

Adorned in Ideas

Lisa Anne Auerbach: Fear No Sweater *by Shana Nys Dambrot*

Los Angeles-based photographer, writer, and conceptual artist Lisa Anne Auerbach wears her mind on her sleeve. She generates free self-published zines and blogs that have to do with the vagaries of life in Los Angeles as a bicyclist rather than a motorist (available at americanhomebody.com), she photographs a variety of subjects, and, of course, she knits. But it was not always thus; she didn't even learn to knit until after getting her MFA from Art Center College of Design in Pasadena in 1994. Instead, knitting is very much an outgrowth of her fine-art practice. Finding herself suddenly a photographer without a darkroom, she missed the feeling of making things with her hands. She was also a political activist who wanted a platform that would prove more enduring than T-shirts and more functional than placards and bumper stickers. In knitwear, she perceived the perfect fusion of her interests in craft, irony, art, and progressivism.

Rather than aim at a career in apparel, Auerbach has deliberately pursued knitting as a formal art-making strategy. She has recast knitting from its traditional role as a nostalgic or otherwise personally historic language to an idiomatic armature on which to pin sociopolitical commentary. It's fine art about radicalized women's work, belonging to a tradition of art making that is rooted much more firmly in conceptual art than traditional garment or textile craft and trade. As with Barbara Kruger's seminal collage work in the eighties—which used text to powerfully send up the conventions of advertising to reveal its agenda toward manipulating women and perpetuating gender stereotypes—Auerbach inverts the quiet domesticity of knitting, drafting the needle art into the service of public outrage and the assertion of individuality.

Auerbach's work has included a camouflage print scarf with "Quagmire" written across the middle, a plush sweater proclaiming "Bush Is Scary," and "Body Count" mittens (one reflects the deaths of 1,524 soldiers in Iraq as of March 23, 2005; its partner reflects the body count a week later—the time it took to complete the pair). Auerbach has recently returned from success at London's Frieze Art Fair and is currently working on a series about the weather, and in a very different climatic context from Los Angeles—the pieces are for a show at CPH Kunsthall, a small public-art museum in Copenhagen. The

series involves a Danish weatherman with a sweater fetish and integrates commentary concerning the devastation of Hurricane Katrina and the seemingly inept Bush-administration response to the crisis. "I like the idea of talking about the weather and making it controversial," Auerbach says, "because the weather is supposed to be the least controversial subject."

Her knitted-art website is called stealthissweater.com—a name taken from the title of a book (*Steal This Book*) by seventies social revolutionary Abbie Hoffman, whose ideas have inspired Auerbach's interest in the spiritual, domestic side of anarchy and revolution. The book was essentially a survival guide, detailing social, cultural, and governmental sources of free food, shelter, medicine, and entertainment as well as providing guidelines for free expression. Despite Hoffman's often angry tone, his belief that a political climate constitutes not only the world of ideas but also the very fabric of daily life is essentially optimistic; his ideas are often used as proof that a gentler kind of life is possible. Along with a talent for fusing the personal and the political and a way with the handmade object, Auerbach shares with Hoffman a particular distrust of a government that she feels seeks to distort people's ability to communicate with one another, or make them afraid to try. Her knitted statements are the direct antidote to this culture of fear: embracing an indiscriminate, unapologetic broadcasting of political views while keeping the wearer warm and cozy at the same time. ●

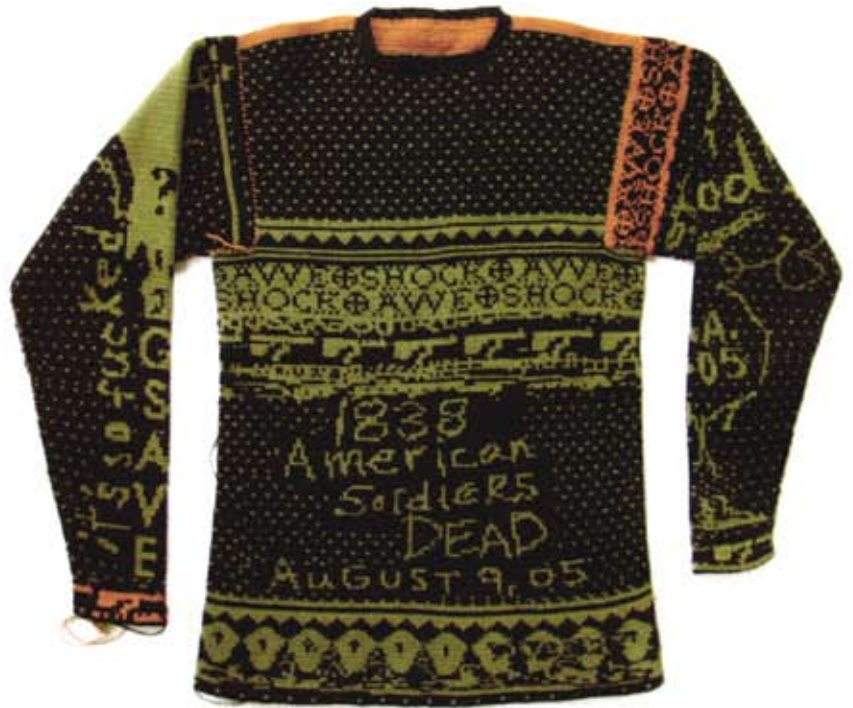
Shana Nys Dambrot is an independent art critic, author, and editor based in Los Angeles. Her work appears in *Modern Painters*, *tema celeste*, *Artweek*, *Art Asia Pacific*, and *Real Talk LA*, and she is the managing editor of L.A.'s *Flavorpill*, an e-mail arts publication.

Lisa Anne Auerbach is exhibiting work at KBH Kunsthall in Copenhagen, Denmark, during the month of January, and will take part in the show *The Workmanship of Risk* at St. Lawrence University's Richard F. Brush Art Gallery in Canton, New York, March 2–April 6.

Auerbach hand knits smaller pieces and designs larger pieces on a computer that is connected to a knitting machine.

ABOVE: Everything I Touch Turns to Sold (back), 2005; wool; machine knit. Photo by the artist.





CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT Body Count Mittens, March 23-31, 2005; wool; hand knit. Photo by the artist. ABOVE: Body Count Sweater, August 9, 2005; wool; machine knit. Photo by the artist. BELOW: Freedom is Messy (Shoot to Kill) Sash, 2005; wool; machine knit. Photo: Francis Shanberger. BELOW LEFT: Quagmire and Lisa Anne (Cheap Trick) Skirt, 2005; wool; machine knit. Photo by the artist.

