



(Detail) *A Book of Horses*, 2008. Fabric, thread, lace, screen-printing ink, latex paint, industrial felt, fusible adhesive, 19.25 x 15 x 2.25 in (48.9 x 38.1 x 5.7 cm)

### *Sowing Friction: The Red Herring of Definitive Interpretation*

"We're hearing 400 things at one time, we get everything in little sight-and-sound bits and part of the 'Gestalt' is putting whatever it is together to make it our own. My art is much more representational of the world I live in," wrote China Marks in 1990 about her exhibition *World Without End: 1975-1990*. The amount of information we have been daily inundated with since the 1990s has only gotten more overwhelming. And the advent of artificial intelligence and its widespread adoption across all industries is only making our infobesity worse. Pondering the impact of modern technology on communication, reporters at *The Washington Post* recently asked, "Do we lose something by not engaging our brains on daily tasks?" The short answer is yes; we lose our ability to think critically—a loss that Marks's works, particularly her sewn reinterpretations or "altered paintings," prompt us to resist by stimulating our narrative intelligence, our ability to listen, understand, and analyze stories.

Reinterpretations of masterworks from the Western canon of art, such as Giotto's *Flight Into Egypt*, El Greco's *Holy Trinity*, and Titian's *Aldobrandini Madonna*, hang throughout *Lucid Perturbations*, China Marks's largest solo exhibition to date. Marks selected commercially reproduced tapestries of artworks one might find in an introductory art history class as the ground fabric for her "altered paintings." While viewers may not immediately recognize the references to these works, they nevertheless live in a world whose culture is significantly shaped by these iconic images. "My narratives offer viewers an alternative to the tired stories so often found in films, video, books, and new media, which recycle and re-work whatever worked last time," writes China Marks. Sewn together from dozens of "fabric fragments" and "patterned scraps," Marks's tableaux—alternately surreal, bizarre, hypnagogic—give us pause to consider whether the determinist march of Western culture in the canon of European classics has provided us with a world that we are satisfied with.



*Have You Heard the News Today?*, 2015. Fabric, thread, lace, screen-printing ink, brass rings, aluminum washer and stamped hardware, plastic googly eye, Jade glue, fusible adhesive on a contemporary tapestry copy of Giotto's *Flight Into Egypt*, 37 x 55 in (94 x 139.7 cm)

Marks's composite pictography for *Have You Heard the News Today?* captures her response to the 2015 escalation of the Syrian Civil War and takes as its canvas a reproduction of Giotto's *Flight Into Egypt*. Giotto's original is a freeze frame from the New Testament of the Holy Family's flight from King Herod's Massacre of the Innocents. In Marks's reinterpretation, the narrative humanism of Giotto's original is subverted with the sober reality of one of the most complex war quagmires of the 21st century, where some 600,000 people were killed, innocents included. Here, a beloved biblical story becomes a contemporary monstrosity. The Christ child, depicted as a lovable teddy bear (a therapeutic consumer product), asks his mother, the central Madonna figure, "Why does God allow such suffering, Mama?" She implores him to ask his father, God, who, theologically implied by an angel in the original, appears in the reproduction distraught and powerless, crying out, "Has it come to this?" Adjacent, a man in a tuxedo and a woman with a Victorian cameo brooch for a head function as familiar symbols of Western affluence. They state, "We have our own problems, an important dinner party tonight."—Unimaginable human suffering? They can't be bothered.

Beautiful paeans about the drama of Giotto's original have been sung for centuries, but no such tribute or memorialization exists for the suffering of biblical proportions that unfolded in Syria in 2015. If the mainstream media landscape reports on such events, the accounts are filtered through business interests and a geopolitical lens that seems incapable of focusing on the raw reality of innocent human casualties. And it is not that tragedies without resolution are not immortalized in art. In 1937, Picasso's *Guernica* became a powerful condemnation of war and chaotic violence. And it persists as one of the most famous and treasured anti-war paintings of modern history. Marks's "altered paintings" seem to ask, as a point of the artist's inquisitive nature rather than moral self-righteousness, "Why is Eurocentric suffering the only kind that art history seems to care about?" Marks's subversion of what is so beloved in Giotto's original—the story of faith, of trust in God's omnipotence—creates a narrative tension that roils under the surface. There is friction between what is quite literally gospel and how things really are. This type of friction is a pillar of Marks's sewn works and what makes her storytelling so compelling. Viewers must wrestle with history as something that is imprecise, bloated with bias, and unfolding in real time—something that cannot be fixed by art.

But Marks's works are not simplistic political critique or hectoring propaganda. Her works question and complicate but they do not condemn or condone. The whiff of critical detachment in Marks's reinterpretations—sniffed in the crisp concision of her chosen text—loosens the tie between final art object and the sociohistorical references that comprise it. To wit, *What's Going On?* turns El Greco's Christ of *Holy Trinity*, a symbol of divine sorrow and sacrifice, into a figure that could be read as Eric Garner or Freddie Gray, whose deaths from police violence sparked public scrutiny in 2015, the year Marks made the altered painting. This use of a body double complicates our understanding of martyrdom and addresses the chronic disease of racism in America, but the work does not offer moral edicts on racialized violence or chain itself to historical or modern politics. Instead, it shares transcendental experiences such as love and sorrow in a familiar structure to recontextualize our present moment as something that is a part of—not apart from—the history we have come to understand through Western art.

The philosopher Benedetto Croce posited, "all history is contemporary," arguing that history is alive because it is understood and interpreted by the living. The symbolism and allegorical depth of Marks's works prompt us to participate in this living history by activating our interpretive instincts and alerting us to its biases, like telescoping. We are enjoined to dialogue with art history in a way typically reserved for artists, where the subject matter is not sacred and fixed but temporal and malleable. As Marks surrendered creative control to what she perceives as the spiritual force of process, viewers of these sewn works are urged to surrender the tidy, definitive interpretation sometimes associated with figuration in favor of metanarratives about art, history, the human condition, and their interrelation.



*What's Going On?*, 2015. Fabric, lace, thread, screen-printing ink, old paint-stained sweatpants fabric, cast and stamped metal and plastic parts, buttons, Jade glue, coated wire, fusible adhesive on a contemporary tapestry copy of El Greco's *Holy Trinity*, 49 3/4 x 37 1/2 in (126.4 x 95.3 cm)

—Spencer Linford