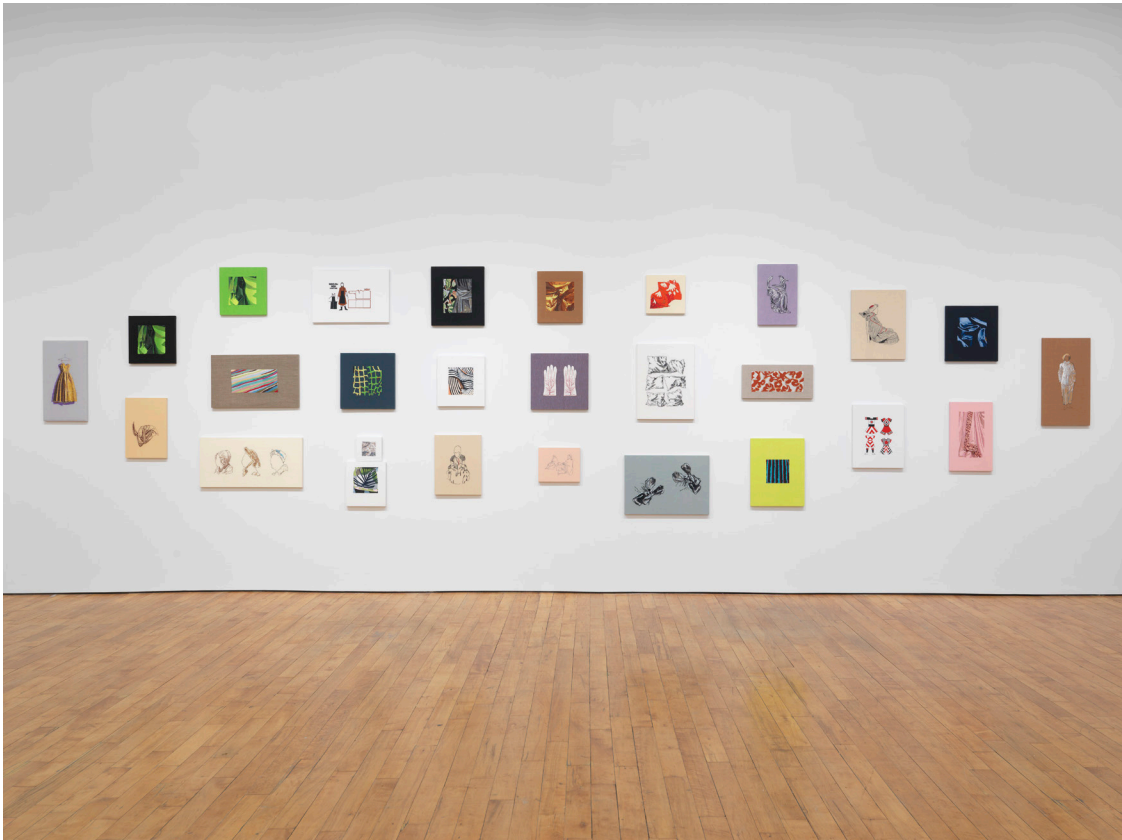


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## Elaine Reichek: *Material Girl*

By [Norman L Kleeblatt](#)



Installation view, Elaine Reichek, *MATERIAL GIRL*, 2022, Marinaro Gallery. Courtesy Marinaro Gallery.

Elaine Reichek scavenges among sources from literature, history, mythology, and art, fabricating images and texts she transforms into textiles. Trained as a painter by avant-garde, intellectually rigorous icons, notably Ad Reinhardt, her career has been defined by her strategic use of the textile medium—a feminist, postmodern strategy. But hers is more complex than the standard connection with craft materials, atavistic objects, decorative inclinations, and gendered imagery. Typically, reflecting Reinhardt's influence on the next generations' minimal and conceptual practices, Reichek's art should be defined as conceptual despite the unlikely medium she deploys.

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Reinhardt strictly compartmentalized his highly reductive, perceptually challenging painting practice from his other two endeavors. He kept his satiric illustrations and art historical/archival “collected” photography as entirely separate spheres. Reichek seems to weave all three of these aspects into whole cloth. There is a purposefully awkward complexity in her translating modernist theory as it has been applied from painting into a medium that is simpler and more basic. In converting painting’s tropes to fabric and thread, her works willfully attack modernist notions of medium specificity. They simultaneously play at the fringes of appropriation without entirely succumbing to its protocols. Reichek’s sources go well beyond appropriation’s routine focus on photography. Her “brand” of appropriation is expressed through a wide range of reproduction, copying, and transposition of arts’ varied means and media. Contradicting the proprieties of both modernist painting and conceptual art, her work is obsessed with narrative.

She traffics in indiscriminate marketplace images of masterworks that circulate in differing commercial materials, patterns, and everyday uses, while she cross-references texts that are at once literary and critical. She interrogates the slippage between production and reproduction, mixing texts and images into discriminating free associations that undergird her personal logic. Her triptych of darning samples, 2018, all hand embroidered, are an excellent case in point of the intersections of the so-called high and low, practical and intellectual.

Reproducing a nineteenth-century style darning sampler in black and white as the central piece, two fields of colored squares on top and bottom confirm an uncanny connection between a practical illustration of simple



darning motifs, *Darning Sampler* (2018) and its pendant *Darning Sampler: Sol Lewitt's Color Grids*: practical DIY vs. the conceptual privilege of hired professional artisans. Reichek's stratagem makes these two seem virtually interchangeable.

*Material Girl* (all triple *entendres* intended) is a two-part show. A salon-style hang of 26 of Reichek's recent hand and digital embroideries forms a major focus of the first part. In each of these embroideries, Reichek takes details from the works of Western artists. Her sources range from Albrecht Dürer and Eugène Delacroix to Michelangelo and Kerry James Marshall. According to Reichek, details of drapery in the work of old and modern masters border on—in fact seem to dissolve into—abstraction. By extracting patterns and three-dimensional folds from the whole representational image, such elements enter the realm of abstraction proper. Within this group, mainly focused on details are two images of an entire figure or a full view of a garment. *Thiebaud Dress* (2020) is a frontal view of an intact garment, a dress with spaghetti straps with no accompanying body. It has the pop flavor of a paper doll's exchangeable wardrobe. Her *Watteau's Pierrot* (2021) is the isolated central figure from Antoine Watteau's masterpiece machine embroidered by the artist as she forces the technical limits of her sophisticated digital sewing machine. Here Reichek translates strategies from modernist painting to embroidery by leaving parts of the fabric support un-embroidered as if she were exposing unprimed canvas.

Her two large homages to Jackson Pollock, *JP Textile/Text 1* and *2* form another strategic part of the exhibition. These works offer yet another manifestation of Reichek's free-associative logic. Two large bolts of cloth—sold as “Spatter” by the reputable fabric house Kravet, are a lax re-interpretation of Pollock's drip paintings. With its unacknowledged artistic source and a commercial name indicative of one of the textual insults of action painting, one wonders whether the work is inspired or simply ripped-off? Each full bolt is mounted vertically to the wall on an industrial textile bolt rack. On to these partly unrolled swaths of fabric, Reichek has embroidered twenty-five titles of books from the extensive literature on Pollock. Biography, criticism, and



Elaine Reichek, *Thiebaud Dress*, 2020. Digital embroidery on linen, 21.5 x 11.75 inches. Edition 1 of 2, with 1 AP. Courtesy the artist and Marinaro Gallery.

hagiography that have embroidered the Abstract Expressionist's reputation are here carefully stitched onto the fabric. The found object meets the custom-made; Reichek's highly crafted embroidered citations become a vast bibliographic landscape.

The second part of *Material Girl* is an assembled and fabricated installation devoted to Henri Matisse. While rare, Reichek has created such gallery-scale projects before, notably her installations at PS1 (1979) and The Jewish Museum (1994). These are at once homage and critique, artistic anthropology, and art historical archivism. Importantly for Reichek they playfully deploy décor as both analysis and critique. Here is a *mis-en-scène* that takes *mise en abyme* to a new level.

A three-part folding screen divides the Matisse room in two sections. A decorative element in Matisse's homes and a familiar prop in his paintings, the screen contributes the period flavor of the late nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries. The front parlor/studio is set with facing Napoleon III chairs like those seen in some Matisse pictures. The floor in the front of the screen, is arranged on and around a black and white rug sourced from a readily available commercial vendor. The rug features a border of Matissian cut-outs, in the same indiscriminate way that the "Spatter" fabric recycled Pollock's drips. On the adjacent walls are Reichek's miniature Matisse-appropriated embroideries. Hung with reproduction scarves, photos of the Fauvist in many different locations, the screen implicitly references a *discreet* place where Matisse's models could dress and undress before and after posing. This furnishing element implies modesty. However, photographs of Matisse with some of his models and paintings of nudes or exotically dressed models show his "low-key" chauvinism, his primitivizing gaze, and allude as well to his ambiguous relationships with his models. The area in the back of the screen presents Reichek's appropriated felt versions of cut-outs à la Matisse. Colored felt is a commercial given, a "color chart" ready-made for Reichek's teasing. In fact, the arrangement of Reichek's cut-outs become a kind of do-it-yourself project, almost like a toy where the artist can install these felt "replicas" as a ready-to-use puzzle. These seem to cry out for a limited-edition kit so that anyone might be able to play with them. Despite her scavenging, her playing with sources and reproduction, high, low, and middle brow, Reichek is a master of understatement. She plays with décor while critiquing—sometimes undermining both art history and good taste.



Elaine Reichek, *Watteau's Pierrot*, 2021. Digital embroidery on linen, 22.75 x 12.25 inches. Edition 1 of 2, with 1 AP. Courtesy the artist and Marinaro Gallery.

### Contributor

#### Norman L. Kleeblatt

**Norman Kleeblatt** is a curator, art historian, and critic. Formerly chief curator at The Jewish Museum, New York, his exhibitions included *Action/Abstraction: Pollock, De Kooning, and American Art, 1940–1976* (2008) and *From the Margins: Lee Krasner and Norman Lewis, 1945–1952* (2014). He has contributed to *ARTnews*, *Artforum*, *Art Journal*, and *Art in America*, among other publications.