

ARTFORUM

INTERVIEWS

ELAINE REICHEK

April 10, 2018 • As told to Lauren O'Neill-Butler



Elaine Reichek, *Toutes les filles (All the Girls)*, 2016–17, hand embroidery on linen, 50 1/2 x 79".

Everything old is new again, and vice versa. Elaine Reichek is a New York–born and –bred artist who has long engaged with some of the women of ancient Greek myths in her works, often via hand embroidery and digital sewing. Her latest exhibition, “Now If I Had Been Writing This Story,” which takes its title from a poem by Stevie Smith, features ten works from the past eleven years and is on view at the Secession in Vienna from April 13 to June 3, 2018.

FOR THIS SHOW, I wanted to spotlight part of a long ongoing body of work. It consists of two series: “Ariadne’s Thread” and “Minoan Girls.” They’re really the same project. Because the Secession is historically a particularly rich place, I’ve chosen works that I felt would both comment on and amplify the site. Gustav Klimt’s *Beethoven Frieze* is in the building, and most visitors to the museum go to see that. And if they wander into the contemporary art shows, well, good.

This work deals with the telling, retelling, and deconstructing of rather primal narratives of desire and betrayal, but also of rape, incest, and bestiality. And now it’s sited in this unique building, in which classical motifs are married to a modern slab structure. The Vienna Secessionists’ Latin motto, “*Ver Sacrum*,” refers to classical art as an eternal and unending source of inspiration. So, for me, this presents a nice opportunity to go back and forth between the old and the new—which I always toggle between. There’s also a long tradition, of course, of the decorative arts in Vienna. One of the Secession’s main ideas was to level the

field, on the one hand, between traditional painting and sculpture and, on the other hand, bookmaking, design, textile production, and the “applied arts.” The kind of modernism that it introduced, which itself shuttles back and forth between high art and craft, is still a topic of conversation in the art world.

I was trained as a painter—I’m not trained in craft. But craft was an avenue for me to investigate and has a truly interesting and engaging alternative history, which I felt carried its own meaning. It also allowed me to develop a language that wasn’t as reliant on the dominant language of high modernism. So, after going to grad school at Yale in 1964 and getting out of an all-male mostly painting tradition, I began to use thread. It suited my purposes.

“Ariadne’s Thread” is named after the clue of thread that Ariadne gives Theseus in order to navigate his way in and out of the labyrinth and slay the Minotaur. Of course, the thanks she gets—after plotting the murder of her half brother—is that Theseus abandons her! They sail off together to the island of Crete, she goes to sleep—you snooze you lose—and when she gets up, he’s sailing away. The stories of the Minoan girls are about their unbridled desires and transgressions. Of course, the original myths attribute agency only to the gods, but in my retelling, each woman is conscious of her role in the story.

[video]

Excerpts from an interview with [Elaine Reichek](#)

The piece that will introduce the show as you go up the staircase is an appropriated [Eugène Atget](#) photograph of a statue at Versailles, a copy of a Roman copy of a Greek statue of Ariadne. Under it, I’ve quoted lines from [Giorgio de Chirico’s](#) poem “The Statue’s Desire.” Inside the main gallery, one wall will be covered with an eighteenth-century neoclassical wallpaper taken from the Hamilton House in Maine. I wanted this backdrop to function like a framing device. There’s a lot of framing and reframing in my work, which act metaphorically. I also wanted to highlight how neoclassicism in America is different from neoclassicism in Europe, and how in this young country we never really had a large artisanal class.

I felt I needed to represent all four of the Minoan girls: Europa, the grand matriarch; her daughter-in-law Pasiphaë; and her granddaughters Ariadne and Phaedra. So, I took an image of Klimt’s famous *Tree of Life* and turned it into the Minoan girls’ genealogy sampler. Because the gods produced a variety of offspring with numerous partners, it’s hard to keep track of who begat whom.

Pattern and repetition, both textual and visual, are other things I wanted to emphasize. Bulls appear repeatedly in these myths, the two sisters hook up with the very same Theseus, and you can barely keep track of the suicides. Visual patterns appear both in the wallpaper and in the textile pattern of *You Coasts (Ocher)*, which features Europa perched on Zeus who is in disguise as a bull. I found this pattern on the Victoria and Albert Museum’s website and had it silkscreened on linen, and then I added embroidery and stitched a quote from the ancient Greek poet Nonnus, in which Europa assigns Zeus three different roles: “You coasts, pray tell my loving father that Europa has left her native land seated on a bull, my *kidnapper*, my *captain*, and, I think, my *husband*.”

Then there’s *I Wonder Sometimes*, featuring a rather rapey image of Pasiphaë, with her own bull—a real one!—which I’ve taken from [André Masson’s](#) painting and paired with my own cobbled-together translation from *Pasiphaë: Chant de Minos* by the reactionary poet [Henry de Montherlant](#).

The show has both hand-embroidered work and embroideries made by a digital sewing machine. One of these digital embroideries, *I Wonder Why*, includes photographs of [Sarah Bernhardt](#) playing Phaedra, first as a young woman and later on a farewell tour. Another piece is a riff on Jasper Johns's work, with embroidered text highlighting the words *desire*, *dread*, and *despair* in the repeated names Ariadne, Theseus, and Phaedra. *Ariadne in Crete* remakes a poster created by [John Currin](#) for a production of the Richard Strauss opera *Ariadne auf Naxos*. In my rendition Ariadne is even more exaggerated than as he painted her, and the text by Seneca reads, "No daughter of Minos has ever got off lightly in love—sin is always attached!" Another embroidery on canvas mesh, *You Were the Heroine*, allows you to see the stretcher bars behind the surface, part of the backstory.

The newest and largest embroidery, *Toutes les filles*, trades language for gesture. Because the myths began as performances enacted by wandering poets, long before they were written down, gesture is an essential part of each narrative. *Toutes les filles* has twenty-four images representing Europa and her daughters, which I fished out of the sea of Google Images I trawl through regularly. I stitched each image on pink linen in four rows of six. Ariadne is well represented, in her coded pose—hand behind head—that was so well known to the moderns. [Henri Matisse](#) used it in *Blue Nude*, which appears here and in my nine-part *Swatch* piece that's lined up on shelves in a cabinet outside of the gallery space. Back to *Toutes les filles*—Pasiphaë appears, as do Phaedra, with arms thrown up in her iconic gesture of grief, and Europa, looking over her shoulder toward the shore as she is being abducted. These women convey their stories not only within the texts, but also through their bodies.

— *As told to* [Lauren O'Neill-Butler](#)

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