

Karen Kraven:
Pins and Needles
Toronto Sculpture Garden
June 7 – Sept. 15, 2018
by Theresa Wang

In Karen Kraven's work, capricious associations collapse upon one another. Such playful semiotics reveal her proclivity for anomaly; nothing is quite what it seems. In her latest project, *Pins and Needles* (2018), at the newly revitalized Toronto Sculpture Garden, the artist presents an installation inspired by the neighbourhood's histories of "labour action in garment factories."¹ What was from 1981 to 2014 a storied fixture for contemporary art, the small, rectangular parcel of greenery fittingly commissioned an artist who recognized the value of historical context for the re-inauguration of its exhibition program. Kraven's installation marks the beginning of a new series of installations at the site that the city has pledged to support. Rooted in both the historicity and myths of women's roles in industrial work, *Pins and Needles* explores the social and physical implications of labouring, gendered bodies.

Like Kraven's recent works, *Pins and Needles* returns to the fashion and textile industry as an

entry point to confront bodies and physicality. The project carries resonance with her solo exhibition *Razzle Dazzle Sis Boom Bah* (Mercer Union, 2014) in its use of narrative and archive as structural framework, but more deeply ties to *Deadstock* (MAW, 2017) in employing costume and uniform to materialize different forms of embodiment. *Pins and Needles* leans heavily into archival photographs of a 10-week strike by the women of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) in Toronto in 1931, as well as into Kraven's personal influences, including her father and his father's knitting factory.

Of a monumental scale, *Pins and Needles* consists of an assemblage of 10 oversized garment pieces on a turquoise steel rack. Wavering against the summer breeze, the fabrics carry a jovial funhouse sentiment and a tinge of the macabre. The title recalls the idiom that signifies disturbance and unease, but it also references the 1937 Broadway musical of the same name, organized by the ILGWU, which presented a charming twist on topical labour concerns of the time, such as fair wages and arbitration.

With whimsical poise, Kraven imbricates ambiguities. A recent turn has seen her forgo some of the random found in her past work while maintaining the enigmatic. In uncovering archival materials, the artist fixated on the unfinished clothing that workers would leave in factories while on strike "as a symbol of their labour and of their protest," the paradox of labour disputes being that efficiency is relegated aside in demand for greater efficiency.² This incongruity is reinforced by the materiality of the sculpture; the fragments of marine canvas are restricted to a palette of pallid nudes and greys, as if the wan molting of the imaginary bodies they could hold. In contrast to the stiffness of the upholstery material, the swatches of soft colours provide a flash of humanity and defiance, despite limitation. Gabrielle Moser's accompanying text deems these pattern pieces—having lost their essential functionality—to be on strike, equating the "quizzical [active/passive] logic of striking" to the similarly disjunctive associations held by the sculpture. Pierced as if driven through a stake, the textile pieces together call emphatically for collective action.

The sculpture is delightfully graphic. The fabrics were cut to make edges like puzzle pieces, each a connective tissue to the social pulse of the city's old industrial neighbourhood on King Street. They are distinctive shapes, though only registering as clothing fragments when the odd zip fastener, belt loop or utilitarian pocket is spotted. Any of the garments' formal relationship to abstraction is important insofar as it draws a complementary link between art and craft. Kraven has previously disclosed that the lay(wo)man nature of her textile work is purposefully awkward, yet certain fabric swatches in *Pins and Needles* reveal an amateur professionalism, if not direct expertise: contrast hemmed stitching of fawn seams on chestnut fabric, adjustable straps with hardware, a slipstitch here and there. We see this rigour throughout the textile dimension of her practice; whether we assign this work to the tradition of found objects (fantasy) or industrialized fabrication (economy), Kraven's visualizations of body labour exist in the curious crevice between that dichotomy.

In *Pins and Needles*, Kraven deftly envisages, in a place that has temporarily lost its community, what it might regain. She cares as much about history as she dreams about its capacity moving forward. Her textile work might be thought of in relation to her family's knitting factory, which closed the year she was born, as her way of renewing a family practice. *Pins and Needles* is truly site-specific, conscious of its locale in the heart of the Toronto commercial district. Just one block north of the garden is the neighbourhood's latest encounter with clothing manufacturing: what formerly housed the stores and factories of the T. Eaton Co., where strikes did take place, now encloses a blockade of shopping centres. *Pins and Needles* excels in its capacity as an abstract visualization of labour action and captures the friction of its environment. There is power and conviction in how it inhabits the space, a touch of the work of womanly bodies.

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Gabrielle Moser,
"Unfinished Work: Karen
Kraven's *Pins and
Needles*" (2018).
2 Karen Kraven,
"Q&A" in *Partners in Art*
(August 16, 2018). [http://
partnersinart.ca/media/
karen-kraven-q-a/](http://partnersinart.ca/media/karen-kraven-q-a/)

Karen Kraven,
Pins & Needles, 2018,
marine canvas and steel,
33 cm x 50.8 cm
PHOTO: TONI HAFKENSCHIED

