

# By a Thread

## Main Gallery

February 6 - May 15, 2010

Jody Alexander, Susan Taber Avila, Diem Chau, Lauren DiCioccio, Robin Hill, Nina Katchadourian, Lisa Kokin, Beili Liu, Katie Lewis, Emil Lukas, Victoria May, Ali Naschke-Messing, Lisa Solomon, Hadi Tabatabai, Nicola Vruwink, and Allison Watkins

**Conversation with the Artists:** Thursday, February 11, 7pm-9pm

*By A Thread* is supported in part by a generous grant from the Myra Reinhard Family Foundation

## Night Moves

Cat Mazza: *The Mill Series*

February 6 - May 15, 2010

## Cardinale Project Room

Ted Fullwood: *Energy Machines*

February 6 - April 3, 2010

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# *By A Thread*

*By A Thread* continues the ICA's ongoing exploration of contemporary artists who are using unconventional materials and techniques to create their work. The exhibition includes sixteen emerging and mid-career artists who are creating unexpectedly nostalgic, poetic and provocative works using thread as their primary medium. From large-scale, site-specific installations to intricately detailed miniscule illustration, traditional notions of threadwork are replaced with innovative methods and techniques that truly bend the dynamics of the medium. While the use of thread in art is not a new phenomenon, it is one that, until recently, has been marginalized and specifically labeled "craft" to deliberately distinguish it from "fine art."

From the 1970s through the mid-1990s, digital and conceptual art-making seemed to reign supreme. However, toward the end of the 20th century and throughout the first decade of the 21st century, there has been a resurgence of materials and techniques most readily identified with craft traditions.

The artists in *By A Thread* represent but a handful of contemporary artists throughout the world who are working with methods and materials that have been labeled as craft. However, this is not an exhibition about precise or technically proficient sewing, embroidery or any other form of traditional needlework. Rather, it is an exhibition featuring contemporary artists who use thread instead of paint, clay, graphite or film to communicate their ideas, visions, and conceptual explorations. In many cases, the artists included in the exhibition have found that the ubiquitous and centuries-old process of stitching can be used in innovative ways to create something new and unique.

Katie Lewis, Ali Naschke-Messing, and Nicola Vruwink draw directly on the wall with thread. They rely on the nature of the medium, the armature of their multiple pins and the subtleness of the shadows to create their images. Beili Liu takes the thread off the wall and extends it through space to create her poignant portrait of two connected souls. Emil Lukas's conceptually beautiful thread

paintings reference the art of weaving on a loom. Likewise, Hadi Tabatabai's subtle monochromatic constructions are created with a precision that would seemingly only be possible with a machine. Lauren DiCioccio, Lisa Solomon and Allison Watkins pay homage to the traditional use of thread in art, creating detailed replicas of everyday objects and scenes. While many of the artists in the exhibition explore the inherent identity and personality of thread, others use humor by stitching together materials that would normally never be bound with thread. All these artists have determined that for these particular works thread was the most appropriate medium by which to communicate their ideas. Ultimately, the exhibition provides a fresh consideration of the value and function of art that is made with unconventional materials.

## ARTISTS

### **Susan Taber Avila**

Working in textiles for more than 20 years, Susan Taber Avila has had a long-standing relationship with thread. While stitching with needle and thread is traditionally used for surface embellishment (embroidery) or in joining materials, Avila simultaneously develops the structure and the surface of an object. Using her industrial sewing machine she stitches together clumps of thread that have accumulated in her studio to create a dense, textural material of her own invention. For Avila, the stitch is her material - it makes her marks, adds color and defines the structure of her artwork.

Avila creates the fragile webs, nets and lace in her sculptures and wall works by stitching onto a water-soluble plastic film. When the base material dissolves, only the stitching remains, allowing the threads to twist together, which results in new and random formations. While traditional embroidery emphasizes uniformity of stitches and tension, Avila breaks the rules to create unique and abnormal textures. In her work, she draws a connection between thread and life. She writes, "Threads metaphorically mimic life's simple, linear qualities, which in abundance are transformed into fabrics (that are) dense or delicate, supportive or fragile."

## **Jody Alexander**

The process of stitching is a driving force in Jody Alexander's artwork. In fact, she finds the very act of stitching restorative and healing. Thread and stitching not only physically hold her works together, but the lines of thread connect her ideas and narratives.

As a bookbinder and librarian, Alexander often finds her inspiration from the pages of books. *Roots (In the New World)* is a series inspired by the detailed drawings of root systems by botanist John Ernest Weaver from *Root Development in Vegetable Crops*, a book published in 1937. When she began stitching the intricate forms of these roots onto the pages of a book that documents the exploration of the Americas in 1555, she discovered a serendipitous connection. Now bound together with thread, the texts form a new narrative about invasion, growth and homecoming.

The *Odd Volumes of Ruby B.* series unravels the narrative of Ruby B., a fictional character who lives a solitary existence and creates photo albums and objects to make sense of the life she has led. Employing other people's images and text, Alexander uses thread to craft an open-ended and mysterious narrative.

## **Diem Chau**

Diem Chau considers herself an artist whose medium is stories, especially those passed down through generations. As a Vietnam refugee, she had very few possessions growing up. She considered stories to be her most valuable asset. Her fragmented narratives evolve from the stories she heard from friends and family as well as her experience of living in what she describes as the "inbetween." I grew up always inbetween. I was Chinese in Vietnam, Asian in America, and Americanized within my Asian family. I've come to understand the world in bits and pieces..."

Using common materials and techniques, Chau uses thread, fabric and porcelain to create her precious portrayals of human interaction. Her delicately embroidered portraits depict the bits and pieces of people connecting or attempting to connect. According to Chau the dangling red thread is "an offering to connect...you can't force connections...all you can do is be there when they're ready."

## **Lauren DiCioccio**

For those of us who still rely on our news being hand-delivered, we take for granted that the paper will be in the driveway, on the stoop, or occasionally in the bushes, each morning. However, we tend to overlook the incredible amount of work it takes to produce our daily journal. Lauren DiCioccio's work reminds us of the physical beauty of this common mass-produced object as it approaches obsolescence. Ubiquitous items from daily life, including the newspaper and 35mm slides, are quickly becoming cultural artifacts as they transform with technology and the quest for a greener lifestyle. One of these days, we will stumble out the door, check on the stoop and rummage through the bushes in vain.

It is no coincidence that DiCioccio crafts these intricately detailed replicas using the nearly obsolete technique of hand stitching. The precious way in which DiCioccio has rendered these simple and intimate objects poignantly recalls their importance in our everyday lives and elicits a pang of nostalgia for their more glorious past.

## **Robin Hill**

In all her work, Robin Hill embraces the notion of accident and chance. She favors "fluidity, spontaneity and forgiveness" in her art rather than a deliberately planned composition. Her *Thread Removal drawings* are no exception. They are derived from the Norwegian expression *den rode trad*, which literally translates as "the red thread," but metaphorically refers to the ways in which particular events or concepts are interconnected.

The *Thread Removal* drawings are made by dropping thread onto pieces of wax-covered paper, which creates an arbitrary impression in the wax. Hill then removes the thread and replaces it with pigment. When seen together, these random compositions coalesce into a rational whole. According to Hill, "...the seemingly arbitrary process of image-making leads to meaning through repetition and organization, and whereby images and forms acquire a sense of purpose, not in their singularity, but in their relationship to the whole, whether that whole is a space or a collection of works in a space."

## **Nina Katchadourian**

The six postcards on display are from a much larger, on-going project *Paranormal Postcards*, consisting of more than 200 postcards, all of which include the artist's insertion of red thread. In the comprehensive installation, the cards are grouped in a seemingly structured way and the groups are connected via an elaborate network of dotted red lines of graphite tape applied to the wall.

According to Katchadourian, "Each time the project is exhibited, I incorporate postcards from the city or town where it is on view so that people can recognize a local point of entry. This project began as a response to a long layover at the Oslo airport in 1998 when I bought a postcard from the gift shop and stitched it spontaneously to kill some time."

In *GIFT/GIFT* Katchadourian uses red thread to insert the word "gift" into a spider web in this documentation of the artist's "uninvited collaboration with nature." While spending the summer in Finland in 1998, she found an illustrated Swedish nature book from the 1950s. In a chapter on spiders, the book described how spiders sometime wrap their dead prey in their own thread and then present it, like a gift, to another spider. In addition to referencing this in the title, Katchadourian plays with language as well. The word gift pronounced in Swedish means "poison."

## **Lisa Kokin**

Lisa Kokin spent many after-school hours at her parents' upholstery shop creating collages by stitching together odd scraps of material. She became fascinated by sewing together things that are not usually sewn. This interest manifested itself in Kokin's non-traditional use of materials and method of assemblage. She scours flea markets and recycling centers for books, photographs, sewing notions and fabrics of all kinds. She then sets out to reinvent these materials. Her work is painstaking. Using an X-acto knife, she carefully deconstructs the originals and inventively sews them back together to create her mixed-media assemblages.

*Panacea Plus* was inspired by a visit to the skilled nursing facility where Kokin's mother lives. She noticed that the brand name of the mattress in the unmade bed next to her mother's was "*Panacea Plus*." Kokin

was struck by the ironic notion of something being even better than a panacea, especially in a nursing home setting. Coincidentally, Kokin's most recent work was focused on the various panaceas promised from self-help books, which she had accumulated in abundance from her local recycling center. She is continually struck by the declarations made by these publications. "Any ailment or predicament can be cured or resolved, often within a specified amount of time, by the smiling person on the dust jacket," she observes. While the titles sometimes remain partially or fully intact, Kokin explains in the case of *Panacea Plus* that she sacrificed the titles for the cheeriness of the flowers, "which I hope will create eternal happiness for the viewer in five days or less."

### **Katie Lewis**

Katie Lewis' artwork traces experiences of the body through methodical systems of documentation. For *201 Days*, Lewis documented physical sensations she felt in her body over 201 days. Drawing a grid on the wall, Lewis correlated each section of the grid with a different part of the body. Every time she felt a sensation in a particular area on her body, she documented the feeling onto the corresponding place on the grid with a pin and the date. Multiple pins for a given date refer to the intensity and accumulation of sensations for time period. For instance, if she marked January 1st with 7 pins, each of the 7 pins were labeled with 1/1/06 and then connected with red thread. When the artist felt a lack of sensation, she only marked the date on the corresponding area of the grid. The artist writes, "I want to evoke a sense of the passing of time, accumulation of information, presence and absence, chaos and order, control and loss of control and the possibility of the system collapsing upon itself or reaching a breaking point."

### **Beili Liu**

Beili Liu's beautifully ethereal installation references a Chinese legend about the "red thread of destiny." According to the legend, all of us are born with an invisible red string that connects us to our soul mate. In *Bound #1*, Liu visually translates the parable. Using sewing needles, she carefully outlines the figure of a man and a woman on separate walls. Through each needle of the male figure, she strings red thread, drawing it across to the corresponding needle of the female figure, creating a drawing in space that graphically illustrates the "red thread of destiny" fable.

Liu's process-based installations explore notions of transience, fragility, time and fate. Her larger body of work employs a broad range of media from everyday materials such as salt, water, needles and thread to digitally processed images, video and sound. Speaking to her choice of medium, she states, "My work depends on a genuine connection to the material. By playing with the material – testing, manipulating, experimenting, and examining, even leaving it for month – I watch for the moment of surprise, when the material responds to one or a series of actions, and leads to an exciting physical or conceptual outcome. That outcome itself sometimes becomes the lead into a new project."

### **Emil Lukas**

Emil Lukas makes evident every process and part that goes into his work – work that is both painting and sculpture. In *Fronting*, *Peeling* and *Wedge*, Lukas has stretched and criss-crossed colored thread across cast boxes, communicating both a subjective experience of color fields – the threads often appear to color the air around them, and the colors to advance or retreat – while at the same time referring to the tangible: looms and weaving, stringed musical instruments, and netting. These complex "cat's cradle" works, both paintings and sculpture, accumulate the thinnest of color lines to create a final result, which ranges from the faintest suggestion of tinted air to the dense materiality of fabric.

### **Victoria May**

Juxtaposing the hardness of concrete with the supple flexibility of silk thread, Victoria May illustrates a palpable tension in her work. She writes, "I attempt to merge the delicate with the strong, to combine the hand and the machine, to seduce and repel, to obscure and reveal." For May, the dichotomies she creates with materials are reactions to the tragedies of war that she hears daily on the news. She asks, "At what point do institutional contortions to defend and protect begin to degrade our environment both inside and out?" Her work is a manifestation of these questions and ideas. The juxtaposition of concrete and silk thread serves as a metaphor for the impervious and the yielding. The needlework creates webs and lines that reference the cycle of mending and destruction. Alluding to the craft and labor of both domesticity and war, May calls into question notions of comfort and protection.



## **Ali Naschke-Messing**

Ali Naschke-Messing's thread installations explore the fragility and transience of language and interpretation. She collaborates with published authors, using fragments of their texts, sometimes in combination with her own, to create a new sculptured text that is open to the interpretation (and frustration) of each viewer.

*What City Girl* is from her series *Dirty Love Poems*. These risqué poems are encoded with desire, perversion, beauty, absence, and ambiguity. According to Naschke-Messing, the works "are inherently partial, wholes made of holes, created through a process of sampling, piecing, and dissolving." The series was inspired by poet Ann Carson's translation and compilation of the ancient Greek poet Sappho's works. *What City Girl* includes fragments from Sappho (via Ann Carson), part of a Will Oldham song, a few lines from poet Honor Moore, and poems written by the artist and her wife Helena Meryman. Naschke-Messing has intentionally juxtaposed legible and illegible portions of the text, thereby "situating desire between private and public space, cloaked in full view."

## **Lisa Solomon**

*Wallet Size Me* depicts 10 embroidered portraits of the artist and her family. Instead of showing the clean and well-crafted "front" of the embroidered image, however, Solomon exhibits the backside. In doing so, she subverts our expectations by revealing what is typically concealed. She writes, "(Showing) the backside of the embroidery speaks to process as I am not ever really sure how the back will turn out. When working, I'm focusing on making a very detailed portrait knowing that the back will end up being "messy." I leave the long threads because they emphasize the drawing nature of the thread, and they begin to hint at the passage of time."

## **Hadi Tabatabai**

For Hadi Tabatabai, the floating and crisp lines of thread in his work illustrate a sensation that he describes as the "edge of perception." Creating three dimensional "paintings" with slate, wood, thread and wax, the work captures an ambiguous space "that comprises the physicality of a line and functions as the transitional space between two entities." He writes, "I have found that by paying attention to this tiny,

subtle yet detailed space, one is forced to turn away from the outside world and focus inward on one's interior space."

While his work relates visually to minimalist art, Tabatabai purposefully distinguishes his work from this movement. "Rather," he writes, "I seek to unite the sensibilities of Eastern thought, which are guided by the individual experience undetermined by the restrictions of logic, with Western ideology, which is drawn to more scientific and conceptual-based nucleus." Just as his work embodies liminality or a "space between," Tabatabai brings his own multicultural experience as an Iranian-born California-based artist to bridge a dialogue between these cultural points of view.

### **Nicola Vruwink**

In her art making, Nicola Vruwink starts with an idea and then finds the appropriate material to illustrate that idea. Therefore, her work comes in a variety of media including metal, video, yarn, crocheted cassette tape and thread.

The genesis for Vruwink's series of wall drawings entitled *Asleep at the Wheel* came from persistently invasive visions of car wrecks that plagued her every time she got in the car. The final motivation to create the series came from a haunting phrase she heard in a podcast: "We are all just a slip or a car crash away from being a totally different person." This question only added to her obsession. She recalls that "...it made me realize my association with car crashes: one part carpe diem, one part what if? What if you could become someone else – would you?

With these concerns in mind, Vruwink formulated her ideas about the format. "It had to be quiet; it had to be lovely and beautiful; it had to amount to very little: a whisper, a hint at the idea of this what if." Thread seemed to be the perfect material by which to create her drawings. In describing her drawings she notes, "...they are temporary and when gone, turn into a tiny tangle; they express tragedy in a hopefully beautiful way."

## Allison Watkins

Allison Watkins constructs work by tracing, re-creating and dissecting things we possess. Watkins' investigation is guided by the embedded histories of old linens, her wardrobe and her grandmother's button collection. By literally tracing these objects and documenting their lines and colors with thread, Watkins provides a new way of seeing them. She created The Closet Series from photographs of her closet. Through the stitches and thread, the clothing's lines and textures are abstracted and distanced from the original. She writes, "The works highlight impermanence and temporality, and serve as a record of time and an interpretation of what was once present."

## Cardinale Room Ted Fullwood: *Energy Machines*

When Ted Fullwood first used chenille sticks (otherwise known as pipe cleaners) while teaching art to a group of middle school students almost ten years ago, he became hooked. Since then, he has spent countless hours weaving together these flexible, colorful and fuzzy sticks that are best known for their use in children's craft projects, not for creating large-scale sculptures. He describes the pleasure of weaving as "going into the zone," where his hands intuitively operate and his mind enters a meditative state to create his artwork.

Considering the low-tech weaving process and materials, it may seem surprising that the title of this show is *Energy Machines*. However, for Fullwood, the wildly abstract and colorful objects emit energy as a machine performs an activity. After all, he remarks, "if art is good, it will start to permeate energy to the people that view it. (While) a lot of that energy is just imagined, sometimes imagined energy is the best kind."

Fullwood describes his aesthetic as excessive and obsessive, where "too much is never enough." Throughout his life, he has created this way, whether in clay, text, mosaics or textiles. Growing up in Palo Alto, he went to an alternative high school and spent all of his time in the ceramics studio. In college at UC Santa Cruz he studied Creative Writing. Though he admits he may not have been a great writer, he discovered great pleasure in using words and allowing language to

spill out of his imagination and onto the page. When he moved into his home in San Jose, after he received his MFA at San Jose State, he embarked upon a huge project of covering the walls in his house with his own fantastically colored tiles. While he considers this to be a work-in-progress, nearly every square inch of his home has been embellished. Working in this way and finding the place where his mind and hands “go into the zone,” Fullwood makes objects that are both wonderfully original and incredibly familiar.

## Night Moves

### Cat Mazza: *The Mill Series*

Cat Mazza's work combines craft with digital media to explore the overlap between textiles, technology and labor. Created with custom software that translates digital video into stitches, *The Mill Series* reanimates the sounds, manufacturing processes and industry marvels of 19th-century textile factories.

Mazza's work has been exhibited both nationally and internationally including at the Museum of Contemporary Craft, Portland, Oregon; the Art Gallery of Calgary, Alberta, Canada; the Triennale di Milano, Milan, Italy; the Museum of Arts and Design, New York City; and new media festivals Futuresonic, Manchester UK; FILE, São Paulo, Brazil; and Ars Electronica, Linz, Austria. Mazza was a founding staff member of the New York City art and technology center Eyebeam from 1999-2002. She received her MFA from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and her BFA from Carnegie Mellon University. Mazza is currently Assistant Professor of Art at UMass, Boston.

#### Hours

Tues - Fri 10 - 5  
Sat 12 - 5

#### San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art

560 South First Street  
San Jose, CA 95113  
tel 408 283 8155 [www.sjica.org](http://www.sjica.org)

