

THE TOWER OF BABEL, c.1563

THE LIBRARY OF BABEL, 1941

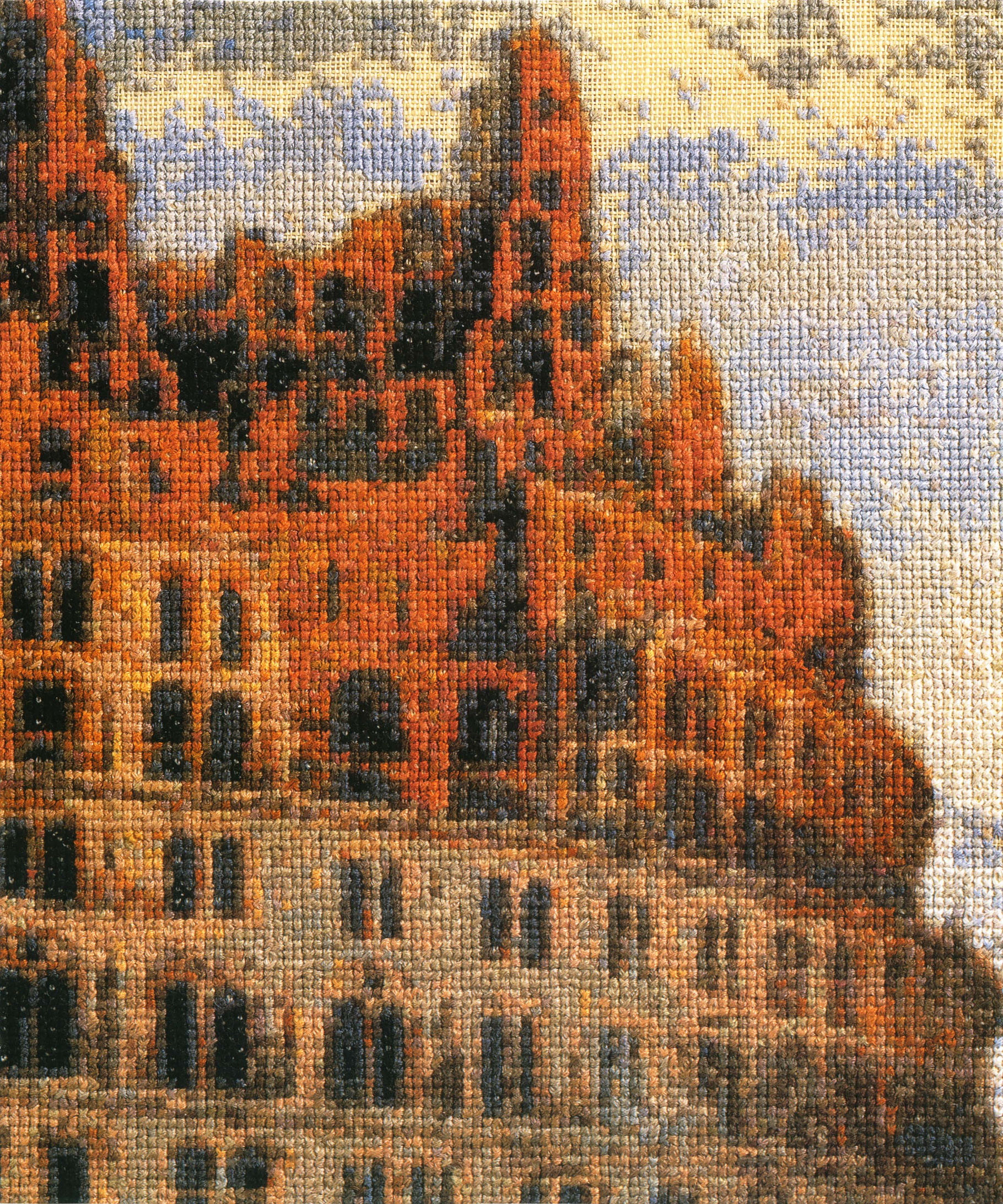
The impious maintain that nonsense is normal in the Library. They speak of the "feverish Library whose chance volumes affirm, negate and confuse everything like a delirious divinity." In truth, the Library includes all verbal structures, all orthographical variations, but not a single example of absolute nonsense. Solitary, infinite, useless, incorruptible, secret, *the Library is unlimited and cyclical*. If an eternal traveler were to cross it in any direction, after centuries he would see that the same volumes were repeated in the same disorder (which, thus repeated, would be an order: the Order). My solitude is gladdened by this elegant hope.


— Jorge Luis Borges

ELAINE REICHEK

STITCHELLATED PICS

BY DAVID FRANKEL





The telegraph, in Elaine Reichek's view, marked the beginning of the global age, as the first medium of instant long-distance communication. Today, in the time of the computer, it is obsolete: it ushered the global in, but its protégé has shoved it aside. History is full of such outmoded technics, going back to the stone axe. Not necessarily useless—in fact producing the same effects they always did—they are slow, or inefficient, or inconvenient, or expensive, or at least their offspring make them so; and consequently they vanish, or surrender to specialist use. Picture, someday imaginable, the same thing happening to the gelatin-silver print.

Reichek's principal medium is itself outmoded and slow: she embroiders her pictures with needle and thread. But her thinking is tied to newer technologies, and her current work pushes beyond any one mode of art-making or communicating into a meditation on the relations among them all, and among all of us. Although the works shown here—sewn copies of Brueghel's *Tower of Babel* (1563) and Samuel Morse's *Gallery of the Louvre* (1831–33)—come out of the history of painting, they begin with mechanical reproduction: Reichek starts by researching printed images of the paintings, choosing one, scanning it into her computer, then running the document through software that maps it as a grid in which each square is coded to a colored embroidery thread. The method fuses the subjective and the impersonal, at many different points: a photographer must have decided how to light, shoot, and process a photograph of the painting; a printer must have worked on the reproduction, crafting the densities of the inks according to the capacities of his machines; Reichek

herself makes idiosyncratic picks, based on color and tone, among the printed versions; and then she turns the work over to the binary translators of the Mac, logical yet inscrutable, which filter the image through their digital combs. And that's just the project's first stage: next comes the matter of embroidering the final work, using a chart printed out from the computer that converts the painting's palette—those carefully hand-blended oils, patinated by time—into that of commercially available thread. The software has its foibles, and Reichek abandons its color choices at will and uses her own.

Duchamp, I suspect, would have smiled at these purchases of thread: where painters once mixed their own colors, by his day they bought them prepackaged, allowing him to write, "Since the tubes of paint used by an artist are manufactured and ready-made products we must conclude that all the paintings in the world are 'Readymades aided' and also works of assemblage."¹ Reichek's blue is not Brueghel's; it is a dye job, and she, like Duchamp, is addressing problems of invention and replication, uniqueness and multiplicity. In her new work, though, those issues are less her particular interest than her basic vocabulary, and while in the past she has shown a complex Duchampian wit, her mood here is more elegiac: she is talking about the effort, inevitably flawed, to communicate, to translate content from one mind into another, and about the fragility of the means of the attempt. Morse, the painter of *Gallery of the Louvre*, is more famous as the architect of both the telegraph and the code on which it relies—a code that finesses language as dashes and dots, just as the computer jockeys zeroes and ones. But

Morse's inventions, if not defunct, are antiquated. (His famous code was dropped from the international maritime distress network five years ago.) As for his view of art students transcribing paintings in the Louvre, and of himself instructing a young woman in drawing—passing along his knowledge—at the picture's center, Reichek appends to it a passage by the Jacobean poet John Webster:

*Vain the ambition of kings
Who seek by trophies and dead things
To leave a living name behind
And weave but nets to catch the wind.*

According to Genesis, "The whole earth was of one language" until, at Babel, the Lord saw it was in His interest that men "may not understand one another's speech." The fall of that doomed tower marked the end of translationless communication. Before Babel, writes George Steiner, in a text underlaid by the Cabala, "There was a complete, point-to-point mapping of language onto the true substance and shape of things. . . . The tongue of Eden was like a flawless glass; a light of total understanding streamed through it. Thus Babel was a second fall, in some regards as desolate as the first."² The Babel story, if taken as literal, explains the diversity of the world's countless languages; symbolically it implies the impossibility of true, unimpeded communication, since communication after Babel must always take place through a preexisting medium, a language—that is, through a system of secondhand signs.

The story of Babel is retold in the history of the photograph, which once was imagined as, more or less, "a complete, point-to-point mapping of language onto the true substance and shape of things." Today, certainly since the advent of computerized images and for many since long before that, we see the photograph's surface as an infinitely manipulable screen between us and its subject. And so it is with Reichek's Babel, which reproduces the continuous fluid pigment of Brueghel's oil paint with an aerated assemblage of stitches, gridded points of color—already implicit, at various scales, in the grain of the photograph, the dot pattern of the printed reproduction, and the pixel of the computer image, a new code modifying the image at every stage. If we could compile a library of all the world's knowledge—a "library of Babel," as in the story by Jorge Luis Borges—it would be the world's size; if we could make a true picture of the world, it would *be* the world. The impossibility of the *vera ikon*, the true picture whose message is as real as its medium, breathes through Reichek's works, and makes their poignancy. ●

An exhibition of Elaine Reichek's work will open at the Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York, in May 2004.

NOTES:

¹ Marcel Duchamp, "Apropos of 'Readymades,'" 1961, in *Salt Seller: The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp (Marchand du Sel)*, eds. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 142.

² George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, 1975 (reprint ed. Oxford and New York: Oxford University, 1998). p. 61.



SAMUEL F.B. MORSE

GALLERY OF THE LOUVRE, 1831-33

ELAINE REICHEK

Uain the ambition of kings/who seek by trophies and dead things/
To leave a living name behind,/And weave but nets to catch the wind.

VANITAS VANITATUM, 1623

— JOHN WEBSTER

All works by Elaine Reichek.

PAGE 34: *Embroidery, Tower of Babel*, Embroidery on linen, 57 x 43 inches, 2004.

PAGE 35: *Embroidery, Tower of Babel*, (detail), 2004.

ABOVE: *Embroidery, Gallery at the Louvre*, Embroidery on linen, 38^{1/4} x 50^{1/2} inches, 2004.

RIGHT: *Embroidery, Gallery at the Louvre*, (detail), 2004.

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