

## Christine Aerfeldt

Silver threads and golden needles  
(cannot mend this heart of mine)

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Trying to explain a work of art is a flawed process, just like trying to explain a piece of music or how long is a piece of string. Instead of making any attempt to explain, the best I can do is to provide a few insights to some of the ideas driving the works.

For some time I have been intrigued by small 17th century Dutch genre paintings, such as those by Vermeer, Teniers, van Mieris, and Dou, depicting women in the home. I have been mulling over the meanings and stories behind these paintings (by men) of beautiful yet moralising pictures (of women). The good wife, the bad wife, the chaste wife, the woman of loose morals... All painted meticulously and on a small (good taste) scale. So many women in so many pictures for so many centuries... Not forgetting the Madonna of course, and her often ambiguous and impenetrable gaze.

Still life paintings from around the same era are similarly loaded with symbolic meanings encoded into almost every aspect of their imagery. The prayer book as a symbol of piety, the candle as a symbol of the brevity of life, one pearl earring as a symbol of a good wife, but many pearls representing female vanity...

In contrast I have been researching some women in mythology – particularly the ‘larger than life’ characters known as the Fates or the Norns. These three women possess immense powers to control destinies. In the semi-random act of measuring out lengths of wool, and with a snip of the scissors, the length of a lifetime has been decided. And perhaps cut short on a whim. Power taken out of the hands of mere mortals. Wham! Bam! Superwoman! Giantess.

Then there are the acts of mending, sewing, cutting, and chopping – sharp, pointy, dangerous instruments involved here. Something with which to heal and repair and make a meal can also be used to hurt and wound. And it is at this point that their placement in the landscape setting of my paintings becomes important. There is plenty of mending and mopping up to be done here. Or, alternatively, hurting and wounding.

Fast forward to the mass circulation of images produced by today's fashion/advertising/celebrity industries. Sharp, bizarre, seductive, beautiful imagery. Women stretched, pulled, photoshopped, brushed up. By whom, and for whom?

Back to Sigmund Freud, and suddenly sexual organs are springing up everywhere. Almost any picture or shape can be seen to have potential sexual connotations. Jung also enters the scene with his archetypes and the collective unconscious, and fairy tales are never the same again. There is the crone, the maiden, the hero, magic spells, Snow White, potions and poisons, hair being cut off, bodily parts dismembered or growing in odd places. Most worrying signs of our inner psychological lives.

Back to the pearls and the act of threading. I am now going to end with the real beginning. This entire series of works can actually be traced back to one small painting that I saw in the Musee Fabre in Montpellier, and which has spawned the whole exhibition. It is the ‘Enfileuse de perles’ (which translates as ‘Female pearl threader’) and is by the 17th century Dutch artist Frans van Mieris. In it we see a young woman in the privacy of her own boudoir, sitting at a table looking towards us whilst threading a string of pearls, with her maid in the background. Each time I see it I am transfixed by the woman with the ambiguous expression on her face, trying to work out what is inside her head.

I started doing some research to confirm some suspicions about one possible reading of this work, which proved to be spot on. In French the verb ‘enfiler’ (to thread), which is at the root of ‘enfileuse’, has a double meaning, and also refers to the sexual act. The eye of the needle is called a ‘chas’ in French, which when spoken sounds exactly like ‘chat’ (cat). This can be extended to ‘chatte’ (a female cat), which is the French equivalent of the English ‘pussy’. In fact when I did a French ‘Google’ on ‘enfiler’, the number one result was what looked like an R-rated site. So threading pearls may not be as innocent as it appears.

*Words by the Artist*