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ART & EXHIBITS

How a veteran feminist artist threads past and present together

New York artist Elaine Reichek has found a through-line with works 'drawn' in thread,...

Molly Glentzer | January 21, 2020



Artist Elaine Reichek poses with "First Morse Message," the anchor work of her show "Between the Needle and the Book," up through March 7 at McClain Gallery Photo: Molly Glentzer / Houston Chronicle

I wanted to go straight to a library and catch up on a lifetime of reading after seeing “Elaine Reichek: Between the Needle and the Book” at McClain Gallery.

The contemporary samplers by the veteran New York artist are based on enticing quotations lifted from more than two dozen books I feel I should know. They are sourced from a wide swath -Romantic and contemporary literature to history and science. Goethe’s “Faust,” Herman Melville’s “The Tartarus of Maids,” Ralph Ellison’s “Invisible Man,” Stephen Hawkins’ “A Brief History of Time,” Margaret Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale” and on and on.

An installer working while I was there said he felt the same way. Reichek says she doesn’t aim to intimidate. Reading has always been her safety net. “The idea is not to make anybody feel anything but quiet and engaged, and to shut out the noise of the constant cycle of news. It’s a way of privileging interiority. So much work is so hectoring. And although the texts are plenty political, you can walk away from them.”

Reichek studied painting in the 1960’s with Ad Reinhardt, coming of age as an artist alongside Richard Serra and Chuck Close. She hit upon the idea of using thread as a material to create formal lines in the early 1970’s. “We wanted to ask what a painting was,” she says. “For me, the idea was to discuss what were the simplest means of making a painting: Canvas, which incidentally is linen fabric. And it’s a grid, a warp and a woof.”

McClain has filled its west rooms with fine examples of Reichek’s early work. Stitching intrigued her in part because it pierced the canvas. “It says to you, there’s a back, a secret underneath. There’s some untold story. You can carry it around. It displaces air.”

She was horrified after her first show when she realized she was embroidering, she says, laughing. Sewing was a craft, and in her sphere, craft was not serious art. “I remember friends saying, ‘This is a career killer.’ But of course, being scared of it, I ran towards it, because it’s just who I am, you know?”

Thread gave her a visual language that also could adapted a domestic practice to make a feminist statement. By the late 70's she was cutting organdy into parallelograms and triangles to create "systems work," abstract compositions about using a single shape to create a multitude of other shapes. Organdy has a history as fancy dress fabric but allowed her to experiment with form and transparency. "That was the intent - to take the practice in its full astringency and to use these feminine materials," she says.

Later she also embraced traditional needlepoint techniques, although her latest samplers are a more minimalist tour de force.

They are all about invisibility," which can be a choice... but can also be used to make you feel neglected," Reichek says. Women of a certain age often feel invisible, she notes. She also sees "the Gutenberg era" of the printed page slipping away, and storing information virtually creates another kind of invisibility.

Reichek stitches the text on canvas by hand to mimic handwriting or typeset pages, doing each piece in a style that reflects its source. Family, friends and studio assistants supplied her with handwriting samples to stitch. "Those people are invisible to you but they are part of my work," she adds, noting that the art of handwriting is disappearing.

The small piece just inside the gallery's front door contains a sentence from Vladimir Nabokov's "Lectures on Literature": "The pages are still blank, but there is a miraculous feeling of the words being there, written in invisible ink and clamoring to become visible." (Reichek has great taste in quotations.)

"First Morse Message," the show's anchor, consumes an entire wall. Dating to 2003-2006, it holds Samuel Morse's first Morse Code message, embroidered with a vintage loop-stitch machine upon a transparent organdy curtain - a nearly-invisible material that also provides a visual bridge to Reichek's 70's compositions.

The invisibility theme aside, she says, "It's interesting for an artist to have the delight of seeing for themselves how things can connect."

"Elaine Reichek: Between the Needle and the Book" is on view through March 7 at McClain Gallery, 2242 Richmond; 713-520-9988,