

# INTIMATE AND POLITICAL – USES OF EMBROIDERY AND TEXTILE IN CONTEMPORARY PORTUGUESE ART

Íntimo y político – usos del bordado y textil en el arte contemporáneo portugués

Íntimo e político – usos do bordado e to têxtil na arte contemporânea portuguesa

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## ABSTRACT

This text aims to address the work of Portuguese artists whose use of embroidery and textile confers an experimental dimension to traditional techniques, interrogates established cultural frameworks, and explores intimate autobiographical practices and feminist positions. In some cases, their mastery of technique is undeniable, while others manifest a preference for poetical forms of deskilling or appropriation. The essay not only covers artists drawn from the worlds of painting, sculpture, and jewellery, and who belong to various generations, although they all produce, but also discusses examples in which embroidery is used as a form of homage by those who count themselves as admirers. In this way, we hope to enlarge the geographical and cultural universe typically covered in the literature.

## KEYWORDS:

Portuguese artists; embroidery; contemporary textiles; feminist art; autobiographical practice.

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#### RESUMEN

En este artículo se propone un abordaje de artistas portugueses cuyo uso del bordado y el textil introduce una dimensión experimental en las técnicas tradicionales, interroga marcos culturales establecidos y explora prácticas íntimas de sentido autobiográfico y posiciones feministas. En algunos, el dominio técnico es innegable, en otros, se manifiesta la preferencia por un registro *deskilling* de cariz poético o por la apropiación. Más allá de los artistas oriundos de la pintura, de la escultura o de la joyería, de diferentes generaciones, pero todos con producción contemporánea, el artículo cubre también propuestas en las que el bordado desempeña la función de homenaje, por parte de admiradores. De este modo se busca ampliar el universo geográfico y cultural habitualmente cubierto por la bibliografía.

#### PALABRAS CLAVE:

Artistas portugueses; bordado; textil contemporáneo; arte feminista; práctica autobiográfica.

#### RESUMO

Neste artigo se propõe-se uma abordagem de artistas portugueses nos quais o uso do bordado e do têxtil introduz uma dimensão experimental das técnicas tradicionais, e interroga os marcos culturais estabelecidos. Nele são exploradas práticas íntimas de sentido autobiográfico e de posições feministas. Alguns revelam um domínio técnico inegável, outros preferem o *de-skilling* de caráter poético ou a apropriação. Além dos artistas da pintura, da escultura ou da joalheria, e de diferentes gerações, mas com trabalho contemporâneo, o artigo trata propostas de amadores que utilizam o bordado com a função de homenagem. Assim, pretende ampliar o universo geográfico e cultural coberto por a bibliografia.

#### PALAVRAS CHAVE:

artistas portugueses, bordado, têxtil contemporâneo, arte feminista, prática autobiográfica.

## INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

As they are not particularly visible or well studied in Portugal, one of the aims of this article is to highlight the works of a group of contemporary Portuguese artists who have taken up embroidery in their work. The study of these ten figures, nine women and one man, structured thematically rather than chronologically, broadens the field typically covered in the literature about textiles in contemporary art, which is mostly published in English.<sup>1</sup>

Embroidery features in the works of all selected artists, although other means of incorporating textile in art have been emphasised, as well as pieces that are wholly constructed in textiles.

After an introductory note, the article begins with a discussion of artists who aim to recover old methods of production, in an approach that is both anthropological and one of resistance. The discussion then turns to artists who aim at an intimate register in their work, then travels on to areas that are markedly feminist. One of the sections addresses a piece conceived by an admirer and amateur, along the lines proposed by Julia Bryan-Wilson in her research, which as she puts it “ramifies into questions about class, gender, race, effort, and materiality as I seek to examine both ‘higher’ fine-art utilizations of craft techniques and ‘lower’ or amateur methods of production. [...] As I have argued, textiles create a rupture around and through notions of amateur, art and craft, throwing the words themselves into crisis—akin to an identity crisis.”<sup>2</sup>

This brief overview will unveil relationships and affinities with the work of artists elsewhere in the world, deepening our knowledge of the field. However, a few notes about the Portuguese context seem necessary to understand the situation of the works under analysis, ranging from the 1970s to the present. The Portuguese revolution of April 1974 was the most significant event of the period, bringing to an end approximately five decades of political dictatorship, official censorship, and surveillance over cultural activities. The historical circumstances show a correspondence between this revolution and the fight for the political emancipation of colonised African territories, for civil rights, and movements for the liberation of women. The emergence of the women’s liberation movement in Portugal, as well as episodes such as the trial of three Portuguese writers that would be known as “The Three Marias Litigation Process,”<sup>3</sup> signal the profound change of mentality that took place during those days of political, social and cultural revision. In the field of artistic practice, the decades of the pre- and post-revolution period in Portugal—those of the 60s and 70s—are characterized by a transition from the feminine to the feminist, as Patrícia Esquível defined it.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the provocative works of the 1970s point towards a subversion of women’s

1. Only one Portuguese artist, Leonor Antunes (1972), appears in all the literature reviewed for this article. See Rebecca Morril (ed.), *Vitamin T Threads & Textiles in Contemporary Art* (London: Phaidon, 2019), 40-41.

2. Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Fray Art + Textile politics*, (London and Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 30 and 272.

3. A trial based on the accusation of pornography and moral offenses, resulting from the publication of the book by Isabel Barreno, Maria Velho da Costa and Maria Teresa Horta, *Novas Cartas Portuguesas* (Lisboa, Estúdios Cor, 1972. Na english version was published in Great Britain in 1975, with the title *New Portuguese Letters*.

4. Patrícia Esquível, “Mulheres artistas na idade da razão. Arte e crítica na década de 1960 em Portugal”, *ex-aequo*, nº 21 (2010), 143-160.

role in society and culture and critically comment on the social construction of gender, issues that remain alive for artists of younger generations and in more recent work, although combined with other values and concerns.<sup>5</sup>

## PART OF LIFE. LIFE ITSELF

As part as the introduction to this paper, I would like to briefly refer to three artists to whom we will return later, for they remind us of legends and myths that are linked to the materials in question, and introduce us to the embodied nature of textiles and their magic presence in the lives of people. In a film by one of these artists, Filipa César, a weaver shares a narrative according to which when an artisan conveys the knowledge of weaving to an apprentice, he dies. This tells us a great deal about the power of those who hold the knowledge of weaving inside a traditional community. The second artist, Rute Rosas, shares another interesting narrative about the use of embroidery in her self-portraits, telling us that this work is always left unfinished; indeed, in her works one can see that the pencil drawing is not completely covered by the embroidery, and that the needle remains stuck in the fabric. As Rosas recalls: “there is a legend that says that self-portraits should not be finished because it signals the end.” And she adds, discussing embroidery: “a person who gives herself the time and the kind of handwriting that embroidering by hand entails will have to be patient and romantic. There is nothing similar to embroidery by hand, it is like writing or drawing: a calligraphy, a seal, an unrepeatable mark.”<sup>6</sup>

The third case is different in kind but still representative of the kind of experience of textiles in which I am interested. Since 2013 artist Susana Piteira has been working on a collection of books using a wide variety of textile materials, from linen and cotton to lace, embroidery, and silk threads, which she attaches to different types of manufactured paper and pieces of metal. The books, displayed as small textile sculptures, make up the series *Autobiografia* [Autobiography], which collects the remains of other works, leftovers, unfinished pieces or materials, including embroidery patterns and sewing materials found in a family house that belonged to her mother and grandmother. Piteiras refers to these objects as books, as she puts it,

not because one can access their content through the language of words in the traditional way, but because they are objects that appeal to the senses to uncover the information that they record. They cannot be handled or opened, demanding time and investigation to access their narrative. [...] [T]hey distance themselves from the pragmatic superficial urgency of modern

5. In recent years several works have been renewing art history in Portugal through feminist readings. For a critical overview of the cultural and artistic feminism of this period in Portugal: Márcia Oliveira, “Arte e Feminismo em Portugal no contexto pós-revolução” (Doctoral Thesis, Universidade do Minho, 2013). And for a critical analysis of the relation between art history and feminism in Portugal: Filipa Lowndes Vicente, “História da Arte e Feminismo: uma reflexão sobre o caso português”. *Revista de História da Arte*, 10 (2012) 210-225; Filipa Lowndes Vicente, *A Arte sem História. Mulheres e Cultura artística (séculos XVI-XX)* (Lisboa: Athena, 2012).

6. Rute Rosas statement collected in a brief interview conducted for the preparation of this article. Translation of this and others artist’s statements by Matt Cox.

times, speaking of the endless days when generations of women spent their time doing everything and nothing, days of the immense, unending, labour that is keeping house and bringing up children, caring for the infirm and looking after the elderly. Days of desire, affection, submission and affirmation. These last, most visible through the organisation of the home or the presentation of their own bodies, for they created, embroidered or designed textiles used by themselves, inventing a space of expression [...] and evading the heavy demands of their everyday existence.<sup>7</sup>

Piteiras's books are a kind of diary without words, a visual narrative created with the care of someone who is handling the memories of their loved ones. Maybe the most interesting thing about this project lies in the discovery of the artist's origins, as her encounter with textiles is a return to the matrix sources of her art.

As these three stories show, textiles embody life; indeed: they are life itself.

### THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL DIMENSION OF TEXTILES

In the work of Isabel Pavão (1960) textile elements are used as part of a refined technique that is consistent with that of painting—laboriously constructed with layers of materials that may include papers, inks, and metallic elements. Pavão's process resembles the construction of a palimpsest, in which the overlaying, hiding, and revealing of materials or their traces create an extremely rich, fragmentary narrative filled with resonance.<sup>8</sup> Her manner of working is extremely slow and time-consuming, as drawing, photography, printing, and painting are successively put into play in a continuous repetition that is both methodical and obsessive. The constancy of her process reveals a ritualistic character that was already at play when she began to exhibit in the 1980s.

Pavão was trained at Porto's Escola Superior de Belas Artes and has been living and working in in the United States of America since the early 1990s. Her work has always studied the question of borders, whether physical, linguistic, cultural, or even psychological, which her paintings explore mainly in connection to anthropological and cultural concerns.

Given the extremely regular aesthetic and structural organisation of her works, which invariably include square shapes, Pavão's was fated to cross paths with quilts, those artisanal artefacts that also contain recurring patterns and designs based on repetition and reproduction. The affinity between her approach to painterly composition and quilts is explored in a series entitled *Americana*, based on fragments of quilt from around the year 1800 that the artist discovered in a box being sold at auction in New York. After acquiring them, she immediately felt the urge to use them in her work because, as she says,

7. Susana Piteira statement in a brief interview conducted for the preparation of this article.

8. Christine Buci-Glucksmann, "Laura picturale du vestige", in *Vestígios* (Porto: Galeria Fluxus, 1990).

I was attracted by the images and the relationship between the aesthetic language of the embroidery, of the quilt, and elements of my own paintings: pattern, repetition, geometry, squares, symmetry, colours [...]. I was also very drawn to the fact that it was a work in progress, unfinished. Because of that I could give it continuity and, nearly 200 years later, use my own voice to give it another purpose.<sup>9</sup> [Img. 1]

9. Statement from Isabel Pavão, collected in a brief interview conducted for the preparation of this article.



Image 1. Isabel Pavão *Americana series*, 1996. Acrylic and collage on canvas, 85 × 100cm. Private collection. Photo Filipe Braga © Courtesy of Isabel Pavão.

Pavão is not interested in the activities of embroidery or sewing, but rather in the appropriation of old works in fabric which she incorporates into the canvas by collage and layering of paint, over and over, in a constant process. The appropriated fragments are thus imbued with artistic status and re-signified. At heart, this mode of appropriation gives prominence to work that was made by women whose voices were not authorised or heard. In that sense, Pavão's reuse of Native American textiles in some of these works calls on us to ponder the relationship between political identity and cultural identity. These works recover patterns associated with ceremonies and practices characteristic of certain women-led communities and traditions led by women, which were later obscured by the advent of English and Dutch colonists.

About *Americana*, the Portuguese critic Bernardo Pinto de Almeida has said:

To start with, the title emerges in the ambiguity of its formulation, making feminine a word which in the original is neutral, and thus subverting, as has happened before, its origin. Then, it explicitly refers to America—where the artist lives—with an almost iconic value, as if, because it is American, made in America, this new series inscribes some supplementary recognition value. However, it denies this association straight away by working on the basis of Native American patterns and, later, of the quilt, associated with native handicrafts. This is a form predating the existence of America as a notion and as a nation. Its ascendancy is documented since this remote period and it is known that the quilt technique was used in blankets and rugs, in tent cloths and wall ornaments, and that these were frequently made by women.<sup>10</sup>

The series is a study in cultural identity and gender identity, driven by the painter's experience of migration to North America. Oddly enough, as she explored her interest in minimalist North American art, Pavão discovered that some of the same visual strategies were already at work within ancient traditions. For her, living and creating in the United States entailed, from that moment on, a dual awareness of a contemporary legacy and an ancient heritage. The dissolution of textile elements that sometimes occurs in her painting can be seen as a metaphor for cultural loss, but at the same time the traces of textile elements may be viewed as a metaphor for resistance. Thus, beneath the cover of great aesthetic care and refined formalism, Pavão's work engages in a cultural and political standpoint. Her personal and artistic experience is likewise present in her body of paintings, intertwined with cultural remembrance, considering that, as Jenelle Porter has stated: "Among textile art, quilts possess an irrefutable capacity to record history and labour."<sup>11</sup>

10. Bernardo Pinto de Almeida, "I.P.2000", in *Isabel Pavão*. (Porto: Galeria Fernando Santos, 1996). English version of the text by Isabel Alves and Bergen Peck.

11. Jenelle Porter, "Sympathetic Medium", in Rebecca Morril (ed.), *Vitamin T – Threads & Textiles in Contemporary Art* (London: Phaidon, 2019), p. 16.

A similar set of concerns is visible in the work of Ana Fernandes (1945), who was trained in Sculpture at Porto's Escola Superior de Belas Artes in the 1960s and who works as a sculptor, jeweller, and creator of objects. In 2017 Fernandes developed a project based on artisanal blankets made for cold nights, discovered when she was tidying up two family houses in little villages in the north of Portugal and thus charged with personal and anthropological reverberations. The project is rooted in the events following some deaths in the family, and the consequent need to empty the houses of the deceased. The need to find a place for the large amount of blankets that she had found in the rooms and attics of her relatives' homes, in chests and drawers, led the artist to a close study of these materials, which she then decided to use in her work. Fernandes discovered that on the edge of each blanket the initials of the wearer had been carefully embroidered, thereby revealing the history of successive generations of occupants of the two houses. The act of embroidering a name was a common practice in past generations, and one of many gestures that revealed the feminine governance of the house. However, in addition to the family name, the blankets were also inscribed with other distinguishing markers: names, letters, and acronyms, embroidered written formulation, some rough and some elegant, revealing the masculine names of Spanish manufacturers and man weavers like "Martin" and "Lorenzo." (Img. 2)

Fernandes's appropriation of this textile legacy is an expression of a creative force that wakes the objects from their sleep, from the lethargy in which they were found, in order to give them a new life. By retrieving them from the intimate sphere and transporting them to the public space of exhibitions Fernandes performs an act of resistance, rather than one of nostalgia. Her gesture should not be confused with those actions that, in blind awe of heritage, aim to preserve the integrity of objects; instead, Fernandes engages in a lived appreciation of their uses and multiple lives. In her artistic reconfiguration of these objects Fernandes both pays homage to those who produced and used them, tracking a history of domestic rituals and social behaviours in which the affective value of the materials is factored by their capacity for being used and recycled as they appear in shifting contexts and scenarios. I have attempted to capture Fernandes's unique strategies of appropriation in the following lines, written on the occasion of one of her exhibitions:

The intimate and sensitive dimension of Ana's approach does not exclude a political and social dimension, expressed in the relationship with objects, from their production to their reproduction, from their consumption to their aesthetic power, from their utilitarianism to their symbolism, from their



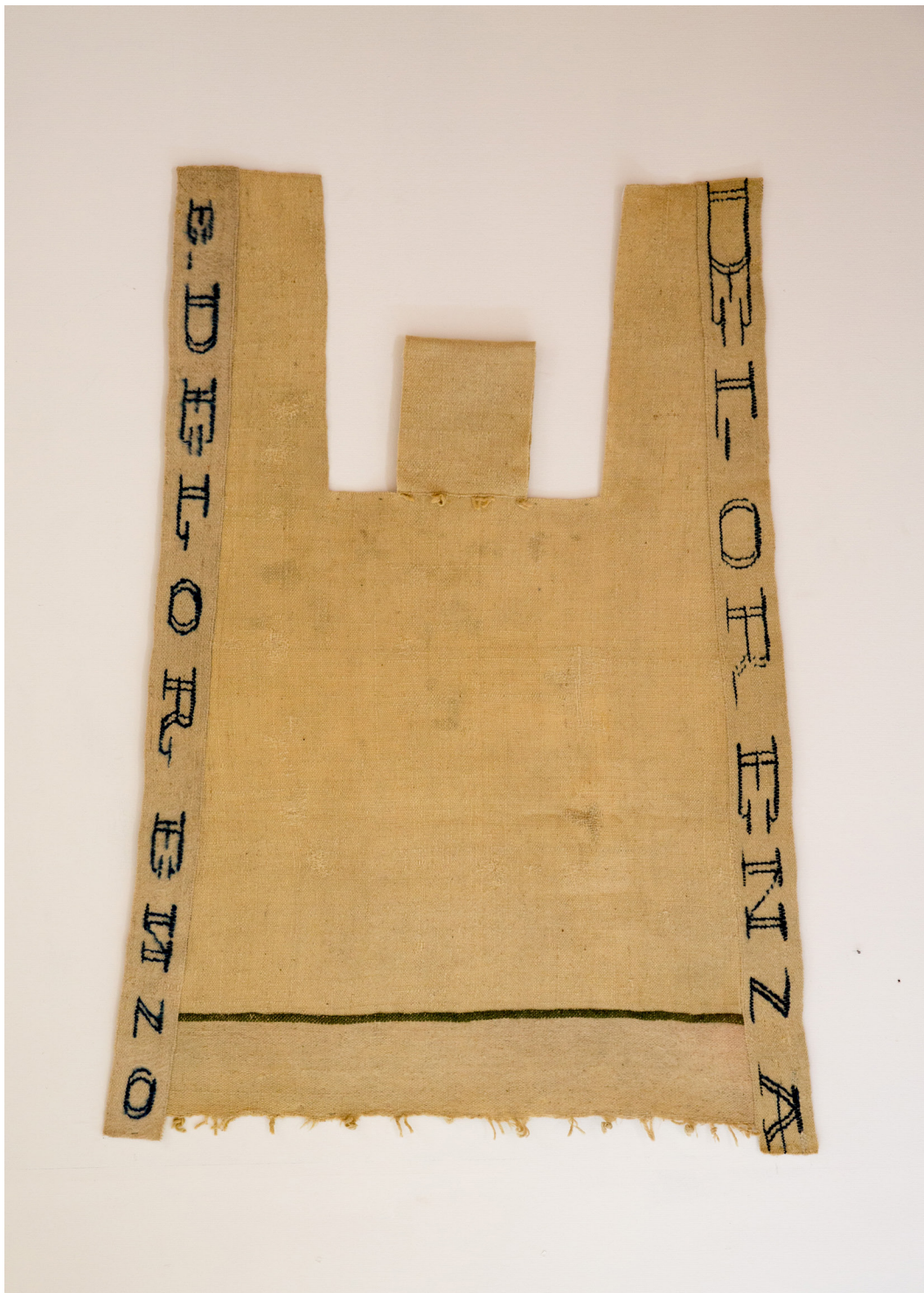


Image 2. Ana Fernandes. *Lorenzo/Lorenza*, 2017. Blanket, 162 × 125 cm. Private collection. Photo Lucília Monteiro, Tiago Reis © Courtesy of Ana Fernandes.

indifference to their expressiveness. This political side is associated with a discourse that refuses waste and incorporates new social experiences and a new cultural order. The recycling of today corresponds to the use that was made in the past. The objects served many lives and successive generations, the utensils were repaired, the cloths were mended. [...] Here two forms of culture overlap: the one that we inherit through the ritual sharing of a way of life and the one that we create, by the formal learning of a given subject. Adaptation in unceasingly renewed processes is capable of reconfiguring not just objects, but people and their individual and social existence. To create is to resist.<sup>12</sup>

If we examine other areas of Ana Fernandes' body of work we will encounter this same will to liberate objects and materials from their restraining contexts, to prolong their lives and extend their meaning. In the particular case of textiles, this re-harnessing evokes the domestic economies and matriarchal family structures that her work often pays homage to. A somewhat marginal case in our research is that of Filipa César (1975), an Oporto artist based in Berlin, who studied in the Faculdade de Belas Artes of the Universidade de Lisboa, as well as in Munich and Berlin. The decision to include César's work in my study is not straightforward, since it plays on the borderline between artistic production and archival research. César has developed an experimental cinematographic work that investigates issues such as cultural identity, social and political conflict, and processes of colonization and decolonization while also researching the language of cinema, the relation between the fictional and the documentary, and the manipulation of the historical image. Since 2008 César has been researching the archival history of Guinean cinema during the period of independence, between 1963, the beginning of the struggle against Portuguese colonialism, and 1980, the date of the coup that deposed Luís Cabral. Produced in the context of this extensive research project, the film essay *Crioulo Quântico* [Quantum Creoule, 2019] deals with cultural and anthropological memory on the Bijagós archipelago, which once housed a slave warehouse and which has been slotted to become the site of an ultraliberal free trade zone in Bolama, involving contemporary forms of colonization. César's work includes films in 3D animation, 16 mm and video format, as well as an installation with weaving materials, all of which aim to rescue the popular tradition of Guinean cotton cloths and their geometric patterns, related to language and the transmission of ciphered messages of political resistance in colonial times. To this, César adds an extra layer of meaning by comparing the use of punched cards in weaving to their use in computer technology, exploring analogies with digital code and the notions of quantum physics, particularly those of superposition, entanglement, and uncertainty.<sup>13</sup> (Img. 3)

12. Laura Castro, "From anything, for everything", in *Ana Fernandes De Nada*. (Porto, Cooperativa Árvore, 2017). English version of the text by Regina Oliveira and André Fernandes.

13. Leonor Nazaré, "Alphabets of Life", in *Filipa César Crioulo Quântico* (Lisboa, Museu Calouste Gulbenkian, 2019).



Image 3. Filipa César. *Quântico Crioulo /Quantum Creole*, 2019. 40” 16 mm transferred to HD video, CGI, colour and sound. Installation view at Museu Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon, May-September 2019. Photo Laura Castro © Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian.

César shoots close-ups of the hands and faces of the weavers, of a young boy helping them, and of the vibrant colors of the cotton thread being used. The aesthetic depth and appeal of the textures and colors are huge, this attraction for the visual side of the weaving installs a tension with the disturbing realities addressed by the documentary, which outlines the harrowing possibility of a technoliberal future.

César overlaps the images of the weavers, the cotton, and the landscapes of Guinea, with those of researchers, artists, and activists filmed at a performance in Berlin, yielding a shifting criss-cross of weaving woofs, the patterns of the cotton cloths, and the matrices of computer code. The schemes that run across the screen vertically or horizontally, with the ensuing overlays of meaning, transform the film into a woven cloth.

### THE INTIMATE TURN OF EMBROIDERY

The work of Lourdes Castro (1930) is also concerned with the activation of cultural memory, although it is distinctive in diving particularly deep into the sphere of intimacy. In contrast with the three previously examined cases, in

which embroidery and textiles appear only in specific projects by the artists, for Castro embroidery is very much a crucial element..

Castro was born in the island of Madeira and studied at the Escola Superior de Belas-Artes in Lisbon until 1956. She then moved to Munich, where she formed part of the important group of artists known as KWY;<sup>14</sup> towards the end of the 1950s she relocated to Paris, where she remained for 25 years. In 1958 she was the recipient of a grant from the Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, and between 1972 and 1974 she had an important sojourn in Berlin. In 1983 she returned to Madeira, where she still lives to this day.

Castro's work is emphatically experimental. Early on she abandoned the field of painting and began, particularly during the 1960s, to explore the creation of objects in coloured acrylic, shadow theatre (which she practiced as a type of happening), and embroidery. Interested in renewing her artistic premises, she chose a theme that she hasn't abandoned since: shadows, which she approached as the negation of light, understood as one of the sources of painting. Arguing for the materiality of shadows, her work grew out of her domestic atmosphere and everyday events, as she systematically recorded her silhouette and that of her partner and friends who visited her house. Silhouettes abound in her work and suggest, firstly, a phenomenological approach based on lived experiences and, secondly, a spiritual proposal that captures the essential, the minimum, the contour. As André Cariou remarked:

In her studio, Lourdes Castro had the habit of placing her guests against a wall, creating a projection of the silhouette that she outlined in soft pencil. Despite the coldness of the process, she managed to retain a certain sensibility. She then began painting, creating a black patch here, a blue line and a dirty yellow background. In the process of dematerialisation, the shadow defines an allusive evocation, an absence, a phantasmagorical universe.<sup>15</sup>

Lourdes continued this exploration of shadows using a wide range of media until she arrived at embroidery:

At first I made shadows on paper, then on canvas, and I painted the canvases white to have the best possible material. Then, as they are shadows, I thought of working with plexiglas, and plexiglas led me to transparencies, projections, and then one day I thought of making shadows lying down [...]. [T]hat led to the sheets [...]. Then the shadows started moving, and that's the idea behind the theatre [...].<sup>16</sup>

14. The group was active between 1958 and 1968. The name took the three letters that don't form part of the Portuguese alphabet, signifying the condition of emigrant lived by the artists. For further information, see: Margarida Acciaiuoli (coord.), *KWY - Paris 1958-1968*. (Lisboa: Assírio & Alvim, 2001).

15. André Cariou, "Sombra Projectada de Claudine Bury", in *Museu Coleção Berardo*. Accessible in: <http://pt.museuberardo.pt/colecao/obras/199> Accessed 27 November 2019.

16. Daniel Ribeiro, "Lourdes Castro: uma mulher que brilha nas sombras", in *Jornal de Letras Artes e Ideias* (Lisboa, 1982, nº 26), 20-21. Translations of the quotes in footnotes 18-21, 23-24, 27 and 30 by Matt Cox.

She adds, in another interview: “I thought of making shadows lying down and, therefore, I had to use sheets, and as I wasn’t going to paint the sheets I embroidered them with a stem stitch. It’s as simple as that.”<sup>17</sup> And, finally, in a statement in 1963 she recounts the experiences that determined her encounter with embroidery in further detail:

They are in fact embroidered sheets with the contours of the shadows of people lying down. I had the idea of making shadows of people lying down a long time ago and the idea of using sheets came along at the same time. People lying down, lying down in a bed, using sheets. [...] The surprise of the image of a person lying down, that is the shadow projected horizontally instead of vertically (as until this moment I almost always did) gradually became so important that now I only do sheets. [...] When the sheet goes up on the wall on the wall the shadows seem to fly. I also like it. Having taken the shadows out of the shadows, having given them colour and transparency, an independent life, stretching them out.<sup>18</sup> (Img. 4)

17. Isabel Fragoso, “Lourdes Castro, na vida como na vida”, in *Jornal de Letras Artes e Ideias*, 18-6-1991, 24-25.

18. Manuel Zimbardo et. al., *Lourdes Castro: Além da Sombra*, ed. por (Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian – Centro de Arte Moderna, 1992), 53.



Image 4. Lourdes Castro. *Sombra deitada / Lying shadow*, 1970. Hand embroidered sheet, 290 × 180 cm. Col. Museu Nacional de Arte Contemporânea do Chiado, Inv. 2552. Photo Mário Valente © Direção-Geral do Património Cultural/Arquivo de Documentação Fotográfica (DGPC/ADF)

Embroidery may be part of Lourdes Castro's memories of growing up in Madeira, where many women used to embroider in their own homes commissioned by large manufacturers. Indeed, the embroidery tradition on the island dates back to the 15th century, when the settlement of the island began. It gained strength in the 18th century, with significant influence from the English, and has grown in commercial visibility since the 19th century. On the island of Madeira, embroiderers, working by themselves at the doors of their houses or in small groups of children and women, were paid by the stitch. The everyday life of artist incorporate common gestures of feminine work and life. This communion, which embroidery captures in its simplest form, was highlighted by the Madeiran essayist and poet José Tolentino Mendonça:

I remember an interview with Lourdes Castro in which she argued that art should not be seen as having a statute of exception with respect to other aspects of life. Art means to do it well, to carry on until the end. And she gave the example of some tribes for whom art was not considered an activity distinct from other everyday ones: art was, for example, the women brushing their hair nicely, or sweeping their patio well. It was, for the warriors, painting their faces following the correct rituals... Nothing else.<sup>19</sup>

Neither painting nor canvas, but embroidery and sheets: this transformation of medium and technique brought a private element and intimate atmosphere to her work, in a way that is both delicate and devastating. And, at the same time, these works demand a different manner of presentation: they are shown, not vertically, but horizontally and, sometimes, on a mattress. Her efforts to close the gap between art and life likewise led Castro to take part in a performance, recorded in a short film during the opening of an exhibition that took place in the famous Gallery 111, in Lisbon, in October, 1970.<sup>20</sup> Lying down in a bed with embroidered sheets, the artist got up when visitors arrived, rendering the moment into an instance of the everyday.

Always interested in moving towards something new, Castro then linked her interest in embroidery to the activities of writing and unwriting. The idea came to her out of the need to write a dedication to her friend, the Portuguese author Helder Macedo, while she was embroidering one of her sheets, in the year 1970:

I had a needle in my hand with coloured thread. I embroidered a dedication on the paper. Turning it over I was surprised by the reverse of the letters: a strange design, only a few of the stitches matched what I had just finished writing on the other side. And so I continued to embroider the reverse of the

19. José Tolentino Mendonça, "Santa Lourdes Castro", in *Diário de Notícias – Madeira, Revista Mais*, 31-1-2011, 24.

20. The film is by Manuel Pires (1942), the author of many documentary films of an experimental nature that covered Portuguese artists in the 1940s. Accessible in: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sIQM9ypB4SQ> Accessed 25 November 2019.

reverse and so on. A book without end. I did several, with different words, each page a transformation of the preceding one, neither recognisable nor legible. Shadows?”<sup>21</sup> [Img. 5]

Castro then began to work on disfiguring the written form through the replication of the reverse side of embroidery, in a process that Joana Emídio Marques has recounted as follows:

40th birthday party was held at the apartment of the writer Helder Macedo, in London. [...] On that night, [she] was wearing *lingerie* that had belonged to her grandmother, and to which she had added some embroidery. In memory of the night, she embroidered on a piece of card the date: 09-12-1970. The yellow thread that picked out the numbers left some illegible shapes on the back of the card. Lourdes embroidered those illegible shapes on another piece of card, and what once was a series of numbers now became merely abstract shapes, picked out on a white space. But the artist continued to embroider the reverse and then the reverse of the reverse and so on. And that was how the embroidered books that she produced by repeatedly using words such as LOVE, GOETHE, SHADOW [...] were born. The technique of embroidery, so ancient and domestic, had been put to use in the construction of a

21. Manuel Zimbro et. al. (coord), *Além da Sombra* (Lisboa, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian – Centro de Arte Moderna, 1992), 111.

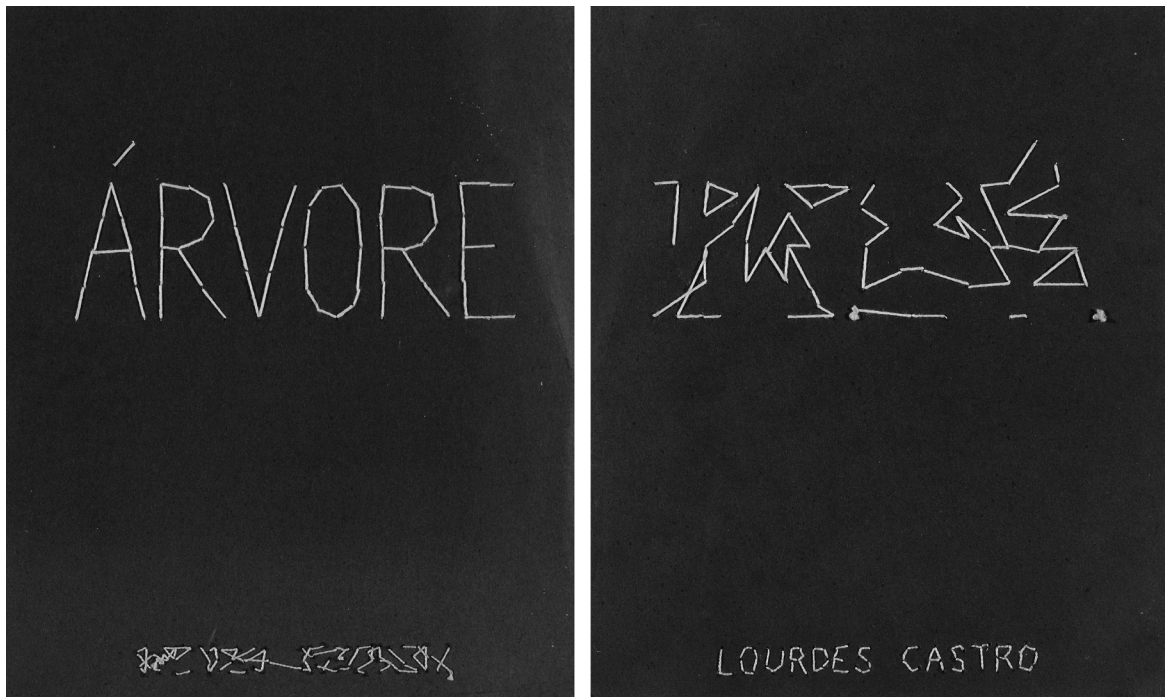


Image 5. Lourdes Castro. *Árvore / Tree*, undated Embroidered cotton thread on black cardboard 21,5x31 cm. Col. Sculptor José Rodrigues, Porto  
© Courtesy of The heirs of José Rodrigues.

piece so absolutely modern that once again it had at its centre the word. The word first codified and then shattered. The poetic symbolism of these objects is profound, ambiguous, and irredeemably seductive.<sup>22</sup>

The work of Fátima Carvalho (1954), conceived from the position of an amateur and art admirer, is also associated with the activity of women embroiderers. Carvalho recently began her career as a professional photographer with exhibitions in Portugal and Brazil, but she had previously practised art, as an amateur, for years, while she photographed the artistic and intellectual community in Porto, where she lives. Her dedication to and admiration for the communities that she photographed led her to generously distribute the photos she took among the artists, writers, and the audience who appeared in them.

To celebrate her friendship with one of the great Portuguese poets, Eugénio de Andrade (1923-2005), she had the idea of making a tablecloth. She drew the author's signature and some of his poems to mark eight places at the table, which she then embroidered in red thread. The cloth and the table are synonymous with communion and fraternity across time and cultures, and their use reveals the social protocols of a community and the personal friendships that constitute it. Each year after the work was completed in 1998, Carvalho had lunch with De Andrade and a guest at a table dressed with the tablecloth (Img. 6). She was inspired in the making of the tablecloth by a piece from the 19th century that was in her family's possession, which also used red thread embroidery and was typically used in diverse ceremonial occasions, such as vigils for the dead. Later, as a way of thanking and paying homage to the artists that visit her at home, she began to record the contour of their hands on a piece of cloth, which she would later embroider.

Carvalho's embroidered objects, which have something of the sacred about them, recall other occasions in which names have been written on tablecloths as a form of commemoration.<sup>23</sup>

A drift towards the intimate is also at play in the work of Cristina Valadas (1965), where a range of sources converge: elements of childhood and figurative strategies that she also employs in her work as a literary illustrator; a drive towards self-analysis and introspection; and the creation of a symbolic universe that can only be completely deciphered through the words of the artist. Her work thereby takes on an extraordinarily intimate nature, denoted by the recurrence of interior settings and family ties.

In the project *No Labirinto dos Afectos* [In the Labyrinth of Affection] embroidery became the privileged medium for exploring this dimension. The project was shown in a house in a small town in the centre of Portugal converted into an exhibition space.<sup>24</sup> Valadas developed her installation as a response to

22. Joana Emídio Marques, "Os livros de autor de uma artista rebelde", *Observador*, 14-7-2015. In 2015, the Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian Museum in Lisbon put on a complete retrospective of her books where the importance of embroidery and the role of the personal element and biographical memory can be verified. A film of all of the books, produced by the Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian was made available online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nnsIG3G1L3Q> Accessed 25 November 2019.

23. Rozsika Parker refers to some of these projects – a table cloth offered in 1945 to Count Folk Bernardotte in acknowledgment of the help given to women escaping Nazis persecution or the 1979 Dinner Party by Judy Chicago. Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch. Embroidery and the Making of Feminine* (London and New York, I.B.Tauris, 2017), 192 and 206.



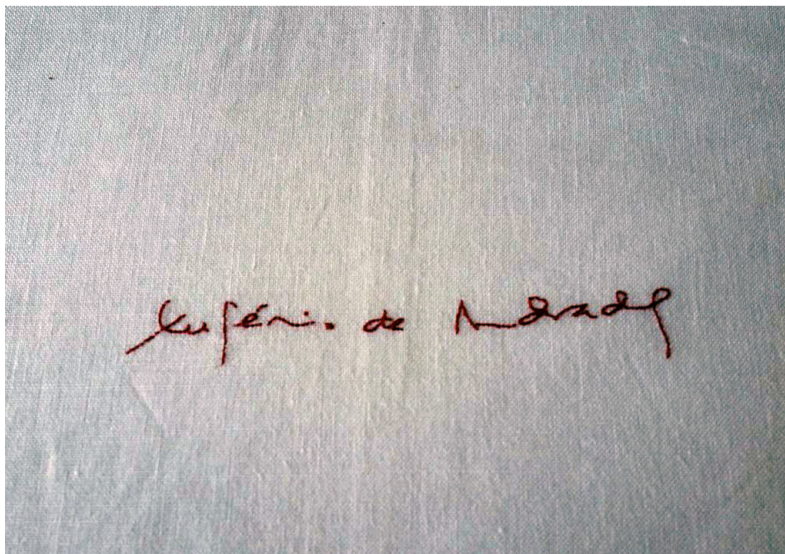
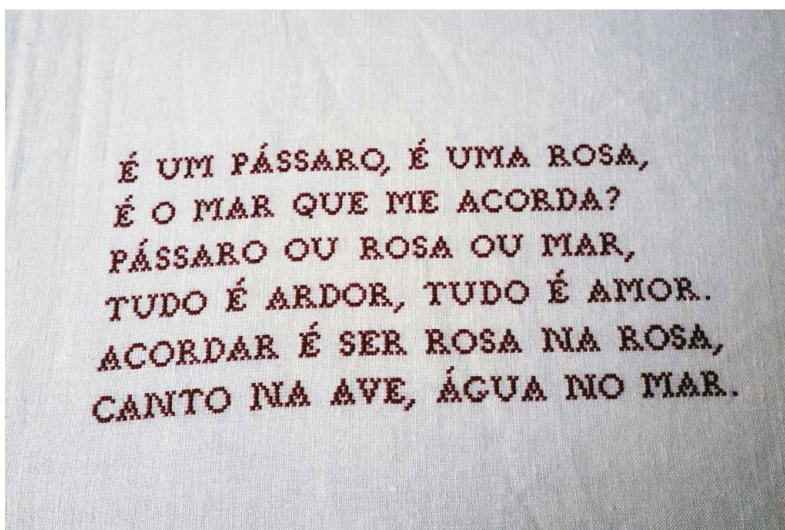


Image 6. Fátima Carvalho, Linen tablecloth embroidered with red cotton yarn dedicated to the poet Eugénio de Andrade by Fátima Carvalho, 1996-98. 240 × 180 cm. Private collection. Photo Fátima Carvalho © Courtesy the artist

the space and its original furniture, reconstructing a set of personal memories through the use of diverse textile elements were used. Embroidery then functioned as a metaphor for a life story, as a stitch-by-stitch account of personal journey. The centerpiece of the exhibition was Valadas's wedding dress, on which she embroidered colourful sentences taken from handwritten letters received years earlier. The work bears a man's name as its title, presumably that of the person who wrote the letters. They are, naturally, love letters, fixed in the folds of a dress that has been transformed into a book of memories [Img. 7].

24. "Fábrica das Histórias" run by Torres Vedras municipality.

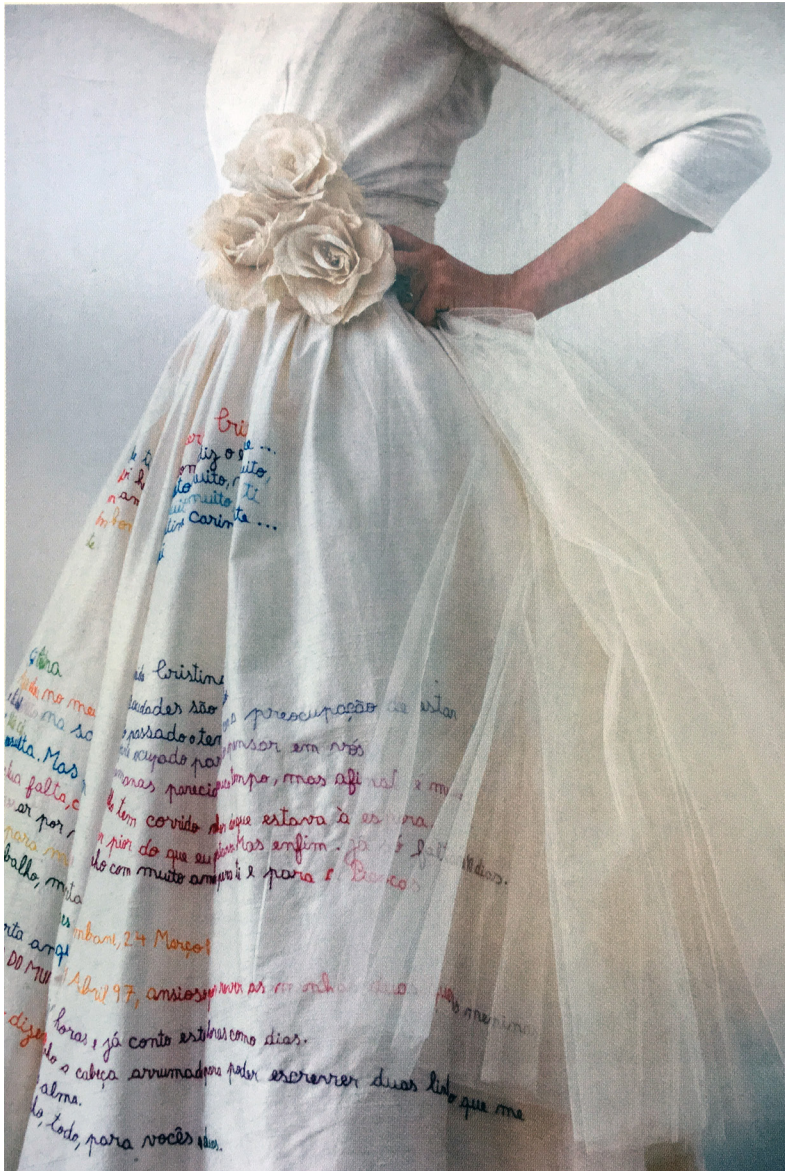


Image 7. Cristina Valadas. *Rui*, 2016. Embroidered wedding dress. Private collection. Photo Teresa Teixeira © Courtesy of Cristina Valadas.

Other works function as symbolic portraits of Valadas's family members, built from objects bearing embroidered sentences that allude to shared significant experiences. While some of these objects are everyday artefacts, others suggest a liturgical tool, as if they were objects of a cult, offerings removed from a religious context and placed in a domestic setting. The gesture of embroidering the written words alludes to an inordinate expenditure of time and to a certain form of sacrifice. Embroidering the written word is a feminine form of writing that underlines the role of the woman in creation.

In her use of ragdolls, moreover, Valadas evokes the sphere of childhood play, but also the practice of magical transference, where the will or feeling that they are imbued with leads to the fulfilment of a desired outcome. In this way, a hybrid model of work reclaims for art the kind magical sentiment that it was formerly linked with. [Img. 8]



Image 8. Cristina Valadas. *Childhood*, 2016. Rag doll Private collection. Photo Teresa Teixeira © Courtesy of Cristina Valadas.

Rute Rosas, who teaches sculpture at the Faculdade de Belas Artes of the University of Porto since 1999, has developed, throughout her artistic and academic career, different strategies for interventions, ranging from installations to performance, from the creation of sculpted objects to the renewal of the practice of tapestry in higher education. With others, she has been responsible for the transformation of the field of tapestry into what has been labeled as ‘constructed textiles,’ referring to a new approach to the use of textiles in the teaching and practice of art.

In her research Rosas centers on the concept of self-censorship, testing the limits between the public and the private and the cultural situation of women. In this context, her use of embroidery has an undeniable activist dimension, linked nonetheless to the autobiographical, as in her silk-embroidered self-portraits referenced above. Two pieces whose height matched that of the artist (1.71m), dated 2005 and 2015, are particularly interesting in this regard. Susana Vaz describes them as follows:

The works display essential characteristics of Rute Rosas’s art. On the one hand, they are self-portraits in silk thread on linen, which use the body of the artist or images of her as permanent icons of her work. On the other hand, they are carriers of a self-referential content that restates the direct relationship that the artist establishes between her current biography and the choice of technologies and language in which she executes her work. Both self-portraits are tributes to love, and their laborious and devoted execution—in the first case in traditional stitches in the style of Caldas da Rainha, and in the second in stem stitches—is a plastic and poetic example of a loved life, representing the dynamic but intimate choreography of each one of the tiny and tightly repeated circuits of the thread of affection, from the single unit to a filling and global construction.<sup>25</sup>

In another portrait from 2012, Rosas depicts herself facing away, using a weave that clearly evokes a card destined to be woven. This faceless self-portrait is accompanied by raw cotton threads falling vertically, and belongs to a series of four works entitled *Um Crime Perfeito* [A Perfect Crime] influenced by texts by Jean Baudrillard<sup>26</sup> and José Saramago<sup>27</sup> that deal with the death of reality and its evidences, the complex relation between images and the real, and the indifference to images as a social crime. The piece presents a critical metaphor: a web of suspended cotton yarns that can not be woven, a technical drawing impossible to implement in weaving. What we see, then, is a useless object laying out an impossible project. (Img. 9)

25. Available on the artist’s website: <http://pre2010.ruterosas.com/pt/works/dez-anos-depois/> Accessed 22 November 2019.

26. Jean Baudrillard, *Le Crime Parfait* (Paris, Éditions Galilée, 1995).

27. José Saramago, *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira* (Lisboa, Editorial Caminho, 1995).

Image 9. Rute Rosas. *Um crime perfeito* #4, 2012. Cotton thread, wood, iron, aluminium and drawing paper 210 × 70 × 17 cm. Col. Faculdade de Belas Artes Universidade do Porto. Courtesy of Rute Rosas.



As an example of Rosas's approach to the relationship between performance, photography, and textile, we may cite the work *Recordações de nós I-IV* [Memories of us I-IV, 2008], a series of photographs produced in co-authorship with Cátia Oliveira, a student of whom she was tutor. The photographs present the two female artists in separate light boxes, where they are both seen nude in the act of reeling a skein of wool, one holding the skein and the other rolling

the thread. The word *nós*, in the title, adds an element of ambiguity, due to its various meanings in the Portuguese language: *nós* refers to the first person plural pronoun ('us') but can also be read as meaning 'knots,' indicating emotional ties. (Img. 10)

## THE FEMINIST ACCENTUATION

Clara Menéres (1943-2018), is the author of some of the emblematic pieces of feminist art in Portugal, in which she explored all manner of sculptural materials, including traditional materials like wood, clay, plaster, granite, slate, marble, white limestone, bronze, steel, iron, and copper; but also synthetic resins, plastic, mirrors, and light sources such as fluorescent lamps, neons, LEDs and fibre optic, as well as earth, plant matter and textile materials. Menéres engaged just as flexibly with different media, from sculpture to performance, from drawing to installation or photography, seeking out historical sources and conversing with non-artistic practices such as scientific illustration, vernacular architecture, traditional methods of ploughing and cultivating land, and domestic artisanal technologies such as embroidery or sewing. Menéres was a controversial and often misunderstood figure, not only for consistently refusing to restrict her work to conventionally accepted parameters, but also for having worked in activist circles and having created a large body of sacred art. Thus, she was used to confrontation and controversy, which led her to state that “[s]culpture is an art that continuously interferes with space and with people, in other words, it is a permanent source of conflict.”<sup>28</sup>

In December 1967 Menéres presented her *Exposição de Bonecos* [Ragdoll Exhibition] at Galeria Divulgação, an important art space in Porto. The exhibition

28. Mariana Camarate Campos, “Conservação na arte contemporânea. Curadoria como possível estratégia de conservação? Estudo de duas obras apresentadas na exposição Alternativa Zero” (Master’s dissertation, Faculdade de Belas Artes da Universidade de Lisboa, 2011), 124.



Image 10. Rute Rosas (and Cátia Oliveira). *Recordações de nós*, 2008. Photography. Private collection. Courtesy of Rute Rosas.

aimed to renew sculpture by resorting to means of production drawn from the domestic environment, typically detached from the artistic field. According to her own statements, she specifically used materials dating from the births of her children in the 1960s, further reinforcing the work's rootedness in the family context and autobiographical circumstances<sup>29</sup> to the artisanal also allowed Menéres to centre her attention on the work of women, typically undervalued and rendered invisible; as hand sewn felt dolls or machine sewn cotton dolls brought to mind motherhood and its related know-how, the work that Menéres produced a few years later, in the 1970s, would add hints of irony and criticism. In these works, in which she used the kind of silk thread embroidery traditionally taught to women as part of a set of feminine labours, Menéres introduced erotic connotations, thereby charging this eminently moralizing technique with a notable sense of tension. These works, which appropriate a medium characterizing the cultural construction of gender in order to bring it into question, recall the words of Rozsika Parker: “Historically, through the centuries, [embroidery] has provided both a weapon of resistance for women and functioned as a source of constraint. It has promoted submission to the norms of feminine obedience and offered both psychological and practical means to independence” Parker then cites the writer Colette, who compellingly describes the potential for feminine in the act of embroidery: “[Colette] writes, ‘... she is silent when she sews, silent for hours on end... she is silent, and she—why not write it down, this word that frightens me—she is thinking.’”<sup>30</sup> [Img. 11] Just so, through her use of

29. Statement recorded and quoted by Lúcia Almeida Matos in: *Escultura em Portugal no século XX (1910-1969)* (Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia, 2007), p. 527.

30. Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch. Embroidery and the Making of Feminine* (London and New York, I.B.Tauris, 2017), xix.

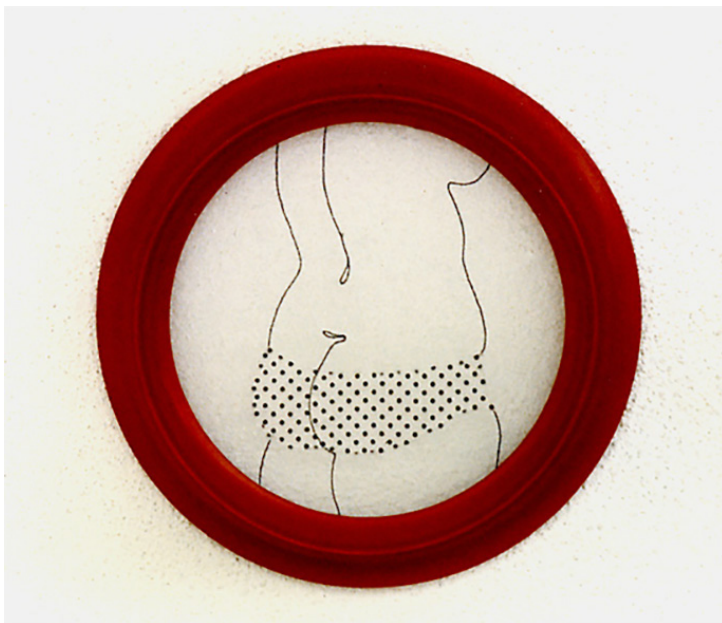


Image 11. Clara Menéres. Untitled, 1972. Silk thread embroidery on silk organza and lacquered frame, Ø 30 cm. Private collection Courtesy of the heirs of Clara Menéres.

embroidery Menéres enacts the affirmation of women's capacity for transforming their tasks into a space of thought, autonomy and freedom.

The following generations of artists has explored these issues in further depth. One of the most outstanding among them is Susana Piteira (1963), who studied at the Facultat de Belles Arts da Universitat de Barcelona and has been exhibiting since 1991. Piteira also uses textiles in conjunction with a wide range of materials like marble, glass, or ceramics, often combined with audio-visual media. Piteira has created a universe of shapes that systematically evoke the female body, either through obvious sexual markings or more subtle references to vegetation and reinterpretations. Some of her shapes suggest protection and shelter through an extremely soft and delicate array of materials that refer to the possibility of touch. Typically these shapes are put into play in performative contexts and installations where the body and eroticism, viewed from a feminine perspective, lead to a discussion of the cultural mechanisms that condition, limit, and construct the female gender, often by way of references to history, religion, art, and the everyday. Running counter to some trends in contemporary art, Piteira never shies away from work that combines artisanal rigour and technique with artistic erudition, even as she remains open to experimenting with mediums and vernacular languages in projects in which textile plays an important role.

In her project *Art Al Vent* (2008), produced as part of a public art project in the small town of Gata, in the province of Alicante in southern Spain, Piteiras appropriates the tradition of decking out the balconies of houses along the route of a parade. For the project, artists of different nationalities collaborated with art students of the region and were invited to create bedspreads to present on the balconies of town buildings, thereby involving the local community. In her contribution Piteira remained faithful to her themes and presented a work that featured machine embroidery in red cotton on raw cloth. [Img. 12] Rather than a bedspread, the material suggests a sheet on which the body reclines or lives, and the shape and colour suggests the female anatomy, blood and life, thus bringing private elements into the public sphere.

The piece *Knídia* (2014) is configured like a sculpture and indeed refers to Greek mythology and the Aphrodite of Knidos, believed to be one of the first sculptures of the female nude in Ancient Greece. Starting from the notion of the attractiveness of the female nude and the abusive use of its image, the artist constructed a piece based on a corset, an item of female clothing designed to model the body. [Img. 13] The corset is a source of ambiguity. Does it glorify or subjugate the body? Is it an erotic instrument or an instrument of constraint? The smoothness of the velvet and the warmth of the chosen colour contrast with the underlying metallic structure of the apparatus, revealing the tension



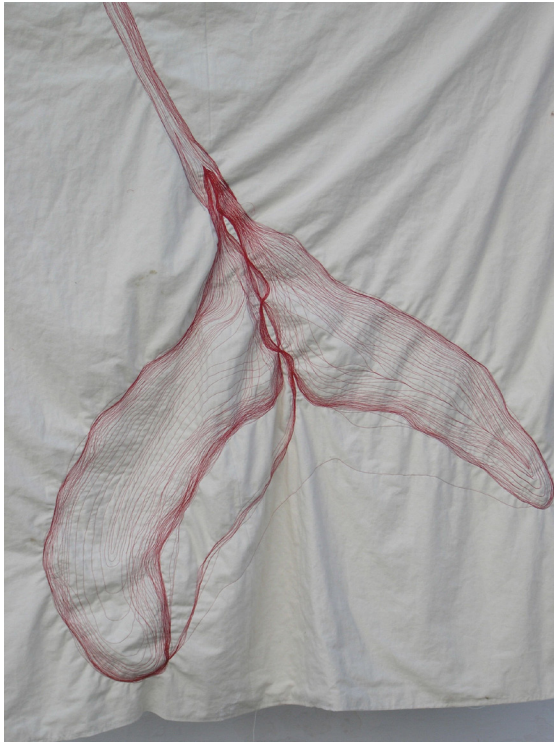


Image 12. Susana Piteira. *Untitled*, 2008. Free machine embroidery with cotton threads on raw cloth, 225 × 163cm. Col. Art Al Vent. Photo Mário Reis © Courtesy of Susana Piteira.



Image 13. Susana Piteira. *Knidia*, 2014. Cotton velvet and metallic elements, 120 × 80 × 40 cm. Private collection. Photo Susana Piteira © Courtesy of Susana Piteira.

between the medium and the effect of the work, analogous to other examples mentioned above.

Piteiras develops a similar strategy in works like *Noli me tangere* (2019), whose texture and shape invite us to approach it, contradicting the injunction that functions as the work's title, which refers to the words addressed, according to a religious tradition, by a resuscitated Jesus to Mary Magdalene. The work is a suspended, cocoon-like structure made of velvet and strips of cotton, with a narrow fissure through which one may peer inside. Read as a suggestion or a challenge addressed to the spectator, the title advocates restraint over precipitation, and acknowledgement over possession. (Img. 14)

In all the examples discussed above we inevitable come up against a questionable reading of the feminine domestic world: on the one hand, it is true that, as these works suggest, certain tasks and ways of being can be read as representing a position of autonomy and power; on the other, they can also be read as forms of constraint and external control. In all of these cases, the artists are interested in reinforcing the ambiguity of the situation. When we witness the activity of embroidery or sewing in the family environment, this may well remind us of a



Image 14. Susana Piteira. *Noli me tangere*, 2019. Cotton velvet, cotton ribbons, plastic tape, 340 × 140 × 100cm. Private collection. Photo Susana Piteira © Courtesy the artist.

happier time and cherished people and moments; but our thoughts may just as easily be captured by the sense of routine, of a tiresome doing and undoing that one wishes to escape. The different artists that we have covered here plainly manifest their awareness of this duplicity.

Álvaro Lapa (1939-2006) is the only male artist to be considered in this survey, and in this case the use of embroidery can be seen as a proclamation of non-artisticity. A self-taught artist and writer with an academic background in philosophy, Lapa worked as professor of Aesthetics at the Escola Superior de Belas-Artes in Porto between 1976 and 2000. From early in his career embroidery would play an important role, as can be seen in *As profecias de Abdul Varetti, escritor falhado* [The Prophecies of Abdul Varetti, failed writer, 1972], formed by 22 elements with texts embroidered on canvas and mounted on iron. Abdul

Varetti is an alter-ego of sorts for the artist, a creation of his with whom he dialogues and coexists. As Estrella de Diego has explained, this fictional character is “[o]ne of [Lapa’s] most fascinating inventions [...], a thirteenth-century author, a failed writer, [...] part of the fiction of his ventriloquism.”<sup>31</sup> The embroidered texts in the work point to ways of irreverence, imagination, indissociation between art, life, and love, calling for the emancipation of artists and predicting a new social order described as “an integral anarchism” and a tribal experience. [Img. 15] Through rude embroidery, misaligned words, and slightly irregular iron bars, Lapa signals his desire to escape from the formalism of the fine arts, the aesthetics of visuality, and technical accuracy. The work thus proclaims Lapa’s commitment to countercultural practices of deskilling and anti-art, and his preference for direct forms of artistic practice that would eventually turn him into a mythical figure in the context of Portuguese art.<sup>32</sup> Lapa refers to himself as a deserter, someone who draws back instinctively on the way to form.<sup>33</sup> His work actively remains on the margins of artistic tradition and official discourse, and he regards embroidery as the appropriate technique for this program. Estrella de Diego views this choice as resulting from the influence of feminist art: “A. Varetti and A. Lapa meet again in the gaps of those embroidered canvases—is this not what 1970s women did at the margin to be heroes?—, those tensioned canvases, which are so radical that they never found their niche in the history of art as it

31. Estrella de Diego, “The artist as a ventriloquist and other accounts of the periphery”, in Álvaro Lapa. *No Tempo Todo*. (Porto, Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Serralves, 2018), 324.

32. Miguel von Hafe Perez, “Álvaro Lapa: Platex Modernity”, in Álvaro Lapa. *No Tempo Todo*. (Porto, Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Serralves, 2018), 316-322.

33. Álvaro Lapa. *No Tempo Todo*. (Porto, Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Serralves, 2018), 225.

34. Estrella de Diego, “The artist as a ventriloquist and other accounts of the periphery”, in Álvaro Lapa. *No Tempo Todo*. (Porto, Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Serralves, 2018), 325.

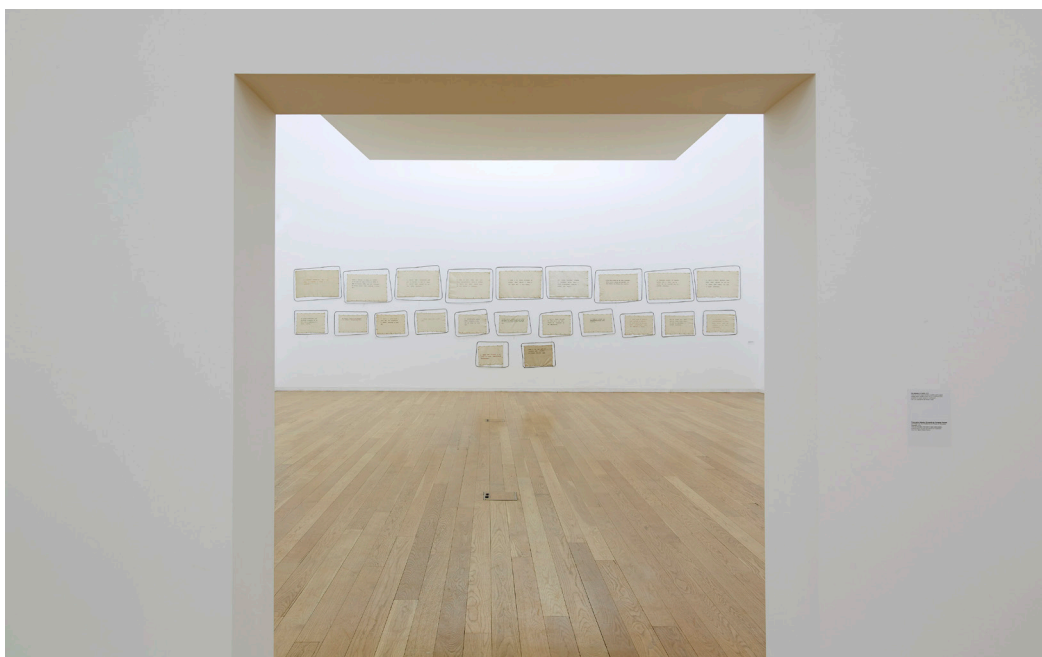


Image 15. Álvaro Lapa. *As profecias de Abdul Varetti, escritor falhado / The Prophecies of Abdul Varetti, failed writer*, 1972. Exhibition view: “Álvaro Lapa: No tempo todo”, Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Serralves, Porto, February 8 to May 20, 2018. Photo Filipe Braga © Fundação de Serralves, Porto.

has been told.”<sup>34</sup> The use of embroidery by Lapa is, in that sense, instrumental in nature: he has chosen it as a vehicle of resistance and marginality in relation to the artistic system.

## CLOSING REMARKS

We have covered diverse Portuguese artists whose works inscribe embroidery, sewing, and textiles within contemporary arts practice. These are works that celebrate the everyday in the form of books, clothing, or bedclothes that coexist with traditional art forms such as pieces of sculpture, objects, portraits, and self-portraits. The making of textiles is often a way of visibilizing learning, not just formal and academic, but also informal, to which many women have been exposed as a tool for imposing a traditional understanding of the female gender as an identity. This is why some artists recover traditional stitches from certain regions of Portugal, or return to the stem stitch that they learned in primary school, as part of the official education before the democratic period. But the option for embroidery can also denote a break with fine art techniques and the academic context, becoming a gesture of rebellion against generally accepted artistic principles.

The referential context of these projects is often the house, seen from the female perspective and from a critical point of view. Several installations mimic the domestic universe, evoking experiences of captivity and escape in order to represent the condition of women and artists caught between subjection and freedom. When artists work with family materials, recovered from the past, they may bring into play equivocal impressions that derive from an internalized memory, rather than from experience, allowing us to see to what extent memory must be treated as material for inquiry and experimentation.

The drift towards the intimate and the sentimental often leads into the poetical and metaphorical, drawing on connections between the embroidery thread and the flow of life; the color red is often used, suggesting associations to blood, wounds, sacrifice, and sin, but also to life, energy, and celebration. Many of the projects explore the tension, conflict even, between the media used (smooth, soft, and delicate) and the effect that they produce here. These frictions and ambiguities are among the aspects that contribute the most to the expressiveness and significance of the works discussed here. Overall, these works suggest the nuanced ways in which textiles manifest a potential to generate resistance, whether artistic, social, political or economic.



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