

Reviewed by Erin Thurlow

Hand & I: Mending the World One Stitch at a Time

Schmidt Center Gallery, Florida Atlantic University
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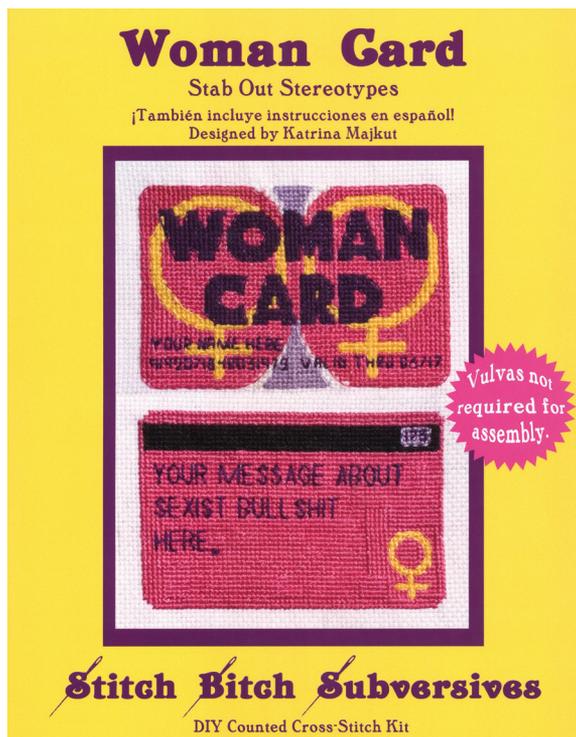
For *Hand & I: Mending the World One Stitch at a Time*, curator **Yulia Tikhonova** has gathered 23 artists working with needlepoint embroidery to address political and social concerns. All the works were done with the laborious, time-consuming method. Twin themes, meant to be complimentary, that needlepoint is a marginalized art form in contemporary art, and that this and other attributes make it especially suited to comment on contemporary problems and confront issues of injustice, are earnestly laid out in an essay accompanying



the show. In it, Tikhonova cites recent textile-based forms of activism—craftivism—such as “protest curtains” meant to hang in homes and business windows, and hand-knit scarves made specifically as gifts for homeless people. While some works include embroidered articles of clothing, this

Top and bottom: *Hand & I: Mending the World One Stitch at a Time* (installations) 2019.





Katrina Majkut *Woman Card Kit: Stitch Bitch Subversives DIY Embroidery Kit Collection* 2019, limited edition, 11" x 8.5".

comes off as sculptural gesture, not actual wearable design so none of those more utilitarian objects are included in the exhibition. Tikhanovah seems to have chosen to double down on establishing the fine-art credentials of embroidery by ostensibly displaying non-utilitarian works.

The power of many of these works may come up against the viewer's own political point of view, but in their deployment of hand work we are forced to reckon directly with the humanity of their maker. **Erika Diamond** demonstrates this power in *Caution: (HB2 Gold 20 Figure)*. Institutionally stylized bathroom sign figures form two rows, but lines we are often forced to accept between binary sexual distinctions dissolve over the twenty figures' varying gender signifiers.

Needlework has its own sense of time and rhythm. **Pip Brant's**, *Keep Going North-Central American Migration Route*, resembles abstract painting as much as a tapestry in the style of the titular region, but painting's gestural mark is replaced by a series of highly considered knots and stitches. This helps us to sense the pace of the migrant's journey and encourages us to take time to understand its gravity and peril. And in a collision of photographic detail and medieval reverence,



Noelle Mason *Backscatter Blueprint (Ultima Cena)* (detail) 2019, cyanotype, 17.5" x 24.5".



Micki Spiller *Book Jacket: The Woman in the Water* 2019, cotton, wire, books, embroidered.



Pip Brant *Keep Going North-Central American Migration Route* (detail) 2019, vintage rug, embroidered, 203" x 14".



Miriam Schaer *Babies Are (Not) On Board, Your not having children...* 2019, baby doll, hand-embroidered garment, 23" x 10".



Aurora Molina *Children of immigration are forgotten* 2019, canvas, photo transfer, embroidered, 44" x 40". Courtesy Bernice Steinbaum Gallery.



Judy Polstra *A Woman's Place is in the House and in the Senate* 2019, vintage cotton slip, embroidered, 30" x 59" x 18".



Ray Materson *Waiting for the Man* 1997, unraveled sock threads, needlepoint, 5" x 3.5". Courtesy of The William Louis-Dreyfus Foundation Inc.

Ray Materson's embroideries illustrate the mundanities and horrors inflicted on prisoners of the legal justice system. Created while Materson was serving time, they were made using sock thread, apparently the only material available to him as a convict. Both artists manage to simultaneously embody and illustrate time.

While an anthropologically useful distinction can be made between utility and aesthetics, it is historically this separation that has been the cause of a hierarchy that undervalues craft placed in the service of utility. Craft and labor in general are devalued in our largely mechanized culture. This is true across all mediums of fine art and design. While all manner of gender biases persist, the idea of textile as specifically maligned in the art world has become a fairly outdated trope, and undercuts Tikhonova's more convincing thread: the distinct intimacy of needle-work, its necessary care and focused concentration of the hand and eye, endow it with the aura of a gift, a heartfelt gesture of human empathy that can speak undeniable truth to power.

—Erin Thurlow is an artist and writer living in Miami, FL. He works as a lecturer at the University of Miami.