I am often given over to lyricism so let me speak/write it plain. The works of Another Country presented in the exhibition, Heirlooms are not quilts; or, not only so. They are road signs. They are portraits of American heartbreak. The works represent our shared, if fractured inheritance of intimacy and inequity. They are the heirlooms of a civilization in crisis.

There now. There we have it. So let’s begin at the beginning . . .

It’s a Sunday in late January. I am huddled with David Anthone and Ron Norsworthy, the duo that make up DARNstudio. Amid the chilly reclaimed wooden interior of the grain elevator, we step together into Another Country.

A circlet of sculptures unfurl around us. Some hang and ripple from the rafters. Others twist and fold on plinths and rise, unbidden, like the Witch of Endor, from the floor. This syzygy of approach makes the surface and materials of these works of fascination: paper matchbooks, recycled felt, cotton thread. In the waning light of winter, I am both disbelieving and enchanted. The surface of the work provides a luster reminiscent of nacre and finely-lacquered veneer. I am not used to works whose minimalist vocabularies of industrial materials and superimposed grids provide beauty as well as dynamic complexity.

In Another Country, DARNstudio forms a compositional bridge between the taut strictures of Donald Flavin, Donald Judd, and Robert Morris and the found-object assemblages of Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson and the luminous, if ephemeral candy portraits of Félix González-Torres. What the works offer us is a new vision of figuration in an over-saturated, maximalist world. Nowhere before, except, perhaps the catwalk and fashion houses, can our eyes feast on patterned mosaics that ripple, fold, and bend. And perhaps the only thing that can rival fashion for tactile pleasure and individual choice is the souvenir matchbook: picked up and pressed into the palm of the hand after a good night out at a place we wish to remember.

The unique materiality of the works on view heighten our awareness that clarity of vision and complex themes are not always at odds. I begin to approach each work gingerly, respectfully looking for clues as to how they do things in Another Country. Here’s what
I observe: custom matchbooks in tessellated patterns appliqued to felt squares and sewn together to form the legible gestures of the American quilting tradition: birds circling, a garden, stars . . . I nod, proud of myself for getting the lingo and finding a rhythm in the complex luster of the patterning. But then, in the far-left corner, a different kind of gesture meets my gaze: a white undulating field peaked with folds covered with the emoticon of the volume amplifier of a Mac computer in red. I come undone . . .

. . . And a shift occurs. A small beat of a new thought drops. Confused, I read the title of the work (Amplify, 2018) and begin retracing my steps, rereading titles, building a new interpretation in my mind. What I thought was a clever contemporary take on American material cultures of consumerism and value is something much more textured, polychronic, and multivocal. With titles and dates such as Doublecross (2019), Snake in the Garden (2017), Nu Shoo Fly (2018), Go High (2017), As the Crow Flies (2017), I begin to turn idiomatic titles and dates-cum-landmarks over and over in my head, aligning visual abstractions to the empirical muscle-memories of living in the mental topographies of a precarious world.

In this interstitial space between repurposed agrarian building and high-traffic gallery, between ceiling and floor—between quilt and sculpture—between new thoughts and memory—between flame and value—these collaborative and patterned textiles play at the edges of conceptual art practice and sculpted figuration. And we, the viewer, offer up our hearts as the tender tinder on which the matches embedded in the pieces strike; catch; blaze.

Ron and David are generous guides to the internal wrestlings the presentation of works in Heirlooms engenders. As we walk, talk, and perch, they help me attend to the ways in which the title names are not answers, but open up paths to understandings. Finishing each others’ thoughts like eddying currents in a brook, they connect the dots for me. Textiles and quilting collectives are deeply American idioms and practices of craft, particularly amongst the southern, the female, the elderly, and the contemporaneously second-class and oppressed. A parallel idiom in the ideological civic imagination of the US as a nation is one of migration and immigration in search of autonomy and religious freedom, and with it, the tangled constructive threads of race, socioeconomic disparity, misogyny, and inequality. Quilts are considered heirlooms: objects of our material inheritance from one generation to another. Thus, the material and visual realities of quilts and patterning carry across the generational limits of life and death the parallel ideological inheritance of discrimination. What is the power and purpose of a quilt that cannot give any warmth save to burn down the building and the empire?

In the days following, I’ve been walking the streets of lower Manhattan, thinking an awful a lot about Time. It’s been twenty years since the world and its data were supposed to end. It’s been fifty-eight years since the publication of James Baldwin’s Another Country. It’s been sixty-five years since the murder of Emmet Till.

And yet the United States, as Baldwin lamented decades before, has still not recovered the specter of the dead black male body floating at the root of its psychosis. I suppose this is because the United States has never confronted the truth of its racial disparity and interracial fetishization: a truth that must prefigure reconciliation and recovery; a truth that links both the marble architecture of our cities and the shit in the gutters of our migrant camps. Internalized obfuscation and denial is our legacy. This is where we are in time.
And so the matchbook, innocuous souvenir and a harbinger of flame, becomes an epistemology for framing how we read, know, and interact with information truths that are both formative and uncomfortable. The red custom matchbooks netted together in an amplification emoticon form a semiotic icon representing the Youtube and Facebook live stream videos of police encounters turned deadly. As I walk along the Harlem River, thinking about walking with David and Ron around and through the gallery space in Wassaic, I realize one of the brilliant components of the installation is its spatial presentation in winter. A quilt comforts; a flame warms. Something about the winter light made these sensate, tactile qualities bloom in our consciousness. But what do we make of a quilt that cannot enwrap us in softness, and a flame, that, if lit, can set the entirety of the grain elevator ablaze? Why is race the layered American pattern that cannot give comfort?

In such a restless, if precarious moment, it feels equal parts horror and justice that Another Country is still in process. All told Ron and David plan seven more works for a total of thirteen. Each gent has their respective art practice, and as we know, the world never stops. But coming together with intention, as life partners and collaborators, on such a conceptual exercise in intimacy and labor, visibly reflects the stacks of race relations in the Americas. For just as David and Ron mingled their threads together, so all of us are enmeshed to each other’s fate. And if this visceral mélange was not stirring enough, several of the thirteen works allude to black bodies—in history and recent memory—killed by extrajudicial violence: Eric Garner, Philando Castile, Sandra Brown, Freddie Gray, and sadly, we could go on . . . So the work never ends.

It’s been a week and a half since I’ve chatted with these two gifted translators of our moment who siphon the Zeitgeist from air and sculpt the precarities of our moment into material vision. I remain compelled and amazed by the brilliance of vision of DARNstudio and the audacity to test whether cotton thread is strong enough to hold thousands of matchbooks together in a mosaic that folds, bends, curves, and hangs flat. Even the extraordinary site- and temporal-specific installations of the contemporary artists Pia Camil, Ebony G. Patterson, Neil Leonard, and Thomas Schütte do not go so far as DARNstudio in embracing color and materials of the everyday to erase the longstanding parameters between sculpture, architecture, and textile-based work. And while I am attuned to the historiographies and function of the quilt as material referent for the tessellated labor of their hands, I cannot shake the feeling that what DARNstudio given us in these excerpts from the series, Another Country, are prayer rugs for the most vulnerable of our generation.

On my drive up from the city, I ducked in to see the work one more time. And remain in gratitude for the volumetric gradations of intimacy that offer no closure but do offer restless reflection. Now, as I take my leave of Heirlooms with the work “As the Crow Flies,” reverberating in my heart and holding my resting gaze, I remember that indelible invective from Adam Zagajewski that helped New York City to heal in the aftermath of September 11th:

Praise the mutilated world
and the gray feather a thrush lost,
and the gentle light that strays and vanishes
and returns.