Severija Inčirauskaitė-Kriaunevičienė by Dr. Jurgita Ludavičienė

Severija Inčirauskaitė-Kriaunevičienė is one of the most original Lithuanian artists of the younger generation and one of the most acclaimed authors working in the field of textile. She is regularly invited to take part in prominent international exhibitions in Lithuania and abroad, successfully runs the Vilnius Academy of Arts (VAA) textile gallery Artifex, and teaches at the VAA Department of Textile.

Severija began her professional artistic career while she was still studying. She was soon noticed by gallery owners and exhibition organizers. Her early work featured her then trademark material – feathers, from which she made objects that in the everyday world belonged to the hard, masculine world. Later she discovered another expressive technique, which for a long time consumed her thoughts, daily life and exhibition activity, – cross stitch embroidery. This activity has long been popular among women – in the post-war period our grandmothers in villages embroidered tablecloths to decorate their domestic environment, and in the later Soviet times our mothers used cross-stitch to embroider cushions and napkins. Embroidery hasn't lost its popularity today – there are specialised magazines for women to draw inspiration for their picture patterns. It has always been and still is a manifestation of a desire to adorn the household, which usually takes the form of perfectly kitschy objects. The latter have become Severija's source of inspiration for quite a long creative period. Cross-stitch embroidery has evolved into a mania of sorts, hence the artist's extraordinarily intensive activity. Yet, instead of fabrics, she chose to embroider metal and similar materials. Found metal objects and everyday things turn into artworks when augmented with cross-stitch ornaments – banal, standard, found in magazines, intended for producing cozy kitsch. Employing irony, Severija conceptually neutralizes the harmfulness of kitsch's sweetness and sentimentality. Irony emerges in the process of drawing inspiration from the postwar Lithuanian village, with which artists have lost connection today, or from the destitute Soviet domestic environment, which women were trying to embellish with handicrafts, no matter what kind of absurd forms it would take. The intimacy of indoors freed from all tensions is the essence of coziness, that is crystallized in Severija's works as cross stitch embroidery on various household utensils not intended for it. At the same time, this embroidery serves as a reference to the female handicraft culture. In the everyday life, not only it is important to see all the things in their usual places, for a safe environment it is very important to keep all of its parts as they are, so that one's eye does not stumble over any foreign, unknown, strange object. However, routine practices are important as well: production of handicrafts strengthens the feeling of safety, it is often suggested to help stress or nervous breakdown – when one has fallen out of the calm flow of the everyday. Knitting, sewing, crocheting, embroidery are seen as a kind of meditation – calm monotonous activity, which nevertheless isn't an end in itself. Often the hours spent making a lace or a needlework are

dedicated to creating an object that will decorate the domestic environment. Yet these objects are usually formed according to unified patterns published by various magazines for women. Thus, in completely different private interiors, women, who are radically different in their age, education and social status, produce identical objects – laces, napkins, throws, etc. This is particularly true for cross stitch embroidery – the technique is used to make replicas of paintings and ornaments from various historical epochs. This gives birth to kitsch in private interiors. Kitsch is precisely something that seems to be based on art, but is in fact unoriginal, banalized, trite, popular and common. All of this contributes to the creation of coziness – clichés of interior design produce the feeling that one's home is just as cozy as the homes of others, and at the same time just as beautiful as the photographs in an interior catalogue, forming a certain communion with other creators of the same object, personal peace of mind and security.

Severija transfers the uniform patterns from the magazines onto huge aluminum pot lids (*Life is Beautiful*, 2005) and turns these unattractive objects of imposing size into prestigious objects of desirable interiors. When it ends up on a bucket, a ladle or a car door, a serialized kitschy ornament paradoxically transforms them into unique handicrafts. Erasing the line between everyday kitsch and high art, the artist ironically reflected on both the universal pursuit of beauty and coziness and an overly serious approach to art. In the Lithuanian art scene, kitsch is often still regarded as the embodiment of evil, thus few authors dare to include kitschy symbols in their work. Severija acts in the exact opposite way, however. Kitsch, irony, metal and embroidery – this unlikely combination of components characterizes a remarkably productive period in the author's artistic career. Embroidery proved to be a very fitting component: ornaments alluding to the everyday, embellishment and sentimentality instantly become conceptual when they enter a contrasting environment or end up on completely unsuitable objects. The impressive *Fall Collection* is based on this contrast: the same old roses familiar from Severija's earlier works, that unoriginal symbol of everyday female life, nearly a cliché, blossomed on rusty objects and merged with the bright brown colour of the metal. In this collection, the author mocked Lithuanian habit of decorating public interiors with antique household utensils: often, when furnishing a new eatery, the owners look for old bast-shoes, lifting forks, irons or shovels, and hang these on the walls in an attempt to create an atmosphere of coziness. This desire is strange and illogical – after all, such interiors are usually created for urban dwellers. Yet a watering can, a cartwheel or a lifting fork are for some reason presumed to be almost obligatory elements of a pub's interior. Salvaging discarded utensils and adorning them with embroidered roses, Severija draws attention to this often-absurd Lithuanian worship of things past and ancient, which often manifests itself as a combination of a trendy car, a shabby cart and a horseshoe hung above the door. Rusty metal surfaces allude to the old times – yet this is not the patina of centuries, but a recent rust, as the objects are not antique artefacts, just corroded utensils of contemporary everyday life. This makes the work look paradoxical, ironic and very aesthetical.

Paradox, irony and embroidery – how can one do without it? – are employed in the artist's other collection, *A Path Strewn With Roses*. Here embroidered roses blossom on a car hood and resemble funeral wreaths or baskets that mark the sites of fatal traffic accidents with fluorescent flashes of artificial flowers. "Hurry up, and your car will be adorned with embroidered roses," could read a slogan on an imaginary social advertising poster. These roses look macabre on a car and make you think of feminine and masculine pastime: while men spend hours on end doing up their cars and then racing at crazy speeds, women wait for them at home doing embroidery. Severija puts cars and roses in one bunch and comes up with a paradoxically ironic version of feminine car decoration. Here a path strewn with roses is a metaphor of absence rather than of good life and luck. Roses cover the driver's path after death.

Cross-stitch ornaments are transferred on various objects: plates, bowls and lids, spoons and ladles, cars and even buildings. But let us leave embroidered walls for later. Because there is another period in line. The artist herself calls it, with reservation and a bit of self-mockery, "designerly". Indeed, it is impossible to keep cross-stitching everything you see for your entire life. To be sure, there have been artists who put their signature on everything, including clouds or war, like Ben Vautier. Yet Severija is also rational: the turn to functional objects was consistent and logical. The abundance of embroidered objects suggested the crystallisation of the idea of the relationship between art and domestic life, art's place in the everyday, and the balance between an object's aesthetics and functionality. Due to this, objects turned from conceptually decorative into decoratively functional. One of the most important examples of this concord of functionality and decorativity is the lighting design collection *Sunflower*. Same artistic methods are employed: cross stitch embroidery and artificial aging of objects, as well as persistent focus on the everyday – pre-designed objects are transformed, but retain their functional nature and are intended for interior illumination. The lampshades of the collection, assembled from found metal parts, utensils and pipes, are at the same time decorative (cross-stitched!), conceptual, and functional. On the other hand, the once functional pipes and faucets, put together, undergo a certain renaissance – they acquire a new function, albeit absolutely different from their previous one. The link with light must be emphasised as well: sunflowers depend on the sun, they turn to it, and are associated with it because of their form. Yet these sunflowers are embroidered on a rusty, damaged surface. Due to this blend of decorativity, destruction and recycling these objects are pieces of art as well as design. They also have an emotional tinge: the reminder of sadness, desertion and the passage of time is combined with the aesthetics of ugliness, as well as with the cheerful readiness for reuse. Perhaps the most emotional is the large-scale work entitled *Seven Days of Art*. It is an impressive and intricate floor lamp with a hint of bitter irony; a menorah, which reminds the viewer about the artist's tireless work seven days and seven nights a week. It speaks about constant readiness, awareness, and inability to get away from generating ideas, but also about the exhaustion that is inevitably

brought by neverending production of art, satiation and burnout. Then again, one can try to simply switch on the menorah-come-floor lamp and relax. But is it possible?

Probably not, if you were born to be an artist. At least this is what becomes clear when one looks at Severija's work retrospectively. Embroidery, which bloomed like fields of flowers on metal objects in the beginning of her artistic career, begins to grow rare and increasingly conceptual, the joy of discovery gives way to exhaustion and meditations on the need for art, its role in society and in the artist's own life. It is impossible to cease keeping vigil in the face of art, but when you keep drawing from your own well, you inevitably begin to hear the scuffing of a zinc bucket as it hits the bottom. Then all the enthusiastic activity starts to look like a huge gray lump of fog, which does not provide inspiration anymore, but rather hampers and disturbs. Yet even this inevitable exhaustion can be used for new works: what can be embroidered can also be undone. This Penelopean act signifies many things: satiety and the feeling of meaninglessness, the artist's role as a disturbing agent in society, finally, striving for purification and freeing up the space for new ideas and new works. For this reason, Severija switches from passionate embroidery to meaningful unripping. I have already said that it seemed embroideries would cover everything – bridges, streets and houses. It ended up being almost like that – the artist's stitches marked two walls. The first was exhibited at Kaunas Textile Biennial, and, naturally, was temporary. It brought the first unripping, compulsory, albeit well substantiated. Then followed the second wall and the second unripping – the wall was permanently exhibited in the Artifex gallery, which Severija manages. Logically, a cross-stitched wall looked quite conceptual in a textile gallery, but eventually this exhibit became an obstruction for other shows. The second dismantlement was symbolical, voluntary and significant: as if rejecting what she had created and established as her trademark technique, the author took out the stitches and left the empty surface of the wall like a screen for a future film. The film is there too – the viewer can watch it frame by frame, observing how the wall is turning pale. What remains is a plane for other works and an empty space, which, if we are to believe the practitioners of meditation, is the thing to pursue. At least for today.

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