



# Meet the maker

Diana Woolf chats to embroidery enthusiast and artist Louise Gardiner about personal development and achievement through art.

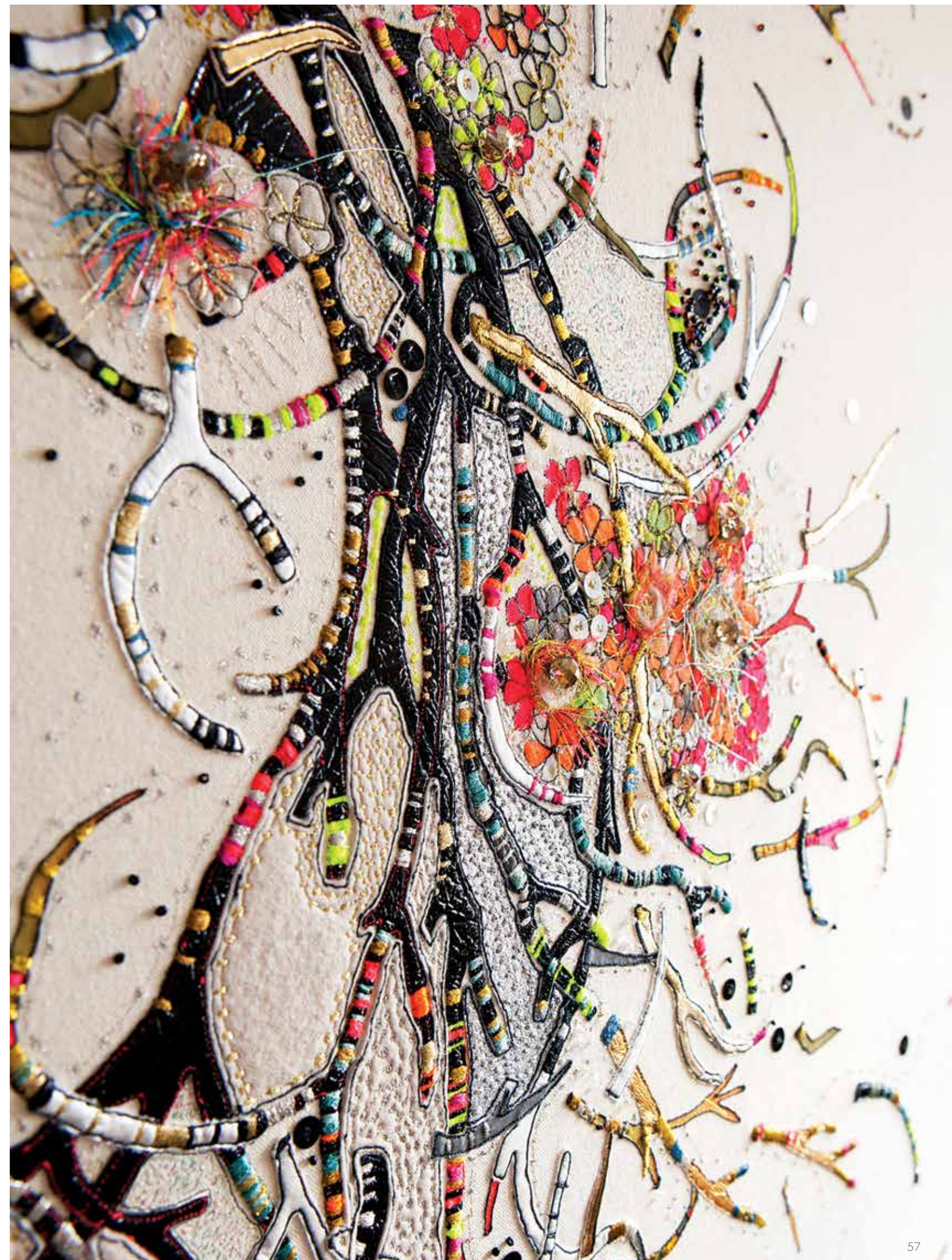
“The challenge I have for myself is to make embroidery exciting,” says textile artist Louise Gardiner. And judging from her creations full of explosive colour and vigorous line she has more than achieved her aim. These embroideries are worked on canvas mounted on stretchers and from a distance look deceptively simple, more like flat print than textile. It’s only when you get close up that you see their extraordinary detail, with individual motifs built up with layers of pattern and texture to create a whirlpool of embroidery, appliqué and ink. Pieces like Bloomin’ Marvellous are almost hypnotic, drawing the viewer into a central swirling mass of sequins and feathers, cunningly framed by curling peacock feathers, leaves and flower stems. The subject matter may be floral, but it’s a long way away from the lady-like flower tapestries of old – these are embroideries that pack a punch, full of energy, attention-grabbing colour and visual excitement.

It’s this excitement that explains Gardiner’s success as an artist. Over the course of her career she has gained a string of awards and

high profile commissions, including a London Embroiderer’s Guild scholarship in 2005 and in 2010 a commission to make a giant quilt for the shop window at Liberty’s flagship store in London. She has also worked on several public commissions for hospitals such as Bristol Royal Infirmary and the Gloucester Royal Children’s Hospital. More unexpectedly, she gained a parliamentary award in 2008 for *Saggy Boobs and Other Breast Feeding Myths*, a book written by public health expert Val Finnigan and illustrated with Gardiner’s embroidered sketches. She also hosts workshops, teaches and lectures, and students have included Kirstie Allsop (the session was screened on Channel Four’s *Kirstie’s Homemade Home*) and Jenni Murray, who was talked through the process live on *Women’s Hour*.

Looking back on her achievements, Gardiner says, “I never planned this as my career but I love the fact that I have now developed my own way of working, although it certainly hasn’t always been easy.” So where did it all start? Conventionally enough, Gardiner started ▶

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off with a Foundation art course at Manchester Metropolitan University near her Cheshire home. Although she didn't come from a particularly 'crafty' family (in fact she comes from a long line of dairy farmers), Gardiner followed this up with a textiles degree at London's Goldsmiths' College. It was here that Gardiner first came across freehand machine embroidery. It seems to have been a case of love at first stitch and 20 years on, the sewing machine is still the main weapon in Gardiner's creative armoury. She was immediately attracted to the technique as a way of drawing with thread, drawing being her first love. "I love the quality of the line it creates, giving it a tactile, 3-dimensional quality. I think of the threads as long lines of ink," she explains. The immediacy of freehand machine embroidery was also a big attraction as it allowed Gardiner's textiles to become more spontaneous, like drawing but only with more permanent lines. The crucial role drawing plays in her work was underlined by an MA in illustration, which Gardiner went back to Manchester Metropolitan to do in 2001.

The link between illustration and embroidery can be clearly seen in Gardiner's earliest embroideries.

These were mainly figurative and were inspired by people-watching in places like local shopping centres or on the high street.

An artist with a sure eye for quirky detail, Gardiner has the startling ability to capture the essence of people she sees around her, in the process creating recognisable figures such as the weary shopper or the over-enthusiastic dancer. These figures start life as pencil drawings and are then translated onto canvas with machine embroidery, the link between the two processes meaning that they retain an attractive, sketchy feel. Gardiner has also worked on a series of embroidered drawings of more humorous character types such as Loula Hoola, a zany, buxom woman in a loud floral dress and red fishnet tights dancing with a hoola hoop, and Smooth Operator, an elderly house husband Hoovering the floor in pin stripe trousers and a frilly piny.

Although these comic characters were very popular, Gardiner has moved on from them, now creating more serious works inspired by the natural world and human emotions. "I realised I had more to say about the world, than just being funny," she says, adding, "I suppose I just matured and wanted to express myself in a different way." The new pieces are dense groupings of flowerheads, seedpods and leaves and Gardiner says they are about experiencing joy in the natural world and about the now, reflecting a more spiritual side to her character.

However, works such as Hello Blossom and Flutter Byes show that you can't keep a good sense of humour down and implies that although she may be older and wiser, Gardiner still refuses to take herself too seriously.

These newer pieces are created using the same freehand machine embroidered technique as the figurative embroideries, but are more time consuming. "I mull over the concepts behind them and plan each one very carefully," she explains. The work is highly labour intensive and a single piece measuring roughly 1.2m square can take anything from 150–250 hours to make. Gardiner spends a lot of time drawing out the design on paper before she even touches the canvas. She says, "I know the shape of the design before I start, but not the colour and the texture." Once the design is finished, it is then embroidered onto the canvas using Gardiner's trusty Bernina sewing machine. Then, with the outlines in place, she fills in the detail using a combination of appliqué, paint and ink. These blocks of colour are over-embroidered with metal threads or coloured silks with a final sprinkling of beads or sequins added for good measure. The result is a heady mix of pattern and texture full of

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movement and brilliant colour with vibrant reds and fuchsia pinks contrasted against cool teals seeming to be a favourite combination. "It's a simple technique," Gardiner modestly says, before going on to say, "but I try and push it all the time by experimenting with different colours and materials and trying to be more exciting and daring."

Like any true crafts person Gardiner knows the value of sheer hard work and she is quick to point out that the longer you spend on a technique the better you get at it. Given that she has spent nearly 20 years perfecting her machine embroidery skills, it's scarcely surprising that she now has an almost intuitive knowledge of the various materials she uses, understanding exactly what she can and can't do with each fabric. However in spite of this impressive skill set, Gardiner is not one to rest on her laurels and is always looking for a new challenge. One such challenge presented itself in 2012 when she was selected to exhibit in Project Space, part of the prestigious craft and design fair Collect. This forced her to work on a much bigger and more conceptual scale than ever before and after six months hard labour the result was a series of five large-scale embroideries collectively titled 'You

Blow Me Away'. Together the five depicted the journey of the humble tumbleweed, starting from the moment it breaks off at its roots and mournfully blows away spinning through the air. However, instead of being destroyed by the wind, Gardiner depicts the weed growing as it picks up items and gathers momentum along the way until finally it is transformed into an object of beauty. Gardiner uses the plant as a metaphor for creativity, showing how it grows from small beginnings, developing into a swirling mass of colour and pattern full of complexity and energy.

Gardiner has a fair number of public commissions under her creative belt, the most recent being one for the A&E Department at the Royal Oldham Hospital in Manchester. She has already completed two other commissions for the same hospital and was given a free rein to do what she wanted with this piece, which is based on a map of The Greater Manchester Area but looks like a large stained glass window or the images you see through a Kaleidoscope. Gardiner clearly gets a huge amount of satisfaction making art for hospitals: "It is very challenging and quite intense work, but I love the fact that I can

really make a difference to the environment in a hospital. I've had emails from people saying how my work has helped them through awful times in their lives and I feel really privileged to be

able to do something worthwhile and give something back to the community."

Gardiner is an artist with a huge amount of creative energy and a nicely quirky sense of humour, but she also has a refreshing streak of practicality. She is quite clear-sighted about the challenges of earning a living through her art and consequently is now trying to become a little more commercial by reproducing some of her embroideries as printed scarves and cushions. "You have to be realistic about how long you can go on creating and trying to direct my work into new areas is another challenge for me," she explains. The result is that her laboriously made one-off embroideries are now being given new life as luxurious silk scarves which can be bought online. With their joyful colours and dense patterning they work very well as scarves and Gardiner laughingly says, "It's a real luxury for me to wear my own artwork around my neck. I love making beautiful things and get so much pleasure out of them." And I suspect that anyone who sees her textiles, whether hung on the wall or draped round the neck, will get an equal amount of pleasure from these wonderful creations.

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