

THESIS

STITCHED CLOTH

Submitted by

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Art Department

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

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WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS
PREPARED UNDER OUR SUPERVISION BY ILZE ANITA AVIKS ENTITLED
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REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS.

Committee on Graduate Work

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

STITCHED CLOTH

The nervous system is the
greatest of all poems

Paul Valéry¹

This is the *fin de siècle* of the twentieth century. Many seek redemption for past excesses and artists are taking stock of the cynical commodity that mainstream art has become. I have bleached, dyed, painted, and embroidered on cloth to make objects that speak of my optimism that art can convey values always important to the dedicated and anonymous maker of things. Frame and pedestal make manifest the hierarchical value placed on objects of traditional art media. I do not wish this cloth to be validated or justified because it answers to the requirements of traditional art media. I ask the viewer to look at my cloth as art *and* craft, and value it on its own terms.

Cloth is approachable because its function provides connotations and familiarity. The viewer brings personal associations to cloth, supplying a wordless narrative that recalls the sensation of warmth, comfort, protection, and so on. The structure of cloth allows it to drape and enfold, and its texture summons a response from the viewer that comes from having known and touched. I have chosen to emphasize the experiential in cloth, rather than the descriptive.

I embrace the qualities of fabric that allow for the memory of function, whether everyday or ceremonial, and so I have not stretched or framed the cloth for the wall. These cloths hang freely, away from the wall, to allow the air to pass around them. The resultant yielding movement of the cloth is *experienced* by the viewer. I acknowledge the fiber aesthetic by using pattern and embellishment, and I honor fiber processes by dyeing and bleaching the fabric so that color is part of the structure. The drips and bleeding edges of the forms evince the component of water in these processes. The motifs I have chosen, the eight-pointed star and polka dots, are two archetypes of fabric design that primarily speak of decoration rather than "subject matter."

The random, overall stitch, called "seed stitch," is repeated thousands of times on each cloth and is the embodiment of time and perseverance. The stitched mark represents an unhurried action -- sewing in and out of the cloth. The cloth is obviously the product of the human hand and suggests a slow, anachronistic pace, dedication to process, and a love of embellishment. These are not widely accepted virtues of mainstream art of this *fin de siècle*.

While it is important that the viewer respond to the "clothness" of these objects, I have chosen their large size to enable the viewer to see these as more than just *specimens* of cloth -- as something familiar removed from the mundane and made heroic.

Like many artists in process-oriented media, I consider limits a strength. In The Unknown Craftsman Soetsu Yanagu states, "the acceptance of limits produces ease of mind."² Bowing to the unique characteristics of the medium, I do not try to transform cloth into something else but through repetition allow the

subtleties of variation to become apparent. Artist Robert Irwin acknowledges this way of working by citing the example of Giorgio Morandi who limited himself to a particular still life in order to produce lyrical variations.³ I have discovered that by embracing this philosophy, I find the universe in a stitch and new visual meaning in each repeated motif. The absence of distraction in such a way of working in combination with the slow pace helps me make well-considered, deliberate decisions that evolve over time. The relative limitation of stitch density and length precludes spontaneity in the usual sense. But the less visceral, less overtly personal mark imposes a strictness, like a steady heartbeat, to the overall character of the cloth that expresses timelessness.

The physical nature of stitched marks on fabric affirms a way of creating that heightens experience but it also invites a personal deliberation on interconnectedness. Viewed from a distance, the cloth appears to have an evenly textured and quiet patina and large forms are easily discernible. Closer investigation brings the realization that the individual stitches pulse with movement and break down apparent edges. Disorientation is not the objective but rather the discovery that all forms are merging and color and stitches are reciprocal between perceived boundaries. The stitches are like atoms -- they are surrounded by space, there is no first or last stitch, no starting point, no real outline of forms. The continual exchange of visual energy between perceived forms negates the concept of independent existence. Patterns, or arrangements, evolve from the process of stitching sparsely over the cloth and returning two or three times to fill in the spaces. As the stitches naturally begin to line up, they

make visible the rhythm of repetitive handwork and the unconscious ordering of intentionally random stitches.

These are the dualities between perception and reality that emerge in the cloth: grounded yet ungrounded, whole yet discontinuous, stable yet active, random yet patterned. The elusive forms dissolve and reemerge just as it is a physiological fact that we only see foreground *or* background in focus at one time. We *think* we see everything in focus because the focus continually shifts as our eyes adjust and readjust.⁴

My formal decisions support these dualities. All stitches lie next to each other on the cloth -- there is rarely actual layering of stitches -- yet layers of transparent colors are perceived. Hue and values cause forms to advance and recede but the space remains shallow in accord with the cloth aesthetic of flatness. Unstitched borders of cloth all around the body of stitching are meant to assert the fact that this is cloth and not a window to illusionary space. Internal borders of color pay homage to the decorative tradition of borders in textiles and play games with the viewer's continually shifting focus as the perception of "solid" border alternates with elusive, peripheral glimpses of color. Hue and intensity are transitory because stitches lie in different directions and so stitches of the same hue catch light and reflect it back differently. This constant shifting of perception creates a soft, visual pulsation which corresponds to the actual movement of the cloth in air.

But color, form, and texture do not exist in a vacuum. I chose the square to limit the reference to landscape or representational space. I chose the

decorative motifs as vehicles for the merging of fabric tradition and personal expression. Yet the fluidity of fabric, surface texture, merging forms, and temperature of the colors carry unknowable psychological references and introduce unplanned "subject matter" and atmosphere to the cloth. For me this is the effect, not the end, of process-oriented art. If the viewer is willing to believe in the argument that runs counter to the prevailing cynicism in art -- that the work of the hand and of the spirit can enrich and enlighten -- then we agree that "content" has many definitions and the valuable experience derived from art can take on many forms.

In the end these objects must be cloth -- with innate attributes, made with the strength of purpose of a good craftsman -- to express my hope of *fin de siècle* redemption. I am asking the viewer to see the ordinary as extraordinary and validate the cloth for expressing the strengths of its medium. And I ask the viewer to believe that an artist can also be a maker of things.

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PLATES



PLATE I: PINK STAR
Dyed and bleached cotton canvas, cotton embroidery floss
Seed stitch embroidery
56" x 56" x 1/16"

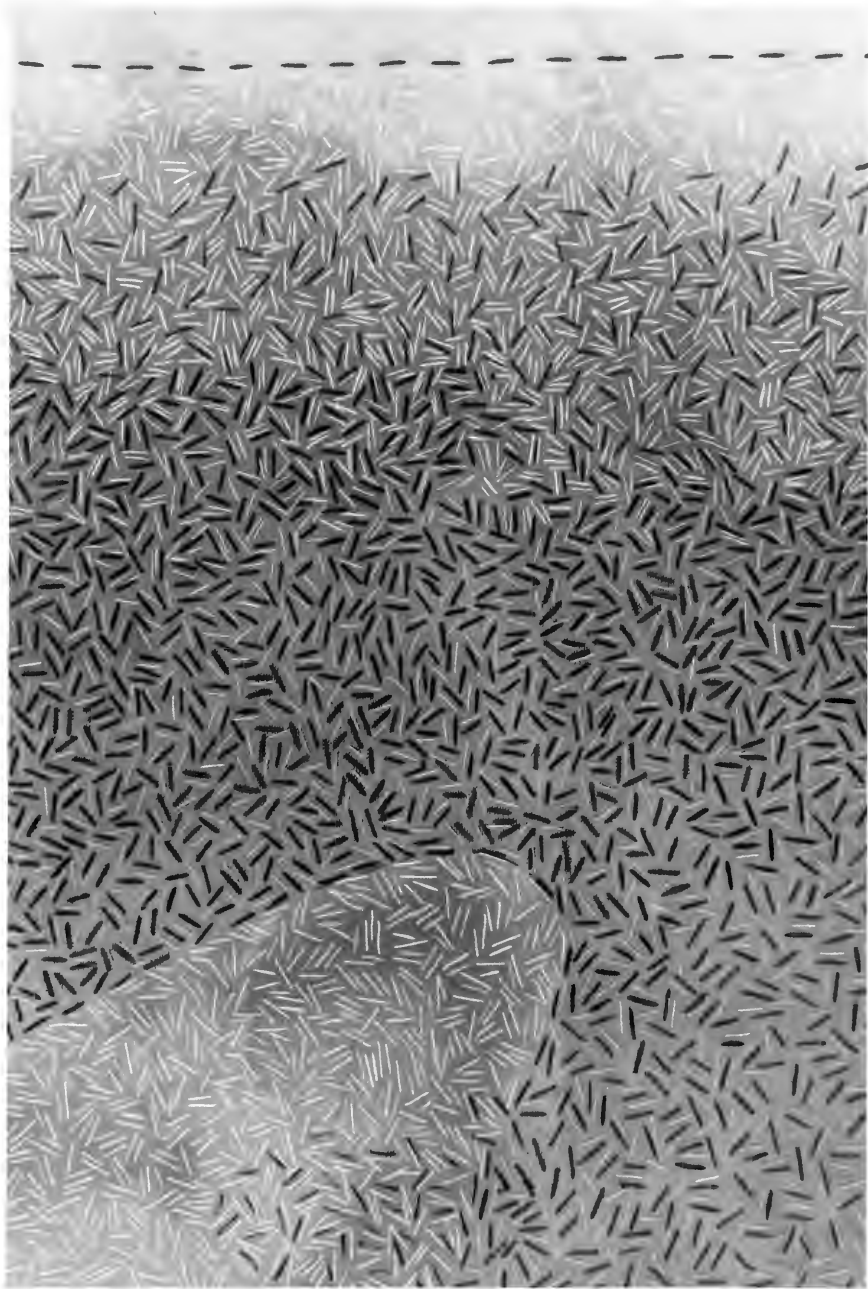


PLATE II: Detail of PINK STAR (PLATE I)
10" x 14" area



PLATE III: BLACK CLOTH
Dyed and bleached cotton canvas, cotton embroidery floss
Seed stitch embroidery
56" x 56" x 1/16"

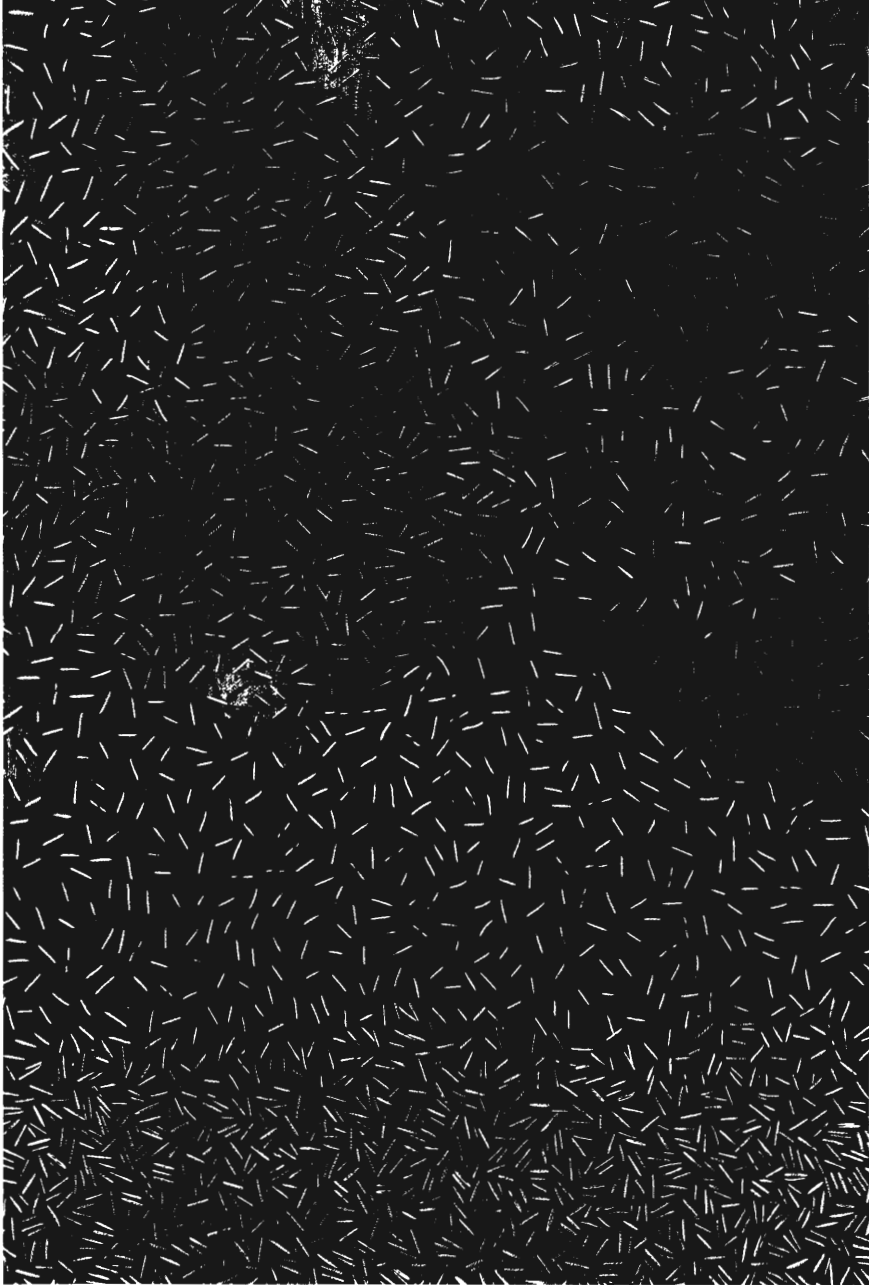


PLATE IV: Detail of BLACK CLOTH (PLATE III)
10" x 14" area



PLATE V: Detail of BLACK CLOTH (PLATE III)
Actual size

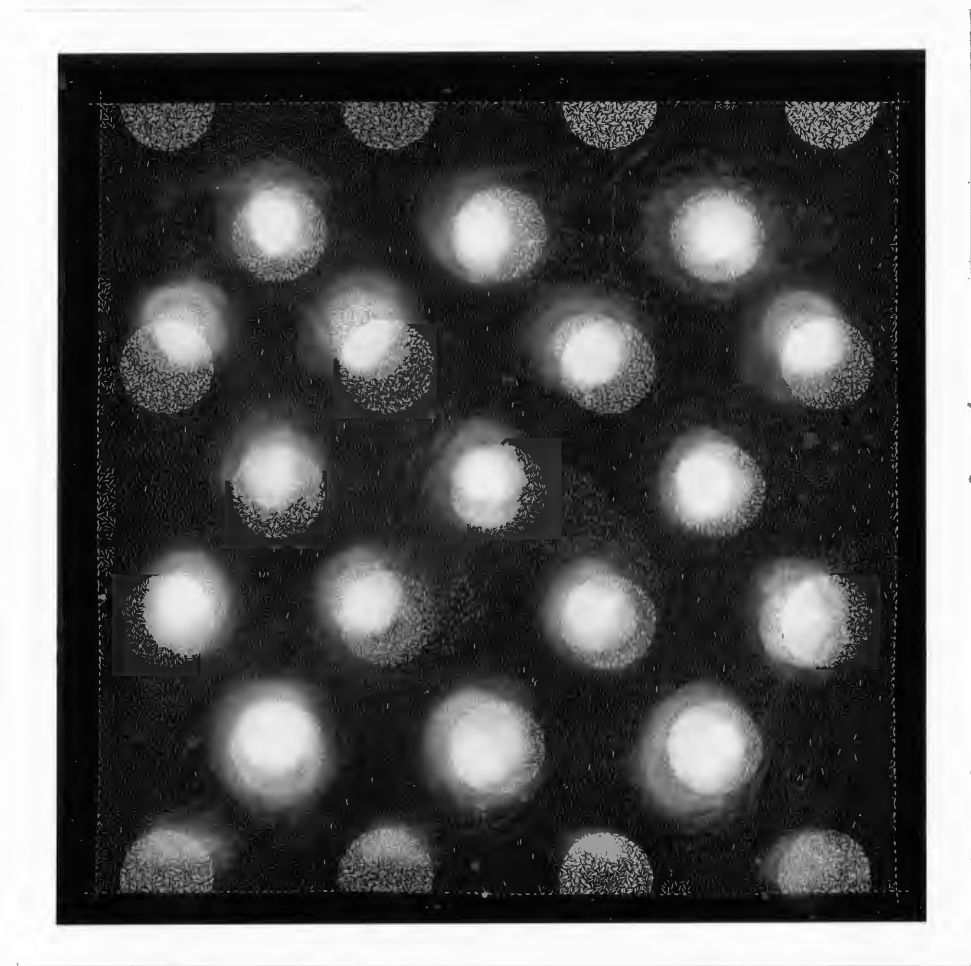


PLATE VI: EFFULGENCE
Bleached black cotton canvas, cotton and metallic embroidery floss
Seed stitch embroidery
55 1/2" x 55 1/2" x 1/16"

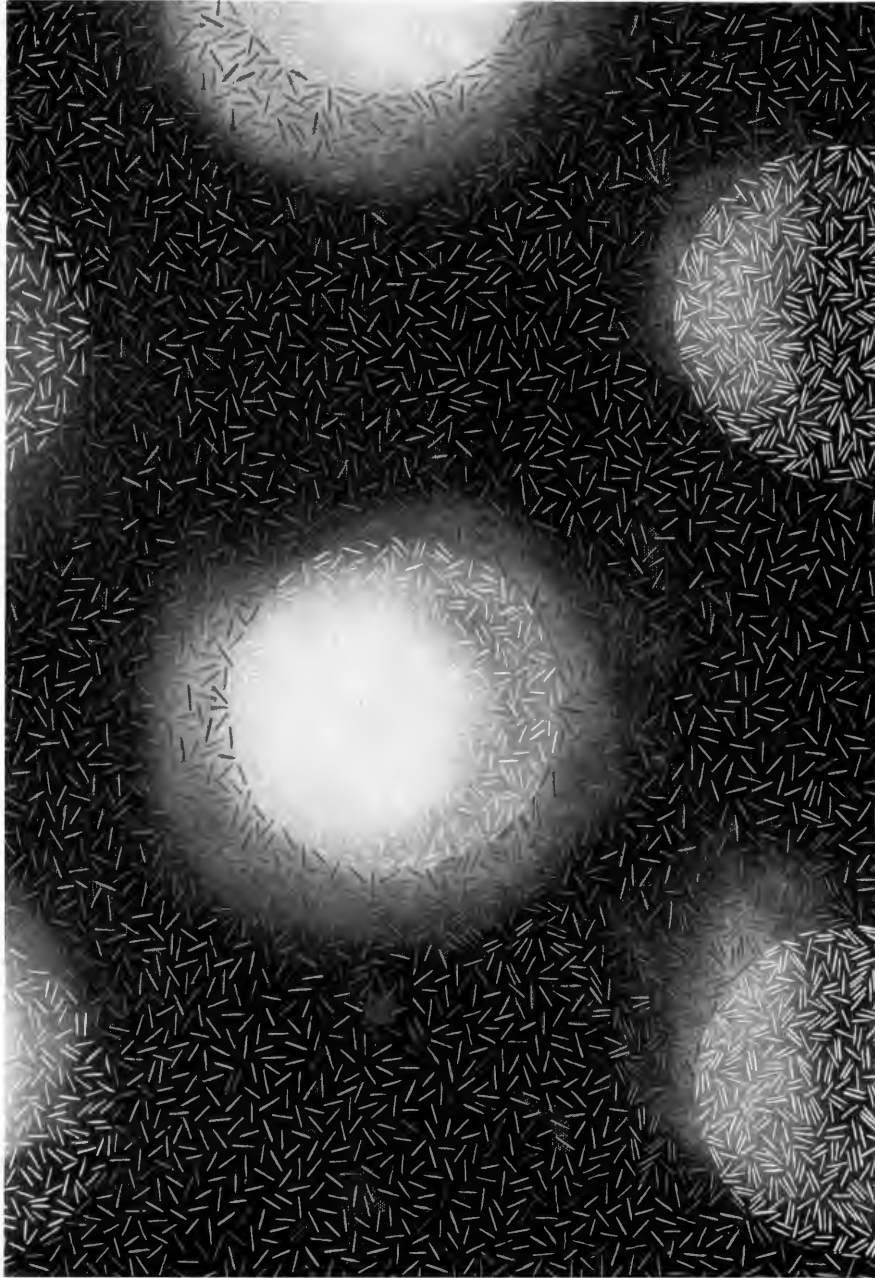


PLATE VII: Detail of EFFULGENCE (PLATE VI)
10" x 14" area

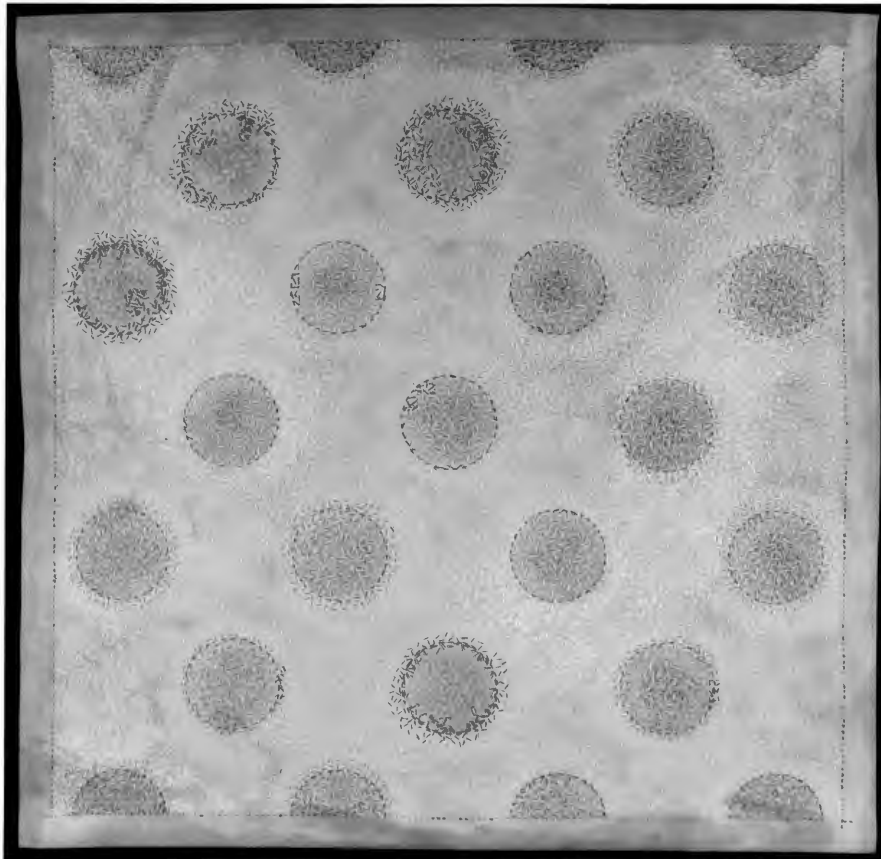


PLATE VIII: ORANGE DOTS

Dyed and bleached cotton canvas, cotton embroidery floss

Seed stitch embroidery

55" x 55" x 1/16"

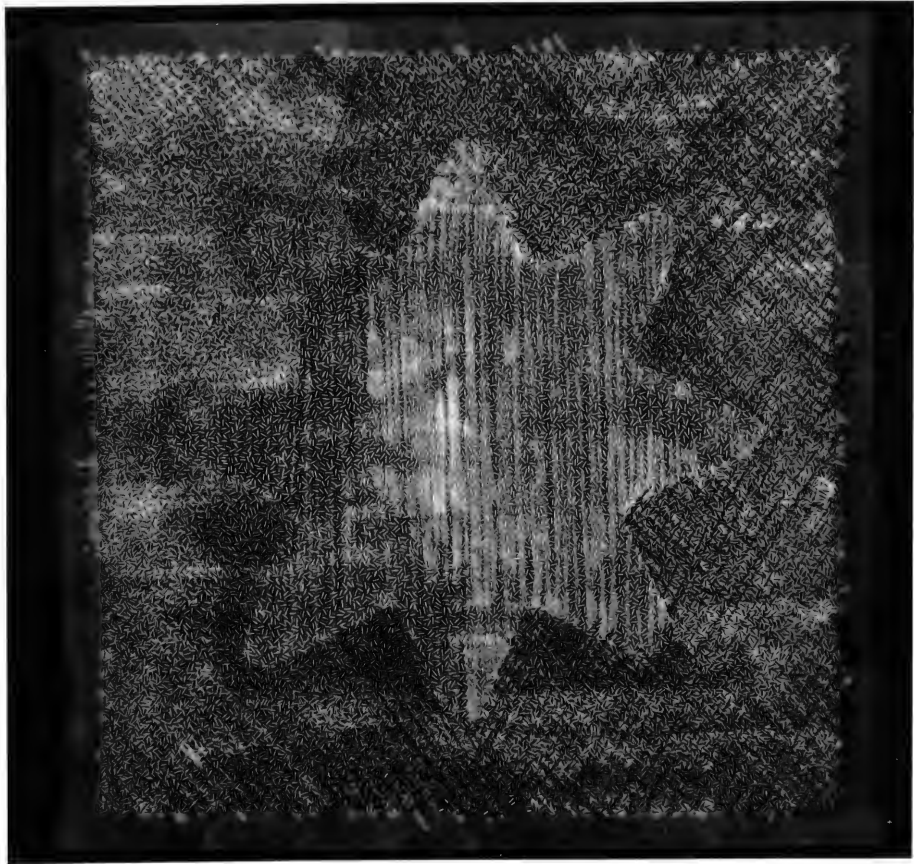


PLATE IX: BLUE STAR
Dyed and bleached cotton canvas, cotton embroidery floss
Seed stitch embroidery
54" x 54" x 1/16"

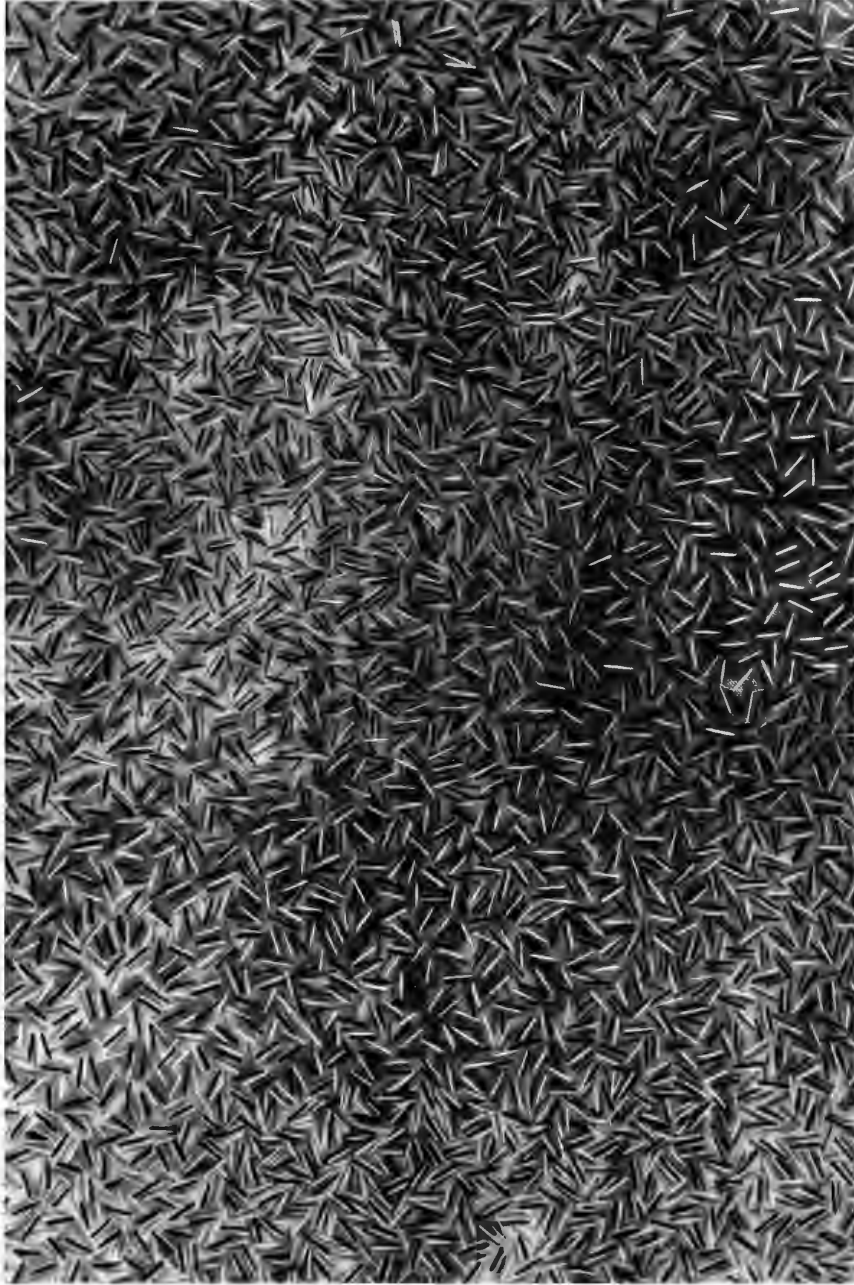


PLATE X: Detail of BLUE STAR (PLATE IX)
10" x 14" area

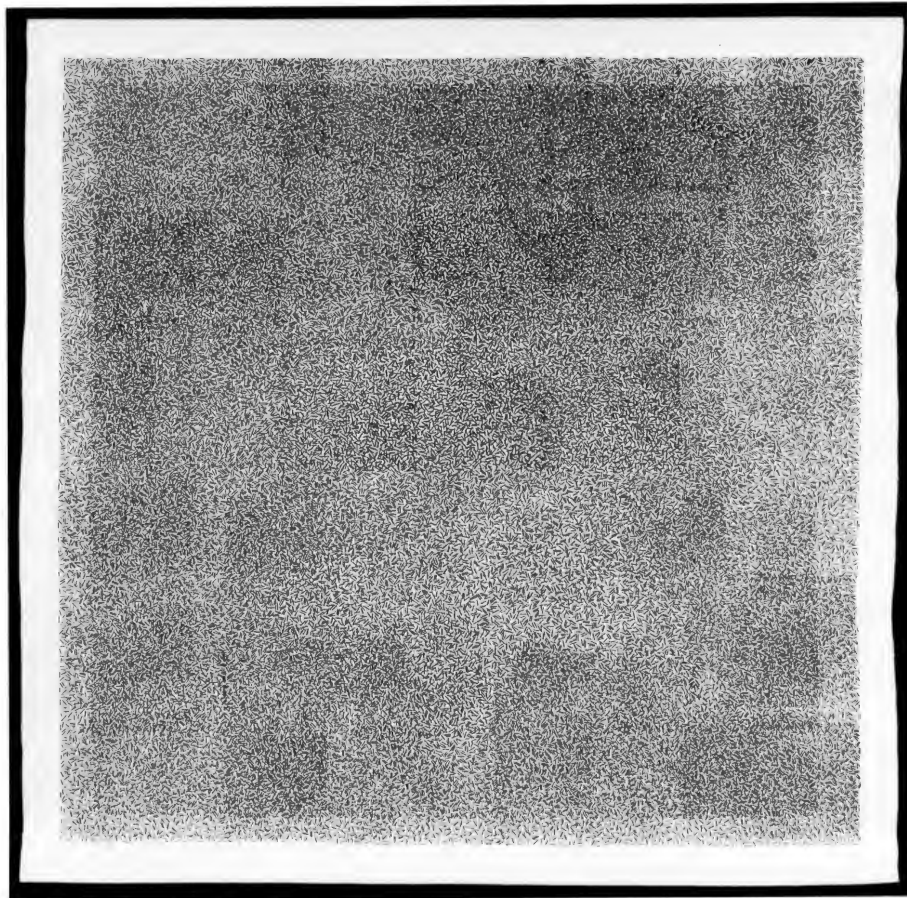
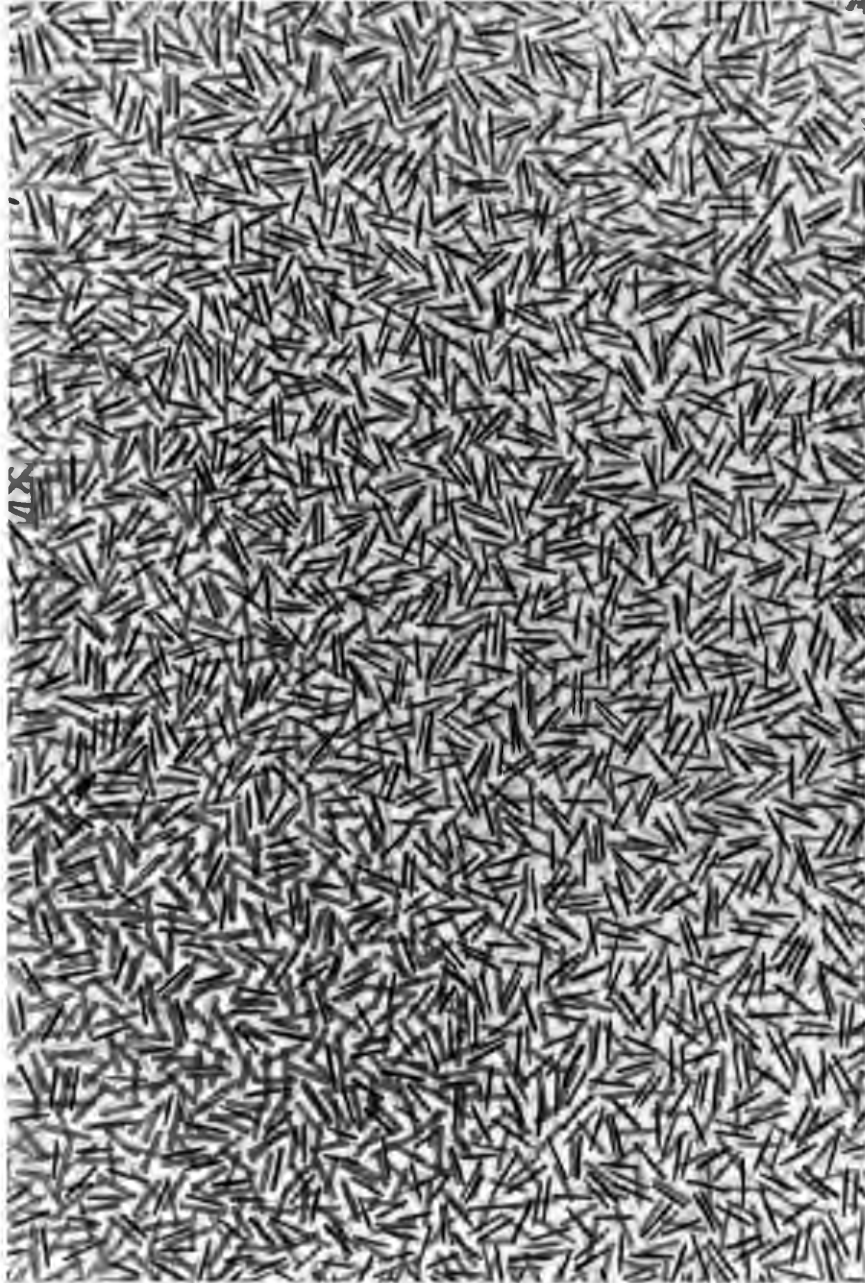


PLATE XI: SCATTERED STAR
Pigment on cotton canvas, cotton embroidery floss
Silkscreened and seed stitch embroidery
55 1/2" x 55 1/2" x 1/16"



**PLATE XII: Detail of SCATTERED STAR (PLATE XI)
10" x 14" area**

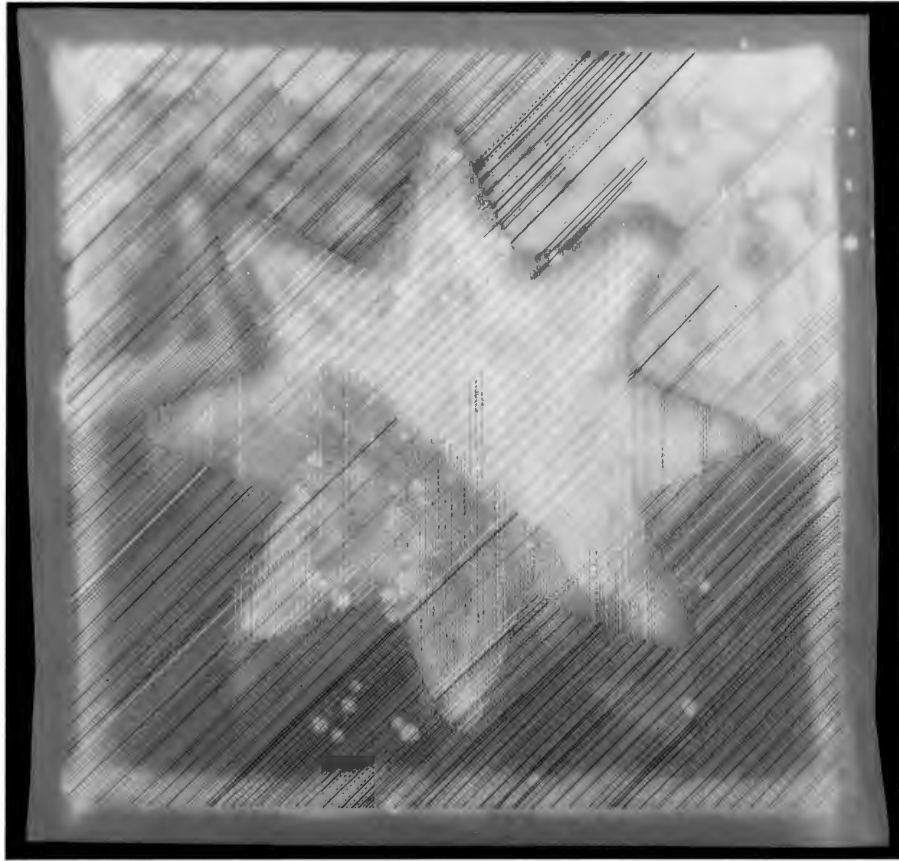
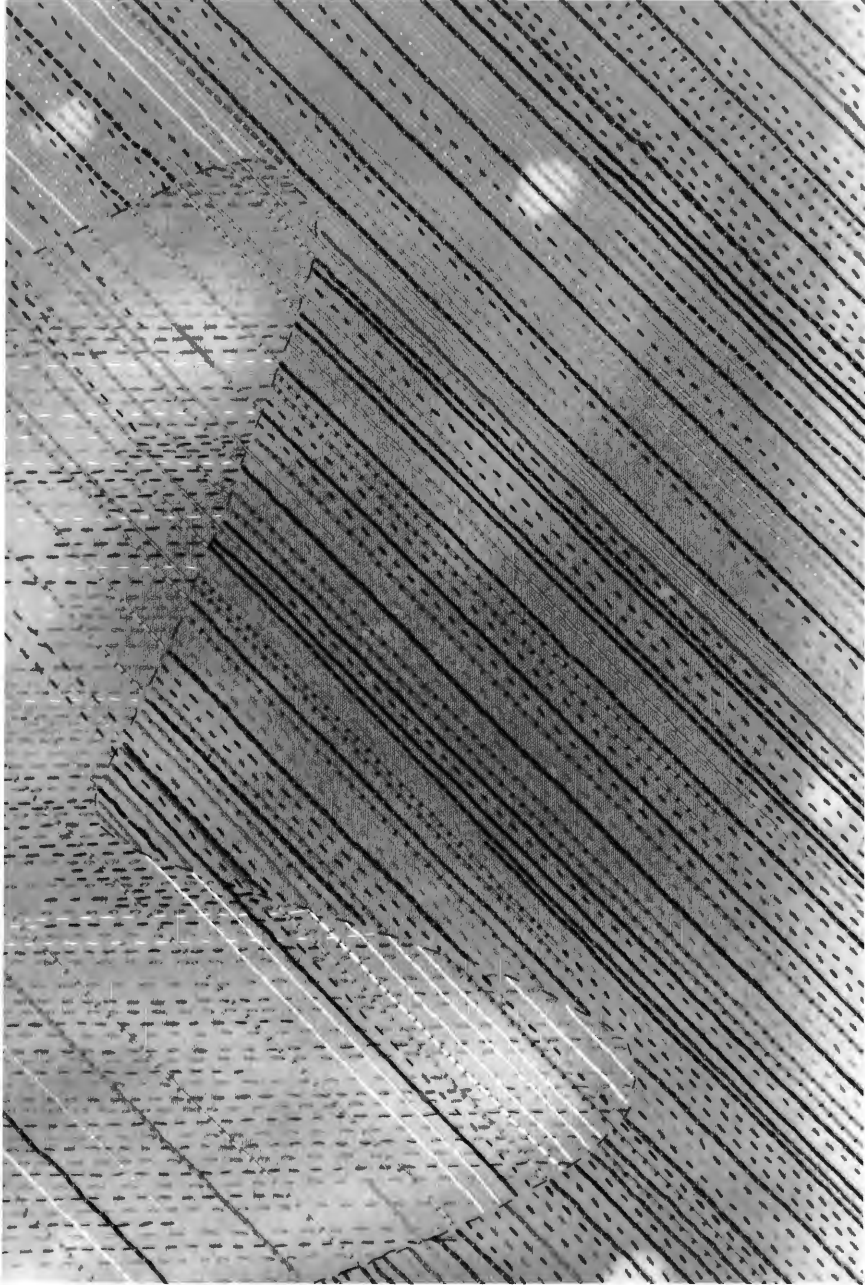


PLATE XIII: COUCHED STAR
Dyed and bleached cotton canvas, cotton embroidery floss
Couching stitch
55" x 55" x 1/16"



**PLATE XIV: Detail of COUCHED CLOTH (PLATE XIII)
10" x 14" area**

ENDNOTES

¹ This line is from *Mélange* : "Le plus grand poète -- c'est le système nerveux." W.N. Ince, The Poetic Theory of Paul Valéry (London: Leicester University Press, 1970), p.40.

² Mueyoshi Yanagi, The Unknown Craftsman: A Japanese Insight Into Beauty / Soetsu Yanagi (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1989), p.117.

³ Lawrence Weschler, Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees: A Life of Contemporary Artist Robert Irwin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p.56.

⁴ E.H. Gombrich, The Sense of Order: A study in the psychology of decorative art (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1984), p.96.

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