

**Sophia NARRETT**

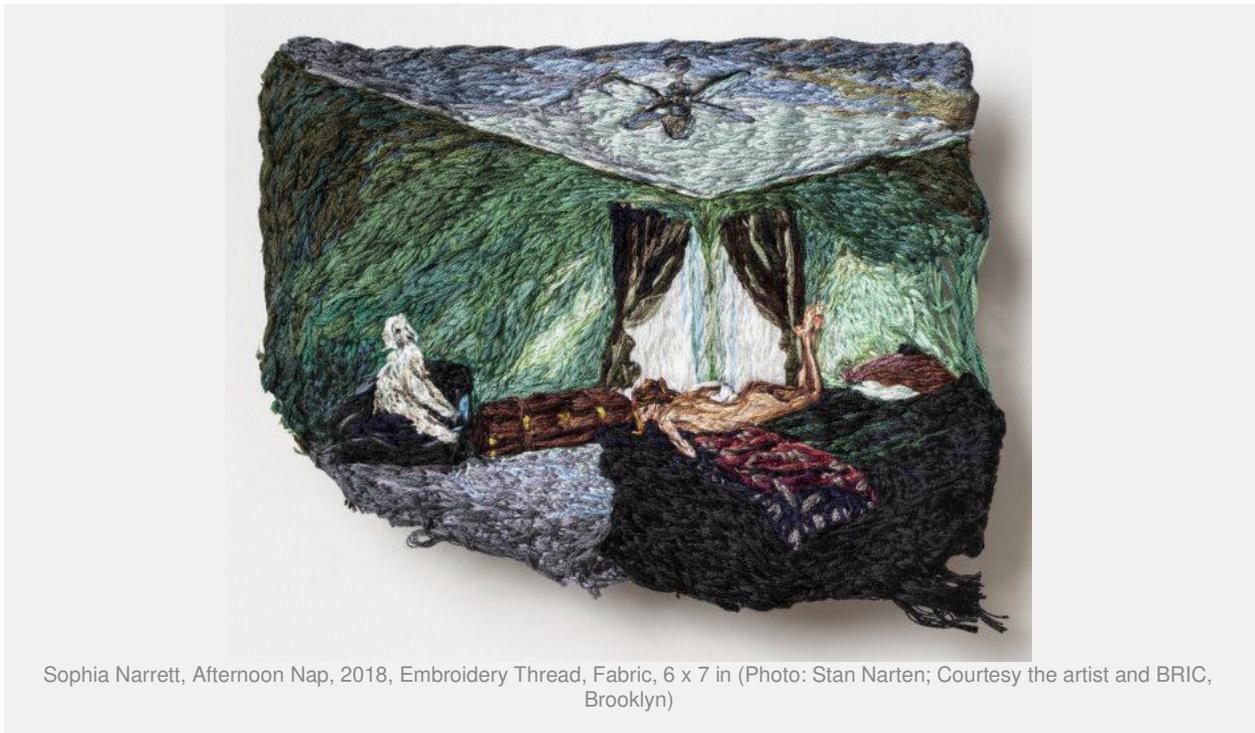
*filthy dreams,*

*Love To Love You Baby: Sewing Threads of Desire in Sophia Narrett's "Certain Magic"*

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# Love To Love You Baby: Sewing Threads of Desire in Sophia Narrett's "Certain Magic"

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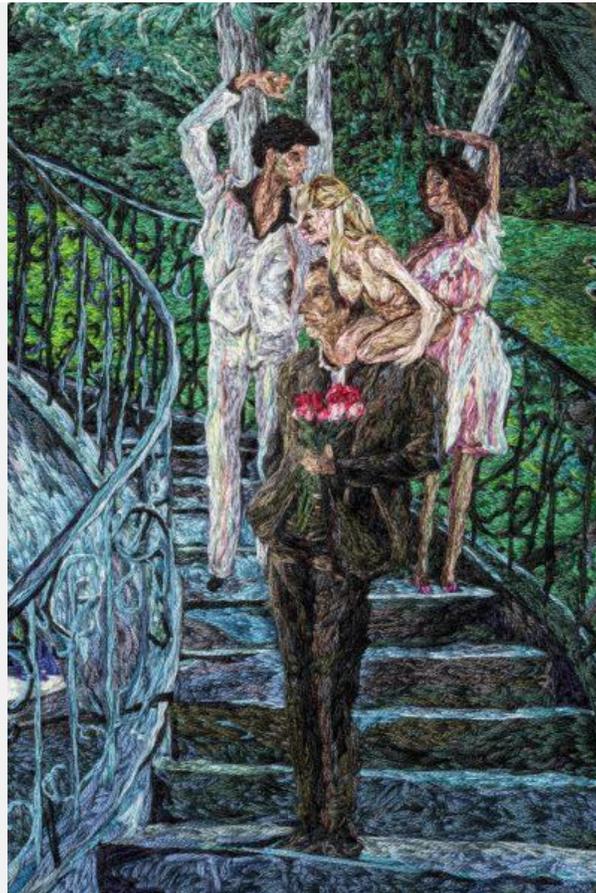


Sophia Narrett, *Afternoon Nap*, 2018, Embroidery Thread, Fabric, 6 x 7 in (Photo: Stan Narten; Courtesy the artist and BRIC, Brooklyn)

"Isn't sex more erotic when spiced with a sense of danger? But how much danger?" asked music critic Stephen Holden in a review of a [Donna Summer](#) album. Those really are the questions, aren't they? What is the line between eroticism and violence—or at least, threat—and how does one know if they've crossed it? Disco theorist Alice Echols quotes Holden's line in her [Hot Stuff: Disco and the Remaking of American Culture](#) to speak to the liberation of women's sexuality during the 1970s and its undercurrent of transgression in male-driven sexual culture, particularly in songs like Summer's steamy, moan-filled "[Love To Love You Baby](#)."

But, these questions remain as pertinent today as they did in the halcyon days of the disco era and the sexual revolution. Artist [Sophia Narrett's](#) embroideries, which are currently on view in a solo exhibition [Certain Magic](#) at the Project Room at [BRIC](#) House, mine this territory between desire and

danger. Whether a woman peaking out of a manhole cover and catching a glimpse of a nude woman being tied to a giant web on top of a Twister board or a man hoisting another nude woman into a tree house under the gaze of a man who sports a T-shirt emblazoned with “See You In Hell,” Narrett sews surreal yet strangely familiar scenes of sex and romance to explore that, as *Rocky Horror’s* sex-crazed Dr. Frank-N-Furter would say, “dynamic tension.” And in so doing, Narrett’s works update the 1970s ethos of fluid and borderless sexuality as a means of transcendence for the more complicated semi-realism of the digital era.



Sophia Narrett, Detail of Right Before, 2017-18, Embroidery Thread, Fabric, Aluminum, 82 x 26 in (Photo: Stan Narten; Courtesy the artist and BRIC, Brooklyn)

It's no mistake that the first detail I noticed in Narrett's show was a sewn version of John Travolta's polyester suit-sporting guido Tony Manero in Narrett's enormous *Right Before*. The *Saturday Night Fever* heartthrob throws his arms in the air, sways his hips and gyrates in the direction of Karen Lynn Gorney's disco era femme fatale Stephanie Mangano. Of course, I, as a devoted disco fanatic, gravitated to the recognizable couple before turning my attention to the other sordid scenes contained in the ambitious embroidery. As Tony and Stephanie dance (just as the Bee Gees say they should be) on stairs, below them, a daisy chain of woman perform various sex acts in a joyous circle of bodies in orgiastic pleasure. But that's not all. The entire embroidery, an unlikely medium for such tantalizing narratives, is

like a maze of various suggestive scenarios: a woman pisses in a hole, a man in a suit carries a nude woman on his shoulders and upstairs, a man proposes to a woman, resembling a scene from *The Bachelorette*.

Like a sex club done in thread (there's even what looks to be a sex swing), *Right Before* exemplifies Narrett's mix of pop cultural references and hypererotic fantasy. Like *The Bachelorette* proposal in *Right Before*, an embroidered rose hangs elsewhere in the gallery, symbolizing the romantic reality show construct. Not only culling characters or tropes from films and trash television shows, much of Narrett's imagery is sourced directly from Tumblr and elsewhere on the Internet, examining how sex, desire and love have been reconceptualized in the time of highly curated Instagram feeds and lightning-fast reality show nuptials.



Sophia Narrett, *Right Before*, 2017-18, Embroidery Thread, Fabric, Aluminum, 82 x 26 in (Photo: Stan Narten; Courtesy of the artist and BRIC, Brooklyn)

Of course, eroticism can contain multitudes, as it does in Narrett's embroideries. In *The Language of Sex the Sex of Language*, [Kathy Acker](#) explains, "In the sexual realm, many, if not all, of the human intercoursers meet: fantasy, the imagination, memory, perhaps especially childhood memory, desire,

need, economy, power.” In many ways, Narrett’s *Certain Magic* covers all of the above. In particular, the artist seems interested in fraught sexual power dynamics. For example, all of the men in her works are clothed, while the women are partially, if not entirely, nude. Not only representing the objectification of women, as well as the visible and visceral vulnerability of a nude female body among clothed men, Narrett also mines the stereotypically rigid construction of masculinity in the form of classic Don Draper-esque suits.

And yet, even though nude women cavorting with suit-wearing men seems potentially dangerous, if not just plain odd, there is also a palpable sense of play in the works. Like Acker’s articulation, there is even a childlike aspect to Narrett’s visual narratives. Take, for example, *6PM*, which features a nude woman being helped across a series of tires, while another naked woman rolls back impishly with her butt in the air near another suit-adorned man. These admittedly bizarre acts take place in a backyard, which adds a nostalgic feeling of summer days and after-school late afternoons innocently goofing off behind classmates’ houses.



Installation view of Sophia Narrett’s *Certain Magic* at the Project Room at BRIC House (Photo by Jason Wyche; Courtesy of BRIC, Brooklyn)

However, even though the embroideries exude childlike wonder and imagination, this doesn’t in any way lessen their eroticism. Namely, the embroideries invite voyeurism in the viewers, acting as self-contained scenes reminiscent of the keyhole perspective in Degas’s bathers. Some of the works like *Afternoon Nap*, which features a woman and her dog in repose under a Lynchian ceiling fan, and *Pin*, with a woman prone on fitted sheets, take the vaguely rectangular physical form of a personal snapshot. And yet, Narrett’s embroideries also act like snippets a grander narrative. Gesturing toward larger worlds of sensual pleasure, figures climb up or down, appearing and disappearing to spaces just beyond our view and leading us to yearn to see more. Not only through the imagery, but Narrett also creates a fetishistic

viewing experience through the materiality of the embroidery itself. With twists and strings of fabric hanging off the works, Narrett draws in viewers' craving for touch, but denies it.

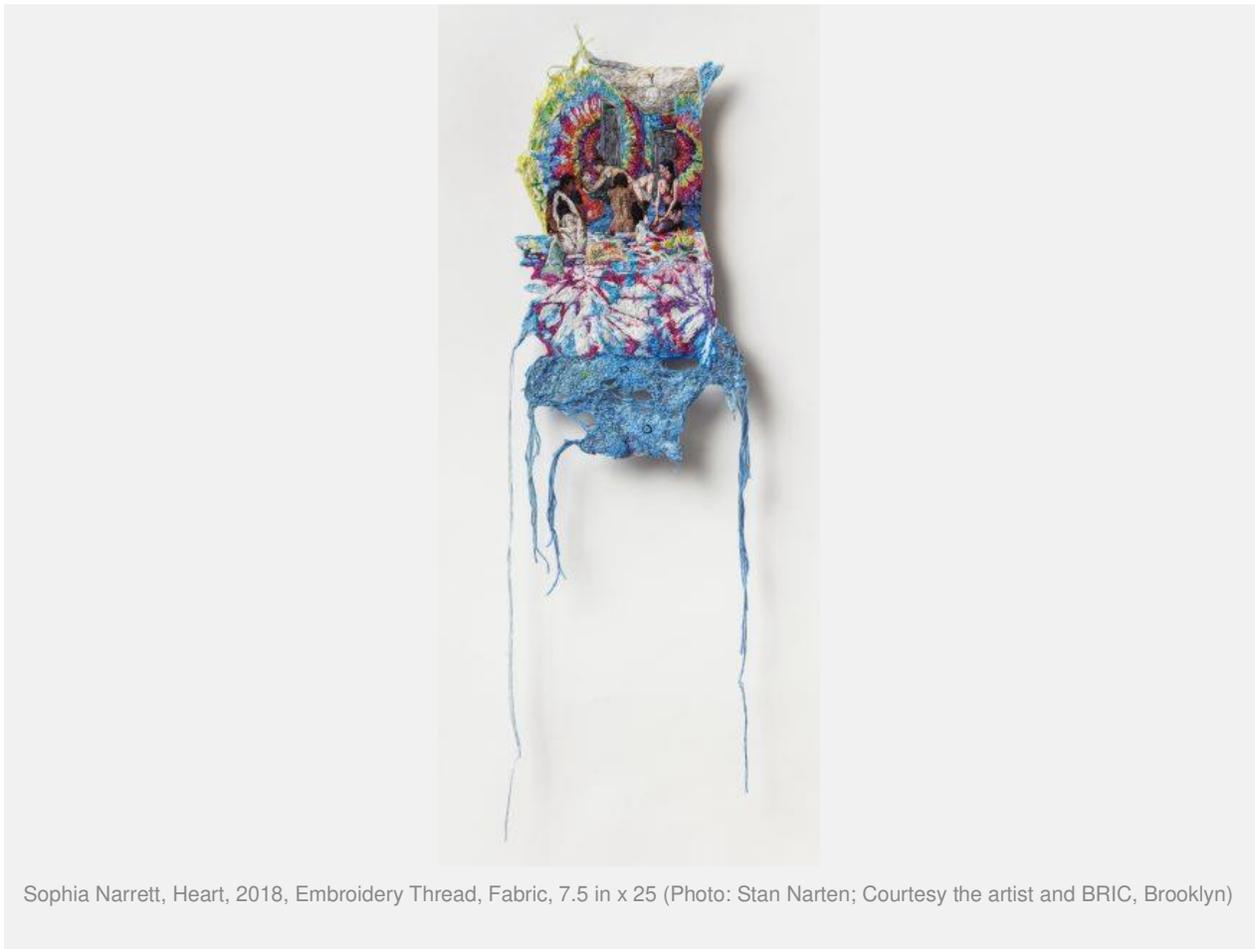
Beyond triggering viewers' haptic perception, embroidery and the disciplines categorized as craft hold a deep connection to 1970s feminist art, not to mention "women's work" in general. As Narrett told I Magazine's Leslie Camhi, "Embroidery and its implicit history help specify the tone of my stories, one characterized by obsession, desire and both the freedoms and restraints of femininity." Of course, embroidery has been tethered to femininity for centuries, but the impulse to use craft methods in fine art just seems so linked to mid-century feminist creativity as typified by the installations in the seminal 1972 Womanhouse.



Sophia Narrett, *Ask Again*, 2018, Embroidery Thread, Fabric, Aluminum, 16 x 33 in (Photo: Stan Narten; Courtesy the artist and BRIC, Brooklyn)

Beyond her chosen discipline, the 1970s loom large in *Certain Magic* and Narrett's work in general—not only through the sudden appearance of the *Saturday Night Fever* couple, but also in various smaller details hidden throughout her works. The 70s appear in the form of the bell sleeves attached to a topless outfit spotted with pumpkins donned by a woman in *Ask Again*. They are also in the rainbow tie-dyed fabrics covering a wall during what appears to be a mass orgy in *Heart*. The era is also reflected in the flower-printed dress worn by a woman who stares down at a man's smartphone in *Text*.

By placing these, at times, subtle references to 1970s culture into her works, Narrett examines an earlier era of freewheeling sexual exploration—the sexual revolution, which saw experimentation as an ultimate form of connection, as well as transcendence. As Alice Echols writes in *Hot Stuff*, “The seventies were the decade of the Big O, the female orgasm. Millions of women whose relationship to their sexuality had been more vigilant than relaxed began, like Janice in *Rabbit Redux*, to experience their bodies as playthings. Feminism was crucial to this shift, as it exposed the yawning gap between women’s sexual desires and standard three-minute missionary position sex. In the process, women’s sexuality, long treated as inscrutable and negligible became a force to be reckoned with. Suddenly there was no escaping the female orgasm. In addition to countless magazine articles devoted to “What Women Want!” bestselling books such as Shere Hite’s *The Hite Report*, Nancy Friday’s *My Secret Garden*, the self-help manual *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, and Erica Jong’s *Fear of Flying* explored female desire” (78).



For women in the 1970s, the zipless fuck represented a space of radical possibility. As Echols continues, “For those women’s liberationists who believed that feminism entailed sexual liberation, women’s embrace of their orgasmic potential—selfishly multiple and for itself—was radical” (78). Even subcultural revolutionaries like Kathy Acker, who would probably balk the proximity of my reference to her and Erica Jong, looked to sex as the potential to, as Robert Glück writes in *The Greatness of Kathy Acker*, “destroy

limits.” As Acker wrote, “I matter when someone touches me, when I touch someone; the touch matters; so in this way I no longer exist, nor do the men.”

In *Certain Magic*, Narrett portrays a continuation of this belief in radical sexual liberation, particularly in the sensual abandon displayed in *Right Before*. With a present sitting the center of the bacchanalia, sexual possibility becomes a gift or an offering. And yet, like Acker before her, Narrett understands the toxicity that looms within the power structures of sex, desire and relationships. The potential of transcendence may remain, but its possibility grows perilously thin.



Narrett not only engages with the principles of the sexual revolution, but places them in the current era, troubling this vintage idealism. She does so through her use of both contemporary references like smartphones and imagery sourced from the Internet. It’s not a fluke that her embroideries, with their long

strings and amorphous structures, resemble a web. By placing these works within the digital age, Narrett poses essential open-ended questions: Is desire still transcendent and revolutionary in a socially isolated world where romance is constructed through algorithm-curated timelines and newsfeeds or through swiping left and right on dating apps? Or is it all just fake news? How are Narrett's imagined scenes any more or less real than what we see online and IRL? How do we tell what erotic and romantic connections are true and what are fantasies? And at the end of the day, do these divisions matter?