Hamilton art exhibit weaves the immigrant stories behind the sewing of men's suits

The work is on view until May 14, and a walking tour scheduled for Saturday, Apr. 1


Workers mimic their tasks in making suits at Coppley Apparel in two of the portraits for the "Mama D'ono" series in Sara Angelucci's "Piece Work" exhibition at the Art Gallery of Hamilton. (Sara Angelucci/Art Gallery of Hamilton)

Inside a monolithic white stone building on York Boulevard in downtown Hamilton, Coppley Apparel has been making men's suits for more than 130 years.

Wave after wave of new immigrants to Hamilton have worked there, their stories woven into the fabric of the city and the company.

For decades, the work of their hands has gone, anonymously, into crafting high-end suits, the ultimate image of Western masculinity.

Now the hands and labour and stories of those workers, in that monumental building, are at the heart of an art installation, "Piece Work," on view at the Art Gallery of Hamilton.

The Coppley Apparel stone building on York Boulevard always intrigued artist Sara Angelucci, whose mom worked there in the 1950s and 1960s. (Kelly Bennett/CBC)

The artist, Hamilton native Sara Angelucci, first learned of the work inside from her mom, who sewed clothes there in the 1950s and 1960s. Her parents and extended family emigrated from Italy in the 1950s.

"They're kind of a quintessential immigrant family; my dad worked at Steico and as did a number of my relatives, and my mom worked at Coppley," she said.

Tale as old as Hamilton

Angelucci originally pitched the concept in response to the gallery's call for works geared to celebrate Canada's 150th birthday.

But the gallery recognized the deep connection the work would have to Hamilton audiences, and the opportunity to represent some minority communities that might not often see themselves represented in an
communities that might not often see themselves represented in an institutional gallery. There are 52 languages currently spoken by workers at Coppley.

And though Angelucci's curiosity was piqued by her parents' experience, the work feels current and crisp, a reflection of the current wave of newcomers to Hamilton – themselves in search of stability.

"The immigrant population now is a lot more diverse than when my parents came," she said. "I think in a way this factory is a kind of microcosm of a lot of industries in Canada where people can find jobs."

The work is on view until May 14, and a walking tour scheduled for Saturday, Apr. 1 sees Angelucci's installation paired with an exhibition at the Workers Arts and Heritage Centre. More details can be found on the AGH website.

**Hands of gold**

One part of the installation, a portrait series called "Mana D’oro" or "hands of gold," depicts the hands of 24 current Coppley workers, each engaged in the piecework task they're assigned to – "pick stitching," "serge assembly," "tack buttonholes," and others.

The workers in this series are paid by the number of pieces they can sew in a day. Their muscle memory and the repetition of their work intrigued Angelucci.

Even though the portraits feature hands, not faces, a viewer can catch a glimpse of the person belonging to those hands, to that jewelry. One woman has chipping red nail polish. Another's hand tendons are stretched just exactly so, mimicking the work she does day in, day out.

"It's not just about the suits, or the history of the city," said Alana Traficante, the curator of the show at the AGH. "It's about all of these women labouring behind this image."

Men and women have left countries all over the world, many of them under duress, to toil for years in Hamilton to hone their craft of carefully constructing suits, ultimately contributing to a picture of sophisticated Western masculinity.

"Shortly into the process, I was like, 'Oh my God; how ironic is this?'" she said. "Here are all these immigrant women who have very little visibility and power crafting suits for men who are in positions of power and are totally visible."

**'There's no way to quantify all of their lives'**

Another part of the installation features a looping video of the "suit elevator" that transports clothing pieces in various stages of assembly up and down the Coppley building's four stories.
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While transfixed watching that, a viewer can sit or stand in the middle of eight speakers that play an audio work called "The Sewer's Chorus."

Angelucci weaves the voices of 17 sewers in the factory together, with a common refrain — "A thread connects us; we are connected by a thread, and we sew and we sew and we sew and we sew" — as a seam between the disparate but connected stories of the workers.

These voices give a hint about the backgrounds of just a handful of the thousands of people who've worked at the company over the years. Some have worked there for more than 30 years. Some are from the Middle East; others hail from Asia, South America and Africa.

"There's no way to quantify all of their lives," Traficante said. But the audio piece brings some specifics to what can often feel like a global, anonymous wave of immigrants and refugees.

"This is a living history," Traficante said. It's a chance to tell "untold stories of the immigrant experience in Hamilton."

Angelucci said she wanted to create work that didn't paint immigrants with a "big, wide brush."

"I wanted people to be able to tell their own stories, because people's histories are complicated. And intimate," she said. "And we make these assumptions about who people are and that's a huge mistake."

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