

statement

Embroidery and Found Photographs: Jane Waggoner Deschner

The ultimate wisdom of the photographic image is to say: "There is the surface. Now—think—or rather feel, intuit—what is beyond it, what the reality must be like if it looks this way." Photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy.

~Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, 1977

For thirty years, I have utilized found photographic images in my artmaking—found in slick magazines, they were the material of cut-and-paste photomontages. During graduate school, I became fascinated with vernacular photography, especially in its most ubiquitous (and human) forms. For almost a decade, I have collected, studied and altered early- to mid-Twentieth Century snapshots and studio portraits, movie stills and news photos. Throughout nearly twenty series of more than seven hundred artworks, I am uncovering what this rich repository can teach about the interconnectedness of human nature. My latest work concentrates on the interplay of amateur photography with embroidered quotes and drawings.

Both embroidery and vernacular photography are marginalized mediums. For centuries, embroidery was the primary creative expression practiced by everyday people. Being a purely interpretive medium, it was a means of poetic and philosophical release for many women who had no other outlets for their idealistic feelings. The quotes and symbols I began embroidering into the photos in 2007 gave me a chance to moralize, in sampler-esque form, on some of the thoughts and lessons my maternal self needed to share—accountability, acceptance, love, honesty, compassion, integrity, gratitude and generosity.

The snapshot (is) the form of photography that is most defined by love.

~Nan Golden, *I'll be Your Mirror*, 1996

In the late 1800s, people were first able to take their own photographs. Since then, snapshooting has become a widespread act of creative expression practiced by virtually everyone. Studio portraits taken by quasi-professionals commemorate important life events. Each photograph is a snippet from the vast fabric of lives recorded on billions of scraps of paper. Family photos represent the universality (and interchangeability) of our everyday lives. Though they often do not depict the way things (really) were, they show the way we wished our familial relationships and ourselves could have been—pointing to a bigger truth about all of us.

Embroidery inscribes words and images; sewing binds photographs together. Stitching by hand into these photos I puncture and suture, wound and heal, simultaneously, meditatively, creating an intimate relationship between paper and thread. I am connecting with generations of ordinary needlecrafters and amateur photographers before me.

Creating garments from stitched-together snapshots, "wearable photo albums," is a recent direction. I craft a narrative in the snapshots I choose, sometimes enhanced by an embroidered quote or image. The garment adds to the metaphor of ways we visualize ourselves (as we do in the photographs we choose to take).

We all snap photos of people and things we love and times we want to remember. In a studio, we hire a photographer to immortalize us looking our best. When I alter a photograph's original intent and appearance, the viewer is invited to *deduce, speculate and fantasize*. I connect us through the common photograph—I complete it by teasing out a common humanity not confined by time, place or circumstance.

By skillfully combining anonymous vernacular photography and quotes by famous personages, Ms. Deschner has created embroidered works of art which are clever, fun, and unique. This is an artist well worth watching.

~Robert E. Jackson, whose collection was the subject of an exhibition and catalog at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, *The Art of the American Snapshot, 1888–1978*