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A Stitch in Time: New Embroidery, Old Fabric, Changing Values

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Using recent embroidered artwork by Ghada Amer, Orly Cogan, and Louise Bourgeois as a bellwether for changing social relationships, this paper will discuss how values regarding time, family and gender roles have evolved in the past couple of generations. Rozsika Parker's pivotal 1984 book, The Subversive Stitch, recognized the significant relationship between women's social history and their embroidery styles, passed down through generations in Europe and America. We can extend that analytical approach to embroidered artwork being made today. Parker's book ends with 1970s feminist art, such as Judy Chicago's Dinner Party. This work achieved a kind of equal but separate status in the art world, and is now installed in the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. A roomful of historic documentation prepares the viewer to appreciate it and the mostly non-professional, feminine arts tradition it alludes to. Hand embroidery was still commonly practiced by women as a craft throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. During the 1980s and 1990s however, embroidery languished as many women reacted against traditional feminine roles by refusing to sew or do other domestic tasks perceived as menial. This rupture in the relationship between embroidery and women set the stage for a different aesthetic tradition to emerge.

These days, in hip towns across America, super crafty clubs in the style of Debbie Stoller's Stitch 'n Bitch knitting groups, meet at bars for sessions complete with martinis and attitude. The DIY Lounge gathering at Portland, Oregon's Doug Fir bar is a good example of this phenomenon. A kind of crafts fair/social hour, it encourages hands-on craftwork, including stitchery, in a public setting. Instead of learning how to embroider from their mothers at home, as women did for generations, young women now teach each other. Out of this new relationship to handmade textiles come stories and humor that would have been inappropriate in an earlier era.

Comparing outmoded social attitudes with the changing function of textiles in daily life, we also gain insight into the revaluing of time in Western culture. Time-intensive practices employed to create common household linens have become almost extinct in only a couple generations. It is significant that hand embroidery, once practiced by a majority of women as a marker of feminine domesticity, has recently been revalued as a museum-worthy medium in the historically male-dominated realm of fine art. Many contemporary artists in the last ten years have addressed the connection between textiles and a woman's current place in society. Much of this work is concerned with its placement in art history, often asserting its own importance with irony, humor and subversive wit.

The subject of her own recent retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, Ghada Amer pointedly adopts some formal characteristics of mid-20th Century modernist painting to challenge cultural expectations. In pieces like Anne (Fig. 1), a stitched and painted canvas from 2004, she evokes Jackson Pollack's famous drip paintings. The male bastion of Abstract Expressionism, with its emphasis on raw masculine energy, was made famous by Pollack, nicknamed Jack the

Dripper. Ghada Amer employs a similar compositional motif, but alters the content to expose the libidinous undertow of Pollack's Jungian inspired works. She provides a voyeuristic experience, co-opted from men's pornographic magazines, that rewards the curious with veiled eroticism. Pollack's drips become Amer's dangling thread, both charged with sexual innuendo from opposite sides of the sexual divide.



Figure 1 (left). *Anne* © Ghada Amer. Courtesy Gagolian Gallery. **Figure 2 (right).** *The New Albers* © Ghada Amer. Courtesy Gagolian Gallery.

The modernist artist Josef Albers' Homage to the Square is also referenced in Amer's work. Albers experimented with changing perceptions of color and shape and sought to minimize the effect of the artist's hand or subjective meaning. For instance, he is known to have used paint directly out of the tube instead of mixing it to his own colors. Josef Albers approached art almost as a science, interested in controlling visual stimuli. In The New Albers (Fig. 2), from 2002, Amer borrows Albers' Minimalist format but offers a much more lively perception of colored shapes in her messier stitched and painted version. It's as if she is liberating the repressed energy of those colored squares from that bygone artistic era.

A lot of art movements have come and gone since the heyday of mid-20th century modernism practiced by Pollack and Albers. Amer chooses to appropriate art made at the height of male dominance in our culture and fine arts. She is exorcising lingering, subconscious expectations encoded in the approach to materials from over fifty years ago.

A different way of layering meaning is achieved by Orly Cogan and Louise Bourgeois' manipulation of materials. The past is invoked by the use of vintage household cloth, freshly hand stitched by the artists with a new message. The surprising contrast between old and new textile strata signifies an elegiac distance from past ways of living and serves as a measure of how much society has changed.

More direct than Ghada Amer's embroidered paintings, Orly Cogan's lustily embroidered nudes of the past few years explore other changing social norms. There is a well-lit, frankly

unapologetic quality to Cogan's voluptuous women and sex-object men. Amorous relationships are freely expressed with rosy nipples and sensuous poses in a celebration of open sexuality from a feminine gaze. Although men are represented as sexually available as in the stitched and painted Size Matters, the female nudes do not pose as objectified pin-ups (Fig. 3). Instead, they look relaxed and in charge, lounging at home in front of the TV or texting on their cell phones as in Busy Barbie (Fig. 4). This title refers, of course, to the nearly goddess-like ability women must strive for to meet the demands of our times: domestic diva, sex bomb, supermom, corporate climber, president? Our lives are full of expectations. In her artist's statement, Cogan says that she is searching for that odd thing, the Feminist Beauty Queen.



Figure 3. Orly Cogan, *Size Matters*, 50" x 43". Photo courtesy of the artist. **Figure 4.** Orly Cogan, *Busy Barbie*, 50" x 50". Photo courtesy of the artist.

Cogan's trope is to recycle used household linens for her artwork. Most of the dresser scarves, tablecloths and bedspreads she uses were originally omni-directional, meant to be viewed from any side as they were draped over furniture. Cogan orients them, creating a two-dimensional pictorial space. They are no longer functional items but have become art. The domestic context of much of her work casts an ironic look back at former times.

Tea towels stitched in the 1950s often include popular embroidery patterns that inculcated the traditional role of housewife in cross-stitched weekly sets. Do you remember the order of a well-run household? Monday is washing day, Tuesday is ironing day, Wednesday is mending day, Thursday is market day, Friday is cleaning day, Saturday and Sunday are baking days. Sometimes, a busy little dog, hen or other domesticated animal intended as a symbolic stand-in for the housewife appears, obediently doing tasks.

Cogan counters that with Saturday, using the familiar weekday-title-on-tea-towel format to illustrate a more leisurely approach to household chores, if they get done at all (Fig. 5). Today's woman obviously has other priorities besides doggedly performing household chores. A Woman's Work Is Never Done (Fig. 6) is another provocative portrait of feminine self-pleasure. The vacuum hose attachment has become a dildo for these unashamed women. We do not live in

innocent times! The tone of Cogan's work celebrates contemporary women's role in society, confidently redefining the realms of housework, gender roles, feminine sexuality and power.

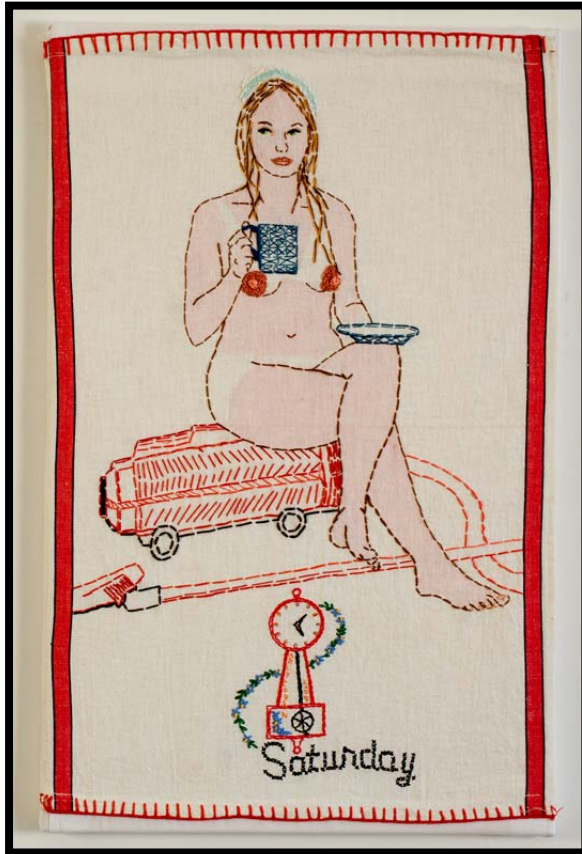


Figure 5. Orly Cogan, *Saturday*, 30" x 21". Photo courtesy of the artist. **Figure 6.** Orly Cogan, *A Woman's Work Is Never Done*, 68" x 51". Photo courtesy of the artist.

No stranger to sexual themes (she was famously photographed by Robert Mapplethorpe with a large phallus sculpture tucked under her arm), Louise Bourgeois' work often involves gender issues. She belongs to an earlier generation than the previous two artists, and grew up in her parent's tapestry restoration workshop during the early 1900s. Her feminist mother warned her not to get trapped working on undervalued textiles for a meager living, like herself, and refused to teach her daughter textile skills in an attempt to liberate her from a lowly social status. However, Bourgeois also credits the tapestry workshop with training her to appreciate beauty at an early age.

In *Ode á l'Oubli*, or *Ode to the Forgotten*, from 2004, Bourgeois confronts this dichotomy of values (Figs. 7 and 8). Old dishtowels, monogrammed napkins and curtains from several decades ago have been reconstructed into an artist's book of abstract images honoring a lived, familial past. Bourgeois' presentation provides a sense of discovery as the layers of household textiles unbutton to display a primer on abstract composition.

Bourgeois re-contextualizes these used fabrics in a sly, understated format to be read as a kind of text. Elsewhere in the book, on only two pages out of 36 she printed text that gives a clue to her intrigue. The words in red ink read, "the return of the repressed" and "I had a flashback of

something that never existed.” They refer to childhood memory, the kind of subliminal experiences that shape our aesthetics without our awareness. On page five, embroidered eggs in a nest echo a theme seen in Bourgeois’ more famous artwork, of a secret potential to be revealed.

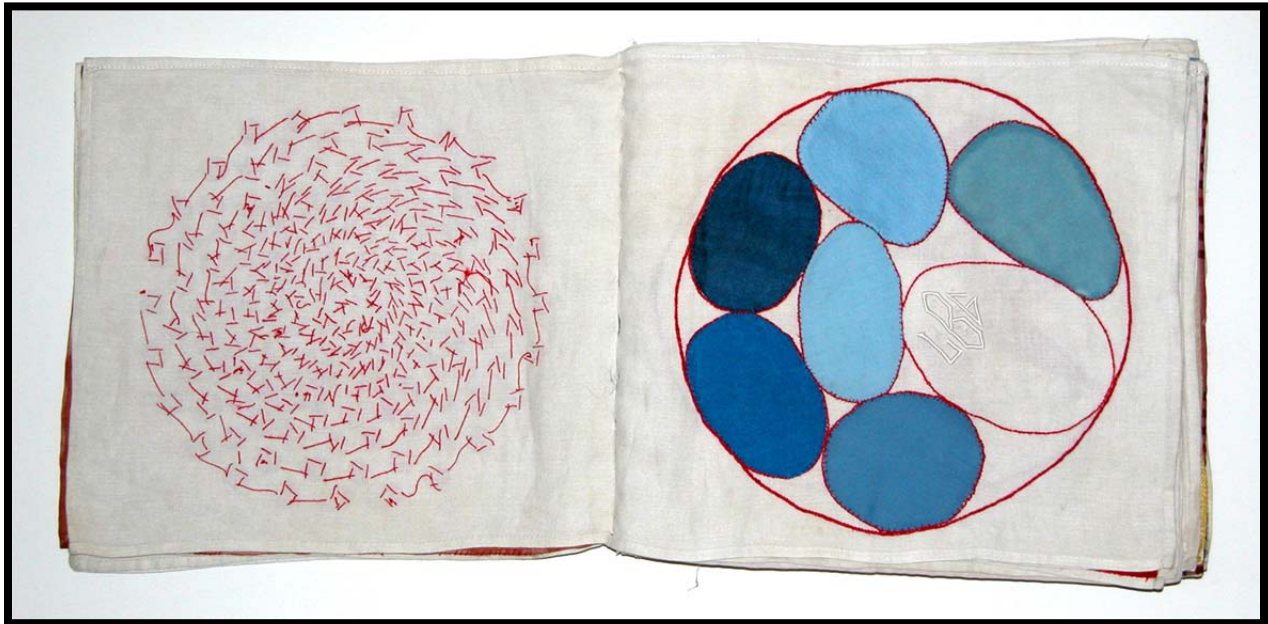


Figure 7. Louise Bourgeois, Ode a l’Oubli, 10 3/4”x 13 1/4”. Published by Peter Blum Edition, New York. Courtesy Peter Blum Edition, New York.

Bourgeois’ early exposure to tapestry would have acquainted her with a visual aesthetic quite different from fine art painting made in the mid-20th century. In many ways they are opposites: for example, groups of anonymous weavers intricately working yarns into tapestry versus a singular heroic artist flinging paint onto canvas. However, they both have fabric as their base. Bourgeois frequently employs dualities in her artwork, and Ode to the Forgotten is no exception. What she has done is to conflate the dual aesthetics of textiles and painting into one piece. Simply woven and stitched, old household fabrics are presented in a context that invites the aesthetic consideration usually reserved for fine art painting.

Again, we can look to mid-20th century painters for a visual comparison. Consider Morris Louis’ stripe paintings, thinned paint poured on raw, unprimed canvas. Their estimated value is over a million dollars apiece. As material objects, they are simply fabric with colored stripes. So, how should we evaluate a page from Bourgeois’ Ode to the Forgotten? What is the worth of a worn striped tea towel, the silent witness to a family’s personal history? This astonishing visual connection between used rags and sophisticated abstract art revalues textiles and begs the question, how much more have we ignored from our past? In Ode to the Forgotten, Bourgeois has raided the family linen collection to bring aesthetic issues out of the closet and air outdated value systems.



Figure 8. Louise Bourgeois, Ode a l'Oubli, 10 3/4" x 13 1/4". Published by Peter Blum Edition, New York. Courtesy Peter Blum Edition, New York.

Bourgeois uses many textile references in her work, both subtle and obvious: the spider, the needle, used clothes, and flax. She has said that, “sewing is my attempt to keep things together and make things whole.”¹ Her use of textiles helps to balance the gendered power roles of male and female elements in art.

Stitchery remains subversive. It continues to hold an outsider’s position in the fine art canon, although that status is changing. With its alternative relationship to painting it still compels artists to pick up their needles to express how they see the world from a different perspective. The three artists I’ve shown here are examining how social values have changed since mid-20th century modernism, not from a militant feminist viewpoint but with an ironic sensibility and self-awareness that challenges long held aesthetic conventions.

Our shared history of cloth makes it capable of expressing the entire range of human experience. Social relationships and gender roles have been represented in textiles throughout history. What is different now is embroidery’s break with the feminine ideal; for the first time in hundreds of years it is no longer an essential part of every woman’s training. The role of women in society and at home has radically changed in the last fifty years. The amount of time spent embellishing textiles makes them extraordinary in today’s culture, where time has become a precious commodity. For all of these reasons, embroidery is being revived as an important aesthetic medium by many contemporary artists.

¹ Matt, Gerald, and Weiermair, Peter, eds. *Louise Bourgeois: Aller-Retour*. Nurnberg:Verlag fur moderne Kunst Nurnberg, 2005.

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