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# Artists

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# A Stitch in Time

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The centuries-old art of working with thread gets a contemporary update in the hands of four groundbreaking creatives.

BY Cynthia Close  
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**D**efined simply as “needlework,” the origins of the word *stitchery* can be traced back to 1600 A.D. Prior to this, as early as the eighth or ninth century, amateur needlewomen produced embroidered textiles. In the Middle Ages, European artisans used silk thread infused with fine metals to embroider elaborate religious scenes on satin or linen canvas for use as church vestments, as seen in *Chasuble (Opus Anglicanum)*, left.

As wealth spread beyond the church and the monarchy in Europe and into a broader swath of the population, a larger segment of society could afford to buy or make richly embroidered clothing and other domestic items. For example, the lush set of valances depicting the Garden of Eden (opposite top) was probably used to decorate a bed.

Before the Industrial Revolution, all textiles were made by hand and required the efforts of a diverse range of people, both men and women.

## STITCHERY IN THE STATES

The history of embroidery in America predates the Pilgrims. Native American



### **Chasuble (Opus Anglicanum)**

c 1330–50, British; silver and silver-gilt thread and colored silks in underside couching, split stitch, laid-and-couched work, and raised work, with pearls on velvet, 51x30

FLETCHER FUND/THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART



ABOVE  
**The Garden of Eden**  
 16th century, British; velvet worked with silk and metal thread; long-and-short, split, stem, satin, chain, knots and couching stitches; applied canvas worked with silk thread in tent stitch, 22½x80

GIFT OF IRWIN UNTERMYER, 1964/THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

women were particularly skilled at porcupine quill embroidery, using the animal hair, teeth and quills colored with natural pigments sourced from plants and the earth to decorate all forms of clothing, footwear (right) and accessories used by members of the tribe, from infants to chiefs. Highly prized examples can be found in private collections and at the National Museum of the American Indian, in Washington D.C., among other places.

As time went on, embroidery and all forms of needlework became an integral part of the education of girls. Young women who excelled at embroidery were often praised, the skill making them more marriageable because the ability was deemed necessary to manage a household. Needlework samplers such as that of Rebekah White (right) were pieces of embroidery or cross-stitching that often included the alphabet, figures and decorative motifs. The samplers were regarded as “specimens of achievement” worthy of being signed and dated by the maker.

The earliest known American sampler was made by Loara Standish from the first Pilgrim colony in Plymouth, Mass., in 1645. It’s this period in early American history that branded stitchery or needlework as “women’s work” in the popular imagination.

The practice of using thread, or threadlike material, however, to embellish, replace line drawing, and add texture and dimensional qualities is employed by many artists today, often in combination with more traditional media such as painting, print-making sculpture and photography. Following is a look at four such artists and how they elevate the art form.



ABOVE  
**Pair of Moccasins**  
 ca 1808, Seneca; native-tanned skin, porcupine quill, 4x10½  
 RALPH T. COE COLLECTION, GIFT OF RALPH T. COE FOUNDATION FOR THE ARTS, 2011/THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

BELOW  
**Embroidered Sampler**  
 by Rebekah White  
 1766; embroidered silk on linen, 16½x17¼

GIFT OF BARBARA SCHIFF SINAUER, 1984/THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART



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# José Romussi

## FREE-FORM ABSTRACTS

No longer stigmatized as “women’s work,” stitchery has been embraced by a number of male artists, including Chilean-born José Romussi ([joseromussi.com](http://joseromussi.com)). His mother was an artist, and he distinctly remembers as a child of 8 or 9 the smell of oil paint while hanging out in his mother’s studio while she taught art classes. He absorbed her influence, but didn’t seriously consider art as a way of life, choosing instead to study landscape design.

Gradually, Romussi came to realize that most of his friends were artists who reflected his own intuitive approach to life. About 10 years ago, he decided to commit to being a full-time artist. “Those memories with my mom returned, and I like to think of them as an unconscious model or guide,” Romussi says. “I tried painting, gouache, screenprinting and, finally, I came to thread.”

Balancing the worlds of fine art and art for hire, Romussi has managed to use his free-form embroidery technique in colorful stand-alone abstract works that have a whimsical Miro-like vibe, as in *FLWR No. 1* (below left), and in works where the multicolored threads embellish black-and-white photos that transcend their more commercial purpose. In some cases, women’s faces are completely obscured with richly embroidered flowers, spirals or other abstract forms, as in *CND No. 2: “AntiSerie”* (opposite). The meaning is

**BOTTOM LEFT**  
**FLWR No. 1**  
by José Romussi  
wool embroidery  
on linen, 47x31  
PHOTO © COURTESY  
OF JOSÉ ROMUSSI

**BOTTOM RIGHT**  
**CNDN**  
by José Romussi  
embroidery on  
organic material,  
21¼x13¾  
PHOTO © COURTESY  
OF JOSÉ ROMUSSI





LEFT  
**CND No. 2:**  
**"AntiSerie"**  
 by José Rosmusi  
 sewing machine  
 thread embroidered  
 on paper, 20x15  
 PHOTO © COURTESY  
 OF JOSÉ ROMUSSI

BELOW  
**Body of Water**  
 by Linda Gass  
 stitched painting  
 on silk (silk crepe  
 de chine, silk dyes,  
 water-soluble resist,  
 silk broadcloth, silk  
 Indian Doupioni,  
 polyester batting,  
 nylon monofilament  
 and polyester  
 thread), 30½x30  
 © 2005 LINDA GASS  
 PHOTO © BY DON TUTTLE



multilayered, appearing decorative at first and simultaneously disconcerting. Masks, or masking, as in *CNDN* (opposite), is a repeating motif that appears in various guises and media throughout the artist's oeuvre.

In a recent interview, Romussi said, "Currently, I'm still working with embroidery, no longer on paper, but on a diversity of material such as linen, burlap and even manually made old carpets. I'm interested in organic material, and I like focusing on the organic shapes that wool can draw."

These works recall both an African and Picasso-esque influence brought into jarring confluence in this 21st-century artist's vision.

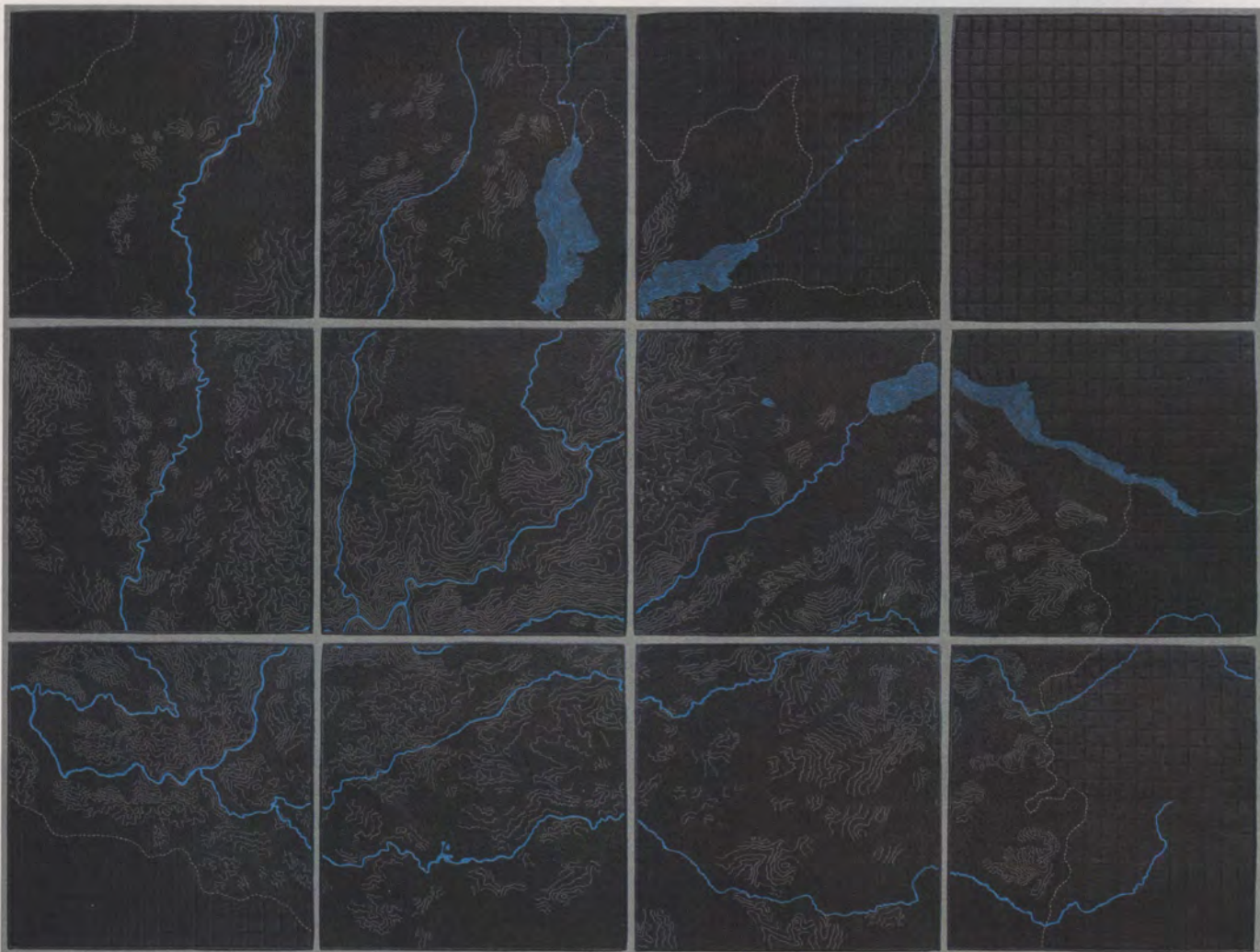
## Linda Gass

### STITCHED PAINTINGS

The role of educator, reinforced by a background in fact-finding and science, undergirds the textile painting, quilting and stitchery work of Linda Gass ([lindagass.com](http://lindagass.com)). An undergraduate degree in mathematical sciences and a master's degree in computer engineering, both from Stanford University, aren't commonly found indicators of artistic merit in an artist's resume, but they're the path that Gass traveled, qualifying her for a successful 10-year career working in the computer software industry.

She never completely neglected her early childhood interest in art. In fact, Gass always managed to squeeze in art classes alongside her academic classes. She found that she had a difficult time connecting with her mathematically directed colleagues and increasingly felt like an outsider.

When Gass realized that she wasn't being true to herself, the decision to leave computing for the creative life of an artist "was one of the most difficult things I've ever done," she says. Winning the Rookie Award at her first Quilt National exhibition, in 1999, helped to ease her doubts and set her on what she calls "the most challenging and fulfilling path of my life."



An affinity for landscapes and a fascination with water, combined with a lifelong interest in puzzle-solving, are key elements that inform the artist's intricately stitched, map-like quilted imagery that brings the effects of climate change into stark relief. The title of the imposing 12-paneled *Severely Burned: Impact of the Rim Fire on the Tuolumne River Watershed* (above) is self-explanatory and visually devastating. Using the language of maps via machine and hand-stitching on black silk crepe de chine, Gass outlines the largest recorded wildfire in the Sierra region of California. Although based on data, this work transcends factual information, becoming a work of art in the process.

Bright color is more prevalent in *Body of Water* (page 69) and provides an aesthetic diversion from Gass' more weighty themes. She refers to her work as "stitched paintings"—a phrase that describes her process of first painting on silk before structuring the work by stitching it into place.

Initially, Gass used French dyes until her research into their toxicity led her to an American manufacturer of non-toxic dyes, which she now uses. Environmental concerns aren't just the subject matter of her stitched paintings, installations and sitework initiatives; they're also essential factors in her life. Yet, she takes a realistic view, saying, "I commit many of the same destructive acts that humans have

**Severely Burned:  
Impact of the Rim  
Fire on the  
Tuolumne River  
Watershed**

by Linda Gass  
stitched silk (silk  
crepe de chine, silk  
broadcloth, cotton  
batting, cotton and  
polyester thread),  
54x70x1½

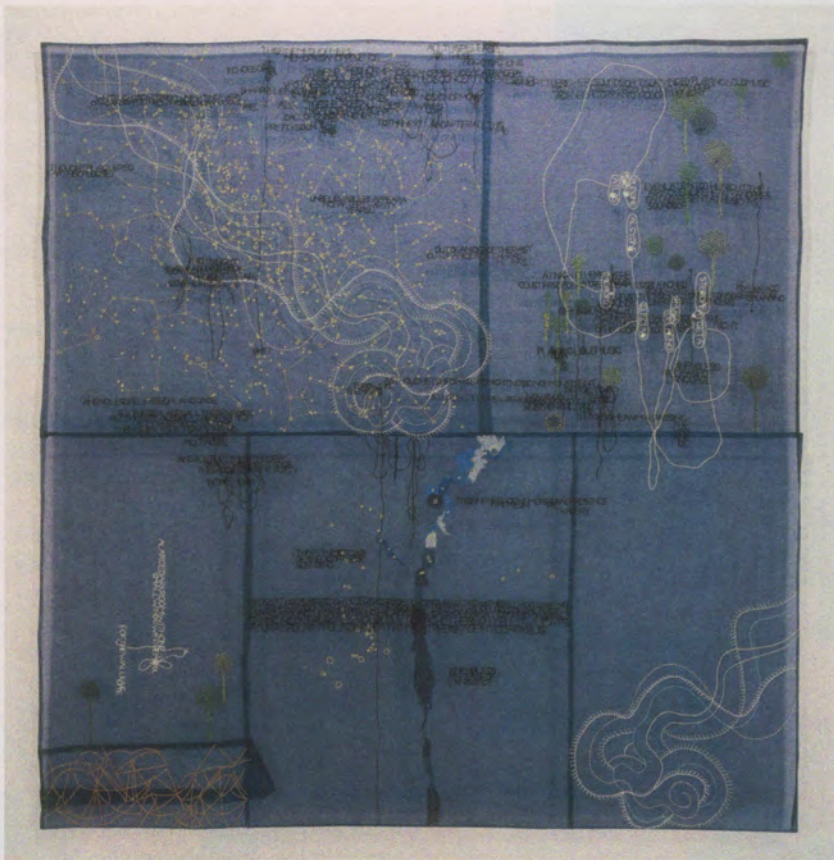
©2014 LINDA GASS  
PHOTO BY DON TUTTLE

done to the landscape: I cut into the fabric, tear it, poke holes into it with needles. I build the equivalent of dams and dikes, using resists to contain my liquid silk dyes. When a painting is done, I stitch it by machine and hand, invoking the tradition of mending and repair through the act of sewing."

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Jessica Rankin

**ETHEREAL VISIONS**

Born in Australia, artist Jessica Rankin ([whitecube.com/artists/artist/jessica\\_rankin](http://whitecube.com/artists/artist/jessica_rankin)) comes from a richly creative family. Her father, David Rankin, is a widely exhibited self-taught painter. Her mother, Lily Bret, is a well-known poet and novelist. The family now resides in New York. Known primarily for using



needlework and embroidery on diaphanous panels of organza, Rankin tracks hidden but felt thought processes, making the invisible visible. Color is barely there. Once seen, the monochromatic work is remembered as colorless, but this isn't meant as a criticism. It's an intentional part of Rankin's conceptual approach.

Much like a poet, some of her works include lines of stream-of-conscious text, so it's not surprising to discover there's a meditative, almost

LEFT

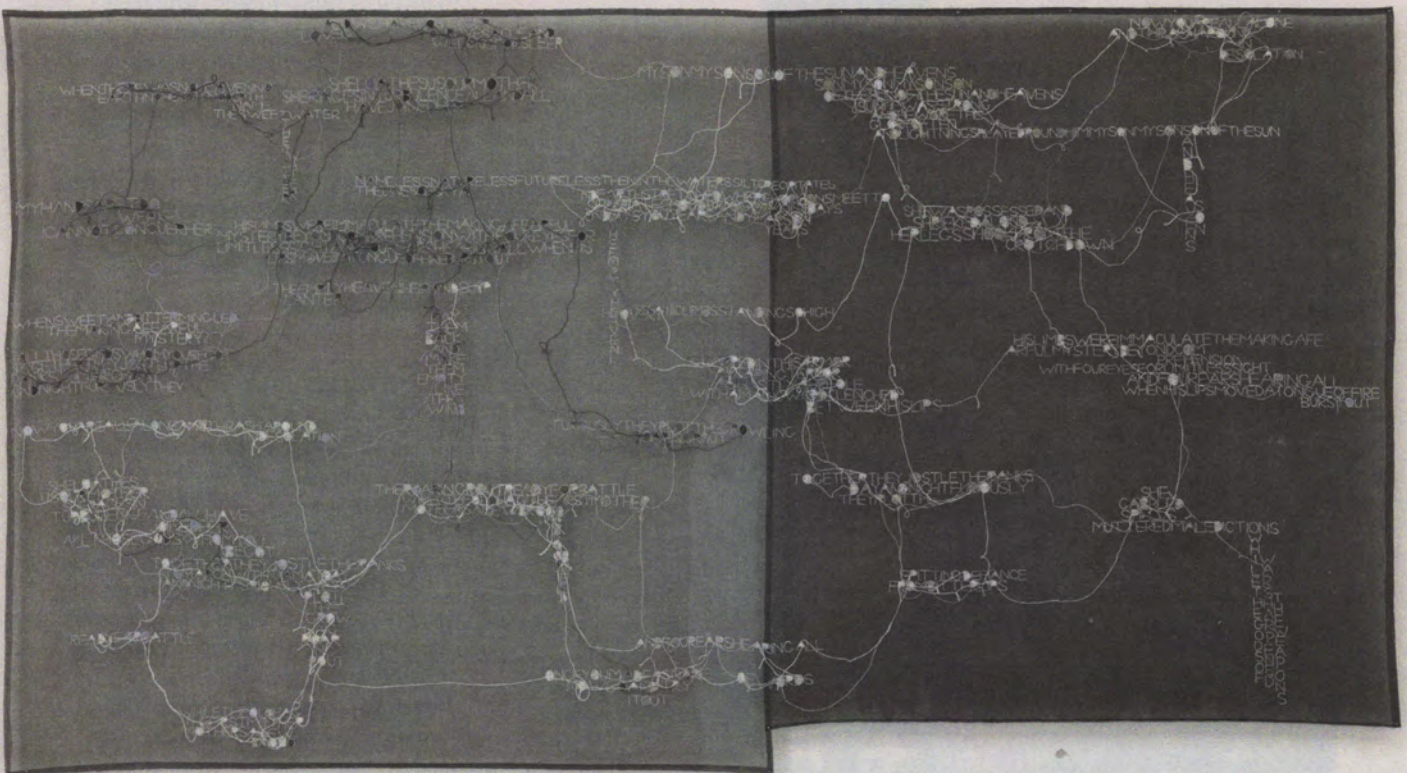
**Nocturne**

by Jessica Rankin  
embroidery on organza, 84x84  
© JESSICA RANKIN  
PHOTO © COURTESY OF WHITE CUBE

BELOW

**Snare From Words**

by Jessica Rankin  
embroidery on organza,  
59½x107½  
© JESSICA RANKIN  
PHOTO © COURTESY OF WHITE CUBE





LEFT

**Tether**

by Jessica Rankin  
embroidery on organdy, 84x84

© JESSICA RANKIN  
PHOTO © COURTESY WHITE CUBE (CHRISTOPHER  
BURKE, N.Y./COURTESY CARLIERIGEBAUER

trancelike quality in her act of making. “I get lost in the work,” she says. “It’s always evolving. It never turns out the way I think it will at the beginning of the process.”

An ethereal quality permeates most of Rankin’s work, whether stitched or on paper. Teetering between meaning and emptiness, the stitched pieces appear to float in space rather than occupy it, and they’re simultaneously insubstantial and labor-intensive, as in *Nocturne* (page 71).

In a studio interview for the artist platform White Cube, Rankin describes her process this way: “The words are there from the start. ... I take them from the author’s text. ... I love ghost stories, particularly the work of M.R. James.” Her art may appear to be effortless, as though it just happened, but Rankin confesses to being “a rigid worker” who feels guilty if she’s not creating all the time.

Although she often collaborates with her artist/partner Julie Mehretu, she’s also very private, preferring to work alone in the studio. When she needs inspiration, Rankin finds visits to galleries and museums helpful, but ultimately, “you just go from one piece to the next,” letting the work lead where it may.



Bisà Butler

**AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL  
PORTRAITS**

Bisà Butler ([claireoliver.com/artists/bisa-butler](http://claireoliver.com/artists/bisa-butler)) knew that being an artist was her destiny when she first won recognition for her efforts at the age of 5. She later attended Howard University as an art major and had empathetic professors who encouraged her to “infuse her work with life.”

The explosive energy of Butler’s boldly patterned, brightly colored





ABOVE  
**Three Kings**  
 by Bisa Butler  
 quilted and appliquéd  
 cotton, wool and  
 chiffon, 72x95

PHOTO © COURTESY  
 OF IAN RUBINSTEIN

OPPOSITE  
**Dear Mama**  
 by Bisa Butler  
 quilted and appliquéd  
 cotton, wool and  
 chiffon, 73x53

PHOTO © COURTESY  
 OF IAN RUBINSTEIN

stitched and quilted portraits have become her response to her professors' directive. Butler wasn't always a textile artist. As a student, she had studied painting. When she became a mother, she could no longer tolerate the smell of oil paint and was interested in a medium with fewer safety concerns. She took a quilting/sewing class and knew she had found her medium.

The idea of family—generations of unique individuals forming a collective group united by their shared history—is the foundation upon which Butler builds her imagery, as seen in *Dear Mama* (opposite). All of her work is part of an ongoing autobiography. "I used to sit by my grandmother's side, and we'd go through her photo album and she'd tell me family stories," the artist says.

Those stories have become part of the narrative Butler tells through the use of traditional African fabrics, bits of lace from her grandmother and mother, and other fabric scraps proffered by friends and fellow artists. "I choose colors based on sensation and mood," she says.

Primarily a portrait artist, Butler's subjects are distinct personalities stitched and built up in layers, sheer chiffon over a printed or intensely colored textile, just as a painter might use glazes for a particular effect.

Butler's reputation is growing. "Bisa Butler: Portraits," at the Katonah Museum of Art, in N.Y., is the first solo museum exhibition of the artist's work (visit [katonahmuseum.org](http://katonahmuseum.org) for the show's scheduling). It will feature 25 or so of her vivid, larger-than-life quilts that capture African-American identity and culture.

The energy embodied in the use of stitchery by these artists breaks all the rules that so often restrained needleworkers of the past, enabling them to explore myriad subjects in a contemporary manner. ♣

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*Cynthia Close* ([cynthiaclose.com](http://cynthiaclose.com)), of Burlington, Vt., earned an MFA from Boston University and worked in various art-related roles before becoming a full-time freelance writer and editor. She contributes to *Art New England* and *Art + Object*, among other publications.