

Hadar Sobol: A Genius in Small Things Close to Life

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Hadar Sobol is a multi-media/mixed-media artist, who works primarily with fiber (embroidery) and video to express pertinent issues of contemporary feminism, rooted in everyday life. She was born in Israel in 1971, and now resides and works in Dallas, Texas. She holds a Bachelor of Design degree from the Department of Textile Design at Shenkar College of Engineering and Design, an institution of international reputation, in Tel Aviv, Israel. After working as a costume designer for four years with Rakefet Levi, a leading performance art designer in Israel, she immigrated to the United States in 2001, where her artistic career began to take hold. In less than a decade she has earned recognition, attracting attention since 2004 in the Dallas-Fort Worth area and in Israel. This year the Art Museum Ein Harod in Israel has organized an exhibition titled *Hadar Sobol: Go*, which is based on the same body of work shown at the McKinney Avenue Contemporary in Dallas last year.

Medium and Method

In Sobol's hand, the slow and tedious needlework—a traditional woman's craft, far removed from cutting edge contemporary art—is transformed into a spontaneous medium suitable for expressing bursts of emotions full of energy. By using a digital embroidery machine developed for commercial use, she gained greater flexibility for improvisation and experimentation. This freedom to create, interestingly, allows her to significantly increase the size of the fiber work she creates, such as in the work titled *Labyrinth* (2011), to which I will refer later. She clearly pushes the boundaries of craft, and she contributes like no other artist in this medium to the subversion of the (modern) western distinction between fine art and craft or decorative art.

This does not mean, however, that she has moved away from the controlled, incremental process of embroidery. She actually embroiders images of burdened female figures—both physical and metaphysical, at times downcast and stooped — and also other images harking back to her Jewish heritage on vintage linen napkins (and sometimes paper). If some of her works have the appearance of pen-and-ink drawings, it is, in part, achieved by the additional method she employs — digitally transferring the stitched image of the reverse side of the embroidered cloth to paper and applying ink and water onto it. To create her work she freely switches among “drawing, embroidery, etching, digital processing, computerized embroidery, etc.,” according to her artist statement.

The use of digital media is also seen in her video art, which is an integral part of her fiber art. For her installations, she creates video footages, which depict feminist issues pertaining to the female body. The looped video is played in a digital picture frame placed in a case, over which is draped her embroidered vintage linens. The images projected by the video through the fabric are subtle and blurred views of women repetitiously obsessing over their bodies. The video seems to suggest that the body, which is the locus of identity and power, is also a burden to women in this society. From a formal point of view, her work represents both the embodiment of repetition (for instance, in stitching) and its metaphor (for instance, of fixation), which then expresses the artist's critical vision of the fundamental conditions of daily life for women. Her art clearly stands upon the legacies of the feminist revolution and the accompanying feminist art movement of the late 1960s and the 70s.

Signification and Significance

Until recently, Sobol's work has generally been small scale, with a graphic and monochromatic quality, which the artist says invites the viewer to "read" it as a text in an intimate setting induced by the effect of low-level and focused lighting used in the installations. The viewer becomes a partner in a sustained dialog with woman's "inner journey," with its life-cycle changes and the accompanying pains and opportunities of re-creation and procreation. But the viewer must realize that the interlocutor is a subject flung unto the contemporary world and standing on communal tradition of the Jewish nation.

She is not the solitary artist who transcends her fellow beings to express herself, but rather she is an artist who gives expression for all those for whom she cares. Correspondingly, her art delves into and embeds itself into the fabric of daily human existence to seek meaning from and for it. She engages in the production of meaning relevant to our life in the most intimate and, perhaps, even mundane, moments of life. The viewer becomes every bit (or, if not every bit, then, somewhat, depending on the subject position) a part of that.

Take for example her move into exceptionally large-scale conceptual work, illustrated by *Labyrinth*, the piece mentioned above. This complicated embroidery on a vintage linen cloth measuring 8 by 12 feet consists of multiple figures and texts stitched onto fabric. One of the two dominant figures is the concentric circle of the labyrinth (from which the title of the work is derived), which forms the ground; the other, the form of a letter "X," becomes the figure. The artist notes that she began with the "X" figure, which, to her, is an icon of the concept of tension in communication between the inner world of the self and the outside world of society. This is symbolized by the repetitive action of "opening and closing," and also of progressing forward and then being forced to stop, which can be strongly inferred when one sees that the figure "X" actually consists of multitudes of overlapping forms of women in procession stitched on cloth. The circular ground then depicts the paths of life as a (Solomon's) labyrinth, a passage way for women to take. What is fascinating is that the icon was derived from her observation of her four-year old daughter trying to work her scissors open and shut, a trivial incident in the midst of her family life. Moreover, this visually stunning piece is a collaborative work in that she invited 20 of her closest friends to make statements of their lives, desires and fantasies, which she stitched into the outer rings of the labyrinth.

Genius in Small Things

Hadar Sobol's gift is in her ability to see small things that lead us to the discovery of much larger things, seen in a slightly different way than before. To use an expression from the last century, Sobol's work precipitates in viewers of her work a *gestalt* change in how we understand and hence experience the world, minute or infinitely large. If one is hard-pressed to call her work political, it is because the political is commonly understood as having to do with the macro-deployment of power, not its micro-deployment in everyday relations that constitutes the political conditions of everyday life.

Her work is unlike anything I have seen: it brings together the most concrete and the abstract both in the techniques she employs and the image she creates. She combines one of history's oldest handiwork traditions (needlework) with the newest digital electronic technology to represent the language of contemporary feminist movement and express the deepest inner feelings of the individual linked to the global conditions of women today. I hope that more of us will be perturbed and delighted by her genius in small things close to life for both women and men.