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Let's Get Stitched

A radical take on an old art, 'Pricked' needles the traditional craft of embroidery

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"Do you embroider?" a boho-chic woman with long gray hair casually inquired of me as we wandered through "Pricked," the Museum of Arts and Design's survey of 48 artists whose radical needlework is upending traditional notions of embroidery. My huffy denial—does she really think I have the time for that?—reveals the prejudices that still inform our responses to this age-old medium.

Time, in fact, is a central motif of "Pricked," where one's eye is slowed by the infinity of stitches, the highly detailed, seemingly labor-intensive nature of much that's on display. The sheer density of works squeezed into close quarters adds to this overwhelming feeling. And their quality varies widely. Embroiderers engaged in a sophisticated repartee with art history—like Elaine Reicheck, contemporary doyenne of the medium—are jarringly juxtaposed with more kitschy sensibilities.



Mesmerizing and off-putting: Laura Splan's
Doily (HIV), 2004_photo: Courtesy of the artist

Still, "Pricked" makes for engaging viewing. And if the absence of some high-profile artists who've picked up the needle in recent years (like Tracey Emin, Annette Messenger, and Doris Salcedo) appears a tad disconcerting, that lack is more than compensated for by a wealth of new discoveries.

The artists in "Pricked" embroider lies (Emily Hermant, in a clever installation) and wine stains on tablecloths (Nava Lubelski, whose lacey creations are imbued with Abstract Expressionist verve). They turn celebrity mug shots into homey needlepoint samplers (Maria E. Pineres). And they dig deep within the body, like Laura Splan, to uncover a range of emotions. (Splan's doilies, based on the cellular formation of viruses such as SARS, herpes, HIV, and flu, are uncannily mesmerizing and off-putting.) She and others included here reveal the unexpected versatility of a pastime long associated with genteel Victorian womanhood.

Not that it was ever all that simple. Rozika Parker, in her classic feminist tome *The Subversive Stitch*, traces the history of embroidery from

medieval times, when it was practiced by both men and women, to the late 19th century, as it evolved into a quintessentially feminine activity. Her argument: that a medium destined to preoccupy the leisure hours of middle-class women (who might otherwise be off fomenting revolution) could also provide, if not a way out, then at least expressions of resistance. ("Polly Cook did this," an 18th-century schoolgirl's sampler states, "and hated every stitch she did in it.")

Many of the more successful works here trade on that ambivalent history. Romanian-born Andrea Deszö's wistful and satirical *Lessons From My Mother*— a series of 48 white cotton squares deftly embroidered with superstitions and folk wisdom—conjures the dark heart of Transylvanian womanhood in words and pictograms. ("My mother claimed that you can get hepatitis from a handshake . . . that if you drink too much water a frog grows in your stomach . . . that a woman's legs are so strong no man can spread them unless she lets him . . . ") The antique toy bed in Tamar Stone's *A Case of Confinement*, whose linens and mattress are stitched with archival quotes recounting the terrors and trials of childbirth, seems at once a plaything and a prison, a theater for the ritualized reenactment of traumatic memory. (Charles Le Dray, take note.)

Freud, in his day, saw a link between embroidery and fantasy, noting (in his and Josef Breuer's early work, *Studies on Hysteria*) the "daydreams . . . to which needlework and other similar occupations render women especially prone." Several artists play off the sense of containment that embroidery evokes—the domestic sphere, the close work—with free-floating imagery, near to dreams and the unconscious. The illustrator Maira Kalman poetically juxtaposes stitched quotations from Goethe's *Faust* with embroidered doodles; Tilleke Schwarz's "samplers" are graffiti-like palimpsests, composed of bits of found language, to-do lists, and other detritus of daily life.

Angelo Filomeno, who apprenticed to a tailor during his childhood in Southern Italy and later deployed his talents in Milan's fashion industry, uses virtuoso needlework in the service of an ornate and highly personal surrealism: lushly embroidered, blood-red floral motifs exploding from the eye socket of a skeleton. And Elaine Reichek marries humility and transcendence with her panel of delicately stitched fragments of poetry and cloud formations appropriated from paintings by artists from Poussin to Gerhard Richter: the Romantic

sublime translated into a humdrum feminine preoccupation. How many others sitting quietly in the corners of drawing rooms—heads bent diligently over workbaskets filled with darning and tatting or embroidery hoops—had trained their inner eyes on the empyrean heavens? We will never know.

Pricked: Extreme Embroidery_The Museum of Arts and Design_40 West 53rd Street_Through March 9