

Art in America

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EXHIBITION REVIEWS



View of the exhibition “Thread Lines,” showing Anne Wilson’s *To Cross (Walking New York)*, 2014, collaborative performance with thread; at the Drawing Center.

“THREAD LINES”

Drawing Center

Discovering that the Drawing Center’s SoHo building was originally designed to house a loom factory, Anne Wilson has staged a performance for “Thread Lines” that turns the site itself into a loom. On designated days during the show’s run, participants walk laps around the gallery’s four central columns, unspooling colored thread to make a figure-eight warp, shin-to-shoulder-high, in bands of neon yellow, black, blue, white and lipstick red. “Thread Lines” proposes expanding drawing’s definition to encompass a range of thread-based work, such as knitting, sewing, weaving and embroidery. Wilson’s installation is one provocative exemplar of the way thread-drawn line can double as both image and surface, asserting directional momentum while also cohering into plane.

Organized by adjunct assistant curator Joanna Kleinberg Romanow, the show brings together 34 works, some dating as far back as 1964 but most made since 2000. That only three of the 16 artists are men underscores how rooted these works are in both the traditionally female realm of domestic arts and the feminist-driven, often subversive reclamation of such practices beginning in the late ’60s. The show sketchily traces the shift in stature of women’s handwork from the margins inward, closer to center, and even more so the breakdown of the class division that relegated fiber-based work to the lower rungs of craft. In the democratic, poly-disciplinary present, thread and yarn, like clay, have largely shed that stigma.

Proof is in the invigorating range of contemporary work in the show. Most of it involves thread, but a few pieces instead invoke its use through drawn patterning. The exhibition marks the intersection of process, labor, autobiography, figuration and notation. Not installed chronologically, it nevertheless kicks off on a note of continuity, with recent

versions of a type of work that Sheila Hicks has been making for 50 years: irregular weavings the size of standard paper that read as intimate diary entries—hybrids of sculpture, writing and drawing.

Sam Moyer’s two “Worry Rugs” (2009) were also deeply resonant. Moyer pulls out sections of fiber from modest-size IKEA rugs and sheathes the altered forms in black encaustic, transforming the mass-produced household goods into portentous relics, carcasses. The pieces reek of physical distress—scarring and tarring—and evoke the censorial violation of redacted text. They also pay wry homage to monochrome painting.

On the softer, more lyrical side was Drew Shiflett’s untitled “constructed drawing” (2012), a muted, earthen-toned collage of cut, torn and layered paper. The lively, puckered field, sowed with lines, lattices and grids, incorporates cheesecloth, watercolor and graphite. It pulses in rich and variable rhythms.

“Thread Lines” is an appealing teaser of a show, identifying myriad affinities rather than mining a select few. There is much fertile terrain here for further exploration and excavation: the etymological connection between line and the threads comprising linen; the mythical thread lines spun by Ariadne, Arachne and Penelope; the relationship between stitch and pixel, and more. Metaphors of following and joining threads pervade our thought and speech, rendering the exhibition’s theme both relevant and inexhaustible. As Walt Whitman wrote, in a passage from *Leaves of Grass*: “We know not why or what, yet weave, forever weave.”

—Leah Ollman