



# Pricked: extreme embroidery

by Gaye Elder

Inez Züst-Gericke. *6 Hiking Days in the Vosges*, 2007. Hand-embroidered silk thread on industrial nylon gauze ribbon; approximately 3.5 inches by 21 feet by 3.75 inches. Collection of the artist.

Like its successful predecessor *Radical Lace and Subversive Knitting*, *Pricked: Extreme Embroidery* "...is an exhibition of contemporary art made by artists that use embroidery as a medium to communicate their ideas." This exhibit at the Museum of Arts & Design through March 9, 2008 (which may be extended), testifies to embroidery as an art medium, and as art, the works are provocative. Sixty works by artists from seventeen countries are featured.

According to Holly Hotchner, Director of the Museum of Arts & Design, *Pricked* is part of a series of exhibitions designed to "explore the phenomenal return to materials and process in the sphere of contemporary art. Artists are rediscovering the artistic potential of traditional techniques, such as embroidery, alongside digital technologies. The Museum of Arts & Design focuses attention on these creative individuals by highlighting work that celebrates the work of the artist's hand in the twenty-first century."

The individual objects in the exhibit are divided into six groups, each group introduced with a quotation. The quotations were chosen as a way of suggesting rather than describing an atmospheric unity for the group. In "The Emergence of an Art Language for the Millennium," his introductory essay to the exhibit catalog, Curator David McFadden explains: "...many works that are presented in one category could justifiably appear in another. They [the section titles] are, however, offered as entrée to the ideas behind the works, and [as] appreciation for what each artist has achieved artistically and intellectually."

In the first section, “Neither More Nor Less,” the artists are concerned with communication, frequently integrating written words into the visual and physical construct of their art. In *A History of String*, Sabrina Gschwandtner explores the role string has played in the development of western technology, its religious use in Talmudic references to the extent of the home, and its use as an Incan information storage and retrieval system. Emily Hermant’s *Lies, lies, lies...* looks like a voting booth where the viewer can become a participant who adds his or her lies to the book of lies on the podium while veiled by curtains upon which others’ lies have already been recorded.

The tradition of the sampler resonates in some work. Andrea Dreszo’s *Lessons From My Mother* documents in simple pictures and words the life instructions her mother passed on to her in her native Transylvania. These comments are neither comforting nor necessarily true. Others’ work comes out of their contemporary lives. Swiss artist Inez Züst-Gericke embroiders in silk floss on strips of industrial nylon gauze. She is interested in organizing a record of the space she has traveled through, on foot or bike. In *6 Hiking Days in the Vosges*, the colors of the silk thread she uses to note the names of places are intended as a reminder of the colors of the villages and the landscape she has passed through.

Tilleke Schwarz’s pieces are descriptions of what she might see or hear as she passes through her daily life: advertisements, logos, admonitions, letters to the editor, and people in action. Images from her internal life and her imagination seem to move about randomly between images from the external world. *Into the Woods*, for example, contains a seemingly unrelated assortment of images: a running man in a field of yellow cross-stitched flowers, a coughing head, a girl with crossed arms dangling a rose down her back, several small dinosaurs and a teddy bear. There is a cat, nearly as large as the running man, who seems to have a bird standing in her stomach with several eggs scattered about. There are flying cherubs—or gargoyles. There is a ship straight out of traditional Greek island embroidery, and various squiggles. The words run a gamut from directions such as “Follow Me” and “Please Continue to Hold,” to quotations from questionnaires about one’s health and one’s work. It is a “quirky” reflection of the confusion of sensual experience we all move through in our everyday lives.

As might be expected, the “Politics is Not a Science” section contains several startling works beginning with *Afro-Abe II* by Sonya Clark, where the artist has added an Afro of French knots to the head of Lincoln on a five-dollar bill. Its intent is to celebrate



**Tilleke Schwarz. *Into the Woods*, 2003.**  
Hand-embroidered, dyed, painted; silk, cotton, rayon yarn, linen, fabric, lace, textile paint; approximately 29.25 by 26 inches.  
Collection of the artist.

Lincoln's ongoing connection to the African-American community where hair is seen as "power." Ghada Amer's *The Definition of the Word Fear in English, French, and Arabic* points to the irony that it is the very fears we share which drive us apart. In Christa Maiwald's *Garden Party*, little girls' party dresses are embroidered with the faces of men whose actions on the world stage have made that world unsafe for little girls—as well as for most everyone else.

At first glance, Michael Brennand-Wood's *Flower Head—Narcissistic Butterfly* looks like a decorative departure from the harsh world of politics. A multitude of machine-embroidered flowers springs outwards on long pins from a mirror ringed with silver beads and centered by puffy little balls of stuffed fabric. But the center of each flower is the portrait of a celebrity. The artist sees the work as a "snapshot" of famous people who will do virtually anything for fame and of our unhealthy fascination with them.

"Whatever Is Well Said by Another Is Mine" points to the ongoing conversation of the art of the past with the artists of the present. Both popular culture and the old masters of art history inspired the art in this third section of the exhibit. Scenes of manliness from action comic books are embroidered on Mark Newport's *Freedom Bed Cover/Zachary*, and advertisements from slick Chinese magazines are painted and embroidered on Mattia Bonetti's "Press" *Couch*. The Statue of Liberty, wearing strappy red sandals and posed like Marilyn Monroe over the air grate in *The Seven Year Itch*, is depicted in Marcia Docter's *Well Behaved Girls*. Men and women from various historically famous paintings are seated at a dining table in a parody called *The Fast Supper* by Cindy Hickok.

There is both humor and beauty in this section. In Stephen Beal's *Vincent Tries on Rembrandt's Hats. Plus Other Horsing Around*, Van Gogh, as he appears in his own self-portraits, models various hats from Rembrandt's self-portraits. Elaine Reichek has stitched a similar montage in *A Lexicon of Clouds* where she has recreated the skies from paintings by J.M.W. Turner, Albert Pinkham Ryder, El Greco, and others. According to Curator David McFadden, "The artist isolates frequently overlooked indications of atmosphere and light in the paintings and recasts them as studies of color and texture. Reichek's continued search for a dialogue that links her work with the history of art is emblematic of the artist's insightful commentary on how meaning is portrayed, communicated, and transmitted by way of visual images. Her translation of the actions of painting into the action of embroidery also sets up a dialogue between modes of creativity and the values assigned to them."

Not all the artists in *Pricked* use words in their work. Laura Owens creates beautiful embroideries on silk-screened prints that suggest the delicate landscapes of Chinese and Japanese scrolls and screen painting. As she explains, "I think that a lot of artists use a painting to point out a reference, a quote, an anecdote, or an idea—and that reference becomes more interesting than the work. I'd much rather have a reference generate a painting."

"Memory is What Makes Our Lives," the fourth section of the exhibit, focuses on the personal. Nava

Stephen Beal. *Vincent Tries on Rembrandt's Hats. Plus Some Other Horsing Around*, 2007. Hand-embroidered; cotton floss, canvas; 25 by 20 inches. Collection of the artist.



Lubelski embroiders around stains on household textiles as “emblems of the inevitability of imperfection.” Lou Cabeen sews on paper maps of Puget Sound in a series called *Maps of Consciousness*, while Clyde Oliver stitches images of dishware onto slabs of rough slate, displaying them on shelves and calling the arrangement Welsh Cupboard. Ke-Sook Lee memorializes *One Hundred Faceless Women* in a series of handkerchiefs and dresser scarves, already embroidered in traditional patterns by anonymous women, which she further embellishes with paint and stitch, then hangs in the gallery as from a clothesline. She wants her work to speak of the “concerns, dreams, and fears of past generations of women in Korea, and particularly illiterate women.”

Karin Birch is both more personal and more abstract than some artists in *Broken Time*, where she sees the process of embroidery as a meditative action coming out of grief over the death of a beloved husband. Although others who seek to reflect a broken world turn the traditional orderliness of needlework on its head, allowing the chaotic disruption to make their case, Birch uses delicate, precise stitches to create beautiful images of brokenness—rather than broken material—to reveal the broken heart.

In section five, “Bodies Never Lie,” the emphasis is on representing the human body as a whole or in its different parts in order to explore the state of physical beauty and the communication that takes place between the body’s different parts. In *Models in New York*, Shizuko Kimuro quite literally draws with the needle and thread catching nuances as readily as if the needle in her hand were a piece of charcoal. Benji Whalen’s dismembered arms are embroidered with tattoos on linen skin which act as indicators of a person’s identity. Laura Splan’s machine-embroidered doilies might seem to have nothing to do with the human body, but here it is the words in the names of the pieces that make the connection to the living corpus. Each rayon lace doily is displayed on a velvet ground, but each design is based on the microscopic structure of a virus deadly to its human host: Hepadna, Herpes, Flu, HIV, and SARS.

Beautiful technique combines with unusual—yet traditional—material in Kate Kretz’s work. She uses human hair so delicately sewn it serves to amaze with technique as well as image. In *Oubliette I* a woman’s wide-open mouth reveals a tornado of destructive wind about to issue forth, while in *Ebb* the closed eyes of a sleeper, complete with curled lashes, appear to emerge from a pillowcase. The catalog describes these pieces as a study of “psychological states of consciousness and intimacy.”

The final section of the exhibit, “Shadows Numberless,” deals with “the darker side of consciousness.” Certainly there are nightmares here. In Morwenna Catt’s *Phrenology*, a series of rabbit-like soft sculptures, we see not the comfort of childhood toys, but the Frankensteinian representation of a father, mother, and child. In Kent Henriksen’s *Perpetual Pleasures*, bizarre hooded figures appear in the centers of roco-



**Karin Birch. *Broken Time*, 2005.**  
Handstitched, hand-embroidery, beaded, painted, hand-dyed; cotton thread, hemp, glass beads, acrylic paint; 20 by 18 by 1.5 inches. Collection of the artist, courtesy of Snyderman-Works Galleries.



Kate Kretz. *Ebb*, 2006. Hand-embroidered; human eyelashes, human hair, cotton pillowcase, pillow; 20 by 30 by 10 inches. Collection of the artist.

TOP: Ke-Sook Lee. *One Hundred Faceless Women* (partial installation view), 2007. Hand-embroidered thread and pigment on one hundred vintage handkerchiefs; dimensions vary. Collection of the artist: courtesy George Billis Gallery, New York.

co-style wallpaper-like arabesques. And in Berend Strik's *Dance of Death*, images of a skeleton fiddling while a young girl dances her life away is a clear memento mori.

Not all the images here are so terrifying, however. Some are more of a meditation on loss and the passage of time. There are no people in Carol Shinn's images of chairs, which are created by free machine embroidery on photographic images transferred to cloth. The objects depicted may be seen as just "well used" or as "abandoned." Shinn says she is interested in the "surface" of things as they reflect the "transitory nature of life." Paul Villinski's *Lament* uses discarded cotton gloves found on city streets as symbols of what we use up, discard, and forget. He has shaped the gloves into a pair of feathered wings attached to a metal backpack frame. Silver needles dangle from light blue lengths of thread, adding tiny spots of light to the otherwise dark surface of the blue, black and brown gloves.

Memory is not always about what we have lost, of course, and Susie Brandt's airy curtain of fabric spots in a monofilament web machine-embroidered to water-soluble laundry bags is a bright statement. As she explains, "Memory has a much broader scope than simply [providing] a narrative. I'd add that we remember sensation—a smell, a touch, snow hitting our faces while we look at a streetlight; the sun in February, in May, in July...saltwater in our nose, in our mouths. There is an aspect of memory not rooted in language, but in the phenomenological and I think that's where my work falls."

At the end of the catalog of the exhibit *Pricked: Extreme Embroidery*, Curator David McFadden explains, "...These are artists that have chosen embroidery as the



Susie Brandt. *Smidge*, 2006. Machine-embroidered monofilament on water soluble laundry bags, and polka dots cut from found fabrics; 7 feet, 9 inches by 10 feet, 5 inches. Collection of the artist.

most direct way to bring their artistic visions to life... These works suggest that the real can trump the virtual, that low-tech activities can be as impressive as high-tech systems, that personal visions are as valid as generic pronouncements, and that process and materials carry their own meaning in contemporary art."

*Gaye Elder, recently retired professor from the University System of Georgia, weaves, embroiders, and writes in Alapaha, Georgia.*



**SAQA**  
Studio Art Quilt Associates

**The organization for the professional quilt artist**





- Member exhibits
- Quarterly full-color Journal
- Monthly e.Bulletin
- Biennial conference

**We invite *you* to join us!**

**Annual membership:**  
Active \$50  
Professional Artist Member \$115  
Student (with copy of ID) \$25

SAQA  
PO Box 572  
Storrs, CT 06268-0572  
[www.saqa.com](http://www.saqa.com)

**THE WOOLGATHERERS LTD - QUALITY WEAVING TOOLS**

**Walk-In Retail Store!**

**35 N. Main St.  
Fond du Lac, WI  
920-907-0510  
[woolg@powercom.net](mailto:woolg@powercom.net)**

**[www.woolgatherers.com](http://www.woolgatherers.com)**

looms • yarn  
weaving tools  
spinning stools  
**New!**  
Linen & Half Linen  
Fabrics  
Imported from Germany



**ÖXABÄCK**  
Counter-marche Looms




**DUTCH MASTER 2510**  
Travel Loom  
Our Own Design

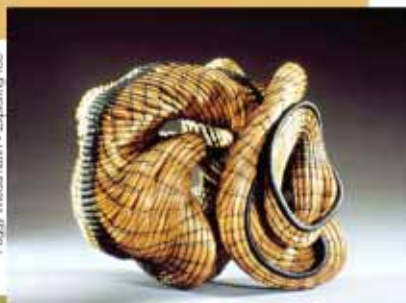


**THE WOOLGATHERERS LTD.**



**CALL FOR ENTRIES**





Froggy Woodrum • Exploring Tool

**SMALL EXPRESSIONS**

**2009**

HGA's ANNUAL JURIED FIBER ARTS EXHIBIT

**Craftsmen's Guild of Mississippi**

February 23 - May 3, 2009

*Submit either  
slides or digital  
images.*

*JUROR:  
to be announced*

For a prospectus send SASE to:

HGA Small Expressions 2009  
1255 Buford Highway, Suite 211  
Suwanee, GA 30024  
or On-line, Spring 2008  
[www.weavespindye.org](http://www.weavespindye.org)

Entries Must be Postmarked by:  
January 9, 2009 - International  
January 9, 2009 - USA