

Interview with Carmen Mardonez for the Textile Art Magazine

Where did you grow up and where do you live now?

I grew up in Santiago de Chile in South America. Almost 10 years ago, my husband started a PhD in Los Angeles, CA, and that's the reason we moved out of Chile, with our newborn. In 2023, we moved to Oxford, UK, where we currently live.

How did you learn sewing, knitting, and embroidery as a child?

When I was a child, I attended a catholic school just for girls, run by nuns. Actually, we were supposed to learn German there (which I didn't do very well). At around 10 years old or maybe a bit younger, I started to learn how to sew, knit, embroidering, cooking, etc. They never told us why we were doing this, but in retrospective, it was obvious what "future" they were preparing us for. We were knitting newborn jerseys, embroidering towels and dresses for babies, kitchen aprons, and things like that. They were not creative classes or a space where you could learn a technique and use it for whatever you want.

How did embroidery become a way for you to resist the expectations placed on you?

As I mentioned, at school I learned traditional stitching. So, I wouldn't say it was really something I enjoyed. I remember how, if I messed up one of the stitches on the cross-stitch pattern, my teachers would make me start over. It was all about the technique and the finish of the piece.

When I came back to hand embroidery, in 2015, I was already kind of a rebel. I was a black sheep in a conservative family. That year, I was writing my master's thesis on community psychology, and at the same time working a full-time job, so I was exhausted and looking for opportunities to feed my creative side. In the middle of this process, I met Victor Espinoza, a Chilean textile artist, doing amazing freestyle hand embroidery. He showed me his techniques and some of his work. I got a lot of inspiration from this and started to explore my own creative ways with embroidery. In 2017, when I found myself in Los Angeles with a newborn, far from family and my previous job, I decided to become a full-time artist. Having become a mother, all the embroidery memories from school came to mind, but instead of knitting newborn jerseys, I used the needle to create my own path and reclaim a space for myself.

In your work, how do you "deconstruct" traditional embroidery?

The first thing is that the technique itself is not "traditional" embroidery. In my work, I use freestyle stitches, usually very long and wild threads; there is no regularity or symmetry that you would usually encounter in traditional embroidery. But I think the more important "deconstruction" that I practice in my work is the use of embroidery itself; I do it not for practical

purpose, or in my “role” as a mother or wife, to make objects for my house or my son; I am making art for its own sake, for my own sake, I embroider simply because it makes me happy and it gives me pleasure.

Why is color and texture/relief more important than copying realistic images in your art?

I guess it started for practical reasons. If I wanted to succeed as an artist, to be able to create and build a body of work, I needed to be good at what I was doing, and “efficient” in the sense of getting the most out of the time I could dedicate to embroidering. So, I knew realism was not my forte, and I also knew I had to work most of the time with my son around, and he would be pulling my threads and tangling my colors. On the other hand, I was good with colors, playing with different palettes and textures. Very intuitively I started transitioning into wilder, bigger, and bolder styles, as I discovered what I could do with the threads. I was making art in my living room, using every minute available in my day, and it didn’t matter anymore if my son was walking around and playing with my threads.

What made you shift your materials from classic canvas to discarded objects like old t-shirts or lemon bags?

From the very beginning I started using discarded textiles on my pieces. Textile waste has always been a concern for me, so every time that I could I re-used materials. It was during the Covid lockdown that I started doing it more systematically, using discarded bedsheets and pillows. At that time, I ran out of fabric and because of the lockdown I couldn't go out to buy them, so I decided to use some old family bed sheets. During that time, I started exploring with the pillows and 3D work. Still in lockdown, when I ran out of my own bed sheets, I asked my neighbors, and when I saw the good response, I decided that it was possible to move from buying new fabrics to just work on discarded bedsheets and pillows. Since then, I never went back to buying canvas. Some people ask me why I don't use other discarded fabrics, but I really like the size of the bed sheets, and even more, the intimacy of embroidering on bed linen. Bed sheets are also something I was supposed to properly embroidery and “decorate” as a good woman and wife, so here I am, trying to resignify it.