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## "Threads" at ICA San Jose tugs at a loose idea

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The San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art consistently offers provocative exhibitions that debunk assumptions and defy categorization. No exception for the current exhibition, *By a Thread*, in which ICA presents works in which the artists use thread as their primary medium, displaying, in fact, how such a humble and un-dramatic filament redolent of womanswork and its homespun status can be twisted, taunted, tightened, stitched, switched and shadowed into works of substantial contemporary attitude.

Case in point the installation of Ali Naschke-Messing who collaborates with writers to create non-narrative works of great formal impact. In "What City Gira," Messing uses fragile silky pink thread posed against a large wall and harshly lit to create a shadow darker than the thread itself. The composition offers fragments of text from Sappho and others to convey, according to the catalog, "the fragility and transience of language and interpretation." Whatever its intention, the result is a fascinating play on materials that are at once delicate and commanding. The work does give rise to the question of how something "written" in a manner so ephemeral and fragile can possibly convey something of lasting importance. The answer lies in pure form.

Another wall piece by Katie Lewis traces something even more ephemeral than thread and shadow: the corporeal sensations documented in pins, pencil and thread to create a chart of the experience over 201 days.

Luxuriating in the contrast between silk and concrete are works familiar from a recent solo exhibition at the Don Soker Gallery in San Francisco. Victoria May of Santa Cruz County is a 2010 awardee of the prestigious Rydell Fellowship and an artist whose use of thread as line or armature coincides with a current art fashion for artworks deploying materials commonly identified with "craft" but now used in innovative ways. May in these works has embedded silk thread in a field of grey concrete creating the suggestion of a compromised landscape through a very sensual exploration of essentially monochromatic materials.

The works of Jody Alexander, also of Santa Cruz County, are also highly distinctive: not only for her use of the form of the book in appropriately narrative works, but also for the formal eloquence with which she organizes the simple materials to which she returns repeatedly. In the "Odd Volumes of Ruby B." Alexander has created a character whose scrapbooks and albums show a life of poignant longing. Using cotton batting, thread, bookbinder's mull, book pages and photographs, she literally and figuratively has stitched together a persona and her ideas. In "Roots (In the New World)" Alexander stitched the forms of the root systems of native plants through pages of a book to convey ideas of "invasion, growth and homecoming." In "Horseradish (In the New World)" (2010) the creeping tendrils of stitchery intrude upon pages of old text in a heavy gothic type as if the tender mycellum (?) by their sheer persistence have overtaken a top-heavy culture. Alexander is always, always a consummate craftswoman, her materials consistently utilitarian but beautiful her ideas eloquent and unique.

*By a Thread* offers many intriguing works. Belli Liu refers to a Chinese legend about the "red thread of destiny" in a gorgeous installation employing needles and Liu's familiar red thread in a literal drawing of the connecting link between a man and a woman. As always, the sheen of the red thread and its clusters takes on an extra dimension in visual perception, its noisy regal color taking up more space than its millimeters demand. Lauren DiCioccio has used the more traditional method of embroidery to paint exquisite miniatures of familiar objects--objects destined for obsolescence just as the painstaking practice of embroidery as a custom for women at home has been displaced by other more technological pastimes. Diem Chau too creates literal portraits, her subject is human connection, or the lack thereof.

This exhibition will not reverse public perception of the humble role of thread, sewing and other homespun techniques and materials. *By a Thread* does remind us that, whether used for its more literal and traditional virtues: malleability; ability to appear or disappear; structural use to create joints of great integrity...or used as a powerful and broadly understood metaphor that crosses cultures, ages and sexes, thread deserves to enjoy what appears to be a new status in the artworld.

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