

“Some things, as a woman, are hard to talk about”

Mending women's history through the fiber installations of Ke-Sook Lee | BY AMBER DORKO STOPPER

The legacy of women, and gap in time and culture between her own Korean grandmother and the contemporary American woman, is a “huge jump,” says fiber artist Ke-Sook Lee. But in her work, “I can hold my grandmother’s hand and I can hold this young woman’s hand. This is our history. It shouldn’t be skipped or ignored.”

The work for which Lee is best known is runic handstitching — on vintage doilies, aprons and handkerchiefs, and on layers of tarlatan — a thin, starched muslin — which she then drape, or are spread across surfaces, in her multidimensional installations. Some of her motifs are insect- or amoeba-like: A strange, small, feathery creature skittering across a mother’s apron, or little water-born insects riding the ripple of doilies across an expanse of floor. There is often a ghostlike, torn-and-mended quality to Lee’s work, but a refined one: It evokes the ghost of the Lady of the House. Looking at the very European- and American-style handwork that Lee often uses as her own canvas, a broader picture of who this “lady” might be, emerges.

“I shared a room with my grandmother and great-grandmother,” Lee said, speaking of her first childhood memories of Korea. “I woke up every morning by the rustling sounds of handstitching.” There would sit her grandmother and great-grandmother, under the lamp, with piles of stitching and embroidering. In particular, she recalls her grandmother embroidering one of Ke-Sook’s garments with a red flower. The child Ke-Sook, wanting something different, suggested, “There’s a yellow flower outside, I want yellow.” “No, I want red,” her grandmother told her, “because I want you to be a beautiful woman.”

While there is no formal code or language in which red flowers translate as hopes for beauty, Lee eventually realized that her grandmothers — who, like many Korean women of that time, could not read and write — were creating their own language in stitching. “They were making their own writing!” she says, and their creativity and original use of symbols stayed with her. In her own, later life in America, facing her own language barriers, Lee would

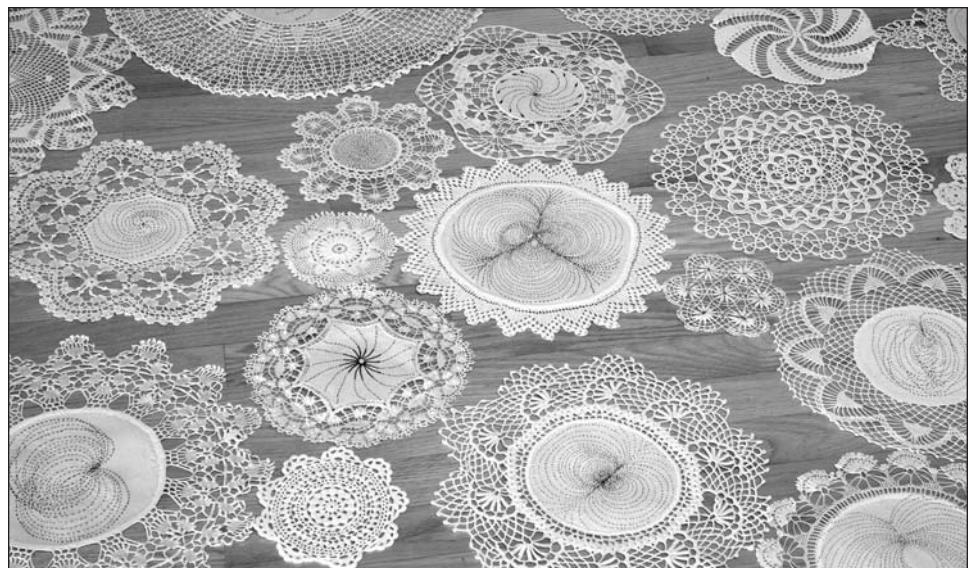


Daughter's Garden Toil - partial 08

experience what it must have been like for her grandmothers.

After graduating from the National University of Seoul, Korea with a degree in Applied Arts, Lee worked as a graphic designer in a pharmaceutical company. At the company, she was introduced to her husband-to-be (who now teaches radiology at the Kansas City Medical Center), and, during that time, took part in a group art show in which she was the only female artist.

In 1964, Lee came to the U.S. so that her husband could complete his internship in Baltimore, and then his residency in Missouri. In Missouri, she enrolled in graduate school, and discovered the women’s movement through brochures and pamphlets around the art department of the University of Missouri, and found it “wonderful.” “When I came to the U.S. and was exposed to women’s liberation.... I felt so bad about my



Grandmother's Flower Garden - partial 08

grandmother and great-grandmother.” She had not forgotten the struggles of the women in her own family, and soon, even in the relatively liberated U.S., Lee would be experiencing the intense struggle that so many women artists feel; the struggle to balance home with art.

After her first child was born, Lee found she was juggling motherhood, the schedule of the babysitter or daycare, and her work in medical illustration. Dissatisfied with the childcare options offered to her, with the birth of her second child, she gave up work to be a full-time housewife and mother.

During this time she had also been painting — often oil landscapes of her new home, with its “wide open sky and land,” in the Midwest. She was aware that when these paintings were seen by others, that there was no way for the viewer to know that these scenes had originally been seen through the eyes of a Korean woman. And, while she painted landscapes, found herself intrigued by paintings with women in them. There were not a lot of places to see contemporary art in Kansas, where she then resided, but Lee did see that figures of women in art were almost exclusively painted by men. She became increasingly aware of the male-dominated world of not

only work, but of her artistic education as well, feeling that this education would be “worthless” to her if it remained so one-sided.

In her own oil painting she saw a “small woman struggling to be a wife and an artist, and it is a Korean woman.” To better express this Korean-ness, she changed mediums, from oil paint, to calligraphy on rice paper.

She was not a Korean woman in Korea, but in Midwest America. She took some clay that she had dug out of her garden, and began to make a pigment out of it that she then used on the rice paper. She had now combined her womanliness, her Koreanness, and her American experience in her work.

As a full-time housewife with few friends in America, Lee took time for herself in antique stores. “Household linens,” she remembers, “brightened my day.” Even though the Americana cross stitch and flat pillowcases were different from the figurative embroidery on bolster pillows and futon covers in Korea, “I knew what kind of creativity it takes, and how long it takes (to create such items). I could understand the value.” Soon, she began to purchase and collect these items, and starch and iron them for use when special guests would come to visit her home.

For a public exhibit of her work in 2000, Lee displayed her calligraphic drawings, made with her Midwest garden clay. She stitched the paper itself onto pillowcases she had purchased. This was the first instance of

stitching in her work, which gradually “pushed away” her brushes and pigment. In time, the handwork of others became integral to her work, more than just as canvas for her own stitching, but as a shared voice. Even without a language barrier, she says, “some things, as a woman, are hard to talk about.” In her wordless art, covered as it sometimes seems with furtive and visceral stitched communications, she transcends both language and nations.

Her grandmother and great-grandmother are now gone, and Lee recently visited her 95-year-old mother in Korea. There, the artist and her family were treated to favorite Korean dishes, all prepared by the elder woman, who still maintains her own independent household. Lee’s description of this time is particularly poetic: “It was such love that she offered us, no word can match our gratitude, no way of stopping her to rest.” This visit, along with a temple mountain retreat of meditation, yoga, and hiking — asking “our loads of questions” of the head monk, and receiving “his wise and refreshing response,” have readied Lee to move forward with her body of work.

In 2008 Lee’s work was part of an exhibition entitled *Pricked: Extreme Embroidery*, at Manhattan’s Museum of Arts and Design, and her one-woman show *Threads of Memory: An Installation* was held at Pennsylvania’s Rosemont College, concurrent with *FiberPhiladelphia 2008*. Her work will also be part of the exhibit *Ladylike* at the Koscielak Gallery in Chicago, June 13 through July 31, 2008. ●