

# GENERATION

KLEA McKENNA



Photography, throughout its short history, has been modeled after the vision of an eye (a lens opens to record the light reflecting off of the world around it). But a photogram physically meets its subject and records the mark of an interaction. By making touch more primary than sight, I subvert photography's intended use and ask it to transcribe texture, pressure and force as well as light—to read the surface of the world in a new way. I use simple materials to make my “photographic rubbings” and “photographic reliefs,” relying on analog light-sensitive paper, my hands, a flashlight and sometimes an etching press. In darkness, I emboss paper with artifacts of material culture and patterns from the natural landscape, and cast light onto the resulting textures. It feels simultaneously like reading braille, praying and gambling. (Such acts of risk and faith are central to my practice). This unruly process invents new marks, revealing nuances beyond what my eyes or fingertips can confirm, as vestiges of the friction and limitations of my materials. Yet, even when used in this crude, unbidden way, photography has a gift for describing reality in strange detail.

In *Generation*, I apply this method to textiles and women's clothing from the last two centuries, objects with a rich legacy of touch—from the labor of their making to signs of wear. The history of textiles, clothing and style is comprised of a million stories of migration, colonialism, and women's labor and sexuality. Each article of clothing contains moments of individual innovation and decades of ordinary devotion. Just as each handmade garment was made through one woman's patient labor, so is it undone that way, worn down slowly over time, deconstructed or creatively cannibalized.

I research each object's origin, intended use and broader representation, and piece together a possible history from the available world of text and digital images. This is a poetic form of study, simultaneously an inquiry into what one can learn from a physical object—and an acknowledgement of how little I can know from this distance. Excerpts of my inquiry are evidenced in this book, a companion piece to the photographic reliefs in *Generation*. The deluge of reference images I gathered reflect a visual history not only of the textiles, but also of the changing notions of femininity and ornamentation, as well as the West's relentless appropriation of traditional global fashions—a glimpse into a chaotic flowchart of influences and the migration of objects that shape what women make and wear. I seek fractures, insights that allow me to re-animate these objects and illuminate them anew from my own vantage point. My process of applying pressure—even to the point of a textile's disintegration—is driven by my desire for haptic communication with women from a time and place different than my own.





## LA CHINA POBLANA

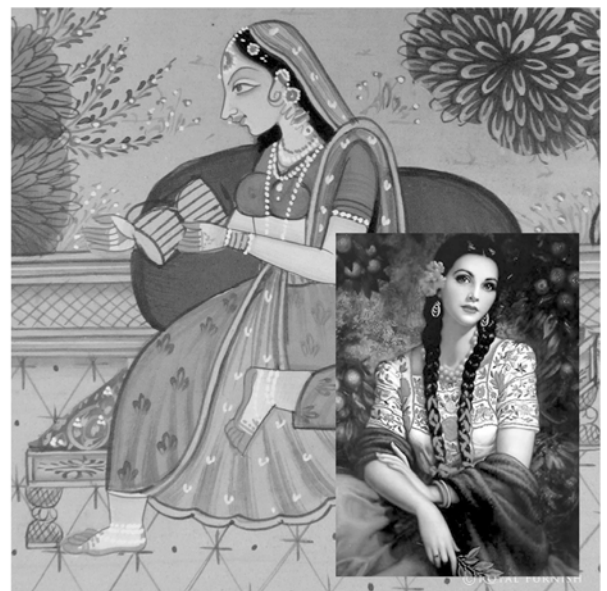
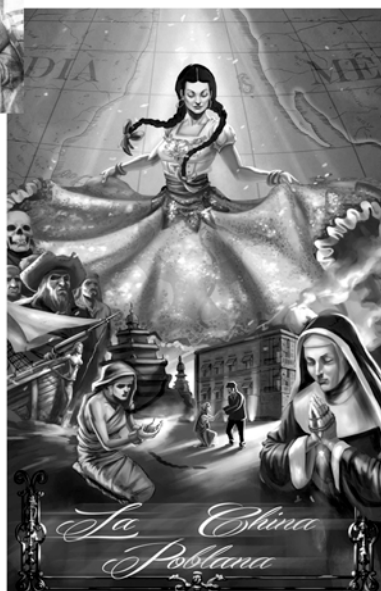
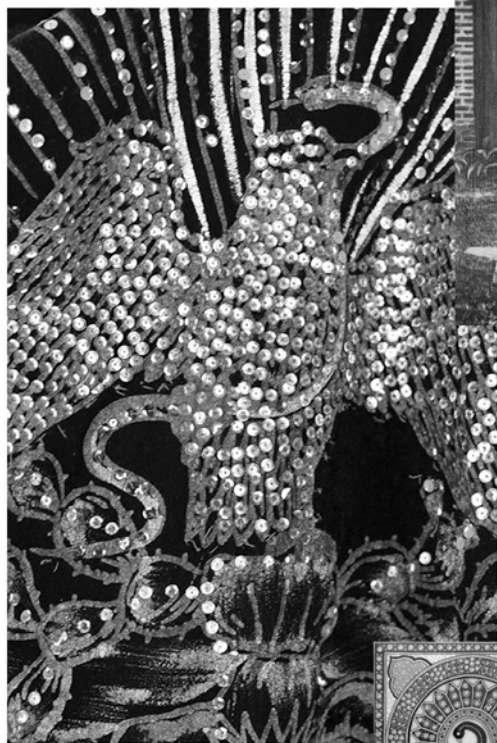
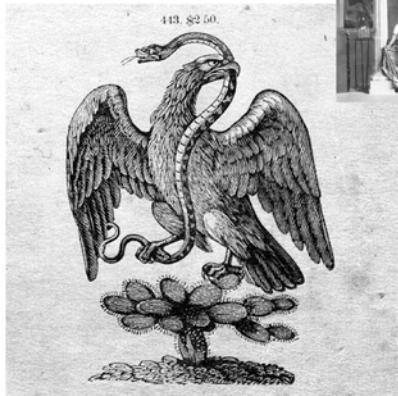
When I first encountered it, in a thrift store in the deserts of eastern California, the fabric was so heavy, so densely weighted with sequins, that I could scarcely perceive the shape of the garment. The colors and textures of rich teal, burnt red and tarnished silver pointed to Pakistan or India, but as I smoothed the scaly surface flat onto the floor, I saw the shape of a full skirt and the familiar image of an eagle clutching a snake in its mouth—Mexico's coat of arms, derived from an Aztec prophecy.

I had heard the story before, or one of the many embellished versions of it, that in the late 1600's a young Rajasthani woman in India was kidnapped by pirates and sold into slavery. She was taken across the sea to Mexico, to the colonial city of Puebla. Once there, a series of unlikely plot twists led her first to life in a Catholic convent and then into marriage to a wealthy merchant. This enigmatic woman became a local icon known as "La China Poblana" (the Asian woman from Puebla). Her personal style was as captivating to the people of Puebla as was her history, and they began to emulate her global look. She merged the draped, sheer fabrics and mirrored details of Indian saris with the local woven shawls and full skirts of Mexico. The China Poblana style evolved over the following centuries in Mexico to integrate patriotic colors and symbols, as well as new materials such as sequins, first made of metal, then of gelatin and celluloid. Later Frida Kahlo embraced it as a nod to indigenous identity politics and imbued it with her bohemian cool, making the style internationally recognizable. Throughout the 1940s and early '50s, my own grandmother, living on an island off the coast of Southern California, dressed in a simplified version of this look. The history of fashion is a history of appropriation, and the origin of a new style is often seeded by foreign influence. But rarely does a seed carried across continents and oceans by one lone woman grow into a symbol of a nation's identity.

The sequins on this skirt reveal its age: some are silver, marking them as from the 1920s, and many others were added later during the brief period when sequins were made of gelatin—a lighter, more luminous material, but vulnerable to moisture, so that a spilled drink or the sweat of a dancer could cause them to melt off a dress. When I pulled this skirt off the damp photographic paper to reveal its imprint, the gelatin sequins had bonded to the photographic emulsion and, in the darkness, I heard the sound of them tearing at it. That separation left tiny shredded fingers of emulsion reaching upward to catch the light that cast long shadows across the map-like surface of the image.

Detail of *La China Poblana (1)*  
41.5 x 78 inches  
2018







## KINGDOMS ARE CLAY

Due to my name I have always identified with Cleopatra. I dressed as her for Halloween when I was nine (and again at 37). My childhood costume was a metallic, teal-green shift that my mom sewed, complete with gold belt and slinky snake jewelry. I wore my mom's beaded headdress, like the one Whitney Houston would wear a few years later. In my rural, second-wave feminist upbringing, Cleopatra seemed a rare symbol of absolute female power without sacrificing glamour and sexuality. My notion of her—at once god-like, narcissistic, cruel and passionate—was informed by a mash-up of archeological artifacts seen in the pages of *National Geographic* magazine, Elizabeth Taylor's cold beauty and the Art Deco aesthetics of late Egyptian revival (my exposure to pop culture was extremely limited). Like my childhood self, Western culture had long ago seized upon Cleopatra as an icon of "exotic" feminine power. Brutal, decadent and beautiful. Her image proliferated and was reinterpreted in a million simulacra over the last 200 years. With each new colonial expedition and archeological discovery throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a wave of "Egyptomania" swept the Western world; it culminated with the British unearthing of King Tut's tomb in 1922. Assuit fabric (also spelled asyut and assiut, among other variations) was born of this craze. Developed in the Coptic city of Asyut during the Victorian era as a product to sell to the new colonial tourists, it merged ancient Egyptian and Turkish techniques of hand weaving with hammering strips of silver metal into linen mesh to create shimmering geometric and figurative patterns, each carrying symbolic meaning. Appropriated by early Hollywood, Assuit, with its mirror-like fluidity and the cold feel of snakeskin, became a favorite in costume design for belly dancers, showgirls and starlets—evoking an unknowable, dangerous sexuality; a textile embodying the reptilian feminine of Cleopatra.

Detail of *Kingdoms Are Clay (1)*  
41.5 x 31.5 inches  
2018











## SWEETER THAN SALT

This dress was one of the first textiles I collected for *Generation*. It absorbed my attention the way a painting can. The oxymoron of electric-pink silk thread covering nearly every inch of the heavy, black, rough-hewn cotton, itself faded to a dusty grey: this is cloth made for labor and to withstand generations of use. Sleeves so long that I could imagine them hanging, clownish, obscuring her hands and declaring them private. The neck is an opening so small that this dress could only be worn by the most delicate woman, a slender-necked girl (a bride maybe), her tiny body lost in its expanse and hidden by the immense garden embroidered on it (a record of the life hours it took from someone). And one deep, secret pocket—evidently added later with the telltale rhythm of machine stitches—holding the riddle of three small pieces of tree bark that graze my fingertips when I reach my own hand inside.

This is one way to know an object, through the senses (scent, color, feel against my skin). But this is a shallow knowledge, and so I begin, by habit, to deconstruct it. Museum halls filled with artifacts laid out, untouchably, on black velvet have taught me this logic. Isolating pieces in a field of darkness; a belief that collecting and controlling is the path to understanding. Take the thing apart in order to know it. Cut the stitches she sewed, pull apart the seams she joined, come to know it in its pieces—a puzzle to be reconstructed once its every angle is recorded. This is a safe distance. This is how we have learned to encounter the unfamiliar, and we take shelter in the limitations of this way of knowing through fragments and facts. The dress is from northern Pakistan, the Swat Valley—a region that is home to both Pashtun and Kohistani people—pulled taut by the Taliban over the last two decades. How much fantasy is required in order to believe that we can know a world through its fragments? This is no way to know someone. I can touch what she touched, even wear what she wore, but I have no idea who she was.

Detail of *Sweeter than Salt*  
Diptych 72 x 84 inches (each panel 72x41 inches)  
2018







## MANTON DE MANILA

A garment designed for movement in an era when women's mobility was limited by everything from their clothing to their class. It is said that the women of Spain requested the fringe, and then demanded that it be longer and longer still... so that it would sway and ripple with each shift of their bodies, amplifying their movements. The shawls came from the East via the Manila Galleons, the Spanish trading ships that for 300 years, beginning in 1565, brought the material world of "the Orient" to Europe. The silk was farmed, woven and embroidered in China with images of frogs, fish and cranes. The shawls traveled from Canton, China to the Port of Manila, crossed the feral Pacific to Acapulco, were carried across Mexico to the Atlantic Coast, and then shipped to Seville (accompanied by the Navy to fend off pirates). But the symbols of frogs and fish were lost in translation. The women of Spain wanted blooming roses and songbirds and fringe so long that it fell like hair down their backs. The market spoke, and the Manton de Manila was born—a shawl which only ever passed through Manila, despite the name's implications.

Movement. From one continent to another, from the upper-class ladies to the Flamenco dancers and the Romani caravans all across Europe. Eventually it adorned the pianos of anyone who could afford one. The knotted fringe, which lives much longer than the body of the shawl, was often torn from the fragile silk to be reused, stitched anew to scarves and dresses as fashions changed. Somewhere in this migration, the shawl's swirling fringe became a symbol of bohemian abandon. So that by the era of my childhood it was draped over every mantel or curtain-less window in every hippy home in California, and Stevie Nicks was dancing, spinning her web, with fringe flying around her like a storm.

Detail of *Manton de Manila (2)*  
42 x 75.25 inches  
2017











## PAINT ME BARE

*“Clothing is a compromise between the fear of, and the desire for, nudity, which would make clothing part of the very process of neurosis, that is both display and mask...”* - Barthes, *The Language of Fashion*, 25.

In front of me is a tangle of 48 pairs of thigh-high stockings from the 1960s. Their colors seem drawn from a palette of earth tones, like shades of soil: soft, dry, fertile, rich—words not unlikely to be used when describing a woman. Tawny clay and taupe, deep russet browns that drift toward burgundy, dusky cocoa hues, cool charcoals and an occasional shot of milk white. Is each color meant to beckon to a specific person, or to paint her the shade of another? Even as a teenager, still obliged to wear these strange sheaths for special occasions, I never quite knew whether I was meant to choose a color that matched my skin or one I wished did. So, from the selection of shiny gold Legg’s eggs in the super market aisle, I would search for a true match and wonder who was represented by that spectrum of available hues—and who was excluded.

In 1939 DuPont Chemical Company released a new “miracle fabric” called Nylon. Stockings, which were previously silk, cotton and even wool, became ever more thin, diaphanous and resilient. They were more ubiquitous than ever before, but also more invisible. This new product coincided with World War II and the resulting unprecedented influx of women entering the American workforce beyond the domestic realm. These women were bridging two eras: one in which appearance (of both self and home) was paramount, and one in which function and modesty, for long hours of labor in public view, was a necessity. Stockings were touted as a veil of modesty and respectability while creating the illusion that we were bare (both “display and mask”). Charged with the absurd task of keeping us covered while making us appear naked, and most importantly, erasing our imperfections. We are taught to conceal, to embrace an illusion that is both our disguise and our armor. But there is a contradiction here, because any glance through twentieth-century advertising imagery, pornography, or even snapshots, reveal that it is the possibility of removing that mask, of disrupting that illusion, that is more titillating than either the mask or what is underneath it. There is apparently no end to the sex appeal and mystique of a removable skin, a layer that makes us smooth like dolls but can be shed to reveal the imperfect and storied texture of real human skin.

Detail of *Paint Me Bare (2)*  
42.5 x 36.5 inches  
2018







## ANONYMOUS

Head bowed, hands busy. The universal posture of a woman sewing, a choreographed dance to which we all know the moves. Spine curved forward, eyes cast down, the body contained in a circle of its own activity, occupied only with the task at hand. This is what she looks like when she sews. But what does she *feel* when she sews? Is the manual repetition mind-numbing, or can it unhinge the mind from the body's conscious movements and allow it to roam untethered? Does it "quiet the mind," as they say, or free it?

For centuries (and somewhere still today) girls were not taught to read and write, but they were taught to sew. And textiles share more than a common Latin root with text (as does texture), as they likewise carry embedded meaning. They embody symbols and signals to be deciphered. Patterns, passed down like stories, encode religions, values, songs, origins and statuses of the families who make them, wear them, or sleep beneath them. But there is room within these flexible, evolving forms for innovation and personal style. Sewing is a loophole in the system: a small, but crucial opportunity for female authorship.

In Europe, embroidery samplers began centuries ago, well before printed reproductions of patterns, and served as an index of one's own skills. Gradually samplers became less private; they began to serve as practice and then as proof of a young woman's skill—and therefore her value as a seamstress, homemaker and wife. Many were gridded panels with stripes of every stitch she had mastered, divided by quotes reflecting virtue and morality—words that the girl herself likely could not read, but had memorized the shape of the letters enough to stitch them out—and then signed and dated (how rarely in that era did a girl have cause to sign her own name?). But some samplers were more cryptic formats, fluid compositions where petroglyphic language crowded the linen and enigmatic doodles were rendered painstakingly in tiny silken stitches. Even the most prescribed handmade object always allows for a degree of individual expression—not only through a show of individual skill and virtuosity, but by breaking the mold and deviating from the plan.

Detail of *Anonymous (4)*  
14 x 11 inches  
2018











*La China Poblana (1)*

Photographic relief.

Unique photogram on gelatin silver fiber paper. Sepia toned. Impression of a handmade skirt, heavily sequined with an eagle and snake emblem.

Mexico. Made 1920s, altered in 1940s.

41.5 x 78 inches

2018



*Kingdoms Are Clay (1)*

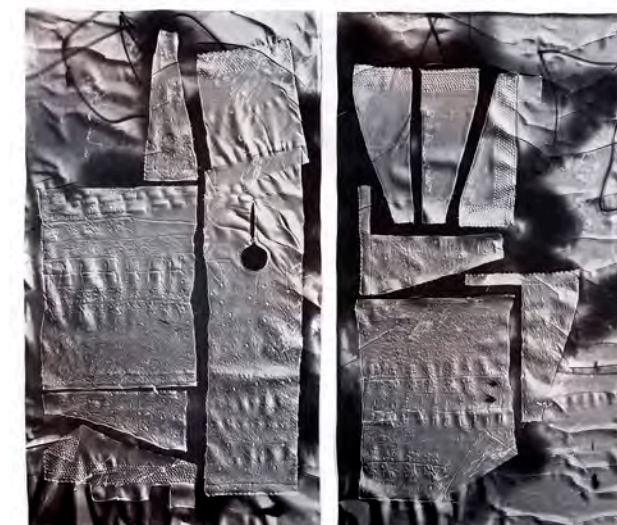
Photographic relief.

Unique photogram on gelatin silver fiber paper. Sepia and selenium toned. Impression of an assuit shawl made of linen and silver.

Egypt. 1920s.

41.5 x 31.5 inches

2018



*Sweeter than Salt*

Photographic relief.

Unique photogram on gelatin silver fiber paper. Sepia and selenium toned. Impression of every piece of a woman's traditional tunic from Swat Valley. Pakistan. 1950s

Diptych 72 x 84 inches (each panel 72x41 inches)

2018





*Manton de Manila (2)*

Photographic relief.

Unique photogram on gelatin silver fiber paper.  
Impression of a hand embroidered silk Manton  
de Manila or Piano Shawl.

Spain. 1930s.

42 x 75.25 inches

2017



*Paint Me Bare (2)*

Photographic relief.

Unique photogram on gelatin silver fiber paper.  
Selenium toned.

Impression of 48 Nylon stockings.

United States. 1950s – 1960s.

42.5 x 36.5 inches

2018



*Anonymous (4)*

Photographic relief.

Unique photogram on gelatin silver fiber paper.  
Impression of a hand embroidered cutwork  
sampler.

United States. 1910s

14 x 11 inches

2018



This book was created as a companion piece to the work in *Generation* on the occasion of a two-part exhibition in Fall of 2018 at Von Lintel Gallery in Los Angeles and Gitterman Gallery in New York. The covers are made of unique, textured scraps and test-strips of photographic reliefs; by-products from the making of the works in *Generation*.

Thank you to Dave, and to my friends and critique groups for sharing their expertise and time to help me realize this work. Most of all, thank you to my studio assistant Andie Lucia Bustillos.

Written by Klea McKenna  
Edited by Emily Holmes  
Collage design by Airyka Rockefeller  
Book Design by Andie Lucia Bustillos  
Printed by Edition One Books in Berkeley, CA.

Von Lintel Gallery // Los Angeles // [www.vonlintel.com](http://www.vonlintel.com)  
Euqinom Gallery // San Francisco // [www.euqinomgallery.com](http://www.euqinomgallery.com)  
Gitterman Gallery // New York // [www.gittermangallery.com](http://www.gittermangallery.com)

[www.kleamckenna.com](http://www.kleamckenna.com)

Copyright © Klea McKenna 2018