

# Threading the Needle

**Barbara Drucker**

*Essay by Irina D. Costache, Ph.D.*





*...I discovered that the questions which crowded my head  
were not generated by my brain but more likely by the melancholy in my heart.*

Susana Tamaro, *A Thinking Heart*, 2015

### *Threading the Needle/Sewing the Narrative*

*Threading the Needle*, Barbara Drucker's 2016 exhibition, comprises recent and previous works, which as the artist poetically states are "threaded together by a common feeling tone tracing memory." But this is not a *retrospective*, as linear chronology is replaced with a hybrid and de-contextualized temporality defined by new associations and reexamined pathways. Throughout the exhibition intersections with the past are subtly anchored in personal histories to form novel meanings with a hint of *looking ahead*, as one of the titles suggests. At first the painterly surfaces, energetic palettes, and innovative shapes, *tesserae* of an eclectic yet unified mosaic, appear to be in stark contrast to the earlier, more austere conceptual work. But appearances have always been an effective "tease" for the artist. Re-claiming creativity generated by both conceptual factors and gestural vitality, this exhibition is a celebratory acknowledgement of art not as a mere result of auspicious inspirational moments, but a gradually developing path, which is as laborious as it is fulfilling.





Threading is a process of connecting and *connection*, construed as a multi-layered concept, which has been central to Drucker's work, is here an indispensable metaphor, a key to deciphering enigmatic correlations. Physical layers, invisible genealogies, tangible mementos and conceptual trajectories construct new bridges to places, times, people, and emotions. *Connected*, 2014-15, one of the paintings in the show, powerfully evokes the intense uncertainty that linkage might generate. A bright red line, beautifully contrasted with the dark and mysterious greenish background, ties the two light colored shapes on the sides. A play between recognizable and imaginary forms emerges. These "suggestions and transmutations," as the surrealist artist Max Ernst would call them, lead, on an inverted timeline, to another work, where similarly, realism and abstraction overlap and compete for primacy.

*Rag Ball*, 1994-2008, is a large, spherical object that joins two centuries and millennia. A formal comparison to a close up from Pollock's famous "drip paintings" is inevitable. A beautiful, layered calligraphy derived on the one hand from the tangible textures and on the other from the colorful crisscrossing indicates a prolonged voyage whose commencement is invisible and its finality open-ended. Memoires and moments are absorbed by the fabrics and threads, rolled and pinned together into a rounded three-dimensional ball. It is precisely here, in the chromatic choice, abstracted realism and formal contour that one discovers the intimate connections to the present work.





Many of the paintings reject the traditional rectangular geometry and opt for a circular form. The delicate, yet focused gaze produces feelings of peacefulness and fragility. Reds and greys juxtaposed to pale yellows and light pinks, prevalent in many of these works, are threaded together to form harmonious spatial relationships, interrupted sporadically by lines reminiscent of stitching on a garment. These graphic, almost monochromatic inscriptions punctuate the circular field to highlight the layers of paint and the energetic brushstrokes. An attentive examination reveals recognizable shapes yet, just as in *Connected*, “a binary opposition of resemblance ” to use W. J. T. Mitchell’s concept, emerges. The images vacillate between a direct meaning and a cryptic significance. Is that a bird or solely the traces of a brush stroke? Is that a girl or a patch of color? Are these mimetic shapes or the figment of viewers’ intense observation and subsequent imagination? Is it realism or abstraction? The titles with either inner connotations (*Wind Blown Sisters and Shining Girl*) or references to the outer world (*Black Bird, In the Distance and Tent Ribbons*) add to the elusive nature of “seeing is believing” as catalyst for art interpretation.

This metaphysical confusion is enhanced in the exhibition by the unexpected superimposition of the installation *Rapunzel's Braids*, 1994, over the painting *Blinding Light*, 2014-15. The suspended dark synthetic hair, now a vertical stripe with soft edges and slight undulations, forms a visual, conceptual, and temporal bond with the painterly pastel shapes on the wall to become an emblem of *connections* in the artist’s oeuvre.



In the center, as an almost converging point of the entire show, is the installation *Foreign Objects*, 1994, flanked by the circular paintings *Black Bird* and *Tent Ribbons*. This impromptu cross-chronological triptych nicely intertwines heterogeneous theoretical and visual elements. Feminist perspectives and conceptual elements are merged with post-structuralist methods and formalist concerns. The oculus-like shapes, which enframe the hanging black dresses each carrying a soft, off-white doll pinned to the front, as if holding a child, establish a quiet, yet rich conversation. The personal nature of *Foreign Objects* is heightened by the original purpose of the clothing, an undergarment in fact, a concealed layer. Visual clues suggest a series of dichotomies, many of them recurring motifs in Drucker's work: family and solitude, love and loss, and birth and death. References to siblings, relationships and the self are suggested, in this and other artworks in the show, by stylized silhouettes, symbolic numbers and metaphorical objects.

The play between private and public, past and present is amplified by hints of rigid rules, imposed order and prescribed behavior. The restrained chromatic choices and the concise language add to the implied nostalgia and the overall meaning. But the artist's own histories are not easily divulged, inviting viewers to add their own, new and unique interpretations. *Foreign Objects*, just as other works, including the painting *Two Women and a Child*, 2009-2014, also connects places: Los Angeles, Samos, and Joshua Tree. Location for the artist, however, is not merely a sum of geographical coordinates, but rather the result of a transformative experiential and emotional occurrence authenticated by cyclical, yet reassessed recollections.





It is this ongoing circular continuity that “sews” together the individual works in the exhibition and turns *Threading the Needle* into a vast and ever-evolving installation. The meanings and operational framework of the ensuing narratives share a paradoxical common thread: they reveal by concealing and connect by releasing. Subtle candor paired with a sophisticated ingenuity, which permeates the dialogues between past as present and tradition as innovation, create a meaningful and reflective epistemological ambiguity. The return to painting, a blunt displacement of trendy digital media and other technologies, reaffirms the value of creation and originality as core attributes of art making and effectively positions Barbara Drucker’s work in the current post postmodern theoretical inquiries and art practices.

*Threading the Needle* is a feast for the eye, for the soul, and also for the mind.

Irina D. Costache, Ph.D.

March 2016



## Barbara Drucker

Barbara Drucker received her MFA from UCLA where she is currently the Associate Dean of Community Engagement & Arts Education; Founding Director of the Visual and Performing Arts Education (VAPAE) Program in the School of the Arts and Architecture; and Professor of Painting and Drawing in the Department of Art.

Drucker is a recipient of the prestigious George A. and Eliza Gardner Howard Foundation Fellowship in Visual Art, Brown University, Providence, RI. In 1994 Drucker co-founded FIG (First Independent Gallery) in Santa Monica, CA; then from 1996-2001 founded and directed The Living Room: Special Projects in Contemporary Art, an alternative exhibition space in Santa Monica, CA. Drucker is currently a member of JTAG, an artists' collective based in Joshua Tree, CA.





Drucker's studio practice includes painting, sculptural installations, documentary video, photography and artists' books. Her work has been exhibited nationally and internationally at venues such as the Mazzocchi Gallery, Parma, Italy; Libera Academia di Belle Arti, Brescia, Italy; Kulturzentrum bei den Minoriten, Graz, Austria; Kennedy Gallery, Hellenic American Union, Athens, Greece; Bouzianis Gallery, Athens, Greece; Art Centre of Hasselt, Belgium; Gallery SIDAC, Leiden, Holland; Biblioteca Rionale Affori, Milan, Italy; Center for Book Arts, NY; LA Contemporary, Los Angeles; 18th Street Arts Complex, Santa Monica; Patricia Correia Gallery, Santa Monica; Mount St. Mary's College, Los Angeles; Minnesota Center for Book Arts, Minneapolis; Rutgers University Gallery, Camden, New Jersey; Gallery 10, Washington, D.C.; and Kathryn Markel Gallery, NY.

Drucker's work is included in public and private collections including the Smithsonian Archives of Contemporary Art, Washington, D.C.; Ruth and Marvin Sackner Archive of Concrete and Visual Poetry, Miami, FL; National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C.; University Research Library, Special Collections/Artists' Books, UCLA; Museum of Greek Folk Art, Film Archives, Athens, Greece; and the Museum of Greek Popular Instruments, Center of Ethnomusicology, Athens, Greece.

## Irina D. Costache

Irina D. Costache specializes in modern and contemporary art and critical theory. She received her Ph.D. in Art History from UCLA. She has taught art history, humanities, and film at UCLA, Loyola University, Cal State Northridge, Mount St. Mary's University and California State University Channel Islands, where she is currently Professor of Art History.

Dr. Costache's extensive teaching experience and innovative methodologies have been recognized with awards and grants. She has lectured nationally and internationally and published in *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*, *Academia Leonardi Vinci*, *Film and Film Culture*, *Computing and Visual Culture*, *FATE in Review* and other journals. Her book *The Art of Understanding Art* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012) was translated into Chinese in 2015. She is the co-author of the book *Venezia, Italia / Venice, California* (Sestante Edizioni, 2015). Her current research examines issues related to digital media, museums and art history.

Since 2008 Dr. Costache has coordinated the exhibition program of the John Spoor Broome Art Gallery and has curated numerous exhibitions including *Postmodern Calligraphies* (2009), *Global Voices, Diverse Narratives: One Medium, Video* (2014) and *Channel Island: It's All in the Name* (2015). Irina D. Costache was elected and served a four-year term on the Board of Directors of College Art Association. She was also elected and served as President of the Art Historians of Southern California.





## Exhibition List

*Blinding Light (Red, Green)*

2014-15

Acrylic on canvas

*Northern Landscape*

2012

Acrylic on canvas

*Rapunzel's Braids*

1994

Synthetic hair

*Totem Doll*

2014-15

Acrylic on canvas

*Connected*

2014-15

Acrylic & charcoal

*Rag Ball*

1994-2008 (Los Angeles)

Fabric, thread, pins

*Black Bird*

2014-15

Acrylic on canvas

*Foreign Objects*

1994 (Athens & Los Angeles)

Fabric, metal hangers, silver pins

*Tent Ribbons*

2014-15

Acrylic on canvas

*In the Distance (5 Sticks)*

2014-15

Acrylic on canvas

*Wind Blown Sisters*

2014-15

Acrylic on canvas

*Red and Black (Honey Bee)*

2014-15

Acrylic on canvas

*Shining Girl*

2014-15

Acrylic on canvas

*Two Women and a Child*

2009-14 (Samos & Joshua Tree)

Acrylic on canvas

*Four Sisters (Red and Black)*

2014-15

Acrylic on canvas

*Looking Ahead*

2014-15

Acrylic on canvas

**Barbara Drucker**

**Threading the Needle**

**January 9 - February 6, 2016**

Past and current work threaded together by  
a common feeling tone tracing memory

Joshua Tree Art Gallery  
61607 29 Palms Highway  
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