

Citing Her Sources: Elaine Reichek's New Clothes at Shoshana Wayne

A new exhibition of the artist's work is not a retrospective but a reckoning, paying tribute to those who have inspired her throughout an expansive five-decade career.

By [Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell](#) · 07/08/23 9:00am

Brooklyn-born Elaine Reichek was part of the first wave of feminist practitioners to use traditional handcrafts like knitting and embroidery to explore social, sexual and identity politics, reimagining samplers, tapestries, and other forms of “women’s work” as art that challenged both the patriarchy and its hierarchy of genres.



One of the pieces on view in 'Elaine Reichek: Frock-Conscious'. Courtesy Shoshana Wayne Gallery

The 80-year-old conceptual artist's show of new and new-ish pieces at the Shoshana Wayne Gallery in Los Angeles is not a retrospective but a reckoning, paying tribute to those who have influenced and inspired her throughout her five-decade career.

Taking its title from a line in Virginia Woolf's diary—"My present reflection is that people should have any number of states of consciousness & I should like to investigate the party consciousness, the frock consciousness, &c."—*Frock-Conscious* is dominated by two generous lengths of cotton, printed in a pseudo-Jackson Pollock splatter in different colorways. Over the print, Ms. Reichek has digitally embroidered full bibliographic entries for 25 critical books on Pollock. While the dialogue between text and textile is a leitmotif in her oeuvre—one of her alphabet samplers is shown here—her past works have featured quotations, not citations. It's a testimony in the form of a tapestry.

Elsewhere, Ms. Reichek references visual rather than textual source material; a triptych of silk scarves is printed with images Cecil Beaton shot for *Vogue* in 1951, the models posed against Pollock paintings.



Two pieces from Elaine Reichek: *Frock-Conscious*. Courtesy Shoshana Wayne Gallery

Henri Matisse has been a longtime obsession, particularly his paper cut-outs, which appeared in 2013's *The Artist's Bedroom*. Here, Ms. Reichek renders them in colorful felt. This is the weakest part of the show, for it seems to emphasize the limits of both media rather than their possibilities. Furnished rooms have long been part of Ms. Reichek's practice, from 1994's *A Postcolonial Kinderhood* to *The Artist's Bedroom*. But the Matisse-inspired room presented here, *Un petit salon apes Matisse*, resembles an improvised stage set more than a foreshortened Fauvist parlor. Also on display is Ms. Reichek's version of Matisse's cut-out *Blue Nude* from her 2007 *Swatches* series; a more recent trio of hand-embroidered images strips iconic Matisse compositions of their distinctive complementary hues, rendering them as black-and-white outlines scrawled with textual color codes, reminiscent of a fashion sketch.



The artist's interpretation of a detail of Picasso's portrait of Olga Khokhlova. Courtesy Shoshana Wayne Gallery

The themes of replication and reinterpretation introduced in *Swatches* are further developed here, but instead of shrinking Old Masters (and modern masters) to patchworks of postcard-sized embroideries, Ms. Reichek's more recent works spotlight sartorial details in paintings—a Michelangelo sleeve, a Tissot ruffle, the sash of the dress worn by Olga Khokhlova in Picasso's portrait—and translate them back into fabric and thread. Other images reduce wearable art—a Wiener Werkstatte dress, Varvara Stepanova's Constructivist sportswear, an Oppenheim glove—to the size of paper dolls or fashion plates.



The detail of 'Sassoferrato's Robe'. Courtesy Shoshana Wayne Gallery

What gets left behind as Ms. Reichek translates the art historical canon into her own idiom is as interesting as what gets reproduced, engaging the viewer's memory—or imagination. *Anna of Austria's Gloves*—hand-embroidered after Henri Beaubrun's portrait of the seventeenth-century queen, and embellished with pearl beads—has the force of a self-portrait, depicting only the sitter's bare arms and beribboned leather gloves. In an otherwise unremarkable royal portrait, Ms. Reichek highlights the flesh and the facsimile, the fabricator and the fabric.

Ms. Reichek—who trained as a painter—is particularly drawn to painters who also designed textiles, including Woolf's artist sister Vanessa Bell and her Bloomsbury Group colleagues, Roger Fry and Duncan Grant. The newest works in the show pay tribute to these artist-designers. Two dresses made from printed fabrics Bell and Grant designed for the Omega Workshops have "tags" embroidered with quotes from Bell's descendants describing her unconventional, unapologetic style. She was not a good dressmaker, they acknowledged, but she wore her badly cut clothes "with a grace which defied the cobbled stitches."

There are no cobbled stitches here; in Ms. Reichek's meticulous version of Fry's portrait of artist-writer Nina Hamnett—wearing a dress designed by Bell while perched on the arm of a chair, its cushion covered with Bell's "Maud" linen—only the textiles are reproduced in digital embroidery. The body and background are blanks, or to use an embroidery term, "voids." This faceless figure inevitably recalls a better-known Woolf quote: "Anonymous was a woman."

Don't miss Elaine Reichek: *Frock-Conscious*, on view through July 22 at Shoshana Wayne Gallery in Los Angeles.