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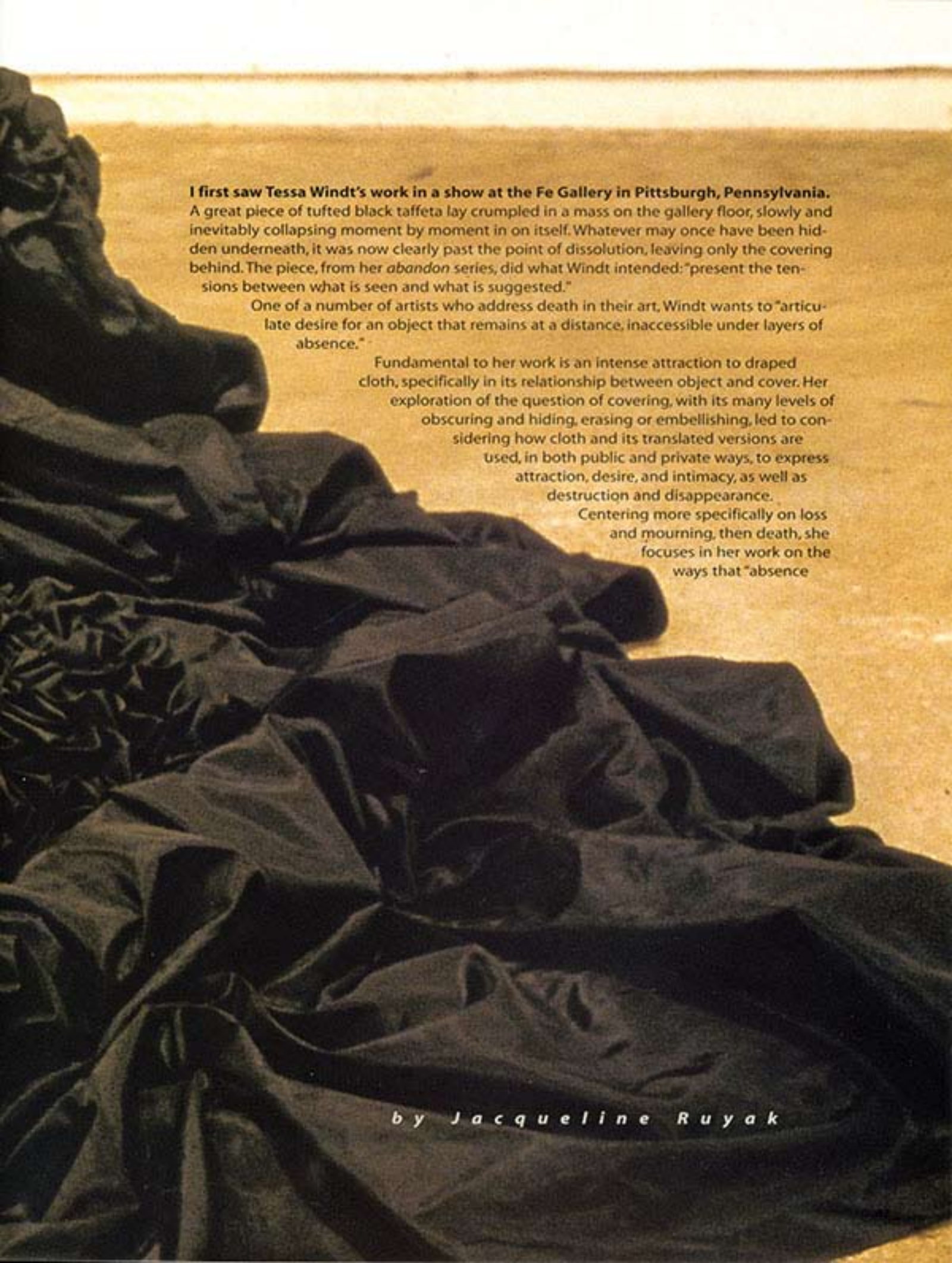


textiles & ritual





Tessa Windt
Covering Absence



I first saw Tessa Windt's work in a show at the Fe Gallery in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

A great piece of tufted black taffeta lay crumpled in a mass on the gallery floor, slowly and inevitably collapsing moment by moment in on itself. Whatever may once have been hidden underneath, it was now clearly past the point of dissolution, leaving only the covering behind. The piece, from her *abandon* series, did what Windt intended: "present the tensions between what is seen and what is suggested."

One of a number of artists who address death in their art, Windt wants to "articulate desire for an object that remains at a distance, inaccessible under layers of absence."

Fundamental to her work is an intense attraction to draped cloth, specifically in its relationship between object and cover. Her exploration of the question of covering, with its many levels of obscuring and hiding, erasing or embellishing, led to considering how cloth and its translated versions are used, in both public and private ways, to express attraction, desire, and intimacy, as well as destruction and disappearance.

Centering more specifically on loss and mourning, then death, she focuses in her work on the ways that "absence

by Jacqueline Ruyak

Tessa Windt Covering Absence

and longing are concurrently hidden and displayed by cloth."

In time, artistic and conceptual considerations became "more grounded in cultural research and practices." In this age of instant and often overwhelming access to images of death and destruction, Windt wondered what ways we

have of integrating them or of responding to them. Thoughts about how we grieve, collectively in public or more intimately in private, led to research in historical and contemporary expressions of grief.

During mourning, it was once common to drape mirrors, lamps, and doors with cloth, much as the body of the deceased was covered in a shroud or the bereaved dressed in black.

At the Museum of Funeral Customs in Springfield, Illinois, and the Aurora Casket Company in Aurora, Indiana, Windt studied domestic drapery techniques and the tufting techniques that have been used since the 19th century to make the casket liners which frame the body of the deceased. "The repetitive tufting," she explains, "transforms cloth from smooth and skin-like to muscular and dense." In her work, however, rather than framing the body, the cloth "underscores the body's absence."

Windt, the first in her immigrant family to be born in Canada, says she always knew that she would go to art school, though her high school art classes left her cold. Instead, it was photography and art classes she took at night school that helped her get through high school and her teens. Some of her strongest role models, too, were artists. Her father is an architect and builder, her mother paints some, and taught painting. "So I came from an environment that makes things. I still use the sewing machine I got at 16." In 1995 she got a BFA in studio art from Concordia College in Montreal and in 2002 an MFA from Ohio State University in Columbus.

In school Windt studied ceramics, but was "orbiting around cloth in different ways." Fascinated by how heavy cloth was depicted in paintings, she made similar works in



ABOVE: TESSA WINDT *Shades* Digital images of fabric printed on vinyl, Masonite.
PAGE 43: TESSA WINDT from *the abandon series I* (view 2) Fabric, 30" x 96" x 132", 2003.



LEFT: TESSA WINDT from *the abandon series III*
(view 2) Fabric, vinyl, 315" x 96" x 96", 2004.
ABOVE: Detail.

ceramics, covering them with cloth. "Clay has that hardness," she says. "I was interested in the contrast between hard and soft. Glaze pouring over clay was like cloth across the body." Midway through graduate school, cloth overtook clay and changed her focus.

Married to an American filmmaker, Windt now teaches sculpture at Carnegie Mellon University and Chatham College, both in Pittsburgh. She also heads a six-month pilot program at the Brew House, a studio, performance, and gallery center in the city. Called the Distillery Program, it nurtures emerging artists of all ages and backgrounds and provides mutual support and a professional context, things she was seeking for herself.

Gravity, the ineluctable force that eventually drags down all beings, is central to the work. "In life, falling happens literally, repeatedly, even predictably," states Windt. "Its remains buried in memory, falling offers punctuation to life. Whether plummeting like Icarus or parachuting gently downward, we are perpetually falling, physically, as well as emotionally, psychically, morally." She calls the shroud "an expression of the grief and loss experienced by those left standing."

Windt's photographic *let fall* series recalls Susan Sontag's famous dictum: "All photographs are *memento mori*." Moving in front of a camera and framed against a stark background, Windt drapes or winds her body in fabric, sometimes

letting it fall freely, sometimes wrapping it in tight mummy-like layers. She refers to famed actress Sarah Bernhardt, who made a practice of greeting guests from a coffin in a seeming rehearsal for her own death. Likewise, she wants "to catch a body as it falls for the last time." Her photographic work allows her to explore more immediately the many ways shrouds are used to conceal and reveal, while she records the lineaments of loss and desire implicit in them.

For *Shades*, the piece she created for the 2006 *Gestures* show at the Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh, Windt turned to photographed fabric in place of fabric itself. Using digital images of shiny blue fabric printed on vinyl, she covered four Masonite boxes, which were then tilted on end against a bare wall. The lush, sinuous folds of the photographed fabric both conformed to and confounded the taut geometric shapes they covered.

Each about the size of a human body, the two larger boxes mimicked the dimensions of the windows directly opposite. I happened into the room late one afternoon in mid-November. Outside, the setting sun seeped through a leaden sky. Inside, the blazing blue slabs suggested portals to another world.

—Jacqueline Ruyak, a writer living in Hellertown, Pennsylvania, frequently contributes to the *Surface Design Journal*.