

# sculpture

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**JAY CRITCHLEY**

**BEILI LIU »»**

**KRZYSZTOF WODICZKO**

**GLENDALÉON**

**YOUNG JOON KWAK**

\$9.50US/CAN



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# qa

**Amass,**  
2013.  
Wood, graphite,  
cotton string, mixed  
media, and hardware,  
each element:  
4 x 4 x 120 in.;  
overall dimensions  
variable.

BELL LIU STUDIO





# Soft Persuasion:

A Conversation with Beili Liu

by Kay Whitney





THIS PAGE:  
*Lure/Wave*,  
2008–20.  
Site-responsive instal-  
lation with hand-coiled  
cotton thread and sewing  
needle, each coil:  
2–5 in. diameter; overall  
dimensions variable.

OPPOSITE:  
Beili Liu

THIS PAGE: BEILI LIU STUDIO / OPPOSITE: ROMAIN BLANQUART



**The work of Beili Liu**, an installation artist based in Austin, Texas, consists of hundreds of not-quite-identical units that construct an architecture of thought with correlatives in lived experience. Although the repetition of objects is a representation of single-mindedness, Liu's installations leap from obsession and repetition to something profound and expansive, merging the personal with the political. They embody, through their process, Deleuze and Guattari's idea of "rhizomatic thinking," a way of describing ideas, actions, and images that are self-generating, multiple, and interconnected. The performances that accompany Liu's installations are not only rhizomatic outgrowths, they are also acts of profound generosity, granting viewers access to her thought processes and experiences.

In Liu's work, the desire to repeat takes many forms: a suspended cloud of downward-pointing scissors, tarred feathers, stacked children's clothing encased in cement, a swarm of thread disks. Clustered together, these markedly ordinary materials emphasize the disjunctive pairing of subtle beauty and cultural narrative. In Liu's hands, repetition creates an impassioned metaphor for the singularity of an act or event. Her work is the projection of a desire that stutters, self-replicates, and incorporates the potential to continue indefinitely.

**Kay Whitney:** You are a female artist and a Chinese immigrant. How do these facets of identity reveal themselves in your work?

**Beili Liu:** During the Cultural Revolution, my parents were assigned to the Manchurian countryside—I was born in a rural farming village and lived there until I was four. We lived in a one-room adobe house and slept as a family on a single adobe platform bed, a *kang*, heated by a cookstove burning beneath it. What I remember most were the groups of women constantly making and remaking essential items such as comforters, shoes, and clothes. Everything was sewn by hand, repaired, and remade. All that I lived with during my early years is the foundation of my love for materials, handcraft, and space. What I make has always come from the versatility and richness that a space holds and the transformative force hidden in



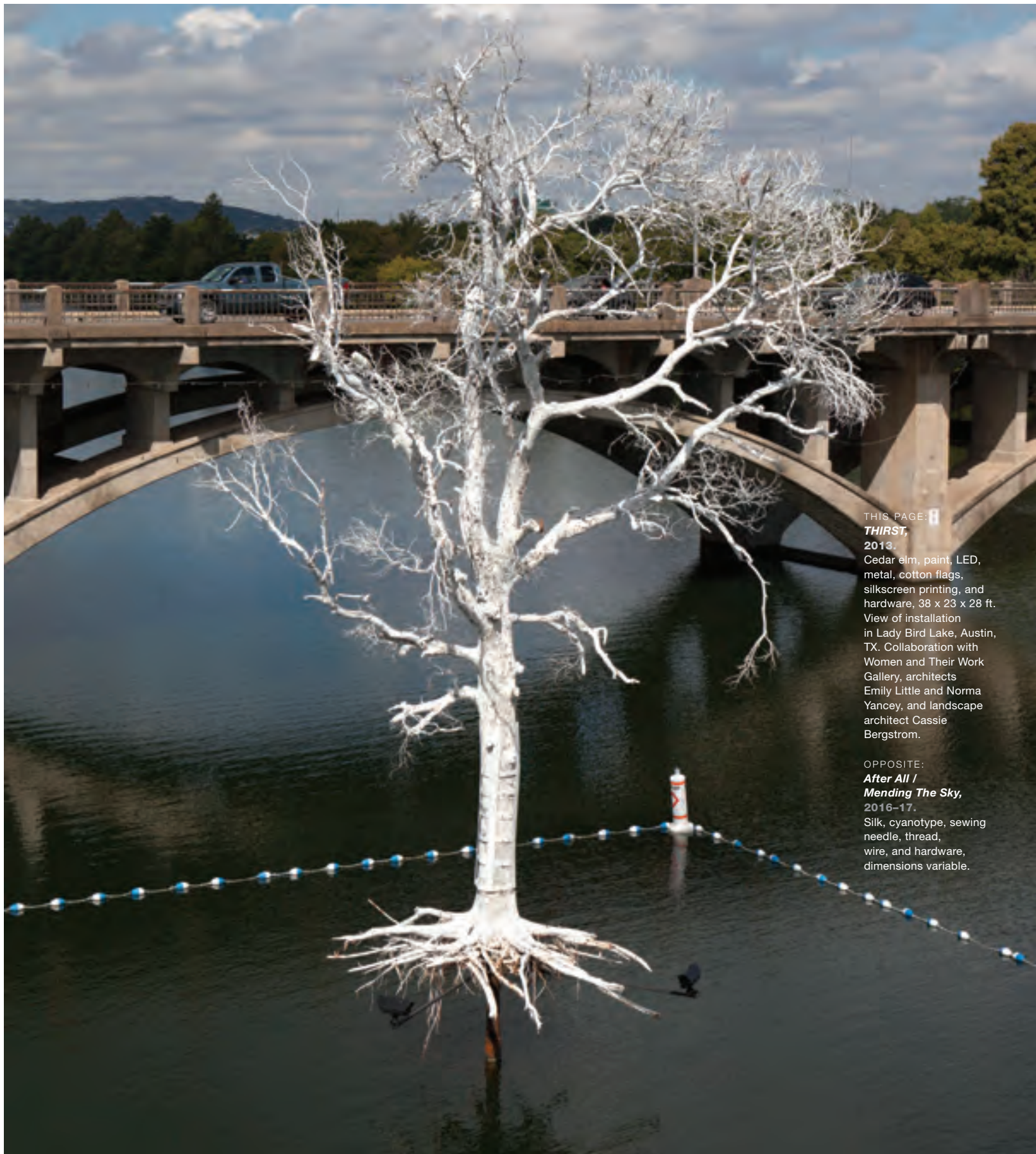
a material. My work can be seen as an act of translation connecting my Chinese past to my present reality. I have identified with the roles played by those strong women, who acted as menders, providers, and mothers.

**KW:** You have a triple presence in your work—the metaphorical content, the materiality of the hand-made elements, and the performance of process. At first, your work seems quite abstract and very beautiful, but as the viewer stays with it, the sense of its subject matter overcomes any initial response. How do your performances become an offshoot of the installations?

**BL:** I'm always combining the personal with the political. Although my work appears abstract, it's conceptually based, and my materials speak to the concept. I'm very focused on each individual segment—it's my way of giving meaning to meaningless objects. It's important that the labor I put into these pieces is obvious, that it's clear how much time it took to make them.

My first performance was *The Mending Project* (2011) at Women and Their Work Gallery in Austin.





THIS PAGE: 8

***THIRST,***  
**2013.**

Cedar elm, paint, LED, metal, cotton flags, silkscreen printing, and hardware, 38 x 23 x 28 ft. View of installation in Lady Bird Lake, Austin, TX. Collaboration with Women and Their Work Gallery, architects Emily Little and Norma Yancey, and landscape architect Cassie Bergstrom.

OPPOSITE:

***After All /***  
***Mending The Sky,***  
**2016–17.**

Silk, cyanotype, sewing needle, thread, wire, and hardware, dimensions variable.



This was a very powerful experience for me, because it showed me that I needed to be present with my work. Seeing me at work on a small, handheld thing gives viewers insight and makes this small act part of the whole. The performances mirror how I make the installation. For *The Mending Project*, viewers cut pieces of fabric and I sewed them together—they ended up on the floor with pieces I had already made.

It's important to me that the installation stands alone without the performance. The performance station—table, chair, needle and thread—becomes my stand-in, offering evidence that actions which have happened before may happen again. When I'm not there, viewers have time and space to experience the installation. When I'm present, the attention goes to my action. I love the silence of it. There is something like a shield over me. I hear everything but also nothing. I am exposed but completely sheltered.

**KW:** **Reiteration in terms of repeated elements and repeated gestures is typical of your work. Why does this seem necessary to you, and how does it function?**

**BL:** Through repetition, time transforms; I lose myself in the rhythms of my hands at work. Sewing is inherently a repetitive task—a stitch at a time, like a step taken. I also think about the idea of processing pain through our hands. Every piece involves sewing—thread and needles, perforating—sometimes I feel that each stitch is a suture. My work holds an accumulation of decisions about how to use the materials—this is also why I decided to perform within my installations, to make female labor visible and present.

**“ My way of working represents a commitment to hope. It is an act of resilience and perhaps of defiance. ”**









***The Mending Project,*  
2011.**

Iron scissors, fabric,  
thread, needle,  
table, and chair, dimen-  
sions variable.  
View of performance.

Two forms of labor have influenced my thinking: the labor of women in my life and of generations before me and the anonymous labor that I witnessed growing up in Shenzhen. Young migrant workers came to Shenzhen for a better life and to support their families back home—the same reasons that immigrants come to this country. Village women’s labor, with its beauty and life-generating power, is a stark contrast to the cheap, relentless labor of migrant workers. I think about this “anonymous” labor in my work all the time—how labor is recognized or dismissed. I wonder how what I make compares to the village women’s work and to that of the young workers selling their days and lives for horrifically low pay. I’m questioning the “preciousness” of my artistic labor compared to these undervalued forms of labor.

**KW:** When I see your work, I feel like I’m seeing something that’s actively in the process of becoming something else. The idea of transformation is a major theme. Even though there are many parts in each installation, they aggregate into a single unit activated by time, space, and shared connections. What is the range of your intentions; what are you offering the viewer?

**BL:** I feel a responsibility to the viewer to make something worthy of attention. I want to make meaning for myself and give that meaning to the person looking at my work. I often talk about “offering” a space, an environment. I emphasize the labor that I put into my work because I feel it adds value; the materials are an invitation, and they are different for almost every project. It is a blessing and a curse at the same time. I’m always looking for the next material or material combination that speaks to me, that “works.” My love for the material is parallel to my commitment to process/repetition/labor.

The space where my work is installed is crucial. I walk it multiple times, measuring and experiencing it, seeing where columns and windows are, how the light falls, the height of the ceiling. I focus on how people coming into the space will use it—how they’ll walk around and through the piece and how those movements will activate the installation.





**KW:** You have shown *Lure* (2008–20) in many countries, and you’ve modified it each time. It’s a dramatic piece that seems to summarize all of your concerns as an artist—it involves process, personal history, and desire for your work to be seen as a gift. How did this piece come into existence?

**BL:** *Lure* began as a saying that I remembered from my childhood: “There is an invisible red thread that connects you to a person who will be the most important person in your life.” The Chinese word for “lure” incorporates the notion of seduction, of something that makes you lose yourself—this is one of the reasons why I chose red embroidery thread. I coiled the thread into a disk held together by a thinner, single thread sewn across its diameter. I made thousands of these disks during six months of work. I make the topography of the piece on site each time—sometimes hanging the disks in a wave form, sometimes having them almost touch the floor. Each disk is hung from the ceiling on a strand of red thread that ends in a needle piercing the center of the disk. Every time I show this piece, I change the length of the thread and rearrange the formation. I change the lighting so there are different kinds of cast shadows. I like to think that some works are timeless and speak to a truth differently each time. I am always watching and learning from the process, from the viewers, and from the work itself. Each time, I learn more about what my intentions are, about the attachments or intentions that I have to let go.

**KW:** You’ve made several installations that have led me to think of you not so much as a political artist, but as someone whose work is intimately informed by what’s going on in the world. Your works, particularly those addressing the refugee and immigration crises, reflect the feminist adage “the personal is the political.”

**BL:** When I was four, my parents were assigned to go to university in a distant city; they were not allowed to take me with them. I didn’t understand why they were going or when I’d see them again. We did not reunite for four years. *Each and Every* (2019) brings together the European refugee crisis, family separations and child incarcerations at the Mexican





“ I see feminine strength as capable of overcoming great obstacles, like dripping water eventually penetrates rock. I’ve grown to view women’s labor as fundamental and powerful.”

OPPOSITE:

**Light As A Feather,**  
2017.

Feathers, black pine tar, nylon, thread, needle, scissors, table, chair, and hardware, dimensions variable. View of performance at Diego Rivera Hall, Detroit Institute of Arts.

THIS PAGE:

**Stratus,**  
2015.

Polyester film, paraffin wax, graphite, beeswax, and damar resin, each element: 19 x 24 in.; 25 x 53 x 11 ft. overall.

border, and memories of my own separation from my parents. In these ways, the installation comes out of my life as a mother and the contrast between my immigrant experience and that of persecuted migrants. I have been stunned by the increasing numbers of migrant deaths. Years have passed now with no answers or resolutions; the news cycle has moved on, leaving behind trauma and loss as if they never existed. There is a deep sorrow that I am trying to process as a witness who carries guilt for the inability to help or change anything.

In 2017, I created *Light As A Feather*, based on the Chinese saying that life and death can be “as light as a feather, and heavy as a mountain.” This was my initial response to the refugee crisis in Europe and mi-

grant issues in the U.S. I used 10,000 white feathers, hand-dipped in pine tar. I made several installations using these feathers. The first was a large suspended ceiling piece, and the second was the *Light As A Feather* performance at the Detroit Institute of Arts, where I sewed the tarnished feathers onto myself.

*Each and Every*, which developed from these feather pieces, also looks at trauma and human suffering. It was first exhibited at MadArt Studio in Seattle. When the space was offered to me, the idea only existed in a small way in the corner of my studio. I wanted to make a piece about migrant children and use children’s clothes in some way. The brick and cement walls of the space interested me, especially how the powdery substance of cement, once activated





THIS PAGE:

**Each and Every,**  
2019.

Children's clothing,  
cement, cotton thread,  
table, chair, scissors,  
needle, and soundtrack,  
view of performance.

OPPOSITE:

**Each and Every,**  
2019.

Children's clothing,  
cement, cotton thread,  
table, chair, scissors,  
needle, and soundtrack,  
detail of installation.

by water, offers tremendous strength—enough to bind bricks together into a wall. I knew that encasing soft children's clothes in hard, industrial cement would make a powerful juxtaposition, enabling me to speak to the cruelty of the family separation policy and emphasizing the losses endured by those children—not just the loss of their parents, but of hope.

I decided to use my daughter's clothes for the piece—I had saved them because they were valuable to me. As the project grew, I asked people to donate their children's clothes. In Seattle, the installation was composed of a single massive area of clothing on the floor, with hundreds of threads suspended from the ceiling so that the clothing was blurred as if by falling rain. It was almost 30 feet across—viewers experienced it by walking around it. While I had the seed for the idea already, the space showed me how to complete it. In my performance, I sat at a table

repairing rips and tears in children's clothes as a way of demonstrating healing and honoring these children.

**KW:** I would imagine, even after all your years in the United States, that there is still some level of friction between your past Chinese reality and your present reality as a U.S. citizen. How much of your work is a translation between the two? How have gender and your experience as an immigrant influenced your work?

**BL:** I avoided gender at the beginning. As an immigrant, I did not want to talk about the expected and obvious—cultural differences and their juxtapositions. I also didn't want anything to do with feminism, or any "isms." I was concerned with answering two questions: How do I and my work fit in here? How is what I have to say relevant here? It took years for me to recognize that I have a responsibility as a woman artist and as an immigrant. If I want to be truthful to my work, I need to fully recognize where I came from, what I experienced; to

stand by the fact that my work is about female labor and is deeply influenced by my cultural experiences. I see feminine strength as capable of overcoming great obstacles, like dripping water eventually penetrates rock. I've grown to view women's labor as fundamental and powerful.

I carry a sense of gratitude. I'm fortunate to have had the opportunities I've had access to, and to have had my work accepted and recognized. I think about the challenges faced by women and female artists back in my home country. I am indebted to so many women artists before me, both Chinese and Western. In choosing to use sewing—a kind of caring, nurturing, healing soft persuasion—I see my work as sharing the gift of contemplation and the gift of exchange. My way of working represents a commitment to hope. It is an act of resilience, and perhaps of defiance. ■



