

Mieke van den Berg

In-Between: [re]winding life's thread

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This exhibition follows a bright red ball of wool. Here, it appears in the hands of the artist. There, it tangles around chairs. And everywhere we imagine it in our own hands. To make this sensation real, Mieke van den Berg sets a ball of wool in a wicker basket and invites us to unwind and rewind its thread. Drifting in and out of mindfulness, the simple task encourages patience, slowness and daydreams of craft, childhood and home. As you return the re-wound ball of wool to the kitchen table, the artist encourages us to leave these thoughts behind, signalling her desire to alleviate our daily woes or deeper troubles.

Thread is one of our oldest and most widespread technologies. The earliest fibres still in existence today date back 30,000 years. Beads found in Europe and Africa suggest the truly ancient presence of thread up to 300,000 years ago. In turn, our histories, myths and religions brim with stories of string. In Ancient Greek mythology, three old women spun, measured and cut the thread of every human life. Similarly in Old Norse, *seiðr* described the shamanistic practice of telling the future by spinning it into being. The word, *seiðr*, has etymological roots in sorcery and string. South Sudan's Neur people tell the story of Kwoth, who allowed humans to travel on a string between Heaven and Earth. When a hyena severed the string, humankind was stranded on Earth, making us mortal. In Chinese, Japanese and Korean myth, an invisible red thread connects every human to their soulmate. And in Genesis, a midwife used a bracelet of scarlet thread to mark the first born of twins, sealing his inheritance and destiny. Today, some adherents of mystical Judaism wear the same scarlet wool bracelet to ward off the evil eye. Across these stories, string speaks of life and death, fate, connection and protection.

For van den Berg, red wool conjures both these universal themes and humbler memories of sitting on the floor as her Mother and Grandmother prepared their knitting wool. Now a mother herself, the artist repeats this act with her daughter in *Matriline* (2021). In van den Berg's art, wool is a commonplace object, a crafting material imbued with labour, love and skill, an artistic readymade, and a vessel for specific and uncomfortable memories. Those of us whose mothers knitted will remember the prickly scratch of a freshly knitted jumper, and complex feelings aroused by knitted presents, of newness and austerity, gratefulness and guilt.

This complex symbolism plays out in the formal and affective variety of van den Berg's work. In *Endless Thread* (2021), wool appears as a singular thread, evidencing the artist's movement through space and time. The work recalls Francis Alÿs' equally purposeless walk, *In Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing* (1997), where the artist pushed a block of ice through Mexico City. In *Mending* (2021), wool is both neat and strong, knotted and messy. In *[Re]Tracing the Thread* (2021), wool's capacity to bind is also its potential for harm. As the artist wraps wool around her head, the red of the thread pre-empts marks cut into her skin. Here the artist's economy of materials, and painful performance, mirrors Marina Abramović's

reiterative art practice. Finally, in *Subliminal I* and *II* (2021), wool ensnares, tangles and dangles chairs in mid-air.

Wool binds van den Berg's practice into a cohesive artistic investigation. Ideas of home, though subtler, are equally present in all of her works, especially her miniatures. Each fragment depicts a real house in the artist's life. Like a dollhouse enthusiast, van den Berg is fastidious in her attention to detail, recreating rooms with photographic records and "real" materials and construction techniques. As she makes, van den Berg works through her memories, joining a chorus of women artists who also addressed domestic space, from Berthe Morisot to Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro's *Womanhouse* (1972). These are places where she once belonged. But they are also empty. In each room, broken threads fall from a chair. The peculiarity of the fragments brings to mind women Surrealists, like Louise Bourgeois, Dorothea Tanning and Leonora Fini, whose domestic dreamscapes are tinged with the horror of nightmares. As these works and their haunting titles—*Drift*, *Stranded*, *Fractured Seams*, *Mending Walls* and *Threading* (all 2021)—reveal, for van den Berg the dualisms of life and death, comfort and pain, belonging and insecurity always hang by a delicate, and complicated, thread.

Words by Dr Louise R Mayhew

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