

The Capital City Arts Initiative [CCAI] is delighted to present Silk & Sinew, a solo exhibition by artist Paula Chung at the CCAI Courthouse Gallery from September 22, 2014 – January 22, 2015. In conjunction with the exhibition, CCAI commissioned artist and writer Sara Rockinger to write the following essay. CCAI extends its sincere appreciations to Paula, Sara, the Carson City Courthouse, and all those involved in the exhibition.



What do flowers, the human body and textiles have in common? That is what I asked myself when I first encountered the work of Paula Chung. After deeper study, it would be trite to answer, "Everything," but in this artist's hands, it is close to spot-on. It might be easier to describe what they don't have in common, perhaps going into detail about cell structure or biology. I certainly wasn't thinking of that when I first discovered her work, but I bet Chung was when she bridged the apparent gap between large-scale flower images and her human x-ray imagery. What is the common thread? "This is life," she said.

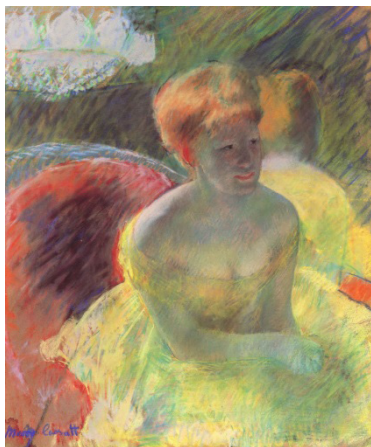
Paula Chung's textile work attracted the attention of the art world in 2005 with her huge fabric images of vividly colored flowers. Sometimes representational and sometimes a riot of abstract color, her intricate methodology and powerful color sense impressed viewers and jurors alike.

This medium and subject matter are not random choices for Chung. She has always been a gardener, she says, from her childhood in California to her current home at Lake Tahoe. Learning to sew was also a childhood interest that has carried forward, as is drawing. However, her early artistic experience was limited. She did not enter an art museum until the age of forty, and was finally able to put these interests together in art classes at her local community college. Painting classes introduced her to color. More painting experience taught her eyes "to see." And even further study gave her the idea to combine her traditional quilting skills with her interests in color. She credits supportive and talented friends and instructors with setting her on her current path of artwork.

In the 1990s, the art quilt wave caught Chung's attention and she began translating her multiple interests into this cutting edge art form. Originally, contemporary art quilts were constructed similarly to their traditional cousins, with the main top layer, a middle layer of batting, and a back layer, all stitched together by hand or machine. For the structure of her art quilts, Chung sticks to this defined and comfortable layered medium. However, the top of Chung's art quilts and her process of image creation are anything but traditional. All of her art starts with a photograph that she uploads into Adobe Photoshop. In the case of the body images, her starting image is a black and white x-ray, sonogram or MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging). Interpreting these black and white images has been arduous as they are often unclear with low contrast. Her trained eye and Photoshop tools help her create a map of the inherent light to dark values in her image. She can then add or alter color to her liking.

As is obvious in the work of Paula Chung, color is (almost) everything. She considers value, tone, intensity and emotive qualities of her color choices. She also considers the relationship of one color to its neighbors. What happens when this color is put next to that color? What mood does this evoke? Does the color pop up or recede? Blend or blur? Does it become more vibrant or do these colors, when put next to each other, get muddy? Chung is not attempting to copy nature in this process. She strives to convey its beauty, power, and vulnerability as she experiences it.

Defying the long-held tradition of somber color palettes, the Impressionists of the mid to late 1800s broke standards by using bright colors and newly developed synthetic pigments. Capturing the ever-changing qualities of light through the passage of time was paramount for the Impressionists. Post or Neo-Impressionists pushed these color experiments further, using swatches, strokes, or dots of pure color, letting them mix in the eye of the beholder instead of on the artist's palette to avoid muddying the impression. These daring artists also began to focus more on the emotion of color, and let go of the need to replicate the optical illusion of light and shadow. Chung often walks a line between these ideals, heading straight toward the dramatic edginess of the Expressionists from the early 1900s.



Mary Cassatt, *Lydia Leaning on Her Arms, Seated in Loge*, pastel on paper, 1879-80, collection of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.



Paula Chung, *Apricot Rose III*, fiber, 2009.

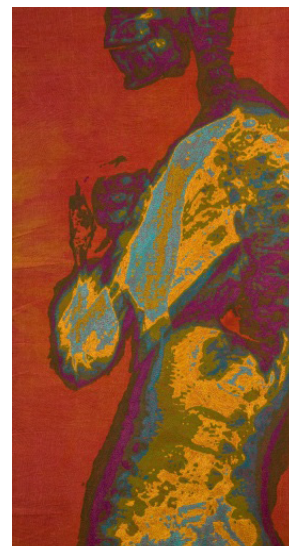
Chung's apparent hundreds of color changes may suggest Impressionistic tendencies of focused attention paid to changing light and shadow, but her compositions and subject matter indicate a broader intention. Both flora and fauna are subjected to her Expressionists inspirations of edgy raw energy. Chung chooses to depict not the flawless flower at the height of perfection but the aging flower as its petals curl toward its last rays of sun. Her off-center compositions, implied movement and vibrant color choices are also expressions of her individual perspective of life's exuberant wear and tear. Chung's body imagery pushes further into the lair of Expressionism, emphasizing the distorting nature of the X-ray imagery and expressing a private vulnerability of life.

At a distance, you might think Chung's work, like her predecessors, is painted, but take a closer look and you will find a meticulous layering of fabric and thread. Her floral art quilts

look like puzzles of separate and intricately applied pieces of silk fabric. Look even closer and you can see the subtle color changes within each piece of fabric. This comes from hours of hand-dyeing her own materials. Chung applies layer upon layer of color to the yardage until the fabric reaches its maximum saturation. Only then does she apply stabilizer to the back of the yardage, enabling her to cut smooth edges and applique her fabric puzzle in place.



Egon Schiele, *Self Portrait with Arm Twisting Above Head*, water color, 1910, Private Collection.



Paula Chung, *Arms Crossed*, fiber 2012.

Chung's most recent work moves away from the traditional definition of quilt as a base or medium. Like other cutting edge textile artists today, Chung is investigating single fabric layers and transparency. Stitching well-spaced lines of thread on a single layer of fiberglass screen material, she is creating new work based on the transparent MRI images she has gathered from friends, relatives and even strangers. One person who donated her images to Chung observed, "You spent more time looking at my spine than my doctor did."

In her bodywork pieces like *Arms Crossed*, above, Chung uses only thread to create the image. She uses her sewing machine in a free-style method. Generally, a stationary sewing machine produces a straight line while the user feeds fabric under the pressure foot slowly guiding the movement of the fabric. In the free-style sewing method, the pressure foot is slightly raised leaving a gap between the foot and the base of the machine. This enables the artist to freely move the fabric under the needle, similar to holding a pencil pointed straight down and moving paper underneath to draw a line.

Free-style machine embroidery enables Chung to spontaneously create dense areas of color or undulating machine-embroidery. She creates her own line colors by threading as many as 6 different colors of thread through her sewing machine's needle at one time. Subtly or boldly, her thread combinations control color in order to explore the emotive qualities of the personal story of her subject.

Using such personal images as X-rays and MRIs begs questions of privacy, pathology, interpretation and aesthetics. Chung says she maintains complete anonymity of her subjects. She also is not focused on the individual's medical complications. It is the beauty of the life process that compels her forward in all of her work. "We are all in a process of birth and death, living and dying," she says. "We all have a spine, a pelvis. It's something we can all relate to."

By bringing these bio-medical images into the gallery, Chung intersects the purpose of the lab with that of the gallery, and changes the images' meaning in the process. Both the doctor and the gallery viewer assess the aesthetics of the image. The doctor needs a clear and precise image in order to diagnose an individual's pathology. Chung's choice of textiles as her medium invites the art viewer in for close inspection of the image but Chung's handling of her subject transcends the individual. She offers the viewer an opportunity to expand the imagination through seeing into a beautiful, invisible, and universally human world.

Like the silk fabrics and delicate threads she sews with, Paula Chung's subjects are strong yet vulnerable, fragile yet resilient. Each work captures a moment of stillness in the midst of life's dynamic transformations. Whether she is in her garden, at her computer, or in front of her sewing machine, Paula Chung is thankful for all the instruction, inspiration and support she has gotten on her artistic journey. "It's such a rich life!" she says.

Sara Rockinger
Lafayette, Colorado
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www.arts-initiative.org
PO Box 1333
Carson City NV 89702