of Art](http://lacma.org/) (<http://lacma.org/>) (LACMA), suggest. And it's funny too, in that seaside postcard way that juxtaposes the skinny and the fat.

The humor is in the mismatch, which is well illustrated by the architecture of the respective museums. LACMA's nine substantial buildings are largely designed by architectural "greats," including William L. Pereira and Renzo Piano, with a [new design forthcoming by Peter Zumthor](http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/culture/la-et-0602-lacma-design-20130602.0.6630482.story) (<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/culture/la-et-0602-lacma-design-20130602.0.6630482.story>). Although individually idiosyncratic, the buildings share an aesthetic of institutional cool. Spacious, shiny, hard-edged, and hard to navigate, they are intended to indicate that visitors are entering a space removed from common concerns.

In contrast, Gilbert Stanley Underwood, who is best known for [his National Park lodges](http://www.nationalparkstraveler.com/parks/grand-teton-national-park/gilbert-stanley-underwood-and-jackson-lake-lodge-grand-teton-national-park) (<http://www.nationalparkstraveler.com/parks/grand-teton-national-park/gilbert-stanley-underwood-and-jackson-lake-lodge-grand-teton-national-park>), designed CAFAM in 1930 as a mixed-use commercial space. Combining colonial and European style cues, the dormer-windowed building radiates an impression of familiar domesticity. So familiar, in fact, that comparison to a dollhouse is inevitable; and I suspect Mr. Underwood went of his way to indicate a space that is special only because it is so exceptionally "ordinary" -- exceptionally welcoming, dependable, and safe.



"Granny Squared," the installation process. | Photo: Martha Benedict.

Operating as caricatures for the 20th century's tussle between "old" and "new," CAFAM and LACMA signpost an abundance of related binaries, which history and culture tell us are mutually exclusive, with one having less value than the other in each pair: domestic and public, female and male, body and mind, fiction and truth, vernacular and formal, low and high, and of course -- even without taking the functions of the buildings into consideration -- craft and art.

"Granny Squared" strides into this hierarchical context like the character in Jenny Joseph's poem "[Warning](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8cACbzantq)," (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8cACbzantq>) who vows:

*"When I am an old woman I shall wear purple  
With a red hat which doesn't go and doesn't suit me."*

Rather than attacking or ignoring the assumptions that underpin the architectures in question, "Granny Squared" embraces them all, with gusto.

Taking its cue from some of LACMA's modern masterpieces, "Granny Squared" is monumental. Made in wool by hand however, it lacks the machine precision of, say, Tony Smith's "Smoke," or the "untouched by human hand" weightiness of Michael Heizer's "Levitated Mass."

Influenced by formalism, particularly as it applied to abstract painting, YBLA has, for this piece, rejected the representation and iconography that flourish in [other examples of its work](http://www.yarnbombinglosangeles.com/forest-for-the-trees--ave-50.html) (<http://www.yarnbombinglosangeles.com/forest-for-the-trees--ave-50.html>). Emphasizing compositional elements, the collective has approached its yarn squares as pieces of color, which it has arranged in geometric patterns.





YBLA-er Carol Zou lays out granny squares. | Photo courtesy of YBLA.

Although the pieces were generated through a public request for single-hued, 5" squares in a narrow range of colors, as YBLA-er Frances Talbott-White explains: "the basic elemental unit has infinite variations." Revealing something of that variety, collective member Judy Richards points out an area of the work (inside CAFAM's left window, if you're looking from the street) that's dedicated to an arrangement of "yellow" squares. From baby bonnet primrose, through lemon green, to neon and gold, this patch takes an analytical approach to color perception that's remarkably suggestive of Josef Albers.



Yellow granny squares. | Photo: Susie Nicholson.

I could go on. But such a list would be redundant. The point is that "Granny Squared" engages fine art concerns using methods and materials that are largely antithetical to the fine art cannon, while exaggerating the Underwood building's existing "coziness." (Is anything more apparently "cozy" than a "granny," in either the wool or the flesh varieties?)

In so doing, the piece broadcasts the low status that craft enjoys in the art vs. craft binary, and signals a challenge to the high status bestowed upon its neighbor down the street.

It's not an aggressive challenge. YBLA -- or at least those members of the collective who care about such things -- intentionally wears a variety of high art "hats" in a fashion that is both conciliatory and provocative. Arzu Arda Kosar, YBLA's initiator, compares the situation to that of an immigrant faced with the question: "to assimilate or not?" The craft world, she explains, has its own language and aesthetic; should we use those "or play by the guy's rules"? "CAFAM Granny Squared"

says: "you can take us seriously because we play with form and color on a vertical plane," but we do it with granny squares. "We use a combination of all the rules."

But where do the "rules" come from, and why is such a challenge necessary?

Once upon a time, in the medieval past, art and craft weren't divided in this way. As described by Umberto Eco, the word art "meant construction, whether it was of a ship or of a building, a painting or a hammer." Under the influence of Renaissance thinking however, the more utile of Eco's constructions fell out of the category "art" altogether, and the remainder became divided into fine art on the one hand, and the decorative arts and craft on the other.

The division became philosophically absolute in 1790, when Immanuel Kant's distinction between "high" aesthetic objects made by "genius," and lowly useful things made by technicians, provided the foundation of "art for art's sake": the idea that art is only truly "art" when it is not tethered to a didactic, moral, or utilitarian function.

Taking things further, Modernism abstracted art from everyday concerns, while High Modernism aspired to an entirely self-referential autonomy. Only by practicing in a purely formalist sphere, removed from the "contamination" of ordinary life, could the fine arts achieve the truth of their "purely visual" essence.

The formalism that held sway in America when LACMA began its architectural project in 1961, comprised a heady brew. With truth, freedom, beauty, and purity aligned on the "art" side of a cultural Berlin Wall, craft became positioned as a skill set for the construction of necessary objects, most usually for remuneration, or a trivial pastime for women, children, and the recuperating sick.



Making "CAFAM Granny Squared." | Photo courtesy of YBLA.

Like cars on a funicular railway, art -- specifically painting and drawing -- rose to the rarefied heights of its current cultural, social, and economic status, while craft became devalued. Despite appearances to the contrary however, there was nothing inevitable about this five hundred-year ascension. Alternative directions advocated the reintegration of art and life at many points along the way.

To name just three of the more influential: blossoming in the second half of the nineteenth century, the Arts and Crafts Movement led by William Morris understood that art is not divisible from its socio-political context, and aspired to an egalitarian society in which art-making was integral to daily life.

Influenced by Russia's early twentieth century Constructivists -- who announced the end of art as an activity separate from life, and applied their skills in service to social progress -- the Bauhaus sought to unify art, craft, and technology in a single vision applicable to the needs of a new society.

Thirdly, at a time when formalism dominated the art system, a number of feminist artists asserted the historic and ongoing significance of female creativity, and challenged the institutionalized sexism of the art system by embracing materials, techniques, and motifs associated with women's work.

As far as I know, not all of the YBLA-ers are advocates for William Morris, Vladimir Tatlin, or radical feminism, but YBLA nonetheless swims in the slipstream of their challenge to a mainline art/craft divide. The genealogy is more evident in the case of "CAFAM Granny Squared" than it has been in other YBLA works -- not least because "Granny Squared" offers such a thoughtful response to its location -- but all of their works are energized by a refusal to accept the extraction of art from everyday life.





Making "CAFAM Granny Squared." | Photo courtesy of YBLA.

In the last 15 years or so, [yarn bombing](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yarn_bombing) ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yarn\\_bombing](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yarn_bombing)) has emerged in Europe and the U.S. from a soup of contemporary trends, including D-I-Y, interventionist, and graffiti cultures, a preference for embodied interaction, and "[popular third-wave discourse](http://www.thirdspace.ca/journal/article/view/pentney/210)," (<http://www.thirdspace.ca/journal/article/view/pentney/210>) which "aims to celebrate and reclaim the domestic arts as a way to fuse fun with politics."

YBLA grew out of a summer 2011 event at Santa Monica's [18th Street Arts Center](http://18thstreet.org/) (<http://18thstreet.org/>). Organized by Arzu Arda Kosar and Heather Hoggan, co-president of the [Arroyo Arts Collective](http://www.arroyoartscollective.org/) (<http://www.arroyoartscollective.org/>), "[Yarn Bombing 18th Street](http://www.yarnbombinglosangeles.com/yarnbombing-18th-street.html)" (<http://www.yarnbombinglosangeles.com/yarnbombing-18th-street.html>) presented "the work of over 50 individuals that push the knit/crochet envelope in public art format."

Since 2011, the collective has met on a monthly basis at CAFAM for "[Stitch 'n Bitch](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stitch_'n_Bitch)" ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stitch\\_'n\\_Bitch](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stitch_'n_Bitch)) sessions, and [crafted in markets, galleries, and malls](http://www.yarnbombinglosangeles.com/calendar.html) (<http://www.yarnbombinglosangeles.com/calendar.html>) to invite participation. Some of the members are trained in the fine arts, but many are not. The majority are women. In addition to all-group actions, members regularly conduct individual interventions. Powered by personal connections and online networks, YBLA's decision-making process is largely horizontal.

The object "Granny Squared" is a flamboyant flag and a symbolic challenge. It highlights the continuing exclusivity of "the Canon" -- artworks deemed to be Western culture's most significant, for which institutions such as LACMA serve as portals -- but it will not dent the foundations upon which that exclusivity rests. Considered as a process however, "Granny Squared" begins to get more interesting.

In 1877, [William Morris forecast](http://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1882/hopes/chapters/chapter1.htm) (<http://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1882/hopes/chapters/chapter1.htm>) that the continued exclusion of craft would be "ill for the Arts altogether." The "lesser" of the arts, he predicted, would become "trivial, mechanical, [and] unintelligent," while "the greater, however they may be practiced for a while by men of great minds and wonder-working hands...become nothing but dull adjuncts to unmeaning pomp or ingenious toys for a few rich or idle men."



Some of "Granny Squared's" makers. | Photo: Martha Benedict.

In YBLA's hands, craft and art are re-knit together, art is made useful and decorative again, and art-making becomes integral to the lives of many more people than those that have been able to make it thanks to an expensive education. Diverse networks for the co-production of art, knowledge, intimacy, and action grow. And the edges of Kant's individual artist genius -- who is, quite literally, a pillar of the establishment -- start to soften and run.

At a time when the LA Unified School District has [cut its arts education funding by 76%](http://www.scpr.org/blogs/education/2012/10/10/10421/lausd-arts-funding-cut-76-five-years/) (<http://www.scpr.org/blogs/education/2012/10/10/10421/lausd-arts-funding-cut-76-five-years/>), when the webpage for LACMA's permanent "Contemporary Art" holdings lists [thirty-two male and twelve female artists](http://collections.lacma.org/search/site/?front=1&f%5B0%5D=im_field_has_image%3Atrue&f%5B1%5D=im_field_curatorial_area%3A37) ([http://collections.lacma.org/search/site/?front=1&f%5B0%5D=im\\_field\\_has\\_image%3Atrue&f%5B1%5D=im\\_field\\_curatorial\\_area%3A37](http://collections.lacma.org/search/site/?front=1&f%5B0%5D=im_field_has_image%3Atrue&f%5B1%5D=im_field_curatorial_area%3A37)), and when decisions in L.A.'s art museum world are made by [a very small number of very wealthy people](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/08/arts/design/08broad.html?_r=0) ([http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/08/arts/design/08broad.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/08/arts/design/08broad.html?_r=0)), "Granny Squared" is not so much a matter of craft claiming admission to the museum as it is part of a wider effort to dissolve the foundation upon which "the Museum" is built: the wall between art and life, and all its concomitant hierarchical binaries.

Celebrating a value system as different from that exemplified by LACMA's architecture as wool is from bronze, "CAFAM Granny Squared" insists that art and craft exist in a continuum of human creativity. It affirms that art is not significant to the degree to which it can be separated from the everyday, but to the degree to which it is integrated into ordinary life. And it does so in public, wearing a red hat. What's not to love about a granny?

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Top Image: "Granny Squared," the completed installation. | Photo: Arzu Arda Kosar.



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#### About the Author

Janet Owen Driggs is a writer, artist and curator who, along with Matthew Owen Driggs, frequently participates in the collective identity "Owen Driggs." Her interests focus on those physical sites where one meets the other, which ... [MORE](http://www.kcet.org/arts/artbound/columnists/janet-owen-driggs-1/) (<http://www.kcet.org/arts/artbound/columnists/janet-owen-driggs-1/>) ▶

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