



IT'S A STITCH -UP

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Alice Alva \ Desiree Ratima \ Kirsty Horrell \ Jay Hutchinson \ May Trubuhovich \ Paul Yore \
Rachel Kiddie McClure \ Tiffany Singh \ Wesley John Fourie \ Curated by Rachel Kiddie McClure

IT'S A STITCH-UP

Essay by Steph Chalmers

The Doormat Series—
The Challenges Are
Different From The Past
Tiffany Singh
2019
Embroidery, Ralli quilt

Google 'Contemporary Embroidery', and the first question prompt that appears is: "Is embroidery a contemporary art?" The short answer is yes. Of course.

When I was invited to write something for *It's a Stitch Up*, my first thought was: how can I write about what's happening in embroidery without rummaging around in the heavy emotional baggage of feminism, and hitting on the Art vs Craft debate? (And, can I do it without using phrases like 'common threads'?)

While it's important to acknowledge that the history and perceptions of embroidery inform and influence artists working in the media today, delving deeper into those histories and perceptions has been done, if you go looking.

Let's just state for the record:

- Craft and Art are entwined; not mutually exclusive.
- For centuries embroidery was considered a feminine diversion and consequently undervalued and underappreciated; marginalised from fine art.
- The landscape of fine art changes. We continue to move on from our previous undervaluing of embroidery as only craft, as we update our ideas of what is worthy of our attention and deserving of analysis.

Artists working with embroidery—or more broadly textiles—are thinking outside the hoop (sorry). There are artists embroidering photographs, fences, buckets, cars, books, plastic bags, cardboard boxes, drums, toast, furniture, garments, and going as far as creating fully immersive installations in unexpected spaces. There are artists embroidering in such exquisite detail that you would swear their work was a painting. Some artists create everyday objects out of thread alone, and others construct impressive large scale sculptures. They are weaving, braiding, stitching, knotting, wrapping, folding, scrunching, beading, stretching, crocheting, lacing, knitting. There are artists embroidering with cotton, silk,



wool, but also wire, plastic, rope, feathers, human hair, animal hair, and all kinds of found materials. London-based artist Eliza Bennett takes hand-embroidery literally in her series *A Woman's Work is Never Done*, using her own palm as a canvas, she stitches directly through the top layer of skin to create calluses made of thread.

All of these artists—and the nine artists in this exhibition—are not defined or limited by their materials. The ideas tackled in their works are as varied and complex as in any other fine art media. Their works traverse an array of concerns and ideas, from inequality, gender identity, cultural identity, mental

health, collective and personal memory, climate change, politics, popular culture, to life, sex, and death. And everything else in between.

Finding a way to be creative during extended periods in our homes during this global pandemic has led to a surge in people reaching for their threads, needles and other art supplies. The calm and control gained by endless hours stitching is virtually unsurpassed by any other activity. It's as if the resilience of the fabric becomes us; after all what, other than fabric, can you stab repeatedly that doesn't die? Perhaps this is why embroidery has grown in popularity since 2020, and offers reason as to why it has been co-opted into both activism and therapy in recent years.

The evidence that creating art has therapeutic benefits is beyond dispute. One of many organisations leading in this area is *Fine Cell Work*. Established in 1997, the aim of this social service is to provide a creative outlet as therapy by engaging with prisoners around the UK to offer training in fine needlepoint. *Fine Cell Work* have worked with over 7,000 incarcerated people to create artworks that now hang in places like the Victoria and Albert Museum and Kensington Palace. Idris Khan, Annie Morris, Cornelia Parker, Wolfgang Tillmans, Francis Upritchard, and Ai Weiwei, are just a few of the big names who have recently collaborated with prisoners to produce embroidered works to be auctioned through Sothebys to raise funds for further work.



Left to right

Witness III

May Trubuhovich
2020

Cotton hand embroidery
and acrylic ink on dyed
cotton placemat

Art Is Freedom

Paul Yore
2016

Mixed Media textile,
beads, sequins, buttons,
marker and acrylic

Fuck me in the Forest

Wesley John Fourie
2020

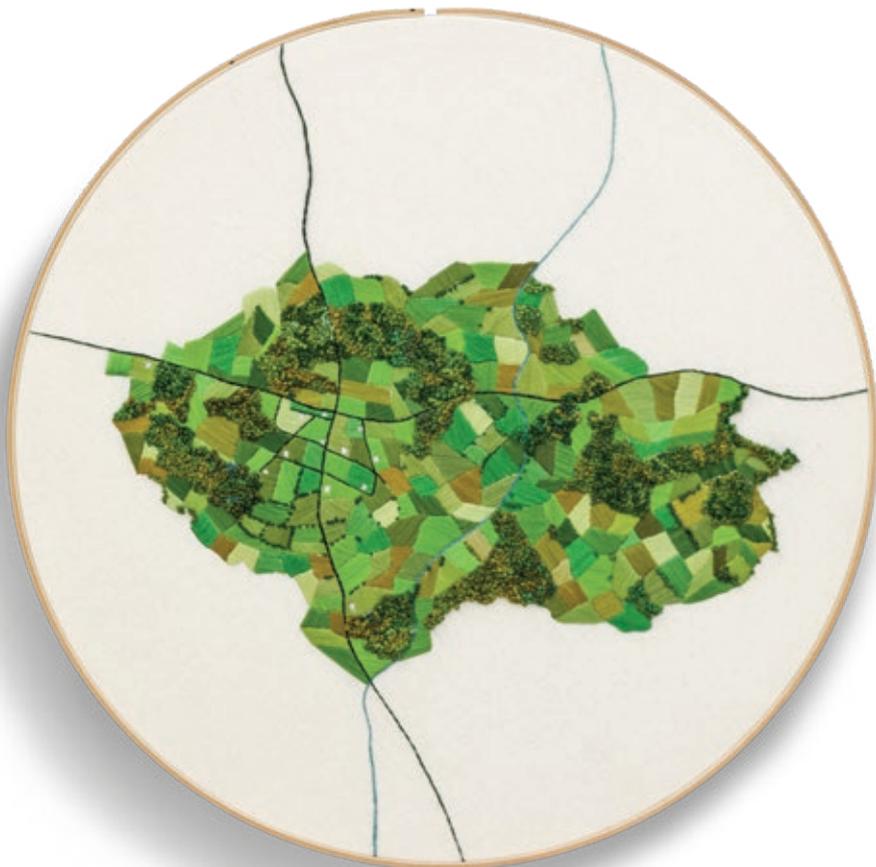
Silk, Embroidery





Left to right
Eight steps to perfection
 Jay Hutchinson
 2022
 Hand-embroidery in digitally
 printed cotton-drill, asphalt
Flow
 Desiree Ratima
 2021
 Cotton, cotton thread,
 acrylic paint, beads
I'll Be Okay
 Rachel Kiddie McClure
 2020
 Textiles, Crafting
 materials, Mixed Media





Cynhefin
Elfinthings / Kirsty Horrell
2021
Hand embroidery (cotton
silk & rayon on calico)

Cover image:
Enclosed
Alice Alva
2020
Cotton and silk on calico
and found linen in vintage
embroidery hoop

It's heartening to read personal accounts from prisoners who have gained new skills, resilience, and pride from being involved in the program.

"Stitching a piece for *Fine Cell Work* is an art. It is the best way to express and process feelings for me—be they good feelings, like love or inspiration, or sad feelings, like broken heart and loneliness. Feelings overflow me, and stitching allows me to unload my heart and soul and help my mind to process my emotions. Stitching is like a workout for mind and soul—and, like after a regular workout, after making art, you feel tired, but happy and healthy!

I feel very proud and humble when I have finished my pieces. *Fine Cell Work* means the world to me. It has allowed me to get through a very bad time of my life and has given me the motivation and determination to look forward to the future and make a difference to my life."

—*Fine Cell Work* stitcher
on Annie Morris' design

A "stitch-up" refers to a situation that has been manipulated in a way that disadvantages one party to make the outcome unfair. It is unfair that textile art has been repeatedly sidelined in the past, but it's safe to say it is now rightly woven into the fabric of fine art. (Sorry, again). There is no question that embroidery is an art form that is relevant and thriving.

Steph Chalmers has worked as an exhibition designer, curator, art collection manager, and picture framer. Steph has been surrounded by embroidery from an early age, and influenced by her mother—a member of the Waikato Embroiderers' Guild for more than 30 years.

