

The Curious Genius of High Art Embroidery

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Andrea Dezsö embroidered sayings picayune and punctilious—- four dozen of them—- onto white cotton squares. They're on display at the Museum of Arts and Design in Manhattan as part of an exhibition of extreme embroidery called "Pricked."

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RACHEL MARTIN, host:

So Alison, usually when you think of embroidery, you think of kind of sweet phrases stitched in pastel, things like "home sweet home," or babies' names.

ALISON STEWART, host:

My mom used to do it in the summer. She's a school teacher and she would have the summer off and she'd always take one project and make some beautiful pillow.

MARTIN: Yeah, very nice. Kind of romantic, homey things. There is an artist. She is here with us now, Andrea Deszo. She is taking embroidery in a slightly new direction, let's say. It still has that homey kind of feeling, but a little sassier, a little edgier, and a little more ironic.

STEWART: I like these phrases. That's funny.

MARTIN: She stitches sayings like these, "My mother claimed that men will like me more if I pretend to be less smart," "My mother claimed that wearing skimpy bikinis will give you a kidney cold," "My mother claimed that men have stinky feet."

STEWART: Your mother had a lot to say.

MARTIN: She had a lot to say. Andrea Deszo is in our studio. Hi, Andrea. How are you doing?

Ms. ANDREA DESZO (Assistant Director, Media Design, Parsons' The New School for Design): Hi, hi. I'm doing pretty good, thank you.

MARTIN: Thanks for coming in. We appreciate it. So you have embroidered these sayings and, like, four dozen of them onto cotton squares, and they're on display at the Museum of Arts and Design in Manhattan as part of a larger exhibition on something called "extreme embroidery." The whole exhibit is called "Pricked." And you're originally from Romania, we should say. How did you start to embroider? Who taught you how to do this craft?

Ms. DESZO: I actually taught myself. We had to embroider in middle school as part of home

economy, but I really wanted to be a feminist, so I refused to do any kind of feminine crafts. I wanted to do woodshop, but they didn't let me. So my mom and my grandmother would sew all my pieces, and I would take them to school because I refused to sew. So when I moved to America about ten years ago, I realized people here were not afraid that if they go outside with wet hair they will die, and that women sat on cold surfaces without being afraid they will catch a female cold.

MARTIN: So these were things people thought in Romania. These were common lore.

Ms. DESZO: These were things everybody believed. This is not just my mother, and a lot of these other beliefs that I grew up with as the truth turned out to be a very small, very regional kind of belief system. And I started with these - the health concerns, the health-related superstitions, and then from there it moved and expanded into how women are supposed to behave based on that region or that society, which is changing, but it's still pretty traditional today.

MARTIN: So are these things - did your mother really - these aren't just general sayings? Did you're mother really claim these things?

Ms. DESZO: No, my mother really did claim these, and especially the newer ones I've been working on are more family related. Like, those ones are not necessarily by everybody else, the ones I've been making, like, about relationships. There is one that says "My mother claimed that you can - you don't know who you've married until after you've married him and by then it's too late." So I don't know if other mothers said that, but mine did.

MARTIN: And we should say - you're embroidery - I'm looking at a book right now with some images - they are very sweet stitchings. The colors are very sweet. And when you start to read them, you, you know, something that starts with "My mother claimed that," you think it's going to be this very kind of benign statement, but some of them are even quite violent. This one, "My mother claimed my grandmother loved me even though grandma says she'll cut my tongue out with the biggest knife she had."

Ms. DESZO: Yeah, I wanted to do that kind of subverting, domestic, feminine craft, and I wanted to use a kind of imagery that on superficial-looking - it looks like it is part of that world of women embroidering...

MARTIN: Domestic arts.

Ms. DESZO: Yeah, but then at the same time, the things that they are saying, I wanted them to be the truth, and the truth is sometimes pretty cruel and strange. The idea is that I taught myself to do embroidery because I wanted to make this project. And I thought that these sayings and these beliefs would be best said in this medium. And so I just sat down and did it.

MARTIN: What are you working on now? I see you've brought something in.

Ms. DESZO: I have one now - I'm working on this on the subway. I usually work on my embroideries on the subway. And this one says, "My mother claimed that if a glass gets knocked over on the table, she whom the beverage flows toward will have a baby."

MARTIN: Now, that's something you really grew up thinking?

Ms. DESZO: Well, whenever we had a family reunion...

MARTIN: If someone spills a glass, then the liquid, and where it approaches and whoever it approaches, is going to be pregnant.

Ms. DESZO: Yeah, it was supposed to foretell these kinds, so you were always careful not to spill the wine towards anyone that did not want a baby. Not to sit on the corner of the table because you never get married.

STEWART: Oh, really?

Ms. DESZO: And other things, and finally, if you finally catch a boy or somebody who would be a prospect, you have to pretend not to be that smart to actually make that happen.

MARTIN: When did you realize that these weren't true? I imagine it was a long process.

Ms. DESZO: Well, it was gradual, I guess. Some of them, growing up, I realized probably were not true. And then some of them I really only realized then I moved here. Like the hepatitis ones, that you can get it from a handshake, or that you can...

MARTIN: Yeah. "My mother claimed that you could get hepatitis from a handshake."

Ms. DESZO: Right. Or a lot of people believe you can get herpes if you eat something greasy without bread, or that you get hepatitis if you eat something you feel disgusted by. I really learned those when I moved here. I firmly believed for a long time that people running around with herpes ate something greasy.

MARTIN: So you're turning all this folklore on its head. How does your mom feel about the project?

Ms. DESZO: My mom is actually proud of it. I was a little bit worried about it, and I called her at a certain point and I told her, I'm doing these things, maybe you don't believe in them anymore. And I'm working on this project, and she wanted to know what these are and she's like, no, those are, like, totally cool. And it's good if people hear about them, and I think she still believes a bunch of them, and others I don't know.

MARTIN: It's very provocative work. It's definitely the most interesting embroidery I've ever seen. Artist Andrea Deszo, an assistant director for media design at Parsons' The New School for Design. Her works are included in a new exhibit called "Pricked." Hey, Andrea. Thanks for coming in. We appreciate it.

Ms. DESZO: Thank you.

STEWART: The Bryant Park Project is directed by Jacob Ganz, edited by Trish McKinney and produced by Matt Martinez. I'm Alison Stewart. I host it.

MARTIN: You host it?

STEWART: You co-host it, Rachel Martin.

MARTIN: This is the BPP from NPR News.

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