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Entertainment

## Sollins unravels the sentimental in favor of abstraction



Kenneth Baker

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New York artist Stephen Sollins cleverly touches themes of memory and loss.

Some years ago, he exposed elegiac, unintended "poems" in newspaper obituary copy by removing any word that would ordinarily have kept a reader from noticing them.

In recent "Domestic Scenes" at Brian Gross, Sollins has unmade embroidered linens and found in them raw materials of modernist abstraction.

In "Elegy (Let me live in a house...)" (2004), he plucked the colored threads from a humble embroidery bearing the words "Let me/ live in a/ House by the/ side of/ the Road." He then re-stitched the colored threads on the same linen panel, arranging them by color and quantity in descending tiers of squares.

Sollins' embroidery overrides the original design but some of its motto and imagery still show: a tiny cottage flanked by trees and a winding path, a floral motif forming a full stop for the verse. The pattern of colored rectangles evokes both the grandiose utopianism of Russian Suprematist painting and the humbler emphasis on materials and systems in New York art of the '60s.

The colliding ideals and levels of sophistication in the works on view make them surprisingly poignant. None of the emblems of incongruous values in Sollins' pieces discredits the others. He hints at the mildest of utopian hopes: that people divided by incompatible ideals, as so many of us see ourselves these days, can repattern our conflicts into novel harmonies.

"Elegy (Let me live in a house...)" makes an especially striking example in that its motto speaks the implicit plea of numberless people living on American city streets nowadays.

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Stephen Sollins: Domestic Scenes: Deconstructed embroideries. Robert Sagerman: Marking Time: Paintings. Through July 2. Brian Gross Fine Art, 49 Geary St., San Francisco. (415) 788-1050, [www.briangrossfineart.com](http://www.briangrossfineart.com) .

Paris During the Second Empire, 1852-1870: Photographs. Through July 2. Robert Koch Gallery, 49 Geary St., San Francisco. (415) 421-0122, [www.kochgallery.com](http://www.kochgallery.com) .



Written By  
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Kenneth Baker has been art critic for the San Francisco Chronicle since 1985. A native of the Boston area, he served as art critic for the Boston Phoenix between 1972 and 1985.

He has contributed on a freelance basis to art magazines internationally and was a contributing editor of Artforum from 1985 through 1992. He continues to review fiction and nonfiction books for The Chronicle, in addition to reporting on all aspects of the visual arts regionally and, on occasion, nationally and internationally.