HAND & I
Fanny Allié, Blanka Amezkua, Melissa Calderon, Liz Collins, Ana de La Cueva, Erika Diamond, Gabriele Fulterer & Christine Scherrer, Kate Huh & LJ Roberts, Barb Hunt, Annie Lucas, Katrina Majkut, Noelle Mason, Raymond Materson, Cat Mazza, Miriam Schaer, Sayaka Suzuki, Chanel Thomas, Angie Wilson

Curated by Yulia Tikhonova

May 5 – July 14, 2019
Opening reception: Sunday, May 5, 2:00–5:00 p.m.
AND & I brings together nineteen artists who use the delicate medium of embroidery to address society’s most pressing issues. While the Hand patiently makes stitch after stitch—straight, backwards, stem, chain or blind—the I presides over a resounding call for resistance to inhumane social policy. These artists address the difficult problems of climate, race, gender, immigration, and the U.S. prison system—their needlework a *cri de coeur* for social justice.

Small stitches tackling big problems is fundamental to the creativity and vision of the growing community of “craftivists” who deploy the panoply of domestic arts in the service of the disenfranchised. Embroidery is uniquely suited to embody their narratives. It is deeply rooted in story telling—“writing with a thread.” Embroidery is ideal to carry not only a political message but also for a very personal one. The medium is often called “the labor of love” because of the passion and dedication that it can manifest.

The tradition of embroidery is imbued with a spirit of community. Sewing together, in silence, or sharing a story, is a slow and patient art form—a meditation—whose enduring creations will be seen and used by generations. It is the singular durability and persistent visibility of embroidery that inspires the contemporary artists in our exhibition.

I am reminded of the Russian avant-garde artists Kazimir Malevich and Oleksandra Ekster, who adopted local embroidery patterns as a means of freeing their timid contemporaries from an alien Western art so that they could embrace their Eastern roots.

Like them, the artists in *Hand & I* subvert the stereotypes of embroidery as a benign feminine craft and transform it into a raucous, striking, and affective art form. Look closely—they have come!

**Fanny Allié** evokes compassion for the victims of economic hardship. *Man-Shield* and *Man-Bare Feet* (2018) are life-size embroideries of people burdened by their desperate condition, a bag on each shoulder, each of them on the go; these nomadic people are moving fast away from us, in the shadows. Allié drapes and stitches black plastic to canvas in such a way that the line of the body, and the weight it carries, become one. These figures are inspired by the artist’s observations of the dispossessed inhabitants of New York City. Allié shares her concern that “it could very much be us.” Originally from France, Allié reflects on her own experience as an immigrant artist in New York. As an immigrant myself, I am only too familiar with the vulnerability that Allié communicates with deep compassion. The artist blurs the line between individual and collective, and makes us shiver in recognition.

**Blanka Amezkua** adopts the language of Latino comic books as the inspiration for textile works that comment on longstanding clichés about female identity. *Re-Konztrukt: Women and Tools* (2017) are larger-than-life embroideries that feature Amazon-like figures armed with tools sacred to the masculine universe. Hammer, drill, sledgehammer, machete, wrench are industrial sized to complement the looming, muscular bodies. Amezkua collaborated with comic book artist Luis Sierra, who deploys the visual language of Mexican fotonovelas to expand the mythos of “Wonder Woman” into our contemporary world. Her super-heroines wear overalls instead of skimpy outfits, and hold their tools as weapons (or trophies?). With her needle, she sketches the outline of her monumental figures, leaving much of the canvas untouched, and trims the borders with Mayan patterned, wide Mexican lace. Gender parity may lie in the distance, but Amezkua’s work tells us what she, at least, thinks it will look like.

**Melissa Calderon** learned embroidery from her grandmother, who was part of a generations-long tradition of seamstresses who worked in garment factories in Puerto Rico and NYC. She has married these feminine sewing skills to her new (mostly male) craft of woodworking. Calderon calls her process “sewing on wood,” where she combines the sculptural and tactile elements of wood, with the lightness of thread, to communicate the persistence of memory. She dedicates her most recent set of embroidered wood panels—*Wood Wounds* (2019)—to a reflection on our post-election shock, and her ultimate belief that our humanity can withstand the
countries in silver thread, surmounted by the Mexican-U.S. border in gold thread, symbolizing both the mythic wealth of the American dream and the omnipotent weight of American exceptionalism.

Her most powerful series, 43 (2017), memorializes and condemns the notorious disappearance of 43 Mexican students at a rural teacher-training college in 2014. The case has come to symbolize the tens of thousands of Mexican victims of the pervasive drug wars. One piece from this series uses humble linen and thread to create pages from a student’s notebook marked by 43 bloodstains—each a “drop” of red thread.

Barb Hunt explores the domestic needlework tradition of European and North American settlers, to proclaim a strong feminist challenge to social and cultural misogyny. Since the 1970s, Hunt has been collecting vintage “hostess” aprons, fascinated by their prominent role as signifiers of domesticity and “wife-dom,” and their not so latent erotic appeal. A quote from Laurie Penny, “We grow up learning that someone is always looking at us and checking for misbehavior,” adorns a white chiffon apron with two pockets in the shape of juicy red and pink roses. Hunt explains her choice of an old-fashioned serif font; the text is being squished into a tight space, exactly how she feels about the narrowness of the roles prescribed for women.

Katrina Majkut’s needle takes on the difficult issues of sex education, health and family planning, birth control—highly personal subjects deeply aligned with the “intimacy” of traditional embroidery. In Control (2012 to present) numbers over fifty small embroideries illustrating modern health products and procedures, pregnancy tests, birth control pills, and condoms that enable women’s choice.

Artificial Hymen & Packaging (2019) depicts an artificial hymen—a pharmaceutical product that a woman can buy to fake their virginity, at the time of marriage. She uses In Control to modernize the tradition of embroidery to other women, as it was passed to her, but with a more comprehensive, educational, and vigilant understanding that the personal is political.
Cat Mazza takes embroidery into the digital realm. Film to Fiber II (2016, 2019) is a stitched animation of the 1968 educational film Cloth: Fiber to Fabric that explores the industrial production of textiles. The animations use custom software that draws on a database of hand-stitched crewel embroidery made by the artist. Mazza founded the website microRevolt.org to construct an online protest infrastructure and to unite craftivists. Their “micro” acts of resistance now have a macro impact.

In the nearly two decades since his first stitch, Ray Materson has used the healing qualities of embroidery to depict the scenes of violence, abuse, and degradation that he witnessed during his long years in prison. Amazingly, he created these embroideries with sock thread, the only material then available to him. Materson's embroideries are small enough to fit in your hand and astonish with their precision: thousands of stitches representing more than 40 hours per image are required for their meticulous pictorial detail. The scenes are highly theatrical, reflecting the artist’s attraction to tableaux vivant when he was a high school theater performer. Mother in Turmoil (1997) looks like a scene from a docudrama: a screaming woman’s face with a missing tooth, and an abandoned baby staring out the window. In 2005, Materson published the book Sins and Needles, a poignant account of his journey through a tumultuous life and his rehabilitation through the craft of embroidery.

Noelle Mason challenges the voyeuristic nature of surveillance technologies and its photographic and video mediation of our responses to traumatic events and tragedies. X-Ray Vision vs. Invisibility (2016) reveals the frightening power of contemporary technologies to trace undocumented immigrants. This body of work consists of the cyanotypes that are backscatter blueprints of people in the trucks and cross-stitch embroideries titled Coyotaje based on these images. Mason uses cross-stitch as an analog to the pixilation seen on the screen of a security camera. She painstakingly embroiders one body, one pixel at a time, over several hours. In making this work she connects to a migrant journey pre-destined to fail. Mason teaches us that the forensic and deadly precision of the new radar technologies is more powerful than any concrete wall.

Annie Lucas continues the visionary tradition of Alabama's outsider artists. Lucas grew up in rural Autauga County, one of fifteen children. She married Charlie Lucas, the legendary Tin Man, who has produced an exceptional body of scrap metal sculptures celebrating the people and the land of Alabama's Black Belt. Lucas practiced her craft in between taking care of their four children and her husband. Samson Wrestling the Lion (1999) is a “revelation” of her devotion. Lucas's work is a testament to a creativity and innovation that seeks to “embroider” day-to-day life. Her story is an important contribution to the traditions of craftivism.

Miriam Schaer addresses women's choice from her own “personal is political” perspective. Her series of annotated antique baby dresses, Babies (Not) on Board: The Last Prejudice? (2012, 2019) casts a harsh light on the criticism directed at women who refuse motherhood. White and lacy, with graceful red script lovingly embroidered on the surface, her toddler dresses seem so sweet at first glance. Schaer interviewed many childless women, pursued anecdotes online, and drew from her personal experience for the texts that she hand embroiders on the dresses. Their texts are cruel: "Your not having children was the biggest disappointment of our life" or "Childless women lack an essential humanity." Baby (Not) on Board: The Last Prejudice? is an example of Schaer deploying her talents.
as a book artist—her primary medium—whereby the dresses are like the pages of a book. Perhaps the most compelling interpretation is that for a woman artist (at least this one), the (art) work she creates demands the same respect as motherhood.

LJ Roberts & Kate Huh collaborated to create the embroidery, West End—neverending (2016), from a vast archive of Xeroxed collages of BDSM imagery, the so-called The West End Collection. Huh used photocopied images of pieces from this collection to create new collages that Roberts painstakingly translates into detailed embroidered scrolls. The collaboration is ongoing, this history is rich and vital and its preservation will require a multitude of scrolls that explore the formation of language about the kinship of gay men, lesbians and trans people, surveillance, and control.

Chanel Thomas, who is currently pursuing her MFA at Yale, portrays nostalgic scenes of her family-life in Chicago using an exhilarating embroidery technique that is almost reckless in its rejection of the refinement so often encountered in this medium. Her Da Big Comfy Couch (2017) is a life-size, hand embroidery that features six members of her family on the left (seated on their own “comfy couch”), beside Loonette and Molly, the clown and her doll from the children's TV comedy of the same name. Thomas uses embroidery in a distinctly painterly manner. The sweeping "brush strokes" of her needle explode from the faces of her family in planes of light and shadow. “The intimacy attained through embroidery is much greater than I can get through painting,” Thomas says. For Thomas, embroidery is a healing process; a skill passed on by generations of women, the dresses are like the pages of a book. Perhaps the most compelling interpretation is that for a woman artist (at least this one), the (art) work she creates demands the same respect as motherhood. The sweeping "brush strokes" of her needle explode from the faces of her family in planes of light and shadow. “The intimacy attained through embroidery is much greater than I can get through painting,” Thomas says. For Thomas, embroidery is a healing process; a skill passed on by generations of women, the dresses are like the pages of a book. Perhaps the most compelling interpretation is that for a woman artist (at least this one), the (art) work she creates demands the same respect as motherhood. As Suzuki patiently stitches these scraps together she carefully reads the various thoughts, fears, hopes, and dreams that will become part of the next installment of Drifting Dreamers. This work is a metaphor for the contemporary tragedies that force multitudes to flee their homes, only to be met with a border wall, incarceration, or death. Suzuki's vessel carries their hopes to the next venue where they will amplify the clamor for immigration reform.

Gabriele Fulterer & Christine Scherrer—art partners from Vienna—attempt to resolve the politics of female identities and bodies situated within public and private space.

As if (2013) is a series of embroideries accompanied wall drawings of larger than life-size elongated and distorted figures that stretch beyond the canvas. These aggressively extending bodies literally break through their frame, fall out of balance, grasp at nothing and stagger onto the wall. Fulterer & Scherrer leave their protagonists in odd, absurd positions and restrict their attempts to gain freedom. As if explores the similarities between graffiti and embroidery. Like graffiti, their embroidery is made of dotted and scribbled lines. The spontaneous, immediate nature of street art is also mirrored by their on-site drawings.

Angie Wilson uses embroidery as a symbol of human interconnectedness. The Universe Within (2015) is an immersive installation of black lights, yarn, and embroidery that transforms the project room into a constellation of stars in various states of formation and explosion. The impetus for this imagery is the radiation sessions she underwent for Hodgkin’s Lymphoma. During each session, she was slid into what looked like a space pod, a strange, cold place that led her to contemplate making work about outer space. Wilson says: “By creating public, shared space where people create together, we connect to a long history of collective hand-making. When we make and move together, we become a connected thread and weave a united vision for our local communities and our world.”

Hand & I highlights the creative ways that contemporary artists have transformed the traditions of needlework into potent tools in the struggle for cultural and economic equity. They affirm embroidery as the medium par excellence with which, in the words of Dr. King, to bend the moral arc of the universe towards justice.

— Yulia Tikhonova, 2019

BIOGRAPHY

Yulia Tikhonova is a curator and educator currently based in Boca Raton FL, where she teaches Art History at Florida Atlantic University. She is the founder of Creative Diasporas, a nonprofit organization that supports and promotes the vital contributions immigrant artists make to American culture. She is known for exhibitions that further the goals of cultural equity. During the last decade, she curated widely across the boroughs of New York City in gallery spaces and public venues. Tikhonova’s curatorial and teaching practice derives from the global perspective that she acquired during her long migratory journey from Russia, to Poland, South East Asia, New Zealand, and finally to the U.S., where she has made her home—in New York City—for most of the past 15 years. Tikhonova graduated from the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College.
I am deeply grateful to the artists for participating and contributing their compelling work to this exhibition. Our conversations made an important contribution—thank you all so much. I am especially grateful to Chelsea Cooksey—for giving me this wonderful opportunity, and for their advice, support, and professionalism during every phase of this exhibition.

Cover: Blanka Amezkua w/Luis Sierra

Re-Konstrukt: Women and Tools, 2017

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Hand me downs unknown. Particularly anything that has been handed down from one person to another. Preferably known as "cheap".

"Look at this dude walking into the club with these hand me down shoes on." "Boy please, we're in so much poverty right now that the closest thing you will get to Jordan's is your father's hand me downs back from class of 86". #cheap #shabby #dune busters #not new #buster browns #second hand; by mr. Swank February 04, 2010.

106. 10. Get a Hand me downs mug for your coworker Helena. "Hand i hand" is a song written by Magnus Uggla, and performed by him on the 1983 album Välkommen till folkhemmet. The chorus are taken from Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's violin concert. Song lyrics reflect upon the hippie movement during the political left-wave in the Western World during the years around 1970. Living for 10 years inside a flat at Västerlånggatan in Gamla stan, he would sometimes be awakened by songs like El Cóndor Pasa. Magnus Uggla would sometimes reply with playing heavy metal.