

# INTERLOCUTOR

May 25

## ORLY COGAN

*Visual Artists, Multidisciplinary Artists*



*Orly Cogan lives in New York City. She was born in Israel, raised in New York and graduated from the Maryland Institute College of Art and The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art. She has been exhibiting her work throughout the U.S. and in Europe for over two decades and has been at the forefront of the fiber arts movement with an emphasis on feminism in contemporary art.*

*Cogan has been included in a number of notable national and international museum and university exhibitions including the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art (Conn.), the Museum of Arts & Design (N.Y.) (which holds her work in its permanent collection), the M.I.T. collection, Riverside (Cal.) Museum, the Hudson River Museum (N.Y.), the Textile Museum of Toronto, Canada (with Judy Chicago), the Brattleboro (Vt.) Museum, San Jose (Cal.) Museum of Quilts & Textiles, Woodson Art Museum (Wausau, Wisc.), Fresno (Cal.) Metropolitan Museum, the Musee International Des Arts Modeste (Sete, France), the Rijswijk Textile Biennial in the Museum Rijswijk (Netherlands) and the Museum of Decorative Arts and Design (Oslo, Norway), as well as other prestigious institutions. Cogan's work is found in various public and private*

*collections, and she has curated several acclaimed group exhibitions in New York City as well as showing in various commercial galleries.*

*Cogan's work has been published in several books and museum catalogues. Her reviews are included in (partial list) the New York Times, New American Paintings, The Chicago Sun Times, the Los Angeles Times, The Reader, NY Press, Art Press Magazine, W Magazine, Elle, Fiber Arts, Textile Plus, Surface Design, Art In America, Tema Celeste, Interior Design, Art Press, Art News, Chronogram, Upstate House, Time Out Chicago, Time Out New York, the American Art Collector and Art Forum.*

*Orly currently has two pieces on display at New York City's Untitled Space group show "UNRAVELED: Confronting the Fabric of Fiber Art," now on display through May 28, 2021.*

Interview by **Tyler Nesler**

**You use vintage embroideries and fabrics as a base for your works. What initially gave you the idea to take what some would merely see as old utilitarian objects and repurpose them into something fresh and unexpected?**

I began thinking a lot 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, pop culture, art history, poetry, psychology and my own emotional personal experience.

I became less hesitant about creating more vulnerable work and it developed from small whimsical erotic playful figures into strong feminist narratives with historical and contemporary commentary.

Initially when I started figurative embroidering I was making small nudes and interspersing them in unexpected Bosch-like scenarios dotted amongst repetitive patterned fabric or upholstery fabric — almost hidden at times throughout the printed designs. The materials often used for curtains or seat cushions always seemed so formal to me and I liked the juxtaposition of creating fantasy worlds with my lilliputian-like figures in surprising incongruous scenes. It felt like I was mixing my contemporary sense of humor with a sort of formal design history which played out in the visual narratives. It felt a little like I was doing an inappropriate act by using traditional materials to say something kinky but keeping an element of innocence with the basic line stitch.

My mother and grandmother collected quilts and samplers. Vintage embroidered pieces with little sayings on them or cute animal patters for a baby's room and days of the week dish towels, etc. Instead of always filling in my figures with thick thread making them dense so they wouldn't get lost among the patters of the existing cloth I decided to try a lighter touch with the line work and thought of it more like drawing with threads and layering of intersecting imagery on quieter backgrounds. I moved on and played with figure size. Conceptually as my fiber work developed I liked using old pieces that had a history to them and continuing on with the story.

**When you repurpose these objects you have said that you act as a "collaborator" with their original creators. Could you elaborate on what this means to you on a personal level? Are you in a sense communicating with the original and now voiceless creators of these materials?**

Yes! And sometimes I have an idea of a story I want to tell and I look for a piece that helps me illustrate that in some way. Other times the imagery I create just grows out of the piece and other times I just find a beautifully embroidered bit that I want to build my scene around, integrate the work perfectly so you can't tell where the original work begins and mine ends. Often I work in a round robin story line format, much like the old paintings depicting time passing or a kind of symmetry using the golden triangle. I work mostly intuitively and many of the narratives have hidden visual symbols that have meaning to me but that may not always be evident to the viewer right away. Ideally the longer you linger the more you see and the more your imagination works with the imagery.

**Many of your works are tableau-like in a style that reminds me of classic "tableau vivant" paintings, yet the content is thoroughly modern in its depictions of frivolity, intimacy, flirtation, and vulnerability. Is this style meant to be a kind of ironic contrast to the more classical arrangements of religious events, battles, and so on that are often seen in old masterworks?**

Yes, it's all that! I majored in painting in art school and spent many summers as a teenager living in Italy where I had the opportunity to study old masters. My narratives tell stories using visual symbols that often have more than one reference to fairy tales or biblical stories. Some objects for me have several meanings — for example, sweets. Sometimes they are used as code for indulgence and decadence, other times they are portraying guilt or obsession, body image, self-confidence, and laissez-faire, or the opposite depending on the context within the realm of each piece. Same with drugs, I use it as visual language for temptation, obsession, addiction, or losing yourself in the desire to find another world. This is featured in the big piece I have in the UNRAVELED group show, for example ["Nature's Secret"].

**Tell us a little about the pieces that you currently have up for the "UNRAVELED" group show at New York's Untitled Space. Why did you choose them and how do you believe they fit into the show's theme of showing "figurative and abstract works that address our lived experience and history through the lens of women weaving, knotting, twining, plaiting, coiling, pleating, lashing, and interlacing"?**

I didn't select the pieces which are included in this exhibition. I offered several available works and the curator [Indira Cesarine] looked through my website and Instagram and asked me if these two pieces were available. I suspect she wanted to have a wide variety of techniques and concepts while the medium unifying the exhibition.

I'm participating in this exhibition with two pieces:

**“Nature’s Secret”** — it’s a queen-size piece with twenty-some odd figures, thirteen animals and many other whimsical elements, all hand stitched. It’s a contemporary mythological tale of the complexity of relationships, whimsy and the magical spells of love and longing. It’s a mysterious piece that references other stories. There’s a hint of Narnia, a Frog prince element and a sprinkle of pixie dust! My quest is to tell fantastical stories through symbols of cultural expression with today’s brand of American confessionism, where many of my heroes linger between a public and private realm mixed with yesteryear’s kitschy conservatism.

**“Alice In Blunderland”** — [this] is actually a transitional piece where you can see the small erotic bacchanalian figures frolicking around the heroine of the piece, a dreamy carefree Alice not seemingly noticing all the mayhem around her. Are there are fairies only the viewer can see, perhaps.

There is a sex-positive feminist imagery running rampant in this piece where polar bears pleasure women and small nudes frolic in nature, using outsized penises as playthings or adornments. It looks at the world like a children's book centerfold. The central figure is smoking (much like the caterpillar was in the original story), while there is a girl child Alice straining to see over a tabletop precipice separating her from adult pleasures. The drawings snap to 2D from a certain distance, but, upon closer examination, one begins to see wrinkles and thread textures.

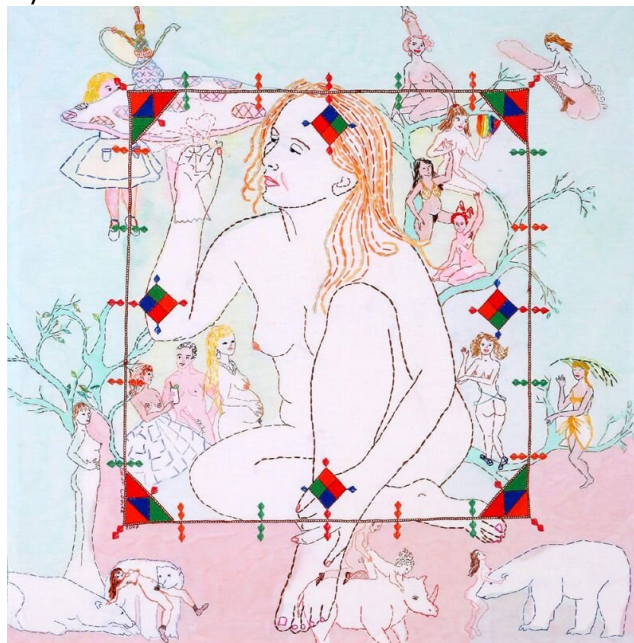


***“Nature’s Secret,” hand-stitched embroidery and paint on vintage linen - 80in x 83in***





“Nature’s Secret” (details)



“Alice in Blunderland,” hand-stitched embroidery and paint on vintage linen, 37in x 32in

How did you initially train as an artist and how did fiber art come to be your primary medium?

I studied painting in art school as I mentioned earlier but came to focus more on fiber-based materials as I continued to develop the concepts I was most interested in and link them to the history and materials of feminism and woman’s work. I started working on small embroideries for myself while still focusing on painting. Whilst 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 nude, so I was excited to explore this further.

To me it all works together seamlessly!

I'm reclaiming a historic womanly past time in the name of feminism — redefining female self-expression by incorporating similar techniques, I draw a direct connection to the forgotten women who decorated and/or used the pieces of fabric that I have appropriated. There is a rich history that I am playing upon and continuing the journey in art and female expression. Embroidery itself is intrinsically intimate and naturally takes time to create with every stitch being deliberate [done] by hand held in my lap.

The history of women using embroidery to learn, decorate, socialize, tell stories, beautify their homes, earn money from the skill and so on is a long labor of love and tradition. The tone of my work celebrates contemporary women's role in society, confidently redefining the realms of housework, gender roles, feminine sexuality and power. Working with fiber-based materials in contemporary art now has become popular and accepted among contemporary galleries but wasn't so accepted when I been working in this way some twenty-odd years ago.

**What is the usual process for you from start to finish when you create a piece? How do you source the fabrics and how long is the process of hand stitching new forms onto them? What are some advantages and also some challenges with this process?**

My mother has a great eye and has sourced many linens for me over the years at antique stores, flea markets and estate sales. Sometimes friends or collectors send me pieces to work with and I have also created personal commission pieces on family heirlooms.

The composition and themes of each piece I often pre-visualize, although it often changes along the way once I get working. I usually will map things out on paper doing drawing from life, looking at book illustrations and from photos I take. I group together bits and pieces of printed fabric I may cut out that will help tell the story I'm hoping to convey.

Once the piece is somewhat drawn out on the fabric I then begin the laborious task of hand stitching. I sit and work with a hoop in my hands with needle and thread the "old school" way. Some areas are dense with thick thread and layers, others with thin lines to show distance. Usually the final stage is painting stains to define various figures or showing movement and flow against the staccato embroidered line. I go back and forth pinning the pieces up and seeing how they look from a distance as a whole and then back to my lap for close up work. The pieces, if very large, hang loose on dowls — others are stretched or framed. The advantages I find is that I can take my work with me and ship it overseas unframed easily and the pieces can be mounted once they arrive at their perspective new homes or exhibitions with little shipping cost. The challenges is how long each piece takes, but that is what makes them so unique and special at the same time! Finding good representation, sales and exhibition opportunities are always challenging I think, for many artists.

**You've said that you are "drawn to the space between dichotomies such as soft and tough, dirty and clean, fantasy and reality, especially as related to gender." Would you say that**

**women, in particular, have to find ways to deal with more extreme dichotomies than men do? And how do you try to capture the essence of those elusive "in-between" spaces?**

Below is a quote that describes aspects of what you're asking about in my work very well. I often am far more comfortable making art and speaking through visual language rather than talking/typing about it.

"Cogan's use of vintage fabrics, outdated but not beyond our recent memories, incites memories. Like a mother's apron and linens, or a green and brown, leaf-patterned tablecloth that we sat at refusing to eat our peas, we are already both attracted and repelled. By layering these scenes of sexual delight and unnoticed horror, Cogan seems to propose that these elements are ever-present, then and now, hidden by veils as thin as these. Cogan eroticizes the very nature of linens and the act of sewing. Rather than simply reusing a previous generation's products for mere commentary, she respects them, using them like two-way mirrors into the like-minded fantasies of competing generations." -Michael Kiser

Also here is a link to an online exhibition up now through September [at Wagner College] with text about particular pieces.

*"UNRAVELED: Confronting the Fabric of Fiber Art," is now display at NYC's Untitled Space through May 28, 2021.*

**View more of Orly's work on her site and Instagram.**

**Also check out our recent interview with another UNRAVELED show participant, Linda Friedman Schmidt.**

*Tyler Nesler is a New York City-based freelance writer and the Founder and Managing Editor of INTERLOCUTOR Magazine.*