

KE-SOOK LEE BETWEEN CULTURES AND GENERATIONS

NOT ONLY PRESERVING ANCIENT SKILLS, HER WORK SUGGESTS THEIR METAMORPHOSIS INTO A UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE OF ART.

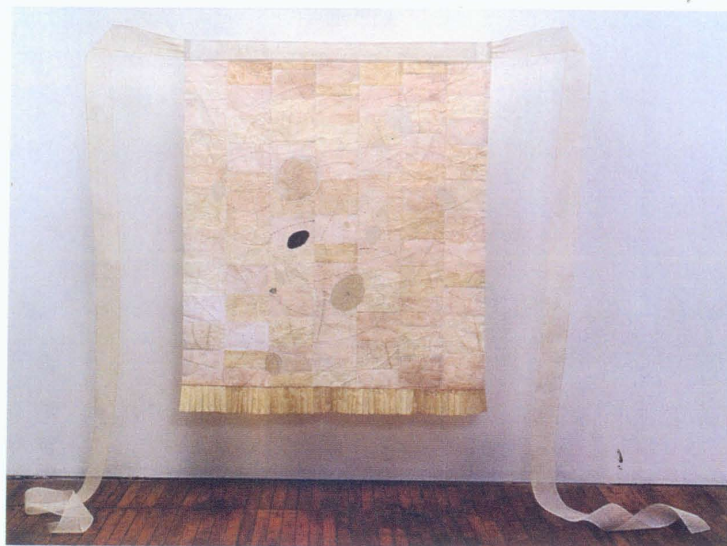
BY SIGRID WORTMANN WELTGE

Ke-Sook Lee is emerging as an important artist of our time. But how to take her measure? Her work is so multivalent, so personal and complex, it resists neat categorization. Various referred to as mixed media, installation or fiber art, it has a visceral presence that holds viewers in thrall.

The art of Ke-Sook Lee mirrors her life. She draws inspiration from the duality of having roots in two countries, of practicing as a professional artist while relishing the role of mother, homemaker and gardener. Born in 1941 in Seoul, Korea, she experienced not only family division but family loyalty and, above all, matriarchal strength. As a child she shared a room with her grandmother and great-grandmother, expert needlewomen who passed their skills on to their charge. A year after receiving a B.F.A. in applied art from Seoul National University in 1963, Lee and her husband immigrated to the United States. She pursued postgraduate studies at the University of Missouri and in 1982 received a second B.F.A., in painting, from the Kansas City Art Institute, where she later taught mixed media and drawing.

While motherhood interrupted Lee's career, it also became the springboard for her future artistic direction. Abandoning drawing and oil painting for calligraphy on rice paper, she then took up stitching and embroidery. The domestic sphere—sewing, mending, ironing and tending to house and garden—is the underlying theme of each of her creations. Her preferred material is *tarlatan*, a sheer plain-woven cotton, heavily sized for stiffness. It serves as the foundation for her multilayered collages, but is itself manipulated to convey directional lines through sharply ironed creases. Lee has as much affection for her collection of American domestic fabrics—worn pillowcases, towels and doilies—as she does for Korean rice paper. She unites these seemingly disparate materials by stitching them onto *tarlatan*. Her vibrant needlework not only expresses the beauty of calligraphic line, but also provides a text extolling simple domesticity. Earth from her garden provides pigments for the subtlest color gradations.

Lee's most recent work, "Stitches from the Garden," an exhibition/installation at Snyderman Gallery, Philadelphia, this past June, consisted of various smaller pieces, but was dominated by oversized Aprons mounted against the wall and Arm Pillows suspended from the ceiling. One imagined that a gigantic earth mother had just left the room. Lee celebrates and honors women's domestic duties by bestowing heroic status on objects that normally go unnoticed. At first glance *Apron 3: Her Earth is Warm*, 2004, has a quilt-like appearance, except for the pleated ruffle at the bottom and apron strings trailing to the floor. Despite the partially diaphanous material, its presence is overwhelming. Each square contains or is overlapped by amoebic shapes and circles of appliquéd rice paper and doilies. Embroidered into place, they are surrounded by exuberantly expressive stitched lines. One cannot help being reminded of Matisse's *Joie de Vivre*.



Spirals, ancient symbols of spirituality, are another recurring theme. This affirmation of life is evident in the titles of the Apron pieces—such as *Seed Pods* and *Maternity*. Earth pigments impart deep, rich hues, resulting in a surface reminiscent of Italian marble. Reflecting a modern, abstract aesthetic, the Aprons are simultaneously flat and dimensional.

The Arm Pillow pieces, like floating wind socks, are full of visual surprises. Looking at and through the layers of tarlatan, one sees changing yet interacting planes. Stitches hold the familiarly shaped appliqués in place, but they also surround and draw attention to cutouts, which form windows and voids, underlined by sharply ironed directional creases. “Arm pillow” in Korean means *pallbegae*, a mother’s comforting and cradling presence. Lee’s arm and breast pillows are metaphors for a mother’s body—soft, yet protective and strong. They are, Lee says, “symbols of women’s hard work, their unconditional love for the family and [their role] as nurturers and givers of comfort.”

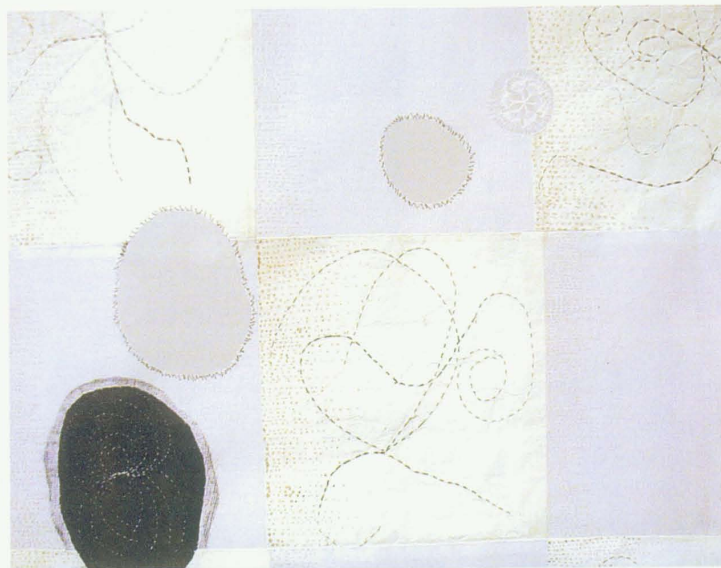
Although Lee’s work is undeniably feminine in subject matter, its minimalist style has universal appeal. By means of a singular artistic vision and nontraditional materials and techniques, she has achieved a transfiguration of images that might easily have slid into sentimentality. Her two variations of *Seed Pods on Clothesline*, for instance, are starkly abstract, evocative pieces whose interpretations are entirely personal and open-ended. She is, in her words, “exploring the boundaries of art making.” At the same time, she is a storyteller recalling a vanishing way of life. While motherhood has not changed, female domestic chores certainly have. The needle skills Lee so vividly conjures up are unknown to modern young women pursuing professional careers. Her work, therefore, not only preserves ancient skills but suggests their metamorphosis into a universal language of art.

Ke-Sook Lee’s art resonates because it is at once ancient and modern. A woman of two countries, she stands between cultures and generations. She has listened to her ancestors, to women in their private sphere, to her garden and to the exigencies of contemporary mark making. From the experiences of her life she has created a multilayered yet unified body of work proving the extraordinary power of art to transform the ordinary. ■

Sigrid Wortmann Weltge is professor emerita at Philadelphia University and the author of Bauhaus Textiles: Women Artists and the Weaving Workshop (Thames and Hudson, 1998).



Apron 3: Her Earth is Warm, 2004, overall and detail, stitched rice paper, tarlatan, doilies, earth pigment, approximately 75 by 71 inches, photo/Jen Macartney. OPPOSITE PAGE: *Apron 4: Seed Pods*, photo/E. G. Sempf.





Apron 4: Seed Pods (on wall), approximately 70 by 65 inches, and *Arm Pillows 1 and 2* (suspended from ceiling), length 61 inches, girth 39 inches, and length 58 inches, girth 36 inches, all 2004, stitched rice paper, tartan, doilies, earth pigment. BELOW: Detail of *Apron 4*.

