



11 Artists Using Embroidery in Radical Ways

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November 21, 2017



Jordan Nassar, *And the sea drowning the sea*, 2017

“Queen Elizabeth I often embroidered with other female rulers, much the way male leaders might play golf today,” says Barbara Paris Gifford, a curator at the Museum of Arts and Design (MAD) in New York. “It was a favorite activity because it inspired concentration, conversation, and competition.”

Many of our modern associations with embroidery, like needlepoint samplers or cheeky cross-stitch pillows, seem quaint, but the medium is used in diverse and complex ways. In fact, needlework has a long relationship to politics, power, and resistance.

In 17th-century Turkey (then the Ottoman Empire), embroidery offered symbolic protection for the most precious things, including religious objects and babies. More recently, in the 1970s and '80s in Chile, women created bright embroideries called arpilleras, as an act of resistance against Augusto Pinochet's military dictatorship. The arpilleras, which memorialized family members “disappeared” by the regime, were so threatening to the government that it became a crime to own one.

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In the 1970s, feminist artists including Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro, and Faith Ringgold used embroidery and other handcrafts to tell powerful and disruptive stories. They mined craft techniques to explore the construction of gender roles and challenge the hierarchy that valued painting and sculpture above the art and craft forms traditionally considered women's work.

Today, fiber arts like embroidery are a growing presence in museums and galleries, and artists use their needles to investigate a dizzying variety of concerns, exploring gender, sexual and ethnic identity, cultural history, memory, and pop culture, among other themes. Below, we talk to 11 artists who are continuing to expand this potent medium.

Jordan Nassar

Nassar works in tatreez, a traditional Palestinian form of embroidery. Historically, its motifs were passed down from mother to daughter and the story of the pattern was visually encoded in the design itself. Palestinian-American, and born and raised in New York, Nassar was drawn to embroidery out of the desire to connect with his Palestinian heritage and its cultural traditions. The longer he did it, the more he learned about its history, systems, and meanings. "Palestinian embroidery really has it all," he says. "Geometry, superstition and magic, social cues, family and village associations, embellishment and more."

Nassar's "The Jaffa Series (and After)," completed during and after a recent residency in Tel Aviv-Yafo, is made up of small, exquisitely stitched canvases covered with motifs that resolve themselves into desert landscapes, gentle green hills, and curving coastlines. Although there's an undercurrent in his work that touches on issues of colonialism and occupation, he avoids tackling those problems explicitly.

"In my opinion, any sort of hardline political stance when it comes to Palestine and Israel is going to be flawed," he explains. "It's a situation where everything is right and yet wrong at the same time. The way I try to address it in my work is more introspective than declarative, and this is important to me, as someone who is so very much 'on both sides'—with Palestinian family on my father's side and Israeli family via my husband."