

A MAGAZINE ABOUT CONNECTING CULTURES AND INSPIRING ACTION.

HANDEYE

Folk Drifter

BY KEITH RECKER | AUGUST 19, 2010



COURTESY ANDREA DESZO

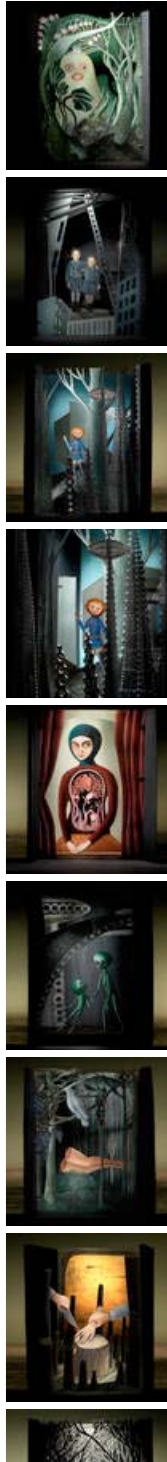
Transylvania-born artist Andrea Dezsö puts her folk toolkit to work wherever she goes

"They were trying to make me into more of a woman than I wanted to be!" says Andrea Dezsö of the home economics program all girls took in her Romanian hometown. "We dressed up in white aprons and learned embroidery and crochet and knitting. It was a long game of "pretend housewife," which started with lapwork and ended with having babies, and I hated it." Though avoidance and rebellion were her main coping mechanisms at the time, the lessons reappear in Dezsö's art, which has roots in folk-based techniques such as embroidery and paper-cutting.

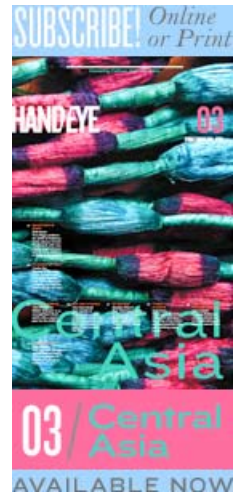
"Somehow my family was very understanding about the home economics thing, and farmed my homework out to ladies in the neighborhood so that I could pass the class. I never really learned embroidery while I was in Romania." Just after arrival in the US, however, Dezsö found herself re-investigating craft.

"With some distance from Romanian culture, the unquestioned beliefs that were part of my education started to erode. For example, I was taught that if you leave the house with wet hair, you die. Every time. Outside of Romania, I saw people walking around with wet hair and they seemed perfectly fine. This led me to wonder whether authority wasn't really closer to opinion. Once I started down this path, I began to see even science as arbitrary: what appears to be fact one day (leeches are good) turns into something else (leeches are medieval) and sometimes even comes full circle (leeches are helpful in some cases). So what I thought about health and sex and family and men and

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dating and telling the right people from the wrong ones was, well, wobbly once you took it out of context.

"I started thinking specifically about a lot of what I "knew" as the direct product not just of my culture, but of my mother's special beliefs. Also known as meshugas. We're talking about elaborate theories of space alien visitations, puppies living in human stomachs, ideas about virginity and certain kinds of underwear opening you up to deathly kidney disease, and what you should have for dinner. Don't misunderstand me: my mother is a perfectly functional, well-adjusted, successful urbanite. She just believes in her own nonsense. She makes up the rules of her own world, and lives by them."

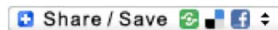
Dezso turned to the dual lenses of craft and folk tradition to focus her thoughts. Her 2003-4 series Lessons From My Mother retells the best of her mother's teachings in embroidery. (See handeyemagazine.com for a slideshow.) Why embroidery? During Dezso's childhood, Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu mandated a vast migration of country dwellers into cities. As people struggled with how to adapt the customs of country life to their new jobs and apartment complexes, "they couldn't abandon everything," says Dezso. "One thing they brought with them was quaint embroidered kitchen wall hangings. My grandmother had one that made a big impression on me: There are no roses without thorns and no love without tears. What could be truer than that? I remember others, too. Mixed in with the flowers and the cross stitch flourishes were humorous remarks about what would happen to the man of the house if he didn't hand over his paycheck on payday. Or what the wife would do if he stayed out too late and came home drunk. There was often a threat under the pretty flowers. A message. I tried to capture than in my embroidery work."

Subsequent projects involve paper cutting and the construction of pop-up books, design and installation of mosaic murals for the NYC Arts for Transit, painting and drawing, and now vitreous ceramics thanks to a fellowship at the Kohler Company's Arts/Industry residency program. "I LOVE factories. And I can work at a much larger scale than at home. And the challenge of clay is an adventure," she says of the experience. Adventure may soon push her toward a graphic novel, as well as into a paper cut animation to accompany a poem she wrote about her father's death.

Meanwhile, Dezso is looking forward to attending the opening of SLASH-Paper Under The Knife, a MAD Museum show all about work on, with and about paper. Her outfit will be red, she says. "My hair may be wet or dry."

For more of Dezso's work, visit andreadezso.com.

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