

Interview with the Italian textile artist Ilaria Margutti for the Textile Art Magazine

1 — Where did you grow up, and where do you live now?

I was born in Modena, in Emilia-Romagna, and grew up between Umbria and Tuscany. I studied in Florence, where I received my artistic training. Today I live and work in Sansepolcro, a small Tuscan town on the border with Umbria, known as the birthplace of Piero della Francesca, one of the most important painters of the Renaissance. Here I pursue my artistic research and teach Drawing and Art History at a science-oriented high school.

2 — Do you have an artistic education?

Yes, I studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Florence, where I graduated in 1997. My academic training was primarily in painting, but over the years it has expanded through an ongoing personal practice and my encounter with different languages and materials.

3 — How did you transition from expressionist painting to making embroidery the central part of your work?

The transition was not sudden. In 2007, while my work was still rooted in an expressionist approach to painting, I met Rosalba Pepi, a master embroiderer who recognised in my paintings something that could move beyond painting itself. She welcomed me and guided me into the language of thread, teaching me the first steps of embroidery. I chose to learn from her because I immediately felt a profound trust in her and, little by little, I began to explore the themes of my work solely through needle and thread. In 2008, I created my first embroidered works, brought together in the series *Mend of Me*, which explored feminine identity, reconstruction and rebirth. From that moment onwards, embroidery gradually became the central language of my artistic research.

4 — What does embroidery symbolise for you in your exploration of the feminine and identity?

For me, embroidery enacts the feminine—not as a quality belonging exclusively to women, but as a way of knowing rooted in relation rather than separation, in vulnerability rather than domination, and in embodied experience rather than an abstract and detached gaze.

To embroider is to bring the body into a precise relationship with matter and time. Each stitch is a choice, a passage through and a connection. Even when the thought is already defined before the gesture begins, it continues to evolve as the hand works. Slowness and repetition open up a space of listening in which form can emerge without being entirely foreseen.

Thread connects distant points, but it also leaves behind knots, tensions and hidden passages. For this reason, identity in my work is never something self-contained, compact or definitive, but a weave composed of relationships, memory, absences and possibilities. Every thread belongs to a larger whole, and every gesture, however small, alters the overall form. It is in this sense that thread holds the possibility of the event.

5 — Why do you view embroidery as a form of resistance and transformation?

I consider embroidery a form of resistance because it introduces a slow, persistent and non-productive form of time into a society that demands speed, efficiency and immediate results. It is a silent resistance, enacted through attention and repetition. I also bring into the space of contemporary art a language that was long confined to the domestic sphere and treated as subordinate, affirming instead its capacity to generate thought and knowledge.

Embroidery is also a form of transformation because, in order to create a form, the needle must first pass through and open the surface. The thread does not erase the wound; it takes it into itself and makes it part of a new configuration. Mending, therefore, does not mean restoring what existed before. Its task is to hold fragments together without concealing their fractures, and to generate a new possibility from them. During this process, it is not only the material that is transformed: the person carrying out the gesture changes as well. I, too, change as I follow the rhythm of what is coming into being.

6 — Your figures often hold a needle. What does this gesture represent to you?

Those female figures belong to an early phase of my research dating back almost twenty years. The needle they held was a tool of awareness and self-determination. Through it, the figures seemed able to act upon their own form, mend fragments of their existence and redefine the boundaries of their identity. The needle held a dual possibility: it could wound and, at the same time, join together what had been separated. It therefore represented the responsibility of participating in the construction of one's own identity without concealing its fractures.

Today, this way of representing identity is no longer directly part of my practice, but it was a necessary passage towards my current research. What at the time was primarily concerned with the reconstruction of the self gradually opened out towards a relationship with the world and with the urgent historical, political and ecological questions of our time. My research now asks how the feminine might rediscover its connection with the structures of nature and the cosmos through listening, waiting, generativity and an awareness of cycles.

It is an attempt to bring back to light a feminine that has long been erased from history and subordinated to the logic of power and domination—the same logic that has separated human beings from nature. For this reason, I observe the natural world and the cosmos, as well as the work of the women scientists who have helped us understand them, revealing the profound relationships connecting the different structures of reality. The needle is no longer in the hands of my figures, but the gesture of mending remains. It seeks to reunite what dominant thought has separated: the body from knowledge, human beings from nature, and the terrestrial world from the celestial.

7 — What do empty spaces and presences reveal about the visible and the invisible in your work?

The void is a concrete presence because it is created by the cuts and openings made in the canvas, which sometimes surround the figures and at other times seem to pass through their bodies. I see these openings as breaths: spaces in which form is interrupted, allowing infinite possibilities—forms of rebirth—to emerge.

I imagined them as akin to the vacuum described by quantum physics: a field teeming with energy and possible generative events. In the same way, my figures, traversed by these voids, are not closed and separate bodies, but permeable presences in a continuous relationship with everything around them. The visible is not opposed to the invisible; it emerges from it and holds within itself everything that remains unexpressed.

8 — Where do you see yourself and your art in about ten years' time?

In ten years, I hope I will still be able to surprise myself. I do not know whether embroidery will remain my central language or take on different forms, but I would like to preserve what it has taught me, so that I may continue to think through relation, slowness, listening and waiting.

Rather than imagining a final destination, I hope that the question guiding my work today will continue to expand: how can my work help reopen a space for listening to the relationship between human beings, nature and the cosmos?