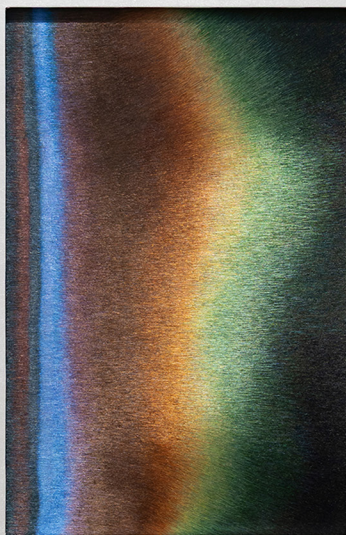


ARTEFUSE



Threading Light: Wang Ye on Xiang Embroidery, NYC (Interview)

5 September - 1 November, YveYANG, New York

By Yihsuan Chiu

Artist Wang Ye sits with retired embroiderers in Changsha, Hunan, learning Xiang embroidery (湘繡) side-by-side. They work from sunrise to sunset, their bodies attuned to how silk shifts in color with the changing light. This natural rhythm is material.

Xiang embroidery has a history of at least two thousand years in Changsha. Its needlework is so intricate that it can render light, shadow, texture, movement—the translucence of petals, the flow of animal fur. But today, this craft has nearly vanished. The consumer market is gone. Machines have replaced hands. In 2018, after studying industrial design in Beijing and sculpture at Yale, Wang entered this disappearing world through family networks, gradually developing a collaborative practice with the embroiderers, mostly older women retired from former embroidery factories.

They gather to work from paintings, discussing every detail: which stitch to use, how to depict a form, and how to divide the labor. This collective discussion is called “jianghua (講花)”. The embroiderers were already steeped in Xiang embroidery’s vocabulary: plum blossoms, orchids, bamboo, chrysanthemums, dragons, phoenixes. These motifs, passed down through generations from ink painting

and gongbi painting, had become rigid formulas.

Initial communication was difficult as Wang questioned conventional approaches. Together, they negotiated a simple yet effective approach: returning to lived experience. “We went to observe the natural world around us. When we looked at lotus leaves, we noticed their actual form again, even the microscopic textures that make water bead and roll off, for instance. Then that led to discussion of how to express this lotus, the one before us.” The techniques slowly transformed. Once bound to convention, they became instruments of expression: liberated, speaking a new language, moving freely.

Aunt Li, the embroiderer closest to Wang, had her own encounter with modernism. In 1989, representing Xiang embroidery at an international exchange in Kagoshima, Japan, she discovered books on modernist artworks. Years later, that seed bore fruit. Between 2019 and 2021, Wang and Aunt Li co-created a series translating modernist works into Xiang embroidery. For the piece paying homage to Meret Oppenheim’s *Object*, they used the needlework technique originally for depicting tiger fur to render the fur in Oppenheim’s Surrealist object. This single piece took over a year to complete.

Wang emphasizes the nature of labor Xiang embroidery demands,

not only the time invested, but the re-integration of body and environment. The embroidery process depends on light because silk threads shift in hue throughout the day. The embroiderers must adjust their stitches with the sun’s movement. Beyond metaphorical labor, this is bodies learning to work within natural cycles, re-sensing color, shadow, and texture as they emerge and fade. Wang describes this creative environment as “nourishing (養人)”.

Deeply inspired by this intimacy between body and environment, Wang began creating works to express this experience. In *Legume Blossoms in Blue* (YveYang Gallery, New York), butterfly wings, rolling grasslands, wildflowers, the iridescent interior of shells become the subjects. Yet these images are manipulated through magnification, distortion, and repetition, in order to render varied modes of human perception: shifting angles of vision, sensory encounters, imagination, memory. Though drawn from nature, the works feel like surreal dreamscapes that shimmer and drift, unmoored from literal representation.

Formally, these Xiang embroidery works should be understood as three-dimensional sculptures. Dense needlework creates tightly woven surfaces that respond to ambient light. As viewers move, each work presents dynamic changes: ever-shifting, activating

the viewer's body and senses, as if the images themselves were alive.

The works Wang and the embroiderers create have long surpassed the traditional constraints of Xiang embroidery. What they propose is not merely new expression, but new grounds for aesthetics. Starting from the question: whose way of seeing? Wang rethinks the relationships between labor, body, industry, and culture that this ancient craft once carried. After major structural and historical shifts, can such practice continue to live in contemporary practice? How and by whom?

This inquiry takes practical form in production challenges.

The fishing net sculptures in the exhibition reveal Wang's experimentation with silk threads. In addition to silk threads from old factory stock, Wang also uses threads made by Changsha dye masters using traditional methods, rather than machine production. But each dyeing session requires a certain quantity to proceed, creating friction between contemporary art's production model and traditional material supply, pushing the artist to explore other possibilities for working with silk threads. This exploration itself further proves that Xiang embroidery remains a living practice, one that continues to generate questions, and to seek answers.



View from Wang Ye's studio. Courtesy of the artist.