The Artist Highlighting Sexism with Needle and Thread

Since the 1970s, Elaine Reichek has been using the embroidered sampler—as well as collage, knitted sculpture, installation, and video—to explore power and gender through the divide between "art" and crafts.

By Olivia Parkes

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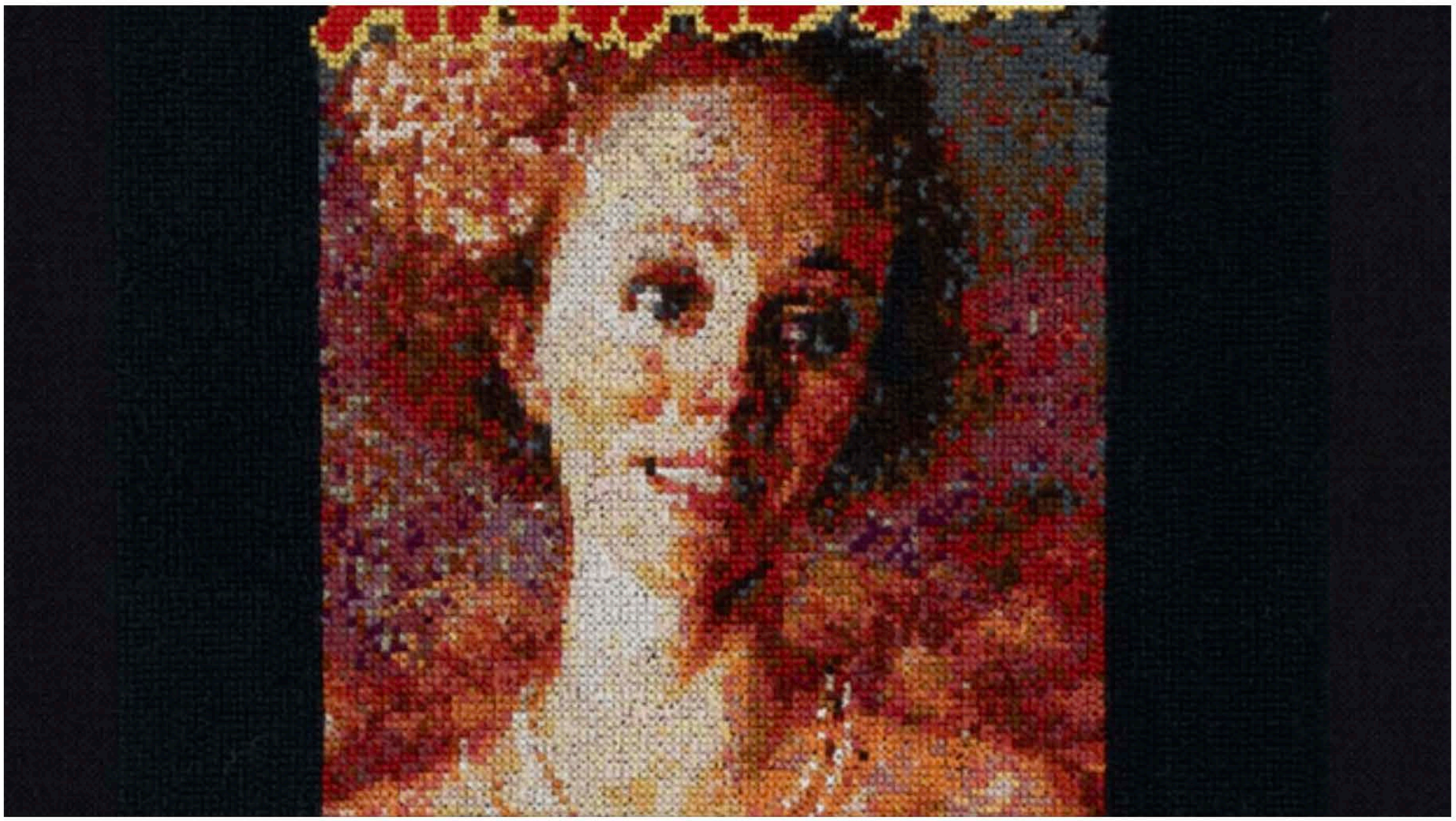


ARIADNE IN CRETE (DETAIL), 2009–10. ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF ELAINE REICHEK

Armed with needle and thread, New-York based artist Elaine Reichek has been poking holes in the Western tradition since the 1970s, when the feminist movement was busy debunking many art world myths. The artist is best known for her work with the embroidered sampler, a format she uses to explore power and gender through the art/craft divide. She embroiders traditional idioms alongside contemporary phrases, quotes from Ovid or Melville, and images from popular art and culture, creating disjunctions that blast open a traditionally "restrictive" form. The embroidered sampler, after all, long shaped female education, as an exercise in repeating bland pieties and sitting still.

Reichek's practice, however, is broad, and it includes thread-based drawings, knitted sculpture, collage, installation, and video. The artist understands that each image-making technique passes and shapes information differently, and she selects her formal tools (and their respective historical baggage) with intelligence and wry humor. By exploiting media often associated with crafts or the domestic, Reichek explores questions of gender, culture, race, and appropriation. Her work forms a critique of art as a social institution, as a force with categories of high and low and a drive to homogenize what is different. We spoke with the artist about her career, what it means to work with "domestic" or gendered materials, and making work that offers the possibility of conversation.

"SAMPLER (WORLD WIDE WEB)," 1997. HAND EMBROIDERY ON LINEN. COLLECTION OF ALLEN W. PRUSIS

BROADLY: A theme running through much of your work is the exclusion of the female artist. What's your view on this in the art world now?

Elaine Reichek: Things are much better now than when I was a student in 1960s, or when I was involved with [the female cooperative] A.I.R. Gallery in the 70s and 80s. But we certainly haven't reached complete parity. The younger women artists I meet are still struggling with questions of balancing family and work, and we seem nowhere nearer to resolution than when I raised my children 40 years ago.

Did you encounter any resistance to using embroidery and knitting as fine art techniques when you started working with them?

Not so much resistance as startled confusion. The 70s were, of course, a time of experimentation with materials through process, but this most often meant industrial rather than "domestic" materials. For instance, even when Robert Morris used felt, he used industrial felt. Also, you have to remember that even if other women were exploring "craft" materials, we were often doing so in isolation from each other. Woman House was happening on the West Coast in the early 70s, but the influence of those artists was not felt on the East Coast until much later. There was not the same kind of networking that we have now, or as much blurring of boundaries between disciplines.

"PAINTED BLACKFOOT," 1990. KNITTED WOOL YARN AND OIL ON GELATIN SILVER PRINT

How does the social function of knitting or embroidery—which began as a kind of female "education" and is now a popular hobby—inform your work?

In the early 70s, I kind of fell into using thread as another way to make a line on my minimalist paintings. Suddenly I thought, "OMG, I'm sewing! What does that mean?" So I tried to work my way through the implications. I realized I was working with the classic modernist question of high versus low. Even in the Bauhaus, all the women were sent to the weaving workshop. The materials I had chosen were culturally gendered, though my use of them came out of a ridiculously formal, Greenbergian discourse. Sewing and knitting were never things I did as a hobby; in fact, I had to teach myself. New York girls do not do home ec! So my early work was about this process of learning to knit as a formal language, and translating knitting from language to image to object.

My project *When This You See . . .* (1994–99) was directly focused on embroidery as a gendered medium, with all the attendant implications and associations, negative or positive. I wanted to posit an alternative history in which women who sew and read are seen as actively engaging in creative work, rather than as passively frittering away their hours.

> **Watch:** Artist Marilyn Minter on Depicting Female Sexuality

It's interesting to orient the stitch within the discourse of painting. Especially in contrast to the big, expansive gestures being vaunted by Abstract Expressionism, a movement much associated with machismo and masculinity.

Well, I made those kinds of paintings as a student! I mean, [the abstract painter] Ad Reinhardt was my teacher at Brooklyn College, and in grad school at Yale I continued to make big smeary paintings until I got out of there. One day at Yale, I overheard one of my teachers discussing my work, saying, "Oh, she's that little blonde who makes those big paintings with her hands. But none of it matters because she's just going to get married anyhow." That was certainly enough to encourage me, eventually, to explore a different path.

But Ad's influence remained. I began to examine what exactly makes a painting, and that is where the interest in making a palpable line in thread began to subvert the painted or drawn line. I went from a semiotics of the hand through gesture to actually hand-making, hand-stitching.

REICHEK AT YALE WITH ONE OF HER "BIG SMEARY PAINTINGS," MAY 1964

Can you talk about your work's relationship to nostalgia? I'm thinking of your references to folk art and Native American crafts.

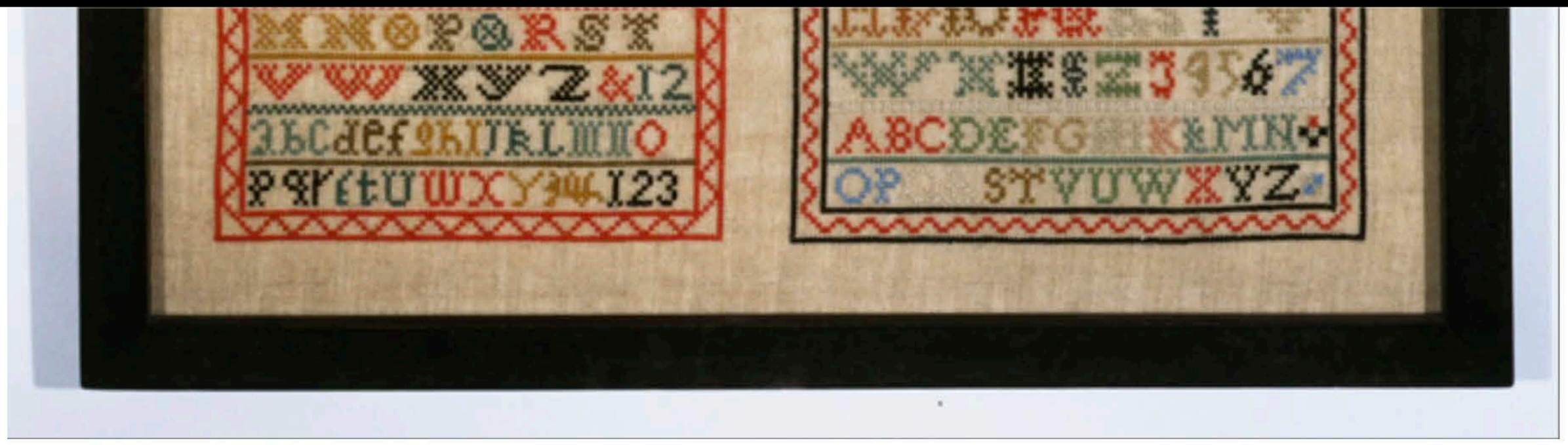
The nostalgia associated with Native American crafts and with 19th- and early 20th-century images of Native peoples is a direct product of historical nostalgia—which, after all, grows out of unexamined and simplistic narratives. So for me, taking on nostalgia was a political choice. But the knitted teepees in *Native Intelligence* (1987–92), for example, were not solely about nostalgia—they were also embodiments of a "lost in translation"

situation, where meaning collapses as the teepee goes from an ethnographic photograph to a knitted object.

The ethnographic photographs also appear in your photo collages, which juxtapose images from the 19th century with contemporary images from movies or advertising.

Collage, pastiche, and parody are all tools of appropriation, which I see as a way to make the authorial voice—my voice—less insistent. It's not the master's voice, it's a juxtaposition of voices. And when two or more voices are present, there's the possibility for conversation. I grew up in New York and spent a great deal of time in museums and libraries, so cross-referencing seemed very natural to me. In these encyclopedic museums like the Met, the Natural History Museum, or the Brooklyn Museum, which I loved, you wander from room to room, century to century, and culture to culture, and make your own connections.


A fool and his money are soon parted.
Phebe Smith 1768
DO AS YOU WOULD BE DONE BY.
Hannah Bre 1756
I shop therefore I am.
Barbara Kruger, 1987
ABUSE OF POWER COMES AS NO SURPRISE. JENNY HOLZER, 1977



"SAMPLER (KRUGER/HOLZER)," 1998, WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, NEW YORK. PROMISED GIFT OF MELVA BUCKSBAUM AND RAYMOND J. LEARSY

I'd like to talk about the use of text in your work. What is the balance between using words as visual elements in a composition and the associations of their definitions?

I love to read. I even read most footnotes! I'm a terrible driver because I read all the signs and billboards. The visual form I give to a text can change its meaning—amplify or negate it—which is also a form of commentary. Why would I want to give this up? For me, language is never purely visual.

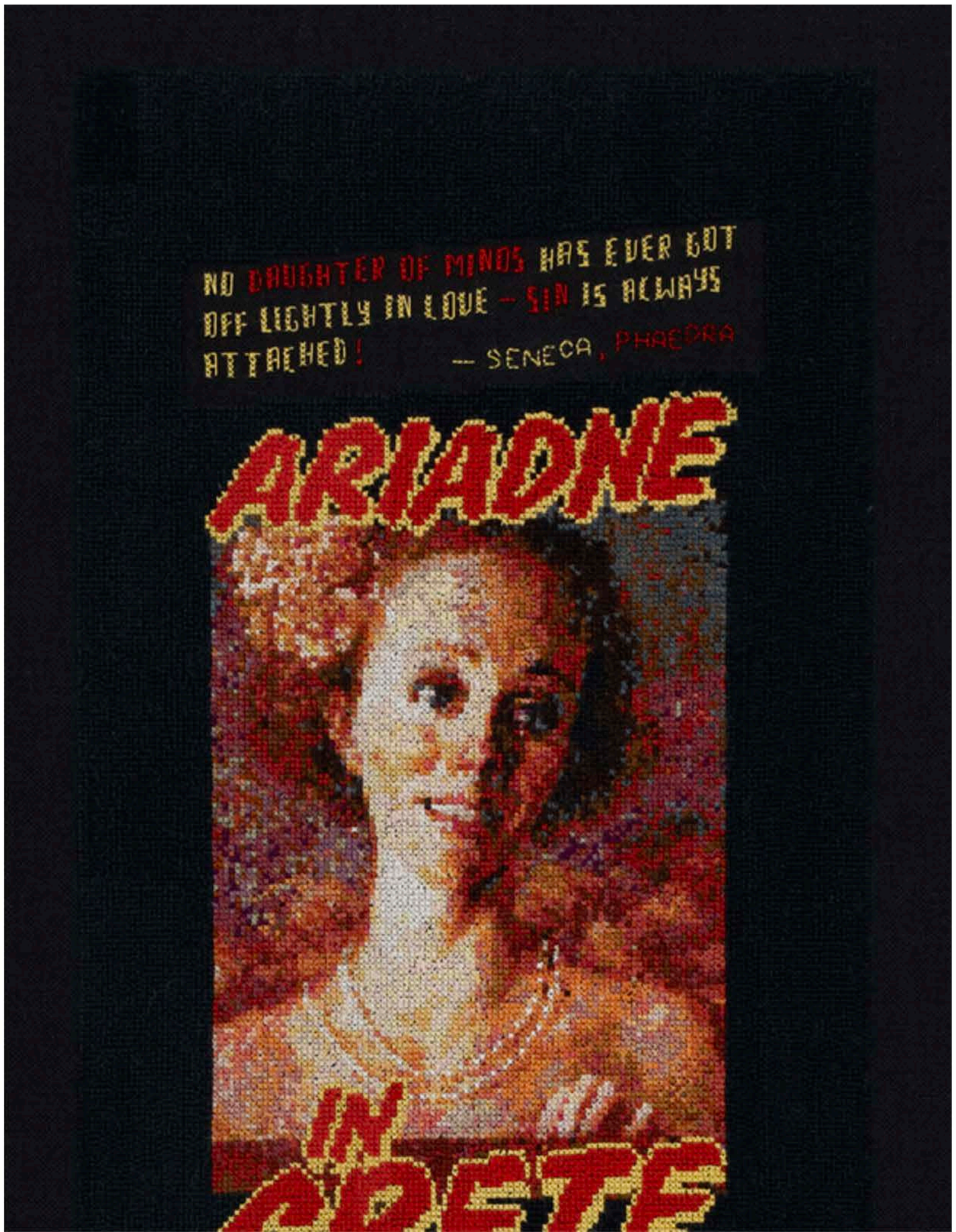
> **I overheard one of my teachers discussing my work, saying, 'Oh, she's that little blonde who makes those big paintings with her hands. But none of it matters because she's just going to get married anyhow.'**

***Sampler (Kruger/Holzer)* (1998) combines the 18th-century sampler idiom "Do as you would be done by" with Jenny Holzer's truism "Abuse of power comes as no surprise." What attracts you to the idiom or truism?**

Truisms and homilies are like slogans or one-liners. I thought the tone of Jenny Holzer's and Barbara Kruger's texts made them easily adaptable to the sampler form. Both artists were admonishing or addressing a public audience, so using their voices was a way to translate a private, domestic form (the sampler) into a public one. It was a revisionist act, as well as a "C*hapeaux*!" to Jenny and Barbara.

You did a series of works—*Ariadne's Thread*—re-centering the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur on the heroine, whose ball of thread gets the hero out of the labyrinth. How did you approach this subject?

I've developed this method of just wandering around in my interests. I guess other people call it "research." I started by reading (and re-reading) the classical texts, and went on to sample as many of the subsequent retellings and commentaries in literature as I could find. At the same time, I culled every image that seemed relevant, whether from art history or pop culture. And then I try to come up with some interesting pairings. The original myths don't give you a lot of information—they just provide a narrative thread—so the metaphorical possibilities are labyrinthine indeed.



Do you see your work, which deals with webs and networks, in dialogue with the Internet?

I've always been attracted to how information on the Internet is web-like and associative in its nonhierarchical presentation. And obviously it's a great source for images, which then easily morph into other modes. In some of my work I've tried to deal specifically with the impulse to archive and arrange information—which is a historical problem, not just a contemporary one. But it does take on new meaning when you're dealing with these vast new networks of storage, which also include misbegotten information and serious omissions—a new and unending source for unreliable narratives!

But basically, I'm a maker, I like materials, so I have to translate the digital into some kind of embodied form. Even when I use specifically mechanical or digital processes, there is always a haptic quality about the work. And what's interesting to me is the emergence of a "new materiality" as older technologies and analogue mediums seem to be passing away. Older methods of making are being reexamined for their visual and conceptual possibilities in a way that was not possible in the past, partly thanks to the dissemination of knowledge through the Internet. Instead of approaching these outmoded materials and crafts with nostalgia, or seeing them as wayward steps on the long march to modernity, we can reevaluate them discursively as cultural products. The way in which everything seems available now gives artists a new freedom to use whatever they need to make work. Things have gotten much more interesting!

TAGGED: CULTURE, FEMINISME, FEMINIST ART, CRAFTS, EMBROIDERY, ELAINE REICHEK, BROADLY CULTURE
