



“My goal is not to make things pretty,” says Los Angeles-based artist **Karen Hampton**, “but to make pieces that have content.” Her textiles incorporate techniques ranging from embroidery to digital printing.

# Social Fabric

*Karen Hampton weaves stories from the past –  
her own and her ancestors’ – into her multifaceted textiles.*

STORY BY *Liz Logan* PORTRAITS BY *Douglas Kirkland*



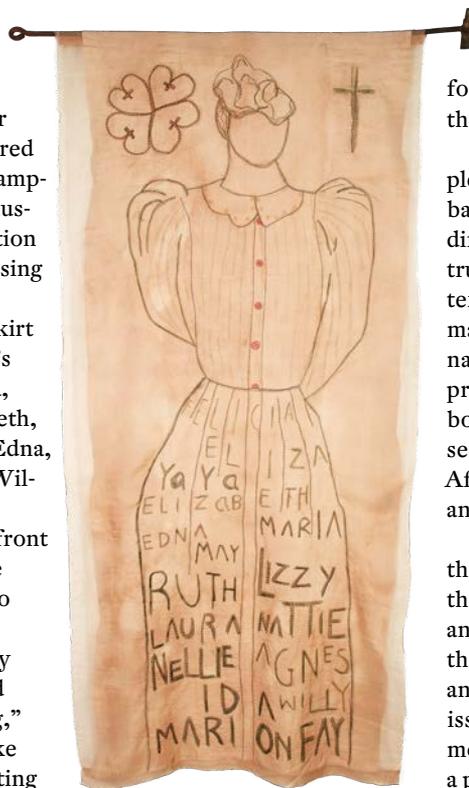


**A**S THE 21ST CENTURY turned, Karen Hampton got wind of some long-lost family documents, revealing ancestors she never knew she had. Her work hasn't been the same since.

In the documents, Hampton discovered one of her forebears, a woman named Flora. Born a slave in Florida in the late 1700s, Flora had her freedom – and 500 acres of land – by the early 1800s. George J.F. Clarke, the son of British settlers, bought her and granted her freedom, and together they had eight children. Clarke also ensured the children's freedom, educated them, and left them, collectively, an inheritance of 33,000 acres of land.

*Flora's Daughters* (2002) is Hampton's portrait of her ancestor, pictured in a collared dress with an ornate hat. Hampton laid silk organza over muslin to suggest Flora's transition from slave to landowner. Using indigo and cotton weaving yarn, she inscribed on the skirt the names of some of Flora's female descendants: Felicia, YaYa, Eliza, Nattie, Elizabeth, May, Maria, Ruth, Lizzy, Edna, Agnes, Nellie, Laura, Ida, Willy, Marion, and Fay. These women would come to confront racism as they defended the family's land rights well into the 20th century.

"The women in my family took so much battering, and they were incredibly strong," Hampton says. "It seems like my ancestors were just waiting



for me to come along, to bring them back to life."

The piece is just one example of how the Los Angeles-based artist weaves together difficult historical and personal truths in her complex, startling textiles, using a broad array of materials and techniques, from natural dyeing to digital photo printing on fabric. Through both art and scholarship, she seeks to honor and examine African American history, with an eye toward healing.

"Each time my weft crosses the warp or my needle pierces the cloth, I reach through another layer of scorched earth that slavery has left behind, and I attempt to reframe the issues of race that haunt our modern lives," she wrote in a paper, *Stitching Race*, for a



LEFT:  
**Abolitionists Tale**, 2015, raffia cloth, ground pigment, linen paper, raffia thread, 3.25 x 5.75 ft.



RIGHT:  
**Spirit Dance**, 2012, dye-sublimation print, repurposed Kuba cloth, raffia cloth, fiber-reactive dyes, raffia thread, 3.25 x 3.7 ft.



LEFT:  
**The Model**, 2011, digital and color-field prints, silk organza, linen, silk thread, 24.5 x 22 in.

FAR LEFT:  
**Flora's Daughters**, 2002, silk organza, cotton, indigo dye, branding iron, cotton thread, 7.2 x 4.3 ft.

Textile Society of America symposium in 2012.

Her own life has also been about “healing and gaining strength.” At 58, she says, “I’m coming into my power.”

Hampton grew up in a middle-class neighborhood in Los Angeles during the civil rights movement. She was among the first group of children in California selected for

a desegregation busing program. She attended school in the affluent Bel Air neighborhood, where all of the children, aside from those on her bus, were white.

“It was the most beautiful school in Los Angeles, and I was a very lucky little girl,” she recalls. “But I learned almost nothing about my own heritage there.”

Her early encounters with racism inspired some of her pieces, such as *Female Negro* (2000), a strip of woven linen and synthetic fiber. She burned the title into the fabric with a chemical technique called *devoré* (also known as burnout). “It’s about the need to be seen,” she says. “I remember the sadness that would go through me in those situations, when I thought, ‘My father is as

important as their father, so why is it that we are Negroes and less than?’”

Hampton’s parents divorced when she was 10, and her mother became an alcoholic. Her grandmother and her great-aunt, already her primary caregivers because both parents worked, became even more important. At home, drawn to craft from a young age, Hampton learned to sew and embroider. In high school, she embroidered all of her clothes, in keeping with ’70s style.

At 17, she left Los Angeles for Oakland to attend Laney College but stayed only a year. She then taught art at various venues and made rag rugs and jackets, a project she later abandoned after disappointing sales. In the late ’80s, she returned to

school to study art and anthropology at New College of California in San Francisco. After college, she apprenticed for a year and half with Ida Grae, a master weaver and a leading authority on natural dyes.

After graduating from New College in the early '90s, she decided to focus on her artwork, even if she couldn't make a living at it. "After that, everything was an investigation of what was true for me," she recalls. But after a divorce, she struggled to balance her ambition with raising two sons as a single mother. Living in an artists' warehouse in Oakland helped, and she kept her artistic practice steady.

Her decision to go to grad school came in the mid-'90s, after she attended a textile conference and found the same dismaying lack of diversity she had noticed 20 years before; out of 500 attendees, only four were African American – especially disappointing since African textiles were a major topic on the program. Around the same time, after a lecture she gave on her work, someone asked, "Why is it that I see looms only in white people's homes?" The question haunted her. "It was like an epiphany," she says. She realized she could research the subject in grad school, and she decided to focus on slavery and African American textile history at the University of California, Davis.

It was an area of scholarship that had been largely ignored. "I wasn't really interested in writing, but I had to take up the charge," she says. While African American quilting traditions are well known,

Hampton is not only a weaver but also a scholar of African American textile history. "I wasn't really interested in writing," she says, "but I had to take up the charge."

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Hampton questioned why African Americans were so underrepresented in the weaving community. As she wrote in a paper, “The history of female slaves and early American textile production had been forgotten.”

As she studied slavery, Hampton used her art to respond to its legacy. In 2000, she created *Spirits Cry*, with images from early 20th-century postcards of African American babies sitting atop bales of cotton. She applied the images with transfer liquid onto woven and indigo-dyed linen and cotton. The title of the piece is burned into the bottom with devoré, leaving ghostly, tattered threads and gaping holes. “It’s all about the children crying,” she explains.

Her studies prepared her well to research her own ancestors; as luck would have it, the centuries-old family documents came to light shortly after her graduation. Finding threads of inspiration in their stories became a cathartic journey for Hampton that lasted more than a decade. She made numerous portraits, incorporating archival photos, stitching in text from period documents and using fabrics and dyes that were true to the era.

Last year, when she was offered a solo exhibition at the Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art in Clinton, New York, Hampton expanded her historical research to abolitionists, since many had lived in the region. Her portrait of Angelina Grimké (2015) includes a photo digitally printed on two layers of fabric – a technique she adopted in the late 2000s – as well as hand-stitching of small, playful cartoons and tree branches stemming from Grimké’s face. The cartoons are based on the announcement of Grimké’s 1838 wedding to fellow abolitionist Theodore Dwight Weld.

“I love Angelina Grimké and Theodore Weld. Their wedding was filled with brown



Photos: Courtesy of the artist



LEFT:  
**Transcendence**,  
2014, dye-sublimation  
print, raffia cloth, pig-  
ment, linen and raffia  
thread, 8.5 x 2.3 ft.

FAR LEFT:  
**Lady w/ Watches**,  
2012, archival and color-  
field ink-jet prints, silk  
organza, linen, silk  
thread, 22 x 13.6 in.



ABOVE:  
**Spirits Cry**, 2000,  
woven linen and cotton,  
indigo dye, copy  
transfer, 3 x 4.3 ft.

LEFT:  
**Angelina Grimké**,  
2015, dye-sublimation  
and archival prints,  
polyester twill, silk  
organza, silk thread,  
24.75 x 15 in.

TOP:  
“I think of the fabric  
of the person as I’m  
making the piece,”  
Hampton says.



people,” Hampton says. “The tree is about how important family was to her.”

Hampton’s work has been in numerous group and solo shows over the past decade, but she started attracting major recognition only in 2008, when she received the Fleishhacker Foundation Eureka Fellowship. In 2015, she was a resident artist at the Sacatar Foundation in Brazil, where she studied Brazilian culture and history, including Brazilian lacemaking traditions.

With race relations at the forefront of America’s national

conversation in the past few years, Hampton’s work continues to be piercingly relevant. “I’m so glad people are really confronting racism,” she says. “That’s why I’ve been telling my ancestors’ stories. The world needs to heal, and I believe that storytelling is one of the best tools. I hope people stop and look at my work, and are opened up to empathy.”

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*Liz Logan is a Brooklyn freelance writer whose work has appeared in the New York Times and other publications.*