

BO LEE AND WORKMAN

Interwoven Worlds: Alice Kettle and the Poetics of Embroidery

Written by TF Chan

There is a quiet poetry in encountering Alice Kettle's work in a former chapel. For one, her embroideries – ambitious in scale, luminous in colour, teeming with detail – invoke a sense of near-religious awe. While visually distinctive, they draw their narrative format from the Bayeux Tapestry, that magnificent chronicle of the Norman Invasion originally conceived for another religious site, Bayeux Cathedral. 'I was moved by the exquisite nature of drawing with thread, to create a material chronicle of a historic event,' recalls Kettle of her first viewing of the medieval masterpiece, in replica, at the Reading Museum in the early 1990s. (She is careful to point out that the Bayeux Tapestry is technically an embroidery, as a tapestry involves weaving images as part of the cloth.) She was struck by the depiction of war 'not only as the division of two parts in conflict, but also as the interweaving of worlds – the material, symbolic and spiritual'.

Four decades into her career as a textile artist, Kettle continues to cite the Bayeux Tapestry as a formative influence. Whether referencing classical mythology (notably in *Odyssey*, 2003, based on Homer's epic poem), or calling our attention to contemporary events (in her 2018 exhibition 'Thread Bearing Witness', foregrounding the global refugee crisis), she addresses the sweep of history without ever losing sight of individual lives and struggles. The interaction between a cast of characters – soldiers in war, migrants at sea, protestors speaking truth to power – may give her embroideries their visual dynamism, but it's the individual depictions, which strike a delicate balance between detail and abstraction, that infuse them with emotive power. She brings each character to life vividly, while situating them in wider context, alluding to the 'invisible threads' that bind them to one another.

The title of her show at Bo Lee Gallery, 'Balancing Act', sums up the intended effect of Kettle's work. It also refers to specific qualities of her chosen medium. Kettle trained as a painter, and cites Howard Hodgkin, Albert Irvin, Mali Morris and Georg Baselitz as influences, but her embroideries should not be considered translations of painting into thread. Rather, they reflect a distinct way of thinking and drawing. Her primary tool is a lockstitch machine, which mixes a thread from the top with another from the bottom to form each stitch, and she works by combining threads of varying thicknesses, colours and textures. 'I change the ratio of the tension between the top and bottom to create movement, colour and light,' she says of this physical balancing act. Things don't always go as intended: Kettle

has to be prepared to cut out mistakes, patch up her fabric and rework it. And unlike painting, which is typically worked from one side, textiles allow for multiple points of entry. To use a thicker thread, Kettle flips her fabric over and works from the back, so she is stitching without knowing how it translates onto the front. As she describes it, ‘the uncertainty of things being unfixed is always present, but there is a virtuosity in not knowing, not seeing, not being in control.’

Such a way of working demands exceptional skill, but also faith in the artist’s own agency and process, which Kettle sees as an apt analogy for how we handle ourselves in uncertain times. She wants us viewers to remember that we live in a divided and conflicted world, scarred by wars in Gaza and Ukraine, and from our positions of privilege we must not forget the precarity of other people. She also wants us to hold on to hope and work towards better times.

Rather than offering a specific prescription, Kettle’s work insists on attentiveness and care. Her characters, depicted catching and throwing balls of thread in the five embroideries that form ‘Balancing Act’, are impressive in scale but not conventionally heroic, with deliberately ambivalent expressions that suggest they are tussling with forces larger than themselves. Whether juggling solo (*Juggler*, 2026) or standing as a pair face-to-face (*Air and water, up and down*, 2026), they serve as reminders that our lives are shaped by broader circumstances but not entirely determined by them. In that way, Kettle encourages us to confront the world’s brutality and fragility, to recognise our own implication in them, all the while living our lives to the fullest.

Marking a departure from Kettle’s more painterly work, the embroideries are accompanied by a moon-shaped sculpture, suspended from the ceiling of the former chapel – her equivalent of Hailey’s Comet, which blazes above King Harold II in the coronation scene in the Bayeux Tapestry. The inclusion of a celestial body to anchor the space comments on how cosmic forces interweave with everyday lives: ‘These archetypal symbols connect us and transcend what it is to be human,’ Kettle explains. ‘The micro and macro, the personal and the turbulence of politics, are all in this balancing act.’

TF Chan is a former editor of *Wallpaper** (2020-23), where he was responsible for the monthly print magazine, planning, commissioning, editing and writing long-lead content across all pillars. He also played a leading role in multi-channel editorial franchises, such as *Wallpaper*’s annual Design Awards, Guest Editor takeovers and Next Generation series. He aims to create world-class, visually-driven content while championing diversity, international representation and social impact. TF joined *Wallpaper** as an intern in January 2013, and served as its commissioning editor from 2017-20, winning a 30 under 30 New Talent Award from the Professional Publishers’ Association. Born and raised in Hong Kong, he holds an undergraduate degree in history from Princeton University. He is now the Director of Collect Art Fair.