

All that is common is thread in Southwest School's celebration of a medium

DARNING TRADITION

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Mend, a video by San Antonio artist Karen Mahaffy, clearly sets the tone for Southwest School of Art & Craft's invitational exhibition "Drawing the Thread." Side-by-side monitors play recordings of Mahaffy's hands as she rips old stitches from one garment and sews new stitches into another.

It's a fitting metaphor for the precarious position that thread-based art occupies in contemporary practice. Fraught with aesthetic, practical, and social history, thread poses a mighty challenge to those who dare to sew "outside the box." Not surprisingly, the twenty artists in this smart, satisfying collaboration from Director Paula Owen and Associate Curator Kathy Armstrong-Gillis distinguish themselves by working with and against thread's cultural baggage.

One group uses thread to shock. Bettie Ward's *The Love of a Shaman* is a nearly-naughty, Cocteau-influenced tablecloth. On white linen, a mythic being sprouts fantastic genitalia amid prim, embroidered flowers. Karen Reimer also uses thread to draw pictures, but her uncannily precise repro-

ductions of torn envelopes, receipts, and other worthless scraps of paper are truly unexpected gestures from the medium. Likewise, cryptic references to slavery, Japanese illustration, and sexual abuse make D.R. Wagner's *Sorrowing Sampler* a strange, inscrutable work executed in a traditional form.

"DRAWING THE THREAD"

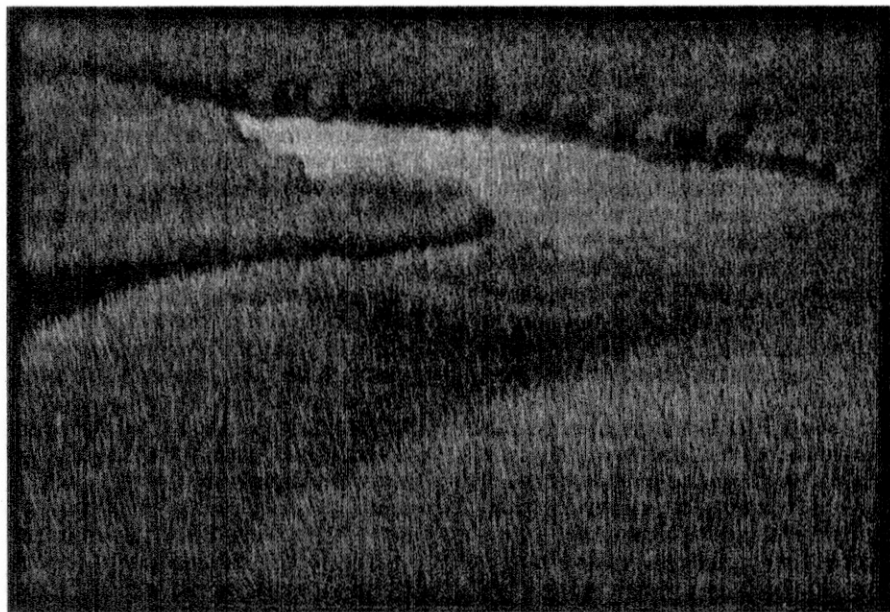
"MARY FIELDING MCCLEARY: BEGINNING WITH THE WORD"

Through Nov 3
Russell Hill
Rogers Galleries I
and II,
Southwest School
of Art & Craft,
Navarro Campus,
1201 Navarro,
224-1848

the mountain's rise.

In other pieces, humor and poignancy are intensified by careful thread work. Dar-

rel Morris' small quilt *Allowed to Open the Door* features an abject, green-faced doorman for a building of giants. Stephen Beal's *Dancing Popes* is a goofy, beautiful chorus line floating above the needlepoint rooftops of Vatican City. Additional artists stun by sheer force their craft and its masterful application to an artistic idea. Linda Behar's *Salt Marsh III* is a tiny, astounding piece in which every stitch articulates one of a million blades of grass.



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"Drawing the Thread" is the perfect companion to "Beginning with the Word," Mary Fielding McCleary's exhibition of deeply eccentric Biblical illustrations "woven" from decorative objects, colored rope, and odds and ends. Yes, the Good Book is as old as thread, but apparently neither is obsolete, as demonstrated by these two first-rate shows. ●

Linda Behar's *Salt Marsh III*, 1997, embroidery, 4x5.825 inches

REVIEW