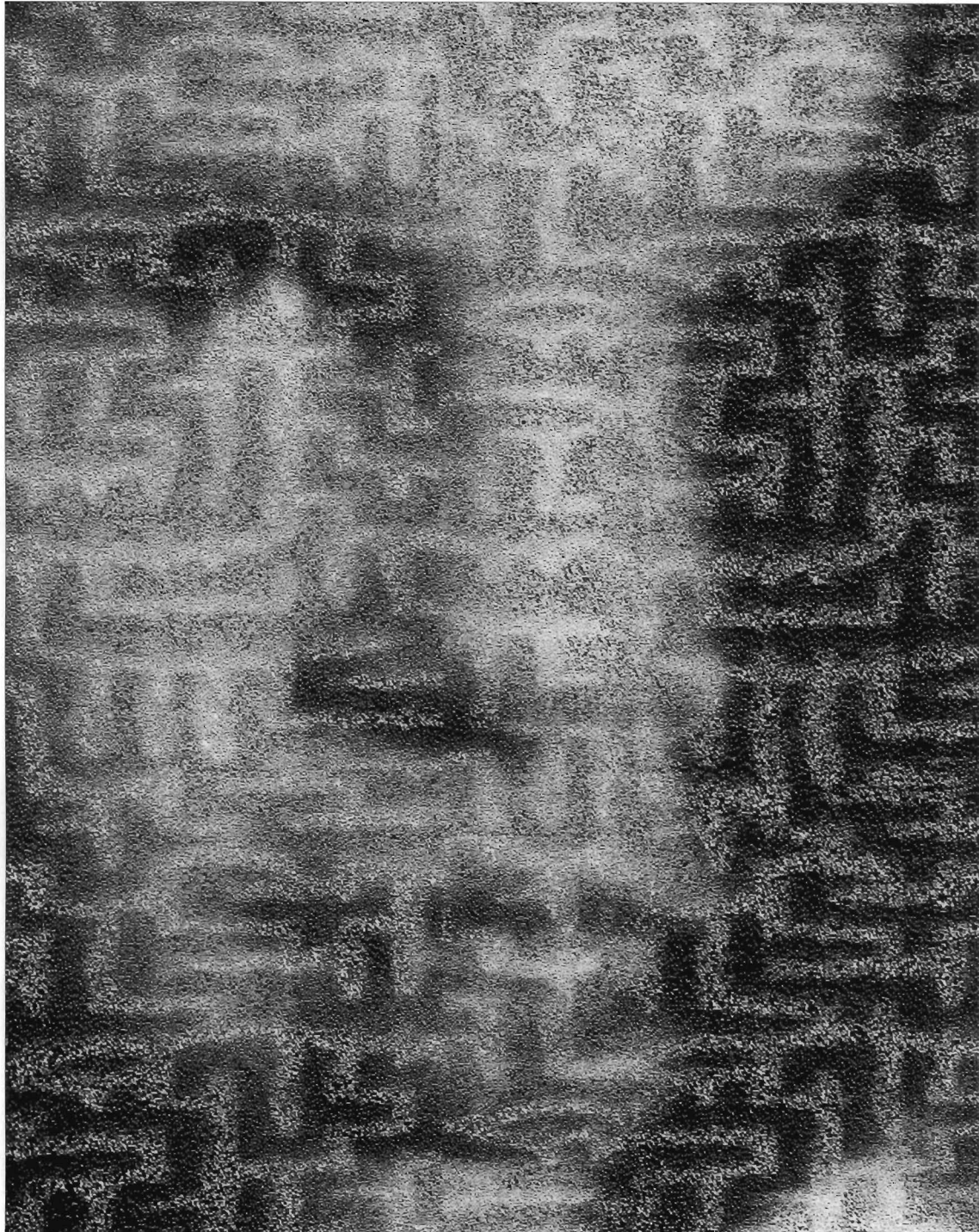


Exhibition Review

Lia Cook: Re-Embodied



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Nancy Margolis Gallery, New York, March 2–April 22, 2006

I first encountered Lia Cook's work in her 2004 exhibition *Embedded Portraiture* at Perimeter Gallery in Chicago. Walking into the gallery, I found myself surrounded by large woven images—faces and cropped details of faces, mostly in black and white, some as large as a meter square. Though I recognized immediately the technical virtuosity of the work, it was something else that captivated me and that continues to fuel my curiosity about Cook's work.

Approaching one piece after the next, I became acutely aware of how the woven construction of the image frustrated my attempts to resolve that image. At a certain distance I could only see image, not thread. At another distance I could only see thread, not image. Standing at the precise threshold demarcating these two possible views of the work, and rocking first forward then back, I found that the resulting perceptual confusion released a particular affective response—something in proximity of grief or longing though not exactly either of those. Something that in a story would be evoked by the word *ago*. What was being enacted here went

beyond a game of resolution and dissolution. I became convinced that this strong affective response, shared by many viewers of Cook's work, was triggered less by what was depicted than by something in the structure of the work itself. It is not that the face illustrates an emotion and so we feel, rather that in attempting to resolve the woven face we retrace a series of internal operations, and this retracing produces affect. An old record replayed by a new device.

Cook's show *Re-Embodied* in March 2006 at Nancy Margolis Gallery in New York presented me with an opportunity to re-experience the work and to attempt to tease apart how I understand her work to function. In doing so I want to consider the following: what is it about the inseparability of material and image in these works that makes them function differently than a painted, photographed, or printed image would? Is there value in considering the works as having a performative aspect and evaluating them as events rather than simply images or objects? With regard to this, are there craft-based conventions of presentation left unchallenged that interfere

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with the lay viewer's ability to see beyond the work's technical refinement and impressive investment of labor?

What does an infant see? For curious parents who want to know what their infant sees at birth, four weeks, eight weeks, the website www.tinyeyes.com allows one to submit a photograph, which is then processed according to an algorithm designed to alter the image so that it will look to an adult as the corresponding reality would look to the infant. Reproduced here is an image processed to show the development of sight from birth to six months to adulthood (Figure 1).

In Cook's earlier work, such as *Binary Traces: Blur* (2004; Figure 2), we are presented with large, unfocused faces peering out at us. It is telling that I am willing to call this a face, for it is in reality nothing more than two dark ovals where I know eyes to be, a dark line where I know a mouth to go, and a mottled curve that locates the other shadows on a round surface. My ability to resolve more than this is limited. Nothing I can do with my eyes will change the focus of what is presented. A perceptual limit is built into the work, for if I move closer as we

know to do when trying to better see a thing, I lose the face entirely in the surface patterning of black and white threads. I am pushed back in my approach to the work. It holds me at a distance.

What distinguishes the approach to a woven image is that the dissolution of image into constituent parts upon approach is not the familiar dissolving into a field of printer's dots, photographic grain, or brushstrokes, but is rather the resolving and recognition of another dimensional object—thread. The material has body; the image is re-embodied. One does not lose sight of the work nor lose oneself in the work, but is, rather, tracked along a narrative in which one sees, sways momentarily at a threshold, and then sees again. One does not fall into the work, but is pushed back again by the patterning at this second, smaller scale. I would argue that what makes Cook's work so powerful and so *not* limited to the technical, is this performative aspect of the work—the way in which it scripts a particular perceptual encounter.

In recent works, such as *In the Maze* (2005; Figure 3), that encounter is complicated by superimposing the micro-pattern of threads over the image as a whole.

Figure 1

Simulation of what the infant sees at a distance of 36 in. at birth, four weeks, eight weeks, three months, six months, and as an adult. Photograph of performer Mark Jeffery (www.tinyeyes.com).



Figure 2
Lia Cook, *Binary Traces: Blur*, 2004,
56 in. × 50 in. cotton, woven.

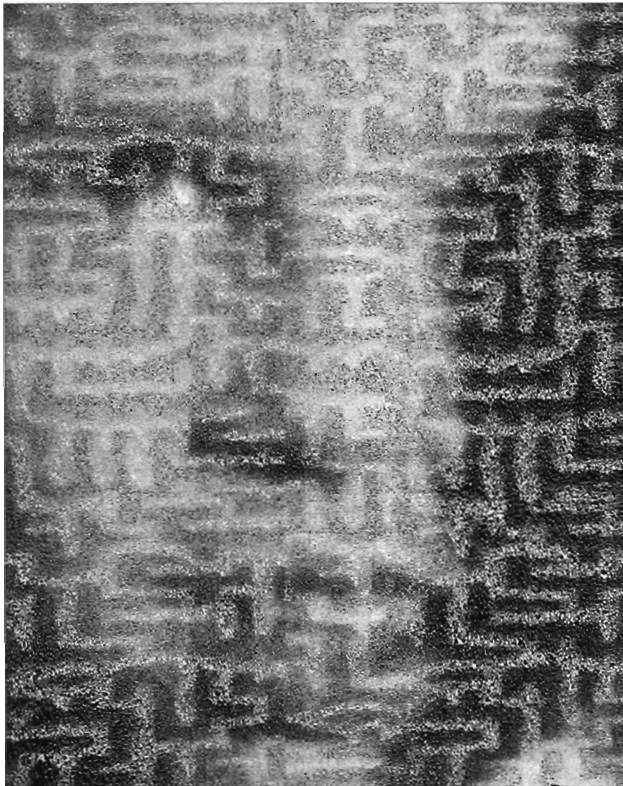
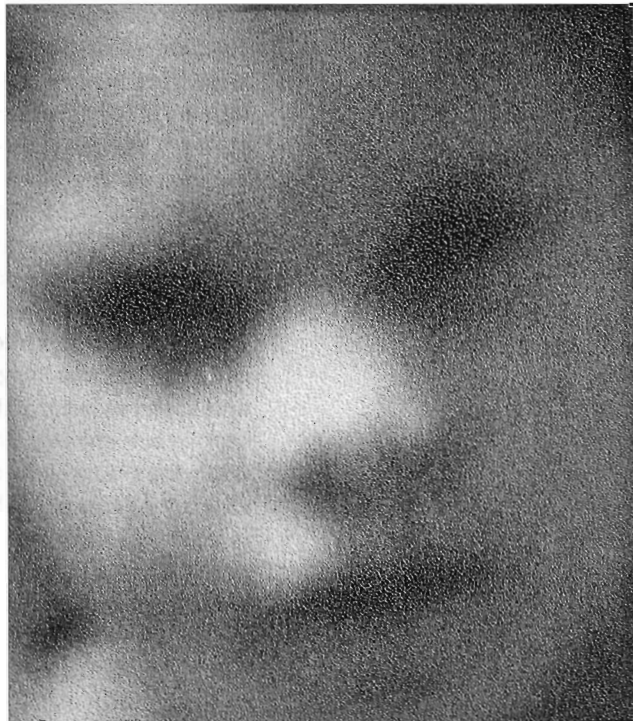


Figure 3
Lia Cook, *In the Maze*, 2005, 66 in. × 53 in.,
cotton, woven.

With the older works, standing back after seeing the cloth up close, I had to mentally add my memory of the detail to my current seeing of the whole. Now though, the micro-pattern is reinscribed into the cloth—the after-image made material, guaranteed recognition. The perceptual task of the viewer now includes the labor of seeing through an interference pattern to find that thing our eyes spend so much of their time seeking out—the face. Enfolded within the seeing of the distant view is the necessary subtraction of interfering information. Perhaps the equation of that labor looks something like this: distant view of face (what is seen minus the interfering micro-pattern) plus close-up view of the substance of the piece (micro-pattern of threads).

Doubling abounds. Recursive circles loop and repeat. Thresholds are crossed and recrossed.

This tight cycle of self-reference echoes and makes sense of works that in their apparent simplicity might at first appear out of keeping with the rest of the exhibition. In these works, *Embedded Digits* (2004; Figure 4) and *Material Digits* (2005; Figure 5), we see hands touching each other, being brought to touch lips, cheeks. Among those who study nonverbal communication, self-touching refers to those gestures, apparently without purpose, in which the body reaches back for itself—rubbing the chin, squeezing the hands together, touching the fingers to the lips. Once thought to be indicators of negative affect—ways of displacing unwanted emotion, they are now also considered to play a role in the production and processing of information. One recent study, for example, found increased self-touching behavior as subjects were asked to recall a list of words given



Figure 4
Lia Cook, *Embedded Digits*, 2004, 37
in. x 50 in., cotton, woven.

Figure 5
Lia Cook, *Material Digits*, 2005, 40 in. x
52 in., cotton, woven.



to them two weeks prior. We know these gestures, each have our own vocabulary, bringing together, reassuring, reinscribing a self. These gestures are made at times of uncertainty, in moments of loss, need—the sudden and involuntary gesture of bringing one’s hands over one’s mouth. In the way Cook constructs her work, as in our own use of such gestures, we see the productive capacity of circling back on oneself.

That the works are woven and not painted, printed, or embroidered is significant, but this crucial difference is downplayed by how the works are presented. For the viewer who understands weaving and how works like these are constructed, these are not flat frontal images. We know they have a back, know that they are dimensional artifacts of the process of threads lifting and crossing. The back of such a double cloth will by necessity hold the

negative image of the front, and in the richness of Cook’s play among binaries—black and white, up and down, here and gone, it comes as a loss to encounter only front. Neatly sewn along the edges, the work seems at this final moment to submit to the conventions of craft and the presentation of high-end textile work. What would happen if the raw backside were offered?

Watching and listening to gallery visitors, there was a well-deserved attention to the intricacy and technical virtuosity of these works. Cook’s work certainly merits recognition of its highly sophisticated craft, but I worry that this technical “wow factor” is also an endpoint for many viewers who do not share the insider’s knowledge of what kind of object is before them. With her evident understanding of how to build in constructive interferences, might there be a way for Cook to interfere with this tendency—to disturb the

edges of the viewing experience itself?

The perceptual script Cook embeds in her works is not an optional way to look at the work, it is the sequence of what one *does* do in order to see the work. The sequence of looking and looking again follows from the way in which Cook has constructed these works. And so it is fair to consider this embedded script an integral part of the structure of the work. Physically the works are woven double-cloths of black and white cotton threads. But in a performative sense they are scores for a certain sequence and timing of perceptual additions and subtractions operating inside the viewer.

I want to speculate that the internal operations required to see Cook’s work are enough like those of the infant first learning to see—looking out, subtracting

interfering information, navigating the relationship of distance and resolution—that to engage Cook’s work is in some way to retrace paths long since abandoned in favor of more automatic and unlabored perception. And if this is the case, might retracing along these old grooves release affect, much as a record in the appropriate device releases sound? Or is the development of vision the wrong arena entirely—could the affect have less to do with learning to see and more to do with the temporally coincident processes by which a self would have been coming into focus?

At the time I went to see Cook’s show, I was reading the work of the child psychologist Jean Piaget. In the language of his narratives of how the child comes to knowledge, there is abundant reference to doubleness, to thresholds, to crossing and recrossing. Here is one particularly dense passage:

... if there exists at the start neither a subject in the epistemological sense of the word, nor objects conceived

as such, nor invariant intermediaries, the initial problem of knowledge will therefore be the construction of such intermediaries: starting from the point of contact between the body itself and external things, they will develop in the two complementary directions given by the external and the internal, and it is on this twofold progressive construction that any sound elaboration of subject and object depends.
(Piaget 1972: 19)

If Piaget has it right, is it any wonder that Cook’s double cloths—with their familial faces swimming just out of focus, with built-in frustrations to sight, with all they allow and all they refuse—would be the thing capable of making palpable for us the distance between then and now?

Reference

Piaget, Jean. 1972. *The Principles of Genetic Epistemology*. Trans. Wolfe Mays. New York: Basic Books.