

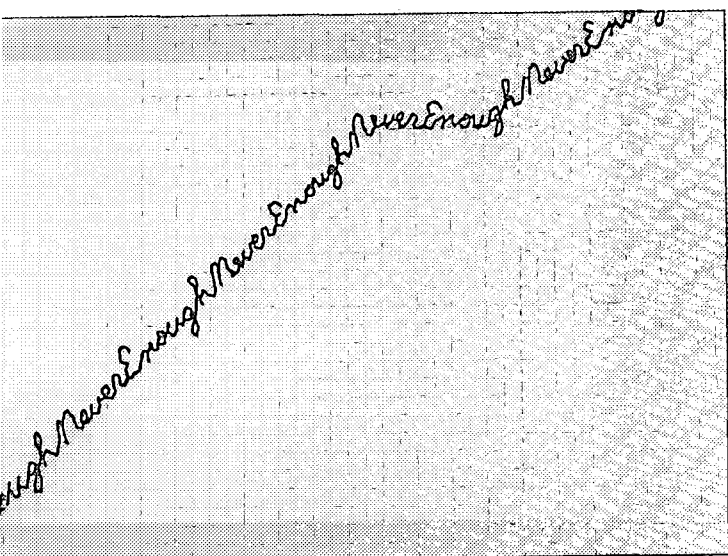
Take the work *Forgive Not Forget* (2005), a found handkerchief upon which Julia Chiang has hand embroidered a continuous, asyntactic text that reads, 'forgivenotforget-forgive...'. To be clear, it does not really read at all. Lacking any spacing, the text begins to fragment – 'give', 'not', 'forg', 'etf', 'or' – and then loses any and all semantic substance. But what exactly was that substance? There is a 'not' where normally an 'and' would be. Isn't one meant to forgive *and* forget; to 'move on', to 'let it go', to 'not hold a grudge'? This exchange of negation for conjunction, or rather, this negation of conjunction, seems both a prohibition against forgetting and a tax on forgiveness. But is this not a double bind, this forgiveness without forgetting? Or is it somehow closer to true reconciliation? And

if the handkerchief is a found object, does this mean it too is forgotten? Does this make it a personal effect without a cause? Such questions accept that there is a message here at all, a message which the unbroken letters trouble, just as the handkerchief's patterning, and its missing past, trouble it again. So if there is a message, it must have something to do with repetition.

The obsessive-compulsive is one who repeats. It is said that such a person recognizes the futility and irrationality of their behaviour, which is why it is all the more maddening. But that disorder attaches itself to very specific kinds of behaviour, such as the checking and rechecking of ovens, the turning off and on of lights, or the taking care not to step on any living thing no matter how

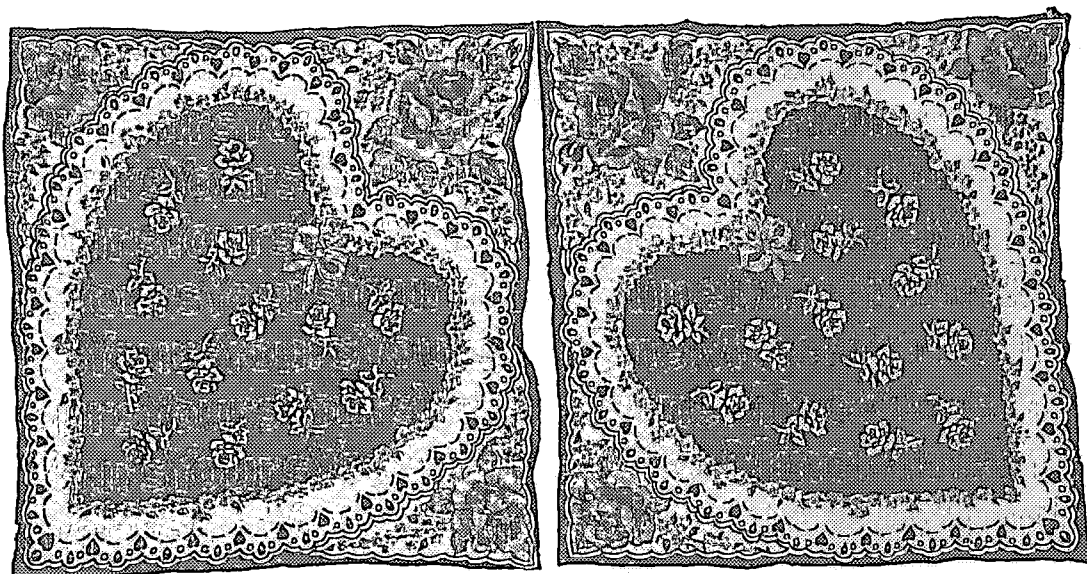
small. This is a compulsive caring for one's world which guarantees its disintegration. But like the other handkerchiefs of its kind – *We Are So Happy* (2005), *Everything Is Fine* (2005), *Yours, Mine* (2005) – *Forgive Not Forget* is not compulsive, but aims at what Chiang has called 'healing through repetition'. Stitching a single saying over and over again invokes a different kind of care. It reflects less a compulsion to repeat than a replacement of a lost conviction. Like Pascal's directive, if practised enough, prayer eventually leads to belief.

Chiang's embroidery is not limited to handkerchiefs, however, but is a strategy deployed across a diverse range of works. There are *Your Expectations of Me* (2005) and *Never Enough* (2005), embroidered graphs



From left
Never Enough, 2005
hand embroidery on paper,
each sheet 22 x 56 cm

Yours, Mine, 2005
hand embroidery on found
handkerchief
29 x 57 cm



Emerging Artists Between Embroidery And Suture

Julia Chiang's stitches in time
by Jonathan T.D. Neil

reminiscent of EKGs or the day's stock market gains; and there is *Almost Perfect* (2004), an embroidery reading 'iloveyouiloveyou...' on vellum sheets that stretch the length of a wall. (Recently, the artist has begun to apply her craft in more iconic ways by stitching images of white picket-fences.) Yet it is difficult not to hear the disingenuousness of such phrasing after a while. The words themselves attest to nothing more than a need to objectify a habit of mind. What is more, these words have no origins. The phrases themselves are found objects, a kind of linguistic sedimentation which is picked up and passed along as a token, or what some would call cliché. Such language is so calloused from overuse that it cannot help but signify its opposite; irony is a Janus-faced character, otherwise it is simply a lie.

Below from left
Forgive Not Forget, 2005
hand embroidery on found
handkerchief, 26 x 27 cm

Untitled (iloveyou), 2004
etched glass on found
mirror and frame, 36 cm
diameter, 3 cm deep

Chiang's work certainly has that character, but to call it 'ironic' would seem a too-easy relief of the work's animating tensions. For example, the myth of Narcissus bears no uncertain irony, yet Chiang's series of mirrors, *Untitled* (2003-5), whose grounds she etched so as to leave only the familiar bands of 'iloveyouiloveyou...'; challenge such an easy correlation. To see ourselves in these mirrors requires that we look past the message inscribed on their surfaces, but then our only reward is a fragmented face.

Perhaps it is enough to say that the diastole and systole of Chiang's art lies in the beat between 'embroidery' and 'suture'. As mentioned before, the act of embroidery carries with it a sensibility that seems to negate the compulsive through the slowness

of care. 'Suture', on the other hand, flips such a sensibility on its head. It, too, marks a certain kind of care, but one that is clinical and often intensive. The suture is the mark of a cut and its closure, and, after a while, it is meant to disappear. It was this disappearing act which led 1970s film theorists to adopt 'suture' as a term to describe how we, the spectators, are unknowingly stitched into a film's narrative fabric. And it was the perceived passivity of this experience which led certain members of the avant-garde to want to reveal those stitches and, in some cases, to tear them out. Chiang does not seem interested in such tearing just yet, but it would not be wrong to say that her work is bent on revealing how a certain empty language of signs and symbols gets woven into our everyday lives.



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in Time

SOURCE: Mod Painters JI/Ag 2005

WN: 0518201632014

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