

# ORLY COGAN

TEXTILE ARTIST | NEW YORK



Afternoon Lovin', 2019, 44IN x 56IN

## HOUSE OF THEODORA CHATS TO ARTIST ORLY COGAN



Schieles Flower Basket

### **How did you come to be interested in embroidery and what were your earliest influences?**

For the first twelve years of my education, I attended a Waldorf/Rudolf Steiner School where the arts and music were given the same level of importance as the academics. I learned various fibre based craft techniques there from a young age such as knitting, crochet, hand sewing, felting etc. And, there, I felt a sense of freedom to explore different materials and got comfortable using my hands to create things and express myself visually. Growing older, I was given great opportunities to travel within Europe, the Middle East and Southeast Asia, all of whom have rich traditions of textile art, tapestries, and embroidery. My home was filled with paintings, Persian rugs, antique quilts and embroidered folk samplers.

In high school I loved looking at romantic paintings that portrayed goddesses and gods, like in Botticelli and Rubens for example. Later I became interested in the line work of (Egon) [Schiele](#) and (Gustav) [Klimt](#). I was so taken with the whimsy and guile and the unexpected scenarios in (Hieronymus) [Bosch's](#) and (William) [Blake's](#) work. Then in college I was introduced to more modern and contemporary art.

About a year after graduation from art school I attended a one-day traditional quilt square workshop at the then Folk Art Museum, New York; I took my mother's place last minute as she couldn't attend. There I stitched between the seams a little nude figure. All the embroidery work I had seen had a prudish granny feel and I wanted to add something different and contemporary that I connected to. The senior women in that class were a bit shocked and yet inspired by my stitched nude on the traditional quilt square. Sexuality and embroidery rarely intersected at that time.

After that I started working on small embroideries while still focusing on big painting. This was the time in my life where I transitioned with my thinking regarding materials. I started thinking more about traditional ‘woman’s work’ and also looking at what some artists were doing during the coming of age in the 70’s. While nude figures have been drawn since the days of cave paintings and religious art, an embroidered nude seemed a lot more scandalous than a painted one, so I was excited to explore this further and started doing more research into fibre work and feminism. This was back in the mid nineties. Back then, I knew very few artists working with craft-based materials.

### **What’s your artistic process?**

Over the years I’ve accumulated quite a collection of fabrics and vintage pieces. I sort them into bins according to size, print, plain, patterned, etc.

I often start out with the existing fabric as my foundation and then build the story from there, but sometimes I have an idea and then go searching for the right materials, pinning together bits and pieces of fabrics, embroideries and appliqué. I studied painting and learned traditional drawing so I think of my techniques more as drawing with thread really.

If my concept is fully formed, I figure out how to go about translating it into a visual language using symbolism to move the narrative along. In many of my works, characters simultaneously act as subject and object. The actors are present in the way a child perceives the world — wholehearted, engaged, uninhibited, and reliant on the senses. In some pieces smaller figures are intertwined among the larger, encircling the protagonist. The age and scale of each figure vary, creating a kind of hierarchy that hints at a state of constant flux between each character’s assertive and passive roles.

Since the stitched line is staccato, I veil paint layers that give movement and a dreamy quality. I hand embroider using a hoop in my lap, working each area slowly. Throughout the process, I pin the piece up to the wall to see how it is coming along from a distance and then, many times, I will go back into it. Since my background is in painting, this was my process for when I would do detailed work – close-up painting and then stepping back and away from the piece for a while before taking the next step. I haven’t actually learned any particular stitch work techniques. I like to figure it out as I go using thread just like I would any other art material; I work intuitively. I love mixing various sensibilities within the work – like loose stitches that feel more like a sketch drawing or thick dense areas of threads that become more sculptural, to fine thin layering of the simple running stitch that creates perspective and gives the feeling of familiarity and naiveté.















**It's an interesting time to be a woman in the arts. In the past few years, what has had the greatest impact on your work?**

I began thinking more about becoming intimately connected with what I was making, and how that connected to my life and what I was most interested in: relationships, dichotomies and my own emotional experience as time goes on. I became less hesitant about creating more vulnerable work and including my daughter and political views. I'm glad for the 'Me Too' movement because I think the power of a collective voice of women speaking out against what had become a common experience was about time and finally gained notice and consideration.

**It is quite something to be bringing up children during these times. In your artist statement you ask: who are our role models? What does being a role model mean to you?**

In my work I'm often either drawing attention to an issue where I see inadequacies or areas I'm unhappy about or fantasies I'm imagining and highlighting of how I'd like things to be. Other times I'm being ironic or cheeky, visually pointing out contradictions. I also examine vulnerability and the public/private voyeur aspects of society and moments of pure dreamy surrealism where you have to discover your own narrative as you look longer and more imagery is revealed.

Trying to be a role model as a parent is another matter and a tall order at that. Modelling feminist thought and raising them free of religious indoctrination, sexism, anti-semitism, racism, etc would be a good start in my opinion. Trying to model positive thoughts and actions, fairness and empathy towards animals, mother earth and one another would be my ideal.



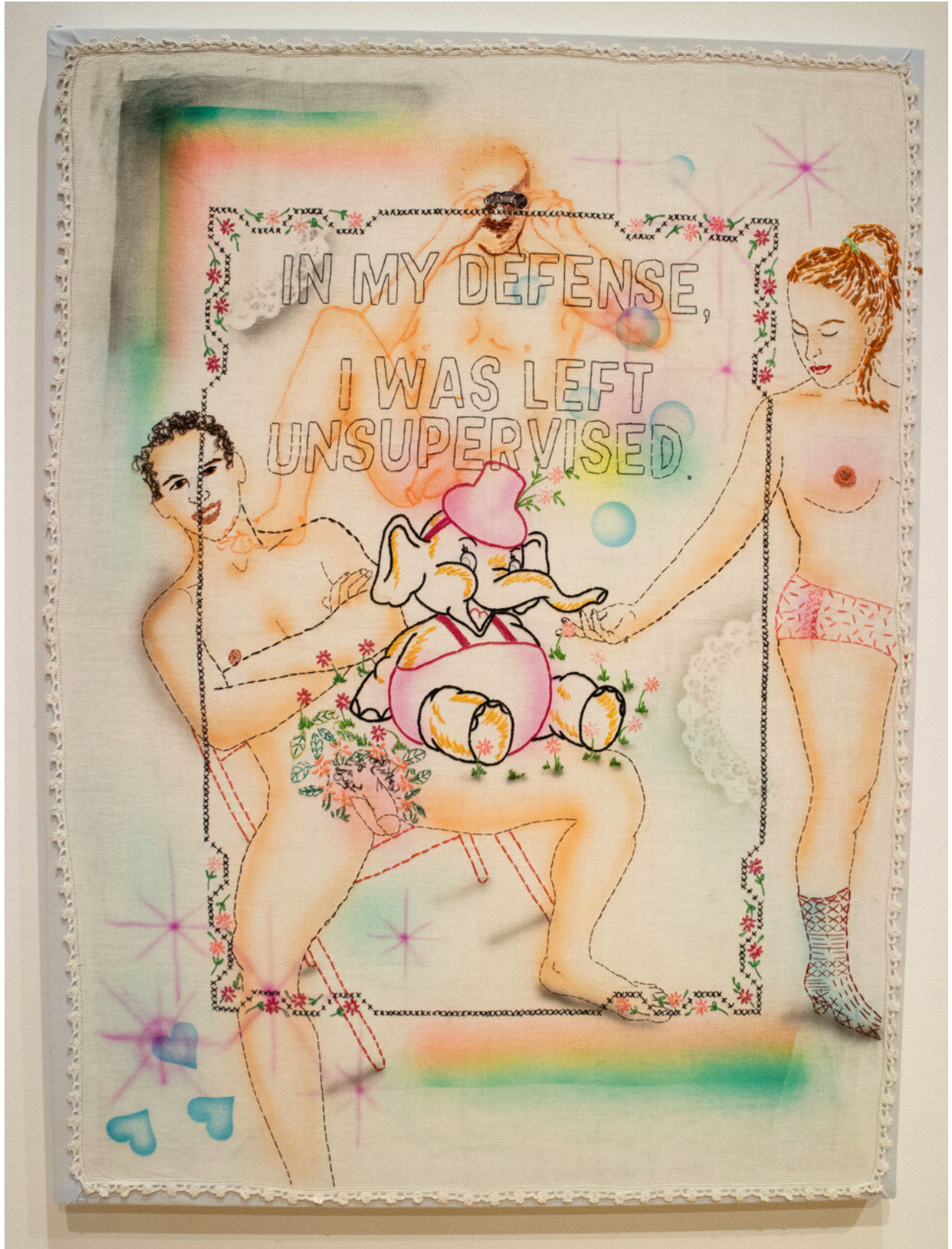
Liana Horovitz writes about my piece titled **Power of Women: POW (2018), hand-stitched embroidery, appliqué, and paint on vintage bed linen 84 x 72 inches** ‘Cogan’s feminist fairytale weaves fictional characters such as Cinderella, Snow White, Princess Leia and Wonder Woman with real-life activist superheroes Harriet Tubman, Ruth Bader Ginsberg, Frida Kahlo, Stacey Abrams, Dr. Christine Blasey Ford, and Anita Hill among others who have resisted and confronted patriarchy and racism. In the background a faceless woman politely drinks her cup of tea, a young girl covers her eyes with her hands, and another child unabashed by her nakedness, defiantly extends her fist to the audience. These juxtaposed female archetypes highlight the mixed messages of who our female role models really are. Cogan’s delicate detailed stitching is laced with powerful messages: *Me, Too, but not you, my child*. The inclusion of a child perched in front of a laptop computer begs the question: How are young women receiving their messages regarding self-worth today? Has social media done more harm or good?’”

### **What is your experience as an artist and mother during this period of a global pandemic?**

Over this year, we have all experienced so much. Quarantining wasn’t so hard at first as I’m an only child and grew up spending plenty of time alone and as an artist I spend plenty of solitary time in my studio but after so long I do yearn for a community and miss socialising and dressing up. I see now more than ever how important having those connections is so vital and when things get back to whatever version of normal will be I hope to reconnect with old friends and acquaintances and form new relationships and entertain studio visits.

Now my little nuclear family has settled into a routine of being more flexible and rolling with uncertainty and unplanned future near and far. My daughter, Viva, now understands that every day that she’s scheduled to have in-person schooling could change at the last minute and the school will close and she will have to work remotely from home. She has developed a different kind of self-sufficiency with her mostly online schooling this year.

I wonder about how this will impact all the school age children socially as time goes on. I’m grateful the vaccine is here and that our new administration has taken a positive turn but there is still much to do to make things better. I felt a heaviness over the past years that has now been lightened which is a relief. Politically there were so many simultaneous contradictory moments that I found myself at times feeling paralysed and not being able to make much art and other times completely driven and focused. My time these days is very fragmented but I’m trying to make the best of it.



Up Close And Personal, Orly Cogan





Mystery, 2019

**If we were a cicada on the wall of your studio, what would we see and hear?**

You'd probably be seeing me working on a drawing on a long rectangular table. Or maybe working on one of the studio walls, a thread drawing installation where I incorporate a variety of mixed media elements with a more abstraction sensibility. Lately I've been bringing home most of my fibre work since my daughter is at home more. Right now, honestly, my studio is in a bit of disarray, filled with frames and stretcher bars, a couch with piles of knotted up threads and trimmings all over the place. Many bins with linens and other fabrics in various stages of incompleteness. Various odds and ends of collage elements on the desk, piles of drawings on all different sizes of paper, paints, brushes, drawing materials all spread out on the floor with table, bookshelves with reference books, art history books, old black and white photographs, vintage Playboy magazines, medical and botanical drawing books, art books and children's picture books. Various props I use as drawing references, like puppets, old toys, silk flowers and many stretched, framed and loose completed works of art also fill my studio. You'd probably hear either an audio book or some program on National Public Radio. Sometimes I also listen to music but mostly talk.

**What is the biggest inspiration for your work?**

That's a hard question. I don't think I can say one biggest, it's more of an accumulation of years of various combined influences that has gone into developing my style on a more intuitive level. My natural story book illustrational way of constructing visual dialogues between my subjects



comes from my own childhood sensibility growing up and looking at art books and mythology. Subject matter wise, my influences are what's going on around me personally and in popular culture. I also seek out bits of poetry or prose that I connect with. Here's one I recently saw for example that seems poignant for right now ...

'Highly sensitive people are too often perceived as weak. To feel intensely is not a symptom of weakness, it is the trademark of the truly alive and compassionate. It is not the empath who is broken, it is society that has become dysfunctional and emotionally disabled. There is no shame in expressing your authentic feelings. Those who are at times described as being a 'hot mess' or having 'too many issues' are the very fabric of what keeps the dream alive for a more caring, humane world. Never be ashamed to let your tears shine a light in this world.' — Anthon St. Maarten

**If you could invite 5 people, living or passed, to dine with you, who would they be?**

Oh my goodness, there are many but here are 5 dead ones that first come to mind: Sigmund Freud, Jesus Christ, Marylyn Monroe, Anne Frank and my grandmother, Cecile Paris Cogan before she developed Alzheimer's.

All the living people I can think of I've already done research on and so that's why I selected all decided ones because a lot of what we know of them is finite or hearsay. This would give me an opportunity to see for myself









Born in Israel, Orly Cogan was educated at The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art in NYC and The Maryland Institute College of Art. Cogan has been exhibiting her work throughout the US and in Europe for over two decades. Her intricate designs tell stories of power and innocence and struggle and joy. Her creations have shone in notable museum and university exhibitions and galleries. Recently her work has been selected by Pulitzer prize winning art critic, Jerry Saltz, for the book 'The New American Paintings'.