

Fang Ling-An

Everything Is Stitching Together Simultaneously

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Fang Ling-An, a Chinese-American, born in Taipei, Taiwan, where her grandparents and parents had sought refuge exiled from mainland China, traces her ancestral home to Shandong, the birthplace of Confucius and the seat of traditional Chinese culture. She left her native Taiwan and migrated to the U.S. in search of a new life and to study Western art and in the process reinventing herself afresh in the new world abandoned not only her home, but in an act of deliberate forgetfulness also the traditions and heritage associated with it, since that home was no longer tenable, an anathema, and to forget was protective. She now makes her home in Chicago, the hub that lies at the crossroads of the continent, its history inextricably intertwined with the birth of the new nation; and from her adopted home, twice removed from her roots, once forcibly, once by choice, drawing tenuous colored threads across two generations and oceans of memories she embroiders her art while simultaneously stitching together her own identity, piecing fragments of willed memory interwoven with recollections of stories her grandmother and mother had told her, memories and stories that at one stage in her journey she had painfully distanced herself from and now dredges from the depths of her unconscious to bring to the surface and illumine the texture of her art.

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"Artistic observation can attain an almost mystical depth. The objects on which it falls lose their names. Light and shade form very particular systems ...but get their existence and value exclusively from a certain accord of the soul, the eye, and the hand of someone who was born to perceive them and evoke them in her own inner self." Walter Benjamin, in his *The Storyteller*, quotes these words of Paul Valéry reflecting on a woman artist whose work consisted in silk embroidery of figures. To tell a story, Benjamin informs us, is to exchange experience and transmit memories; for the storyteller speaks from experience, her own or those reported by others, and in turn makes it the experience of her listeners. Historically, he notes stories have two sources; someone who has travelled afar and brings back stories of experiences from distant lands and someone who has stayed at home and accumulated the local tales and traditions, thus combining the tales from faraway places brought home by the traveler, with the lore of the past kept alive by the natives of a place - yin and yang, the man who ventures out into the cold

world and the woman who stays behind to keep the hearth warm - and without the intimate intertwining of these two sources the historical breadth of storytelling would be inconceivable. And these stories are retold, shared and kept alive in intimate settings - the workplace, the pub, the home, the kitchen, the bedroom.

Modern times, Benjamin bemoans, have led to the decline of the sharing of experience and memories through story-telling. These days, one makes one's home in an alien land, and the place she dreams of as home is a faraway place in a distant time. Identity is based on one's sense of belonging - and these two are not the same anymore as people are wrested away from their homes, who you are and who you are in relation to others is no longer a certainty, and has to be continually reinvented. And America, they say, is a country of immigrants, where everyone is from somewhere else, and thus the question of identity is central to our times. Our identities are intricate embroidered myths woven against the backdrop of history, from strings of memories and shards of experience and words long fallen silent, around an imagined home that we cannot go back to, or even do not want to go back to, oftentimes having fled from it.

In her country of adoption, Fang Ling-An, as a Chinese-American artist, tries to piece together her identity by translating the traditional Chinese art of silk embroidery onto a modern medium. Embroidery is an art form she never learned growing up in Taiwan, as was expected of every cultured Chinese girl. Traditional silk embroidery, a delicate feminine art, was an essential part of the upbringing of every genteel Chinese woman with bound feet confined to a life within the protective cocoon of domesticity. But, as exiles in Taiwan, Ling-An's grandmother, mother and aunts had to sell



Mama Maya, 2010
Silk thread embroidered on stretched canvas
28.5" x 22.5"

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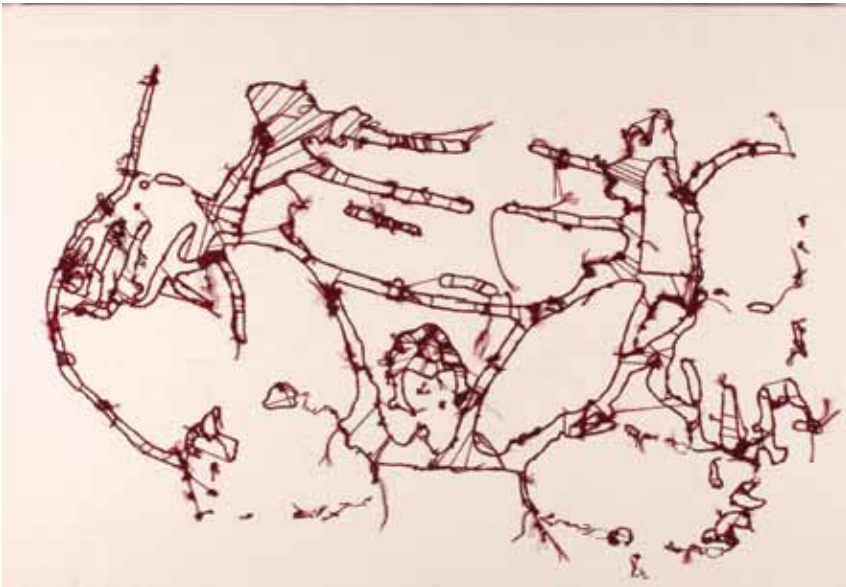
their art to eke out a livelihood. Revolting against both these aspects, she had rejected the art. Fang Ling-An broke loose and fled from her native land, its culture and heritage, to the U.S., the promised land of freedom and opportunity, to start a new and independent life as a single woman in modern America. Wanting to give expression to her new self, over the years she studied at several leading art schools across the country, mastering the various modern Western artistic genres and techniques. She explored the expanse of space and dimensions of volume, consciously choosing to eschew the subtle color and intricate texture of her native Chinese art.

by the American business of transnational adoption. The choice of camouflage pattern in some works too is apposite, for pressing just beneath the surface of this material is the persistent reminder of the horrendous violence that American power perpetrated in the jungles of Asia.

Some of her embroidered works are displayed back to front, so what one sees is not the finesse of the finished works, but instead confronts the raw painstaking work that underlie them. There is in this too the suggestion that the artist is turning herself inside out, laying bare and revealing the inelegant reality that lies behind this effort to translate a tenuous reinherited memory into harsh living reality. Cervantes remarks that a translation is like the rearview of a Flemish tapestry - one sees the outline and form, but loses the color and the texture. And yet, the quixotic yearning to bring into being, to re-enliven, a lost world in a new setting, to stitch together our fragmented selves out of bits of remembered past onto the fabric of lived present, just to be able to tell a story to ourselves and those around us as to who we imagine ourselves to be, is an irremediable human urge. For as the American poet Robert Hass observes:

Longing, we say, because desire is full of endless distances.

Manu S. Shetty
Manu Shetty is a philosopher, residing in Chicago; a retired painter, he now only contemplates art.



But now transplanted in America she has relearned the technique in an attempt to reclaim her heritage, stitching together the memories of her grandmother's embroidery intertwined with her stories of their lost ancestral home and creates embroidered sculptures while simultaneously fashioning her own identity. Her works woven in fragile, delicate threads try to recapture her grandmother's half-remembered myths and legends or the bonsais her grandfather, once a privileged member of the Confucian literati, nurtured tenderly over years in exile or landscapes reminiscent of traditional Chinese water color paintings. The camouflage pattern of the material she often uses as the backdrop reinforces the abstract feeling of natural foliage.

Fang's creations are an artistic expression of the profound ambivalence and intense agony of hybridity experienced by an alien woman in a man's world who has chosen to make her home in a foreign land as she tries to stitch together a torn self out of fragments from radically different cultures, across ages and continents. The base for these filigree creations, some worked in gold thread, is not the opulent traditional Chinese silk, but tarp - that crude modern packaging material of bulk produce, which in her native China is routinely remanufactured into ubiquitous cheap shopping bags, that one also encounters on the streets of American cities flaunted as statements of chic political correctness. Implicit in this choice of material is an angry political statement too - an expression of her horror at the commodification of the uprooted Chinese girl child



From top, counter-clockwise:

The Little Treasured One, 2010
 Silk thread embroidered on stretched canvas
 21" x 30"

Baby Dress, 2009
 Fiberglass, vinyl and paint
 8" x 7" x 6"

Daddy Dandy, 2010
 Silk thread embroidered on stretched recycled tarp
 30" x 24"