

The Viral Quilt Comes Together, At Last

#RitasQuilt, the posthumous stitching project that won the internet's heart, goes on display this weekend.

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Rita's Quilt, pictured on December 19 in the final stages of assembly
PHOTO: DS SHIN

TEXT BY SARAH STEIMER

Activists of all stripes love a good catchphrase – stenciled on poster board, screen-printed on a tee, or rallied around on social media. Two such zingers, printed on vintage buttons, caught the eye of [Shannon Downey](#) – a “craftivist” whose embroidered political art has gone viral under the name Badass Cross Stitch – as she perused photos advertising a September 7 estate sale in Mount Prospect.

Downey learned that the buttons, which read “Liberated men are better” and “My vote goes wet” (a pin worn by those in favor of repealing Prohibition), belonged to a woman named Rita Smith. But the buttons were only the beginning. At Smith’s estate sale, Downey also found a framed, embroidered map of the U.S. and a box filled with the beginnings of an accompanying quilt.

The quilt pattern called for stitching each of the 50 states, plus its state bird and flower. Smith had recently passed away at the age of 99, leaving the work unfinished.

Exactly three months after that estate sale, Smith's two buttons were part of a small altar perched above a bustling "quilting bee" at Wishcraft Workshop in North Center. There, stitchers huddled together to complete Smith's quilt in time for its first public showing, a single afternoon pop-up show at Woman Made Gallery on December 21. Her black-and-white high school graduation portrait was flanked by two candles, along with her embroidery hoop and the needle that pierced her unfinished work.



An homage to Rita Smith at the December 7 quilting bee PHOTO: SHANNON DOWNEY

Smith might be the catalyst in this story, but Downey – working alongside other quilters at the binding party in coveralls emblazoned with a slogan of their own ("Make art. Smash systems.") – is the instigator. Online, she rallied a network of stitchers to complete the project, using the hashtag #RitasQuilt. In time, she'd built a devoted following and sparked a bona fide media frenzy.

“I have done this like 10 times this week,” she says during an interview in early November. She looks up and shakes a fist toward the sky. “*Ritaaa!*”

Downey estimates that she’s completed a dozen or so unfinished embroidery projects she’s found at estate sales. With an undergraduate degree in archaeology, she looks at the unfinished work as an artifact, studying the techniques and styles the person used so she can finish it in the same vein.

After finding the box of patterns for Smith’s quilt, however, Downey quickly realized the project was far too big for her to take on alone. So, the day after the estate sale, Downey put out a call for help via Instagram, describing the Tupperware treasure chest and asking if anyone would be willing to embroider part of the quilt.

In 24 hours, more than 1,000 people volunteered. The pattern also called for 50 appliqué stars, so Downey assigned those as embroidery work instead so more people could participate. She set up the guidelines – tag your work online with #RitasQuilt, send your completed square back by November 15 – and sent out the patterns in early October. Almost all pieces, save for four stars, made it back to Downey. One determined stitcher even drove down from Wisconsin to hand-deliver her piece the day before the quilting bee.

Despite the analog task at hand, the project immediately inspired an online community. The volunteers kept in touch through a private group chat and tracked their progress publicly via hashtag. One woman told *The Washington Post* that she’s used the craft as a tool for recovery. Two of the stitchers even realized they lived blocks from one another in Massachusetts.

“One recognized the other’s dog,” Downey says. “Now they’re getting together to hang out and stitch.”

After her digital contributors embroidered the individual pieces, Downey needed local expertise for the quilting process. Her initial posts about the project caught the attention of Chicago crafters, who offered to donate their time, talents, and – in the case of Candice Blansett-Cummins, the owner of Wishcraft Workshop – their space.

Quilters Heather Kinion and Sarah Evans joined Downey at her Rogers Park apartment in late November to help cut the embroidered squares into hexagons and lend their quilters’ knowledge. With Downey’s two dogs keeping watch, the women washed away the remaining blue marking pen ink on the squares, blocked the pieces, measured, cut, and stacked, making the most of the limited counter space afforded by a vintage Chicago apartment. Each remarked on her favorite embroidered flowers, peppering in random facts (did you know school children selected the official birds in some states?) and crafting history lessons.

At Wishcraft’s quilting bee, volunteers hand-stitched the hexagons and chatted as they worked. Someone even baked hexagon-shaped cookies, iced to mimic the quilt’s states and stars.



Shannon Downey removes the quilt centerpiece from its original framing.

PHOTO: SHANNON DOWNEY

One of Downey’s larger personal goals is to bring attention to art that is traditionally women’s. At the estate sale, Downey recalls being immediately drawn to Smith’s “gorgeous” framed U.S. map embroidery, even before she found the unfinished quilt. But the asking price frustrated her.

“This woman created this beautiful piece of art that was perfect and showed such skill – and it was five bucks after she died,” she says.

Since #RitasQuilt went viral, people have shared stories online about their own women-made family artifacts and why those pieces are so important to them.

“I just keep laughing at how people are reading [the quilt] as so apolitical,” Downey says. “‘It’s so wholesome.’ Sure, yeah. But it’s also a political statement – it’s a feminist statement about where we assign value and meaning.”

Asked about the quilt's future beyond December 21, Downey says she plans to ride the initiative's momentum – quite literally. When volunteer stitchers noted that not everyone can easily visit the National Quilt Museum in Paducah, Kentucky – where the quilt will go on display this spring – they suggested the masterpiece go on tour. Downey set up a [GoFundMe](#) for what she's dubbed the Badass Cross Stitch Tour, an RV trip that will bring the quilt to those who helped embroider it. She's hoping the quilt's popularity will draw people out to view it at their local galleries or museums, where they may learn to appreciate other fiber arts.

“Hopefully we can move the needle in people stopping to think about the role of fiber art and what is craft and what is art,” she says. “Why do we value one medium over another?”

Volunteers will be adding finishing touches to the quilt up until Saturday, but Downey posted a photo of its near-completion after the quilting bee. Those assembled held out the hand-stitched product. At its heart is Smith's original map of the U.S.

“It's super important to me that this group understands that I do not believe that this quilt is mine in any way,” Downey says. “It is ours.”

DETAILS: *Pilsen. Woman Made Gallery. December 21, 1-4 p.m. Free. womanmade.org*