

Future Heirlooms – Orly Cogan

Posted on 2 June 2010 by Joetta

Today's Future Heirlooms interview is with the incredibly talented artist Orly Cogan. You kind of have to have been living under a rock to not know her gorgeous layered figurative embroideries. Orly lets us into her practice and inspiration in this interview and gives us a nice long list of artists that inspire her, some good names to look up. When I first saw Orly's work at the incredible exhibit, Pricked: Extreme Embroidery at the Museum of Arts and Design in NY I immediately loved and related to it- we both are connected to and use found vintage linens and work autobiographically. It took me a few years to further research her work but the more I did the more I enjoyed it. And now we have even more in common being new mama's to some adorable babies. I am lucky enough to know Orly and am excited to watch how motherhood will affect her work and practice- as well as my own



Where do you live? Does this affect your work?

I live in Manhattan, NYC. I'm not sure that living in this city effects my work exactly – more just the experience as a product of American culture and the influence of pop culture in the media that surround me.



How did you first begin to use embroidery as your medium? Are you self taught or formally trained?

I went to art school (The Cooper Union For the Advancement of Science and Art and The Maryland Institute College of Art). I majored in painting. I never formally learned embroidery but went to The Rudolf Steiner Waldorf School from 2nd through 12 grades. There I learned many different handicrafts from a very young age. I don't think not having formal classes in needlework has made a difference in my work. It's not really about the technique of stitches anyway. I enjoy the creativity of making up my stitches or just keeping it simple since the drawings and concepts are so full.

Art was highly regarded in my household. My mother collected Folk Art, antique quilts and vintage samplers. Having that sensibility and sense of style was probably what gave me a natural leaning to being drawn to using fiber based material in my work. It took me some time to evolve to finding my media of choice though and I'm still mixing things up- also using collage, drawing, sculptural elements, photography, and installation in my latest pieces.



Often your work includes imagery of yourself and your loved ones – Can you talk about how the work is and is not autobiographical?

It's sort of a combination. I like having portraits of people that are in my life- it's a way to keep them close to me while I'm alone all day. It's also always a challenge get ones likeness and I enjoy it when you can recognize yourself in a piece of art. It's like your image might one day becomes a little piece of art history. It's a kind of public intimacy. Much like an album on a Facebook site. You can almost create a character for yourself or it can simply be documentation of true moments you want to share. The characters in my work sometimes play themselves and other times are just playing a role within the story line world of the piece. I also like using reoccurring characters in different pieces so the viewer becomes familiar with them, a similar experience we have with celebrities.

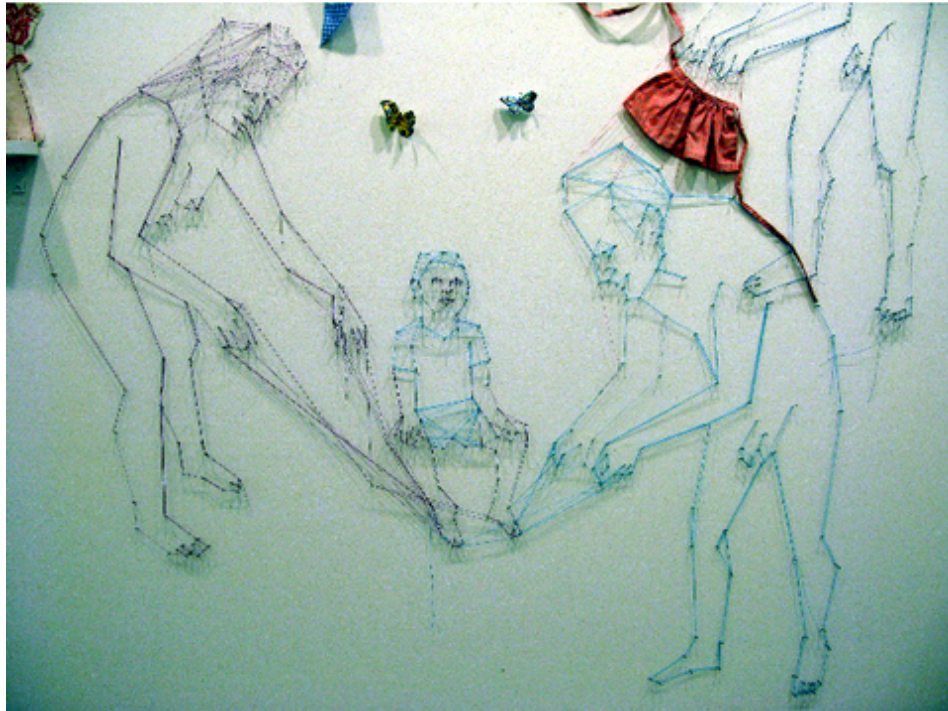
There is an element of fantasy in your work and your use of composition can you discuss what importance this has to your work?

I mix fantasy and reality embroidered in an illustrative style that is reminiscent of children's story books mixed with a sprinkle of romance novel. Often the format is in a round robin fashion, much like the early paintings depicting the story of Christ. Sometimes I like to use a long narrow format, alla Darger. In general, I tend to be drawn to a kind of symmetry and triangle shape with a denser lower half leading to a lighter quality towards the top. That has just evolved more intuitively I think or maybe it comes from my early formal education with life drawing in Italy.



How does the practice of embroidery affect the conceptual aspect of your work?

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. The personal tableaux that play across these quilts, table runners, and doilies illustrate different elements of contemporary identity. They ask questions about relationships, sources of emotional sustenance, and feminine archetypes. The juxtaposition of vintage feminine and contemporary feminist is a rich contrast that gives the work much of its energy. The choice of using embroidery and the concepts for my work go hand in hand. Embroidery itself is intrinsically intimate and naturally takes time to create with every stitch being deliberate. 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. I'm continuing to build on this history by respecting what was before me, collaborating and continuing to reinvent and contemporarize the act of making art using crafty materials.



How has your work evolved since you first began working with embroidery?

When I first started using embroidery in my art work, it was mostly small densely embroidered figures I made up frolicking on printed fabrics. The lilliputian like characters played off the patterns and interacted with the printed imagery. Some of these earlier works you can view on my website. As the work evolved my techniques and concepts became more in depth. I began drawing larger scale figures, portraiture of actual people I knew that interacted with the small figures and animals. My technique evolved with overlapping line work, applique, more complex compositions, and mythological symbolism to help convey narratives. Conceptually the work started to become more self aware and have a feminist slant with the use of vintage materials that had their own history to build upon.

You have begun to expand into installation, thread drawings, and soft sculpture how has this changed your work?

The installations came about as a natural evolution of wanting to expand beyond the square or circular picture plane. They are more open and airy – breaking free of the traditional format's boundaries. Thread and pin drawings directly created on the wall meander throughout a space. The shadows they create are a big part of the piece and the outcome is reminiscent of constellations. Figures gather like gods and goddesses in a flower filled celestial-like realm. The characters simultaneously embrace and ignore each other to their own liking. The age and scale of each woman varies, creating a seemingly randomized hierarchy that hints at a state of constant flux between each woman's assertive and passive roles. There are flat embroidered runners that connect to bits and pieces of lace and crochet, spools of thread sit on small shelves with strings

dangling down as angular figures emerge out of tangles. I play with abstraction as the figures sprawl over and around the architectural elements of the space. A variety of media is employed such as buttons, doll heads, hooks, hoops, old hankies, aprons, cut paper drawings, and even objects I create out of thread and felt. I'm interested in creating an environment where the viewer can walk through and enter into this magical world. In a way these installations are a metaphor for how fragile life is. With just one tug of a thread, the whole piece will unravel. These installations can never be duplicated and will only live on in the photographic documentation.



Describe your studio and studio practice. Are your images free hand drawn or from sources?

I can describe my studio and how I worked before I had my baby, Viva. I had a great studio space in a building shared by other artists. I went to the studio every day. This past summer I left that studio space since we had moved and it was too far from our new apartment and with the preparation of a baby on the way, it wasn't financially prudent to keep such a big space. My images are drawn from many different resources. Mostly from my imagination, images I find in books, ads and from photos I take. I also collect props that I draw from at times. All my work is done by myself by hand. First the plan then the drawing, stitching and applique, and finally the painting. Since Viva's arrival, everything has changed regarding my "studio practice".

Honestly, at the moment I'm in the process of transition . I'm now working on figuring out how my time, space, and art will evolve while I tend to my greatest new creation that is my daughter.

What is the next direction or step for your work?

Since my work is naturally semi- autobiographical , I suspect once there is time to process my experiences of change during this year, my baby may be appearing in some new pieces. I would really love to create more site specific mixed media installations in general. I would like to expand on that concept by having the opportunity to really branch out with materials and imagery in a large space and build a whole environment in a room.

You have been working in embroidery for quite awhile and have seen the rise of interest and popularity in it as an art form, what is your opinion on its growth of popularity, especially amongst younger female artists? Are there any other artists that work in embroidery that you are particularly fond of?

I have been using thread in my work and exhibiting fabric pieces for over a decade now. When I started, there were very few of my contemporaries working with embroidery in their art. I've seen a definite rise in popularity for this media as you say. Many artists become inspired by others and jumped on the fiber arts bandwagon. I attribute it to several things. To name a few – the whole DIY movement has become trendy with television shows. Also there has been renewed appreciation for the handmade in general. Even within fashion, there is a style of shabby chic for example Anthropology and Urban Outfitters are two big retailers that have brought the crafty, cool, country look into an urban sensibility. There are also several craft and design museums that are receiving great press from powerful new exhibitions with artists working with fiber based materials.

There are a number of my contemporaries whose work I admire, to name just a few, Loren Schwerd, Mandy Greer, Tilleke Schwarz, Andrea Dezso, Kate Kretz, Liza Lou, Wendy Huhn, and Annette Messenger. Some are also men in fact, Nick Cave, Mark Newport, David Cole and Michael Brennan-Wood among others.

Where can we see your work? links, websites, galleries, shops, etc.

My website is www.orlycogan.com. I also have some art albums on FaceBook. Currently you can see my work in person in two simultaneous solo exhibitions in the US. My Instagram handle is @orlycogan.