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NEW | ART EXAMINER

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Thread

Christinerose Gallery
529 W. 20th St., 10011
212/206-0297

Recently, a number of art exhibitions have examined the incorporation of activities traditionally associated with "women's work" into contemporary art practice. Advocating an oppositional strategy, one that valorizes the labor-intensive domestic tasks of sewing, baking, arranging, and decorating and the use of non-canonical materials such as fabric, lace, and string, these shows proffered an alternative to the mainstream traditions of painting and sculpture. While continuing this approach, "Thread" argued that these tactics also present a new theoretical model for art production in the '90s.

Drawing upon the ideas of the Surrealist author Georges Bataille and the writings of Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois, "Thread" proposed that the work of the ten invited artists be viewed as a series of "operations," loosely categorized as Pulse, Base Materialism, Entropy, and Horizontality. As Tom Moody (who was also involved with the selection of artists) writes in his catalogue essay, these overlapping and fluid terms invert the structured, fixed, pure, rational, and vertical standards of Modernism in order to give preference to the low, hand-made, protean, and non-virtual.

An agenda can be a heavy burden for any exhibition, much less a group show in a commercial gallery. But in this case, the astute and careful selection of artists and work, in conjunction with a well-written catalogue text, produced a persuasive argument for the viability and validity of this "new taxonomy" within post-feminist art practice. Equally enticing were the connections not stated in the essay but evident in the art on view.

For eyes used to painting, the spectacle of opaque and transparent layers of fabric hung, gathered, bundled, and stacked in the work of Ava Gerber and Beverly Semmes provide startlingly visceral evocation of color and light. Thread-corded, crocheted, sewn, and stretched—in Brigitte Nahon's installation, Mimi Smith's knot drawings, Bill Davenport's needlepoint constructions, or Ghada Amer's embroidered surfaces slow down the appetite for the "quick fix" of a gestured brush stroke, suggesting instead that the time-consuming effort of production can offer other, more subtle rewards. Those accustomed to searching for subjective meaning in tangled webs of paint or evocative sculptural shapes discover in the inversion of text and line of Ann Hamilton's *Untitled (Hair Collar)* or within the intricate and colorful braiding of Jim Isermann's human-scale capsule a quietly meditative counter-discourse.

Equal to these visual pleasures are the diverse critical narratives that circulated throughout the work on view, most notably in Robin Kahn's joining of needlepoint re-creations of images from children's textbooks with functional chairs, Annette Messenger's juxtaposition of sewn and photographed body parts, Amer's layered sampling of pornographic poses, Semmes's exuberant ballerina's dress, and Mimi Smith's obsessively measured domestic interior. As "Thread" amply demonstrated, "women's work," neither marginal nor forgotten, is now central to both the theory and production of contemporary art.

Annie Provo is a cultural activist who lives in New York.

Bill Davenport

Loops, 1993, from "Thread." Wool, needlepoint, 7" x 8". Courtesy of Christinerose Gallery.

