

2016 Interview with Chawne Kimber (Quilter and Mathematician)

Kate: I was reading a little a bit about you and listening to a podcast you did a while ago. I understand that you were a practicing mathematician and a professor before you were a quilter. Quilting came, as I was understanding it from listening to your podcast, while you were going through the tenure process?

Chawne: I started sewing when I was in high school. We had to wear formal dresses to all kinds of occasions. I'm from the south. It's a very different culture than up here. I had the skills to sew beforehand, and kind of already thought about making a quilt. I'm actually cleaning out my mother's house right now. I found that I did make some patchwork then that I just didn't remember. I did have the idea in mind, but never really spent the time to get into it, because college came, and I had other priorities. When it came time for tenure, it's out of your control at that point. I needed someplace where I made all the decisions. Just getting to do it for an hour or two. I would start at 1:00 a.m., 2:00 a.m., after my evening of work was done, and then just sew for an hour. Somehow I was then able to sleep, which I hadn't been able to do before. It was meditative. You're working through things in your mind. As soon the provost called me and told me I had tenure, I stopped. I made ten quilts and stopped.

Kate: Really?

Chawne: I think it was very clearly a therapy thing. I just returned to my regular daily life. Then I returned to quilting when my father passed away. Again it was a way of dealing with the grief. It's at that point that it kind of turned from being this mechanical, super highly precise, traditional thing that I was doing into more of an art practice.

Kate: When your father passed away, it was during that period?

Chawne: Yeah. Suddenly it had to have meaning. I really couldn't figure out why I was cutting full pieces of fabric into tiny pieces, and sewing that back together. The futility became very obvious to me. Whereas maybe I could turn it into a way to express myself, and actually be more intentional about the therapy that was going on. The first quilts I made were made from clothes that I got from my family. Then I suddenly realized it can be more meaningful. My dad wore a lot of ties. He would go on trips and intentionally forget to take a tie so he could buy a new one. I inherited like five hundred ties. There's so many ties. They're all beautiful silk. He had sent me like fifty of them because we had been talking about this idea of making a quilt from his ties.

At least I knew I had his blessing to chop them all up. His death was completely not expected. It wasn't like he was preparing for this memorial. I ended up making two quilts, one for each of my siblings as we were all going through this grief. They didn't really have anything of his. That ended up being sort of this extension of meaningfulness. I still have hundreds of ties, and I'll make one for myself one day. All I needed was that time just to commune with the silk, and some of them are comical. It was really a great way to work through the sadness.

Kate: Sure. What a thoughtful gift for your siblings. I have two trains of thought going but I guess one would be this idea of identity? This is something that I think about having been a scientist and then suddenly saying, oh yeah, I think I'll do this writing/art stuff. How did you find

that, being a math professor on this college campus, and then getting interested in this other thing and doing it really well? Your quilts are so fantastic.

Chawne: Thanks.

Kate: How did you find it when you first starting sharing your quilts with people?

Chawne: Well, it's funny that's punctuated by the promotion process on campus. I actually did not come out of the closet as a quilter until I became a full professor.

Kate: Okay.

Chawne: I think my colleagues knew a little bit about it. I had a blog under a pseudonym. One of them found out just because he heard me talking, and he was interested. It turned out that these four letter word quilts, the dudes love them. Why had I not thought that through? As a woman in science you don't want to be the mother in the room. You hide any kind of female, outwardly female thing that you do. It turned out that I wasn't doing quilting in a traditionally female way. We were able to have a greater conversation about it.

As far as identity goes, though, most of what I do and what I put out for public consumption is actually reactionary to things in our society.

On the Lafayette campus I'm really not going to remember the specific year, I'd have to go back and look at my quilt journal, but that year there were incidents of people writing the word nigger on walls, and bathroom stalls. The college, the public safety people, send out an email whenever there's a crime of public interest. Then it says what they're doing or not doing.

There were eleven of these in a row with no response. Not even a dean stepping out and saying, "We don't stand for this." I'm fairly silenced just because I'm a math professor and I can't integrate these things into my classes in the ways some of my colleagues can. It was really just not being addressed. Then all the sudden there was an incident where someone wrote on a car that was dusty and dirty, and they basically put every possible racial, and gender epithet on it, including swastikas. All of the sudden the campus responded. They responded by saying, "Here's what the swastika means. We don't stand for this." It was a very clear message to me and many students on campus that it's acceptable to call people niggers. Yes, we actually do believe that's what you are, and you deserve this. Whereas there's a line on this other side, and we don't stand for it.

The campus being sort of incapable of dealing with issues like this, never really got that complexity. Which I think was fairly obvious. The comments were like, "Well we didn't want to stoke the fire, and have more people doing these things by responding to it." I'm like, "You know that's not right."

There's simultaneously in the quilt world a little bit of a revolution going on into the modern quilting era. Which is actually Modern with a capital M. It's branding, it's everything. People were experiencing the acquisition of fabric and pattern as saying something about who you are. When you buy a comforter for your bed, you're actually making choices about what that expresses about you.

Kate: It's very personal, like a comforter on your bed, you can't be more personal than that.

Chawne: Yeah. I started being pretty blatant, and putting words on quilts. Actually choosing the fabrics to illustrate those words. I did princess and bitch and of course nigger. That quilt is

actually more of a performance art. You need to see it wrapped around a person, and then talk through what's going on there. I think that's where it all sort of came in response to how unsupportive this campus is of people who are different.

Kate: Did you have a period where you were doing traditional quilts just to learn the trade and the practice of it?

Chawne: Yeah.

Kate: Was that the shift then for you? This thing that happened on campus.

Chawne: No. I would say the shift was my father's death. Actually the quilts I made then were more improvisational. They actually looked more like my great grandmother's quilts. She was from rural Alabama, and used used-clothes to in kind of wonky, kind of patchwork that was based in traditional patchwork. This is the first time I was really overt about what I was trying to do. I think I've become a little more nuanced over the years. You always start out someplace and you refine. I started out making very structured foundational quilts. I followed *Quilting for Dummies*. It was one of those yellow books. I made every project in there, practicing every technique. Ripping apart and resewing until I got it perfect, because as an artisan that's what you look for. Then once you have the foundational skills, you can then make anything.

Kate: Part of what I was wondering as I was looking at your work also was the idea of the quilt as comfort. A lot of what you've done has kind of turned that on it's head in some way. It makes your quilts so provocative. Was that a conscious choice? Or did it sort of just come out and there it was? I'm just wondering what that experience was like.

Chawne: I can say I've been an activist for quite awhile. I come from a long line of activists. Whether it's just on campus fighting for the rights of the students that I have here who are unrepresented on campus. I'm a very gentle activist in ways that I think are more effective for me. I think it was inevitable that it was going to come out in the quilts. I've taken on a lot of different issues, and had a pretty good effect on a couple of them in actually changing the community, and setting some values. Especially along the lines of censorship. Also again in sort of this new revolution of younger quilters starting to quilt now. That idea of social justice being explored here was not considered okay in the beginning. We're not in the environment where it's actually being celebrated. That quilt has been acquisitioned by a museum, the most recent one. It's a very different environment. You know chicken, egg actually. I've always been interested in helping those who can't help themselves. It's going to come out on a quilt eventually.

Kate: I don't know much about your work as a professor, but I was reading a little bit about how you marry math with social justice using statistics to help people understand what political polls are really saying and things like that. Does your interests in quilts and math intersect at all? Or are they very separate?

Chawne: It was intentionally separate from the beginning, because this was where I was escaping. I now have enough stature as an artist that I want to have a professional profile, but that requires time. Then in order for it to double dip as my scholarly work, it will have to have mathematical themes. It was approved at my last sabbatical, three years ago now, that I could make

mathematical quilts. Well I had a long line of non-mathematical ones that I wanted to make. I made sixteen quilts that year, and none of them are mathematical.

Kate: That's incredible, wow.

Chawne: All of them exhibited so it was a very successful year as an artist. Am I a mathematical artist yet? I'm not sure. I am working on my first work. As usual I'm overly ambitious in it. It's all hand sewn using shapes that you can't just cut out with scissors. I had to get a laser cutter, and now I've got to program it. I think that it's at least in terms of my gut instincts about the kind of art that I want to make. I'm not just going to make some very shallow mathematical expression. I am going to pursue more interesting things that actually can have social implications. It's why are you making a quilt. If you could just draw it on a computer and print it out, what's the difference? For me there has to be meaning in using cotton to do it. It really is just through my selfishness that I really can no longer hide the fact that I do this. I'm not going to compromise. Having it be accepted by my department and the college is the interesting part. My department is actually totally on board. It's the administration that I struggle with. I'm not the only person who's trying to do interdisciplinary art as their scholarship now, and it's difficult to get it accepted.

Kate: Which is weird, because you always hear that this is a college of liberal arts and science, and how wonderful all that is.

Chawne: It just depends who the administration is at the time. Right?

Kate: Do you see into where you're going with this? What the future holds?

Chawne: Yeah. Because I am now well integrated into the art world, and the quilt world, I think that as long as I'm making high quality stuff, I am able to do the version of the publication of an artist so I can exhibit it. I can sell my work to academic institutions. Those are the gold standards for studio artists. If they have mathematical themes then they're fully accepted. Honestly, I think they shouldn't have to be mathematical for them to be accepted as a full status scholarship since the guy down the hall, that's what they do. There's some incredible poets on our faculty but because they're not in the English department...

Kate: They all have to stay in their box.

Chawne: Yeah. I am a planner when it comes to my academic career. But in art, I've been very careful not to plan too much. My horizon is one year, like what can I complete? It allows me to be more spontaneous. If Eric Garner gets killed, and there's something that compels me to respond to that, I'm free to do it. I'm not locked into something. Though my goal is always to have at least one significant piece of work. I do a lot of handwork, so it means a year or two is how long it takes me to complete a work. In the future, yes this would be a great retirement activity too. I'm kind of building up to that being a more significant part of my life. It's kind of where I'm headed. I have started teaching my [quilting] techniques and things like that. It's just another way to engage. It's just always nice to be around people who get it.

Kate: You probably have this math community, and now you have this quilting community, do you enjoy one over the other?

Chawne: Oh absolutely. I've never actually viewed myself as a mathematician. I think that's a societal thing. It's also the community itself who's not very accepting of people who are different in certain ways. I don't behave the same way as many of them that I work with. I don't necessarily fit in socially. We're not in the lab. You go out to a bar and you talk math. Hooters is actually where my group of guys go. To say it's not accepting is really an understatement. I'm actually quite isolated in the mathematical world. Whereas in the quilting world, I actually started doing it when blogs and Flickr and online communities were flourishing. I immediately had a community in all of that, and could support other people, and other people were supportive of what I was doing.

Now that I'm spending more time traveling around and meeting more people, it's even more significant. There's more validation for who I am as a person in that, than I ever get from math. I should say that it's different on the Lafayette campus of course. The math community that you're in every day is typically more supportive than your community. Yeah, these guys are awesome.

Kate: That's good.

I did have a couple of questions about some of your work specifically. I was looking at your website, the red work. I was just wondering, obviously there's red thread. But does it have more meaning than that? Is that a quilting term that I don't know?

Chawne: It's actually not quilting, but in fiber arts red work is a tradition. In fact it is from the fifteen hundreds, sixteen hundreds.

Kate: Oh that's cool.

Chawne: I think many would say it originated in France. There's evidence of it all over, and specifically in red. If you go to Scandinavia, it's a lot of black thread on light colored linen. There's this tradition of a single color actually making things pop more. I love it because I don't have to change colors all the time, which is a pain in the butt. I was just sort of exploring that tradition. Again women's work is always on the surface of everything. I love samplers. I love using alphabets and words. I'm always trying to push the boundaries. I use a lot of four letter words and stuff there. I should say I used to. I don't do that stuff as much anymore. It is time consuming.

It was just a way to let things out or to again just challenge the community to think more. If you're only writing Christian quotations, aren't you limited in what you can express? You know the Bible is quite finite. Why are these things considered sacred? Why can't we actually be our full selves in these environments? I'm not the only one doing this. People all around the world are poking at people about this. Even just using pop culture quotations from TV shows and catch phrases that people recognize is actually shocking to people.

Kate: I'm sure. It's very traditional. What could be more traditional than a quilt?

Chawne: And even embroidery and stuff.

Kate: Embroidery, absolutely right, and samplers from the past.

Chawne: You know it was something fun to do. I learned to cross-stitch and embroider when I was like ten or eleven. It's always been part of my life and something more portable. A quilt is enormous and you need equipment to do it.

Kate: Maybe you want to comment on this or not. You kind of already talked about it a little bit. Your quilts have words, when most don't. Is that related to what you've already described, or is there more to it than that?

Chawne: Well it's more in the modern era that words that are on quilts. Yeah. My hand writing, if you want to call it handwriting, is an improvisational thing. It's not all measured. It's just like talking, for me. I picked it up from a friend. Her name's Tonya Ricucci. Then she eventually wrote a book about it. Again at the time there were clear boundaries of what you were able to say. That's when I started doing some of these four letter words, George Carlin's seven words you can't say on television. I did it in kind of a baby quilt that I gave to a friend, and it's on her wall in her living room right now. Which is not something I would do, but that's another weirdness is that some of it is a stunt for me, but others can view it as traditional art. I have a dividing line for myself as well. Though I had to have a couple of the larger quilts on my bed, and stuff that have these kinds of words, just to make sure that it works.

There was Tonya, who would make these quilts that she called four letter word quilts, but it was always love, hope, and hugs. I kept waiting. It felt like click bait every time she talked about it. I'm like when are you going to actually do it? This is a teaser. I just started doing it for her. I think that resonated with younger cultures, with quilters who had never thought about expressing themselves in what they make. I even did a community project where I had sixty-nine different people working on the word fuck, and then put it all together as sort of a communal expression because I was getting all the backlash and being told I was going to hell. I think I needed the community to understand that I'm not the only one.

Kate: This is a movement amongst people in some ways. Right?

Chawne: Yeah. It should be a possibility. All of them have kind of brought up social issues that many of these women, they're mostly women that have been out there, would never have thought of on their own. The nigger quilt was actually put up on a very popular crafting community website in Australia that was a worldwide website. There's no picture of me on that site, and the initial comments were all, "Well maybe you don't understand this word, because you're Australian, but you really should not be using that word if you're not black." All of it was just full of these assumptions about who a quilter is.

Kate: That's fascinating.

Chawne: You don't even need to talk about this word. Which obviously they were offended by. Let's even back up to the fact that you're racist because you can't even imagine that the quilter could be black. It never occurred to me that this would be a response actually. I think because I am naïve and I think better of people. Then we got to open up a much deeper conversation in which you know quilters were telling me, "Well you don't make African American quilts." I'm like, "What do you even mean by that?" Well it's because they don't fit whatever stereotype has been created in the community. The Gee's Bend quilters of Alabama that was a sensation, is both good and bad.

Many black quilters view it as a bad experience, because we're now somehow shoe-horned, which has just happened in every sector of the art world. I'm only allowed to draw black people. Even just that one quilt ended up in a million different conversations just about the community itself, and how things have things changed for some people. Some people have had their eyes opened, and they're a little bit better human beings now, so we'll see.

Kate: It seems like it would be really upsetting on some level to put something out there, and then have all of these social media comments, which can be just really horrible. At the same time to think about it like you just described, where even if people are struggling to wrap their head around something new or a new concept, that's created some positive thing happening in the world. Even if they're sounding defensive, at least maybe they're coming around to something new that makes them think about things in a better way, or a more evolved way, or whatever.

Chawne: It also makes it hard for me because often my true point is missed because we have to work through all this stuff.

By the time they have enough, they're settled enough, and they have enough background, they're tired, and they're not going to continue to consider the piece. I've one 'cotton sophisticate,' and it's just very traditional log cabin pattern done in an improvisational way. It's a riot of color. Then the quote I put on it was, "In essence I am a sophisticated cotton picker." It was Eartha Kitt who grew up in South Georgia, and she had to pick cotton as a kid, which my aunts and uncles did, and I did for five minutes. She's just this flamboyant figure in our culture who reflects on where she came from, and where she reached. That quote is just such a great summation of her life.

But, wow, is it pregnant with meaning. It hung at Quilt Con, which was this modern show out in LA just this last February. These quilters are thinking so close to themselves that all they could reflect on was that I used every color in the rainbow in this. They saw it as a joke, that I actually wasn't very sophisticated in my choices, or they saw it as she's the stature hoarder who just grabs every fabric possible. There were two layers to this. Of course, they're not recognizing that we're reflecting on slavery here. They're also not reflecting on, and it's only something you would know through reading the tag, the fabrics that I choose were all cotton grown here, and the fabrics were manufactured here. It was commentary actually on labor conditions outside of the United States.

I meant it to have all these different layers, but it really means that obviously as an artist you put your work out there for people to consume and you can't control that. But, wow, it was a teaching moment for me, and I missed the mark apparently. There's too much meaning in it maybe. I don't know.

Kate: Yeah. It just makes me think that we're a sound byte society these days. With most things people don't want to dive very deep. They don't want to study something. They don't want to look at it closely.

Chawne: Yeah, I guess.

Kate: It seems to me that way anyway.

Chawne: I know. Well for the 'I can't breath quilt,' which is my response to Eric Garner, a woman on Facebook wrote, "Oh gosh I drank so much last night, I had an asthma attack." Then she put the quilt up there as an illustration of how she felt.

Kate: Oh good lord.

Chawne: I was offended honestly. Actually in Pasadena where it exhibited, I won a big award. It was on the cover of the LA Times. I have to stand by a quilt every once in awhile, and wow. There were a couple of people who walked up, and they said, "Oh, do you have asthma?" It just, again, was another one of these situations where it would never occur to me. Just because those words were ... In this moment it had only been exactly one year since Eric Garner was killed, so it was in the news. California is not that far away from New York City, especially in this age of technology, and CNN cycling through this.

Kate: It's a national thing.

Chawne: These women had never heard of Eric Garner. When I sent them to go read the description tag, because I couldn't keep re-explaining this. Okay they started crying. Okay, yes it worked. To have it be utilized as a joke was even more offensive to me actually.

Kate: Sure, yeah. I guess that's a challenge with any piece of artwork that's created. In some ways there's a chance of missed meaning. I mean on different levels, there will always be that. People bring themselves to what they're looking at, whether it's something they're reading, or what they're looking at. Then all that back story that they have or lack thereof influences their reaction.

Chawne: I wish somebody could carry my baggage for a little while, though.

Kate: Yes. It's been a really wonderful conversation. Thank you.

Chawne: Good luck with your project.