

The Sunday Edition

My Mother's Threads: daughter weaves garment factory stories into art



Alisa Siegel · Posted: May 13, 2018 9:00 AM ET | Last Updated: August 15, 2018



(Submitted by Sara Angelucci)



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In *Piece Work*, which opened this spring at Toronto's [Stephen Bulger Gallery](#), artist [Sara Angelucci](#) pays tribute to her late mother, Nina, and to the lives of garment workers.

Angelucci retraced her mother's work as a seamstress at [Copley Apparel](#) in Hamilton, Ont., in the 1950s and '60s.

A producer of high-end men's suits, Copley has operated out of the same building since 1883.

"This factory is almost as old as Canada itself," says Angelucci. "Every wave of immigrant — it was women primarily who were the sewers — would have worked in this factory."



Sara's mother, Nina, poses on a ship while she was immigrating to Canada. (Submitted by Sara Angelucci)

But the stories of the people who work behind its stone walls remain hidden from view.

"*Piece Work* is a project about a garment factory, but more than that it's a project that looks at the workers in the factory who we never get to see. The people behind the suits. I want to give the audience a glimpse into who these factory workers are."

Angelucci spent nine months on the Copley factory floor. She combed through basement archives, took photographs and interviewed garment workers.

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"These people behind this stone wall working away, no one knows they're there. They very rarely get to tell their stories, where they came from, and how they got to be doing what they're doing," says Angelucci.

"But also, ironically, they're making men's business suits so they're making clothing for people that are highly visible, in positions of power and authority, and that's not who they are."

At first, the factory workers were suspicious. What was Angelucci doing there with her camera? Why would an artist be interested in their work?

Until she explained, "My mother worked here too." And everything changed.



Sara Angelucci poses with some of the garment workers featured in Piece Works. (Liz Gareri)

"As soon as I said my mother used to work here, it was like I was a member of the family.

I wasn't an outsider anymore, and that made all the difference. Then they understood that I understood what they were about."

Sewing was in Angelucci's family. The artist named a part of her project, a photographic series of sewer's hands, *Mano D'oro*, *Hands of Gold*, "because it speaks of their skill, but also they are literally translating their hand work into money."

At Copley, Angelucci's mother, Nina, who died in 1990, worked hard, fast and with precision. Her skill and speed were recognized and meant that she was able to do piecework. The number of pieces she could sew paid her more than an hourly wage.

"She was a perfectionist," Angelucci recalls of her mother. "I tried to learn to sew from her, but it was a disaster because she was so good. She would say, 'It's easy. All you have to do is this.' And then I'd do it, and it would be crooked and a mess. And she'd say, 'It's terrible!' It would make me so angry, so I'd go back and try to do it again."



Artist Sara Angelucci (left) with her mother, Nina, at Sara's first art exhibition. (Submitted by Sara Angelucci)

"We loved each other desperately. We could read each other's glances. We knew each other so well. If my voice quivered a tiny bit, she could read that something was wrong."

Angelucci's most moving moment in the factory was when she met Rose Vartanian, who worked at Copley for 55 years. "She looked at me and burst into tears, and then I burst into tears," recalls Angelucci. "And she said, 'I worked three machines away from your mother.'"

That's when everything shifted for Angelucci.



Rose Vartanian (right) worked closely with Sara Angelucci's mother. (Liz Gareri)

"She conjured her. Suddenly, I was able to visualize my mother in that factory. To project her in the place of the women that I saw there."

Rose Vartanian recalled the day a new owner summoned all of the workers onto the factory floor for a meeting. He grabbed a pair of pants and held them up for everyone to see, and said, "'Have respect for these pants. Do a good job because this is the pants they give you bread, house, everything to live.' And then he put them down and walked away."

“We ended up in refugee camps. I knew how to sew and was able to feed my family.”

- Tamim Kayhan

When Nina Angelucci worked at Copley in the 1950s, the seamstresses were primarily of Italian, Jewish and Portuguese descent.

Today, a new generation of sewers hail from around the globe, from countries such as Syria, Jordan, China, the Philippines, India and Guyana, as well as Hamilton locals.



Inside Copley Apparel in Hamilton. (Sara Angelucci)

Tamim Kayhan, an immigrant from Afghanistan and one of the few men, learned to sew at the age of 10. He had always dreamed of becoming a doctor, like his older sister. Once war broke out, his family understood that medical school was out of the question. Instead, he apprenticed as a tailor, a skill that saved his family.

"We ended up in refugee camps. I knew how to sew and was able to feed my family."





Sara Angelucci's exhibit *Piece Work* pays tribute to garment workers. (Sara Angelucci)

Creating art from the stories of garment workers

Angelucci's exhibition, *Piece Work*, is composed of photographs, a video, a sound installation, and sculpture. The artist unearthed original suit patterns and transformed them into abstract images.

She mixed interviews with the garment workers with a spoken word poem. The result is *The Sewer's Chorus*, a 14-minute audio composition that Angelucci created with sound designer Phil Strong.

Multimedia artist Sara Angelucci mixed interviews with the garment workers featured in her exhibition *Piece Work* along with a spoken word poem. 14:41

And she photographed the sewers' hands and created faceless portraits.

"There's so much history that you see in their hands. You get little clues from the jewelry, or the clothing they're wearing. The women from India have beautiful gold jewelry. The women from China have a jade bracelet," Angelucci says. "And you see the ages of the women as well."

“As the garment workers looked at the images of their work ... they were overwhelmed, proud and excited. They snapped photos. Some began to cry.”

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It was the memory of her mother that inspired Angelucci to delve into the factory, but as the project unfolded, her focus shifted to those who work there now.

She was left with a nagging question: how to reinsert her mother into the place where she had worked? She found the answer in her mother's sewing box.



'This is the box of threads that belonged to my mother that I kept for over 30 years. I just felt compelled to keep them.' (Sara Angelucci)

During a visit to the factory one day, Angelucci noticed a thread holder with an image of the Virgin Mary just above it. It reminded her of the votive candle holders in a Catholic church.

In her studio, the artist inserted small electric lights into her mother's original spools of thread and used a sewing table as a base. She named the work Votive Threads.

When Angelucci's exhibit, *Piece Work*, first opened at the [Art Gallery of Hamilton](#) in February 2017, Copley Apparel sponsored a luncheon there for all 300 of its staff.

As the garment workers looked at the images of their work, their hands and their names prominently displayed on the gallery's crisp blue walls, they were overwhelmed, proud and excited. They snapped photos. Some began to cry.

"They felt themselves celebrated," Angelucci says. "They felt themselves being honoured."

Sara Angelucci's exhibit, *Piece Work*, opened at Toronto's [Stephen Bulger Gallery](#) at 1356 Dundas St. W. on June 2 and ran through July 14.

Click "listen" at the top of the page to hear the full documentary, My Mother's Threads, by Alisa Siegel.

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