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## **Feminism meets domesticity ; Increasingly women turn to handcrafted arts to take refuge, make a political statement; [Chicago Final Edition]**

Connie Lauerman, Tribune staff reporter. **Chicago Tribune**. Chicago, Ill.: Dec 14, 2005. pg. 1

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### **Abstract** (Document Summary)

Edgewater resident [Brandy Agerbeck] lies on a bedspread she made from various fabrics. Agerbeck, 31, is part of a new generation that views crafting as a way to express personal beliefs about social issues. Agerbeck's do-it-yourself attitude stems from "not wanting to impact the environment." Graphic artist Cinnamon Cooper of Rogers Park, who sells her one-of-a-kind purses online, is among the urban hipster crafters. She doesn't consider country crafts as her "aesthetic." Tribune photo by E. Jason Wambsgans. [Tammy Terwelp]'s Lincoln Park boutique, Mint, showcases the work of local crafters. A handmade purse by Cinnamon Cooper. Tribune photo by E. Jason Wambsgans.

### **Full Text** (1487 words)

*(Copyright 2005 by the Chicago Tribune)*

This fall Brandy Agerbeck needed something to wear to a friend's wedding.

She had a vintage dress that was fine, except for its short sleeves. A shrug would solve the problem nicely, but out of concern for her budget and the environment, Agerbeck, an inveterate crafter, decided to make her own. She made it out of a \$2 wool sweater she bought in a thrift shop, then "assaulted" in the washer so it would be easier to cut apart.

"A huge part of what I do is about not wanting to impact the environment," says Agerbeck, 31, of Edgewater, an information designer.

"My first thought is always, How can I 'MacGyver' something I need from what's already in my apartment?" she says, referring to the 1980s television show in which the main character used science and his wits to solve problems.

In 2002, 60 percent of U.S. households participated in crafts, up from 58 percent a year earlier, and the number is expected to rise sharply when the Hobby Industry Association releases new data next month.

Crafting is not only about knitting, beading and scrapbooking or Martha Stewart-style perfection.

Agerbeck is part of a new generation of crafters that has reclaimed crafts as a feminist act, a refuge from the working world, or a way of making a political statement about mass production and environmental destruction.

"Women who embrace what I call the new domesticity are not traditional women," says Jean Railla, 35, founder of GetCrafty.com, a Web site she designed to "explore the place where feminism and domesticity could meet."

"Most of them, I think, consider themselves third wave feminists," says Railla, a New Yorker. "They're independent, earn their own living, but they also have come to appreciate doing things by hand, taking care of their home, knitting, embroidery as a way to find meaning and create a haven."

Railla, who says she interviewed hundreds of women for her book "Get Crafty: Hip Home Ec" (Broadway Books, \$15), found

that large numbers of them are making a statement against sweatshop labor and mass production and a world they see as increasingly homogenized and dominated by chain stores.

They are women like crafter and graphic artist Cinnamon Cooper, 34, of Rogers Park, who says, "It's more subversive to buy hand-loomed yarn from women and make a scarf than to buy an \$8 scarf at Wal-Mart that someone was paid 8 cents to make."

The young generation's interest in crafting is a "reverse rebellion," says Jane Saks, director of the Institute for the Study of Women and Gender in Arts and Media at Columbia College Chicago, and sponsor of a recent panel on "crafty culture."

"The modern woman can approach crafts with a healthy dose of irreverence but also as a choice," Saks says.

Many women participate in traditional knitting circles, but the urban hipster crafters tend to trade ideas online.

Craftster.org, which decrees "no tea cozies without irony," is at the forefront. The site has 300,000 visitors monthly and 50,000 registered members. Most of the postings feature offbeat and alternative crafts, such as a crocheted Yoda hat for a baby.

"I was just so sick of finding crafts to be this cross-stitch Home Sweet Home plaque kind of thing," says Craftster founder Leah Kramer, 31, of Brookline, Mass.

"So I started to hook up with other people in my area. I found inspiration in what other people were making--hip, fun, offbeat."

Even the traditional craft fairs are changing. Judie Feller, chairman of this year's fundraising craft show at Queen of Angels parish in Chicago's Lincoln Square neighborhood, says younger people in the area expressed a desire for less traditional craft items.

"When people think of church craft shows, they think of crocheted toilet paper covers and old-time things, but we tried hard to seek out new crafters," Feller said. The result: Purses with straps made from neckties, bottle cap jewelry, handmade greeting cards and funky hats.

"The show was an interesting, strange mix of felt ornaments made by little old ladies and wallets made out of duct tape," says Tammy Terwelp, 34, who helped Feller locate younger crafters. Terwelp, a knitter, owns Mint, a new Lincoln Park boutique that showcases the work of local crafters. She features 50 crafters and has 139 others on a waiting list.

The Grandma stigma and aesthetics create a sort of tension between traditional and new wave crafters.

"Country crafts are definitely not my aesthetic," says Cooper, who always is working on one craft project or another, including making the one-of-a-kind purses she sells online.

#### Mutual feelings of distaste

"Urban hip crafters would find all country crafts in bad taste," Cooper says. "The country crafters would probably look at a lot of their reconstructed T-shirts or pebbly crocheting and just consider them horrible as well."

Nina Rubin, who owns a trendy knit shop, Nina, in Wicker Park, has noticed that "mature customers want to follow a pattern to the word, want guidance, want to do the right thing. The younger knitters are much more experimental."

#### Uniqueness above all

A wish for personal expression is paramount. "The new, edgier generation of craft consumers prizes uniqueness," says Mike Hartnett, publisher of Creative Leisure news, an online trade newsletter. "It ties in, I think, with tattooing and body piercing, which is a way of personalizing your body."

Shoshana Berger, 36, co-founder and editor of ReadyMade magazine, a 4-year-old bimonthly based in Berkeley, Calif., says the hip DIY wave is "not about domestic perfection. It's about ... finding a really individual way of putting things together."

ReadyMade features projects ranging from making a skirt out of an old pillowcase to turning computer casings into end tables.

"Young people look down their noses at the more grandmotherly arts," Berger says. "At the same time they are adopting them and making them their own. ... We're crazy about what our grandparents did. They were products of the Great Depression and they knew how to make odds and ends into something."

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#### Crafts, activism an unlikely pair

If there is one place where traditional country crafters and urban hipsters can find common ground, it may be in Craftivism.

The term, a combination of "craft" and "activism," can encompass remaking thrift shop apparel as a protest against sweat shop labor, joining with others to make warm items for those in need--or even participating in 1960s-style protests.

"There are individuals and groups who are doing an enormous amount of crafting for charity," said Mike Hartnett, publisher of Creative Leisure News, an online trade newsletter for the crafts industry.

Warm-Up America, a non-profit organization founded by Wisconsin yarn retailer Evie Rosen in 1991, is one example. WUA helps organize volunteers to knit or crochet squares that are stitched into afghans. The finished afghans then are donated to victims of natural disasters, the homeless, battered women's shelters and such.

Style differences don't matter much when women from different walks of life are working for a common social cause.

The Revolutionary Knitting Circle, which began in Canada five years ago and spread to the U.S. and Europe, uses craftivism to work for social change. The group's first major actions were protest "knit-ins" held outside various corporate sites during the 2002 Group of Eight economic summit near Calgary.

Craftivism also encompasses artisans such as Beth Respass, 33, of Rogers Park, who grew up crafting and turned to selling her handmade jewelry online four years ago. She looks for materials for her jewelry company, Dejahmi, that she believes are not harming people and the environment. She rarely uses gold because, she says, gold mining pollutes local water supplies and harms poor people without the political clout to stop the mining companies. When she occasionally uses recycled gold, she donates a portion of her profits to gold mine clean-up projects.

"My generation grew up hearing about ozone, the rain forest," Respass said. "Once awareness happens, it's hard to separate it from the rest of your life. I remember listening to the music of Sting and watching the work he did in the rain forest and thinking about the impact we have on indigenous peoples.

"Little choices people make every day can change things," she said.

-- Connie Lauerman

#### **[Illustration]**

PHOTOS 4; Caption: PHOTO (color): Edgewater resident Brandy Agerbeck lies on a bedspread she made from various fabrics. Agerbeck, 31, is part of a new generation that views crafting as a way to express personal beliefs about social issues. Agerbeck's do-it-yourself attitude stems from "not wanting to impact the environment." Tribune photo by Alex Garcia. PHOTO (color): Graphic artist Cinnamon Cooper of Rogers Park, who sells her one-of-a-kind purses online, is among the urban hipster crafters. She doesn't consider country crafts as her "aesthetic." Tribune photo by E. Jason Wambsgans. PHOTO: Tammy Terwelp's Lincoln Park boutique, Mint, showcases the work of local crafters. PHOTO: A handmade purse by Cinnamon Cooper. Tribune photo by E. Jason Wambsgans.

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