

Flow of Energy

Beili Liu makes an art of channeling the forces within objects and us

BY ROBERT FAIRES, FRI., MARCH 11, 2011



*Sew Calm Under the Circumstances: Beili Liu at work in/on *The Mending Project* (2011), metal scissors and mixed media.*

COURTESY OF RINO PIZZI

A cloud of scissors – 1,500 pairs – is suspended in air in a circle 20 feet across, each of their black iron handles held aloft by a slender strand of black saltwater fishing line, their keen-edged blades aimed earthward and open, like the beaks of hungry birds descending on a mess of wriggling worms, or maybe like the squawking maws of grackles massed in the trees around Lady Bird Lake at twilight. In any case, they hover, directing their potential to snip, to clip, to cut, at the floor, where lies another cloud: a ring of snowy white fabric made of irregular pieces that have felt the sharp bite of those scissors' blades. But they have since been mended, like patients after surgery, with loops of black thread around their edges. They lie one atop another, scores of them now attached together, exuding a restful calm – the counterpoint to the sharp, active energy of the hanging scissors.

Between the two, in a small bare patch of the floor, a petite woman goes about the business of sewing thread around the edges of these fabric pieces. She seems to see no threat in the mass of sharpened implements just overhead. Her attention is on her task, stitching up the white swatches and adding them to the horseshoe-shaped pile on the floor around her, and she goes about it with a spirit of quiet industry, measured and poised. And she is poised, too, between the destructive energy of the scissors above and the serene energy of the fabric below. In this charged space her steady, simple activity seems to channel the former and transform it into the latter.

The woman doing this, you should know, is actually the generator of all this energy, the creator of this installation-with-performance known as *The Mending Project*, currently showing at Women & Their Work. Her name is Beili Liu, and though you wouldn't guess it from her steady hand and stillness as she works on/in her latest project, she's one of the busiest visual artists in the city. Two weeks prior to the March 3 opening of "The Mending Project" exhibition in Austin, Liu was opening "Extent," an installation at Form/Space Atelier in Seattle. Five months before that, she created an installation for the 2010 ArtPrize competition in Grand Rapids, Mich., and her piece *Lure/Wave*, *Grand Rapids* won third place and \$50,000. Two months before *that*, Liu had a piece in the group show "Unraveling Tradition: Contemporary Artists Working With Fiber Media" at 516 Arts in Albuquerque, N.M. In May 2010, Liu had two international shows:

"Fray" at Asia Unlimited Gallery in Berlin, and "half empty.half full." at Nordisk Kunst Plattform Project Space in Brusand, Norway. And in the 18 months before that, she managed to show in Ann Arbor, Mich.; San Jose, Calif.; Buffalo, N.Y.; New Rochelle, N.Y.; Shanghai, China; Fiskars, Finland; San Antonio; and Los Angeles. Since moving to Austin in 2008 to join the faculty of the University of Texas Department of Art and Art History, Liu can claim 11 solo exhibitions and work in 14 group shows all over the world. And it didn't take long for her to make an impact in her new hometown. At the first Austin Visual Arts Association Awards, she was named the 2009 Artist of the Year 3 Dimensional Art, and her first solo show at D Berman Gallery, "Bound," was named the Outstanding Solo Gallery Exhibition of 2009-10 by the Austin Critics Table. Liu didn't move to Austin *knowing* that her career would take off in this way, but she left Michigan, where she had obtained her master's in fine arts and taught art for five years, hoping that the new location would help propel her work to a new level. "The reason I accepted [the job at UT] was because my work and my career were at a stage where I really wanted to grow as much as I could, and that opportunity presented a lot of possibilities," Liu says. "And since I've been here, I've just gotten busier and busier."

Austin has played a significant role in the surge of activity in her career, the artist says. "It's a really nurturing and supportive space and environment. There are a lot of resources. It's a really great community. The [UT art] department has very high expectations, and that's a great thing. My colleagues – we have so many amazing, productive artists, and that's a really good influence on me. So you want to be contributing to that creative energy, to be part of that and say, 'Look, I am also participating and doing the best I can.' I feel very productive ever since I moved to Austin. You know when you have a good vibe in your life? That's what I feel right now, and that's really helping me to do as much as I can as an artist."



The Mending Project, 2011, detail
COURTESY OF BEILI LIU

A good vibe ... energy is never out of the conversation for long when Liu is talking. There's the energy in her life, the energy she brings to her art, the energy that viewers bring into the space where she's installed a work, the energy exchanged between the viewers and the work, and the energy within objects. This last was the catalyst for *The Mending Project*. Drawing on her Chinese heritage – Liu was born in the village of Jilin and raised in the city of Shenzhen – the artist sought to channel the energy of a tool found in every household of every village across her homeland. "There's an energy in each and every pair of scissors," says Liu. "It's as if they're some kind of creature. I knew that I wanted to take advantage of that energy that's very threatening. It's a very commonplace object, but it holds such a presence that's heavy, that's harsh. In feng shui practice, it's a harsh object that you're not supposed to point at anyone." And she had in mind not just one or two pairs but hundreds.

That's a passel of negative energy, but Liu also knew just how she wanted to counter it: "The idea of the fabric being stitched by hand – it responds and softens it. So there's that above and below, and

there's that energy in between, and the idea is that [the mass of stitched fabric] will grow larger, so it will be able to contain and receive all that [negative energy] and neutralize it in a way."

When the work was installed – and Liu's husband, Blue Way, had to apply a considerable amount of his engineering expertise to the challenge of safely hanging 1,500 pairs of iron utensils from *Women & Their Work's* ceiling – Liu discovered that she had balanced those opposing forces of energy even better than she'd imagined. "When I planned the piece, I thought it was going to be very threatening," she notes. "But when I see it, it's actually very peaceful to me. I wasn't expecting that." Even when she sits at the table sewing, with that arsenal of blades inches over her head, she's at ease: "It's almost like being under a tree. It's not supposed to be protective, but there's that blanket feeling. It's a very calm space – the center of the storm. All these things are happening around me, but at the center it's very calm."

One could apply that description to Liu herself, who comes off as quite composed and unassuming amid the swirl of activity all around her these days: the hectic schedule, the critical acclaim, and the powerful responses that her work generates. "At ArtPrize, I had several people come to me with tears in their eyes" after seeing her installation, and one young man found such beauty and inspiration in Liu's work – which was rooted in the Chinese legend stating that soul mates are connected at their births by invisible red threads that eventually allow them to find each other – that he arranged to bring his girlfriend into the installation to propose to her. (You can see video of it on the links page of Liu's website, www.beililiu.com.) Such responses are particularly gratifying for Liu. "There are moments when people come to me and they're so touched, and I can sense that. That's the best thing I can ever hope for," she says. And it goes beyond the simple pleasure of moving people with her efforts; for Liu, it's evidence of people bringing to the work their own energy – there's that word again – and exchanging it with the work, to be touched and influenced by it. Which goes to the heart of why she does what she does: "The whole idea of making art is really to share, and I really want to share work that's worthy of people's attention. If you come to see the show and if you want to spend time to look at it, I want to have something to offer. [People who see my art] give me an understanding of why I really want to make the work I make and to know what really matters to me as an artist. I think it's that connection that is so precious to me. It gives me the encouragement and energy to know why I want to make the next project."

And the next project is coming soon, with another soon after and another soon after that. Liu has three solo exhibitions lined up for the coming year. And with the Department of Art and Art History having just promoted her from assistant professor to tenured associate professor, it's clear that Liu still has plenty of busy days ahead of her. Some may find just the sound of it exhausting, but here's betting Liu can handle all that work and more – and with energy to spare.

"Beili Liu: The Mending Project" is on view through April 2 at Women & Their Work, 1710 Lavaca. For more information, call 477-1064 or visit www.womenandtheirwork.org.