

“Risky Thread- Stitching Whispers”

Ke-Sook Lee (Oh) (b.1941~) has been using embroidered thread and fiber installation for her art production, a Korean immigrant resides in the US. She has held about 20 solo exhibitions, received first place in the category of New Media and Installation at the 4th Florence Biennial in 2003, her work has shown in numerous prestigious curated group exhibitions nationally and internationally, however not known in Korea. In fact after she majored in Applied Art, got married and moved to US in 1964 and being out of touch from the art world by chose to stay home and raise her children when she found it difficult to balance her art career and homemaking in US.

In 1982 Lee earned a degree in Painting and fulfilled her dream to be a full time professional artist, but as the return of ‘Cut-off career woman.’ She came back to the art world when she was 40 years old, with the experiences and memories of her 18 years as a mother and homemaker informing the work. She struggled to find a medium to express her identity as Korean immigrant woman. She remembered sharing a room as a little girl with her grandmother, who was illiterate but could express her impassioned thoughts and wisdom through embroidery and symbols. Lee realized her grandmother’s embroidery was a visual language inherited from older generations of women, and after discovering through experimentation that thread and stitching felt more comfortable than oil paint, hand embroidered thread became the media for her drawings and installations.

Lee collects and incorporates into her work vintage household items such as handkerchief, doily, tablecloth, towel and embroidery hoops. By recycling used linen, she revives the lives of unknown women who made those items. She often draws through hand embroidery on transparent tarlatan, sometimes making holes to stitch around or mend, and making various transfigured images on it. Sometimes Lee uses clay from her garden mixed with acrylic to make a pigment with which she smears onto the fabric to symbolize women’s dreams or hopes. Visible or not visible, the stitched thread marks leaves zigzag traces and semi-abstract images that resemble a woman’s body, insect, flower bud, seedpods full of seeds. Each individual image whispers, as if telling their life stories and dreams; they fill minimal installations with their echoes, the spaces full and resonant.

Lee uses hand embroidered thread and fiber as a woman’s way of revelation just as her grandmother did, in the belief that through this media we can reconnect with our common ground and bridge the gap between past and present. Her conceptual ideas and handcrafted method of making art references the first generation feminist artists of the 1970s, in particular Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro, Faith Ringgold and others sought to change the concept of traditional art through the use of fiber and crafts: because these were made by women, the work was not regarded as pure art. The early feminist artist effort changed the boundary of art, and since 1990 fiber and stitching is no longer a female artist inheritance, nor is the use of media a political issue. Because of this connection Lee’s work has earned attention as pure art.

Lee's return to Korea as an artist occurred in 2012 with a solo show at Artlink Gallery and invitational exhibition at the Park Eul Bok Embroidery Museum, both in Seoul. Like Louise Bourgeois once experienced, Ke-Sook Lee (Oh) might be called as "fiber artist" rather than as "contemporary artist who uses fabrics and stitching." One hopes this Trunk exhibition introduces her work as pure art, and offers a fresh chance for re-evaluation and growth to Korean art world, which still has limited boundaries between pure art and crafts.

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