

Karen Haas

Karen E. Haas has been the Lane Senior Curator of Photographs at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston since 2001. She has authored numerous publications, including “Edward Weston: The Early Years,” a book on the early work of Edward Weston.

Introduction

I vividly remember evenings spent as a child seated at the table with my mother and grandmother, their heads bowed over knitting, mending, and embroidery, accompanied by the rhythmic click of needles and the soft squeak of thread passing through fabric. Looking back on it now, I'm quite sure they never tried to teach me the intricacies of the handwork that appeared to come to them both so naturally – I was too young, fidgety, and distracted at the time. I can still recall the conversations which flowed so effortlessly between them on those occasions – I would marvel at the way their easy, repetitive movements and the monotony of those soothing sounds seemed to have encouraged the telling and retelling of so many family stories.

Unlike my long-ago Connecticut childhood, Astrid Reischwitz grew up in a small rural village in the north of Germany, immersed in the lives of local farm women, including her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother. Their labor centered on the home, and included not only child rearing, cooking, and cleaning, but tending kitchen gardens, raising and slaughtering animals, and working the fields as well. Today, she pays homage to these women's unrecorded histories by creating delicately layered diptychs and triptychs that combine decades-old black-and-white photographs of village life paired with an assortment of quotidian objects – from brightly colored cross-stitched tablecloths and wall hangings, to kitchen tools, china cake plates, and freshly picked wildflowers. Through these images, Reischwitz celebrates the longstanding tradition of Spin Clubs (or *Spinneklümpe*) that for centuries brought German women together to sew, spin, knit, and embroider. The brief respite from domestic chores such intimate gatherings provided to these female friends helped give voice to their personal stories, ensuring that their expertise in the needlecrafts would be passed down from one generation to the next.

It is often noted that the words *text* and *textile* share the same etymological roots, from the Latin *texere*, meaning to weave. We still employ phrases like “spinning a

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Commented [NF1]: Perhaps reword to make more direct, as presumably the speaker would know whether or not they were taught; ie. ‘They never tried to teach me the intricacies of the handwork that came to them so naturally—I was too young, fidgety and distracted at the time.’

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Commented [NF2]: There is a tense discrepancy in this sentence. Should it be in past or present tense? The beginning of the sentence (recall) indicates it should be in past tense—‘marveled’ or ‘would marvel’ instead of ‘marvel’

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Commented [NF3]: It's not immediately clear what the comparison here is—perhaps reword. ie. “In comparison to my relationship with community, now a distant memory tied to my long-ago Connecticut childhood[...]”.

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yarn," "weaving a tale," or "embroidering the truth" when narrating a story. Having left Germany as a young woman, and now an American citizen with a daughter of her own, Reischwitz introduces her personal biography into her most recent work in the form of stitches that are literally sutured into her paper prints, viscerally speaking to the fragmentation and sense of loss she faces in living so far from her home country. Whether copying a precise, decorative pattern from family linens, or embellishing traditional designs, such as the tree of life or the double eagle, the artist makes no effort to hide any mistakes made in her own hand embroidery. The backs of her prints, each slightly different from the next and replete with wayward knots and stray tangles, are often as visually compelling as the front. The end result is a complex web of colorful threads that bind together elements of both old and new in the artist's images, and beautifully evoke the ebb and flow of human memory.

Commented [NF7]: Indirect and run-on sentence—I suggest restructuring

Deleted: ...literally sutured into her paper prints, that viscerally speaking to the fragmentation and sense of loss she faces in living so far from her home country. Whether precisely ...copying a precise, decorative pattern from family linens, or embellishing traditional designs, like...such as the tree of life or the double eagle, the artist makes no effort to hide any mistakes made in her own hand embroidery. The backs of her prints, each slightly different than ...rom the next and replete with wayward knots and stray tangles, are sometimes ...ften as visually compelling as the fronts... The end result is a complex web of colorful threads that that ...inds...together elements of both the ...ld and new elements ... [1]

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Deleted: By emphasizing the handmade and personal in her digital prints, ...eischwitz deconstructs the artificial hierarchies between craft and fine art by emphasizing the handmade and personal, and ...eminding...us of the power of creativity...in all its forms; , ...ot only to ...s a tool to tell our stories, but to to ...elp mend our pain as well. For example, sS ... [2]

Commented [NF9]: World War II as per Chicago Manual of Style

Deleted: , as, for example, ...n "Four Did Not Return," with its jagged, blood red stitches that remind us of the terrible splintering that occurred within German families and communities brought on by...pon the rise of Nazism. She also explores the generational trauma borne by people like her father, who was left an ...rphaned as a young boy when both of his parents died at Buchenwald, ... [3]

Commented [NF10]: Use of the word "respectively" implies knowledge as to which parent died where—either this information should be added to the beginning of the sentence or the word should be removed.

Deleted: A ...his tragic story is revisited in her piece entitled "Broken," that ...hich features the only surviving portrait of them, taken on their wedding day. Somehow, almost magically, she manages to breathe life into all these varied elements within her pictures – the old family photographs, the embroidered fabrics, the ancient farmhouse, the land, and the people – ...and createinge...meaning as she pieces them together into a rich tapestry that bridges time and distance. Like her grandmother, who was the overseer of the local history museum and, for many years, the keeper of the keys ... [4]

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In her digital prints, Reischwitz deconstructs the artificial hierarchies between craft and fine art by emphasizing the handmade and personal, reminding us of the power of creativity, in all its forms; not only as a tool to tell our stories, but to help mend our pain as well. For example, she doesn't shy away from the grim realities of World War II in "Four Did Not Return," with its jagged, blood red stitches that remind us of the terrible splintering that occurred within German families and communities upon the rise of Nazism. She also explores the generational trauma borne by people like her father, who was orphaned as a young boy when both of his parents died at Buchenwald and Ravensbrück, respectively. This tragic story is revisited in her piece entitled "Broken," which features the only surviving portrait of them, taken on their wedding day. Somehow, almost magically, she manages to breathe life into these varied elements within her pictures – the old family photographs, the embroidered fabrics, the ancient farmhouse, the land, and the people – creating meaning as she pieces them together into a rich tapestry that bridges time and distance. Like her grandmother, who was the overseer of the local history museum and, for many years, the keeper of the keys and teller of old stories, Reischwitz, the artist, has taken on the mantle of witness and narrator rather than silent bystander. Through her work she reminds us of the many ways we can learn from our collective memories, heal our spirits, and move forward. Astrid Reischwitz has, in a very real sense, become the new keeper of the keys,