

The narrative bent of Ringgold's quilt is also reflected in a unique work by Marilyn Lanfear created by sewing mother-of-pearl and bone buttons onto linen. *Aunt Billie* (Fig. 437) is the first of three large panels in the triptych *Uncle Clarence's Three Wives*, each of which is a portrait of one of the artist's aunts. The buttons create an image that is composed of large pixel-like dots, but because of the different reflective qualities of mother of pearl—and the more matte finish of the bone buttons—the surface of the image shimmers and glows in the light. The overall effect is dreamlike, as if the eye is at the edge of capturing a fleeting memory of the past. Because her Uncle Clarence worked the oil fields of East Texas in the boom days before the Second World War and then, after the war, was among the first to man an anchor handling tug supply (AHTS) vessel in the Texas Gulf, supplying the

newly designed oil rigs, towing them to location, and anchoring them in place, her triptych is also a history of the oil industry in Texas from the point of view of a worker's family.

Aunt Billie, as it turns out, died in 1937, the victim of one of the great tragedies of the East Texas oil fields. As a result of the oil boom, the town of New London, just south of Longview, was one of the richest communities in the United States, and it had built a lavish new school building. In order to heat the facility, the school district had tapped into the residue gas lines from the oil fields, gas that would normally have been flared off as waste. Unbeknownst to anyone, natural gas had been leaking from the tap on the residue line and building up in the crawl space under the 253-foot-long building. On the afternoon of March 18, 1937, a spark from an electric sander being used by a maintenance worker caused the gas to explode. Of the approximately 600 students



Fig. 437 Marilyn Lanfear, *Aunt Billie*, from the triptych *Uncle Clarence's Three Wives*, and detail, 2007.

Mother-of-pearl and bone buttons sewn to line, 8 × 4½ ft.
Courtesy of the artist.

and 40 teachers in the building at the time, only about 130 escaped without serious injury, and 295 were killed. Aunt Billie, who had gone to the building to meet her sister, was one of those who died. To reduce the risk of future leaks going undetected, the Texas Legislature began mandating within weeks of the explosion that thiols, compounds of sulfur and hydrogen that have a very strong odor, be added to all natural gas. The practice quickly spread worldwide. In Lanfear's portrait, Billie stands before the school, just as it begins to explode—parts of it rising to the right of the arch. In this context, the buttons have a profoundly haunting effect, functioning like talismans of the tragedy.