

The Mending Project: In her new installation, artist Beili Liu balances fear and calm

A cloud of menacing scissors; a billowing circle of white cloth



Image: Rino Pizzi

As artist Beili Liu stitches a kind of order together from chaos in 'The Mending Project,' visitors are invited to cut more pieces from a roll of white fabric, adding to the process.

By [Jeanne Claire van Ryzin](#) March 23, 2011

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Hundreds of pairs of razor-sharp scissors blades open and pointed downward hang in a circular mass from the gallery ceiling at Women and Their Work. Artist Beili Liu, seemingly unaware of the hazard above her, sits calmly underneath the menacing cloud at a small black table. Splayed around on the floor is a billowing mass of white fabric pieces stitched together with black thread.

At her table, Liu methodically, silently sews together more of the scraps. Draping from one gallery wall is a large roll of fabric, and visitors are invited to cut a piece that Liu will then use in her mending, increasing the fabric circle during the course of the exhibition.

This is "The Mending Project," Liu's breathtaking new installation and performance piece on view through April 2.

The Austin artist and University of Texas professor isn't always in the gallery stitching, though. When she's not, the evidence of her mending sits placidly on the table. And her absence offers a different facet of her compelling tableau.

Yet nothing mitigates the ominous flock of gap-mouthed scissors. They dangle at head height. To our Western eyes, the peculiar black curvilinear steel scissors seem vaguely unfamiliar, even outdated. (Liu sourced them from her native China, where they are common household utensils.) Hence, their threat, though overwhelming, remains vague and undefined — a stand-in for all fear global, local and psychological.

Ditto with the circle of patched fabric — it's a metaphor for all that's calm, domestic, handmade and heartfelt.

Serenity and fear stand in perfect balance in "The Mending Project" — the negative energy of a brood of scary scissors blunted by the pillow fabric underneath. Even the shadows cast on the gallery wall work to bring yet another dimension to "The Mending Project." Seen in silhouette, the mass of menacing blades seems to be a landscape of indeterminate foliage or flora — friendly and dreamlike.

Liu cannily mines the poetic possibilities of quotidian materials in all her work. Last year, she stunned with a solo exhibit at D. Berman Gallery for which she won the Austin Critics' Table Award for Outstanding Solo Show. And her work continually goes on exhibit nationally and internationally, making her currently one of the more widely shown Austin artists. (Also in 2010, Liu won \$50,000 and third place for a site-specific installation in the ArtPrize competition in Grand Rapids, Mich.)

In our tumultuous times, Liu's "The Mending Project" stands as an especially relevant moment, elevating the importance and power of a simple, silent task.

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