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Labour, migration, and environmental concerns define Beili Liu's art practice

The site-responsive and process-driven installations by Beili Liu are motivated by tenants of handcraft and labour while talking about cultural memory, materiality and climate change.

by [Dilpreet Bhullar](#) | Published on : Jun 12, 2023



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The rhetorical device of tautology without a loss of the fragment of time realigns the focus to the point of emphasis. The pattern of recurrence in nature is a constant reminder to see the wonders of the environment. Simulating the presence of a similar experience in the site-responsive installations and performances is what defines the **visual art** practice of Chinese-born US-based **visual artist** Beili Liu. The artist is mindful of constant changes in the environment that demands the synthesis of personal choices and cultural transformation to mitigate its further decline. Despite the surmounted trepidations that conceptualise the practice of Liu, she weaves her **art installations** with materials and elements found commonly including cement, feather, needle, salt, scissors, thread and wax.

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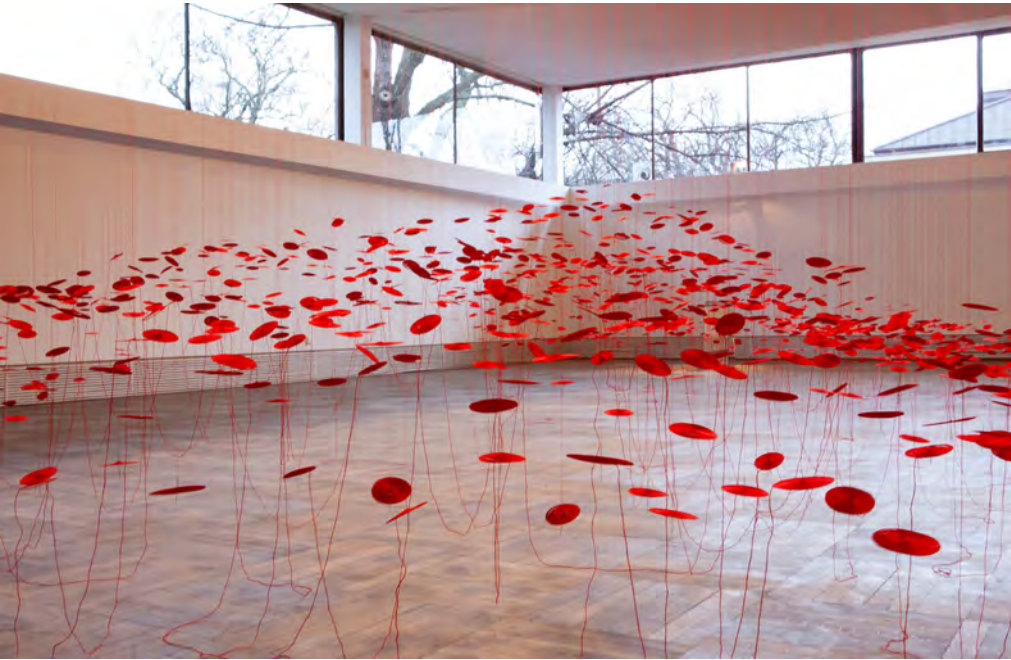
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Detailed view of *Each and Every*, 2019, Children's clothing, cement, cotton thread, table, chair, scissors, needle.
Installation, with performance
Image: Courtesy of Beili Liu Studio

The large scale art installation *Each and Every* is a response to the 'Family Separation Policy' and the 'Zero Tolerance Policy' implemented by ICE at the Southern border of the United States between 2017 and 2021 that has embroiled the migrant children crisis. Like every burning news sensation, the media attention gradually fades away from the topic of importance, but the installation serves as a reminder of the dark fate of the detained children after two and a half years. The material cement here is also a metaphor for the verb “cemented” thought. The small shirts of the children are given to a hardened form when preserved by industrial cement. Installed above the floor of the gallery, it gives an illusion of a floor. The cement-dipped white cotton thread further accentuates the display. Even if dipped in the cement, the tactile quality of the shirt is maintained—made visible since it maintains the traces of original colour, drapes and folds. The performance, in conjunction with the installation, enacted by Liu is a manifestation of a motherly expression of care and protection. The feminine labour here engages with the task to mend the torn parts of the shirt with a colourful piece of cloth. An extension of redemption and healing touch, the performance subtly calls for consideration in the unheard noise.



Lure/Kraków Hand, coiled thread, sewing needle, 2017
Image: Courtesy of Beili Liu Studio

The mythologies around goddess Nuwa have inspired the installation *After All / Mending The Sky*. The goddess who is a creator of the human tribe takes it upon herself to mend the broken sky that brought suffering and calamity to her creations. In an interview with STIR, Liu says, “The installation draws a parallel between the goddess’ heroic effort and the humble, domestic, women’s task of sewing—both endeavours of mending and healing. The installation consists of nine suspended, organic, cloud-like forms, each composed of translucent half domes crafted from raw silk fibre, which is imprinted using a cyanotype process to lend it rich indigo tones. From the nine forms, hundreds of sewing threads descend. At each end of a thread, a sewing needle is attached.”

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Recall/Como, 2015, Paraffin wax, thread, hardware, site-specific installation for the historical church of San Francesco in Como, Italy
Image: Courtesy of Beili Liu Studio

Since Liu makes installations with a variety of materials, another work, *A Breath* is a wall installation consisting of 149 hand-sewn cloth masks, each hardened in cement. It is created as a corollary of a tumultuous 2020 punctuated by the global **COVID-19** pandemic, and racial injustice in the US: **George Floyd**, a black man, was killed at the hands of police. Liu mentions, “The contradiction of the materials used, cloth masks and industrial cement, is the key to the project concept—speaking to the unfathomable, unresolved trauma and loss. In this air that we share, for life and death, a breath connects us all.” She is a believer in the fact that to perceive this world through our senses, and our body’s relationship with space, light, and time, “an **immersive experience** is essential for my spatial compositions in response to materials, site, and its social and cultural history,” adds the **installation artist**.



Arctic Mending/Snow Mandala, 2022, performance still, Longyearbyen, Svalbard, Norway
Image: Courtesy of Blue Way

When one speaks of environmental damage and **climate change**, the Arctic is the first place that experienced the lopsided effect of ecological and geopolitical changes. The artist’s current creative research focuses on the complex ecological, political, and environmental concerns facing the Circumpolar North. She has recently participated in the Arctic Infrascapes exhibition at the University of Vienna, **Austria**, during the 2023 Arctic Science Summit with the latest installation *Arctic Mending: Snow Mandala*. It is a **video installation** and a site-specific performance still which focuses on the artist’s ongoing research in the Circumpolar North. Drawing from the principles that shape her large art practice, this work also enquires about the lived experiences of Arctic Indigenous peoples through the criticality of handcraft and labour.

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Beili Liu's portrait
Image: Courtesy of Rogers Studio

The artist feels a sense of responsibility to the viewer to make something worthy of attention. "I emphasise the labour that I put into my work as a way to infuse meaning, effort, and intention, and I am always combining the personal with the political. Through my work, I hope to offer a space, an environment, and an experience. Rooted in the simplicity and persistence of hand-making, I create my sculpture environments to explore resilience, healing, and hope through humble materials and accumulated labour," admits Liu. Her upcoming exhibition will take place at Hå Gamle Prestegard, Norwegian National Art and Culture Center from June to September 2023.



Each and Every
Beili Liu Studio

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Each and Every, Beili Liu
Video: Courtesy of Beili Liu Studio

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