

Text and Textile: Lisa Kokin

by Maria Porges

1. *Breath is the thread that ties creation together.* -Morihei Ureshiba

Thread is the place where the textile subtext of our lives begins and ends, and the slender connection to everything between. As a material, thread winds its way so far back in time that it is impossible to determine or even imagine who might have first made it, twisting plant fibers or animal hair. Its starring role in myths and fairytales has made it a metaphor for everything from stealth to patience, continuity to endurance. Thread connects, corrects, mends and embellishes. It has even entered the world of the internet, as a term for chained remarks on a topic in an online discussion.

For Lisa Kokin, thread has always been both idea and material. Her parents were upholsterers by trade; her grandmother worked in a tie factory. Kokin got her first sewing machine at nine, and soon began making her own clothes. As an artist, her work has included a range of methods and materials, but thread itself has connected many of the parts of her career—stitching together books, photographs, paper, or buttons, among other things.

In art as well as life, thread's role depends on how it is employed. Woven, it becomes a surface, goods, stuff-- a *thing*. In contrast, when used to sew, thread serves as a means, connecting or decorating other materials. In Kokin's most recent body of work, thread occupies a magical place between these two, becoming the matrix for its own messages. These texts—and there are actual words, in the majority of these floating webs of thread—are, for the most part, the utterances and writings of Kokin's mother Mollie in the last part of an extraordinarily long life which ended in December of 2011, only a few months short of 100 years.

Living with dementia and physically fragile, Mollie Kokin spent her final years in a skilled nursing facility. Just before she passed away, it seemed as though she knew that the end was imminent—or had in some sense become ready for it, which can be the same thing. During a visit with her two days before her mother's death, Kokin remembers Mollie saying emphatically, over and over, "Take me home NOW."

Over the following weeks and months, Kokin found herself wanting to focus on those four words, and *take me home now* became the basis of several pieces. Using embroidery thread in her machine, she sewed the words, over and over, in different formats. In two horizontally-oriented rectangles, the word *now* is most clearly readable, standing out in a way that recalls Mollie Kokin's emphasis on it. The stitched script, chains of thread and words, evokes both stria and strata—scratched marks on the surface of rock, as well as successive layers, accumulated over time. The horizontal rectangle suggests an open book, its pages completely covered with scribbled words.

This idea of marks serving as a kind of record-making or -keeping is evoked even more strongly in the circular works that followed in this series. Including the word *record* in their titles, Kokin creates a double meaning, referring not only to the notation of speech that these represent, but additionally to the resemblance of these pieces to vinyl LPs. The words *take me home now* are stitched in a spiral, like the grooves into which a needle enters to play a record's sound. At the same time, the densely sewn circles of text resemble tree rings, and the pieces' overall form invokes clocks, sundials, and countless other measuring devices.

In Kokin's previous work, color has often been determined by the materials themselves—the bright hues of book spines and covers, the tans and greys of pulped pages, the black and white of old photographs. *Record (Derma)* is a disc of sewn words, in shades of red and purple with hints of vivid yellow. As the title poetically infers, these colors represent the range of tints Kokin saw in her mother's fragile, bruised skin over the many hours spent just observing her, sitting by her side. As with the stubbornly faithful use of transcribed text represented in this and other works, Kokin has created a visual record of what she saw.

In *Transcript (Kaddish)*, the same range of colors have been used to stitch the words of last conversation Kokin had with her mother—a disjointed, oddly poetic exchange about taking a trip, getting ready to go somewhere. This metaphorically-charged exchange spirals outwards from a small opening in the center, the thread dense and dark at first, but ending in a lucent yellow. Under these words, Kokin has sewn a Hebrew text in progressively lighter shades of blue. It is the Kaddish: prayers that are spoken as part of the mourning ritual in Judaism.

Prayers in Hebrew also appear in the haunting works titled *Ninety-nine Leaves #1* and *#2*. These veils of pale leaf 'skeletons' composed of thread incorporate delicate shreds of printed text taken from an all-but-destroyed prayer book Kokin found at a salvage yard. In these pieces, there is one leaf for each of the years of her mother's life. Kokin found and pressed the actual leaves that served as a pattern for her thread creations in the course of a walk she took a few hours after her mother died. These familiar shapes—maple, oak, eucalyptus-- are potent symbols of the evanescent nature of life itself, and its eventual and inevitable end.

In one form or another, death has been one of the central materials and themes in Kokin's work: through her frequent use of pictures of long-deceased people, her considerations of the Holocaust, her elegies for her father. Now, she remarks, she is truly an orphan. Yet these webs of thread are by their very nature connection itself, serving as a reminder that friends and loved ones are around us. Even the dead are not completely gone, as long as we live, remaining as memories, in word and image.

2. An invisible red thread connects those who are destined to meet regardless of time, place or circumstance. The thread may stretch or tangle, but it will never break.—Chinese proverb

Like the *Record* series, *Motif* is round. Unlike those works, however, it consists of a series of concentric circles rather than a spiral, and its 'text' is an image of a mother and child, rendered in thread, dozens of times. These two close figures in contrasting dresses are Kokin and her mother, based on a photograph taken in 1960.

Traces of red thread appear in the web of stitches that join the hypnotic, mandala-like circles of tiny couples. These sanguine bits go nowhere, yet they invoke the umbilical cord that once connected girl and mother-- and, perhaps, the invisible connection described in the Chinese proverb above. Whatever they might signify, they are all but invisible from only a few steps away. They are a reminder (for the sharp-eyed and observant) of the many ways in which Kokin has followed the path of her singular imagination, creating worlds of wonder out of simple materials such as paper, buttons, old photographs and thread-- essentially inventing ways to make what she needed to see in the world. In the work presented in this exhibition, her elegiac memorials for her mother connect her vision to our own memories and losses; to love, and to remembrance.

Maria Porges

Maria Porges is an artist and writer. She is represented by John Berggruen Gallery in San Francisco. She received a SECA award from the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and has twice been in residence at the Headlands Center for the Arts. For over two decades, Porges' critical writing has appeared in many publications, including Artforum, Art in America, Sculpture, American Ceramics, Glass, the New York Times Book Review, and a host of other now-defunct art magazines. She has also authored essays for more than 60 exhibition catalogues and dozens of scripts for museum audio tours.

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