

Reaping What He Sews

Strangers depend on the kindness of **Lee Mingwei**, and he on theirs. “For my practice, art is about exchange and interaction with strangers and gift-giving,” says the Taiwanese-born, New York-based artist, who cites the book *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* by **Lewis Hyde** and his Buddhist upbringing as his main influences. “I’m not always the giver or receiver,” he says. “It’s a mutual gift-giving process.”

Most recently, the artist, who has a B.F.A. in textile arts, presented *The Mending Project*, which he set up for 20 days at Lombard-Freid Projects in New York to mend garments dropped off by visitors. After resewing them, Lee attached the garments to long threads from 400 large spools displayed on the gallery walls. As the days passed, the installation evoked a colorful spiderweb, in which the artist continued to work. On the final day of the exhibition, he cut the threads so the garments could be returned to the participants.

“This project is a platform to really connect with those I don’t know but who trust me anyway,” the artist says. “I’m giving a gift back to the person who provided me a chance to mend something for her or him, and I’m a richer person for

being provided a chance to mend something.”

Lee was no ordinary tailor. He used elaborate stitching with three different colors of thread in the needle, and even attached small toys (a plastic truck, a crayon) to draw particular attention to a garment’s flaw. The gesture, in Lee’s words, “celebrates the rip” by leaving visible traces of it.

Cheng-Hsun Wu, an architect, brought a sock to the gallery, one he had kept even though its mate had gone missing five years ago. Lee sewed the hole closed. “For me Mingwei is like our

idea of a mother, not only through the mending, but he gives new life to the garment,” says Wu. “He sends it on its journey.”

After remembering to empty the pockets, this reporter brought in a severely torn gray-striped jacket. Lee looked at the garment with reverence, as if recognizing that it had had a tough life. “This is by far the biggest rip anyone has brought me,” Lee said, before offering assurance that he was up to the task. On the final day of the exhibition, I went to the gallery to pick up the garment. Lee was seated at his table, in between a small box of sewing notions and a pile of carefully folded clothes. I was the first participant to arrive. Lee handed me my jacket, a raised scar where the tear had been.

Mending garments is the latest expression of Lee’s quest to bring about inti-

mate exchanges. In *The Dining Project*, which debuted at the Whitney Museum in 1998, volunteers (including me) supped with the artist after the museum closed. In a reprise of *The Sleeping Project*, at the 2003 Venice Biennale, the artist held sleepovers with strangers in a former prison. He also accompanied randomly selected participants on their personal journeys to meaningful New York City locales for *The Tourist Project* in 2002.

So what has Lee learned from these works? “My practice has made me a more humble person. When I began doing ‘new genre public art,’ I would often tell my art what to do. Now, 12 years later, it is my art telling me what to do.” Getting to know people through his projects has been gratifying, he notes. “I am inspired by the fragility, generosity, and multifaceted personal history behind each person,” Lee says.

The Mending Project is headed to a collector. “It will have the table and the two chairs, and spools, with the threads on the wall connected to a rock,” says the artist. “The rock acts as an anchor.” —**Doug McClellent**



Lee Mingwei’s *The Mending Project*, 2009, at Lombard-Freid Projects in New York, included 400 spools of thread mounted to the wall.



A gallery visitor brings garments for Lee, right, to repair.