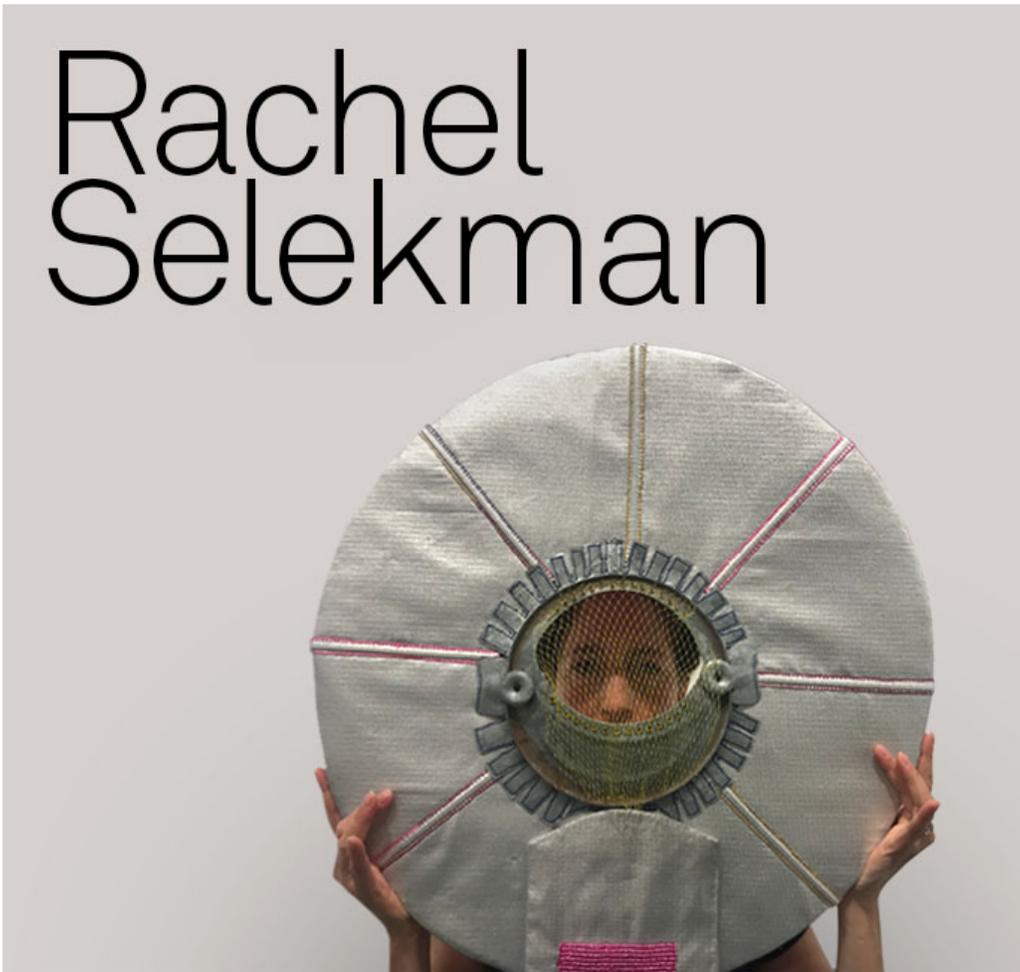


Rachel Selekman



Rachel Selekman, *Face Shield 1 (ERA)*, 2019, watering can remnant, fabric, thread, beads, mixed media, interchangeable fabric banners, and metal base, 73 x 23 x 13 ½ inches

Without a preconceived plan for my library residency, I started my research by looking at books on embroidery, having recently started incorporating embroidery stitches in many of my collages. I became enthralled with the book *Encyclopedia of Embroidery from the Arab World*, aptly named for its extensive, deep dive into this craft, which like many crafts has been employed worldwide and for centuries. I like to think of embroidery, an embellishment technique that's also used for mending fabric, as a universal language that connects people and cultures, an idea I find deeply resonant today when we live in such divisive times that aim to separate us versus unite us.

Continuing my research, I started looking at books on shields and armor. Shields, in particular, were of interest because they sparked many associations for me and led my activist group, We Make America (WMA), to make painted cardboard shields for NYC's March for Our Lives, the nationwide gun control rally organized by the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School students on March 24, 2018. When WMA was preparing for the rally and deciding on our visual campaign, I was thinking about shields metaphorically—if only we could give our youth shields to protect them from gun violence. If only, like superheroes, we could all have shields. I first made a little paper maquette of a shield to show to the group, and then you can see in the photos from the march, how they were realized for the rally, with each WMA member painting the front of them as they wished and the back of them all with yellow backgrounds and the word VOTE in black, promoting the means by which we can participate in our democracy and have our voices heard—at the ballot box.

The idea of shields, both as objects of protection and as assertions of strength, stuck with me. But rather than thinking about them regarding gun violence, I wanted to work with them in relationship to women's lives, feeling intensely how my rights—women's rights and those who identify as women—are currently under attack.



Rachel Selekman, paper maquette for shield



We Make America at the March for Our Lives in NYC, March 24, 2018.
Photo by George de Castro-Day.

Returning to my studio, I set out to create my first sculptural shield, in keeping with my signature approach of using fabric, found objects, mixed media, and embellishment. I found in a box of watering can scraps, having used watering cans and parts of them in many previous sculptures, the central element of *Face Shield 1 (ERA)*, the top of a watering can with an eye-shaped opening. Immediately, I held it up to my face, looked through the opening, and decided to make a face shield. I wanted it to be celebratory, exuberant like many of the costumes I see during Brooklyn's West Indian Day Parade on Labor Day, and I wanted it to include messages, so I conceived of the "banners," embellished fabric elements that hang down from the circular part.

The first banner I made was the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) one. Can you believe in the twenty-first century that women still don't have constitutional protection? Well, it's time to get the ERA back in the spotlight and get it passed. With Nevada (2017) and Illinois (2018) recently ratifying it, only one more state is needed and then it goes back to federal lawmakers. In addition to the ERA banner, I also have the current language of the ERA (it's changed a little since it was first introduced by Alice Paul in 1923) in four of the wall cubbies. The second banner I made is the VOTE one and I have plans to make a few more. The banners snap on and off of the face shield, so the messaging is interchangeable.

Moving forward, my plan is to make more shields, full-body ones and more face shields, and consider using them in performative ways in addition to as static objects.

Rachel Selekman is a visual artist based in Brooklyn. Recent exhibitions include a solo show at Rosemont College in Rosemont, PA, and group exhibitions at the Invisible Dog Art Center, Brooklyn; Marc Straus Gallery, NYC; Brooklyn Academy of Music; Galerie Aurel Scheibler, Berlin; and Lesley Heller Workspace, NYC; to name a few. Selekman's work is in numerous public and private collections, including the Museum of Modern Art, Microsoft, the US State Department, and Montefiore Medical Center. Commissioned pieces can be found at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore and the Virginia Medical Center in Charlottesville. Selekman received her BFA from the Maryland Institute College of Art and her MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Visit her website: www.rachelselekman.com.