I wish everyone I know could see Ruth Adler’s new show “FABRIC LANDS”.

The pieces are painterly. Except they’re not. The format of the work is mostly square and rectangular (as in most paintings), but it’s three dimensional and kinetic. There are no canvasses as such, but fabric is sewn, pinned, glued, splattered with paint, to create the appearance of a canvas. Most of the *paintings* are sewn with fabrics, ribbons, and threads that can be found in any rag bag and remainder bin. They explode with colour, and assign meaning to the common materials of everyday life.

The fabrics all seem innocent enough… or do they? Did Ruth want that slashed and splattered piece of twill to remind me of a child’s room? Did she mean that jagged-edged patterned cotton to resemble a woman’s hijab? And what about that white innocuous sheeting… is that what was used to make the robes of a white supremacist group? Ruth seems to be saying culture doesn’t live in a silo any more, and maybe it never did.

Are we humans sewn together in our common experience? Are all rich people alike? Why are poor women the ones who sew things? In Canada, why do fabric stores still exist, when most of us buy fast fashion? There is an unbroken line running from 3400 B.C. when fabric was first used, to now, but how did the means of production change? Do we care?

Fabrics, Ruth seems to be saying, are like immigrants and refugees; they come from everywhere and they can be found in every corner of the world. How else do African wax prints end up in an artist’s work? But it goes deeper: those wax prints favoured by so many Africans were actually manufactured by a Dutch entrepreneur in Africa in 1846. Today, nearly all African textile print factories have shut down because they can be made more cheaply in the port of Qingdao in China. Everything--even a humble half-metre of fabric--is political.

After you leave the show, you will feel lifted by the colour, and the art, and the gorgeousness of the pieces. You might also leave questioning your tea towel and every other cloth item in your life. Where is it from? Who made it? Did someone else own it first? Who sold it to you? Were any women and children harmed in the process?

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