

“Making the Threads Dance: *Ode to Sprout II*, an Installation by Ke-Sook Lee”

Kris Imants Ercums

Ode to Sprout II is composed of varied shades of blue thread—occasionally punctuated with yellow—that sprout upward from neatly bunched spools, assuming an organic temperament like plants reaching for the sky (fig. 1).¹ When I first encountered *Ode to Sprout* at Ke-Sook Lee’s studio on the eve of her departure from Overland Park, Kansas to her new home and studio in Berkeley, California, the threads danced. I was mesmerized...what magic had she deployed to compel the threads to grow, twirling and spinning in graceful loops as they reached for the sky?

The blue-and-green palate of the spools used in *Ode to Sprout II* evokes an archaic style of East Asian landscape painting known in Korean as *cheongroksansu hwa* 청록산수화 (Chinese: 青绿山水画 *qinglv shanshuihua*) or “blue-and-green” landscape.² This fantastical style first emerged as early as the 7th century in China, and when utilized by artists in proceeding centuries, the blue-green landscape not only evoked deep antiquity, but a world in harmony.

¹ *Ode to Sprout II* was commissioned as part of the exhibition *Holding Pattern: New at the Spencer Museum* (10/09/2014—03/21/2015).

² See further, National Museum of Korea, *Ch’ongnok sansu, nagwon ul kurida: Kungnip Chungang Pangmulgwan sojang Choson sidae ui ch’ongnok sansuhwa* [Dreaming of paradise: blue-green landscape paintings from the Joseon Dynasty at the National Museum of Korea], (Seoul: Kungnip Chungang Pangmulgwan, 2006).

While the blue-green hues of *Ode to Sprout II* reference East Asian landscape painting, for Lee the cerulean palette is also deeply related to her personal transformation as an artist. At the Spencer, *Ode to Sprout II* was displayed in conjunction with two other works by Lee. The 2001 work *Awakening in Her Garden 3* mirrors Lee's transformation as an artist. Much of Lee's work diverges from her background in two countries: Korea and America. Her work also celebrates her role as a mother, homemaker, and gardener. As a child, Lee shared a room with her grandmother and great-grandmother, both of whom were expert needlewomen and taught her to sew by darning socks. After receiving a B.F.A. in applied art from Seoul National University in 1963, Lee and her husband immigrated to the United States. In 1982 she received a second B.F.A. in painting, from the Kansas City Art Institute. *Awakening in Her Garden 3* is constructed of tarlatan—thin muslin, which is used as a stiffening fabric in garments. Inspired by quilting—Lee has an amazing personal collection of handmade American quilts—Lee stitched together pieces of Tarlatan and paper in a grid in which she brushed organic glyphs evocative of East Asian calligraphy. Each symbol is tied to her growth and personal development as an artist, as she “awoke in her garden.”

Lee's artwork is also informed by the process and materiality of sewing—an occupation often derided as “woman's work.” In her *One Hundred Faceless Women* series of hand-embroidered thread and pigment on vintage handkerchiefs, that these personal remnants of cloth touched the faces of countless, nameless women, held great spiritual power for her.³ Elisabeth Kirsch observes: “One can almost hear the polyphonic utterances of those who fashioned the delicate, hand-made handkerchiefs.”⁴ For this reason, I intentionally included a late Joseon *bojagi* 보자기, a traditional Korean wrapping cloth that is embroidered and composed of remnants of cloth sometimes from the very *hanbok*, or traditional gowns of a Korean woman, in order to underscore how Ke-sook Lee's artistic practice is situated in relationship with the legacy of Korean traditions.

Lee's use of repurposed material achieved monumental potency in *Green Hammock* (2010).⁵ Constructed from U.S. Army nurse's uniforms dating from the height of the Vietnam War in the 1970s, *Green Hammock* both conveys the trauma

³ Elisabeth Kirsch in *One Hundred Faceless Woman*, (self-published catalogue: 2012), no page number

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ After viewing *Green Hammock* in Lee's studio in 2012, SMA director, Saralyn Reece Hardy and I successfully proposed that the Spencer Museum purchase the work for the collection, after which it entered the SMA permanent collection under the credit line: “Museum purchase: R. Charles and Mary Margaret Clevenger Art Acquisition Fund and East Asian Art Acquisition Fund, 2012.0075.”

and horror of loss, while its “hammock” shape conjures a protective cradle. Lee encountered the uniforms at an Army surplus store not long after 9/11 and recalls being struck by the way the fatigues were torn, marked, and missing buttons; thus suggesting the combat experience that the nurses who wore them had endured. Initially Lee set out to create a camouflage net, like those used during the Vietnam war; however, as she progressed, the piece evolved into a hammock. For Lee, the hammock represents a place of temporary respite and restoration from the horror and trauma of warfare. The hanging threads and patches of fabric act as, what Lee terms: “dream remnants.” By evoking the human form, *Green Hammock* functions as both a powerful testament to the often overlooked role of army nurses while also acting as a striking rumination on the trauma of war.

Lee’s sensitive engagement extends to her exploration of the natural world, manifest in potent symbols of origin—seeds, eggs, and nests—in her work. She once turned to me and said that there came a point when she couldn’t hide her irrepressible need to make art...“it was like a mouse’s tail.” As Ke-Sook Lee, installed *Ode to Sprout II* at the Spencer Museum in 2014 she laughed and danced the whole time, charming the threads to stretch to the ceiling above and celebrate the potent marvel of life.

Kris Imants Ercums, PhD

Curator of Global Contemporary and Asian Art

The Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas

Ke-Sook Lee's work *Green Hammock* is constructed from US Army Nurse's uniforms dating from the Vietnam War. Lee discovered the uniforms at an Army supply store, and recalls being struck by the way they were torn, marked, and missing buttons. This history of wear further reflects the experience of the nurses who wore them. Initially begun as a camouflage net, the piece eventually took on the shape of a hammock, representing a place for temporary respite and restoration from the horror and trauma of warfare. With hanging threads and tentatively stitched patches of hanging fabric (what Lee called "dream remnants"), through its evocation of the human form, the work is a powerful exploration of the role of army nurses and a larger rumination on war as it resonates in current affairs.



The art of Ke-Sook Lee mirrors her life. She draws inspiration from the duality of having roots in two countries, of practicing as a professional artist while relishing the role of mother, homemaker and gardener. As a child Lee shared a room with her grandmother and great-grandmother, expert needlewomen who passed their skills onto her. After receiving a B.F.A. in applied art from Seoul National University in 1963, Lee and her husband immigrated to the United States. In 1982 she received a second B.F.A. in painting, from the Kansas City Art Institute.

Motherhood interrupted Lee's career, it also became the springboard for her future artistic direction. Abandoning drawing and oil painting for calligraphy on rice paper, she then took up stitching and embroidery. The domestic sphere—sewing, mending, ironing and tending to house and garden—is the underlying theme of each of her creations. Her preferred material is tarlatan, a sheer plain-woven cotton, heavily sized for stiffness. It serves as the foundation for her multilayered collages, but is itself manipulated to convey directional lines through sharply ironed creases. She explains:

My work explores boundary of drawing, adopting common marks from everyday life as drawing mark such as worn holes, mended holes, wrinkles and folded marks and layered doily marks on wet pulp. Holding sharp needles like a pen, thread follows the needle pricks in and out of the fabric leaving the dots. Each dot stays in line and accumulation of lines create form until it gives a meaning. These forms are personal symbols and transfigured image of women from my experience

of mother, wife, homemaker and an individual artist.

I learned hand embroidery and sewing from my grandmother and great grandmother. They did not know how to read or write like most of the women of her generation in Korea, but knew how to express their impassioned thoughts through embroidery. My work is inspired by their graceful endurance and creativity. Holding my inheritance in one hand and reaching out to contemporary drawing with the other hand, my work continues freeing itself from the boundary of art making, cultivating to find my identity and feminine aesthetics.

While this work presents its own installation and storage challenges with regard to our current space constrictions, it represents one of the most important works in Lee's body of work. Saralyn and I had the pleasure to view it in her studio recently and in consultation with the artists, feel this is among her strongest works. Furthermore, the work relates to our strong holdings in textile, in particular the history of quilting, which includes a comprehensive sampling of Yoshiko Jizenji, and other contemporary fabric art. Finally, its exploration of and meditation on war and conflict, in particular the healing role of women, is charged with tenderness, a haunting sense of loss, and personal transcendence.

Figure List



Fig. 1 Ke-Sook Lee (b.1941), *Ode to Sprout II*, 2014 spooled thread, dye



Ke-Sook Lee installing *Ode to Sprout II*, 2014