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Devorah Sperber: Thread Spools

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Devorah Sperber at work, ph Jennifer May, courtesy the artist

DEVORAH SPERBER

THREAD SPOOLS



interview by LEDA CEMPELLIN
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LC: Let's start from your artistic background.
DS: I started out as a stone carver in Colorado. It's quite intimidating, because once you remove a chip of stone you can't put it back; and often the further along you progress with a sculpture, the more you like it, and thus the more fearful you become that you will make a mistake that you can't fix. At that point, I would either start becoming reckless with the stone, or walk away for a while. I spent ten years creating stone sculptures, observing my brain go through all the different defense mechanisms it has for self-protection. I believe these years of introspection made it possible for me to pursue the body of work with thread spools I am known for.
LC: What else exercised an influence on your spool thread work?
DS: I started doing these works in mid-to late Nineties, and that's when people first started sending each other JPGs. Photos were large, but the resolution was so low that you would see little color blocks in the pictures. The pixels were so obvious. Also at the same time in NYC, artists were first been asked to transfer 35 mm. slides of their work onto digital CDs, and you were able to see for the first time your sculptural works on a computer screen. I remember being shocked by the implications that digital pixels could have on sculpture. This eventually led to contemplating how pixels could be translated into 3D physical forms. I did the first work on my own, without the use of a computer. I had the thread company send me one spool of each color available. I enlarged the chosen photo on my computer monitor to 800%, which was the maximum enlargement available back then. I literally matched each pixel on the computer monitor to a thread spool next to my desk 5760 times. It took three months, but it turned out that I was capable of matching colors close enough to maintain the image's integrity. This first work, *Reflections on a Lake*, is a shoreline view of Lake Tahoe.
LC: When and how did you develop the idea of using convex mirrors to create imagery?
DS: When I created my first thread spool work my studio in New York City was very small, about 250 square feet so I couldn't back up enough to actually see if the image was recognizable. You know, the further back you get, the smaller the pixels become, and the more clear

the photographic image becomes. I was standing out in the hall and it still wasn't far enough. My studio mate owned binoculars; I flipped them around and they dramatically condensed the image back into its photographic roots. It gave me a gasping moment: it was the beginning of understanding how what we think of as reality is based on the perception of the human eye and brain which is very limited. From there I began to use different optical devices. Many of my works incorporate viewing spheres, because they shrink and condense imagery like the human eyes and brain, inverting imagery 180 degrees while also making sense of the raw data that is out there in the world around us. The viewing sphere became a great metaphor for human perception.
LC: I like this duality of image dispersion and condensation. There is also a dialogue between abstraction and realism that connects your work with the history of art.
DS: Right. The person can actually see that there are two realities, each of them being equally important to me, how the work looks when seen through the viewing sphere and how it looks in its abstract state when seen directly with bare eyes. The original connection to the old masters was based on my researching and understanding that artists throughout the history of art making have always been influenced by the technologies of their eras, whether it was just finding a way to make a new colored pigment, or inventing ways to carve stone. I am very transparent about the links to the technology that I'm using. If you just flip through the pictures of David Hockney's book *Secrets of the Masters*, you get a sense of how painting radically changed with the advent of the convex mirror.
LC: Is your relationship with technology evolving?
DS: In 1998 the pixel was at the head of technology, but now it is rather blasé. I am moving away into a new series of work that uses new technology, some of which is so new that it is changing as I am working on these pieces, so my work is currently in a state of flux yet moving forward. I am currently using a 3d program, *Blender*, which is an open source software that is being developed by hundreds of people around the globe. It is a fascinating concept that a highly complex program has been developed by a network of strangers. I am also incorporating digital video,

and I am using panoramic photographs that allow you to scan around a 3D environment as though you are actually there. My new series sort of invites people to step inside one of my viewing spheres, so they can experience the work in a totally immersive fashion vs. being on the outside looking in. It's been as exciting to pursue this new series as it was to develop the first pixelated work. The concept has forced me to learn many new technologies, which is definitely challenging but also very exciting. The new work is actually not on my website, because I am not putting it out there until I have my first exhibition.
LC: Other works, like *Star Trek* and *Bus Shower Power* are quite different from the Spool Thread works. Would you expand on the thought behind them?
DS: *VW Bus: Shower Power* was created along with a series of maptack bandanas and bikinis that are all cultural icons of the Sixties. I actually own a 1975 Volkswagen bus, that's how much I love that era and what it represents. This work was somewhat inspired by David Brook's *Bobos of Paradise*, which talks about all the people who were hippies are now in power, the movers and shakers of our time. In regards to *Star Trek*, I loved the many technological advancements presented in that series that later became real objects like the cellphone, but more important for me was that several *Star Trek* episodes explored storylines with parallel realities / mirror universes which have been of great interest to me since childhood. Also I loved that the *Star Trek* Transporter was conceived to transport people down to the planet. It was inspired by a lack of budget to build a shuttle set, just like we artists are limited by the size of our studios and the size of our budgets. And I love *Star Trek*!
LC: Do you think there will be conservation issues with the thread spool work?
DS: Actually the thread has very good longevity. As far as the color goes, it does not fade quickly like a sofa does. It's similar to Renaissance tapestries: if they are kept where they have good air circulation, they have great longevity. They can also be vacuumed and every one to two hundred years (or so) they can just unwind one layer of thread - not that I recommend that, though. In any case, my work is going to live well beyond me.