Craft Contemporary

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Strings of Desire
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Left: Ken Gun Min, *Night Lake*, 2016-2022. Korean pigment, collected bead/crystal, silk thread, embroidery wax, oil paint on canvas, 74 x 50 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Right: Carmen Mardonez, *Twilight*, 2021, Hanging sculpture on pillows and hand embroidered bed sheet, 14 x 11 x 14 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

LOS ANGELES - United by themes of human desire and longing, ***Strings of Desire*** brings together thirteen artists who have created a hybrid aesthetic that conflates embroidery, painting, sculpture, and architecture to explore personal identities that, like their art forms, are not solitary. The artists featured in *Strings of Desire* have chosen to work with embroidery either as a singular medium or as part of a multimedia art practice and have embraced needle and embroidery floss to connect with and integrate their non-Western cultural heritages, their queer identities, and their fantasies. Contemporary embroidery, like painting, has lately taken on a narrative or figurative bent with the story of desire and

longing permeating this particular collection of artists who include Chiffon Thomas, Kang Seung Lee, Sophia Narrett, Ardeshir Tabrizi, Jenny Hart, Jordan Nassar, Carmen Mardónez, Aubrey Longley-Cook, Ken Gun Min, Diem Chau, Erick Medel, Miguel Osuna, and a portion of *the 25 Million Stitches* project.

The slowness and intimate nature of the act of embroidery can capture an anticipation and elongated state of desire before it reaches its fulfillment. In the works of Sophia Narrett, she depicts scenes of erotic encounters where female figures are placed in awkward positions in an attempt to connect to each other and their male counterparts and, often times, failing. The artist states, "*While romance can be an escape from tragedy, isolation, and even boredom, its power can be tied to those moments when excitement borders on toxicity, or play bleeds into manipulation, and when the inherent danger of power exchange (real or imagined) comes to light."* Narrett combs the internet to mine hundreds of images which she collages together to inspire these hand-stitched erotic female-centric narratives. These narratives portray how the mechanization of desire through the web has altered our relationship to one another. The work of the hand provides a different pacing against our present media onslaught and returns us to our material reality. Media construction and consumption as demonstrated in the romanticization of Los Angeles in Aubrey Longley-Cook's cross-stitch panels affect his own perception and longing to find his place in his adopted city. Choosing imagery from L.A.-based films such as *Rebel Without a Cause, Nowhere, Clueless,* and *Real Women Have Curves*, Longley-Cook uses these tropes to view Los Angeles as a longing to succeed newcomer to the city. Embroidery, here, is a means of freezing the pixels and extracting the moving image from its role as vehicle of desire.

Embroidery allows some artists to engage with their familial longings. These artists navigate in-between worlds and constantly negotiate what they have inherited through family narratives and childhood memories despite geographic separations. Artists Diem Chau and Miguel Osuna use embroidery as a way to engage with their parents. Osuna's abstract geometric works are made during regular Zoom calls with his mother who lives in Mexico. Mother and son each work on embroideries together as a way of sharing time and space across distance. The artist's emotive exploration of surface, volume, and color gradients is based on the recollection of landscapes. He imagines the work as a funnel for the mass of intimate feelings, thoughts, and emotions which he seeks to communicate with the viewer. A few years after her father's death, Diem Chau found a box of old photos from his college days in Vietnam. This imagery became the source of her embroidery that she later transposed onto vintage plates. The faceless characters and fragmented body parts allow for the viewer to fill in the identity as the artist herself tries to find threads that tie her family here and there together.

The split between *here* and *there* is emblematic of the diasporic experience for several exhibition artists and is at the crux of feelings of nostalgia and longing. One is never whole in one place or the other, but can only exist in the tension of the in-between. Nostalgia, from the Greek *nostos* 'return home' + *algos* 'pain', is a feeling that can never be quenched, especially for those artists whose homelands have only been imagined or are politically barred from returning to. Erick Medel's studio window overlooks his Boyle Heights neighborhood which serves as source imagery for his machine embroidered compositions. Choosing denim as the substrate for his stitches associates his works with the fabric of labor. His color palette is inspired by weathered hand-painted murals draping over local stores. Documenting life in this neighborhood is a way for Medel to reflect on his Mexican heritage as it translates in the context of a U.S. city. For Ardeshir Tabrizi and Jordan Nasser, traditional crafts from their countries of origin are

access points to an identity they have lost. Tabrizi looks to his Iranian heritage as a source of visual inspiration. Referencing Persian *Suzandozi* needlework, Persian rug designs, sacred geometry, painting, and collage, the works embody a sense of dislocation that immigrant's offspring often feel. Home for Jordan Nassar is itself already split, war-ravaged Palestine has lost its original demarcations and saw its population torn apart by the Israeli occupation. His embroidered landscapes, which draw on traditional Palestinian craft techniques and regional motifs, keep him connected to his ancestry where embroidery is a way of life. Nasser utilizes the matrilineal technique of Palestinian cross-stitch, *tatreez*, as a gesture to safe keep and uplift his ancestors' craft.

Often either self-taught or gained through matrilineal knowledge, embroidery's fraught relationship to gender roles and female labor is still unresolved. The revival of embroidery through a feminist lens have led artists like Jenny Hart and Carmen Mardónez to contend with the problematic nature of craft and femininity. Each in their own ways, the two artists disassociate embroidery from notions of female drudgery and subvert the traditional women's labor of producing embroidery as household items. A design entrepreneur, Hart's recent work focuses less on the fan culture and portraiture she's known for and more on personal symbols and statements. Hart's edgy, flip attitude pervades her designs, demonstrated in bold statements like, "I trust no one but myself." Mardónez also confronts the traditional roles of wife, mother, and homemaker by turning her stitching into large-scale wall hangings and sculptures in shocking pink and orange colors that scream feminine, but are unruly and wild. Mardónez uses bedsheets and pillows castoff by neighbors and friends, materials associated with dreams and intimacy.

Historically suppressed and overlooked, queerness is an on-going struggle for a political imaginary in which a multiplicity of desires can be recognized and fulfilled. Kang Seung Lee's elaborate antique gold thread embroideries build on the lack of representation of queer people in the media, especially in Korea where he grew up. Lee's career is dedicated to creating his own archive of queer legacy. Starting with his own friends, he created a 3-channel video that recorded the threads drawn on their skins which he pairs with an installation of objects and embroidered imagery. In his latest piece, *Untitled (Put Badly, Gi Hyeong-do)* Lee paid homage to the Korean poet, Gi Hyeong-do, with the gold embroidery of his poem, *Put Badly,* which the artist stitched in a font of his own creation. A celebrated poet, Gi Hyeong-do's body was found at a gay theatre. Lee weaves intergenerational histories and memories of queer communities across different locations, tasking us with mutual care and the question of what kind of a future can we build with what we rediscover from the archives?

Similarly, Ken Gun Min's rich tapestries of figures, wild animals, anatomical drawings, flowers, Western fabrics, and rich landscapes blend narratives from his experience of coming into his queer identity in the 1980-90s, his Korean heritage, and his formative years in Europe and the U.S. In *Night Lake*, the artist sets the stage for his childhood awakening as a gay boy in 1980's Korea with the backdrops of Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* and the local modern crime story of MacArthur Park Lake murders in Los Angeles, where he currently resides. The overlapping of worlds and identities can be traumatic as well as transformative. The expressive materiality in Chiffon Thomas's powerful assemblages evoke personal feelings of nostalgia, longing to belong, and affirmations of self-identity in a hostile environment. Starting from silicone body parts, Thomas incorporates embroidery, architectural elements, and salvaged materials to represent the various ways trauma becomes compartmentalized and fractures the

individual's identity in order to heal. Resorting to multiple identities is also a survival tactic for many queer people and people of color to fit in.

These unsettling states between sexuality, spaces, temporality, and multiple identities create a framework for a utopia, imbued with humanism, where the work of the hand can connect and heal generations of silence and repression. Jennifer Kim Sohn's project *25 Million Stitches* embodies this potential of humanism through embroidery. The project emanated from the artist's dream in which an enormous public engagement effort encouraged the recognition of the plight of 25 million global refugees by counting one stitch for each refugee. The project asked for contributions of embroidered panels from communities worldwide, which are later connected into seven feet long flags. Eight of these flags are on display in the museum's lobby along with didactical information about the project. Most of the project will be simultaneously displayed in an exhibition at the Mingei International Museum in San Diego.

From the most intimate desire to the struggle for a political imaginary, to the romanticization of a city and longing to belong, the artists in *Strings of Desire* strive for human connection and the ability to create a collective fantasy while complicating and maintaining the legacy of embroidery.

PROGRAMS in conjunction with *Strings of Desire*:
For a full list of exhibition programs, visit https://www.craftcontemporary.org/programs/

Opening Reception
Saturday, January 27 | 6:00 – 9:00 pm | in-person, courtyard, and galleries
$12 general admission / free for members
Join us as we celebrate the opening of our new exhibitions, *Strings of Desire and Alicia Piller: Within.* Guests enjoy first access to the galleries, complimentary beverages, and live DJ music.

CREDITS:

This exhibition is supported in part by the Antonia and Vladimer Kulaev Cultural Heritage Foundation, the City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs, the Los Angeles County Department of Arts and Culture, and the Bernard Kester Trust in Memory of Edith Wyle.

About Craft Contemporary

Craft Contemporary is an art museum whose purpose is to reveal the potential of craft to educate, captivate, provoke, and empower. Craft Contemporary achieves its mission by exhibiting the artists of our time who favor craft materials and processes. Giving voice to local artists, emerging artists, and often under-recognized mid-career artists is a museum priority that works to ensure the recognition of

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various voices not always heard in larger institutions. The museum strives to achieve equitable access through free and low-cost programs, and the inclusion of multiple teaching artists from communities throughout Los Angeles who offer unique art-making workshops, K-12 school programs, senior adult workshops, and art talks.

LOCATION: 5814 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90036

ADMISSION: $9 for adults; $7 for students, teachers, seniors; free for Craft Contemporary members; FREE admission every Sunday

HOURS: Tuesday - Sunday, 11:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.