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Embroiderers' Guild

embroidery

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Rachel Sumner's embroidery
NAUTICAL BUT NICE



profile

Beside the seaside

Inspired by the untamed, rugged beauty of Devon, textile artist Rachel Sumner enshrines a fascination with nature, landscape and the sea in her vibrant embroidery



Detail from an experimental embroidery, *Lighthouse*, 2007

THE BRIGHT COLOURS IN RACHEL SUMNER'S often nautically themed embroidered images are what first draw you in: subtle, complementary shades of blue, turquoise and sea-green, with a judicious use of reddish-brown highlights.

Then it's the detail in the montage that keeps you looking. Is that a wavy length of fishing line that she has incorporated? How did she stitch all that ship's rigging without getting in a tangle? You imagine hours of advance planning.

But the Devon based textile artist says she can't sit down to a blank canvas and labour over a design. It is only when she surrounds herself with a pile of fabric remnants from her substantial stash that Sumner can start a new embroidery. With a concept in mind, she picks out relevant colours and builds up a picture layer by layer, stitching as she goes.

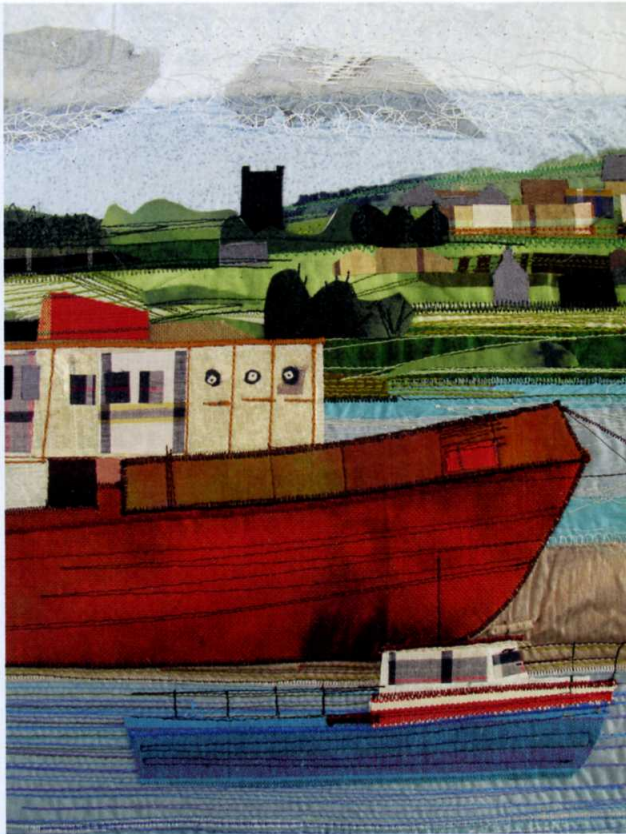
'I keep putting things together and a story evolves, usually something that is a surprise to me. What I like is that people look at the pictures and create their own stories as well'

'I have a making process that I'm happy with, which frees me to be creative,' Sumner says. 'I use a lot of found materials and vintage fabrics as well as things I've dyed myself – fairly plain, not too patterned. I keep putting things together and a story evolves, usually something that is a



PHOTOGRAPHY: CAROLINE REES

Rachel Sumner Stargazy Pie, 2010



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Although Sumner, 51, studied fine-art painting at Maidstone College of Art, with textiles as a subsidiary subject, various jobs and a decade-long sojourn in France followed before she reconnected with her creative side. She got back into the swing with silk painting, which was popular in France, then, when she returned to live in England in 1999, she started experimenting with fabric montages.

'It's really important how you relate to the landscape where you live. It filters through. I can leave the house and do a 90-minute walk full of marvellous things.'

'I wanted to express things that wouldn't work on a silk painting and I started playing with bits of material that I hadn't been able to throw away. I don't know where the idea came from, though, even as a child, I always liked combining things to make something else. It was a breath of fresh air to find a medium I was happy with because, at college, I couldn't quite find my own technique.'

Sumner readily admits that the sales and promotional aspects of her craft are not her forte but collaborating on joint shows with her sister Mary, a painter based in mid-Devon, helped to ease the way. Today, Sumner's textiles are exhibited in galleries across the West Country; she also participates regularly in north Devon's open studios and Art in Action show in Oxfordshire, as well as undertaking commissions.

Some of her work tells tall tales; other pieces are more literal, 'an exercise in observation and interpretation'. She might photograph a scene as a reminder but she doesn't do

a detailed drawing. 'At art college, you were taught you had to get a sketchbook, then this whole process followed. That doesn't work for me. And it's only been in the past few years that I've realised it doesn't matter. It all happens on the actual piece with me.'

She agrees that her first response is to colour. 'I like colours that are quite jarring on first impressions, then it's how to make them work together that makes me want to do the whole landscape.'

Whereas some artists are stimulated by virgin vistas, Sumner enjoys mining a location that is familiar: in her case, the Taw-Torridge estuary. 'It's really important how you relate to the landscape where you live. It filters through. I can leave the house and do a 90-minute walk full of marvellous things.'

'I love North Devon's untamedness. You've got sandy beaches, then sometimes you see snow on top of Exmoor, which is beautiful. You get seagulls following the tractors in the fields, then there are old boats with peeling paintwork. Looking at all those colours under different light conditions inspires me.'

It's also a case of seeking out the quirky detail. 'I was on the top of a bus one day and it was pouring with rain,' she recalls. 'There was a perfect formation of sheltering seagulls on the spars of a wrecked boat, so I had to go home and start a picture. It's quite a lengthy process so you've got to have something that retains the interest.' The local port of Bideford's two bridges are favourite shapes: 'They give structure to the view'.

For anyone familiar with Sumner's output, it's no surprise to learn that her first embroidered picture featured a fish in the sky. 'It is a theme that has stayed with me,' she smiles. 'We just bob around on the surface of the sea but there is this amazing universe beneath the waves, so I was juxtaposing it with what happens above. It seems amazingly primitive now but I quite

