

SECURITY BLANKETS

Birgitta Nordström's infant wrapping cloths

Swedish artist Birgitta Nordström is a weaver. For many years her academic and artistic research has focused on what she describes as 'textiles and rites, especially woven textiles for funerals and moments of loss.' Infant Wrapping Cloth is her ongoing project that weaves small cloths for lives that end during pregnancy or delivery. Nordström explains, 'these wrapping cloths have an important task to perform in a difficult situation where words fail those involved.' Here, the textile is asked to meet the responsibility of bestowing the memory of dignity following death.

Before beginning the Infant Wrapping Cloth project, Nordström, for several decades now, has woven funeral palls. 'The action of covering the coffin with the pall can be an opportunity for a family member to take an active part in the funeral preparations. This gesture can be seen as a way of saying farewell to a dear one – through the making of a bed.' Today Nordström continues to hand weave funeral palls, often as public commissions requested by churches and, more recently, hospitals. On occasion, she also lends funeral palls selected by an individual preparing for their own death.

Nordström's ongoing work with funeral palls allows for the time investment that hand weaving demands. On a practical level, the cloth's purpose is primarily a symbolic covering of the casket and thus allows for reuse. In the setting of the hospital viewing room, woven

palls hang ready for the hospital staff to prepare for the relatives that visit to say farewells. History reminds us that past norms involved family members preparing the body with ritual washing and wrapping in cloth. More recent custom has designated these roles to professional undertakers and focused family participation instead on the ceremony of the funeral. In Sweden, returning to the use of a funeral pall may allow a ritual possibility that reminds us of some of the earlier traditions for family members of draping the body in cloth as a step in the mourning process.

The Infant Wrapping Cloth project relates to Nordström's prior experience hand weaving funeral palls, but is distinct in its requirement to mark the experience of birth and death together. Nordström received requests from healthcare professionals to weave these cloths and, as she explains, 'hand weaving unique cloths was initially a perfect way to address the question of offering dignity in death. But in order to find out how these cloths could find their way into hospital I needed the cloths to be produced with as little cost as possible, and, at the same time, without losing quality.

I chose to design a material that could be industrially produced. From the basic material that was woven in a local factory I cut cloths that were of two sizes. I then sewed a hem on them with the help of silk or flax threads that marked a little line where the material was allowed to fray; a simple, final touch.'

Nordström explains that in 2017 in Sweden, 'wrapping cloths and sheets are delivered to pregnancy, childbirth and abortion clinics that are part of the clinical study, and used as the midwives find appropriate and according to the wishes of the parents. The wrapping cloths do not involve any cost for the hospitals in question, but are a gift to parents. After a wrapping cloth has been used in cases of death, this is then documented by the staff involved on a clinical report form. The questions here touch upon what staff have experienced and observed, as well as reporting how the wrapping cloths have been used. There are also questions related to the size and characteristics of the textiles chosen.' It has been reported that in some instances families have chosen to keep the wrapping cloths after leaving the hospital.

The Infant Wrapping Cloth project has required further challenging material learning. Over time, advice from hospitals has meant the size of some wrapping cloths has been reduced. Nordström recounts an urgent wish from a midwife: 'We should not forget the very, very small. We need blankets no bigger than 45 x 45 centimetres that can, maybe, be used in the case of late miscarriages and abortions.' Other medical professionals have taught her further unspoken physical realities: the young human body begins to break down rapidly after death. A wrapping cloth capable of both literal and symbolic function must be highly absorbent and provide 'some of the resilience the dead body has lost.' These realities are tasks the textile is capable of performing, if we are strong

enough to hear what is needed.

Currently, Nordström is also hand weaving again with volunteers in the Weaving Research Group at the Academy of Design and Crafts (HDK) at the University of Gothenburg to produce handwoven cloths. She explains that it was these requests to create cloths of a smaller and smaller size that required her to return to hand weaving: 'to think of bodies in that small a scale, I had to work through my artistic knowledge and create a direct woven response. These small cloths are used in the largely unspoken experiences of abortion and miscarriage.'

Writing that the textile envelops, that it is with us from the first moments of life until we enter death, that in the time between it protects and comforts, are all familiar introductions to countless textile exhibition catalogues, articles and artist statements. The repetition of these statements – at least for those who often read about textiles – starts to blunt their meaning. None of these observations are inaccurate, but familiarity begins to make such observations benign. In Birgitta Nordström's practice, the poignancy of the textile's contribution to birth and death tropes is stark. Speaking of the volunteers who continue to meet and weave for the project at the University of Gothenburg she reflects, 'to embrace, to hold and to wrap are the words that lead us – as we weave on the same loom, and encourage each other on by saying: let's weave – and let us weave the loveliest we can.' ••• **Jessica Hemmings**

Peder Hildor

