

Artisan Embroidery: Emily Jo Gibbs

Description

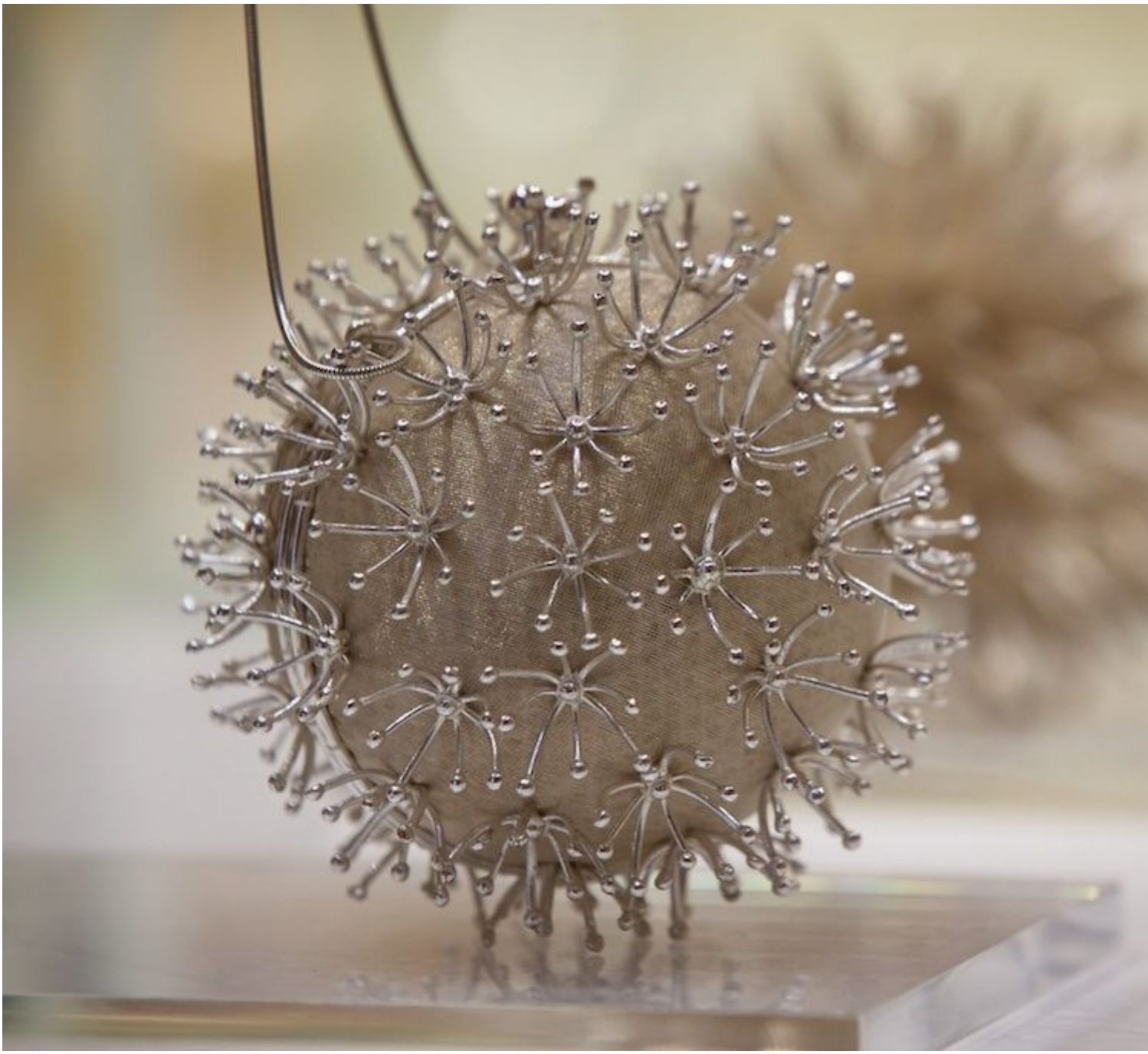
The first of our embroiderers is Emily Jo Gibbs,â?? a British artist specializing in hand-stitched textiles. A member of the 62 Group, she became internationally known for her exquisite luxury handbags, but has recently found more artistic acclaim for her embroidered portraits. Her unique ability to bring objects and drawings to life with embroidery means she has made a distinct space for herself, turning a simple craft into a celebrated art and business for herself. Her pieces can be found in the permanent collections at the Victoria and Albert Museum, The Crafts Council in London and the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston.

Emily Jo Gibbs in Lâ??uomo Vogue, October 1995. Photo: Emily Jo Gibbs

Emily began her career in the early 1990s after graduating with a degree in Wood Metal and Plastics degree from Wolverhampton University. She started making fashion accessories in textiles and metal in her final term and after a brief spell of studying shoe making and leatherwork Emily embarked on her handbag business with early interest from illustrious designers and press such as Koji Tatsuno and American Vogue. Her early handbags involved a incredible amount of work, each involving intricate embroidery as well as hand painting, the fusion of metal leaf to silk organza, the construction of sterling silver frames, clasps and finely wrought chain handles.

Robin purse. Photo: Emily Jo Gibbs

Emilyâ??s talent lies in combining different materials and her handbags, which are more like objets, were inspired by her observations of nature. Emily describes how: â??Å?I find beauty in tiny little pieces of moss, grass and peeling bark. I try to describe something that is extremely beautiful, very fragile and short-lived, using a palette of color and texture. I am fascinated by the contrasts between materials, the texture and the shimmer of the beaten metal against the soft matt colors of the silk and wool.â?•Â• Some of her bags feature delicately embroidered birds on silk organza, while one involves highly intricate beadwork to simulate the bag as a dandelion. Others show beaten metal insects as the focus, nestled on a bed of embroidered flowers.



Dandelion purse. Photo: Emily Jo Gibbs

Her early work was fashion-focused and while beautiful and intricate like art, was also highly functional. Emily then went in a slightly different direction, where she explored new techniques under the theme of nests. Her focus was less on embroidery here as she let go of the traditional bag form slightly, incorporating silver wire and using her basket making skills to produce more

unusual handbag pieces. Emily describes how she is â??Å?fascinated by the contrasts between materials, using a palette of color and texture I try to describe something that is extremely beautiful, fragile and short-lived. However, the functionality of the object is still important to her and she says how she enjoys â??Å?the notion that my work could be whisked away from the mantle piece and be taken out to a partyâ?•Â•.

Woodland series. Photo: Emily Jo Gibbs

In 2005, Emily won an award from Craft Central to create a whole new body of work, which was for a new audience. She says how she found it extremely liberating creating this collection as the pieces she was making had less

constraints and allowed her to explore new techniques whilst still using her skills from making handbags. Emily became interested in the idea of â??Ë?nature tablesâ?? that â??Å?give gravitas and reference to collections of knobbly sticks, grass and other natural treasures. She started making hand-embroidered drawings of sticks in jam jars and really enjoyed the quiet beauty of such every day items. Her strong sense of color and proportion and the subtle ways she uses tiny colored stitches really brings life to her fine sketches. This saw her transition from running a fashion-driven handbag business to establishing herself more as an artist, which she admits she found quite difficult to navigate.

After her still life work came portraits â?? Emily wanted to make work that was personally and creatively rewarding so embarked on a series of embroidered portraits of her family. These studies are constructed from layers of silk organza, linen and hand stitch and examine the relationships between people. In her exhibition â??Ë?Stitching, a love storyâ?? Emily describes how the work is about her journey as a parent, the joys and frustrations as well as reflecting on her own upbringing and priorities. For example, embroidered into a portrait of her son are phrases which explore the contradictory messages parents give their children and expresses her hopes, fears and aspirations for her son Fred. Another portrait of Fred and her other son Bill is titled â??Ë?Why donâ??t you â??Ë?turn off your screens and do something more interesting insteadâ??, inspired by the boysâ?? unrelenting quest to play computer games â?? Emilyâ??s childhood was filled with making things and regrets that theirs is not.

Billy 2011 â??Donâ??t rush, it takes time to do things wellâ?? â?? Photo: Emily Jo Gibbs

However, Emily continues to pass on her love of making to students as she teaches at West Dean College, eager to impart her â??Å?knowledge and passion for color and texture and small precious packagesâ?•Â•. Emily also runs workshops at museums and galleries, teaching aspiring makers how to make their own bags and sharing her artistic techniques. Her humble approach and eagerness to pass on her skills and love of making is so important particularly because, as she observes herself, we live in an age where children are more interested in playing computer games.



â??Slaleyâ??. Photo: Emily Jo Gibbs

Emily herself appreciates the slower way of life, sitting at her kitchen table, sewing with a view of her woodland garden, and advises aspiring makers that â??Å?hand crafted products by their very nature are slow to make, donâ??t under value your time or you will never have a businessâ?•Â•. Although she has been doing it for years, Emily embodies the recent revival of going back to a slower-paced life, mastering a craft and turning it into a business; with her teaching and workshops she will continue to inspire a new generation of makers looking to do the same.

CATEGORY

1. EMBROIDERY
2. TEXTILES IN HISTORY & ART

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