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Stephen Sollins' handiwork needles some stitch crafters



Kenneth Baker

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With the revisionist embroideries by New York artist [Stephen Sollins](#), Brian Gross Fine Art has brought one of the smartest shows of the season (through Saturday) before the Bay Area art public.

Startlingly, after my appreciative review appeared online, the show brought Gross a slew of angry e-mails from as far away as Russia. They come from needleworkers incensed by Sollins' unstitching of cheap, mass-marketed embroideries to reorder their colored threads into monochrome rectangles on the original perforated fabric grounds.

"I do embroidery and can't imagine having that done to one of my pieces," one correspondent wrote. "He may think he is creating a new piece of art, but . . . he is destroying an old piece with no regard for the stitcher/artist before him."

"I hope someday, someone comes along and destroys what he is doing in the name of art!" wrote another.

As the outrage spread in stitch-craft chat rooms, so did the misconstruction of facts. Several people accused Brian Gross of having assisted Sollins in deconstructing embroideries. "I hope some day you find whatever is missing in your life that requires you to do such heinous things in the name of art," one protester wrote.

Sollins felt compelled to reply. "I do realize that I have undone someone's labor, and I take full responsibility for this," he wrote to the complainants. But "the embroideries I am taking apart are not 'original' works. They are mass-produced items from the 1940s and '50s in which a person follows printed or stamped directions to achieve a predetermined result. There may be some choices made by each needleworker ... and I know exactly how many hours of work was involved in making each one, but these embroideries could not possibly be called 'precious handmade pieces of our needlework history,' " as one respondent had said.

Sollins attached a smart, concise statement of his artistic intentions to his rejoinder. But he is apparently talking across a cultural divide he may not have known existed.

Despite the artist's effort to explain himself, Gross said, women he suspects of being angry needleworkers occasionally visit the show, eyes downcast except when they scan Sollins' work, and then exit silently fuming.



Written By
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Kenneth Baker has been art critic for the San Francisco Chronicle since 1985. A native of the Boston area, he served as art critic for the Boston Phoenix between 1972 and 1985.

He has contributed on a freelance basis to art magazines internationally and was a contributing editor of Artforum from 1985 through 1992. He continues to review fiction and nonfiction books for The Chronicle, in addition to reporting on all aspects of the visual arts regionally and, on occasion, nationally and internationally.