

# THE FIBER STUDIO

fiber art and design inspiration

June 5, 2018

## Cocaine and Cupcakes: Embroidered Vintage Linens



Israeli born artist Orly Cogan has been creating semi-autobiographical feminist fiber art for over two decades, exhibiting throughout the US and in Europe. Cogan's subversive textiles use contrasting archetypes to highlight society's constantly shifting expectations of women.

These archetypes come in the form of cotton candy conventions of femininity, crossed with 'unladylike', funny and erotic scenes. A woman sits amid pastel-coloured fairy

cakes: another holds out a saucepan for a man to ejaculate into. One woman frolics amid blossoming rosebuds, swooping swallows and butterflies: another rides a giant phallus in the manner of a witch on a broomstick.

With these overlapping scenes, Cogan provokes certain questions:

‘What role do women want to play in society today? Who do we want to be? What kind of relationships do we want to have? Who are our role models? What are we teaching our children?’

Cogan uses vintage linens as the base for her works. She finds tablecloths, aprons and other ‘feminine’ decorative fabrics, some with prints, some hand-made. In appropriating these objects, Cogan pays due to the women of the past who were filling different roles with these linens. With the domesticity of the fabrics, Cogan invites us into the private realm of the woman.

The techniques she employs; hand embroidery, fabric painting and applique, speak of ‘women’s work’, while her overall style, childlike and whimsical, suggests an innocence not shared by the protagonists of her works. Her subjects do not always fit their assigned gender roles and there seems to be general confusion about where they should fit in, if anywhere at all.

The work directly below is one of my favourites, titled ‘Sugar ‘n’ Spice ‘n’ Everything Nice’. Nine female figures recline in the centre of a vintage bed linen, separated from five male figures by an embroidered floral border.

The women are all either nude or almost nude; clad in knee-high socks and knickers. They provocatively nibble at muffins, cuddle kittens, speak on the phone or sprawl out, seemingly daydreaming. The men on the outside are nondescript, appear to be waiting, wanting to connect with the women. Is the female figure on the phone speaking to one of the men on the outside? Are these women trapped by the men? Trapped in their gender roles? Or are they hiding? Taking refuge?

When I asked Cogan the role of the male figure in her work she answered:

‘They play a part that is present but not always necessary or a major part of the story. Similar to how women have been portrayed in contemporary narratives, nice to look at and have around but not a particular major part of the bigger theme of what is being said and, in a way, that is saying something...’

What I love about Cogan’s work is that the more you look, the more you’ll find. On close inspection, you’ll notice symbolic details like the ticking clock placed on the abdomen of a reclining woman in ‘Sugar ‘n’ Spice. Some of the smaller details are humorous, like a couple having sex on a rhino’s back, but there’s an overall sombre tone to the scenes too. Girls laying on the floor snort cocaine, Alice in Wonderland holds a giant cake with knives sticking out of it, a dejected looking woman sits on the outskirts of what looks like

a major bitching session, and another female figure sits overwhelmed, hand to forehead, surrounded by newborn baby paraphernalia.

I asked Cogan about the symbols in her work, specifically the constant references to food. I wanted to know if the presence of tea and cake was a reference to woman's role in polite society, as homemaker and provider? Or is it more to do with self-image and body issues in a society that insists we must all be skinny to be successful?

'My narratives tell stories using visual symbols that often have more than one reference to an old fairy-tale or biblical story (like the apple or a shoe). Some objects for me have several meanings, for example, sweets. Sometimes they are used as code for indulgence and decadence, other times they are portraying guilt or gluttony or obsession, body image, self-confidence, or the opposite, depending on the context within the realm of each piece. Same with drugs, I use it as a visual language for temptation, obsession, addiction or losing yourself in the desire to find another world...'

Whether coy or flirtatious, passive or assertive, all the women in these works seem to be acting out roles, or occasionally, and more importantly, lingering somewhere in between roles. In 'Fairy Tale' there is even a dot-to-dot stitching of a bodiless woman, yet to be complete. The women seem to be trying to figure out where to next; connecting the dots and negotiating the boundaries that define our relationships and our identities. Learning, in their world of candy coloured stitches, how to be a woman.

Cogan has two upcoming shows, her New York solo show 'Summer Lovin'" at the Hudson Valley Center For Contemporary Art, Peekskill NY, Opening June 10, 2018. And a group show 'In Her Hands', at the Robert Mann Gallery, NY, curated by Orly Cogan and Julie Peptio. The group show is a collection of portraits by women artists of female candidates coming up for the US elections. Head over to her website to see more of her work here.

