

Finishing Touches - A&I Magazine

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Louise Gardiner describes her method of combining embroidery with painting to create some colourful characters.

I am a freelance funny figurative embroidery artist, painter and illustrator. Which when said for the fifteenth time during the first course at a dinner party, is quite a mouthful, especially if they serve soup and a bun.

I've always done lots of drawing and painting but my passion for embroidery began on my Textiles BA at Goldsmiths' College in London. I was attracted to the spontaneous nature of the sewing machine needle, the quirky lines, the double-sided nature of machine stitch on canvas and also the inevitable mistakes.

In my second year at college I was struggling to find my creative voice and a subject matter on which to base my work. I was a Northern dairy farmer's lass bewildered by the hectic London scene. So I began to explore the city and found myself photographing strangers, queues and crowds. One photo, of two elderly ladies in Lewisham shopping Centre, was particularly poignant and unbeknown to them – was to become the basis of my work and to feature in my embroidery regularly.

I am mad about people watching. The way people behave when they are sober and the way they change when they are drunk. The way they dress, move and interact. They amuse, fascinate, sadden and entertain me all at the same time. I am intrigued about how individual we all are yet so very much the same.

My work is built up of fictional characters who all derive from a concoction of memories, observations, experiences, photographs and sketches. I have a basic need to illustrate my observations of people and to create humorous and colourful characters to entertain and charm those who look at my embroidery.

Whether out on the town, in the pub or even queuing for the ladies' I am always gathering information to inspire my work. I like to exaggerate human behaviour and to create larger than life characters. I have slowly created my own race of odd shaped people.

WORKING FROM DRAWINGS.

I do lots of scratchy pen drawings in the evening. If one 'works' I later manipulate, perfect and transfer it to canvas in black stitch on my Bernina sewing machine using the needle like a fixed pen. I often repeat figures or change their scale on the photocopier to build up queues or crowds.

Deciding on the mood of a piece dictates the movements, colours, and expressions of each figure. It is just as important that the work that the work has a sensitivity and sometimes pathos as well as being entertaining. This seems natural as I am exploring human nature through my work.

When I have drawn on the canvas in stitch, I then paint the characters with acrylic, mixing colours to suit the piece. Then the frenetic embroidery begins and I start to create intricate and repetitive patterns, in different coloured threads, treating each shape or shoe one at a time. Sometimes the stitched lines whiz off the figures and sometimes lines are missed out entirely so as to play with the use of space and give the impression of movement. Each figure is embroidered individually and is unique.

Occasionally, on completion a piece has certain magic, which has developed subconsciously. That is exciting. Somehow the theme is universal and contains some inherent quality of human nature. It is often a surprise as I work so closely to the machine and have not looked at a piece as a whole until I have finished.

The thrill of it all is seeing people look at my work and noting their reaction. It is most rewarding when peoples faces light up in recognition of what the piece is trying to say, especially when they laugh. That's why I do it.

ORIGINAL IDEAS.

Whether I am a fine artist, illustrator or crafts person is unimportant to me. My success as an artist depends on my ability to communicate original ideas creatively and professionally with my personality as the main factor – not the medium I use. As a result I have become quite the opportunist and can turn my hand to almost anything from video production and set design to disco dancing and milking cows. I am now asked to do talks, workshops, commissions and exhibitions, which after ten years of tiring self-promotion is fabulous. I have been commissioned to do an embroidered illustration for the Guardian, build a small set for the BBC, and the worlds largest glitter ball. I teach A' level art at Sir John Deane's College, Cheshire and I'm working on a series of greetings cards. As far as I'm concerned variety is most definitely the spice of life.