

John Barbour

Untitled Object: I Will Not Steel  
2003

This is one of about 50 embroideries I've made over the past couple of years. Sometimes they're big and declamatory, sometimes – as with this one – small and concentrated and a bit strange. I'm looking for a particular quality of psychological intensity I only find in the making process itself. Then I wonder why I invest so much of myself in making them, and I wonder what they 'mean' and why others should care enough to look at them. They usually include words – often collected from everyday life – from books, or overheard or reported conversational fragments.

This one. A few years ago, after a certain incident, I told my daughter to write out 'I will not steal' 20 times. This she reluctantly but dutifully did, and presented the document for approval. She was forgiven, and I kept the list, being struck initially by the misspelling of the word 'steal' as 'steel' – a suggestive transposition of the order of things for the ideal moral order. And I was struck by the way in which her baldly (and I thought rather blithely) repeated injunction to herself suggested, perhaps even repressed, a much more ambivalent state of mind and feeling. In fact it wasn't difficult to imagine her passionately hating me – telling herself she wished I'd die.

Perhaps I made my own penance as a 'bad father' by forcing myself to recreate her list as an embroidery. I think this particular piece is also quite like a traditional sampler, which, as far as I know, are conventionally meant to display the maker's competence in a variety of stitches. I like the sense of resistance and determination it expresses. I also think it gives off a kind of toxic malevolence. The paradox is obvious enough: you will die. And I will die. Perhaps this thing will survive.

'... a sense of urgency ...' John made this comment when he was telling me how he made his embroideries. It has stayed with me since, shaping my relation to his work and reminding me of other things he told that day: his visit to Brazil – the festivals, the intensity of life teeming in the streets and the making of banners using whatever was around.

