

HARRIET RIDDELL

Born in UK. Lives and works in Hampshire, England.

“I love to work from life. My work is about immediacy, spontaneity, adventure, interaction and gaining trust and acceptance with all audiences. I love working from life because the subject matter is real, true and present in the world. I like to celebrate the mundane to the extraordinary.”[...]

ARTWORKS



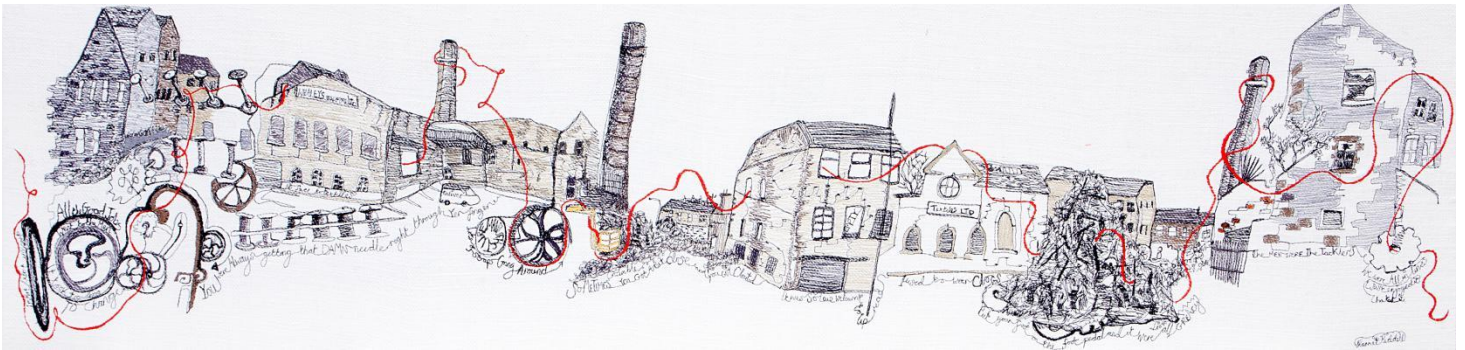
The Proud Daughter, 2020, machine stitched with applique,
80 x 70 cm



Mindy and Margaret, 2020, Machine stitched with applique,
57 x 80 cm



**San Matteo, 2020, Machine stitched,
115 x 47 cm**



Memories of the Mills, 2020, machine stitched with applique,
37 x 160 cm



Band practise, 2021, machine stitched with applique
52,5 x 64,5 cm



Stay at home, 2021, machine stitched with applique
65 x 66 cm



Stand behind the yellow line, 2021, machine stitched with applique
174 x 80 cm

Interview Harriet Riddell and Lorenzo Bruni for C + N Canepaneri

Lorenzo Bruni: I would like to start our conversation by asking you a question about how your works are born. Particular works in which you use the sewing technique with which you represent the relationship between the person portrayed and the place where you portray it, but also between you who portray it and the subject you portray. Your work sessions are always characterized by your impromptu questions about his life and which lead to enriching the work and experience.

Harriet Riddell: My work is about immediacy, spontaneity, adventure, interaction and gaining trust and acceptance with all audiences. I love working from life because the subject matter is real, true and present in the world. I like to celebrate the mundane to the extraordinary.

LB: So, your particular working method comes from the fact that you want to create not only a portrait of the person but of the moment in which he opens up to a dialogue. Thus, you reveal an intimate dimension of the other. For this reason, you have chosen the sewing technique which, not being an artistic technique in the historical sense, eliminates the idea of authority and judgment on the part of the artist with respect to the subject portrayed?

HR: Yes, that's exactly right. When stitching portraits, I like to speak with my subject, this does put them at ease, they become natural and feel themselves, this is important as this is what I am trying to capture. I listen to their story and intertwine words and symbols which respond to what they have told me, I find the experience can be very intimate and it's interesting what people choose to tell me when they are given the time and space to speak about themselves. I also like to work quickly when stitching portraits. 30 - 45 minutes usually. I think people are very busy and to be able to capture them efficiently is important.

LB: yours, however, is a particular sewing. it is not the hand sewing of the archaic tradition but a sewing linked to the industrialized world. Why do you use this sewing machine?

HR: I love using a sewing machine as an artistic tool because no matter where you are in the world, people feel affiliated with the sewing machine, it conjures memories of mothers, fathers, grandmothers, grandfathers and their own carers. The sewing machine is a tool which can represent sweatshops, a hard life, restrictions and mundane tasks, it can also represent creativity, necessity, functionality, freedom and expression. I love how the sewing machine connects to people.

LB: Can you tell me about some of your portrait/works? You can describe some of those that will be on show in Milan.

HR: Several pieces from the exhibition were created in my local laundrette. I have always enjoyed a laundrette, something about arriving with dirty textiles and leaving with folded clean clothes is very satisfying. The situation is a perfect stitching spot. As people sit and wait for their clothes to wash, they have a small window in a hectic life to do nothing, just be, or read or on their phones. This is just long enough for me to capture them 'waiting'.

LB: How do you choose the people to portray? When do you understand that a work is finished? Examples?

HR: My work started in the life drawing room. Stitching naked models who stand very still for all to draw them. This is an excellent environment to practise drawing, however I feel at the end, you have captured a person being very still. I love to portray people doing something, an activity they enjoy, or a skill they know well. It might be just waiting, or sewing, or dancing. I love capturing movement: this can be challenging with stitch and one must work very fast. Sometimes the person walks away, which forces a new outcome to the art.

LB: What has been responsible for your portrait/works is that the context in which the encounter takes place is always present. It is never an aseptic space or your studio but are squares, landscapes, factories. How does the relationship with environments, factories and landscapes develop? Is there a difference in your way of working between the two subjects?

HR: When working in the environment you are portraying you learn about the space and this experience can be fed directly into the work. By drawing with a sewing machine in public spaces, people are less intimidated than the use of a camera or paint brush. The subjects may not even know you are drawing them. They expect you to be fixing the curtains! When you show them you have stitched them, they are usually pleasantly surprised. I love this. I also use a bicycle when working in environments without electricity. People ride the bicycle which powers the sewing machine. I think this collaboration and bringing the audience into the art in a literal sense is very beautiful. The cyclist then feels a deeper connection with the art and feels as though they also made the work. I usually celebrate the pedallers in the work by incorporating something they have told me about the space we are in. I can quickly learn of new destinations by listening to the local people who ride the bicycle. I like how the artwork acts as a tool of communication. Even in hostile environments, once they see how I have responded to the surroundings, mostly people welcome me and the atmosphere changes completely.

LB: Do you recover this free sewing to connect with a female tradition for too long relegated to the world of everyday life and the home and that's it?

HR: In our culture a sewing machine can be considered a very feminine tool, and, in the past, it was a tool for the 'good housewife', who makes and mends clothes for their families in between house work and cooking. I like to use a sewing machine to contrast these ideals and kick back against these traditional values. Traveling with my sewing machine, table, chair, fabrics, batteries and sometimes bicycle is no easy task. It's very heavy, cumbersome and requires patience and strength. Taking my kit to challenging places such as tops of mountains, to African slums, across India, dangerous Johannesburg parks etc. takes bravery and a trusting nature with the world. I feel that I stand up for the women around the world, to be independent, adventurous, brave and strong whilst maintaining a feminine persona.

LB: I'm very fascinated by the way you work with the sewing machine that you create performances in public spaces but without them being announced. Only actions that are not presented as works of art and that make the reaction of the public more complicit. Is this a way to reflect on the tradition of performance in art from the 70s to the present day and the use of the body by women artists? Or is it a criticism of the way social media always showcases the subject and not the dialogue between them? Is it a way to make the dreamer participate in the work and not just a subject of it?

HR: Yes, I like the quiet unannounced performance on the street and I like that it does give a nod to those artists' performance of the 70's till now. When stitching portraits, I can't help think of Marina Abramović's 'The artist is present'. I gaze at my subject over my sewing machine and encourage them to just talk about themselves. It is a celebration of 'the process' and being 'in the moment'. The work is real and not contrived.

LB: There is an artist who was important to you for your way of seeing things. Instead, which female artist of the generation previous to yours do you see similar to your work?

HR: I love Grayson Perry's work. Not a female I know. I love his use of drawing, storytelling and investigation and documentation into different social dynamics. He works on pottery and tapestry, two typical 'crafts forms' yet he has elevated these objects as an artwork. I am very inspired by him.

LB: Are these works of yours born as unique pieces that you then relate to each other within the exhibition display? Or are they born as part of a cycle with a unique theme and project?

HR: The artworks are all running along a loose theme of 'Textile' related subject. Because my work is not as simple as creating an artwork from my studio, I rely on many other factors, sometimes permission to take my machine somewhere, the weather, a power source and cooperation of the other. This can really sculpt the places I choose, or get accepted to go and stitch as it is not always in my control. I must be open to opportunity when it arrives. For this project, I approached countless places and people to stitch, but met with a lot of closed doors. With this in mind, the artworks are loosely related to each other as places people welcomed me to do my art. This has definitely made me consider how I approach people and considering in the future to collaborate with someone who gains stories professionally, like a journalist or an anthropologist, this may give more weight to my expression of interest in making a work of art on their story.

LB: Do you want to tell me about a particular work in the Milan exhibition that for you can be considered as an introduction to your exhibition?

HR: The body of art work finds its gravity in the series of pieces created in my local laundrette. (Life in the Laundrette, Life cycles, Mindy and Margarete and 25 Minutes Waiting). I like how the work captures a snapshot of mundane life in Eastleigh. From conversations, fashions and daily life. I was always welcome to bring my sewing machine into the Laundrette. It was like I fit there somehow. The local people are not so familiar with art. Some engaged with me but many ignored me, allowing me to be the fly on the wall. A contrast to Liberty London, people in London were more open to the performance, stopped to chat, watch for a while and engage with me. Over several days, I sat outside the building in mid-January, on a mission to stitch the building.

LB: We started this conversation before the global pandemic arrived. How did you go through this period and how will it affect your way of thinking about art?

HR: I guess, like us all, I am still digesting the current changes and the future is still so unsure. My work celebrates and savours freedom. Lock down took that all away from us. Despite being a challenging time, we are now in the moment to focus on the here and now because who knows what tomorrow will bring.