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A Pile of Blankets, With Personal History Woven Into the Fabric

By [ALISON LEIGH COWAN](#)

RIDGEFIELD, Conn., Aug. 18 — It's the sort of homely hand-me-down that a thrift store might think twice about accepting or putting in its window. The color is a muddy brown. The woolen fabric is scratchy. A ragged hole and blotchy stains of uncertain origin form the only discernible pattern. Calling it an army blanket would be paying it a compliment.

But it comes with a wallop of a story, and it's the talk of a show at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum here.

Marie Watt, an artist from Portland, Ore., who likes to say she is "part cowboy and part Indian" because of the Seneca Indians on her mother's side and the Wyoming ranchers on her father's, has incorporated that blanket and more than 1,000 others into an eight-foot-high installation in a second-floor gallery.

The exhibition as a whole, titled "No Reservations: Native American History and Culture in Contemporary Art," is meant to challenge stereotypes about American Indian art and showcase living artists who reinterpret Indian influences in "curious and unexpected ways," said Richard Klein, the museum's exhibitions director.

From the start Ms. Watt had a communal project in mind for the exhibition. She spread the word in the community that she was looking for donated blankets that would be stacked flat to create a tower. She encouraged donors to share the stories behind their hand-me-downs, and she had these stories written on tags that hang on the blankets. Roughly 150 used blankets arrived — in a riot of colors and patterns — and another 900 factory-fresh blankets were donated. But one gift in particular floored her.

The offer came on July 5 from Peter Kubicek, an urbane 76-year-old retiree from Queens who had noticed the solicitation in a leaflet he picked up at the museum.

His blanket, he told the museum staff in an e-mail message, was "certainly not much to look at." But it had special meaning for him, he explained, because it had been issued to him in March 1945 at Sachsenhausen, the last of six German concentration camps in which he had been incarcerated in the last eight months of World War II. He carried it on a 12-day death march after the Nazis evacuated the camp's Jewish prisoners one step ahead of the approaching Allies, and he nestled inside it on his first morning of freedom after his captors fled, and the Nazi war machine was collapsing.

Museum officials "got rather excited" to hear the story, he said in an interview before the final assembly of Ms. Watt's work, titled "Dwelling."

The result of Ms. Watt's collaboration with the donors, the museum and at least 100 local residents who volunteered to sew trim on the blankets is now on view with the work of nine other artists, four of whom have American Indian ancestry.

In previous works Ms. Watt has stacked blankets into ladderlike columns, braided patches of blankets into geometric swirls and created animated wall hangings by using the satin finish that often binds blankets as freely as Mondrian used stripes.

Many Indians exchange blankets to mark important events, she said, citing the Pendleton her parents gave her when she graduated from college. "It's one of the most special gifts you can ever be honored with," she said.

Over time, she said, the blankets come to be associated with sharp memories.

"These are humble objects we almost take for granted, but they have extraordinary histories," Ms. Watt said.

She has promised that all the new blankets donated for her installation will be distributed at the end of the project to social service agencies in Connecticut, ensuring that the artwork will have an afterlife.

Among the other pieces in the show is a custom-made car by Lewis deSoto, a California artist who traces his ancestry to Hernando De Soto, the Spanish conquistador, and the Indian people whom de Soto helped vanquish. The car's every detail mines that period of colonial history and mocks the way Detroit appropriates Indian names like Cherokee and Pontiac.

Riga 23, a Portuguese-born artist, has recreated the prison cell of Leonard Peltier, an Indian advocate who is serving life sentences for the murder of two federal agents. The installation is being presented as a museum within a museum with its own sign visible from Main Street, evoking efforts by Indians to achieve sovereignty on American soil, said Mr. Klein.

Yoram Wolberger, an Israeli-born artist whose work explores conflict, has taken his inspiration from those cheaply cast plastic toys that children use to play cowboys and Indians. Blowing them up, flaws and all, he has created a tableau that is both sinister and playful. Two huge Indians holding bows and arrows are aiming at the museum from the lawn. Inside, a huge cowboy with a pistol shoots back from the second floor.

For Mr. Kubicek (pronounced COO-bee-check), the camp survivor, whose postwar life has embraced art in many ways, donating his blanket offers a sense of comfort. "The war started for me when I was 9 years old," said Mr. Kubicek, an only child whose parents owned a small department store in Trencin, in

the Slovak part of what was then Czechoslovakia.

In early 1939 [Hitler](#) dismembered Czechoslovakia and reassigned Jewish-owned businesses to non-Jews, including the Kubicek family store. He said his family was soon expected to sew Stars of David onto their clothes and surrender things that Jews were barred from owning, from real estate to sports equipment. He recalls turning over his sled, skis, soccer ball and what he described as his most prized possession: a bicycle.

He and his mother were separated from his father but persevered until the fall of 1944, when the Nazis began deporting the last remnants of Slovakian Jewry. At the camps he was taken away from his mother, assigned an inmate number, 119,748, and put to work.

In April 1945 the Nazis evacuated Sachsenhausen, a camp near Berlin, as the Russian Army approached. The guards ordered 30,000 prisoners to march northward in what became known as the Hunger March. Mr. Kubicek was 15.

He walked for 12 days with the rolled-up blanket slung over his shoulder. In his e-mail message to the museum, he described it as “my only shelter since it was all I had between the cold, hard ground on which we slept and the dark sky above us.”

He recalls being wrapped in it when he was awakened by the sound of shooting on the drizzly morning of May 2, 1945. “We had a little shooting, and when we woke up, our German guards were gone,” he said. “We were free.”

At a nearby town of Schwerin, where American troops were assisting refugees, he said he eagerly discarded the few possessions he had from the camps but kept the blanket. “It was useful,” he figured.

He found his mother, and 18 months later the two of them made their way to the United States, where his father had ended up.

There Mr. Kubicek attended college, married a fellow refugee from Eastern Europe, Edith, with whom he reared two daughters.

He started a business selling hardware for cabinets and furniture and retired four years ago. He has a wide-ranging collection of contemporary art, an interest he nurtures in his role as a docent at the Metropolitan Museum. “Yeah, I’m a tour guide,” he says puckishly when people ask what he does.

Far from forgotten, the blanket sat in the trunk of the family car in recent years and was used whenever he bought a piece of art or something special that needed swaddling on the way home.

Mr. Kubicek said he offered the blanket without knowing much about the artist, her work or how she would use it. From her initial e-mail messages, he said he gleaned that “she was looking for parallels.”

Mrs. Kubicek chimed in: “It’s a fitting end, whatever she does with it.”

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