

# Time Out

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Michael  
Raedecker

## So far sew good

Threads may hang from his canvases, but there's nothing woolly about Michael Raedecker's paintings. In the third of our four profiles of this year's Turner Prize nominees, he describes the dark side of sewing. Interview **Sarah Kent**

**T**he first paintings I saw by Michael Raedecker made me angry. They were landscapes bearing no sign of human presence and dwellings isolated in woodland or open country. It wasn't his subjects that enraged me, though, but his technique. With wool stuck on to or threaded through the canvas, the pictures were part paintings, part crude embroideries and their presence in 'Loose Threads' – a Serpentine Gallery show exploring the subversive use of stitching – seemed an act of trespass.

Traditionally, sewing was a woman's domain; embroidery, cross-stitching, knitting and crochet were among the few activities in which we were allowed to demonstrate expertise. And to ensure that we did not get too big for our boots, the activities were denigrated as pastimes. During the '70s, feminist artists like Judy Chicago employed

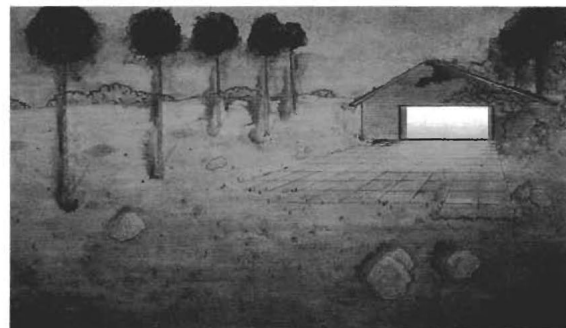
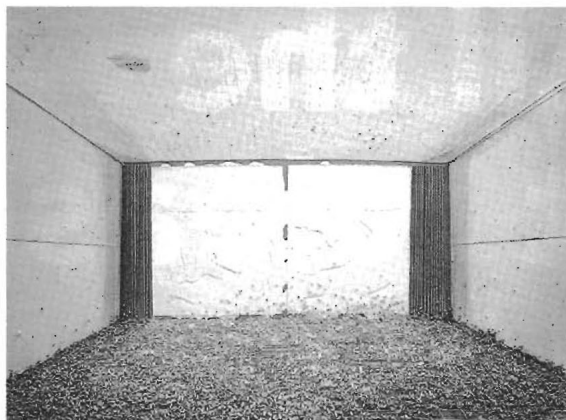
these and other handicrafts, demanding that the status of 'women's work' be reassessed.

How dare a male artist hijack her stratagem? Raedecker is bemused by my outburst. 'There are no politics in using threads,' he says. 'It's a nice material with many possibilities. The technique feels like mine; I am comfortable with it.' The idea developed out of his previous career. He studied fashion in Amsterdam, then worked for a designer in Paris where his romantic expectations were thwarted. The business was so time-consuming that designing was relegated to planes and hotel rooms. A lot of people were involved and, preferring to work alone, Raedecker gradually turned to painting. After some experiments, he enrolled at the Rijksakademie, Amsterdam, where he quickly found his direction. During his first year he began



## Turner Prize

**REAP WHAT YOU SEW**  
**Top: 'Radiate' (2000)**  
**Bottom: 'Ins and Outs' (2000)**



► incorporating threads into his work. In 1996 he came to London to study at Goldsmith's College and has stayed on, single-mindedly pursuing his unusual mixture of painting and sewing.

He uses the wool as a remarkably subtle drawing device. Sewn into the canvas, vertical threads may represent curtains or define the planking of a shack; horizontal threads indicate shadows or light playing over the surface of water. Stuck on to the surface, long strands are used to outline irregular shapes such as boulders, pillows or plants; glued on in dense clusters, they suggest foliage or the rough texture of bark. Worm-like curlicues mimic the shag pile of a carpet; poked through the canvas from behind, single oily strands stick up like stems.

Everywhere the infestation implies disease. Paint often lies on the surface in dank puddles of inert colour – greys, beiges, white or brown – or, mixed with the wool, forms clotted tangles that resemble mould and imply the presence of something rotten. 'It's a reference to the failure of representation,' says Raedecker. 'I was influenced by Luc Tiemanns and Gerhard Richter who argue that, after the atrocities of WWII, painting can never adequately describe reality again.'

Raedecker's subjects also imply the failure of utopian schemes – dreams that fall short of expectations. His houses, shacks and bungalows are inspired by catalogues such as 'Vacation and Second Homes' published by Home Planners, an American company that supplies the plans to build your future retreat. 'When I was a teenager, I watched American TV – soaps like "The Brady Bunch", he recalls. 'America is a faraway country with a mythical dimension, where people have luxurious lifestyles. And in '93, I started to play the director, making a series without people. There'd be a suburban house with a car in front – Daddy is at home, so it represents a happy family scene.'

The catalogues show dream homes set among trees, lawns and flower-beds but, with no context besides the printed page, they seem like paradise islands – marooned. Surrounding his dwellings with wilderness, Raedecker exaggerates this sense of isolation to the point where longed-for seclusion becomes threatening vulnerability.

'Homes represent security, a secret hiding place,' says Raedecker. 'They are the only places where we can be ourselves. I'm curious to see what's happening inside and I give the impression that you can look in, but create so much light that it camouflages things and prevents insight. It's not about suspense or scariness, though. I'm not trying to create a Hitchcock scenario; these are not horror images.'

'Ins and outs' is resolutely grey. A weedy patio flanked by a line of dismal trees leads the eye to a lone bungalow under assault from an encroaching tangle of creepers. The gloom of the dismal grey

atmosphere of the paintings is important,' says Raedecker. 'They are like a state of mind. Melancholy is too strong a word; I'd call it a sense of reality. London is a grey city. People are not really happy. I'm trying to discover what life is; asking unanswerable questions that have no solutions, especially not in painting!'

'100,000 Years' is a bird's-eye view of an empty landscape. A series of lunar rocks cast thin shadows of black thread across the barren ground. A few tall trees with woollen canopies grow near a lake whose water is meticulously sewn in blue thread. The scene looks both familiar and strange. 'It could be anywhere,' says Raedecker. 'I don't want to portray an actual landscape. It's empty – remote and unspoilt. I'm fascinated by the idea that it was there long before we were and doesn't change. Holland is a fake country, it shouldn't be there, and every metre is organised. If you want to change anything you have to ask permission – even to cut down a tree. It's the most densely populated country in Europe – you can always see signs of human presence. There's always a church or pylon. Perhaps that's why I like to play with landscapes – shape them, even turn them upside down.'

'Echo', the view through the mouth of a cave hidden by a tangle of lianas (a curtain of wool), represents the ultimate retreat from the world. 'It's the painter's den or eyrie,' says Raedecker, 'a space for reflection. I need the isolation of the studio; it's a comfortable space, a different world.' The rocks surrounding the entrance create a womb-like frame, an enfolding envelope. The painting was inspired by 'Moon Palace', a novel by Paul Aster about an artist who leaves his wife and travels to the Colorado Desert. He finds a cave full of food and some canvases and, having killed the inhabitants, begins making paintings that he knows will never be seen. On his return to civilisation, he leaves them behind.

Poking through the surface of '100,000 Years' are dozens of worms of wool. Threading them through meant walking back and forth from one side of the canvas to the other. Sewing threads to create the shimmering water was similarly time-consuming. 'It's very slow,' says Raedecker, 'but I really like the slowness; the lake felt like a never-ending story.'

'You make an effort and, because you spend time, it seems worthwhile. Painting is serious in that way. I have problems with jokey paintings. I like the fact that you can see a work again and again and establish a relationship – see new things in it. If you tell the same joke twice, you feel you've already heard it. There is a funny element in my work, but there's also something darker. I don't want to be too

**'There are no politics in using threads. It's a nice material with many possibilities.'**

scenario is alleviated by bright light shining through the picture window like an invitation. Step inside, though, and you might find a scene similar to 'Radiate'. The place seems abandoned; the room is empty save for curtains flanking the picture window – the view is obscured by the opacity of thick white paint. A riot is in progress. Having wriggled free from the carpet, myriad curls of wool rampage about the space like an infestation of maggots.

The message of the paintings seems clear: the world is a hostile place and constant vigilance is required to keep chaos at bay. Entropy is the most powerful factor governing our lives. 'The

explicit. I don't think a painting should be perfect; if everything is in the right place, there is nothing left to the imagination. I'm creating a space of contemplation for the viewer.'

Last year Raedecker won the John Moores painting prize. As an artist who obviously needs solitude, was he phased by being shortlisted for the Turner Prize? 'I was surprised. I thought I needed a couple more years. But I'm quite a cool, quiet person so I'm getting on all right.' ●

*Next week: Wolfgang Tillmans*

*'Turner Prize exhibition is at Tate Britain until Jan 14. The winner will be announced on Nov 28.*