A woman with dark hair tied back, wearing a light-colored long-sleeved shirt and a patterned scarf, is seated at a wooden table. She is operating a white Bernina sewing machine, which is decorated with various colorful patches, including a Union Jack and a red heart. She is stitching a large, vibrant quilt with a complex, multi-colored pattern. The background is a dark, cluttered room with various items hanging on the wall.

'I can drive my sewing machine like an Aston Martin,' says Louise Gardiner of the Bernina she uses for her free-machine embroidery

# AN ITCH TO STITCH

*Louise Gardiner is on a mission to make people notice machine embroidery. With her boundary busting pieces, she's well on her way to doing so*

FEATURE **CLARE GOGERTY**  
PHOTOGRAPHS **ANDREW MONTGOMERY**



**O**n a wall in Louise Gardiner's studio in Styal, Cheshire, is a large typographic poster. Hand-drawn, it is jam-packed with arrows and thought bubbles that spiral and spin and interconnect.

Words and phrases such as 'super stitchers', 'tease', 'sew disco' and, mysteriously, 'houmous' are written in various sizes and styles. What's that all about? 'It's a brainstorm, a disco blanket,' says Louise with a hearty laugh. 'A concoction of ideas about what it means to be a contemporary embroidery artist. It's how I view myself. I hope it doesn't reveal too much!'

What it does reveal is that here is an artist who is playful as well as accomplished. Her work, which has evolved over the years from the figurative to the more conceptual, is packed with vibrant colour, wild imaginings, witty ideas and layers of exquisite detail. One thing it never is, is dull. Much like Louise herself.

Louise grew up on the family farm in Cheshire, where she learnt a lot about hard graft but little about sewing. 'Mum made a few samplers but that was it,' she says. 'All I made at school was an apron. Drawing and drama were my things.' After school she did a foundation course at Manchester Metropolitan University, followed by a degree in textiles at Goldsmiths in London and an MA in illustration back in Manchester. After a few years running a studio in Bristol, she returned to the farm.

Her roomy studio, filled with bolts of fabric, sketches and mood boards, is in one of the outbuildings, and she has plans to turn a barn into an exhibition space. She also helps look after the herd of Hereford cows. 'Coming from Oak Farm has provided me with a unique set of circumstances,' she says. 'The work ethic of my family is strong, and I need that because I have chosen a medium that is physically demanding. You end up with arthritis in your joints from grappling with fabric and snipping thread.'

### SPREADING THE WORD

Despite the painful process, Louise is evangelical about embroidery. Tired of it being considered less significant than fine art and drawing, if it is considered seriously at all, she is determined to spread the word through workshops and, most importantly, through her work.

'Bloody hell!' she says thumping the table in mock rage. 'Someone notice embroidery! It's really popular – so ➤



**ABOVE** Louise layers thread, appliqué, ink and paint on to her pieces, which are rich with texture and colour

**LEFT** The penultimate panel in her series *You Blow Me Away*, which she created for COLLECT at the Saatchi Gallery in London. It uses tumbleweed as an analogy for the creative process

**BELOW** Her embroidery designs are printed on to fabric to make desirable cushions





*'I want to push the boundaries of embroidery and I'm mad about colour and materials'*

many people are taking it up. Textiles and fabric and thread and beading: all of that is so therapeutic and so beautiful.' Nowhere is the beauty of her embroidery more evident than in *You Blow Me Away*, a series of five panels she made for COLLECT: The International Art Fair for Contemporary Objects at the Saatchi Gallery in 2012. Using the life cycle of tumbleweed as an analogy for the creative process, it records the brittle plant snapping free at its roots then rolling and tumbling, gathering more objects and more energy as it does so, until it becomes a living thing once more. Each panel is increasingly layered with stitching, appliqué, paint and beads until the final panel is encrusted, glittering and gorgeous.

'I really wanted to highlight the beauty of embroidery,' says Louise. 'So in this series it was important to use the techniques to the best of my ability. It was all-singing, all-dancing. The last panel even had bells on it. I want to push the boundaries of embroidery and I'm mad about colour and materials. I use a lot of bright colours, a lot of neon. Currently I'm experimenting with embellishing pink leather.'

All the panels of *You Blow Me Away*, except one, which has pride of place in her studio, were bought by collectors and are now scattered across the globe. Louise works mainly to commission, for private clients and organisations – she has done nine pieces for hospitals. 'I have a few people who really support me and collect my work,' she says.

## CREATIVE MOJO

Louise brings her enthusiasm for the medium – as well as her love of drama – to her Super Stitcher and Disco Stitcher workshops, held in the 18th-century Quarry Bank Mill, a National Trust property down the road in Styal. Promising to 'bring the rock 'n' roll back into stitch', they have gained a reputation as a lively and creative way to spend a couple of days. 'A lot of people arrive terrified and go away thrilled with what they've achieved,' she says. 'It's not about embroidery, it's about rediscovering your creative mojo. I want to encourage



**ABOVE** Louise's trusty Bernina sewing machine in her studio in Styal, Cheshire

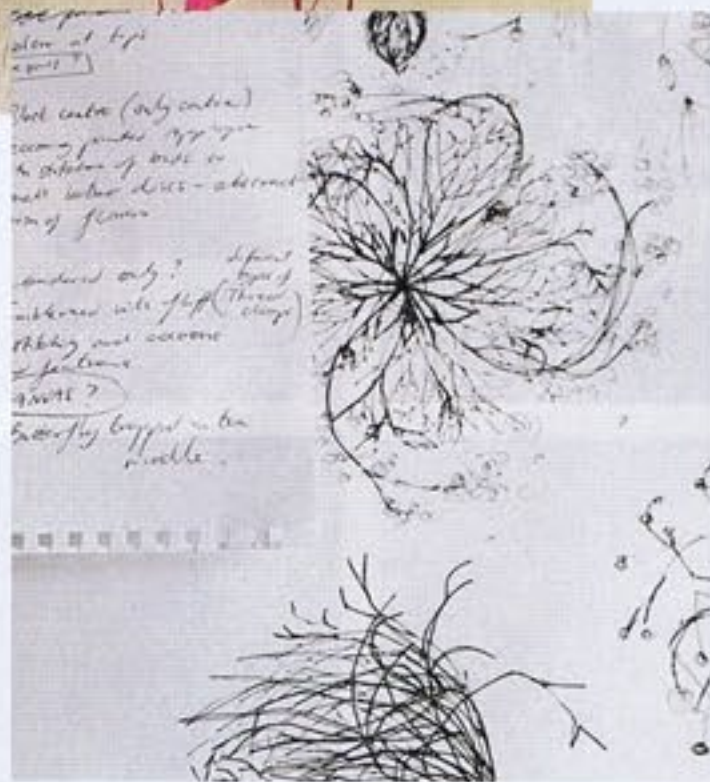
**RIGHT** One of Louise's crêpe de Chine scarves printed with her design *Because I Love You*

**BELOW** A detail from the *You Blow Me Away* series shows the amount of detail in her work. 'It's ridiculous the amount of layering I do,' she says





**BELOW** Spools of cotton in the studio. 'I use a lot of bright colours and a lot of neon,' she says



'Louise combines hand-drawn skill with intricate, free-machine stitches, paints, appliqué and inks. Despite using complex, labour-intensive processes, her pieces never feel over-worked. There's a spontaneous aesthetic and spirited quality to her work. Her piece *You Blow Me Away* made for COLLECT in 2012 conveyed tangible momentum and echoed Louise's personal journey of creating - over many months - work for such a prestigious event. Never did an artist's work so closely reflect their personality than with Louise. One of the joys of collecting contemporary craft is the possibility of starting a relationship with the artist. This makes collecting her work an irresistible prospect.'

