

BEILI LIU

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*The Mending Project*



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

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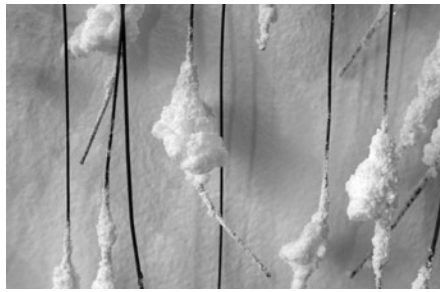
BEILI LIU  
*The Mending Project*

A series of black lines delicately hang from the curved wall at the entrance to the gallery and welcome the viewer into Beili Liu's site-specific exhibition. Entitled *Seep*, the work curves around the wall with an undulating visual tempo. Composed of reeds normally used for basket weaving, Liu transforms the material by moistening the reeds with water to stretch and straighten them out. She then places the bottom of the reeds into a container of salt water and as the water evaporates, salt crystals grow up the reed's stem to create a crystalline structure that acts as both a physical weight and a ghostly residue that retains the memory of the laborious process that Liu uses to transform everyday materials into something ethereal. The deliberate use of materials in this work expresses the importance of process in her work, and the stark contrast between the black reeds and the white crystals, as well as the verticality of the black lines, visually orients the viewer to fully experience the gallery's interior installation, *The Mending Project*.

The first thing the viewer notices as she encounters *The Mending Project* is the cloud of 1,500 scissors hanging from the ceiling by fine lines of black fishing filament. Menacing in effect, the scissors hang by their handles with their blades pointing down to the ground with a hovering fear of violence. The majority



Detail of *Seep*, 2011, salt & reeds, dimensions variable.



Detail of *Seep*, 2011.

of the pairs are open as if about to make a cut, although a few pairs are interspersed throughout the installation with closed blades implying that a cutting action has already transpired. The scissors hang at around six feet off the ground, which allows most viewers to cautiously get very close to the scissors and even walk underneath them, although a quick look up at the threatening daggers forces the viewer back out to the safety of the work's perimeters. Elegantly shaped with soaring handles and a simple, yet highly functional design, there is an inherent beauty to these ominous scissors that seems foreign to western eyes. Sourced from Liu's native China, these scissors can be found in most Chinese homes and Liu remembers her family having one pair which was used for all household cutting purposes, although in more affluent homes, families had two sets of scissors: one reserved solely for sewing and one for all other needs.<sup>1</sup>

Beneath the looming cloud of scissors sits a simple black table and chair upon which stands a spool of black thread, a few sewing needles, and a pile of cut pieces of thin white cloth. It is at this workstation that the mending implied in the title of Liu's installation takes place. During the opening and for an hour each week during the run of the exhibition, Liu – in her first public performance piece – sat at the workstation, dressed in a simple black dress, and quietly sewed together pieces of white cloth cut by visitors to the

exhibition. With each performance, she slowly mended enough pieces of cloth together to create a new swath of material that filled the top of her workstation. Connected together with an interlock stitch, Liu does not hide the mending process, but rather highlights it with her choice of black thread so the stitches take on the appearance of a surgeon's handiwork and literally embody the idea of healing. These new pieces of material are given structure by the tension of the thread and become more sculptural in dimension than their previous incarnation as a floppy piece of cloth. Once the sewing is completed, Liu adds the new piece to a growing layer of mended cloth on the floor



Detail of *The Mending Project*, 2011.

that envelops the workstation and grows with each performance. This ethereal landscape functions as a study of visual and emotive contrasts to the looming scissors hanging above: white versus black, light versus heavy, innocence versus violence, and fleeting versus permanent. It is within this liminal space between these two opposing forces that Liu inserts her physical body into the installation as an intermediary. By performing in the piece, Liu brings into the gallery her studio process of creating and reveals it to the exhibition's audience. However, her presence in the piece is not so much about her own identity explicitly, but rather a way to call forth the action of mending itself and the implications of what it means to mend.

A historical parallel to Liu's *The Mending Project* is Yoko Ono's seminal work *Cut Piece*, in which the artist invited audience members to come on stage and take a pair of scissors

lying in front of her to cut off pieces of her clothing. Throughout the performance, Ono sat in submissive silence while she was eventually stripped bare by the audience, who were then invited to take their cut scraps of clothing with them as a souvenir. First performed in Kyoto, Japan in July 1964, Ono's five original performances of the score have been interpreted as a landmark feminist work of art, which addressed issues of anger and violence against the gendered body of a woman.<sup>2</sup> In 2003, Ono performed the score of *Cut Piece* in Paris for the first time in thirty-seven years: Eschewing a strictly feminist-reading of the work, Ono proclaimed that "*Cut Piece* is my hope for world peace," and asked that the cut pieces of her clothing be sent to someone who the audience member loved in order to spread the message of peace and hope.<sup>3</sup> Ono's statement marks the act of cutting, not as a violent gesture, but one rather imbued with a sense of healing which Liu further explores in *The Mending Project*.



Detail of *The Mending Project*, 2011.

Like Ono, Liu invites the audience to participate in her installation by asking them to cut off two to ten inch-sized shapes of white cloth that will then be sewn together by her and become part of the mended cloth on the gallery floor. Rather than provide her clothes as the material to be cut, Liu hung a large sheet of white cloth from the gallery wall as a part of the installation. This sheet of material can be read as a white blank page onto which the participant can project any fears, anger,

or hatred while they cut their fabric. The sheet of cloth becomes a record of this action with it marking the process of cutting by the random edges that transpire from the audience's participation. Similar to Ono, Liu provides only one pair of scissors for participants to use, the same kind as the Chinese scissors hanging from the ceiling, which allows each participant to feel the heaviness

of the iron scissors in their hand and to perform the actual cutting action that the hanging scissors only imply. The use of the same pair among all participants and the ease in which they fit in each unique hand suggests a sense of universality and a way to connect each participant under the larger aegis of Liu's mending project. Liu takes this idea to the next step by literally mending the cut pieces of cloth with black thread into a new configuration taking into account the different edges and sizes of the cut pieces by the audience, and the different fears and anger of the participants.

It is within this act of mending that Liu highlights the universal power and energy to heal and make things better, which she situates as something specifically feminine through the insertion of her body and her presence when performing. Her choice to use sewing as the physical means to take disparate pieces and make one new piece better and stronger than it was previously reinforces this idea. By using a traditional woman's endeavor often hidden in the private sphere of women's work, but that which is exposed through her presence in the galleries, Liu spotlights the persistent hard-working energy of women as a positive force in the world and the silent never ending power of a stitch to connect and unite. This idea of the feminine power and ability to heal is most



Performance Detail of *The Mending Project*, 2011.

apparent when Liu herself is in the galleries calmly sewing under the cloud of scissors, but more often than not during the length of the exhibition, the galleries were empty of this performative aspect. Instead of a woman's body standing in as a reminder and acknowledgement for the world's need for positive change, the shadows cast by the scissors on the surrounding gallery walls fill in this liminal zone and can be read as a surrogate for the artist and the feminine energy imbued in her ritual sewing. Diffused by the light, the shadows becoming fleeting fragments on the wall, shifting in place as the scissors silently move on their wires, and remind the viewer that there are always powerful and positive forces at work in the world, even if they are not always readily seen or are not what they might seem to be at first glance.

Alex Codlin

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<sup>1</sup> Conversation with Beili Liu, March 21, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> See Marcia Tucker, "Mother Laughed: The Bad Girls' Avant-Garde," in *Bad Girls*, ed. Marcia Tucker (MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Michael Bracewell, "Yoko Ono: Cut Piece (2003): Théâtre du Ranelagh, Paris, France," *Frieze* 79 (November-December 2003). For more information on the later performances of *Cut Piece* and their relationship to the earlier performances, see Kevin Concannon, "Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*: From text to Performance and Back Again," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, PAJ 90, volume 30, number 3 (September 2008): 81-93.

BEILI LIU *www.beililiu.com*

*Born in Jilin, China, Resides in Austin, TX*

EDUCATION

- 2003 Master of Fine Arts, Mixed Media, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI
- 2001 Bachelor of Arts, Magna Cum Laude, Graphic Design, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN
- 1994 Associate Bachelor of Arts, Chinese Literature and Communication, Shenzhen University, China

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2011 *The Mending Project*, Women and Their Work Gallery, Austin, TX  
*Extent*, Form/Space Atelier, Seattle, WA
- 2010 *Fray*, Asia Unlimited Gallery, Forum für Internationalen Kulturaustausch, Berlin, Germany  
*half empty. half full*, Nordisk Kunst Plattform Gallery, Brusand, Norway  
*One, Another*, Buffalo Arts Studio, Buffalo, NY
- 2009 *Bound*, D Berman Gallery, Austin, TX  
*In Between*, 之间, Elisabeth de Brabant Gallery, Shanghai, China  
*Three Thousand Troubled Threads*, Tarryn Teresa Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
- 2008 *LURE / 惑*, Chinese Culture Center of San Francisco, CA  
*LURE*, Urban Institute of Contemporary Art, Grand Rapids, MI
- 2006 *Recall*, Gallery One, Ann Arbor, MI  
*Aline*, Ann Arbor Art Center, Ann Arbor, MI
- 2005 *Breadth*, A site-specific installation, Lloyd Hall Scholars Program, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI
- 2004 *The Little House Stands on the Prairie*, A site-specific installation, Art Farm, NE
- 2003 *In-prints – Recent 2-D work by Beili Liu*, Center for the Education of Women, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI  
*Fixtures*, in collaboration with Kendall Babl, The Institute for the Humanities, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI
- 2002 *Wayfinding*, Michigan Guild Gallery, Ann Arbor, MI  
*Solid State*, Warren Robbins Gallery, Ann Arbor, MI

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2011 *Kaunas Biennial TEXTILE 11*, National Art Museum, Kaunas, Lithuania  
*Obsessive Worlds*, Art Museum of Southeast Texas, Beaumont, TX  
*The Mona Lisa Project*, Austin Museum of Art, Austin, TX  
*Material Spaces: Veneration Through the Needle's Eye*, Elaine L. Jacob Gallery, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI
- 2010 *Nature/Culture*, Castle Gallery, New Rochelle, NY  
*Unraveling Tradition*, 516 ARTS, Albuquerque, NM  
*By A Thread*, San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art, San Jose, CA
- 2009 *IT IS BEAUTIFUL HERE*, Granary Gallery, Fiskars, Finland  
*IF/ELSE*, Detroit Industrial Project, Detroit, MI  
*A Strange Land*, Creative Research Lab, Austin, TX
- 2008 San Francisco International Arts Festival, San Francisco, CA  
*Ying-Inspired by Chinese art ad History*, Museum of Art and History, Santa Cruz, CA  
*Aging with Attitude*, Slusser Gallery, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI
- 2007 *Transparent*, Granary Gallery, Onoma foundation of Finland, Fiskars, Finland  
*Crisis*, Detroit Industrial Project, MI  
*in.stal.la.tion*, Anton Art Center, Mount Clements, MI

AWARDS AND PRIZES

- 2010 3rd Place, ArtPRIZE 2010, Grand Rapids, MI  
Austin Critics Table Awards – Outstanding Solo Exhibition, *Bound*, D Berman Gallery
- 2009 Artist of the Year Award, 3D Medium, Austin Museum of Art and Austin Visual Arts Association  
Artist Residency Fellowship, Fundación Valparaíso, Spain
- 2008 San Francisco Major's award  
Ronald Colins Distinguished Faculty Award for Creative Activity, Eastern Michigan University
- 2007 Artist Residency Fellowship, Onoma Foundation Fiskars Artist Residency, Finland
- 2006 Artist Residency Fellowship, Djerassi Foundation, CA
- 2004 Artist Residency Fellowship, Art Farm Artist residency, NE

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 2011 *The Mending Project: Artist Beili Liu balances fear and calm*, 03.23.11, Jeanne Claire van Ryzin, Austin American-Statesman  
*Flow of Energy – Beili Liu makes an art of channeling the forces within objects and us*, 03.11.11, Robert Faires, Austin Chronicle  
*An Artist Bridging Cultural Differences*, March 11, Marilyn McCray, Austin Women Magazine  
*Beili Liu at Form, Space/Atelier*, Adrianna Grant, March, Visual Art Source, Seattle
- 2010 *Not just an eye-ful - ArtPrize finalists that actually encourage meditation*, 10.4.10, Brian J. Bowe, The Rapidian  
*At UICA, Expect the Unexpected*, Highlight: Beili Liu, Jeffery Kaczmarczyk, 9.14.10, Grand Rapids Press  
*In Side the Art*, Sigrun Hodne, 06.09.2010, Stavanger Aftenblad, Norway  
*From Berlin to Brusand*, John Pertter Nordbo, 05.14.2010, Jærbladet, Norway  
*Ties That Bind*, Colin Dabkowski, 01.22.2010, The Buffalo News
- 2009 *Beili Liu, Top 10 Exhibitions in Shanghai 2009*, Chris Moore, December, Saatchi Gallery Review, UK  
*Beili Liu at D Berman Gallery*, Lauren Adams, 10.09.2009, ...Might be Good, a contemporary art e-journal, Austin, TX  
*Spirits Summoned for artist's abstract discourse*, Zhang Kun, 08.22.09, China Daily  
*Dialog, conversation with Beili Liu*, Elisabeth de Brabant, September, Nine Dragon magazine, Shanghai, China  
*Fiskars Summer Exhibition Draws "Red Thread Connection"*, Merja Ilpala-Klemm, 05.15.2009, Turun Sanomat, Finland  
*Beili Liu at Tarryn Teresa Gallery, Los Angeles*, Janet Koplos, April, Art in America  
*Three Thousand Troubled Threads*, Beili Liu, Los Angeles, Steven Irvin, 02.03.2009, Buzzine, Los Angeles
- 2008 *Don't Miss, Featured Exhibition "Lure,"* June, San Francisco Chronicle  
*Legend made visible*, Janos Gereben, 05.20.2008, San Francisco Examiner  
*Lure: Beili Liu Explores the Ties that Bind Lovers*, DeWitt Cheng, 05.18.2008, ArtSlant San Francisco  
*Change Dynasty*, Maureen Davidson, 04.23.2008, Metro Santa Cruz, CA
- 2007 *Fiskars summer exhibitions*, 05.17.2007, Turun Sanomat, Finland  
*Through the surfaces and structures*, 05.25.2007, Helsinki Sanomat, Finland



This Panel: *The Mending Project*, 2011.

Cover Panel: *The Mending Project*, 2011, scissors, fabric, thread, table, chair, hardware, dimensions variable. Installation & Performance.





*The Mending Project*, 2011, scissors, fabric, thread, table, chair, hardware, dimensions variable. Installation & Performance.

## Women & Their Work

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 Foundation. Special thanks to BAH! Design.

Known for its pioneering spirit, embrace of artistic innovation, and commitment to Texas audiences and artists, Women & Their Work is now celebrating its 33rd anniversary. Presenting over 50 events a year in visual art, dance, theater, music, literature, and film, the gallery features on-going exhibitions of Texas women artists and brings artists of national stature to Texas audiences. Since its founding, Women & Their Work has presented 1,852 artists in 269 visual art exhibitions, 113 music, dance and theater events, 14 film festivals, 23 literary readings and 445 workshops in programming that reflects the broad diversity of this region. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in Art in America, ArtForum and on National Public Radio and was the first organization in Texas to receive a grant in visual art from

the National Endowment for the Arts. Women & Their Work reaches over 1,800 school children and teachers each year through gallery tours, gallery talks with exhibiting artists, participatory workshops, in-school performances, dance master classes, and teacher workshops.



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