

ART REVIEW; New Samplers That Give Old Pieties the Needle

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In a series of smart, visually striking exhibitions over the past decade or so, Elaine Reichek has carved out a distinctive place for herself in New York art. She is a conceptualist who is also an ethnologist, a self-taught crafts artist, a historian, an indefatigable archivist and a shrewd cultural critic with a gift for unraveling the tangled politics of image making.

A concern with image making is evident from the moment one sets foot in her Projects exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, which has been organized by Beth Handler, a curatorial assistant. The lobby gallery's walls, usually dead white, are painted a bayberry green. The floor is carpeted. The result has a comfy, salonlike ambiance associated with painting galleries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Instead of paintings, the Project space, devoted to contemporary art, is hung with two dozen embroidered samplers, of a kind produced by young women in America and Europe a century or two ago. Samplers were learning devices (alphabetic and arithmetic versions were common), as well as displays of dexterity that might enhance prospects of marriage.

They also incorporated words and images -- pietistic homilies, domestic scenes -- that reinforced societal norms. Among them was a feminine ideal that valued handiwork over intellectual pursuits, ingenuity over originality, stasis over movement.

None of the samplers in Ms. Reichek's show are historical, though they are certainly real: they were all embroidered by the artist. For this extended conceptual work, she taught herself embroidery through popular how-to instruction books, she researched traditional motifs and then added a generous helping of entirely untraditional information.

In place of standard pictorial motifs like farmhouses or mourning figures, her samplers quote from contemporary art. Instead of homely aphorisms and verses, she includes passages from literature -- Ovid, Virginia Woolf, Kierkegaard -- that in some way refer to needlework and the dynamics of gender and power that it implies.

Given this theme, some of her references are inevitable. The first piece in the show, for example, tells the story of Arachne, the over-achieving weaver transformed into a spider by a spiteful goddess. Another depicts Penelope of the Odyssey, pulling apart her weaving at night to keep importunate suitors at bay.

There's plenty of comic relief. One sampler brings together the corporate executive Maurice Saatchi and Dickens's infernal knitter, Madame Defarge, who watched heads fall without dropping a stitch. The former football hero Roosevelt Grier, the author of "Needlepoint for Men" in the 1970's, takes a bow. So does the World Wide Web on an embroidered computer screen.

Ms. Reichek's eye for absurdity has always been sharp. But so is her critical intelligence, which keeps revealing unexpected facets and depths in her material. No one will be surprised to read Freud's declaration, stitched in the sampler titled "Dispositional Hypnoid States," that needlework is an indirect cause of hysterical symptoms in women. But it is startling to find, in the same piece, words by the novelist

Colette that read: "I don't much like my daughter sewing. She is silent and she -- why not write down the word that frightens me -- she is thinking."

The idea of needlework as an instrument of psychic control and self-control runs through everything here. And it is distilled in a series of samplers devoted to the Brontes that include excerpts from Charlotte Bronte's "Villette."

In one passage, the novel's troubled governess-heroine writes that she is trying to "sustain and fill existence" by concentrating her energies on an elaborate piece of lacework. But in another she records that she is forced to abandon her needlework in the presence of a man "who considers sewing a source of distraction from the attention due to himself."

Women being interrupted in their work is one of the basic motifs of history. And such interruptions have, without question, cumulatively and drastically, shaped the course of art. But needlework has provided a surreptitious means for women to add to and comment on the fabric of culture in ways that Ms. Reichek clearly understands.

It is in this participatory spirit, one senses, that she both appropriates and, in some ways, expands upon work by art world colleagues. Her sparkling little version of a Jasper Johns painting manages to replicate in thread the low-relief sheen of his relief-like surfaces and to suggest the folk art sources for his work.

And when she imbeds one of Jenny Holzer's cautionary aphorisms ("Abuse of power comes as no surprise") in an alphabet sampler she both honors the sampler's original didactic function and Ms. Holzer's desire to send subversive messages out into the world.

Ms. Reichek's response to earlier modernist art is especially telling. In a sampler focused on the Bauhaus she matches dismissive comments by men about ornament and weaving as female concerns with an example of Anni Albers's snazzy textile designs. And in another piece she sets a beautiful quotation from Ad Reinhardt (1913-1967) -- "Perfection of beginnings, eternal return, creation, destruction, creation" -- beside embroidered versions of his "black" paintings.

In these paintings, Reinhardt suppressed color and touch to create a timeless, egoless abstraction. Ms. Reichek, working in a medium that is so much about touch and time, even physical endurance, follows suit in what amounts to a tender homage.

Ms. Reichek studied with Reinhardt in the 1960's. And one suspects that the two artists share certain temperamental features. Both are intensely suspicious of what images hide and what they can be made to say. Both share a much challenged faith in art as a vital medium for clarifying ideas and feelings. And both use humor as part of the corrective, perfectionist impulse in their work.

That humor is evident throughout Ms. Reichek's exhibition, as well as in her short video on view at the Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery in Chelsea, a hilarious compendium of cinematic scenes of needleworking, from Olivia de Havilland's thread-snapping triumph in "The Heiress" to Audrey Hepburn's free-form knitting mishap in "Breakfast at Tiffany."

But for all its inventive wit, the Projects show is also very moving, not just for what it says from piece to piece but also as an exercise in self-education, evaluative thinking, emotional empathy and sheer hard work. The energy that went into it was clearly enormous, but judging from the results and from Ms. Reichek's ambitious undertakings in the past, her illuminating work is far from done.

"Elaine Reichek: Project 67" is at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53d Street, Manhattan, through March 30. "Elaine Reichek: When This You See" is at Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, 526 West 26th Street, Chelsea, through March 30.