

Elaine Reichek

Elaine Reichek is a force: sharp, incisive, and disarmingly generous, with a mind that moves quickly between centuries of art history and the most immediate cultural concerns. Her work in embroidery, knitting, text, and appropriation has long occupied a vital space in which conceptual art meets the language of craft and probes ideas about authorship, gender, and the hierarchies that shape what we value as art. Her practice is rigorous yet witty, cutting through pretense and inviting viewers to look again and think harder about what they see.

I knew Elaine's work before I met her. I was actively seeking out artists who merged conceptual strategies with traditional craft methods and trying to find my place within that lineage when I saw *First Morse Message* (2003) gracing the industrial windows of Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery in 2004. The twenty-nine-foot organdy curtain embroidered with Samuel F. B. Morse's 1844 telegram linked code, digital logic, and decoration, transmitting a message I felt instantly: that concept, material labor, and visual beauty could speak through a single form.

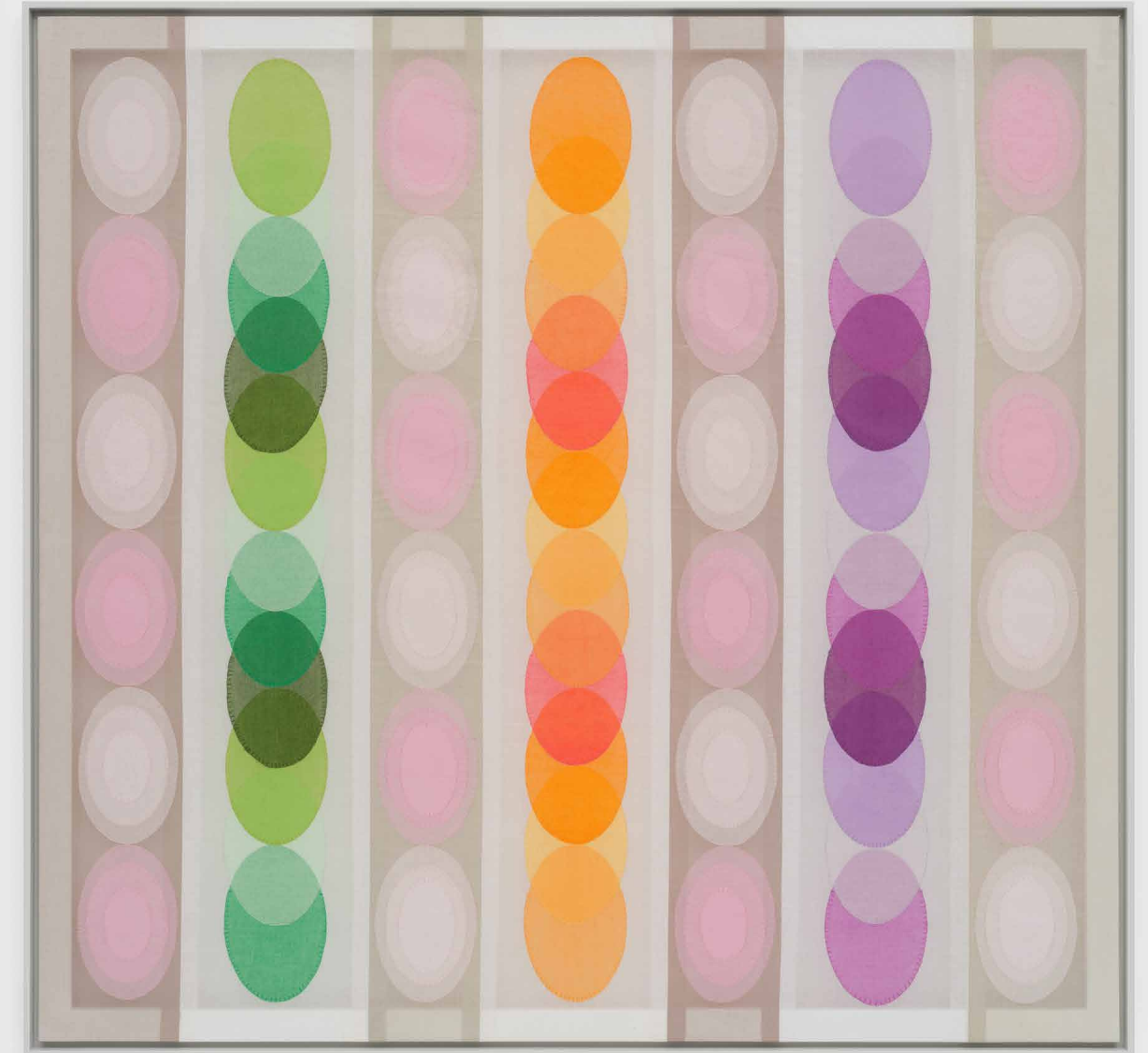
Nothing quite prepared me, however, for encountering her in person. When she introduced herself at the opening of *Pricked: Extreme Embroidery* at the Museum of Arts and Design in 2007, a show in which we were both included, I was intimidated. She was clearly brilliant, direct, and utterly engaged. At the end of the opening, she sidled up to me and suggested, "Let's get drinkies sometime!" Just like that, my intimidation dissolved, replaced by the sense that a friendship and an ongoing dialogue had begun.

Since then, Elaine's work has continued to expand and deepen, returning again and again to the stitched line as both medium and metaphor. She draws from literary sources, canonical artworks, decorative traditions historically relegated to the margins, and her own identity as a home-based studio artist whose grandchildren, aged seventeen and twenty, drop in constantly for extended stays. She mobilizes her materials for critique and invention, insisting on the intellectual and political weight of fabric and thread, while also reveling in their tactile richness, visual beauty, and capacity for play and subversion.

I spoke with Elaine at Hoffman Donahue in New York City before the opening of *Back Stitch*, an exhibition for which she revisited and, in some instances, revised her work from the 1970s for the present.

by Sabrina Gschwandtner

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SABRINA GSCHWANDTNER:

The title *Back Stitch* refers to both a literal technique and a way of thinking backward in time. When you revisit a work from the 1970s today, do you experience altering or completing it as continuity, correction, or a collaboration with your earlier self? What does authorship mean when a work unfolds over decades? Is time itself a material in these pieces?

ELAINE REICHEK: The works do embody time because the material contains anecdotes about the process and the time in my life that I made these pieces. When my kids were little, I felt I had to buy more yardage than I needed because the babysitter cost more than the material. That fragmented time of early motherhood is when I, as a mature artist, first began to make work, between bottles and feedings. Those, too, are part of the pieces. Sometimes when I look at my older work, I think I could have chosen some option that I didn't explore at the time, whether I thought then that the piece was finished or a decision just didn't occur to me. Now, in some ways, I'm in the same head. I know that kind of time travel isn't possible, as if I were wading through the river twice at the same point. But if I think about altering a work, I go ahead and do it. I'm old enough to think about archives, and one way to solve this problem of authorship is to double-date pieces, and many of the works in the show are double-dated.

SG: Are there any works in *Back Stitch* that you radically altered when you returned to them?

ER: In *Parallelograms*, I combined four works that Erin Dorn, who runs Seven Sisters in Houston and is my Texas dealer, bought back from auction. I looked at them and realized I hadn't considered their current configuration. The benefit of working now is that organdy comes in different colors. When I used organdy for *Parallelograms* in the 1970s, it was intended for bridal and prom dresses—there was not a lot of hot pink, bright yellow, and aqua around. I was stunned by these new colors, so I configured a piece of four colors, four different configurations, and four shelves. This work has a double date: 1977/2024.

SG: Quoting a review of your first show, at Rina Gallery in 1975, the press release for *Back Stitch* describes the act of threading as piercing “the ‘hieratic’ surface of the Greenbergian picture plane.” Can you talk about the moment when the surface of painting stopped being inviolate?

ER: Those untitled pieces were made within the conversation about painting as an object and the Greenbergian notion of support. I studied with Ad Reinhardt at Brooklyn College in the early 1960s, and the idea of a painting as an object wasn't associated with his black paintings. In art school I knew a painting was an object because it took me so much time to stretch a canvas: to make the stretcher bars and the cross, to put in the little wood keys, to stretch and prime the canvas. Before priming, we had to cook up a batch of stinky rabbit-skin glue for the surface, which was horrible, and only then could we gesso and sand the canvas. When I finally finished the thing, it was an absolutely beautiful object—I thought, Who wants to put paint on this? The unpainted canvas is fabulous and represents an enormous amount of time and effort that goes into the object itself.

When I first punctured the picture plane, my idea was to make a palpable line, a way of drawing in reality, in three dimensions, that was truly physically attached to the canvas. When I stuck the needle through the surface, I thought the thread would inform the viewer that there's another side, there's air back there. The canvas disguises, so everything on the front is completely theatrical. But I didn't know what I was making back then. When I opened my first show, I had an astounding moment in which I thought, Damn, I'm sewing. This is awful. What am I supposed to do about this? People said sewing was a career killer. And of course, being bratty, which I still am at eighty-two, I then thought, What's the matter with that? So, I went for it.

SG: How did you come to sewing as the way of puncturing the canvas instead of, say, cutting it with a knife?

ER: Lucio Fontana had already done that. I wanted to show that there was something on the back side. The wall

was the whole big deal, and sometimes Fontana put another surface behind the slashes he made. I wanted to come back to the front side with the thread, not just pierce it.

SG: Did you sew as a child?

ER: Absolutely not. My grandmother was a children's dress designer, but she never taught me to how to sew. Nobody taught me. It was something I had to learn. Using a needle was purely formal. The conversation that I was engaged in then was very different from the conversation about textiles now, when sewing, draping, and fabric's material properties are the subjects of discussion. That's not what I was exploring.

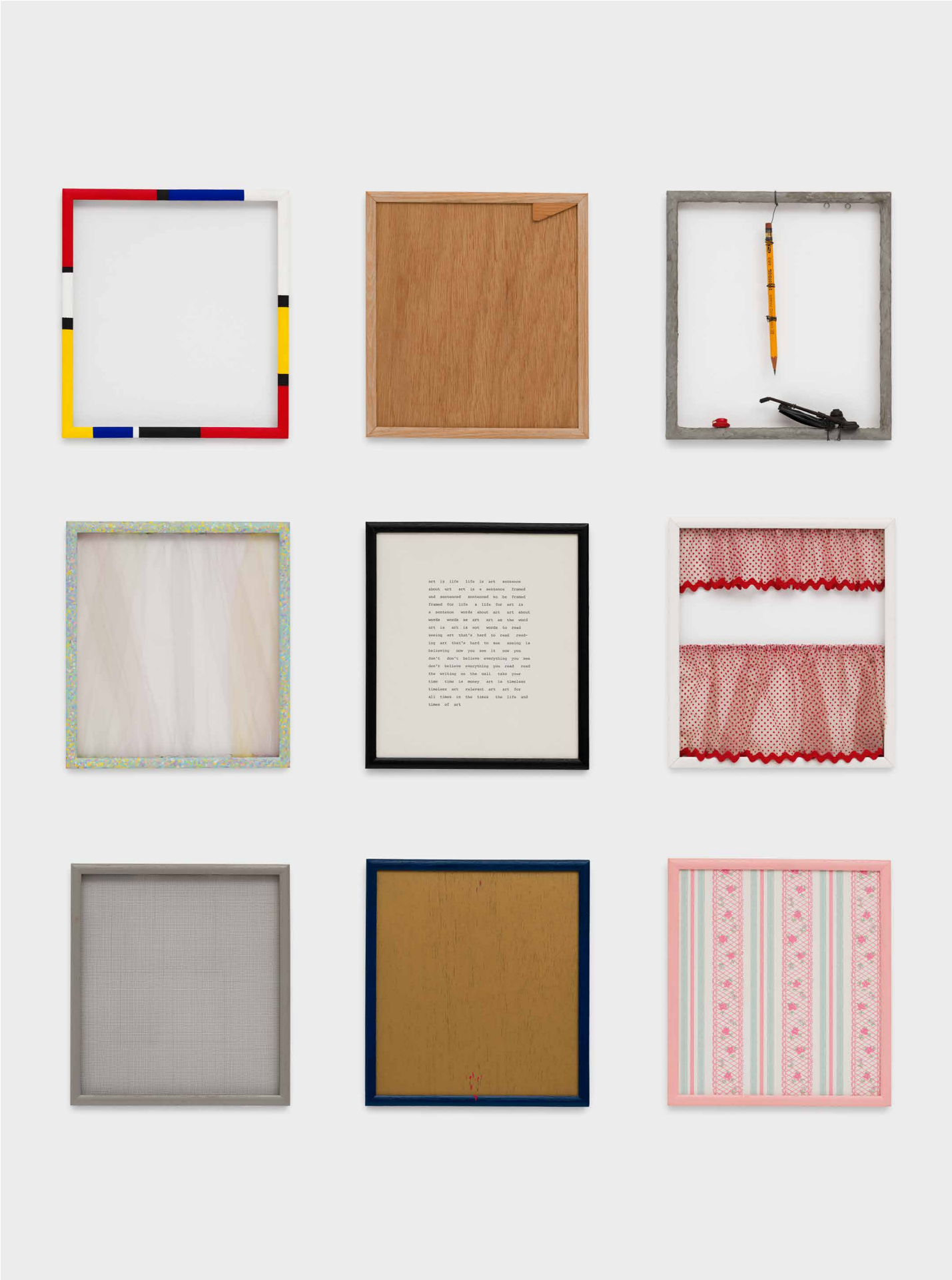
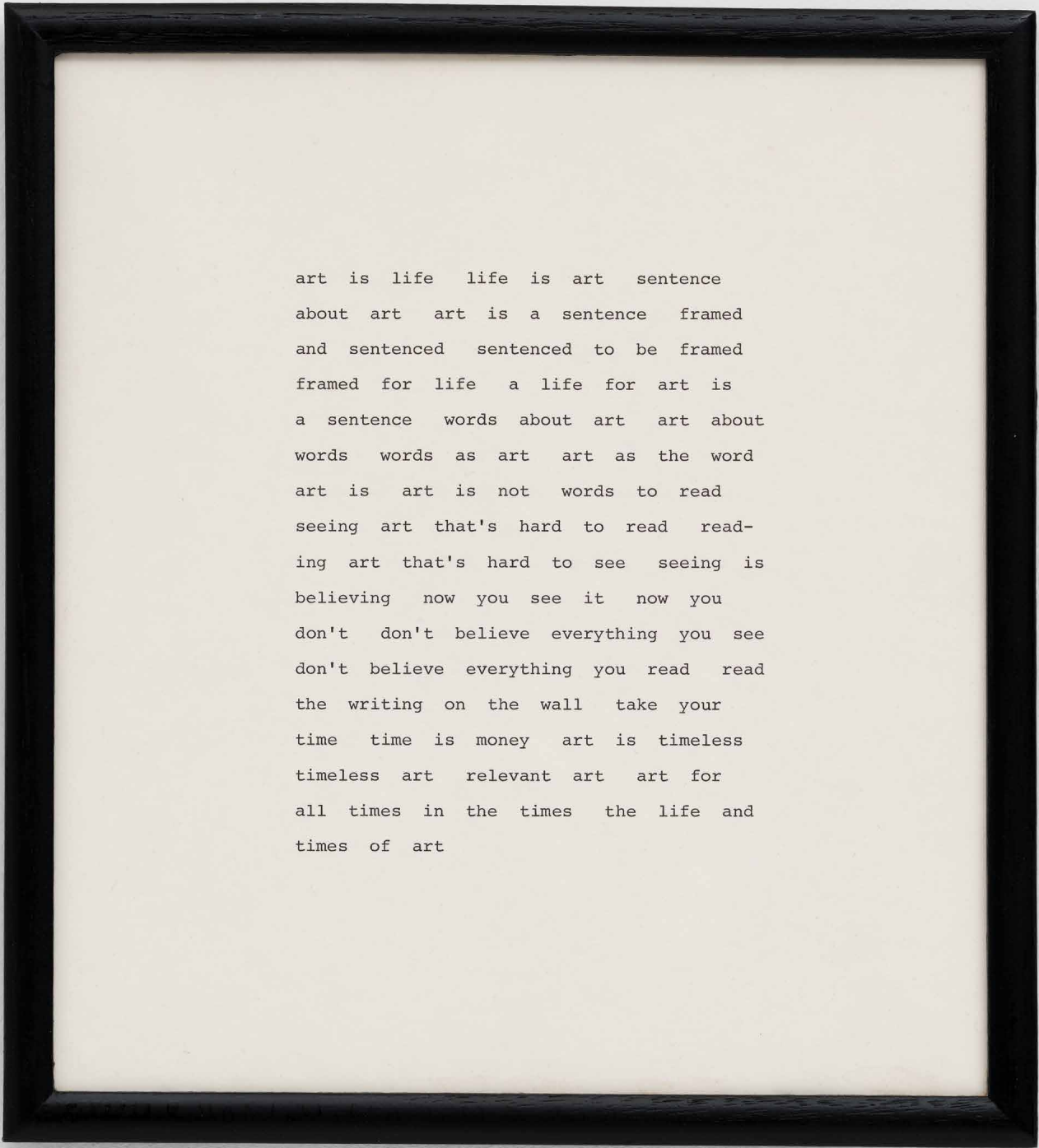
SG: But craft critique, as Julia Bryan-Wilson has termed it, is something you do. While conceptual art pursued a dematerialization of the object, textile practices reassert a materialization of labor and meaning. Your embroideries occupy this intersection, translating conceptual strategies into carefully wrought, richly embodied forms. I'm thinking of your *Sampler* works, in which you replace the prescriptive messages of traditional samplers with quotations on artmaking and women's agency, reshaping the form into a site of critique.

ER: Completely. When I saw my first show, I thought, Okay, I'm a woman with small children. I don't live in a huge loft. I'm not throwing hot lead like Richard Serra. Mine was not the kind of loft aesthetic you had to have to be

page 25: *Ovals*, 2025, organdy and thread on wood stretcher bars, 53.5 x 55 inches. Photo by GC Photography. Images courtesy of the artist, Marinaro Gallery, New York City, and Hoffman Donahue, New York City and Los Angeles, unless otherwise noted.

opposite: Detail of *Parallelograms (Gray, Turquoise, Pink, Yellow)*, 1977/2024, organdy, thread, and Plexiglas with plastic screw posts, wood shelves, 77 x 77 inches. Photo by GC Photography.

below and opposite: *The Life & Times of Art*, 1979, wood, paint, fabric, wire screen, ink on paper, printed wallpaper, pencil, wire, and metal miniatures, nine parts, each 10.75 x 9.75 inches. Photos by GC Photography.



considered an artist then. That was so prescriptive. Even the artists who were using textiles then weren’t using them the way I was—their approach was more industrial.

SG: Staying in the ’70s for now, *The Life & Times of Art*, from 1979, stands apart in *Back Stitch*. Its framing devices, use of text, and the assertion “art is life life is art” feel conceptual and personal. Given your formative experiences at Brooklyn College with Ad Reinhardt, and later, amid the misogyny at Yale School of Art during your graduate studies, how did this work respond to those pivotal moments?

ER: The text in *The Life & Times of Art* is a restatement of a Reinhardt maxim in my own voice. I’d never admitted that a painting was anything but a painting or had any referent at all. Ad Reinhardt said, “Sculpture is something you bump into when you back up to look at a painting.” He made paintings, but he also made wonderful cartoons and drawings, and he was a great photographer and taught photography at Brooklyn College. He invited students over to his loft on Broadway to watch endless slideshows of torsos in Indian statuary, to get us into a state of boredom where our eyes were receptive and open. However, he separated these other types of work from his painting and thought of them as unrelated. I knew these pithy statements by Reinhardt so well: “No fooling-the-eye, no window-hole-in-the-wall, no illusions, no representations, no associations, no distortions,” and so on. So, in *The Life & Times of Art*, I was subverting Reinhardt’s separation between art and life. It was my first use of text, and one of the few times I’ve used my own voice in my work.

SG: *Back Stitch* moves between systems-based abstraction and works that openly engage domestic and feminist associations, such as *Black & White Beds*, from 1978, which consists of thirty-four units arranged in a grid, each depicting a miniature double bed complete with doll-sized pillows and a unique patchwork quilt coverlet. How did you navigate that fork in the road in the 1970s?

ER: Grids and quilts are both systems. Cut out fourteen triangles, fourteen squares, fourteen rectangles and assemble them—that’s how you make a quilt. I wanted to link minimalist grid-based work with textiles. Having done all that stretching and priming, I was deeply aware that canvas is fabric, and I wanted to talk about how important that was. Artists, Jackson Pollock and Henri Matisse among them, have always known this. Of course, there were feminist associations with the quilts. I was thinking about Dorothea Rockburne, who gave Robert Rauschenberg a quilt, and what did he do with her hours of labor? He stretched it on his bed and threw paint at it. Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns lived near Coenties Slip in Manhattan, where they’d visit their artist friends. Rauschenberg could have seen Ann Wilson’s quilts with paint there—I credit this to Prudence Peiffer and her book *The Slip*, even though she doesn’t explicitly make this connection. The Whitney has one of Wilson’s quilts in its collection.

SG: Did you consider your early work feminist when you were making it?

ER: Always. From the time I realized that I was sewing and making art with string and thread, I have always believed I was making feminist work. I consider myself a feminist, and my work has always been feminist. In fact, I left Parsons Dreyfuss Gallery, where I had had two shows, to join A.I.R. because I felt my work should be seen in a feminist context. A.I.R. was the first feminist cooperative gallery, and I joined in 1978 or 1979.

SG: You came of age as an artist at a time when motherhood and serious artistic ambition were framed as mutually exclusive. You’ve told me that women artists then didn’t talk about having children. Do you feel the conditions for artist mothers have meaningfully shifted since? Or have the pressures simply taken new forms?

ER: I knew Nancy Spero and worked with her at A.I.R. for five years on public programs and panels, I think until 1985, but she never told me she had three sons. One just didn’t. Motherhood defined you as bourgeois. Lucy Lippard,

to her credit, does a deconstruction of class and the art world in her 1977 essay “The Pink Glass Swan.” The pressure of a fragmented life is that when you’re working, you think you should be doing something with your children, and when you’re with your children, you think you should be working. That persists. I talk about my family and my children and my grandchildren as a political statement, and I always want to hear about young women and their lives and how one can reasonably juggle ambition and motherhood. In the United States, there’s no universal daycare. There’s no support for working mothers. This is a criminal way in which women are denied lives as adults in the world, if that’s what they want. These systems are very necessary for women who don’t have the means to pay for childcare themselves.

SG: I’m struck by how your early material decisions anticipated conversations about craft and feminism that would later become much louder. By embedding textual content like literary quotations, art historical references, and feminist aphorisms directly into your stitched forms, you transformed the material itself from merely a support or decorative surface into a vehicle for critique and meaning. In this way, your work prefigured later feminist discourse, by asserting the intellectual and conceptual weight of materials long dismissed as minor and positioning labor, gender, and materiality as inseparable from the art itself. How did it feel to make this work before there was an invested conversation or audience for it?

ER: At the beginning, the materials were so controversial that many people couldn’t see anything besides them, whereas I had hoped to talk about something else. People didn’t talk about painting like that. Not so long ago, I had a studio visit in which a curator said, “Well, it’s nice work, but I haven’t sewn a button on in years.”

SG: Oof!

opposite: *Black & White Beds*, 1978, hand-quilted fabric in wood frames, 68.5 x 60 inches. Photo by GC Photography.



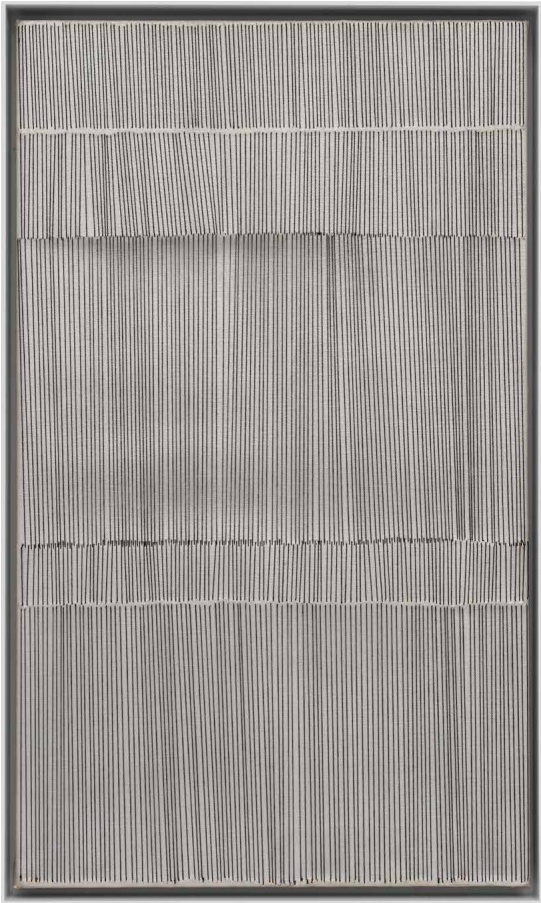
right: Installation view of *Back Stitch*, Hoffman Donahue, New York City, 2026. Photo by Paul Kennedy.



below: *Fan Factorial #2*, 1977, organdy and thread sewn to kozo paper, 31.75 x 27.25 inches. Photo by GC Photography.



above: *Untitled #21*, 1973, gesso, acrylic, and thread on canvas, 24 x 14 inches. Photo by GC Photography.



ER: And I thought, Have you painted a painting in years? (*laughter*) In the 1970s, I wanted a craft discussion, but I wanted it for political reasons. I thought, Many other women besides me must be working at their kitchen tables. That is an experience available to many people in the global sphere, and those were the people I wanted to talk to. I hoped including craft and these kinds of materials would be a political gesture.

Today, I have lots of people to talk to about materials. Maybe I put my foot in the door, but what came through the door is nothing I could have anticipated. There is now a fabulous exploration of the properties of textiles and materials, which is not what I do. It’s another form of investigation, and every artist does what they want. I’m grateful to my younger colleagues for making chat.

SG: There’s an archive table in *Back Stitch* that features a review of your 1978 show at Parsons Dreyfuss, which notes, “By incorporating ‘handwork’ into a complex structural system, the artist validates the use of a traditional craft for a purely pictorial context and assures that method will not be obscured.” I’m surprised by how the reviews displayed in the archive table also fail to understand the materials beyond formalism.

ER: Exactly. Yet somehow, in the 1970s, the craft people wouldn’t touch me with a ten-foot pole. Craft was not something I eschewed; I just never got invited to the table. Back then, people in craft didn’t like me because they thought I got a pass using their materials, and people in the art world weren’t sure what this stuff was. This was a very interesting position to be in, and because I have no craft background, it was more referential than utilitarian. There just wasn’t context for the work then, but people still paid attention, which was weird. In art, craft used to be looked down upon.

Foraging for the work in *Back Stitch* was interesting. I’m not a big archivist, but I made an archive table because I’ve always enjoyed everybody else’s in their shows. For my archive table, I designed a case. I love it. It’s a sixteen-foot-long shallow box on collapsible sawhorses made to spec by Miles Huston. To situate the exhibition,

I wanted to show documentary material and sketches and small works from that time. It organizes my many disparate parts in a new way.

SG: And there’s a grid inside. You’ve persistently used grids and modularity and variation, even as meanings and materials have shifted. What has kept these structures alive for you across so many decades?

ER: Well, the grid was big in minimalism. We were all doing grids. But for me, the grid comes from the warp and weft of fabric. It’s also psychological. Reinhardt’s paintings were built on the cross and the grid, and it’s life-affirming that there are endless permutations and possibilities within those structures. Everybody has structures in their lives that they’ve inherited or chosen, and every choice has consequences: where you live, how you earn your keep, whether you have a family or don’t, who your friends are. As you make choices, you inevitably narrow the range of possibilities, but there’s still plenty of room to maneuver. I was married with two children born twenty-three months apart. I thought then, How am I going to make my time work for me? I could be in my studio between the two o’clock and four o’clock feedings and then sleep an hour and get up for the day. You know, I always say *Sesame Street* gave me my career. I used to put the kids in front of the TV with a box of raisins and have a nap. (*laughter*) Now that I’m older, I’m never going to be an explorer in the Antarctic—something I would have liked to do—but there are other possibilities. I’m grateful to have done everything I’ve done and want to do more.

SG: If *Back Stitch* is about returning to a line of thought and reinforcing it, what threads do you feel remain unfinished?

ER: Right now, I’m thinking about revisiting earlier bodies of work. For example, I’m interested in the new palette of organdies. The organdy work is so much about color vibration through overlapping to create other colors. It really has a Josef Albers reference. I didn’t think that when

I was making it, but when I look at *Parallelograms* now, I do.

I took a class on Albers’s color theory at Yale. Si Sillman was my teacher, and Richard Serra was my color monitor. That’s too crazy! (*laughter*) Even rust was far off for him then. At Brooklyn College, I studied with Reinhardt, Harry Holtzman, Jimmy Ernst, and Philip Pearlstein. It was a stellar cast. When I got to Yale, Albers had left the building. It was a boys’ club. There were so few women in my class: Jennifer Bartlett, Jenny Snider, and me. I was the same age as the undergraduates because I had graduated high school early, so I was a phenomenon in classrooms and very self-conscious because there were no women around. It wasn’t good.

Recently, I was asked to teach the same color theory class at Yale. I read Albers’s book again and started to play around with colored paper, and I had such a good time reinvestigating those ideas about color. I even reached the boys in the back of the classroom. Big accomplishment. They turned out great work, especially the mathematics majors.

SG: When starting a new body of work, what is your first step: the concept, the materials, or the narrative? Or is it some combination?

ER: The concept is the first step, then narrative follows because text is important. The materials that are appropriate for making the work come after. I love fabric, but it’s what supports the structure of the thought. It’s a very Rosalind Krauss idea, you know?

SG: To me, your work is primarily conceptual, but you’re also a materialist who is committed to fabric and thread, who works with an embroidery machine, kneels down on the ground to hem fabric by hand, and shops at Mood, the fabric store, to choose your materials. How do your ideas and your physical labor inform each other while you’re making work? What does the tension between hand and machine embroidery mean to you conceptually?

ER: I love to shop, so that’s part of the process of selecting materials from what’s available. I’m engaging with the material and its possibilities. And I like

to read, so I try to make my work in terms of what I enjoy doing. If an artist is not satisfied in the studio and not having a good time, I don’t know why they do it. This is my life: I make work, I shop, and I read. It’s good.

An embroidery machine is like a printing press. It’s a way of making multiples. It takes a lot of time to program and sew. Believe me: It is easier for me to embroider something by hand than it is to digitize it, sew it out, and make it again. It’s not about saving time. It’s about wanting to produce a smooth surface that is more like a painting surface than a hand-embroidered canvas. Hand embroidery cannot give you the same flat, uninflected field that machine embroidery can.

SG: Reading is like a parallel studio practice. You’re an avid reader. It’s your research, it’s your material, and it’s perhaps also one of your feminist strategies because it’s one way you reclaim and reinterpret narratives historically dominated by male voices. It’s also what enables your layered, multivoiced meaning. How do reading and its rhythms, structures, and ways of making meaning shape how you think about image, pattern, and composition?

ER: There are writers who I consider sculptural, from Borges to Bob Dylan. You can almost see the underlying forms and structures in their language. I’ve just started to make these new and very strange New England samplers that feature graveyards and angels. I’ve also used a lot of this imagery in earlier bodies of samplers. These motifs are death cathected. I was brought up on American authors like Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville. I’m sewing these samplers with, let’s say, a graveyard, some distorted angels, and vine-like patterns while listening to Daniel Mason’s *North Woods*, which is a fabulous novel about renewal and listening for echoes. So, there’s a big, beautiful, Melvillean noise coming through my AirPods as I sew. It’s an incredibly rich experience, and text has led me many times astray into my own woods.

SG: When did you first sample someone else’s text?

ER: It was for a show I did at Grey Art Gallery in 1992 called *Native Intelligence*. I sewed Native American quotes onto American samplers. After that, it was for *Home Rule* at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in 1993, where I had English samplers with quotes from Irish patriots. I hoped to create a tension between the voices I was quoting, which had been excluded from mainstream history, and the traditional sampler form itself.

SG: Has it ever been the case that you’ve read something and thought, I’m going to turn this into art?

ER: No, I come up with an idea first, and if I need text, I find it. I have a very good memory.

SG: That you do.

ER: And I have a lot of little tabs in my books. *(laughter)* I look at the text in the book and edit from there. I write it down by hand, I type it, I choose a font and spacing, I print it out, and then I graph it out for embroidery. I often combine passages, and sometimes the ellipsis is my best friend.

SG: What draws you to the intersection of text and image, and what do you see as the unique power of samplers as a form of communication? I’m thinking of your series *Minoan Girls*, from 2012 to 2016, in which you pair images of works by artists ranging from Titian and Rembrandt to Klimt and Anni Albers with quotations from works of literature by Ovid, Plutarch, Stevie Smith, and others. *You Were the Heroine*, from 2015, combines an image of a painting of the Black Sea printed onto needlepoint canvas with a hand-embroidered poem by Erika Mumford titled “Labyrinth,” in which an abandoned mythic heroine moves through grief to anger, survival, and self-reliance.

ER: The combination of text and image is what drew me to samplers in the first place. I choose an image and a text that often work in opposition to one another, not in the way that illustration and caption work together. Sometimes I’ll choose a text that emphasizes the meaning that I derive from the images, which is purely subjective. The text

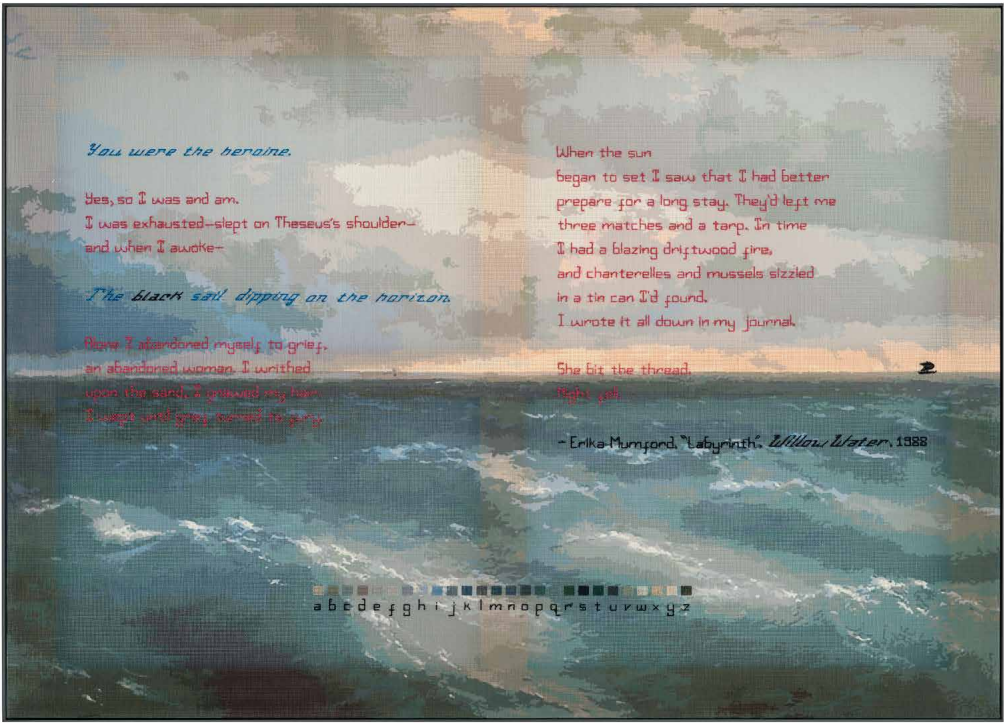
and image can be intermarried, in support as well as in tension, just as you can have two quotes correcting and commenting on each other. That creates the potential for a big chat, which I like, and I hope my work is always conversational.

SG: It strikes me that you’re creating a situation for the viewer that’s much like the situation you’re in when you listen to a story and embroider something that’s different from the story you’re listening to. When I encounter your work, I find that I have to navigate multiple registers of meaning simultaneously. It’s a participatory, interwoven space of discovery, where layers of narrative, material, and context invite me to move between seeing, reading, and thinking.

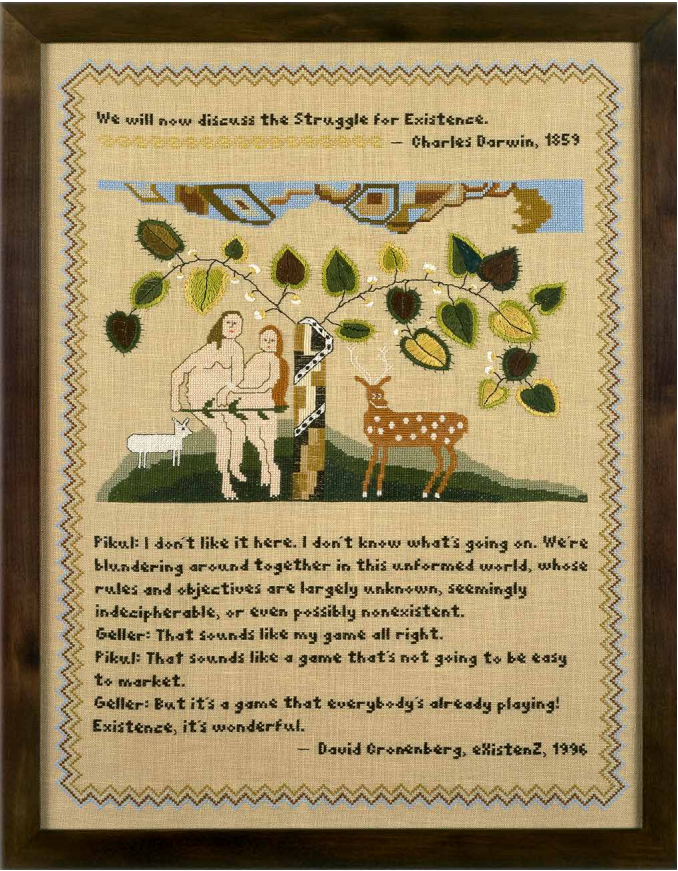
ER: I have always loved being read to. I was the kid who settled in for a good story while the others ran around the classroom. I like narrative. I like dinner parties. I like exchange. I like the rich way shopping, reading, and making interweave with life. Conversation—what you glean from other people and what they contribute—is extremely important. I try to make my work seductive so the viewer is drawn into it. Images do that, and so do intriguing texts or materials. You can say more through seduction. The Mumford poem you mentioned is a wonderful example in that it subverts the notion of Ariadne as abandoned and helpless. After a bit of grieving, she pulls herself together and pragmatically faces her circumstances. She becomes the heroine of her own story rather than the victim.

SG: Your bodies of work are tightly wound around specific ideas, like *MADAM I’MADAM*, from 2000 to 2002, a series of hand-embroidered samplers that reference Genesis and the story of Adam and Eve. That work addresses creation in the most literal sense while also exploring reproduction, replication, and how ideas about creative genesis persist and transform as technology and artistic methods evolve.

ER: That specificity is not the best strategy for an artist. *(laughter)* You can hardly hang the different series together. I wish there was more overlap



below: *Sampler (We Will Now Discuss)*, 2001, hand embroidery on linen, 26.5 x 20 inches. Photo by Gene Ogami. Courtesy of the artist and Marinaro, New York City.



left: *You Were the Heroine*, 2015, hand embroidery on printed needlepoint canvas, 30.5 x 42.25 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Marinaro, New York City.



above: *Duncan Grant's Matisse (Digital Version)*, 2023, digital embroidery on linen, 18.75 x 13.5 inches. Courtesy of Seven Sisters, Houston.

between works, but there isn’t. That’s what I mean by going off into my own woods. I’m obsessed by the Omega Workshops, Vanessa Bell, Virginia Woolf, and the conversation between craft, high art, decor, and fashion. To be sure, they were flawed people, but the utopian experiment to make a society that was new and less restrictive and more expressive is interesting. Vanessa had children and Virginia didn’t. They were just practicing different lives. The dresses in “*Something Betwixt and Between*”—*Matisse & Bloomsbury* are the only ones I’ve made. The fabric and the textile designs of the Omega Workshops were so interesting to me. I was brought up on conventional art history, on wall-based work as distinct from sculpture and architecture, but by now I’ve done a lot of installation. Installation can be a kind of decoration; it’s making a mise-en-scène. My Omega dresses were on round dramatic platforms—very theatrical—part of a mise-en-scène with potted and hanging plants and Matisse-based decor. There was a lot of exchange between the Omega Workshops and Matisse, with many members visiting his studio.

SG: In the 1970s and ’80s, you created immersive installations before installation was common language. Were you thinking of decor as critique then?

ER: The first installation I made was *The Artist’s Bedroom* in 1979. Installation was already prevalent among minimalist and conceptual artists, but mine was thoroughly domestic. I installed a bed in a broom closet at PS1 and painted the room *Starry Night* blue, with matching blue bedding and a single hanging light fixture. The walls were lined with small framed beds with single coverlets and a pillow. Each coverlet was in the style of an artist who meant something to me. It was an illustration of the liminal state of a woman artist with too many male artistic influences. It was a way to consider “the anxiety of influence,” and a literal form of appropriation.

SG: The Matisse over the bed in your 1979 installation marks the beginning of a dialogue you’ve returned to repeatedly, most recently in your 2023 digital embroidery, *Duncan Grant’s Matisse (Digital Version)* from your Omega

Workshops series. That’s forty-four years of sustained influence! Looking back across decades of shifting materials and formats, what has remained constant in your internal compass as an artist?

ER: I’m different now. When I was younger, I was much less interested in other people’s opinions, and now I’m much more open to other ideas and suggestions. I know what my boundaries are. I know who I am, but I can take specific pleasure in other people’s involvements and what they have to say. That’s the difference. As for what remains, I understand and know that no matter what happens, I will always make work. It has always been my support and my ballast. When I’m not,

I feel deprived of the conversation that happens between me and my work. There I am in my studio, chatting with the work, and it’s chatting with me, telling me what to do. It’s a part of my consciousness. My brain doesn’t get exercised when I’m not making work. That’s why it’s so addictive.

below: *The Artist’s Bedroom*, 1979, fabric, acrylic, and thread in wood frames and a bed with linens and pillow, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Marinaro, New York City.



Losing Patience: Part Allegory, for Blasted Brains

by Elena Alexander

1.
What is tipping? The hat, no longer; the food server, yes.
The point? Now. Maybe not now. Maybe just soon.

2.
Feet tapping—relentless—those jiggling
knees dizzying if you follow them
with your eyes, *updownupdownupdown*.
Before cutting, there was chewing. Nails
gnawed away, cuticles bloody, devouring
oneself bite by bite. Start small.

3.
You will need this—what? Qual?
Capacity? Capacious space within
to face declines—your own, and
others. Aging or dead parents,
and, oh, flappy arms and
flabby abs.

4.
Patience, name
of a child
we left behind,
not reckoning
how important she
was to us. To
you, to me.
How deeply
she belonged to all in the big village.
How she was. Difficult and
demanding. Whole. Full.

Pregnant with it
we were, experienced
in our bodies. She, carried
within, shared. Downright
miraculous. We’d been told
we were bearing twins.
Patience; Virtue.
Virtue died first,
and we told no one
our secret
relief at her demise.

She crimped our good
times, crippled us with her
disapprovals; style-cramping is what
we called it. Virtue grew too heavy,
too fast. I suspect progeria. We grew
pissed off with her piousness,
inconvenient to screwing outside
of vows; inside motel rooms.

Yet Patience remained,
tied to her dead sister, and how annoying
is that. Before Patience lost her footing
she, too, became a burden. Clumsy
to be slow. How to make her go away
so we could continue videotaping warry games
in peace. Play *Bang, Bang!* like a trained chimp.
Say “I want what I want when I want it!”
like surly children. How to make Patience
disappear in a puff of pixels? How to remonstrate?
Absent her? We put on our clowning
around make-up, picked up remotes, scoffed:
“Patience won’t be here today. She has gone AWON:
Absent Without Noticing.” Left behind as though
never belonging. We’d already begun to starve
her. She looked a right wreck. Old Scrawny
Hollow-Eye. Patience; how silly. You were soon
obsolete as paper maps. What made you imagine
we might ever continue to need you when we have
roomy Zooms in our *Zm rms*?

5.
Reasons to be speedy:
Space telescopes, yea.
Weapons, nay.

6.
By the time we understood we had lost Patience forever,
we were addicted to speed. You know what they used
to say. “Speed kills.” Cyber. Hyper. Warfare. Missile.
Hypersonic missiles do not make noise.
Not like the sound of an insect whose infected
bite will take you down. Listen quietly.
Try and be still, the way you once could:
Tck; tck; tck. Meta. Twitta. Insta. TikTok:
“Are we there yet? Are we? Are we? Then *when?*”

Elena Alexander is a poet and writer, as well as a longtime resident of the Bowery, in New York City. She believes cynicism is a cheap shot, despair is a luxury we cannot afford, and poems are a protest.