

Threads THAT BIND

There is an innate connection between embroidery and feminism.

Needlework has traditionally been viewed as domestic work, a hobby for 'idle' women. But a wave of artists is reclaiming the skill as a tool through which they can talk about sex, gender, and womanhood.



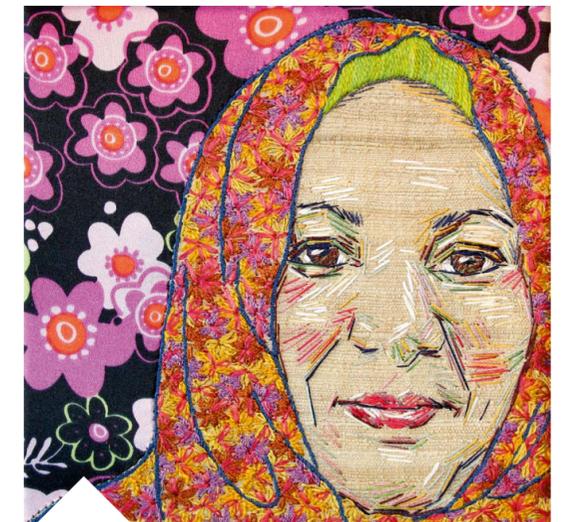
SUMAKSHI SINGH

"Making art has been a way for me to process the big questions—those about death, beauty, femininity, the various planes of perception, and the nature of memory. Given the existential and often metaphysical nature of these inquiries, I choose to work with very repetitive, slow, meditative techniques—like threadwork or painting miniatures—that calm my mind and allow me to sink into my subconscious to more peacefully, slowly, process these thoughts.

My mother (an accomplished embroiderer and gardener among other things) passed away in 2013. As a way of reconnecting with her, I began to embroider the words from her letters to 'secure' them. You can erase a drawing but an embroidered image is tied to the fabric. Ironically her words seemed to protest this 'clinging'. It felt like they wanted to levitate. I devised a way to remove the fabric until just the floating words remained, ephemeral and ghost-like. I then began embroidering the flowers and plants from her garden, which were pressed in letters and sent to me. The result was almost an archive of my engagement with the poetic, the feminine, and the inner landscape of memory."

A graduate of MS University, Baroda, New Delhi-based Singh's artworks have been presented in solo and curated group shows at venues like Saatchi Gallery, London, Kochi-Muziris Biennale, Kochi, and Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. She has been working with embroidery since the early 2000s, both as a form of embellishment and as a medium in itself.

A portrait from the Aleppo series



SUSIE VICKERY



IMAGES COURTESY: SUMAKSHI SINGH; SUSIE VICKERY.

"Embroidery is an intimate, tactile craft with infinite possibilities. It is also a medium that extends across most cultures. Because of its 'homely' reputation it can be an unthreatening medium, one which an average viewer might find more approachable. This is a portrait of a Syrian refugee with whom I worked in Istanbul. Women are often tasked with the preservation of the traditions of their society, particularly in dress and behaviour. When they move to a new country or society, this becomes especially important. But their lack of access often means they are also hampered in their ability to blend into their new home. The floral hijab plus the floral background is about the challenges they now face to blend in and adapt, chameleon-like.

I also wanted to question our response as outsiders and non-Muslims to women wearing the hijab. I wanted to emphasise the women's personalities, rather than their religion."

Over the last 20 years, Vickery has built her expertise in fine art embroidery and development work. A former costumier for theatre and film, she works with communities in India, Nepal, Turkey, Tibet, and Myanmar in rural and refugee development through handicraft and art. ►



L I P I K A B H A R G A V A

“This work, titled *Contemplation*, is about a moment of self-realisation, of realising that the threads of self-loathing and the simultaneous dissection of one’s own body are both tied together. Talking about these personal experiences through crochet and embroidery allows me to situate myself in the long history of feminist artistic practices. It is through this willing submission to the durational and repetitive labour of these craft forms that I can also join the struggles of other women. The work then becomes mini chapters of revolt against the backdrop of a long history of subjugation of desires and expectation by society to stay in a passive state.”

A former intern of artist Mithu Sen, Bhargava uses embroidery and crochet to dissect sexual dynamics and assigned gender roles. She recently showcased at The Irregulars Art Fair and is currently working at Shrine Empire Gallery, New Delhi.



(Far right) *Contemplation* displayed as part of a series titled *Dilemma*

(From left) The works *Cactits* and *Red*



S A R A H N A Q V I

“With every stitch, I hope that I can challenge common misconceptions of embroidery as ‘women’s work’ and show how much strength and voice each piece can carry. The pieces titled *Cactits* and *Red* are both products of sheer frustration, and comment on the hypocrisy of a misogynistic and capitalism-driven society feeding on our weakest points.

Red addresses the fact that the bare minimum efforts are being made to put an end to the taboos surrounding menstruation. Rather, counterproductive acts such as promoting periods as matters of secrecy in the media, increasing taxes on products of personal hygiene when they should be distributed for free, and ridiculing the importance of an inclusive sex education class in schools are seeing more frequency.

We’ve come such a long way to still be bound by oppressive and vile social norms that don’t let women express and experience their bodies to their fullest. I’m a strong supporter of the Free the Nipple campaign and *Cactits* was driven by the idea. I try to do my part by making work that raises these issues and, if nothing, brings them back on a pedestal for debate.”

A textile design student at NID, Ahmedabad, Naqvi gained acclaim for her popular Instagram account (@naqvi_sarah), which features images of the female body in all its various forms. ►



IMAGES COURTESY, LIPIKA BHARGAVA; SARAH NAQVI.



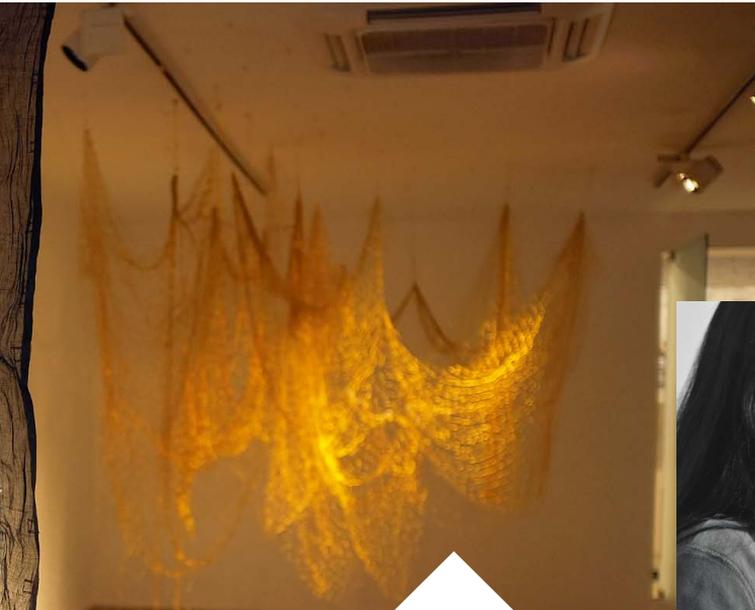
SMRITI DIXIT

“There are many reasons why I chose to work with embroidery. One is that the raw material was always readily available at home. The other is its flexibility. Another reason is the inherent feminine and human quality of it. Thread ages—it changes shape, colour, and texture and it can mould itself to the body.”

In my works, I gather found objects and I sew them into the thread. It almost creates a patchwork, a portrait, of my life. Here I have gathered objects that I found in the market outside a temple and the colour reminds me of the *puja*.

There are two approaches to feminism. One is to stridently try and place men and women together and say we are the same. The other is to believe that women should have the freedom to have children, cook for their families or sew, but know that it doesn't make them any less valuable. Even in the art world, embroidery is viewed as a craft and it's not highly valued in the market. I'm often told I should switch to painting. Working with embroidery started as an accident, a convenient way of stilling my mind, but it has quickly become my way of rebelling against these diktats.”

Artist Smriti Dixit's large-scale, abstract, mixed media works deal with concepts of recycling and renewal. She has showcased her work at Triveni Gallery, Delhi and Art Musings, Mumbai, among others, and has even designed threaded jewellery, which she showed at Lakmé Fashion Week Summer/Resort 2017.



Manifesto on display at Exhibit 320



YASMIN JAHAN NUPUR

“Titled *Manifesto*, this piece was part of my most recent show at Exhibit 320, New Delhi. I first wove jamdani cloth and then embroidered on it in a style called the borat stitch, where every part of the surface gets covered in thread. One side almost looks like stone while the threads at the back are loose and seem to come out of the fabric.”

Embroidery creates a very intimate relationship between human bodies and cloth. I work closely with local weavers and craftspeople, and I wanted this piece to highlight the intense labour that goes into each piece. By hanging it from the ceiling, it's no longer just cloth, it's a work of art, and in that way I hope to elevate it. I might not be able to change society as a whole, but I can make a difference to the life of the young woman who made this.”

Nupur completed her MFA in paintings from Chittagong University in Bangladesh. Her practice includes installations and performances, and in 2010 she won the International Arts Residency by the Commonwealth Foundation. ■

Detail of an untitled textile piece by Dixit

