

Honno-Hanashi, 'The Art Of Punk: Embroidery Artist, Junko Oki, Finally Releases Her Long Awaited Art Book', Hon Bunshun, June 2014

THE ART OF PUNK: EMBROIDERY ARTIST, JUNKO OKI, FINALLY RELEASES HER LONG AWAITED ART BOOK

Embroidery artist Junko Oki has received a host of praises from art enthusiasts and collectors in France, United Kingdom, Germany, Holland, Switzerland, Taiwan and many other countries as well as in Japan. Her artwork consists of thousands of stitches applied to materials like washi (Traditional Japanese paper) and antique fabrics. We talked with her about her work and her long awaited first photo art book that will hit the shelves very soon. (For the Japanese language text, go to <http://hon.bunshun.jp/articles/-/2998>)



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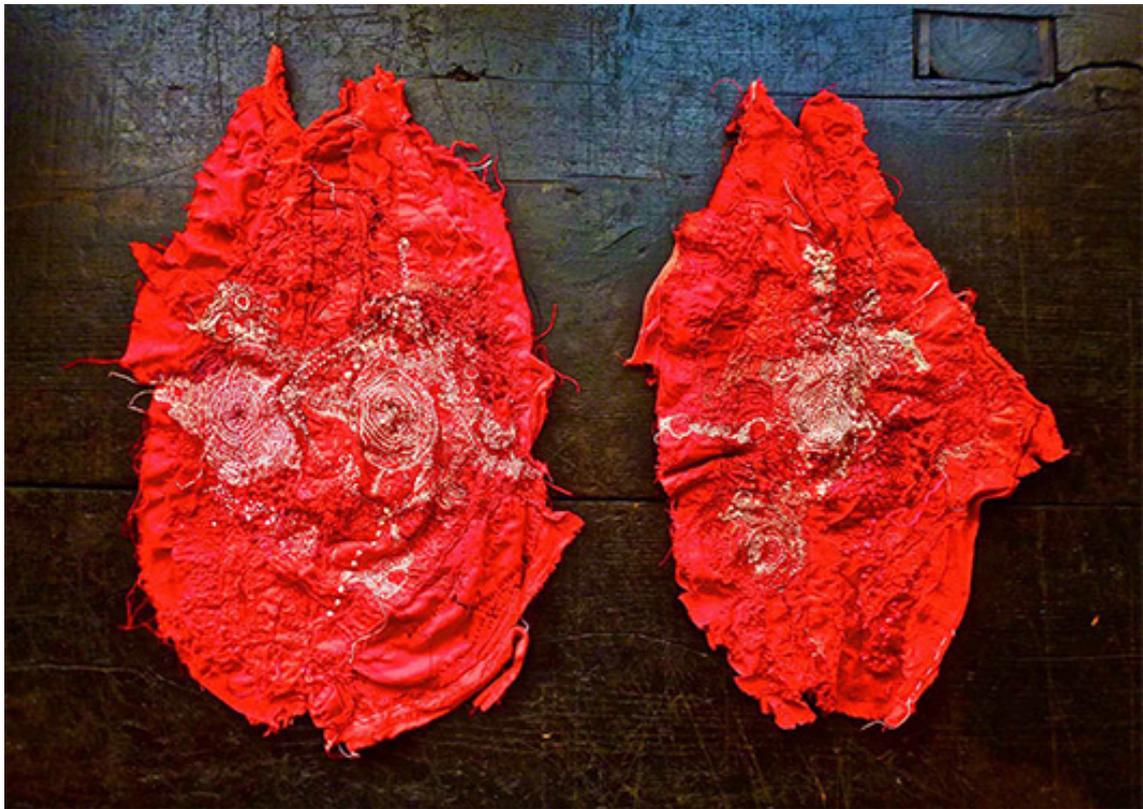
Interviewed by the Honno-Hanashi

-- I heard that you started your embroidery art in 2002, just before you turned forty. It was rather a late start to embark on a completely new frontier, wasn't it? What did you do before that?

I was working for a company. I was in charge of designing packages for character goods as well as production control of the merchandise. Now I think of those days as a good experience, but at the time, I was very unhappy that my creativity was restricted to the confines of industrial demands. With my fortieth birthday quickly approaching, I spent my days writing about what I would be doing ten

years from then. I thought that writing about what I would be doing in the future would help to move myself in the right direction. I wrote “I will be making my living with my art” or “I will be engrossed in planning my next exhibition.” I was trying desperately to find a way to express my art. At the same time, I applied to competitions in design as well as in oil painting. I also started learning about glasswork. Maybe I was too desperate.

Around that time my daughter, then a junior high school student, made a small bag from the Liberty fabric that my late mother had collected and handed down to me. She just cut the fabric, stitched it up and embroidered it in whatever way she wanted. She gave it to me as a present. I was shocked. My first thought was “Oh no! How could she cut up the precious fabric?” But the bag had a very powerful energy radiating from it. I supposed it was because the bag was made with pure joy of making it and nothing else. It came out from her heart’s desire. I was much moved. Then I realized, “Yes, it’s fine with this. It’s the way I should go.” I decided to make it simple, so I took a needle and thread which I had at hand, and started to work.



Pomegranate

-- Some people say that the most symbolic of your works are white fabric or paper on which you embroidered with white thread, stitch over stitch over stitch, almost compulsively. What do you think about that?

I started embroidery with white thread when I was waiting for my turn at a hospital. To kill time I just idly stitched with what I had in my portable sewing box. There was only white thread in the box so I had to use it! Stitching is a very simple process and you can start right away if you want to. I am not good at something that requires complicated planning before beginning. I believe the steady pace of stitching is just right for me. When you are stitching, you can go sideways if you like. Even if you find a tangled-up thread, you don't have to cut it off, you can leave it to create a new pattern. In other words the path is endless and you can keep on going - no turning back. I know I have found my place, my expression.



-- Your embroidery is quite different from the traditional, at home kind of embroidery that we often see, isn't it?

I studied traditional embroidery for a while, but many of them required complicated planning which I was not the best at, so before long I deviated from that practice and started running my own course. After I saw the works of Antoni Tapies [Note: Tapies is a Spanish artist. He started as a painter and was influenced by Paul Klee. He gradually moved on to mixing various things with his water color paintings as well as using threads and carpets to create his own art.] I thought it was perfectly all right to be free and not follow the regular patterns that was required in traditional embroidery. So my method of artistic expression is to keep on adding stitch after stitch until I finish a work of art.

-- When I read the afterword, it seems that a lot of the influence or inspiration comes from your memory about your family when you were a child. Can you comment on that?

Yes, my family did have a strong influence on my art. I don't stitch on the pre drawn designs or sketches; I do it spontaneously. This might sound too grandiose, but the driving force behind my stitches could be something like "Love and Death." While I was stitching, I might have been thinking about my family, like, "I want to see my deceased mother again," or "I would probably not be doing this if she were still alive," or "I always had a falling out with my father, but maybe I am the most like him in the family," and so on. Then I realize that the stitches have piled up to be my work. I get similar inspiration from people and cats that are around me. Maybe my fancies, hatreds, whims enable me to move my hands to create my art. I feel there is a gap I have to fill in, and once I start, I hear my inner voice saying "Keep stitching! More stitch! MORE!" I feel that I am compelled to stitch!



Egg Necklace / No Title

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-- Where did the title "Punk" come from?

I got the inspiration from a female writer who came to my exhibition. She looked around and bursting with excitement exclaimed, "They're so punk!" "Er... punk?"

I said uncomprehending. She said with finality, "Definitely punk" and she bought a brooch of mine as a token of "fellow punk." I didn't know much about "punk" at that point, but her words gave me the feeling of something being ignited deep inside me. I tried to find out what the word meant. I found out that Johnny Rotten (the lead vocal of a famous punk band, Sex Pistols) once said something like "Punk' is to be true to yourself." How I regretted I did not know about punk when I was in my teens and my twenties. But at the same time, I felt I was lucky enough to come across "punk" in my fifties. I was struggling to find a title for my book then and I knew it had to be "Punk." "Punk," in my understanding, is not just fashion on the surface. It is a pride and self-respect that people have deep inside them whether or not they seem to lead a sensible social life. It includes the will to protect something that truly matters to you and the will to never give it up. I sincerely hope that this book reaches the "punk" people in this sense.

-- Some people are amazed that such a luxurious book is being published. It is sized A4, 256 pages all in color, thread bound, in a fine indigo box with gold plated title. The whole book is a work of art. How do you feel about that?

It feels like a miracle especially at a time when most books are required to be made as fast and cheap as possible. Yet, this book was given far better treatment; I could devote a year and a half to complete it. Maybe that was "punk." This book validated my decision to continue making my art works. I am truly happy if this book is read by people who have ever threaded a needle or have the spark of any passion in their hearts.

PROFILE

Junko Oki

In 2002, Junko Oki began designing original embroidery works using various materials her mother had collected. Her high-density unique embroidery attracted the attention of fashion designers, photographers and other artists. Ms. Oki has had several solo exhibitions at ARTS & SCIENCE Aoyama, Gallery Feve, DEE'S HALL, COW BOOKS and other cutting-edge galleries. These exhibitions have resulted in a hail of praises for her unique style. She has published several books privately, including "Poesy," "Culte à la Carte." All have been rapidly sold out and now they are regarded as legendary private books that many fans are eager to find.