

Follow the thread

Artist Devorah Sperber uses colorful spools of thread to form pixilated renditions of iconic imagery.

Devorah Sperber is a New York-based artist whose sculptures, composed of thousands of ordinary objects, negotiate a terrain between low and high tech. Her labor-intensive works explore repetition and the effects of digital technology on perception, scale, and subjective reality.

—Patricia Phillips, Executive Editor, Art Journal

She has been called a “conceptual sculptor,” “installation artist” and a “deconstructionist of familiar imagery,” but Devorah Sperber thinks of herself, more broadly, as a visual artist.

Raised and educated in Denver, Colorado, with a Bachelor of Arts from Regis University in 1987, Devorah moved to New York City in 1991, and now divides her time between two homes and respective studios: Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts (subsidized studio spaces for artists where she has worked since 2001) and the Large Works Studio in Woodstock, New York.

The “thousands of ordinary objects” mentioned above include colored faceted beads, chenille stems (aka, pipe cleaners), Moore map tacks and Letraset marker caps. But thread spools are by far her favorite medium and, with partial funding from Coats & Clark (www.coatsandclark.com), Devorah has the perfect source for creating her “paintings.”

Writer and editor Kitty Cox interviews the artist:

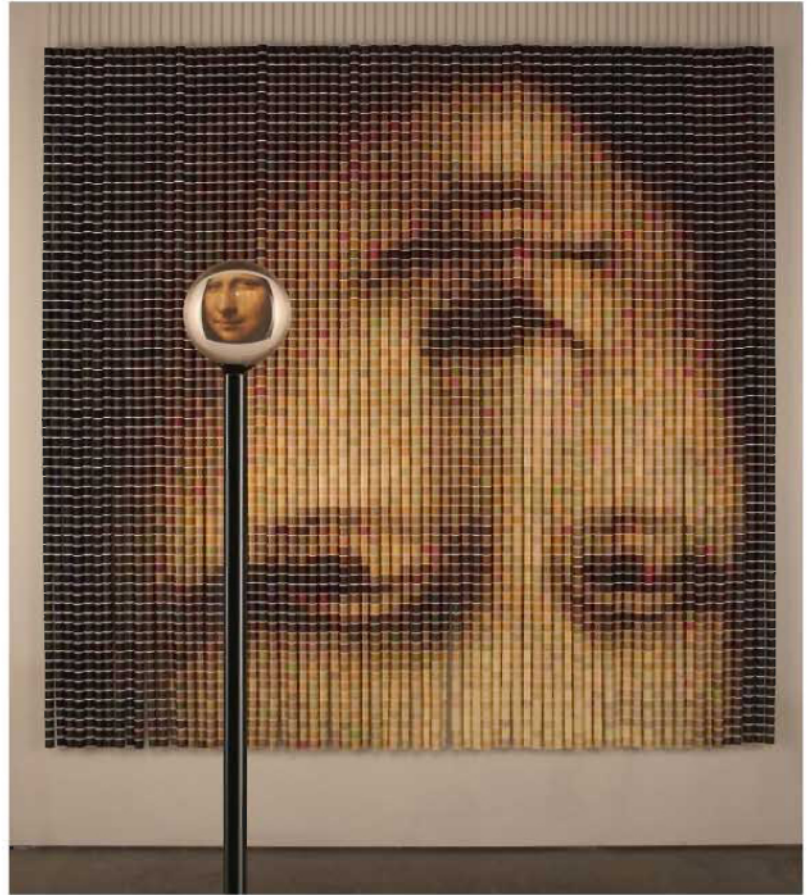
Q: What influences your ideas and how do you choose your medium?

A: In most cases, my idea inspires the medium. For instance, taking an iconic portrait painted by an old master and recreating it with lowly thread spools offers an element of surprise. The criteria for selecting a medium are three-fold: It must be a beautiful and interesting object in its own right; it must come in a range of colors; and it must be widely available, so I try to source from the U. S.

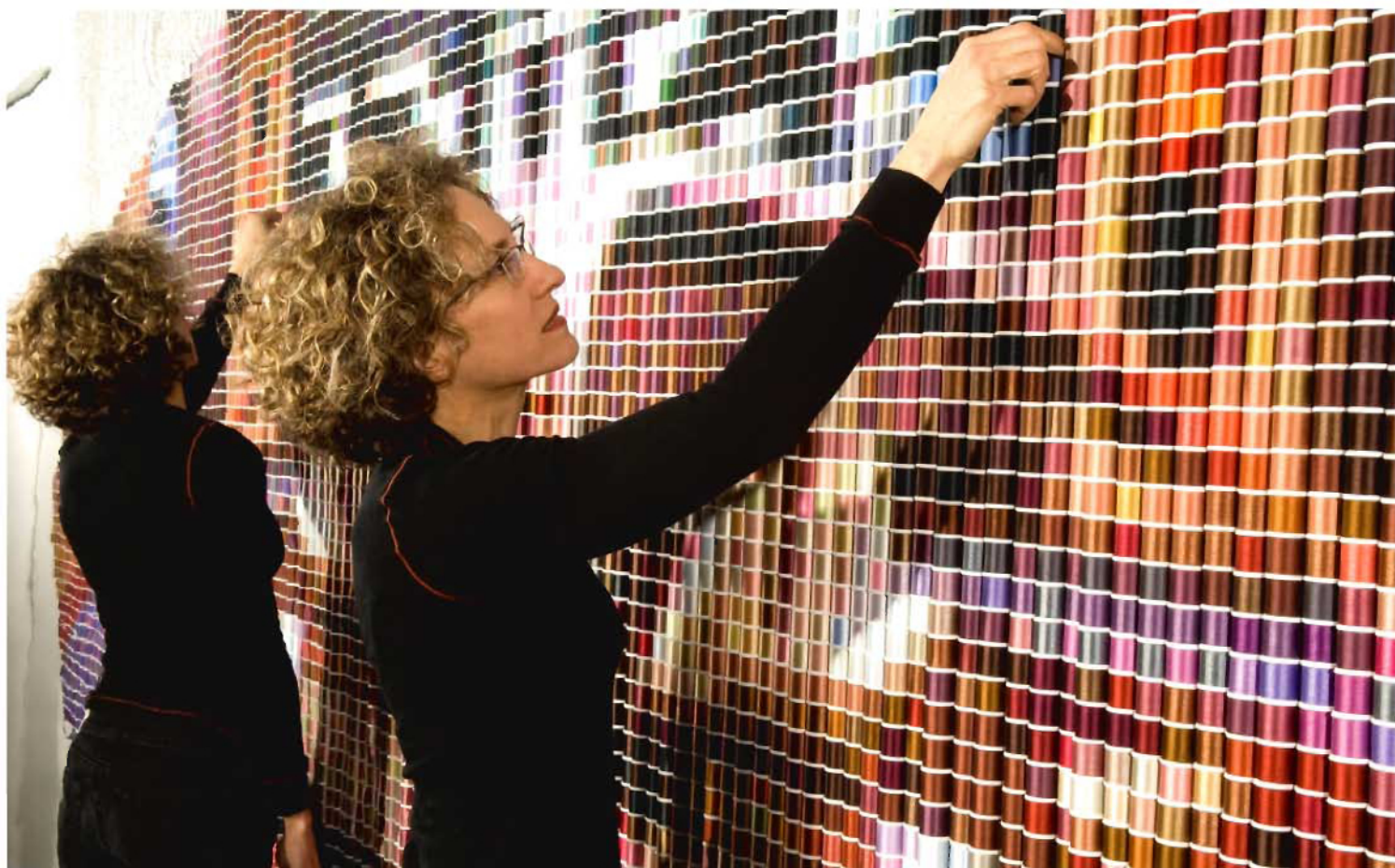
Q: You’ve been quoted as having a “continuing interest in the links between art and science...how the brain makes sense of the visual world.” How does that relate to your thread-spool renditions?

A: My interest in the biology of vision grew from my desire to understand how viewers experience my work. For example, using ordinary spools of thread, I create pixilated images of masterpieces, which appear as colorful abstractions to the naked eye. The works are hung upside down in reference to the fact that the lens of the eye projects an inverted image of the world onto the retina, which is corrected by the brain. A clear acrylic sphere, positioned in front of each work, functions like the human eye and brain, not only inverting but also focusing the image so that it appears as a sharp, faithful, upright reproduction of the painting. This shift in perception functions as a dramatic mechanism to present the idea that there is no one truth or reality, emphasizing subjective reality versus an absolute truth.

Q: Do you use computer technology to create your iconic portraits such as Leonardo da Vinci’s “After the Mona Lisa 2, 2005?”



“After the Mona Lisa 2, 2005” is constructed from 5,184 thread spools. Photograph by Aaron Deetz



Devorah Sperber installing "Star Trek: TNG Bridge, 2007-2008," constructed from 5,822 thread spools. Photograph by Jennifer May

A: My process begins by rendering 50 or more quick digital sketches, which are initially derived from digital photographs. In this phase, I like to keep my mind free from attachment to any particular image. Eventually an idea begins to emerge. If I am unaware of the nature of my interest in an idea or subject matter, I conduct extensive research to make conscious the unconscious so I can determine whether or not an idea is worth pursuing.

For example, while researching the Mona Lisa, I stumbled upon a scientific explanation about the nature of her enigmatic smile. Margaret Livingstone, a neurobiologist from Harvard, determined that her smile is so illusive because it is best seen with the low spatial frequencies of peripheral vision where one sees less detail, which is caused by the edges of the Mona Lisa's mouth being blurry in the original painting. In my rendition, the smile can be viewed with central vision, because the curve of the sphere causes her mouth to curl up dramatically, adding humor to this iconic masterpiece.

I selected Coats & Clark 200 series thread spools as a medium because of their inherent beauty, the fact that they are available in 302 colors, are about the same dimension in height and width as digital pixels and that I don't have to modify them, since the hole for hanging already exists.

Q: The six-page resumé on your Website (www.devorahsperber.com) is impressive—and expansive! How do you accomplish site-specific commissions, lecturing, curating, and exhibitions, in addition to creating prolific art works?

A: I'm a very driven person from a family of very energetic people. I like to operate out of my comfort zone, but I struggle to find a balance between art and life.

My artistic process is highly compartmentalized and requires hours of planning and preparation. In the beginning stages, I prefer to work alone in the studio. Once assembly begins, I consider it delayed gratification for the hours spent thinking, researching, planning, problem solving, designing, building and

preparing. Life doesn't get more simple than declaring 'I will complete X number of rows today' and having the wherewithal to do it. But with so many exhibitions scheduled, I have had as many as five assistants working with me in the studio, which I imagine feels a little like a giant sewing circle.

Q: What do you like to do in your "spare" time?

A: I have finally found something that interests me as much as my art! After my husband and I adopted our Australian terrier, Jake, a year ago, I started dog agility training in order to bond. You and your dog are a team—jumping over stiles, going through tunnels and tires, etc. We take classes for an hour a week when in Woodstock and try to practice every day. It takes my mind off my work and we both love it. (Search for Jake "The Swagman" videos on www.youtube.com)

Devorah Sperber: Current and Upcoming Exhibitions

"Through the Looking Glass: Image and Process Deconstructed"

Works by Chuck Close and Devorah Sperber

le Poisson Rouge Gallery, New York, NY; September 23 – November 30, 2008

"2nd Lives: Remixing the Ordinary"

Museum of Arts & Design (MAD) inaugural exhibition, New York, NY;

September 2008 – March 2009

"Devorah Sperber: A Strange Sense of Déjà vu"

Taubman Museum of Art, Roanoke, VA; March 19 – May 31, 2009

"The Eye of the Artist: The Work of Devorah Sperber"

A traveling solo exhibit co-organized by the Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY;

Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico, San Juan, PR; January – May, 2009

Boise Art Museum, Boise, ID; July 11 – October 18, 2009

Knoxville Museum of Art, Knoxville, TN; January – May 2010