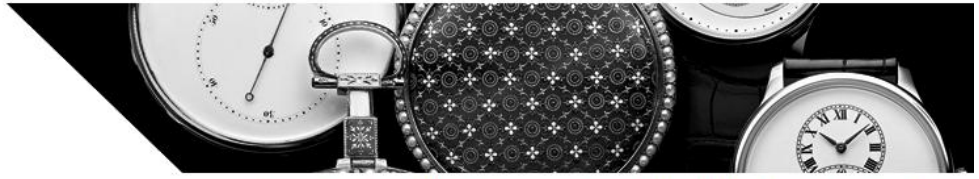


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Cool threads

Artists and designers are using traditional embroidery to make strong, subversive statements



The Callas



Tracey Emin's first major retrospective at London's Hayward Gallery is certainly a can't-miss but it's not the magnificent wall of neons or the pathos-filled wooden hut that resonate most. The double hung appliqué and embroidered blankets could host an exhibition all of their own, so striking, compelling and intricate are they, while Emin's masturbating figures rendered in painstaking embroidery demand close-quarters inspection. These crafting techniques have always been present in Emin's work, a recurring contradiction between the fast and furious messaging (howling spelling mistakes, confrontational swear words) and labour-intensive delivery. Yet they also demonstrate a wider interest in crafts that for a long time were seen as demeaning, genteel or decidedly old fashioned.

The recession-ravaged years have given rise to a renewed love for the hand made and traditionally crafted with sew-your-own circles satisfying both creative and social urges. Emin admits that she doesn't have time to do all her own needlework and relies on six sewers to pick up the slack but "I envy them. I see them all sitting giggling and sewing and having a nice time." The latest subversive spin on stitching has artists and designers referencing pop art and pop culture with spirited, graphic results. Olympia Le Tan's book-shaped minaudieres are sold at Browns and Colette and take their inspiration from classic book covers, which are playfully recreated, in felt appliqué and hand embroidery. "I like the idea that these graphic and kind of modern designs are being transformed into hand embroidered felt and silk thread embroideries, as if a granny was giving her interpretation of them," says Le Tan, whose forthcoming collection is a statement on the modern day housewife who cooks and sews yet also works and values her independence. The irony of thoroughly modern women like Le Tan undertaking the most passive of pastimes is of course all part of the appeal. Danish artist Inge Jacobsen caused a stir recently when her cross-stitched Vogue covers went viral. Created as a commentary on mass imagery, by stitching directly onto the pages of Vogue, she slows down the consumption process, simultaneously creating a unique, handmade piece of art. "The thread is appropriate because cross-stitching has in the past largely been viewed as a feminine craft and pastime," says Jacobsen, "this is my way of connecting the old with the new, the glamorous and the slightly less glamorous interests of women."

Meanwhile, multi-media artists The Callas' punk approach beautifully marries old technique with riotous graphics. On display at Ντέφι Humanism (Dirty Humanism), a show of Greek art

at London's Faggionato Fine Art Gallery, their embroidered canvases display potty-mouthed wordplay amongst dazzling fluoro flashes. "For The Callas, embroidery is another way to subvert the well known art languages and create new, strange vernaculars which can better express 'a revolution of the everyday'", says curator Nadja Argyropoulou. "It's about folk craft and mama-made objects infused with wild club flyer iconography. It speaks with humour and tenderness about the most basic needs and organic processes of creation and communication."

The very act of embroidery in modern society can be seen as a rebellion in itself, a thumbed nose to today's go-faster, always-on digital culture. "People are always really surprised when they look at the book clutches, they imagine how much time I must have spent doing it and how crazy I am to spend so much time doing something like that," says Olympia Le Tan. And yet the precise process of hand embroidery can also be a meditative response to the information overload of technology, a welcome focus on something tangible and tactile. "I love making things, using my hands. It's my therapy. I'm a bit of an anxious person and I use it to calm myself," she adds.

by Navaz Batliwalla

Tracey Emin: Love is What You Want / www.loveiswhatyouwant.com
 Olympia Le Tan / www.olympialetan.com
 Inge Jacobsen / www.ingejacobsen.com
 Ντέγι Humanism / www.faggionato.com

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