

B.J. Adams
Hildur Bjarnadóttir

Louise Bourgeois

Susie Brandt

Lou Cabeen

Orly Cogan

Celia Eberle

Dana Fenwick

Jenny Hart

Maggy Rozycki Hiltner

Wendy Huhn

Masah Kalugin

Emily Katz

Roberta Lavadour

China Marks

Darrel Morris

Karen Reimer

Shanon Schollian

Andrea Vander Kooij

David Willburn

Anne Wilson

New Embroidery

Not Your Grandma's Doily

September 22–November 12, 2006 Contemporary Crafts Museum & Gallery

Co-curated by Annin Barrett, Manya Shapiro and Namita Gupta Wiggers

Introduction

Namita Gupta Wiggers, Curator, Contemporary Crafts Museum & Gallery

New Embroidery: Not Your Grandma's Doily examines a critical shift in the social life of utilitarian domestic textiles. Through the work of twenty-one contemporary artists using embroidery on vintage linens and found textiles, the exhibition reveals a new agency in the use of domestic materials and iconography. The works in the exhibition – created between the 1980s and the present – are distinctly different from the self-conscious female subjectivity seen in artwork characterized as feminist from the 1970s and early 1980s. Today, shifting modes of appropriation, nostalgia and subjectivity engage content and imagery from an ironic, humorous, even subversive perspective in which the world is not always what it appears to be.

Barely fifty years ago, production of functional embroidered domestic textiles in Western cultures rested firmly in the hands of women. Objects created through hours of meticulous needlework adorned households, served as gifts and provided constructive activities for young girls and women. As middle and upper middle class women increasingly sought work experiences outside the home in the 1960s and 1970s, time spent on embroidery developed into a marker of a woman who was not “gainfully employed.” For the modern “working woman,” tucking the high-maintenance linens into drawers and storage closets liberated them from the tyranny of extra household chores.

Where young girls once learned to stitch from their grandmothers and mothers, the shift from home to the public worksphere facilitated modes of creative expression outside of the stereotypical parameters of domestic handcrafts. The fervent need to express oneself through needlework decreased as women gained access to a broader range of media and exhibition venues in the public sphere. As generations of women stopped embroidering, the art form itself grew increasingly obsolete.



See Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party: A Symbol of Our Heritage* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1979). In the 1960s, Miriam Schapiro coined the term “femmage” to describe her artworks that combined hand-sewing techniques and commonplace domestic materials, such as lace, fabric scraps and tea towels, with “high-art” collage.

Maureen P. Sherlock, *Reconstructing Memory: Sanctuary & Desire* (Lou Cabeen) (Bellevue, WA: Bellevue Art Museum, 1997). An exhibition brochure. Sherlock notes that Cabeen, who uses her great-grandmother Sarah English’s embroidered works, is “too old to read Sarah’s pieces as kitsch.”

Artists who exemplify this trend include: Robert Crumb, Amy Cutler, Marcel Dzama, Neil Farber, Seonna Hong, Chris Johanson, Joe Sacco, Chris Ware and Robert Williams.

In conjunction with this shift from home to the public sphere in the 1970s, such artists as Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro challenged the art world to engage traditionally feminine materials, handcraft techniques and increasingly plural forms of expression. The positive results of their efforts gave the “witness generation” – men and women who observed firsthand the struggles of women in a time of limited options – the opportunity to create work for the “white cube” instead of the home.

Today, emerging artists have a plethora of opportunities in which to exhibit their work. In the current mixing and melding of art practice and contemporary life, making things – art, in particular – is a part of a lifestyle that runs counter to mainstream aesthetics and consumer culture. The work of a single artist may be featured simultaneously in alternative art spaces, museum exhibitions and DIY (do-it-yourself) craft fairs, as well as *Art in America*, *Fiberarts* and *Bust* magazines within the same calendar year. Artists cross over between art and design, product development and fashion, linking embroidery and artmaking to broad segments of an expanding subculture seeking unique creations and connections to handcraft traditions.

New Embroidery is not a showcase of needlecraft virtuosity. While the majority of the artists on view attended art school, they are largely a group of self-taught embroiderers. The stitch, as a mark, is individualistic and dynamically expressive, and whether executed by hand or machine, physically links the artist to the materials. As a line, the stitch provides a tactile means for artists to draw with thread, merging current interests in drawing, illustration and graphic novels with a traditional handcraft.

Rescued from rummage sales, thrift stores and flea markets – even from the closets of family members or the artist – these fragments or whole textiles are readily accessible, inexpensive and portable. The textiles are markers of a prior era, a time when women actively pursued handcrafts to decorate their lives and homes with unabashedly feminine colors and stylized designs. Importantly, many of the artists in the exhibition take the philosophical stance that the world is already populated with an abundance of things. As such, the re-purposing of objects does not create more things, it simply redefines that which existed in a prior form – a process of re-appropriation that is directly linked to broader studio art practices today.

As a craft museum dedicated to innovative work created in craft media or using craft techniques, the presentation of this exhibition links craft and contemporary art practice. In *New Embroidery*, both the “raw” materials and the transformation methods engaged by the artists on view are rooted in a specific handcraft tradition. Today, with the significant increase in exhibitions that consciously and visibly reference traditional craft materials and techniques, it is vitally important for craft museums to clarify connections between process and concept, and to provide a historical context and framework for contemporary art practices. *New Embroidery: Not Your Grandma’s Doily* connects contemporary artists newly discovering embroidery with traditional craft guilds and fiber art communities. Contemporary Crafts Museum & Gallery thanks the artists, galleries, collectors, writers, curators, guild members and embroiderers – anonymous and named – who have contributed to this multi-faceted and multi-layered project.

Exhibition History | Annin Barrett, Guest Co-curator

This exhibition project began over two years ago when Guest Co-curators Manya Shapiro and Annin Barrett noticed embroidered artwork incorporating old, worn fabrics in galleries throughout the Pacific Northwest. Work by such artists as Shanon Schollian and Dana Fenwick offers a fresh perspective on using textiles in art, including witty subject matter, a playful approach to materials and subtly subversive imagery. Importantly, the work reveals a widening gap between past and present expressions using thread on cloth. Created with an ironic sensibility, these embroidered works engage the nearly lost art of hand sewing in a reclamation and reworking of “women’s work.” When Namita Gupta Wiggers joined the museum and project in process, she recognized that this new approach moved beyond a regional phenomenon. Together, the curators expanded the exhibition to include a historical context through art that clarifies the shift observed in the regional work.

A medieval guild craft once practiced primarily by men, embroidery in recent centuries shifted to the realm of “women’s work.” As such, the practice and resulting embroidered objects grew to symbolize repression in a woman’s life by the 1800s. Rozsika Parker’s pivotal book, *The Subversive Stitch*, re-chronicles the evolution of embroidery as a marker of women’s liberation from patriarchal society in Western culture. This marginalized medium provided women both a social retreat and a voice for personal expression well into the 20th century.

Traditionally handed down from mother to daughter through the generations, hand sewing is a domestic skill imbued with feminine connotations. Yet the artists in this exhibition, both women and men, do not necessarily define themselves as feminists. Many use embroidered domestic textiles to portray radically different gender roles and a new domesticity which includes an unprecedented fluidity of lifestyle and sexual identity. Orly Cogan’s sweetly embroidered nudes sporting urban accessories and David Wilburn’s “queering of the cloth” witness this shift to new social norms.

Humor was largely absent from textile art in the 1960s and 1970s, which was inextricably linked to the serious politics of the feminist movement. Fabricated by many assistants, Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party* recast embroidered fabric place mats as installation art. A feminist critique of gender roles, Chicago used textiles – long devalued to the category of functional craft – to represent women’s social status and to critique gender roles.

Imbued with rich records of past lives, used textiles challenge artists with a narrative counterpoint. When artists like Susie Brandt and Dana Fenwick revitalize reclaimed linens from thrift store bins with new stitched imagery, the contrast between old and new embroidery marks an elegiac distance from the past. In *Ode à l’Oubli (Ode to the Forgotten)*, Louise Bourgeois constructs an artist’s book of abstract images from reproductions of old dishtowels, napkins and curtains used by her family. The antithesis of a blank canvas, the use of recycled linens adds great depth and subtlety, linking work by the first embroiderer to the messages conveyed by the latter artist.

The recent resurgence of activity in textile-based arts signals a new consideration of the value of handwork. The amount of time spent embellishing old domestic textiles makes them extraordinary in today’s culture, where time has become a precious commodity. It makes sense, then, that embroidery is being revived as an aesthetic medium by a new generation of artists. Reworked with countless stitches and contextualized as art, these household linens reveal profoundly meaningful insights into core values conveyed through domestic items. Hilarious and caustic at times, *New Embroidery: Not Your Grandma’s Doily* surveys a new approach to textiles that parallels changes in life today.

David Wilburn draws on Miriam Schapiro’s “femmage” strategies, seeking a place to use her methodologies and language to explore hyper-masculinity through stereotypically female materials and handwork practices.

SELECTED RESOURCES

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O’ Doherty, Brian and Thomas McEvilley. *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000.

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Self, Dana. *Subversive Domesticity*. Wichita, KS: Edwin A. Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita State University, 1996.

Welchman, John. *Art after Appropriation: Essays on Art in the 1990s*. New York: Routledge, 2001.

Wiens, Ann and Alison Ferris. *Portfolio Collection: Darrel Morris*. Winchester, UK: Telos Art Publishing, 2003.





STITCH-O-RAMA

A participant in the creation of Judy Chicago's famous exhibition *The Dinner Party*, Guest Co-curator Manya Shapiro's experiences inspired *Stitch-o-Rama*, a community-wide embroidery project. Throughout 2006, the Museum sponsored a roving project to turn a vintage tablecloth, donated by Shapiro, into a collaborative work of embroidery. The kitchen-themed tablecloth is our current North Window Project and includes a list of participants in the museum exhibition.

Contemporary Crafts Museum & Gallery thanks all of the stitchers who participated through the following organizations and places:

Art Hop at Frock, The Art Institute of Portland, Art in the Pearl, Church of Craft at Rimsky-Korsakoffe, Contemporary Crafts Museum & Gallery, Craft Wonderland at the Doug Fir, Fort Vancouver Tapestry Project, Holt Campout, Multnomah Days at the Multnomah Arts Center, Oregon College of Art & Craft, Pacific Northwest College of Art, Reed College, Vancouver Wine and Jazz Festival

IMAGE CREDITS

FRONT COVER DETAILS: Susie Brandt, Shanon Schollian, Jenny Hart, Maggy Rozycki Hiltner, Andrea Vander Kooij, China Marks (courtesy Luise Ross Gallery, New York), Celia Eberle, Roberta Lavadour

INSIDE (LEFT TO RIGHT): Orly Cogan, *Busy Barbie*, 2004, hand-stitched embroidery and paint on vintage tablecloth, 50 x 50 inches; Jenny Hart, *This Work Never Ends*, 2003, hand-stitched embroidery on vintage linen, 11 x 11 inches, collection of the artist; Roberta Lavadour, *A Binding Sampler*, Edition 2/22, 2004, hand-stitched embroidery on vintage textiles, 8.5 x 8.5 x 3.5 inches, courtesy of the Wichita Art Museum; Andrea Vander Kooij, *Space Fetuses*, 2005, appliqué and embroidery on vintage bed linens, 16 x 20 inches, collection of the artist, Photo: Kate Fellerath

THIS PAGE: Susie Brandt, *Darned Blanket*, 1993–95, found embroideries, thread, machine stitched, 75 x 86 inches, collection of the artist, Photo: Tom Grow

DIY LOUNGE

Visitors to the museum are invited to “do-it-yourself” in the *DIY Lounge* at Contemporary Crafts. Throughout the exhibition, anyone may drop in and enjoy the lounge – fully stocked with vintage textiles and embroidery supplies. Try something new or share stitches you already know, and display your work in the lounge. Contemporary Crafts Museum & Gallery thanks Jen Neitzel (founder of the *DIY Lounge*), Heidi Steeves, Village Merchants, Knittin’ Kitten and Design Within Reach for their assistance with this project.

DIY LOUNGE EVENTS

Wednesday, October 4, 6–8 PM
Stitch, Link and Drink in the *DIY Lounge*

Saturday, October 14, 1–3 PM
DIY Lounge with Jen Neitzel

Saturday, November 4, 1–3 PM
DIY Lounge with Heidi Steeves

EXHIBITION PROGRAMS

Friday, September 22, 12:30–1:30 PM
New Embroidery Artists Panel
Moderator: Namita Gupta Wiggers
Artists: Lou Cabeen, Dana Fenwick, Maggy Rozycki Hiltner, Wendy Huhn, Roberta Lavadour, Andrea Vander Kooij
Location: PNCA, 1241 NW Johnson
Co-presented by Pacific Northwest College of Art

Thursday, November 2, 7 PM
Excellence in Craft Lecture: Lou Cabeen
Home Embroidery: The Art and Craft of Domestic Pleasure
Location: Reed College, 3203 SE Woodstock Blvd., Elliot Hall, RM 314
Co-presented by Reed College Art Department

Monday, November 6, 7 PM
Lecture by Andi Zeisler, *Bitch Magazine Which Stitch? Gender and the Evolution of Craft*
Location: PNCA, 1241 NW Johnson
Co-presented by Pacific Northwest College of Art

SPECIAL THANKS TO:

Design Within Reach
Pacific Northwest College of Art
Reed College Art Department
Tazo

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