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Claire Wrathall profiles three artists who are giving modern relevance to the ancient art of embroidery

As an art form, embroidery is at least as old as painting. Think of the Steeple Aston Cope, an embroidery from around 1310–40, now at London’s Victoria and Albert Museum, which depicts a winged angel astride a dappled grey horse, worked in silver gilt and silk threads on silk twill. In subsequent eras, it came to be seen more as a craft – a decorative, essentially feminine skill, rather than a means to make fine art. But it has made a comeback over the past half-century thanks to artists such as Judy Chicago and Alighiero Boetti, and is now undergoing a renaissance. Witness the way well-known figures such as Egyptian-born Ghada Amer, South Korea’s Lee Bul and Ham Kyungah, and Tracey Emin and Grayson Perry in the UK – and the three very different artists profiled here – use it in their practice. »
Jordan Nassar

Born 1985, New York

Traditional Palestinian cross-stitch embroidery tends to feature structured patterns of symbols from nature — birds, flowers, fruit, cypress trees — along with more abstract geometric shapes. But if the densely wrought, hand-stitched canvases of US-born artist Jordan Nassar are rooted in the traditions of his paternal grandparents’ homeland, they are also stylised landscapes: images of a place ‘that only really exists in the minds of diaspora Palestinians, a utopian vision based on their parents’ and grandparents’ reminiscences of the old country, mixed with their own imaginations’. In essence, they represent what Nassar calls a ‘dream Palestine’.

Focus on their stylised blocks of colour, and you may be reminded of the work of the Lebanese-American artist Etel Adnan. This is intentional. On ‘learning about Adnan’s approach to addressing difficulties within herself, her struggle with not feeling “Arab enough”, her self-exile and therefore distance from the place she identifies with’, Nassar felt something open within his own practice. ‘Inspired by her, I tried “painting” landscapes
across the patterns I had been embroidering,' he says. 'I love using landscape as a vehicle for work with colour and composition, in a painterly way.' Landscapes tend to be more accessible than pure abstraction, says Nassar, and he has a message to communicate.

The son of a first-generation Palestinian-American doctor and a Polish mother, Nassar grew up on New York’s Upper West Side ‘where the culture was very Jewish and the standard view of Israel a positive one’. His home was full of traditional Palestinian embroidery: ‘Pillows, wall hangings, what have you. I love that textiles carry people in them, like the quilt your grandmother made.’ So he got some needles and thread and started teaching himself, learning from books and the internet and eventually going to Palestine in the summer of 2000. ‘I’m still learning today: about the symbols, meanings and compositions of the patterns. But I’ve arrived at a place of freedom with my use of the traditional patterns and motifs. I’ll take a traditional pattern and use it as is. Or I’ll isolate one element and then cover the canvas with it. Or I’ll invent patterns inspired by Palestinian patterns. It really depends on my idea for the piece.’

He admits he found growing up in this mix of cultures – ‘with what I felt like the whole outside world was telling me conflicting with what my family was telling me at home’ – very confusing. ‘For much of my youth and young adulthood, I avoided talking or even thinking about it. Nevertheless, I identified strongly with my Arab heritage. I learned to read and write Arabic and studied formal Arabic in college.’

In 2011, he met the man who would become his husband, the Israeli artist Amir Guberstein, and they started travelling to Israel together. ‘This was the beginning of my engaging with the topic, once I started to really explore for myself and began to form my own opinion based on what I saw with my own eyes,’ says Nassar. ‘Palestine and Israel is simply part of my life now: the conflict, that is. It’s in my home and it’s in my relationship and so of course it’s in my work. I feel it is most urgent, for an American audience especially, to educate people on the complexity and nuance of the situation there.’

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