

VISUAL ARTS | Ke-Sook Lee's 'Thread Whisper'

FOLLOWING NARRATIVE THREAD

Dolphin exhibit shows the range of artist's exploration of fabric, the home and woman.

By ELIZABETH KIRSCH
Special to The Star

In her installation "Thread Whisper" at the Dolphin, Ke-Sook Lee incorporates many of her favorite leitmotifs: transparent aprons the size of doors, vintage crocheted work, idiosyncratic, embroidered "drawings" on various textiles, and pigment made from dirt and vegetables from her garden.

It's possible your grandmother's bunble found its way into this show, now illustrated with Lee's hermetic, stitched narratives.

Over the last decade, Lee has exhibited variants of such textiles internationally. But "Thread Whisper" is the first time she has amassed in one room her complete aesthetic arsenal representing a subject she continues to exhaustively investigate: the home and its female householders. For Lee, a home is both highly personal and of continuing global concern.

"Thread Whisper" is part-reverent and part-stage set. Lee's installation, which was mounted by her son John Sang-jun Lee, literally hangs by threads and pins. It consists of a four-sided house dangling in the center of the room and various stages of a garden installed around the periphery.

One need not fully grasp Lee's narrative to appreciate the ghost-like, stitched and stained textiles that float throughout the room and on the walls. But if one looks at Lee's forms long enough, anecdotal origins seem to weave in and out of the various settings, whispering stories eternally invisible. Lee's work aims to give them a voice.

She did this because her own history resonates with the stories of generations of anonymous women, whose lives were limited to the confines of their homes.

Lee was born in Korea. She was 14 when, just after the Korean War, she was put in charge of the family home.

"I grew up in a Confucianism background," Lee said in a recent interview. "Women had no social life then; they could only be at home working. They had to do all the cooking and make all the clothes. And housemakers had no social status. The most fun part," she recalled, "was doing embroidery, so was the most individual expression women had."

After Lee married she moved to the U.S., eventually settling in Kansas City with her husband, Kyo Rak Lee, who was a radiologist and taught at KU Medical Center. Once again Lee became a householder, this time in a foreign country, with two small children. After her sons were older, she attended the Kansas City Art Institute, where she received a bachelor of fine arts in 1982.

Lee has since worked in many media, but 10 years ago she began focusing exclusively on textiles. She incorporated vintage, hand-crocheted doilies into squares she stitched together like quilts. Her fabrics became layered, with multiple openings and hand-stitched



View of "Thread Whisper," an installation by Ke-Sook Lee at Dolphin gallery. The exhibit pays homage to generations of women whose lives were limited to the confines of the home.

ON EXHIBIT

"Ke-Sook Lee: Thread Whisper" continues at the Dolphin Gallery, 1600 Liberty, through July 2. "Asiatica: Vintage Japanese Textiles," Debra Smith; Transition to Blue I-VI" and "Anne Lindberg: Parallel 12" also run through July 2.

Hours are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday-Friday and noon to 5 p.m. Saturday. For information: 816-642-4415 or go to www.thedolphingallery.com

a minigame.

Four such aprons form the "walls" of her house in "Thread Whisper," each one with its own distinct personality. Clearly they serve as metaphors for housebound women.

One is slightly worn. Another has transparent envelopes stitched to it. Each envelope contains a handkerchief with one of Lee's stitched, organically outlined drawings of a person.

"Someone has to open each one up and take them out. They can't get out by themselves," she explained.

The two remaining aprons have more images and more openings. "These allow for more freedom," Lee said.

Lee's drawing, as she calls it, consists of tiny stitches she painstakingly embroiders to form lines. Each little stitch,

she said, "represents a seed that offers hope of personal growth."

In that spirit, Lee has created "gardens" in her installation. In one corner, the ground has been "lawned" with hundreds of minuscule stitches sewn onto various kinds of fabrics that have been rolled, folded, stitched on and dyed.

On another wall, dozens of embroidered circles or rings hover like so many butterflies or bubbles; they represent flowers blossoming and opening up. A profusion of crocheted

work and molded paper shapes formed from doilies explode on a third wall like some giant fabric bouquet.

"Life is a bouquet — whether hard or easy," Lee said.

In her art, there is ever a push-pull sensibility. Lee's house of monster aprons threatens to smother one, yet as "walls" the aprons are transparent and open at the sides. There is a possibility of freedom. And ultimately, endless rows of plain little stitches can sometimes turn into vibrant works of art, just as a garden patiently tended can one day glow with color and life.

Also at Dolphin, in the entrance, are works by Anne Lindberg and Debra Smith.

"Parallel 12" by Lindberg is a mural-sized, hypnotizing, black-and-white graphite drawing on cotton board.

Smith's new series, "Transition to Blue," consists of six small collages in her signature style of interlocking strips of

textiles in shades of white and indigo. These works neatly transition to the Asiatica textiles. Further inside, a handsomely installed, stunning collection of more than 100 20th-century kimonos from the collections of Elizabeth Wilson and Bill White, co-founders of the retail store Asiatica.

The exhibit includes a 40-foot-long dye's sampler circa 1985 made of silk crepe printed with abstract designs in rectangular segments. Scratched the full length of one wall in the gallery, it is electrifying.

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