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Photo: Carlos Avendaño

A Funeral For Five Performances

by **Ellen Chenoweth**

The Fabric Workshop and Museum has temporarily become a funeral home. Visitors are invited to pay their respects to past performances of musician and theater artist Cynthia Hopkins. Hopkins creates theater works with original music and text, often including autobiographical stories. In *Memorabilia*, she has created a quilt for each of five large-scale performance works that she has carried off, going back to *Accidental Nostalgia* (premiered in 2004), through 2013's *This Clement World*.

In her live performances, Hopkins shows herself to be a multi-talented artist, capable of immensely original songs and stories, convincingly performed by Hopkins herself. With *Memorabilia*, she reveals her talents as a visual artist as well; the memorial quilts are compelling as objects even if they weren't attached to an additional body of work. (She shares credit with collaborators Jim Findlay and Jeff Sugg, in addition to naming all those who supported the creation of the original works.) They are sculptures as much as they are quilts, incorporating materials ranging from Astroturf to her father's ties, red velvet stage curtain material to paper cocktail umbrellas. These materials have been harvested from the stage productions, both their research and realization.

The five quilts are at the physical center of the exhibit, but the visitor is also surrounded by an aural experience. There is a surround sound installation of *Requiem for Five Deceased Musical Performance Works* (performed by Philadelphia vocalists Alex Bechtel, Martha Stuckey, Dito Van Reigersberg, and Maria Konstantinidis, joined by Hopkins and Sugg), including music from each of the memorialized shows. Each quilt is accompanied by text on the wall, handwritten by Hopkins in bright colors. The size of the text requires the viewer to get close to the wall, but then to read the whole line requires a slight rocking of the body, reminding the viewer of their own physicality.

Hopkins asks, how is a performance like a person? *Memorabilia* is a "memorial service in honor and remembrance of five live theatrical works that like all living things were conceived and generated and were born and lived for a while and now have died." Like individuals, artistic productions gather people around them, each bringing their own histories, before dispersing again. Each has its own character, its own set of demands, its own unique miniature world. What's left after a life? What's left after a production? For the latter, there is often only a video of the performance, maybe a few file folders, or some set pieces in storage. The quilts feel infinitely more satisfying

than a performance video, and it must be because they are closer to the spirit of the original. The video artifact always feels like a hopelessly pale ghost of the real thing. *Memorabilia* comes at the issue of recording from an entirely different angle, and each painstaking stitch seems to illustrate something of the life of the show. Archival performance videos feel dead and lonely, with little sense of the feel of the audience or the spark in the air. The exhibit at the Fabric Workshop pays homage in a way that feels more fitting to the wild freshness of the original works. Hopkins is also present in the exhibit on so many levels, her essence seems imbued in every element; her voice caresses you as you're examining her handwriting or admiring the intricacy of a quilt element.

Hopkins makes a concerted effort to stress the celebratory elements of a memorial service, pointing out in a variety of ways that "endings therefore make room for new things to be born." If the old things are so eloquently honored, and the new things are so beautiful themselves, *Memorabilia* does provide some comfort and solace, even as the show highlights that "nothing, nothing ever lasts."

Memorabilia, Cynthia Hopkins, Fabric Workshop and Museum, September 12 – January 3, 2016 (extended),
www.fabricworkshopandmuseum.org

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