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Stitches of life and philosophy

By Holly Myers

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"We will now discuss the Struggle for Existence." The quote – one of nearly two dozen that appear in Elaine Reichek's recent body of work at Shoshana Wayne Gallery – comes from Charles Darwin and might well serve as an epigraph for the exhibition as a whole.

Reichek's concern in this work is the concept of creation – the crux of that perpetual struggle to which Darwin refers – as it is viewed in Western thought. Her approach to the issue is scholarly: She's scoured the canons of Christianity, art history, science and science fiction – four fields with a vested interest in the subject – then re-inscribed relevant fragments of image and text into her work wholesale, as one might copy them into a notebook or personal journal.

The medium through which she performs this re-inscription, however, is not typically associated with scholarship: embroidery. Her principal format is the sampler, a mode of needlework that was traditionally used as a teaching tool for young women. Her adoption of the form isn't ironic or glib, but respectfully in keeping with the sampler's original educational purpose. Instead of learning the alphabet and simple arithmetic, however, Reichek is grappling here with Genesis, sorting through Milton and Schopenhauer, and contemplating the role of the artist in the cosmic order.

At the same time, she is reclaiming the tradition of the sampler as a historically valuable body of texts on par with those of art history and science fiction, quoting extant samplers as she does Paul Gauguin and Ray Bradbury, and citing their authors appropriately. The power of the work lies in the intelligence of its many juxtapositions, such as a lofty statement by artist Robert Smithson ("The nonexistence of things is what the artist takes for 'materials' ") with a verse from Genesis ("And God said, Let there be light: and there was light"); and an image of Michelangelo's famous fresco, "The Creation of Adam," with a mournful lament by the monster in Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein" ("Oh, Frankenstein, remember that I am thy creature; I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy").

In suggesting connections between these and other seemingly disparate texts, Reichek draws from each a subtle new dimension. She has been at the business of embroidery for some time – longer than it's been respectable for an artist to embrace a feminine craft – and she seems here to have reached a state of real synthesis. Despite an extremely awkward installation (the gallery space is simply too big for the work), the exhibition takes what began as a politically astute concept to a level of philosophic inquiry.

Shoshana Wayne Gallery, 2525 Michigan Ave., Santa Monica, (310) 453-7535, through Saturday. Closed Sunday and Monday.

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