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Needling More Than the Feminist Consciousness

By KAREN ROSENBERG DEC. 28, 2007

In the '70s, artists who swapped their paintbrushes for a needle and thread were making a feminist statement. Today, as both men and women fill galleries with crocheted sculpture and stitched canvases, the gesture isn't quite so specific. Some contemporary artists gravitate to the retro-kitsch factor; others seize on the exacting technique, or the association with sweatshop labor, or a personal memory of Aunt Gladys's afghans.

The work in "Pricked: Extreme Embroidery," at the Museum of Arts and Design, reflects all these approaches and more. The second in a series of exhibitions (following last year's "Radical Lace and Subversive Knitting"), "Pricked" makes another case for needlecraft without the "craft." The museum, which will move to Columbus Circle next fall, dropped that word from its name in 2002 and has all but banished it from discussion.

Its curators seem anxious to fill the void with terms like "process" and "materiality" (which are less dated, if a bit clunky), and to invoke solemn topics like politics, gender, the body and memory. In the best works historical and technical concerns overlap, just as they do in traditional embroidered samplers.

Elaine Reichek's "First Morse Message," a transparent curtain embroidered with dots and dashes that spell out in Morse code "What hath God wrought," cuts a striking, serpentine swath through the upper gallery. Ms. Reichek has been working with thread and textiles since the '70s and is deeply immersed in the twin histories of technology and the so-called women's arts.

Her heir apparent, Sabrina Gschwandtner, has made an ingenious series of works called "The History of String," linking the sewing machine's spooling mechanism to early film projectors. One consists of spiraling text embroidered on cotton fabric and placed within a zoetrope.

An even more powerful argument against embroidery as a niche feminist medium comes from several widely known contemporary artists who use needlework in lieu of painting. Laura Owens and Angelo Filomeno fall into this category. Mr. Filomeno's image of a skeleton, stitched on silk shantung with metallic threads and adorned with crystals, is an explosion of opulence. Ms. Owens's chinoiserie-inspired flowering tree hand-embroidered on tussah silk is more subtly luxurious. Mr. Filomeno, a former tailor's apprentice, and Ms. Owens, who trained as a painter, have both done much to erode the distinction between the fine and the decorative arts.

Thread can stand in for the pencil as well as for the paintbrush, as Shizuko Kimura's virtuoso "figure drawings" suggest. Working from live models, Ms. Kimura uses delicate wisps of cotton, silk and synthetic thread on transparent muslin. They could be pen-and-ink drawings, except for the visible needle holes, loops and knots.

The better-known contemporary artist Ghada Amer has made similar-looking work based on pornographic images, but the curators have chosen one of her more conceptual pieces. Ms. Amer has reproduced definitions of the word fear in English, French and Arabic, a nod to her experience in all three cultures; the text is partly obscured by hanging threads.

Some artists rely on the charm of embroidery to revive tired subjects, not always successfully. Maria E. Piñeres makes needlepoint portraits of Mel Gibson, Paris Hilton and other celebrities, based on their mug shots. While the works exaggerate

the indignities of the pixelated digital reproduction, they do not add much to the originals.

Some of the most interesting works reinvigorate the tradition of the sampler, a piece of embroidery that offers a religious or moral saying. Stephen Beal's "Periodic Table of the Artist's Colors" assigns a subjective experience to each of 95 colors of embroidery floss. Dark green is "New Zealand Spinach"; pale blue is "Theresa at Marseille."

The Romanian artist Andrea Dezso has embroidered 48 cotton squares with bits of Transylvanian folk wisdom passed down from her mother. One square suggests, "You can get hepatitis from a handshake," while another claims, "Men will like me more if I pretend to be less smart." Each warning or cautionary tale is accompanied by a small, equally humorous illustration.

The moralizing tone extends to several works with political content. These include Christa Maiwald's party dresses for little girls, embroidered with the images of male world leaders, and Xiang Yang's portraits of President Bush and Saddam Hussein linked by a rainbow of threads.

Surprisingly, the piece with the most timely subject is also the least dogmatic. Ana de la Cueva's video "Maquila" shows a commercial sewing machine stitching a white-on-white outline of the United States on plain cotton fabric, with a bold red line demarcating the Mexican border.

The surgical associations of needlework give several objects an uncanny anatomical presence. Morwenna Catt's soft sculptures of heads, inspired by the bogus science of phrenology, have Frankenstein-like rows of stitches in place of facial features. Kate Kretz embroiders pillowcases with eyelashes and human hairs (including several from an ex-boyfriend). The result is both delicate and creepy, not unlike Robert Gober's wax sculptures of human limbs.

With 48 artists (nearly twice the number in "Radical Lace and Subversive Knitting"), the show suffers from serious overcrowding. In one problematic section Ms. Reichek's curtain fuses with Emily Hermant's installation made from similar

materials; in another, a tight cluster of needlepoints gives the impression of a booth at a craft fair.

The curators will have more room to play with after the move to Columbus Circle. In the meantime they might want to make sure that their installations reflect the museum's revamped image.

"Pricked: Extreme Embroidery" continues through March 9 at the Museum of Arts and Design, 40 West 53rd Street, Manhattan; (212) 956-3535, madmuseum.org.

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