



Aranya Bhowmik

He is a curator, art writer and researcher. He is currently doing his doctoral research in Fine Arts discipline, Humanities & Social Sciences Dept. Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur. He has done his graduation in History of Art in Kala Bhavana, Visva Bharati, Santiniketan and Post-Graduation in Art History and Aesthetics in Faculty of Fine Arts in M.S. University of Baroda. He has also taught in various art institution over the past years. Modern and contemporary art and art history has been his field of interest which also enabled him to work on his curatorial projects like Material Metaphor in 2021. He has also written in Art Magazines, Journals and Blogs like Art & Deal, Art East, Art Facts, Insignia, Astanzi.com, Searching Lines, Artsome.co and others. He is currently based in Kanpur.

Thread of Thought: Understanding Embroidery in the Context of Contemporary Indian Art

Aranya Bhowmik

Abstract

There are certain mediums and materials that are institutionalized, where they are taught and practiced in art academies as well as predominantly found in the studios of many artists. But there are certain mediums and materials that emerge out to be unconventional physically as well as conceptually. Embroidery or thread-based works have emerged as a significant practice in contemporary Indian art. Embroidery has often been used in craft and utility based works and often avoided or used as a peripheral medium in mainstream art practice. The flexibility and diversity that the medium offers tend to be an important element for certain artists, who have located the potential of the medium and have used it in their works.

In order to understand the adaptation and implication of embroidery in Indian contemporary art, the paper will critically discuss the works of Rakhi Peswani and Sumakshi Singh. Both the artists employ embroidery in distinctive manner which enables conceptual and critical discourses that challenges the status quo of embroidery as a craft medium. Rakhi Peswani signifies as well as questions the stereotypical role of a woman and the often-ignored labor involved in the process of embroidery through her work. Whereas Sumakshi Singh is interested in creating and understanding the dynamics of space, where her thread-based works are skeletal and illustrative in nature that creates an

interaction with the surrounding space as well as memory, time and existential ideas. The objective of the paper is to bring forward a discussion on diverse aspects of embroidery as a medium in the context of contemporary art as well as address the issue of institutionalization of certain mediums over others.

Keywords- Embroidery, thread-based work, institutionalization, unconventional, medium, art practice, contemporary

“Women have always made art. But for most women, the arts highest valued by male society have been closed to them for just that reason. They have put their creativity instead into the needlework arts, which exist in fantastic variety wherever there are women, and which in fact are a universal female art, transcending race, class and national borders. Needlework is the one art in which women controlled the education of their daughters, the production of the art, and were also the audience and critics.”¹

The debate over visual art’s hierarchy in terms of what is high art? And what is craft? Have been going on for ages. Institutionalizing certain mediums or artists favouring certain mediums and material over the other has created critical discourses both in the west as well as in the east. Challenging the patriarchal system of art, female artists throughout ages have created a distinctive practice through the medium of embroidery or needle work. But it was always counted as domestic work or recreational work rather than a piece of art like a painting done in oil or a sculpture carved out of a stone. Embroidery has been an important visual language

¹ Mainardi, P, “Quilts: The Great American Art”, *Feminism And Art History Questioning The Litany*, Edited by Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, Routledge, 2018, p. 331

for women in different cultural contexts at different times, which helped to express their experience, ideas and artistic skill through needle work. "Art history views the art of the past from a certain perspective and organizes art into categories and classifications based on a stratified system of values, which leads to a hierarchy of art forms. In this hierarchy the arts of painting and sculpture enjoy an elevated status which other arts that adorn people, homes or utensils are relegated to a lesser cultural sphere under such terms as 'applied', 'decorative' or 'lesser' arts. This hierarchy is maintained by attributing to the decorative arts a lesser degree of intellectual effort or appeal and a greater concern with manual skill and utility" (Pollock, Parker, 50).

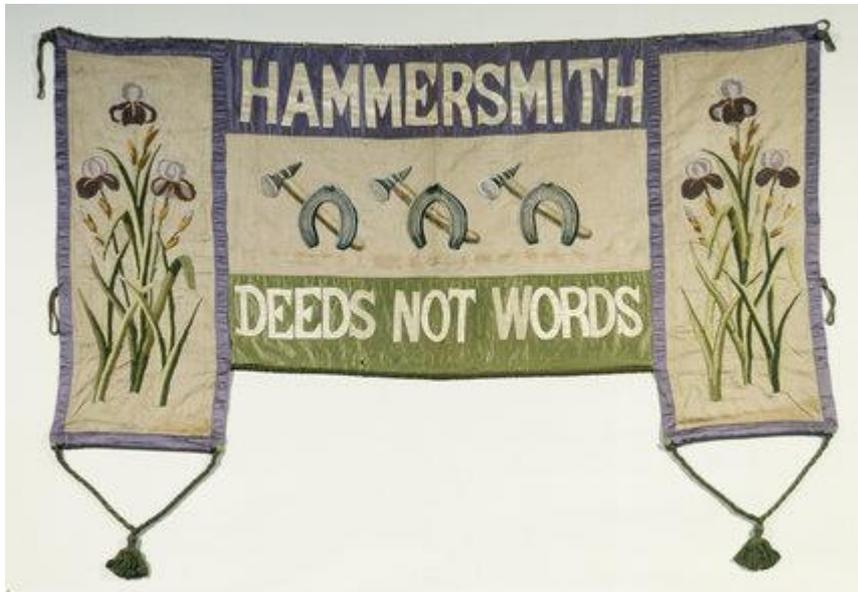
The hierarchy between art and craft emerged in the renaissance and by mid-nineteenth century there was sharp distinction between art and craft both in practice as well as in pedagogy. (Pollock,Parker,50). The amount of serious and critical agency given to artworks like painting and sculpture was not given to embroidery as a medium which had functional and decorative characteristics attached to them. The sheer discrimination between art and craft was also made on the line of class and gender, where embroidery became a female craft practiced for domestic and utilitarian purposes. The skill and creative agency was trivialized in terms of embroidery or such applied or functional art forms and was stereotyped as feminine artwork or craft. Whereas painting and sculpture were admired and given a higher status than embroidery which was seen as a craft practiced and admired by working class people.

"For the British Women's Suffrage Movement it was a connection they believed they could use to advantage. In their hands, embroidery was employed not to transform the place and function

of art, but to change ideas about women and femininity. Far from desiring to disentangle embroidery and femininity, they wanted embroidery to evoke femininity - but femininity represented as a source of strength, not as evidence of women's weakness. The movement left behind numbers of embroidered marching banners: some identifying local groups, others representing individual campaigns and professions, and a series celebrating great women of the past and present." (Parker, 197) The suffrage movement had challenged the social hierarchy and exclusivity of art that was admired, practiced and catered to a particular class of people who had relegated needle work to an inferior form of craft with feminine characteristics. The suffragists were able to break the stereotype and classification attached to embroidery by making it a public art form through embroidered banners and posters that signified femininity as a source of strength and inspiration. The slogans and images that were stitched up on the banner also challenged the monopoly of certain agencies that were involved in printing and painting banners and posters for political and social rallies. The suffrage leaders were able to channelize the domestic, feminine quality of embroidery tradition into a device of protest for the civic rights of women in England. The feminine quality that was often attributed to embroidery was devised into strong political images through embroidered banners; the suffrage movement was one of the first to bring serious attention towards the practice of embroidery in western society.

One such example of protest banner dating back to the early twentieth century, when the women rights movement was at its peak. The banner depicts words and images that signifies the boldness and strength of the movement which was entirely formed and led by women. The contrasting depiction of iris flowers, hammer and horse motifs signify the idea of equality

between men and women, the flower represents the feminine quality but at the same time hammer and horse represents the labor and strength of the working class where the gender should not be the determining factor for any kind of employment in the society. The iris flowers were one of the most popular motifs in needlework of that period juxtaposing the hammer and horse with the slogan "Deeds Not Words" represents an important idea of equality. The embroidery practice transforms from being a beautiful decorative object to a strong revolutionizing language that challenges the rigid patriarchal structure of the society. The banner was made by the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) that aggressively protested against the inequality in the society.



Suffrage banner, Museum of London, London. c 1911 . Paint, embroidery and applique.

Image source- <https://marshallcolman.blog/2019/09/23/may-morris/>

Judy Chicago's 'Dinner Party' (1979) was one of the important feminist artwork that employs embroidery in a distinctive manner. The work consists of triangular tables with plates and runners that depict different women's names from the history, where it addresses the lacuna of historical and mythical accounts on

several women who played an important role in their own context. The process of the work is also significant as Chicago had employed almost four hundred men and women to create the piece. There is a sense of collective effort to revisit and revive the historical and mythical female figures who were often shadowed under the patriarchal structure of the society. The embroidery was also applied in a way that evoked the different embroidery traditions of different periods and cultures. Judy Chicago explains the process, "We examined the history of needlework - as it is reflected in textiles and costumes, sculptures, myths and legends and archaeological evidence - from the point of view of what these revealed about women, the quality of their lives and their relationship to needlework." (Parker, 209).



Dinner Party, Judy Chicago, 1979

Image Source: https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/dinner_party/
https://www.researchgate.net/figure/a-Judy-Chicago-The-Dinner-Party-1979-detail-Judith-plate_fig3_254958376

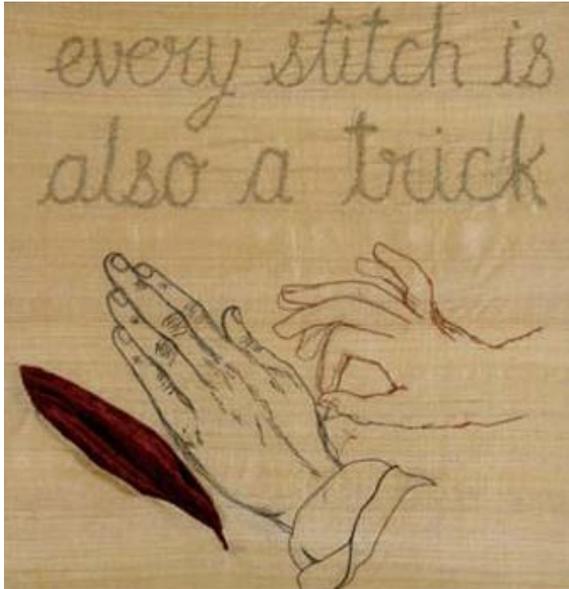
In India embroidery played an important role in domestic life as well as artistic tradition. There are different embroidery traditions in different provinces primarily practiced by women (but men also

take part in some of the traditions). Traditions like Kantha from Bengal, Dhadki from Gujarat, Chikankari from Lucknow and Phulkari from Punjab are some of the most popular and fascinating traditions that embody different cultural ethos of India. However the hierarchical segregation was there as these traditions were classified as decorative arts that are mass produced and lack the intellectual property needed to become a part of so-called mainstream high art. In the modern art context the gap between art and craft grew wider except few exceptions like the works of Mrinalini Mukherjee and Meera Mukherjee who have adapted and experimented with knotting and needle work with dyed hemp and yarn. However in contemporary times some artists have been able to develop artistic practice that embodies embroidery in an unconventional manner that challenges the hierarchy of art and craft and the notion of femininity through their work. In order to broaden this discussion, the paper will look into the works of Rakhi Peswani and Sumakshi Singh.

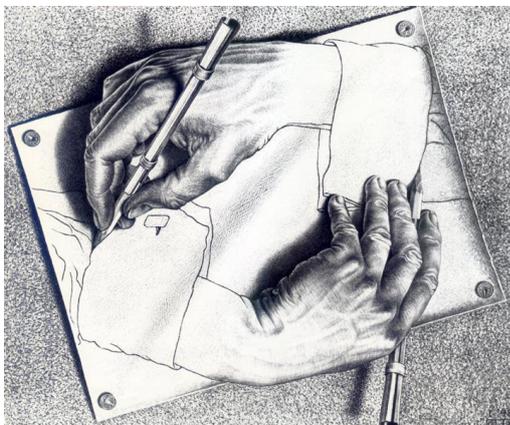
Needlework and diverse fabrics and material surface plays an important role in the works of Rakhi Peswani. Her works evokes a cerebral understanding that connotes multiple trajectories related to society, gender identity, memory, history and materiality. She plays around with diverse materials and processes that creates an individual and distinctive language. Parul Dave Mukherjee talks about her practice, " Rakhi Peswani belongs to this rare moment in the history of contemporary art that stages complex conversation between conceptual art, minimalism and figurative art, At the same time, she undoes academic hierarchies set up between art and craft, painting and stitching, sculpture and sewing by weaving stories, knitted forms and embroidering concept." (Mukherjee,5). Rakhi amalgamates academic knowledge with traditional knowledge where her stitched forms and figures

often involves art historical trajectory as well as images from local and personal contexts. The embroidered contours have a distinctive characteristic that resembles drawing and sketching but more visceral and tactile in appearance.

In the work titled 'On the Rules of the Game' (2008) Peswani projected the procedural complexity involved in the process of embroidery. The diptych consists of text and image that challenges the notion of embroidery as a manual labor rather than a conceptual process. The first image depicts two hands, one in motion with a needle stitching the other hand with a text- "Every stitch is also a Trick". Peswani's interest towards history of art can be traced here as one is reminded of M.C Escher's illusionistic work 'Drawing Hands' (1948). Peswani brilliantly embodies the western reference with a pun that not only challenges the art and craft hierarchy but also represents the intellectual involvement in the process of embroidery which is often neglected and trivialized. The other image of the diptych depicts two hands engaged in stitching a velvet fabric with a stitched text- "Every stitch is also a Prick" connotes the painstaking labor involved in the process of needlework. The two images trace the important aspect of embroidery as a process that involves physical and mental involvement from the artist which is equal to any conventional medium like painting and sculpture. The work has both visual and tactile sensibility which is distinctively found in Rakhi Peswani's work.



On the Rules of the Game, Materials: Hand embroidery and velvet appliqué on muga silk, 2008



Drawing Hands, M.C. Escher, lithograph, 1948

Image Source-

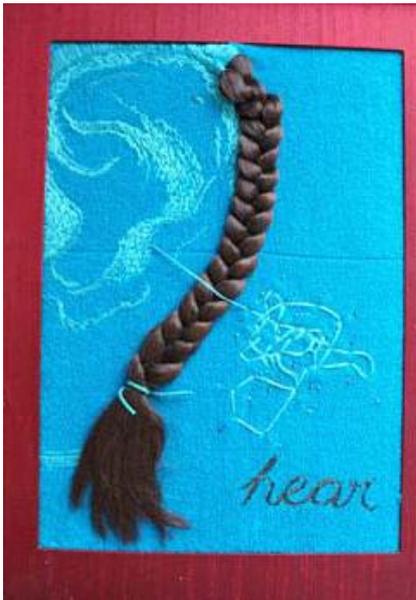
http://www.rakhipeswani.com/on_the_rules_of_the_game.htm

<https://www.wikiart.org/en/m-c-escher/drawing-hands>

"Rakhi explores the interface between drawing and stitching, between two dimensional silhouettes and three dimensional extensions between the language of naming and that of seeing. It is in the gaps and overlaps between our sensations of sight, touch, smell and taste that experience occurs in continuum, language is necessarily governed by fragmentation and repetition-

the sources of its order and condition.” (Mukherjee, 4). Peswani’s work is not only dependent on visual sensation but also experiential through the conversation between text, image and tactility of the material surface. In the work ‘Misnomers (Re-constructing the Body)’ Peswani plays with words and images as well as its connotation. Instead of representing a human body, Rakhi depicts parts of a body juxtaposed with texts that connote the function or purpose of the organ. In one of the works she depicts lungs made of cotton and translucent fabric adjacent with words- ‘hope’ and ‘breathe’ which signifies the function of that organ and its role in keeping a human being alive. The diverse material and process of embroidery and applique on a mundane fabric like towel creates an interesting dialogue between three dimensionality and two dimensionality. In another work of this series represents an ear juxtaposed with a false braid and the text- ‘hear’. The image delves deep into the subject of gender identity, social construction that dictates certain parameters and rules for women. The braid represents the traditional concept of beauty and the word ‘hear’ connotes the idea that women have to listen and obey the norms and ways dictated by the patriarchal society. Rakhi Peswani experiments with materials and the methods where mundane objects transform into conceptual elements in her work. As Avijna Bhattacharya points out that the work of Peswani’s practice involves displacement and redefinition of mundane objects and forms from its “established socio-cultural etyma and replacing it within a different context” (Bhattacharya,17). Rakhi Peswani’s works are critical towards the compartmentalization of feminine characteristics as well as the hierarchical classification of embroidery as craft, Her profuse use of embroidery and fabric based material challenges the notion of academic art that doesn’t allow interaction with unconventional material and technique. She is able to create a language that

embodies both academic and craft idiom diminishing the art and craft distinction.



Misnomers (Re-construing the Body), cotton hand towel, hand embroidery and appliqué, 2009

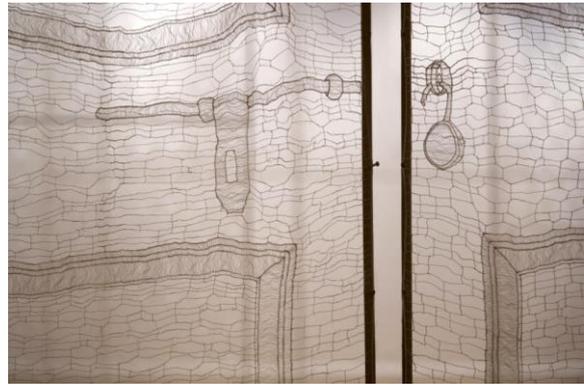
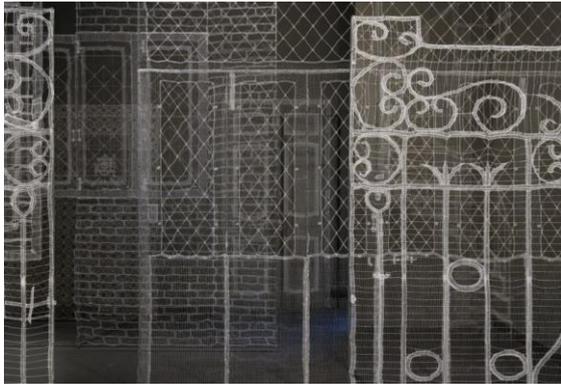
Image Source- <http://www.rakhipeswani.com/misnomers.htm>

“Embroidery also has a place in the feminist effort to transform the conditions of art practice, the relationship of artist to audience and the definitions of what constitutes art. Because embroidery is an extremely popular hobby, and a skill taught in schools, it is considered by many to be a more accessible medium, reaching a wider audience, than painting.” (Parker,208)

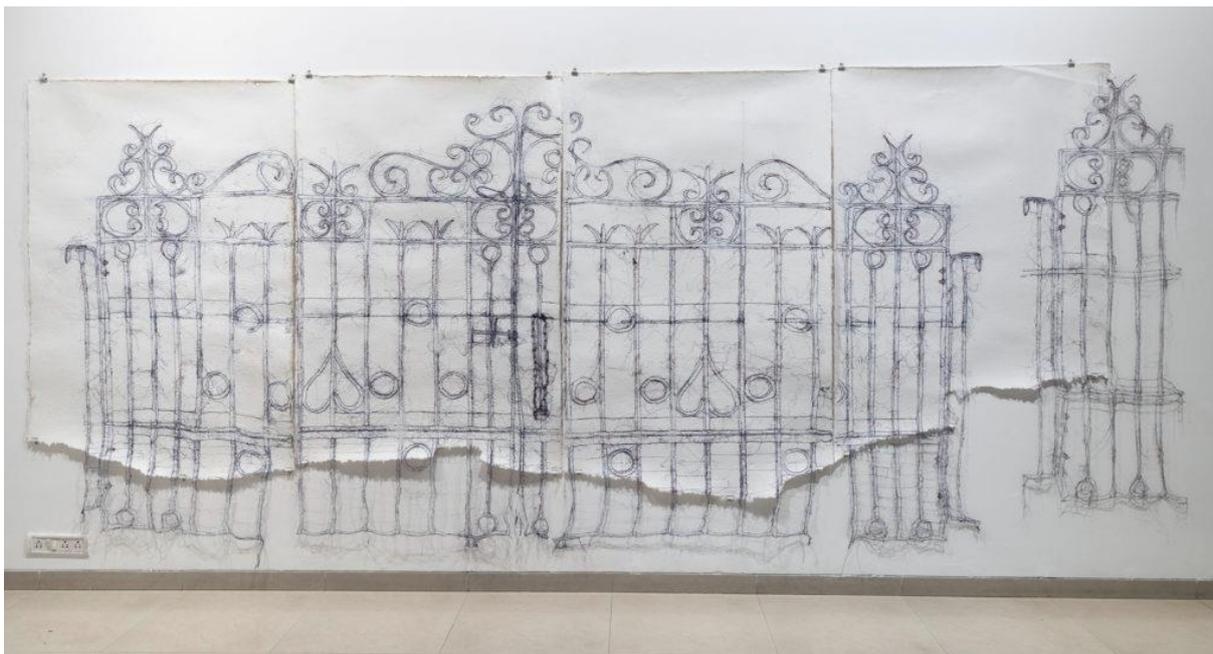
Throughout the ages the definition and application of embroidery has transcended from being a domestic hobby art to contemporary artistic practice. Sumakshi Singh is one such artist who employs embroidery at multiple scales- from organic forms carefully preserved in glass vitrines to life size architectural space that inhabits the entire gallery through its gossamer appearance. Her works are both visual and empirical in nature. The intricate and

delicate rendering of thread based works create a sense of temporality but at the same time embodies visceral sensation of memory and time. One of her most significant works is "33 Link Road ", which is the address of her grandparent's residence, built when they migrated from Pakistan to India, after the partition. The space where generations of memories are layered within the walls of the house. She recreates an exact replica of that house in the gallery with thread work. Sumakshi was able to transform a space with minute detailing of all the staircase, walls, door locks, windows and facades of the original 33 link road residence. The entire body of work was rendered through delicately done thread work on supporting frames to hold the embroidered pieces.

The work inhabits the gallery space as a transient entity that tries to create a corporeal body of the fragments of memories the artist had of that residence. The sense of fragility and fragmentation in the work resonates the impermanence of the moment and the making of memories, where some memories stayed but others were lost over the time. No matter what a house is made of it is temporal in the context of time and space. The skeletal form constructed through intricately stitched threads creates a visceral experience of the space. The artist explains her practice, "I think of embroidery as a way of making image which literally ties itself to the ground (usually fabric) and therefore, feels more permanent and fixed than many other forms of mark-making- for example, one can't easily erase it, like a drawing; with thread, an undoing is required. Ironically in this body of 'groundless thread drawings' that I am currently working on, this 'securing' of image to the ground is challenged, as the fabric itself is removed after the embroidery occurs, leaving behind what appears to be a thread skeleton- are apparition which levitates without support that was used to create it." (Shivram,29).



33 Link Road, Sumakshi Singh, Thread, 2020



33 Link Road, Sumakshi Singh, Thread, 2020

Image Source: <https://sumakshi.com/project/sakshi-gallery-mumbai-india/>

The medium and the technique applied for the work signifies the temporality of existence in the space time continuum. Freeing the embroidery from its ground lets the artist create a porous space potent with memories and histories of people and their lives attached to that space. Through the groundless embroidery Singh breaks away from the traditional method of embroidery and creates a language that goes beyond the conventional

understanding of drawing. The work is spatial drawing of memories and ideas attached to a space but not limited to it.

It is evident that embroidery throughout the ages have contributed to a great extent to shape artistic ideas that go beyond the academic study. Where traditional knowledge gained through generations of women gets translated in modern and contemporary works of women artists who have challenged the conventions and created a language that is potent with new possibilities both cerebrally as well as technically. The works of Rakhi Peswani delves into the critical issues of gender identity and social classifications and addresses the question of femininity and the hierarchical classification of art and craft.

Whereas Sumakshi Singh's work also goes beyond the conventional norms of drawing and the limitation of embroidery. Her work tries to create a space that archives the memory of a home that has served as a permanent address for a family for ages but over time people move away but their history and memories are left behind like shadows inhabiting the nooks and crannies of that house. The work also addresses the idea of temporality of time and space and questions the idea of permanence; it is the memories and moment that keeps that space alive in the minds of the people who had inhabited that space once.

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