

Art in America

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Elaine Reichek: *Gallery of the Louvre*, 2004, embroidery on linen, 34 1/4 by 46 3/4 inches; at Nicole Klagsbrun.



Elaine Reichek at at Nicole Klagsbrun

A jewellike 58-by-43-inch embroidery on linen after Pieter Brueghel's famous *Tower of Babel* was the tour de force of "After Babel/Alpha Beta," Elaine Reichek's intelligent and provocative examination of communication (or, rather, its breakdown) and the interweaving of textual, verbal and pictorial language. Following the conventions of 19th-century samplers, Reichek annotated her sewn image of Brueghel's tower—not with a pithy maxim, but with a passage from Jorge Luis Borges's story "The Library of Babel" that underscores the vast, vertiginous, incomprehensible and awe-inspiring nature of human knowledge.

In another detailed, slightly smaller embroidery (all works 2004), Reichek copies Samuel Morse's 1831-33 painting *Gallery of the Louvre*. Her interest in Morse is twofold. As inventor of the telegraph he devised the first mode of long-distance communication based on a code of dots and dashes that prefigured computer language. His painting's subject matter, moreover, of an imaginary gallery filled with his favorite works from the Louvre, coincides with Reichek's own interest in recontextualizing pieces of art history.

For both *Tower of Babel* and *Gallery of the Louvre*, Reichek made computer scans from printed reproductions and used a software program to generate color-coded embroidery charts. The irony of starting with computer

lously hand-sewn, old-fashioned embroideries is consistent with the artist's wry, intricate and paradoxical approach. She is as comfortable copying works of fine art as she is borrowing motifs and patterns from samplers. Whatever her sources, she fields an impressive inventory of cross-references to art history, architecture, literature, philosophy, science, mythology and popular culture.

The show also included two embroidered charts, *Sign Language* and *White Magic*, both of which translated pictorial signs into letters. *SETI (Search for Extra Terrestrial Intelligence)* was another sampler containing coded mathematical and scientific material, in this case data sent to outer space in 1999 by scientists who sought to transmit information about our culture to the rest of the universe. The simplistic fallacy of their premise, in particular, and the futility, in general, of effectively conveying information and ideas among different peoples on earth—much less with beings in outer space!—brings us back to Babel, as Reichek clearly intended. —Susan Harris