

ARTFORHER

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By

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ABSTRACT

ARTFORHER

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Western Carolina University (November 2015)

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The work addresses the complexities of being a female artist in a gendered world and comments on the structures of power outside and within the male-dominated canon of art. Fueled by statistics and studies on the inequalities within the press, galleries, art markets, and educational institutions, appropriated imagery from major newspapers, mass publications and more specifically *Artforum* magazine inspires soft-sculpture and intricate machine-embroidered thread drawings. The tangled, messy webs of thread that hang from these works reflect lamentations on vulnerability and strength - an idea further visited through the inclusion of the medium's handicraft past and its connection to women's work. Like feminist artists since the late 1960's, my embroidery work is meant to challenge the boundaries that divide art from craft, public from domestic, and masculine from feminine (Auricchio 27). A feminist agenda is continued in order to subvert male authority and reveal inequalities, hypocrisies and avenues traditionally restricted from women. Through the conventionally feminine practice of sewing, the work consumes and replaces the more masculine imagery, devouring it for power.

INTRODUCTION

“But in actuality, as we all know, things as they are and as they have been, in the arts as in a hundred other areas, are stultifying, oppressive, and discouraging to all those, women among them, who did not have the good fortune to be born white, preferably middle class and, above all, male. The fault lies not in our stars, our hormones, our menstrual cycles, or our empty internal spaces, but in our institutions and our education--education understood to include everything that happens to us from the moment we enter this world of meaningful symbols, signs, and signals.”

— Linda Nochlin, *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?*

(Nochlin 150)

The preliminary soft-sculpted works in this research, eventually inspiring and leading up to the fiber works in the series *ARTFORHER*, serve as an intervention into the male-dominated power structure of the art market and into general society itself. The work addresses issues of female subordination through the appropriation of images from popular media sources. The majority of the borrowed imagery is connected to masculinity and the work attempts to subvert and feminize these associations.

MATERIALS/PROCESS

Two sculptural, anthropomorphic forms titled *Handle Me With Care* and *Earthly Delights* were constructed in pyramidal shapes of welded rods of rebar wrapped in chicken wire. Made from a massive collection of heirloom, mismatched patterned and textured fabrics these forms were hand-sewn, soft sculpted, pillow-like organs that were abstractly female. Each pillow was decorated with intricate details of hand-embroidered knots and each was hung in bunches from the rebar armatures.

Sulky Solvy, a plastic-like material, is generally used as a stabilizer or backing when performing traditional embroidery techniques. *Hang Me Up to Dry* uses Solvy nontraditionally, adhering layers of thread to the plastic's surface. This technique was used to produce lines of text were produced that were webbed together in an intricate way. The Solvy could then be submerged in warm water, eventually breaking down into a sticky bonding agent. These were next hung to dry, producing structurally sound sets of words that were able to support themselves. These lines of text were written spontaneously at the sewing machine in a diaristic manner and they were extracted from memories or past conversations with loved ones:

“I DON'T NEED YOU,” “I'M NOT AFRAID,” “I'M NOT SAD, HAPPY,” “DON'T YOU DARE WORRY ABOUT ME.” These messy, webbed words came from a formerly hushed inner voice, now loud and in pursuit of their own feminine language.

Eventually the soft-sculpted forms were placed together in the same environment as the text works- hung using monofilament from the ceiling of the gallery space. This created a domestic narrative that was playful, yet eery and nightmarish. The viewer, in order to see the full installation, was forced to travel through and under the lines of text, which were hung mostly

at eye-level. Kruger speaks directly to the viewer through the surfaces of her site-specific installations. Traveling these spaces, just as in *Hang Me up to Dry*, sensory experience is encouraged. The viewer must “bend, duck, walk across and adjust one's eyes to make sense of the piece (and is) forced to engage with its content” (Miller, “The Unsettling”).

The feminine voice was clearly beginning to speak louder in the work, mimicking the shouts of Barbara Kruger whose statements communicate the need to reconsider modern circumstances. Rather than encourage the “women are good, men are bad” argument, her work is about “a free-floating terrain of desire and pain, captur(ing) the moments of extreme insanity, personal pleasures, and verbal violence of this world” (Plagens, “Working With Words”).

Kruger also appropriates popular images from magazines, combined with short, witty statements critiquing the power structures of society, politics and gender. Her photo collage *Untitled, Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face* features an image of a classical female statue, an icon of beauty in traditional art history. The feminine object, however, is challenged in an aggressive act and she becomes silenced from further discourse. In a similar manner a fiber-work, *You Told me i Looked Pretty In Sundresses, So Now i Only Feel Pretty When i Wear Sundresses*, explored the way that text could operate alongside an image.

A sundress, an article of clothing associated with femininity, was photographed and then transferred with matte-medium onto a thin stabilizing fabric. Next, needlepoint techniques including French knotting, straight stitching, zigzag stitching, and beading were used to embellish the surface of the dress. Loose threads were snipped and left hanging from the article of clothing, connecting it on the wall to the text portion, sewn in a web of red thread duplicating the title. Similar to Kruger’s photograph of the marble woman in *Untitled, Your Gaze Hits the*

Side of My Face, the words “You Told me i Looked Pretty In Sundresses, So Now i Only Feel Pretty When i Wear Sundresses” confront and call out to a male beholder.

The more recent series of work *ARTFORHER* takes the form of machine-stitched drawings into thick, clear vinyl in a manner that is both sculptural and painterly. The machine embroidery can become so thick and layered that it escapes its surface and becomes three-dimensional. This process maintains a looseness and lack of control but still allows a decipherable image. Loose threads are left dangling from the composition, in some ways masking the subject or image. Traditionally with sewing, these threads are snipped off, but by leaving them attached to the piece, a dramatic, emotional response occurs within the viewer and they closely mirror the way paint drips from a canvas.

Ghada Amer, one of the most influential artists discovered during research for the *ARTFORHER* series also works with “dripping” threads from her canvases. In the late 1980’s, Amer studied at the École Pilote Internationale d’Art et Recherche in Nice, determined to become a painter, however she soon found out that painting classes were reserved for male students only. This initiated her quest to seek out a language for women specifically and she succeeded through her adoption of embroidery techniques. Amer knew embroidery’s history as a political tool of feminist artists of the 1970’s and she used this idea, combined with the male-dominated medium of painting in order to create her own thread paintings (Reilly, “Ghada Amer” 8).

Thread, part of Amer’s language, is an interesting material in that while it can provide the strength to hold together two objects, it is also fragile- it immediately begins to unravel if snagged in just the right way. The play between power and vulnerability is an important element in her work, as well as the work in *ARTFORHER*. When physically sitting down to sew, it is a

constant fight against the machine, understanding the right tension for the needle and thread to puncture through a certain material. Sewing is monotonous and time-consuming, therefore requiring constant patience and persistent effort. This relentless struggle harkens back to fiber's push for legitimacy as a fine art medium, but it is also a metaphor for a woman's fight- a fight suggestive of a model for the act of any forceful change.

ARTFORHER

ARTFORHER was initially sparked in an effort to completely render a working artist's studio space in thread. *Artforum*, the American-based international art journal, a staple in every graduate studio across America, was the first item chosen to remake in thread. *May 2012*, titled after the date of the issue of *Artforum*, depicting Mike Kelley's *Liberal Paganism*, was the first cover traced onto a piece of clear vinyl with a fine tip Sharpie (Fig. 1). This process was continued, until nearly twenty covers had been traced from a personal collection and from the online archive on *Artforum*'s website. The alluring way that these covers are designed inspired an exploration of their history through which the lack of female representation on the covers was realized.



Fig. 1. Hannah Rebecca McBride, *May 2012*, 2015 (detail)

In 2013, Los Angeles artist and writer Micol Hebron studied the cover art of *Artforum* magazine since its inception in 1962 and performed an analysis surrounding gender. She found that only 18 percent of these covers featured the work of female artists. While she reported that the underrepresentation of women has improved over time, men have always outnumbered them (Reilly, “Taking the Measure” 42). In *ARTFORHER* the selection of traced covers was narrowed down to twelve, two on which female artists are featured, in order to provide a representative sample arriving at 16.6%, close to the 18 percent statistic that Hebron calculated. The two women artists featured are Kay Rosen, through the work *December 1990* (Fig. 2) and Sophie Calle in *April 2000* (Fig. 3).



Fig. 2. Hannah Rebecca McBride, *December 1990*, 2015 (detail)



Fig. 3. Hannah Rebecca McBride, *April 2000*, 2015 (detail)

Hebron's research on woman's role and lack of representation developed into something much larger, eventually addressing not just the media, but all areas of the art field through a project called "Gallery Tally" (44). She and 1,500 other artists calculated gallery statistics and designed posters showing the male/female percentages, after which they would post these outside of the gallery spaces (44). Along with her tally, in the sphere of education, Hebron reported that on average, students in MFA programs are around 65% to 75% female, only for them to graduate and try to find a place in the gallery system that is 70% male (Steinhauer, "Tallying Art World Inequality").

Maura Reilly, writer and curator, has dedicated her career to marginal artists and is yet another advocate for equality within art museums, biennials, the press, the market, as well as institutions for art education. In June 2015, her studies were published in the widely-circulated art magazine, *ARTnews*, in an article called *Taking the Measure of Sexism: Facts, Figures, and Fixes*. Reilly brings up the key point, “Inequality persists. The common refrain that ‘women are treated equally in the art world now’ needs to be challenged. The existence of a few superstars [...] does not mean that women artists have achieved equality. Far from it” (Reilly, “Taking the Measure” 40). Reilly provides the statistic that in 2014, *Artforum* magazine featured only one female artist on its front cover and out of 73 advertisements for New York galleries, only 11 promoted solo exhibitions by women (42).

With its unique 10.5 inches by 10.5 inches format, *Artforum* magazine has always had a certain presence about it- its shape and size mimicking traditional embroidered samplers, colorful quilt squares, or decorative throw pillows. Generally they feature a brightly colored title along with an image of a popular work of art. Reminiscent of the layout of *Artforum*, fiber artist Elaine Reichek work takes shape in small squares. Akin to Ghada Amer, Reichek chose embroidery as a feminist statement, attempting to level the playing fields of painting and “women’s work” or fiber techniques, after realizing her position as one of four women in her class at Yale which did not have any female faculty at that time (Thurman, “Stitches in Time”). Reichek was drawn to textiles because they “allow(ed) for a kind of seduction, a confrontation which is extremely ambitious although it uses a veil of modesty” (Hemmings 27). With its association to warm and comforting clothing, blankets, or other items found in the home, fiber-work tends to summon, but after the experience of a work is complete, the viewer is often left shocked by what is revealed. The *ARTFORHER* series attempts to do just this, invite the viewer

in with bright colors and soft surfaces but then once reeled in, they are left provoked with a political or social warning or message.

Reichek's collection of embroidered samplers titled *Pattern Recognition* were made on a computer-programmed sewing machine. By practicing needlework, she quickly discovered that "unlike a pen or a brush, a stitch pierces the surface that it covers and belies its flatness, becoming part of the supporting structure" (Thurman, "Stitches in Time"). These miniature works feature more than twenty reproductions of paintings by various modern and contemporary artists including Damien Hirst, Ed Ruscha, Piet Mondrian and Andy Warhol who all fit a "white western male identity" (Hemmings 26).

Reichek's implementation of rhetorical appropriation in *Pattern Recognition* swayed the selection of artists to render in thread for *ARTFORHER*. With the same strategy of borrowing imagery, the oppressor (the art market) is challenged in a derogatory manner by the selection of mainly canonical works. The covers adopted were Jeff Koons' *Rabbit*, Damien Hirst's *For The Love of God*, Andy Warhol's *Lifesavers*, Mike Kelley's *Liberal Paganism*, On Kawara's *May 8, 1967*, Roy Lichtenstein's *Drowning Girl*, Kay Rosen's *Read Lips*, Sophie Calle's *B,C,W*, Ellsworth Kelly's *Colors in Black*, Henri Matisse's *Woman in a Purple Coat*, John Armleder's *Hoi E* and František Kupka's *Disks of Newton, Study for Fugue in Two Colors*. The majority of these works fall under what art critic Lucy Lippard defined as "the frame-and-pedestal syndrome," paintings and sculptures that continue a formalist aesthetic and thus dominate the art marketplace (Cottingham 122). *ARTFORHER* attempts to subvert this syndrome, flaunting feminine materials through small-scale delicate sewn work to recreate what was once masculine.

Gender hierarchies have always matched up with separate aesthetics. Art is associated with mind or idea and becomes coded as masculine, while craft is linked to the haptic and is

coded as feminine (Auther 63). In a letter to the editors of *Artforum* in 1973, artist Brenda Miller addressed concerns with her work being pejoratively described as “craft” in a review by critic Bruce Boice, published in the magazine (93). Boice described Miller’s work *Subtrahend* as having “the general appearance [...] of a white shag-rug of some sort fixed to the wall, suggesting crafts more than art” (95). Miller, in response, delivers various instances when a male artist used craft techniques yet they were not labeled so: Claes Oldenburg used sewn cloth, Richard Tuttle, unstretched dyed fabric, and Carl Andre wove metal rugs (95). Each piece in *ARTFORHER* hangs just as Miller’s *Subtrahend*, fixed to the wall and flowing downwards, piling onto the floor- only each surface image is one of an artist who has been separated from the realm of craft (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Hannah Rebecca McBride, *Installation View: ARTFORHER*, 2015

Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons, both celebrity artists whose works have been adopted and revisited through *ARTFORHER*, scale up their studio production, delegating most of their tasks to assistants. In this mass-production model, the artist may never touch the work being sold under their name. *ARTFORHER* challenges this system, relying only on labor by the artist own hands (or sewing machine) to stitch each piece. Art writer Sarah Thornton in an article “Portrait of Inequality: Why Women in the Art World Earn Less Than Men,” states, “The production-line approach women shy away from has certainly been tried with great success by some artists: Warhol’s Factory, Hirst’s spot paintings, the endless Koons [...] — all men, all top-sellers”

(Spero, *Portrait of inequality*). Warhol, Koons, and Hirst are prime examples of why the art market is male-dominated: Because their work sells- for multi-millions. The use of clear vinyl as a substrate or canvas in *March 2003* impersonates the surface of Koons' polished, inflated sculpture *Rabbit* (1986) depicted on the March 2003 cover of *Artforum* (Fig. 5). By sewing on top of and almost completely concealing the plastic surface, the original work's masculine identity is exchanged for a softer more feminine one. *Rabbit* itself appears pristine and luminous with industrial perfection, while *March 2003* is tousled and confused with loose threads. Hirst's *For The Love of God*, a skull, encrusted with 8,601 diamonds, worth nearly \$100 million, is given a new personality through *April 2008*, a cotton threaded facsimile that cost seven dollars to make (Fig. 5) (Riding, "Alas, Poor Art Market").



Fig. 5. Hannah Rebecca McBride, *March 2003*, 2015 (detail)



Fig. 6. Hannah Rebecca McBride, *April 2008, 2015* (detail)

CONCLUSION

The fiber works in this thesis study re-conceptualize the institutional power structures within and outside of the art world. Each work reflects on women's progress since the late 1960s and contemplates comparative statistics of scholars and critics in order to suggest that revisions must be made in order for females to cease being devalued in society.

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APPENDIX A: EXHIBITION IMAGES



ARTFORHER:
HANNAH REBECCA MCBRIDE
OCTOBER 26 - NOVEMBER 13

Western Carolina UNIVERSITY

Join us for a public reception on
Thursday, November 12th, from 5-7 pm.

Western Carolina University
Fine Art Museum
199 Centennial Drive
Cullowhee, NC 28723

FINE ART MUSEUM HOURS

MON-WED: 10AM-4PM | TH:10AM-7PM | FRI:
10AM-4PM | CLOSED UNIVERSITY HOLIDAYS
FINEARTMUSEUM.WCU.EDU 828.227.3591

Fig. A1. Thesis Exhibition Show Card



Fig. A2. Installation View II: *ARTFORHER*



Fig. A3. Hannah Rebecca McBride, *Summer 1969*, 2015 (detail)



Fig. A4. Hannah Rebecca McBride, *January 2015*, 2015 (detail)



Fig. A5. Hannah Rebecca McBride, *March 1985*, 2015 (detail)



Fig. A6. Hannah Rebecca McBride, *April 2011*, 2015 (detail)



Fig. A7. Hannah Rebecca McBride, *Summer 1966*, 2015 (detail)



Fig. A8. Hannah Rebecca McBride, *February 1999*, 2015 (detail)



Fig. A9. Hannah Rebecca McBride, *January 1976*, 2015 (detail)