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Karen Reimer

Prime numbers, humdrum sources and brainy embroidery



(Image at left: # 19, from the series 'Endless Set' (2007-8))

In an incongruous collision between the mathematics of prime numbers and quotidian craft Karen Reimer's 'Endless Set' (2008) is her most ambitious series to date. Primes are an unlimited sequence of numbers greater than 1 that can be divided only by 1 and themselves: for example, 27 is a prime number, while 28 is composite, divisible by 2, 4, 7, and 14. Combining irregularly shaped fabrics in quilt-like patterns on pillowcases, Reimer's strategy was to stitch white integers onto the cases whose title represents the dimensions of the appliquéd number: i.e., the first integer, #2, measures 2 inches and at the same time dictates the number of printed fabrics arranged on the case. The larger the number, the greater the number of fabrics needed for the case and the smaller the pieces used to constitute it. The results are unexpectedly lyrical and seductively decorative, particularly in the first set of numbers, from 2 to 31, *Primer*, in which Reimer attaches remnants – shirting stripes, geometric and floral patches – and scraps from her mother's sewing basket. As the sequence progresses, the discrepancy between the scale of the figures and the multiplying fragments becomes absurdly compelling.

In her earlier work pairing the physicality of craft techniques with semiotics and appropriation, Chicago-based Reimer, embroidered across the pages of books (*The Consequences of Relativity*, 1999), discarded newspapers and even gum wrappers (*Juicy Fruit*, 1999). What started as mass-produced items with visual information, patterns or texts became partially obliterated grounds for unique originals. Reimer's brainy embroidery offers a brilliant paraphrasing of humdrum sources. When she took as her framework the printed floral patterns on a white upholstered fabric (*The Real and the Ideal*, 2005), she carefully sliced some out and reinforced the remainders with silk thread. Reimer's background as a painter is everywhere integrated in these antic juxtapositions where disciplines and practices converge. But in 'Endless Set' she has set aside the obscuring and recovery of found objects in a critique of originality, instead ratcheting up her ambitious goals for modest materials.

Indeed, by the time Reimer arrives at #19 (19 inches high), the digits are so over-sized that the curves exceed the dimensions of the pillowcase, requiring a vertical fold to straighten its contour. (These folds follow an order not unlike the logical, often infuriating, systems governing the folding sections of a map.) At the same time that the coloured patchwork backgrounds disappear under ever-expanding white folds, flatly ironed seams and creases lend the whole a sense of intricately varied monochrome abstraction. While the divergence between the scales of figure and ground increases in 'Endless Set', any commercial associations or whimsy remaining in the patterns of the textiles have been literally suppressed. Inexorably Reimer's folds render the white numbers illegible and the eventually obscured colourful fragments invisible in a feat of double erasure. Reimer's sense of urgency and obsession has become increasingly

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complex and, paradoxically, abstract. Even feminist associations – this is, after all, traditionally the stuff of women’s handicraft, as well as bedding materials with obvious somatic resonance – are mediated by minimal serial aesthetics reminiscent of Dorothea Rockburne’s geometries.

What makes Reimer’s iteration of a systematic process so moving is the way these pillowslips count as collected memories. As though fatigued by the very thickness that gives them heft and the magnitude of this infinite task, numbers 89, 97 and 101 are installed on tables. Indeed, 101 is three times the size of the case it relates to; it has become independently substantial, a densely three-dimensional object whose stack of folds gives the impression of soft bindings.

Reimer’s laborious process shapes the aesthetic function of a mathematical paradox; she has deliberately transformed the humility and utility of bed linens into a potentially infinite series of subjective poetics. Her stitches and increasingly sophisticated thinking lead to unlimited formal variation – the larger the number, the greater the layers; the larger the number, the more image becomes heavy object; the larger the number, the smaller its constituent parts – allowing a range of emotional and metaphorical interpretations. To relegate this painstaking fabrication to a contemporary DIY context would be a mistake of over-simplification, since neither the aspect of recycling nor the obviously gendered collaging Reimer has undertaken has been fetishized. Between the visualization of overlapping ghostly numerals and the gaps between primes, the only way to recognize the numbers is to return to the preceding integers and begin counting all over again. The poignancy of this serial project, doomed to incompleteness and sustained by our desire for more, derives its qualities from the concentrated intuition of Reimer’s veilings more than from their infinite source. With ‘Endless Set’ she has suspended the functional economy of prosaic pillowcases so that they become unique placeholders, white-on-white palimpsests in an orderly progression and episodes in a narrative dream work whose conclusion might ultimately be reduced to threads.

Judith Kirshner



above left: *The Real and the Ideal*, 2005, embroidered fabric; middle: *Juicy Fruit*, 1999, embroidered fabric; right: from the series *Endless Set*, 2007-8, embroidery on cotton pillowcases.

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