

# Beili Liu Poetry in Space

by Susan Taber Avila



ABOVE: **Beili Liu Lure Series** Installation view of the artist in process, thread, needle, dimensions variable, each coil 2"-5" in diameter, 2008-2011. Photo: [www.romainblanquart.com](http://www.romainblanquart.com). Detail *LEFT*. Photo: Beili Liu Studio.

**Beili Liu's 2012 site-specific installation at Vessel Gallery in Oakland, California, included a dynamic encounter between opposing forces.**

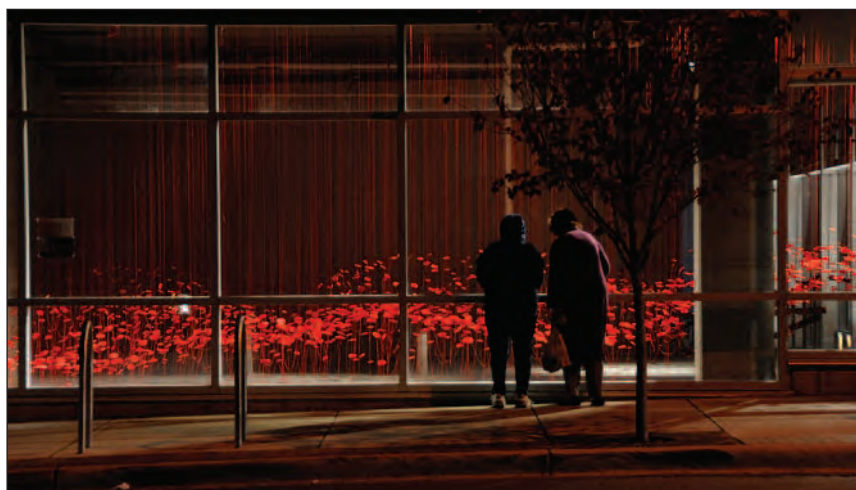
Two 18-foot-long, graphite-colored needles faced each other in the moment before impact, held back and defying gravity by a myriad of white threads stitched through the objects, suspending them in space. Hung at eye level, the piece invited provocation, yet almost everyone experiencing the work had the urge to stand in the minimal space between each missile and stare down one of the projecting protagonists. While there is an obvious military implication—and Liu even toyed with naming the piece MAD (mutually assured destruction)—she opted instead for the more optimistic description of balanced confrontation, *Stalemate*. Threads function both physically and metaphorically to hold back the pointed objects and prevent impending war.

Liu's work often captures the moment of tension between opposing forces, the hesitation between fragility and strength, hard and soft, or good and evil. In her 2011 installation/performance, *The Mending Project*, Liu sat quietly sewing under a cloud of imported scissors. The sharp blades hung by threads and pointed toward her head as a poignant visual metaphor for the vague uncertainty and fear often felt by the artist, but also relevant to anyone who has experienced moments of vulnerability. Additionally, the instantly recognizable and particular shape of the iconic Chinese scissors provided additional subtext about the cruelty implied by pointing scissors in Chinese culture. As a balance to the threatening violence overhead, the act of mending was healing and restorative. Liu stitched together fragments of pure white cloth (provided by gallery visitors) into a growing

carpet with a calm persistence that asserted strength and control over the situation.

Chinese references occur frequently in Liu's work. Born in a small farming village in Jilin, China, she moved around frequently during tumultuous times in Chinese history. She eventually ending up in bustling Shenzhen, a highly commercialized area that provided more freedom and information about western culture than other areas of China. After studying Chinese literature for two years in Shenzhen, she decided to pursue her passion for art in the United States. She received an undergraduate degree in graphic design from the University of Tennessee and an MFA in mixed media art from the University of Michigan. Living alone in each new city meant cultural shock and adaptation as she adjusted to the contradictions between East and West. It is no surprise that experiences from her past continuously inspire her creative work.

Her adoption of red thread—a ubiquitous emblem of good luck in Chinese society—is an example of how her Chinese background inspires her creativity. In one of her first installations in graduate school, she had the idea of wrapping chopsticks and silverware with thread. While she was aware of the cultural associations of red thread, initially she chose the color intuitively, perhaps subconsciously attracted to the idea of protection or good energy the red thread implied. It was years later that she revisited thread as an art material, specifically utilizing it to materialize an ancient Chinese love story. The resulting *Red Thread Legend* series has been presented in various forms and venues. According to the Chinese myth, at birth everyone is tethered to their one true soul mate by an invisible red thread. The thread keeps them connected as they



**BEILI LIU *Lure Series*** Installation view, thread, needle, dimensions variable, each coil 2"-5" in diameter, 2008-2011. Photo: Beili Liu Studio.





BEILI LIU *The Mending Project* Overhead view of installation and performance, iron scissors, fabric, thread, needle, mixed media, dimensions variable, 2011. Photo: Rino Pizzi. Detail RIGHT.

get closer and closer to finding each other. Liu has interpreted this story by creating multitudes of coiled disks joined in pairs. A needle pierces the center of each red spiral so that it can be hung from the ceiling and float delicately in space. The repetition and visual rhythm of these lyrical elements beautifully illustrate the true love allegory. When installed at the Urban Institute of Contemporary Art in Grand Rapids, Michigan (2010), it not only was awarded third prize in the prestigious Michigan ArtPrize competition, but it also prompted one man to use the setting for a marriage proposal to his girlfriend.

For an installation at the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art in California (2010), she appropriated a corner of the gallery for another version in her *Red Thread Legend* series. For this site-specific piece, Liu outlined the images of two figures with needles hammered into adjacent gallery walls. Threaded through each needle on one figure was a corresponding thread attached to the other. The illusion created by the masses of hanging red threads softened the hard edged walls and the figures subverted to shadows visible only at certain angles.

Material experimentation—exploring the physicality and potential for transformation—provides the catalyst for much of Liu's work. She is a constant collector of stuff and sees the potential in almost anything as art media. Her work depends on a genuine connection with material and begins with playful sampling; she might burn, dissolve, stretch, pierce, or cut to discover a material's secrets. From there she will further manipulate the results to fit her conceptual plan. When she chooses common materials, like salt, wax, or thread, their built-in associations further enhance interpretations of her work.

The process of creating work, in particular the energy and effort, is another integral quality for Liu. She believes she has a responsibility to the audience who will invest time and energy in viewing her work. In this way she reflects a textile sensibility; the invisible element of time adds sincerity and genuineness to her handmade objects. This commitment to process imbues her work with awe and wonder. In the *Affine* series, for example, all of the threads are hand cut from a single piece of paper. A similar effect could be achieved through laser cutting, but then the





**ABOVE: BEILI LIU *Stalemate*** Installation view (Vessel Gallery, Oakland, CA)

Maple, graphite, string, mixed media, each element 6" x 6" x 18", 2012.

**LEFT: BEILI LIU *Bound#2 Thread, needle***, red oak (reclaimed shipping crates), 6' x 10' x 18", 2009.

Photos: Beili Liu Studio.

intuitive and fluid act of minute aesthetic decisions would not be possible and viewers could not discover almost the imperceptible marks and jags on the paper surface.

Much of her process occurs on site, and she is best known as an installation artist. Liu's site-specific work is usually carefully engineered and planned out with help from her collaborator and husband, Blue Way. However, unless she can physically visit and experience the space beforehand, installing on site often means snap decisions giving way to spontaneous interventions and her viewing the exhibition space as an extension of her studio. By nature impermanent, installations record a passage of time. Again, the artist's early experience in China, moving from country to city, and frequently thereafter, probably feeds her fascination and innate desire to define space.

Beili Liu's work conveys a sense of place, process, and material in a way that transforms common objects into poetic installations. She is an artist with a deep urge to express herself creatively. Ever observant, she absorbs the physical presence of her environment and is constantly processing events and perceptions from her life. Ultimately, the quiet, powerful radiance in Liu's art allows viewers to share the magic inherent in every day.

Beili Liu's website is [www.beililiu.com](http://www.beililiu.com). Liu's *Lure/Kaunas* (2011) installation received a Distinction Award at the 8th Kaunas Biennial Textile '11 in Kaunas, Lithuania last fall. To read a review, turn to page 62.

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