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ART : It Ain't Needlepoint : Ann Hamilton does old-fashioned women's work--ironing, weaving and knitting. But, if you're expecting Home Ec 101 from her installations, you'd better get out of the gallery

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You walk into a vast room that smells of freshly cut plywood walls--gray early morning light pours through the skylight in the arched ceiling. It is reminiscent of a barn, and, in the center, a woman is seated with her head slightly bowed, expression concentrated, hands busily winding strands onto a ball. Light from a hidden projector throws a flickering shadow of the hushed figure and her quiet work onto the wall. The sense of *deja vu* is palpable but vague. You rifle through your visual memory and there it is: Vermeer, the 17th-Century Dutch artist who painted extraordinary portraits of women engaged in the ordinary--writing a letter, making lace or putting on a necklace of pearls.

Yet, this is the Ruth Bloom Gallery in Santa Monica, a venue for contemporary art, and the artist *in situ* is Ann Hamilton. You look more closely and realize that the yarn is spun of strips of typed sentences. She is lifting thin chains of words out of an open book and rolling them into balls of paragraphs and pages. Whenever the sentences accumulate to the size of a softball, she pushes it through a little scrim-covered screen and onto a table. The table is legless, as is the chair where the artist sits--both are suspended in air by nearly invisible cables. Gingerly, you approach to more closely observe these balls of thoughts in cozy repose. An unwound fragment of a sentence projects an unintentional retort--"I didn't pay no attention to it."

Hamilton, 37, is one of the most celebrated artists now working in the art of installation on a grand and theatrical scale. She represented the United States at Brazil's Sao Paulo Bienal in 1991 and was a recipient last year of a so-called "genius grant," a \$250,000 John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Award, to be given over five years.

Such grants and awards are essential for Hamilton, since her ambitious installations rarely produce artifacts for the art market, aside from a few edited video pieces, books and photographs from past installations. This is only her second show in a commercial gallery in the last decade; her first was at the now-defunct Louver Gallery in New York in 1991.

The title of the current installation, "lineament," comes from the Wallace Stevens poem "The Planet on the Table." Certainly, the balls of sentences could be seen as planets of information. Although the piece required 10 assistants, 40 books and cost thousands of dollars to make, it is Spartan compared to Hamilton's dozen works created over the last six years at art institutions in Europe, South America and the United States. Hamilton is renowned for the overwhelming scale and sheer quantity of her unconventional materials: parasitic beetles and turkey carcasses, pigskins, canaries, 16,000 cleaned teeth, 35,000 outdated patent books, a floor covered with 750,000 pennies, and the list goes on.

Usually, Hamilton's installations address the conditions and history of the place where they are made--ranging from the List Visual Art Center at Massachusetts Institute of Technology to the Spoleto Festival in Charleston, S.C. Yet meeting Hamilton is to recognize that for all the drama, ambition and fame, she "didn't pay no attention to it." She often speaks in the second person as though it were all happening to someone else. For instance, asked about receiving the MacArthur Award, she says, "First, you go into Protestant guilt thinking of the millions of people who deserve it more than you." But noting that she was married last November, she adds gratefully, "it gives you the time to slow down and concentrate on the human side of things."

Hamilton has a face that isn't common to the bleached, tucked and made-over population of Los Angeles. It's as open as the prairie. Her eyes are the color of a wind-swept sky, and her salt-and-pepper hair is worn short and tousled. She is so unguarded and friendly that she could only be from another part of the country, which turns out to be Ohio. She grew up in Columbus and that is where she lives today, after a 15-year absence studying and teaching on both coasts.

The fundamental sensibility of her work is drawn from her Midwestern roots and that region's white, Protestant culture. "One of the things about being raised in that environment is that it has inherent tenets of Calvinism. You bought the story that labor is its own redemption," she says. Each of her installations requires the unstinting, obsessive labor of the artist along with dozens of co-workers, both paid and volunteer. Together they slice sentences out of old books, iron and starch shirts, scorch walls with candle soot, pound metal tokens onto floors. The sensibility is emphatically pre-industrial, especially in terms of the labor--which is collaborative and repetitive. Like a quilting bee, it allows time for the workers--who are most often women--to talk and be of service to some lost part of themselves.

"The work part of it, for me, is a way of understanding something in a way that isn't thinking it," says Hamilton. "That's why there is a lot of repetition. It may seem monotonous but every moment is different in its sameness."

Hamilton cites her mother, who often helped with the early installations, as an influence. "She is of that generation that spent a whole lot of her life organizing volunteers, a generation that is disappearing," Hamilton recalls. "Also, it seemed like we were wallpapering a lot. I laugh at the way I'm doing (those things) but in a different context."

Collective labor gives way in each installation to a single person involved in some repetitive gesture. Hamilton decided on the gesture of balling yarn after learning that one of oldest representations of labor is that of a woman spinning.

"It seems the gestures (in the installations) often come back to these basic processes. In doing it, you know it feels right. Maybe it's a bodily memory."

For women, maybe. Certainly, for Hamilton. She grew up in a fairy tale home of stable and supportive family members. "I learned to sew from the time I was really young. We did needlepoint and all those sorts of lap activities," she says. "I learned from my mother and my grandmother. But you leave all that stuff behind at a certain point."

Actually, Hamilton put it in storage. Her artistic instincts initially brought her to the textile design program at the University of Kansas, where she received her bachelor's degree in 1979. In the early '80s, after studying weaving at the Banff Center in Alberta, Canada, she spent a few years working in a sewing factory, editing a journal, going to films and, finally, Yale University School of Art.

"I made a conscious decision when I went back to graduate school not to go to a fiber program because I didn't think it was conceptually very interesting. I decided to go into the sculpture department because that's just about relationships which could be anything," she recalls.

Yale made an immediate impression: "Everyone is making big steel stuff, so you don't really feel like knitting. It's all very unspoken. But I remember my interview at Yale when the department head said, 'You don't do this weaving stuff anymore, do you?' " She laughs, a big, hearty, gusty release.

Photographs of Hamilton's graduate school work show the artist as hedgehog--dressed in a suit and carrying a chair on her back all covered in prickly toothpicks. In another, a shoe appears to be mashed into her mouth. In their deadpan humor, the images recall the early conceptual photography of artists like William Wegman, John Baldessari and Vito Acconci. Hamilton acknowledges receiving a healthy dose of such information via the visiting artist program at Yale. "If you are interested in the fact that all of your experience is up here," she says, pointing to her head, "you put a shoe in your mouth and you are talking about disjunction. Those things came out of the sort of self-scrutiny that is going on all the time." A decade later, her installations are enlarged versions of the surreality of such illogical juxtapositions.

Although encouraged by her teachers to try performance art, Hamilton felt uncomfortable with her few efforts in that direction. "One of the things about these installations is that when you walk in, you are implicated as a subject. You don't have the distance you have in a theater. I was more interested in a kind of time that was like a perpetual present."

After graduating from Yale, Hamilton taught as assistant professor in the art department of UC Santa Barbara from 1985 to 1991. During this period, her installations grew in scale and complexity, many of them at California art institutions. Her "still life" was staged in a Santa Barbara private home in 1988 as part of a series of installations sponsored by that city's Contemporary Arts Forum. The artist sat before an enormous stack of men's white shirts, starched and ironed stiff. The air smelled of the eucalyptus leaves she had embedded in the walls with wax, in the background opera was playing. That same year, she created her enormous installation "the capacity of absorption" at L.A.'s Temporary Contemporary. Ten tons of linotype were laid on the floor, the walls of one gallery were covered in slimy algae, a man stood with his fingers in water running off a long metal table, while an adjacent gallery held a giant megaphone made of flax.

At Capp Street Project in San Francisco, she staged "privation and excesses" in 1989. A floor of new pennies was laid amid a coating of honey. Three sheep were penned into an adjacent gallery to stare at the scene. A seated figure, sometimes the artist, sat wringing her hands over a hatful of honey. Two electric mortars and pestles ground a combination of pennies and teeth.

In 1990, she installed rows of teeth on an examining table during a survey show at the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art.

Hamilton has attempted to find ways of knowing and presenting a nonverbal world using the senses of smell, touch, sound, sight. She creates unfamiliar experiences from the most familiar materials. A knowing Luddite, her installations use forms that pre-date the Industrial Revolution. It is this stubbornly 19th-Century aspect of her work that has led critics to charge her with exploitation of nostalgia. In fact, she is transforming her personal history into art. Despite warnings from graduate advisers, Hamilton recalls the way in which her interest in those "lap activities" crept back into her work. Last year, on a plane to Toronto, she found herself knitting in preparation for a piece. Feeling self-conscious, she suddenly said to herself, "Oh, I can do this now!"

"There was a long period of time when those ideas became very taboo," she admits. " 'Ooh, that's girls' stuff!' But you can reclaim those in a different way. Not that that's the subject of the work, but that is your sensibility and the more that you trust that the better off your work is."

Yet women reissuing domestic labor in their own art is still controversial. "I don't know if it's safe," Hamilton admits. "But the more you work, the more you trust yourself. You trust impulses you can't always credit, ways of knowing and being. You're not censoring those things anymore by thinking, 'Oh, that's corny

6/12/2016 ART : It Ain't Needlepoint : Ann Hamilton does old-fashioned women's work--ironing, weaving and knitting. But, if you're expecting Home Ec 101 from her installations, you'd better get out of the gallery - latimes girl stuff.' That's cultural. Even when my projects are getting really big, I'll think, 'It's just the spinning and the tale-telling.' "

The housework of women--knitting, spinning yarn and reading--is common to the history of 16th- and 17th-century European painting. Critic Dave Hickey wrote one of the catalogue essays for Hamilton's installation "tropos," which closes today at the Dia Center for the Arts in New York. He says: "She purges the industrial world from her art. She has concentrated on the overlap of nature and culture and how they infect one another. So you can talk about her atmosphere as you would in painting: the translucent light, the sfumato, the way the materiality of brush and paint reflect the materiality of the natural world, the self-absorbed subject and the way the atmosphere tells us about that person's interior landscape. She is making paintings that you can be inside."

For "tropos," Hamilton covered the gallery floor with horsehair and filmed the windows to soften the light. The slurred speech of a man with aphasia fills the air while a woman sits reading at a table. As the reader finishes each sentence, she chars it with a wood-burning tool. In an earlier installation, a woman erased each word of a book by using her own saliva and the pink rubber end of a pencil. In "lineament" the books were pre-sliced to be strung out and rolled into balls. Hamilton's unmaking of text is quite literally a deconstruction. Yet her work is resonant of the unique personal experience that contemporary post-structuralist theory questions. As Hickey discovers, Hamilton did her chores while her mother read to her, so the labor became synonymous with the song of speech. Unraveling the words helps to make the world.

Hamilton says: "I read a lot of books--a lot of poetry but also Elaine Scarry, Lewis Hyde. The reading is not only to gather information but looking for the way a thing is said. I don't have a studio. Reading is my main process when I'm not on site on a project."

Since Hamilton's installations offer no narrative, viewers often feel obliged to provide their own. "I was on a panel at Headlands (an art center in the Bay Area) with a scientist named Wes Jackson," she recalls. "He said, 'The problem is that you're not in control of your metaphors.' " She laughs at the kernel of truth in this observation. "You are going along with your intentions and someone comes in with the most literal reading. And they're not wrong."

"You know what it's like to look at contemporary art. You go to the didactic panel that tells you what to think about it because you couldn't possibly understand it on your own."

Hamilton points out that viewers have a more immediate experience of her work: "During these installations, a lot of people want to tell you their stories. It means people trusted themselves in a way. If people want to tell you these stories, something else is happening."

Suddenly self-conscious, as if caught in the act of having faith in human nature, she adds, "I'm a very optimistic person."

** Hamilton's "lineament" continues through July 17 at Ruth Bloom Gallery, 2036 Broadway, Santa Monica, (310) 829-7454. A performer will be seated in the installation every Friday and Saturday from noon to 6 p.m. The gallery is open 11 a.m. to 6 p.m., Wednesday to Sunday.*