



VISUAL ARTS

Adventures in embroidery: ‘Thread Hijack’ at Hunterdon Art Museum showcases consistent creativity

Written By TRIS McCALL • October 27, 2022

If you were forced to pick a fight with a visual artist, you’d be well advised to steer clear of embroiderers. Of the many ways to make a straight line on a blank surface, thread may be the most physical. Punching a needle through canvas or paper or cloth requires strong hand muscles. Pulling the thread tight demands a flexible wrist. Doing it hundreds of times demonstrates tenacity and determination — and, perhaps, a waspish will to puncture something.

Yet a thread never lets you forget its mutability. Catch it on a button and it will snag; pull it too tight, and it may fray. Bunch threads together and they achieve a plush, fluffy, squeezable texture that engenders protective feelings. Let one stand on its own and it may look like a wisp. Compared to paintings, or statues, or textile pieces made of thicker fibers, art made of thread is fragile. It’s hard work to create something so soft.

“Thread Hijack” embraces these contradictions with so much ardor that a visitor would be forgiven for blushing. This show, which will be on view at the Hunterdon Art Museum in Clinton until Jan. 8, is a passionate love letter to colored string and a playful, needle-sharp investigation of its creative possibilities.

The six artists in the show are experimenting with thread, but the pieces don't feel clinical in the slightest. Instead, this show is as warm and comfortable as a winter scarf — a weird one, mind you, with a mesmerizing pattern. Mary Birmingham's curation doesn't feel daring, even though it is. It's also quietly defiant. Even within the still-marginalized field of fiber art, embroidery is infrequently celebrated. The smart, subtly muscular "Thread Hijack" could help change that.

The most revelatory works in "Thread Hijack," though, are the ones in which the string is the star. Iranian artist Abdolreza Aminlari pulls his thread so tight that it barely seems to rise above the paper surface of his pieces. He's also meticulous about his measurements: he's arranged his stitched lines so they form perfect squares and set the squares to intersect at precise angles, hypnotic in their consistency. It's a geometry teacher's gilded dream. What really makes Aminlari's thread shimmer and sing is the stuff it's made of — Japanese-milled 24 carat gold. Set against blue backgrounds, Aminlari's arrangement of metallic shapes feels like a blown-up schematic for the world's most luxurious computer chip.

Artists working with thread may not be the most famous, or the most institutional, or the loudest voices in the gallery. But they're well worth tangling with.

"Thread Hijack" runs at the Hunterdon Art Museum in Clinton through Jan. 8. Visit