

## SOCIAL DISTANCES

# Mending Social Distances: Beili Liu Makes 1,000 Masks

From the unused surplus of a high-profile public art installation, the Austin artist is making masks to give away



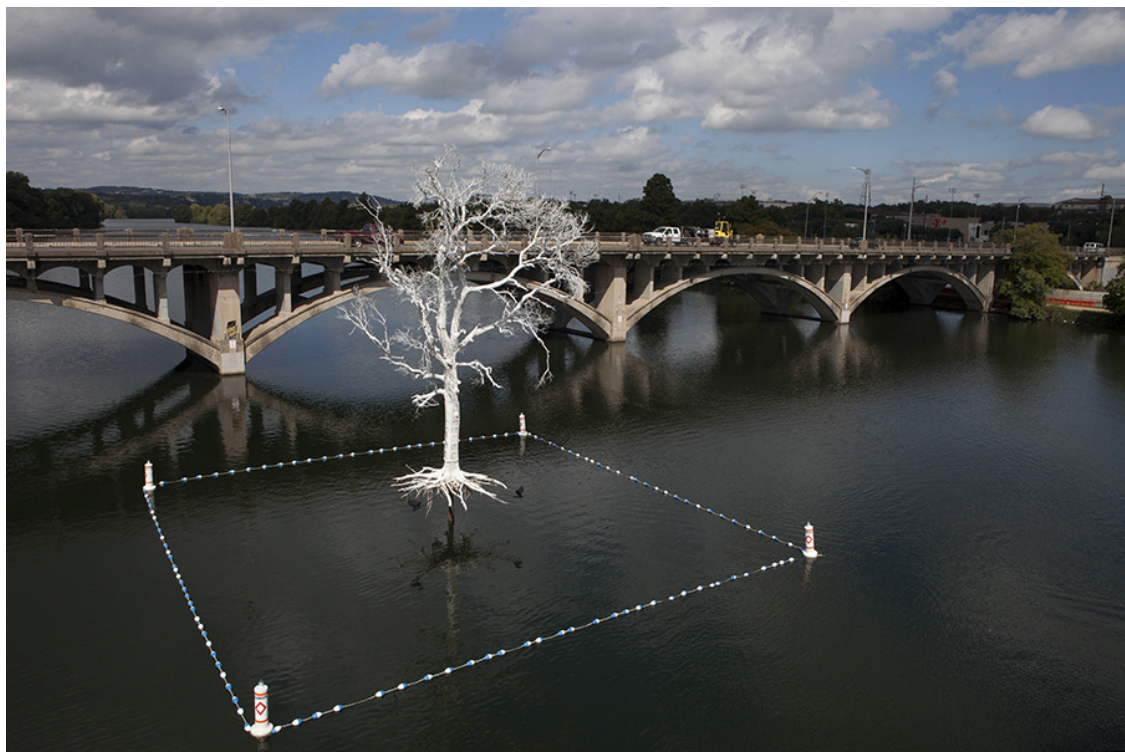
*Beili Liu is making 1,000 masks, using surplus prayer flags from her 2013 public art project, "Thirst." Photo courtesy the artist*

By **Jeanne Claire van Ryzin** - April 5, 2020

Beili Liu is sewing 1000 masks.

"I couldn't just go into my studio and make something irrelevant, something that had nothing to do with the crisis we're in," says the Austin artist.

Liu is using surplus prayer flags from "Thirst," her heralded 2013 public art project that saw a ghostly white tree intriguingly poised just above the surface of Lady Bird Lake in downtown Austin. Along the lakeshore, up and down the hike-and-bike trail, Liu hung 14,000 of the prayer flags. The 38-foot-tall tree used in "Thirst" was just one of the more than 500 million Texas trees lost to droughts between 2011-2013.



*The iconic, drought-killed tree embodies the enormous loss of the hundreds of millions of trees in Texas. With its root reaching but not touching the water, the tree visualizes life's dependency on water. Installation view looking toward Lamar Bridge in Austin. Photo courtesy Beili Liu*

Though it was up just over two months, “Thirst” garnered national attention, and amplified Austin’s public art landscape. (Liu collaborated on the project with architects Norma Yancey and Emily Little and landscape architect Cassie Bergstrom. It was sponsored by Women & Their Work.)



“‘Thirst’ was a project about our relationship with water, our environment — a chance for us recognize what we lost,” Liu says. “The mask project is one of hope. If we wear a mask we can protect ourselves and we can protect others.” Each white cotton mask bears a black silk-screened image of a leafless tree.





For “Thirst,” 14,000 white cotton flags, each printed with an iconic image of a drought-killed tree surrounded a 2.5 mile loop around the Lady Bird Lake. A central radiating composition is seen here at the Pfluger Circle, the beginning and the ending point of the loop merge. The prayer flag borrows from the physical form and cultural and spiritual reference of Tibetan prayer flags, which are often found strung along mountain ridges and peaks high in the Himalayas. They are used to bless the surrounding countryside, people and their lives. The color white also signifies water in Tibetan prayer flag tradition. Photo courtesy Beili Liu

Liu will mail her masks for free to anyone who requests them. The double-layer cotton masks are not meant as medical-grade protection, but rather they are community masks made from patterns that are being widely used and shared now.

People can make [requests via Liu’s website](#). And she asks that those who can make a donation to [Covid-19 Response Fund](#), [Feeding America](#), or the [International Rescue Committee](#).

Liu has already sent 50 masks to the Livestrong Cancer Institute at UT’s Dell Medical School, after receiving a request. And personally, she is supporting the [Austin Asian American Community COVID-19 Relief Fund](#), which is raising money for N95 masks for local healthcare workers.



*The cotton masks are not medical-grade protection, but rather for personal use and are made from patterns that are being widely used and shared now. Photo courtesy Beili Liu*

Liu's very personal, generous creative action sets it apart from a contemporary art landscape typically filled with stylish events, moneyed competitions, and exclusive art fairs.

And these days, who has the mental space for anything that is not immediate.

"It feel like this is right project for me to do now, and I need something to make. This is what I able to do help my community."

Instead of working in her backyard studio, Liu has set up mask-making at her dining room table. A professor of sculpture at the University of Texas, she is now juggling academic



obligations conducted via video conferencing and keeping her 6-year old daughter, Cyan, educationally occupied.



*Beili Liu's six-year-old daughter Cyan is helping with the mask-making project. Photo courtesy Beili Liu*

Cyan helps as she is able to, when she's not busy with baby chicks Liu admits they recently stress-bought. "Cyan's learning how (mask making) is a way to help people we don't even know," says Liu.

For Liu, sewing by hand has always been a means of comfort, a gesture of healing and fixing. It's also a main component of her process-driven artistic practice.

Presented in 2011 at Women & Their Work, "The Mending Project," for example, featured a cloud of hundreds of Chinese scissors suspended from the ceiling, pointing downwards, and Liu seated beneath them at a small table, stitching together pieces of white fabric. Liu's silent, steadfast act of mending made a positive contrast to the hovering cloud of scissors and its a looming suggestion of violence and uncertainty.



*Presented in 2011 at Women & Their Work, Beili Liu's "The Mending Project" featured of hundreds of Chinese scissors suspended from the ceiling, pointing downwards. Liu sat beneath, stitching together pieces of fabric. The hovering, massive cloud of scissors alludes to distant fear and worrisome uncertainty. Photo courtesy Beili Liu*

"Thirst" was the last of Liu's large site-specific projects to be seen in Austin. But her career is national and international now. The exhibition ["Beili Liu One and Another"](#) opened in January at the Crow Museum of Asian Art in Dallas, and feature two major site-responsive installations. The exhibition is scheduled to remain on view through Aug. 16.

Last year Chinese choreographer Yang Liping's production "Under Siege" made a stop at New York's Lincoln Center, its stage design — a cloud of scissors — based on "The Mending Project."

Liu hasn't been beyond her home in over three weeks. In part from the decision to begin social distancing before the city of Austin issued its first order March 15, but also because as a Chinese-born American, Liu has been vulnerable to acts of public aggression. In early March, someone hissed "coronavirus" at her while she was shopping at a Home Depot.

"After that, I just made the decision to stay home," she says. Her husband, who is white, does the family's shopping.

With family in China, including her parents, Liu has for a while now been alert to severity of the novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19. Likewise the racism and hate crimes directed against Chinese people, globally and in this country too.

Just last week a recent campaign ad by Houston area Republican congressional candidate Kathaleen Wall used the slogan, “China poisoned our people.” A man in the West Texas town of Midland was arrested in mid-March for stabbing several members of an Asian American family at a Sam’s Club.

“It’s sad, it’s heartbreaking. This is a health crisis circling the entire globe,” Liu says. “I see this (project) as a prayer for well-being, for all of us. A small positive act that I can contribute as a citizen of this country.”

## TAGS

Beili Liu

Crow Museum of Asian Art

UT Art &amp; Art History Department

Women &amp; Their Work

**Jeanne Claire van Ryzin**<https://sightlinesmag.org>

An award-winning arts journalist, Jeanne Claire van Ryzin is the founder and editor-in-chief of Sightlines.

[Previous article](#)**The Weekly Line-up: 4.5.20****Related articles**

**From Ruby City to MONA:  
How Some Private Museums  
are Changing the Way We  
View Art**



**West Austin Studio Tour  
Postponed**



**The Animal Facts Club Wants  
You to Contribute to its Zine**

## Newsline



Newsline

A List of Arts Resources During the Coronavirus Pandemic



Newsline

Austin History Center Seeks Your Submissions for its new COVID-19 Collection



Newsline

Zach Theatre Furloughs Majority of its Staff



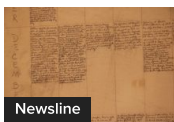
Newsline

The Fusebox Festival 2020: Virtual Edition set for April 24-26



Newsline

SXSW 2020 Official Short Films Screened Online

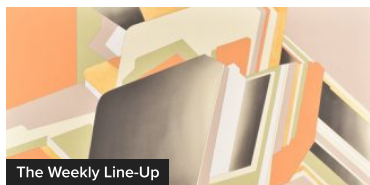


Newsline

Writers' League of Texas Shifts Workshops, Programs Online



## The Weekly Line-up



The Weekly Line-Up

The Weekly Line-up:  
4.5.20

Sightlines - April 5, 2020

0