HYPERALLERGIC

The Feminist Revival of Embroidery

Once denounced as “women’s work” with no artistic merit, embroidery is experiencing a revival, with a feminist punch.

by Stefanie Graf

Hannah Hill, “Sex-Worker Still Life” (2020) (courtesy and © Hannah ‘Hanecdote’ Hill)

The stereotypical image of obedient housewives doing needlework is rooted in the reality of many historical women. Embroidery became almost synonymous with a domestic and delicate depiction of womanhood. It was not only seen as a feminine activity but also considered a mindless hobby and not art. Despite the lack of appreciation for a medium that is often viewed as “women’s work,” contemporary female artists like Judy Chicago, Orly Cogan, and Hanecdote use embroidery to create fine art with a feminist message.

The attempt to elevate embroidery to the ranks of fine art goes back to the Arts and Crafts movement of the 19th century. Advocates of the movement felt that handicrafts should have the same prestigious status as fine art. It was when only paintings, sculptures, and architecture created by men were considered "real art" and women artists and embroidery were viewed as irrelevant. The Arts and Crafts movement encouraged women and non-professionals to create designs that challenged the male-dominated and exclusive art world. May Morris — who was the daughter of William Morris, an important figure of the movement — was a skillful embroiderer and pioneering feminist figure but she never received the same recognition as her father because of her gender.

May Morris, detail of the panels "Spring and Summer" and "Autumn and Winter" (c. 1895-1900), silk embroidery (photograph by mia! via Flickr)

Because women were not allowed to join the Art Worker's Guild — which was integral to the Arts and Crafts movement — May Morris co-founded the Women's Guild of Arts in 1907 with Mary Elizabeth Turner. While her designs did not specifically feature feminist messages, Morris's pathbreaking role as a professional female embroiderer and her other achievements challenged sexist institutional structures and paved the way for other women working with the medium.

Despite these efforts, the medium was still often seen as women's work devoid of artistic merit. It also was not a popular medium for feminist artists who wanted to disassociate themselves from the oppressive past linked to handicrafts. If as Simone de Beauvoir wrote, "One is not born but becomes a woman", embroidery is arguably one of the things that make you "become" a woman in the eyes of society. When feminist artists like Chicago use embroidery, they do not disagree with this narrative of a traditionally female medium, but rather embrace it. Early in her career, Chicago tried to avoid the incorporation of "women's work" in her art due to its pejorative connotation but that changed with works like her 1979 *Dinner Party,* which honors the medium as a valid art form.

Detail of Judy Chicago's "The Dinner Party" (1974-79), ceramic, porcelain, and textile, 576 x 576 inches (photo Mark B. Schlemmer via Flickr)

Years later, it seems that an increasing number of female artists use embroidery to convey feminist ideas despite or maybe even because of its past. A medium that was so clearly denounced as women's work and therefore avoided by many artists in fear of being viewed as "feminine" and "irrelevant" is currently experiencing a revival.

The contemporary artist Orly Cogan uses vintage embroideries created by women from previous generations and turns them into a "foundation for a fantastical exploration" by altering them. Her works examine stereotypical depictions of women such as the femme fatale archetype or the Madonna-whore dichotomy. The artist aims to overcome these stereotypes while still honoring women and their work from past eras.

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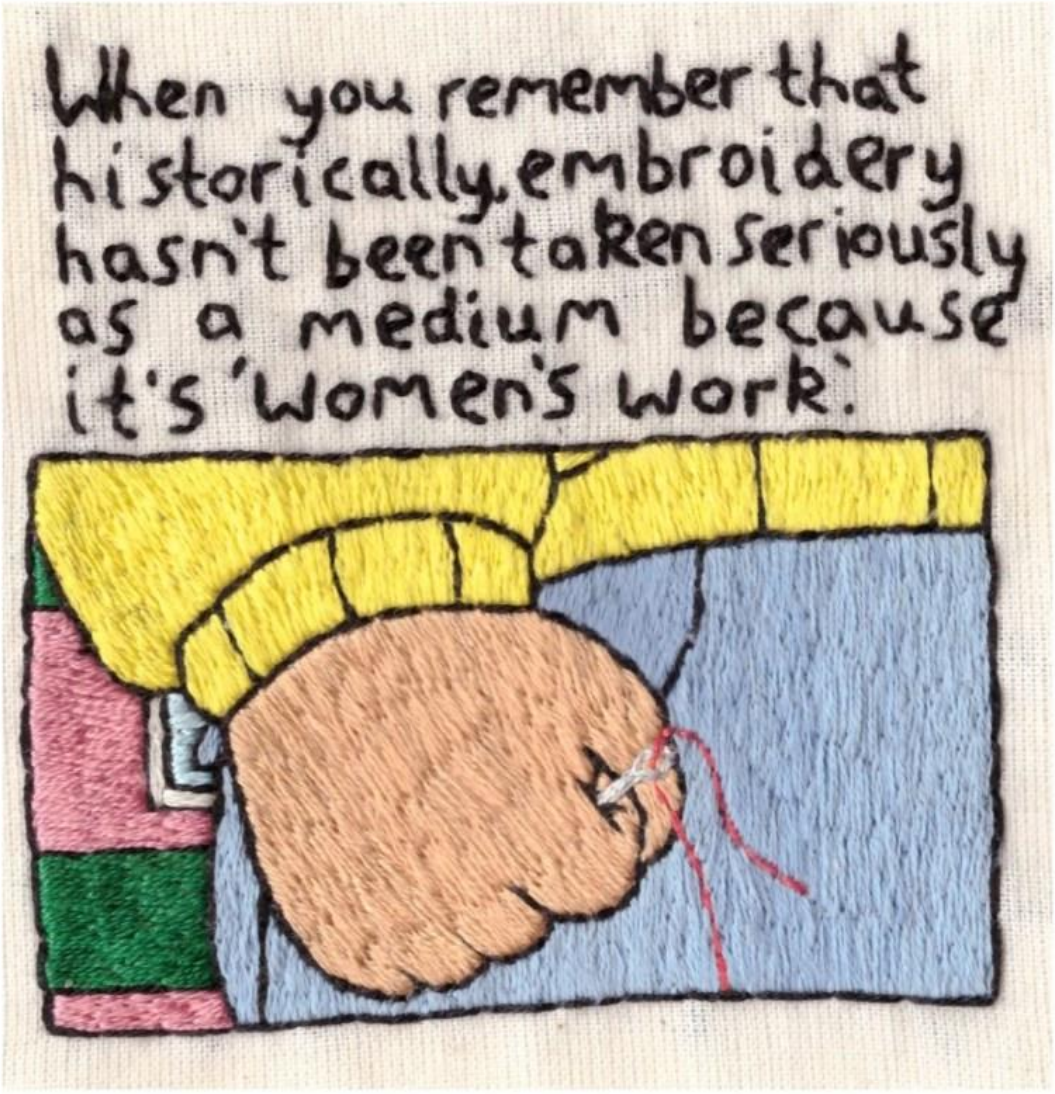
Orly Cogan, “Searching For My Prince” (2007), hand-stitched embroidery, appliqué, and paint on vintage print table linen, 68 x 51 inches (image courtesy the artist)

Another contemporary artist who uses embroidery as a feminist medium is Hannah Hill, also known as Hanecdote. Her work addresses the exclusion of embroidery from the art canon while exploring themes such as gender, feminism, and the stigmatization of sex workers. One of Hanecdote's works references the past of the medium by using a meme of the cartoon character Arthur angrily clenching his fist. Above it, a text reads: "When you remember that historically, embroidery hasn't been taken seriously as a medium because it's women's work."



Hannah Hill, "Arthur Meme" (2016) (courtesy and © Hannah 'Hanecdote' Hill)

It seems that these artists do not want to eradicate the past of the medium and contribute to the narrative that women's work is bad work. Instead, they reclaim embroidery as an inherently feminist medium. Their work has ties to so many historical women who used embroidery as an art form or as a way of self-expression.

These artists reference the historical tradition of the medium as women's work and turn it into something new. Their approach seems similar to movements like the *écriture feminine* ("women's writing") which strived for a new way of expression beyond the male-centered literary tradition. One important figure of the movement is the philosopher Luce Irigaray. Her words also offer a possible explanation for the transformation of embroidery into a feminist medium. "If we continue to speak this sameness, if we speak to each other as men have spoken for centuries, as they taught us to speak, we will fail each other," she writes in her 1980 essay "When Our Lips Speak Together," adding, "Words will pass through our bodies, above our heads, disappear, make us disappear."

This quote has already served as an inspiration for the feminist artist Jenny Saville who attempted "to paint the female" in her work instead of writing it, which was the goal of the *écriture feminine*. By taking on a language or medium that deviates from a masculine and male-centered narrative, women artists are able to reclaim but also retain the feminine identity of embroidery. It allows them to tell stories about female archetypes and to overcome them, advocate for the better treatment of sex workers, and honor a medium that was used by so many women before them.