

Bring me sunshine

Louise Gardiner is one of Britain's best-loved embroiderers, we discover how her stitches are entertaining both the great and good

Meet an artist who likes to spread happiness wherever she goes. Her work, she says, 'celebrates life, has a dance and makes people laugh'.

Louise Gardiner has a great way of breaking the ice when beginning one of her talks to Embroiderers' Guild branches. She shows them a slide of herself wearing glasses and a goofy smile, with chocolate cake embedded in her teeth and announces: 'I am a very professional artist!'

You don't have to meet Louise – or view the slide – to understand that she likes to make people smile: you just have to look at her work. She says the comical nature of her stitched drawings 'is a reaction against the drudgery and the darker aspects of life. It's the love of the daft: of humour in the face of adversity. We're such a funny race, the British.'

The Embroiderers' Guild holds a special place in her heart. 'I've been doing talks for ten years and the Guild has made me what I am today. I'm talking about the women; the backbone of Britain. They've supported me and given me the confidence to think: I'm damned if I'm going to give up.' Pretty and vivacious, Louise says her work is 'a

mixture of celebrating life and trying to capture moments of frivolity. Or emotion. Or love. Or ridiculousness. It's like dancing round the kitchen to mad music when you're feeling down.'

A farmer's daughter from Cheshire, with a younger brother and older sister, she says: 'I have tremendous respect for my parents and the way they brought me up. I had such an idyllic childhood. I was made to work on the farm, milking the cows and all that jazz.'

'I have the innate desire to be creative and produce things that make people happy'

It comes as a surprise, then, to discover that no one in her family ever picked up a needle and thread except to sew on a button. She admits she can't stand sewing on buttons. 'I have a love-hate relationship with sewing,' says Louise. 'Doing it for a living is extremely tough – and it's not the embroidery itself. It's bloody hard work so I'm not going to spend all this time doing it if I'm not going to get anywhere with it.'

At school, she didn't do particularly well at her A Levels but liked art, so







applied to do a foundation course. 'I chose Goldsmiths; I liked the name,' she explains. 'And I liked the idea of going to London. Having grown up in a little village where I knew everyone, the big city held an irresistible attraction. I didn't know what I was letting myself in for.'

It was at Goldsmiths, back in the early 1990s, that she began working with textiles. 'Some bugger put me on a sewing machine and ruined my life,' she laughs. 'I know who it is and I'm going to get her.'

Reality check

'People think that being an artist is a glamorous lifestyle,' says Louise. 'But if you think that doing embroidery for a living is wonderfully creative, you need to take a reality check: making a living from what you produce is an uphill struggle. The success comes with producing something that sells. And you have to make people feel they can justify buying funny work because it's beautifully crafted.'

From her studio, on the top floor of an old industrial building in Bristol, Louise looks out over a crowded cityscape. The acquisition of the studio, four years ago, was a catalyst, strengthening Louise's resolve to be a success. She had gained an MA in illustration at Manchester Metropolitan University in 2001, following this with a full-time teaching job.

Teaching hindered her personal development she explains, because as commissions came in, she had little time to work on them. 'When I got the studio, I thought I've got to get my name

out there if I'm going to survive,' she says. Louise works to a punishing schedule. Typically, she works for 10 or 12 hours a day. 'Last year I did 12 exhibitions, two public commissions, taught at the V&A (Victoria and Albert Museum, London) for two days on machine embroidery, taught at Newport as a part-time tutor one day a week and did the *Saggy Boobs* book,' she says.

The book, produced by the NHS and written by Valerie Finigan, dispels common myths about breast feeding and is peppered with Louise's light-hearted illustrations; it earned her a Parliamentary award.

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'A freelance career means working not only all day but at evenings and weekends,' she says. 'Marketing, emailing, contacting people is about 80 per cent of what I do. The computer is at home, so in some ways that's a blessing. At my studio I get on with the work. A typical day is John Humphries at eight in the morning, check emails, possibly buy an apple, then walk or cycle to the studio in time for Woman's Hour.'

Louise has quite a way with words and an infectious sense of humour. On her website, she states that her work derives from 'the minestrone memory I have for sights and sounds' and she has

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built her reputation on a parade of stylised, comical characters: dancing ladies and bow-tied gents. Her more recent work, however, is a departure from this: it is larger, a lot more ornate, and floral.

'It's not just about maturing and having the confidence to do new work,' she says. 'I am an artist. I want to be taken seriously.' On the day of my visit, she has just picked up her latest piece from the framer: a large square canvas featuring a rather serious-looking owl.

Working it out

Louise says of her work: 'I know it's sewing but I think of it as mark-making.' She combines freehand machine embroidery with flat areas of colour created with appliqué or the application of acrylic paint, 'in an attempt to free myself from the restriction of the medium'.

Her latest work was born of a desire to do more drawing. 'I know I can draw and I like drawing properly but I can't afford the time,' she says. 'The floral pieces came about because I felt I wasn't drawing enough. I love geraniums, I had some in the studio, and I thought



Louise Gardiner

Louise Gardiner, now an established British artist and illustrator, grew up on a dairy farm in Cheshire. She creates a world of weird and wonderful characters and creatures in order to make us laugh in a 'longer than planned' career as a 'modern embroideress'. Lousie has helped push this niche art form in new directions and has continuously promoted stitch as an exciting, rich medium, with strong associations with drawing and our cultural heritage.

Following an art foundation at Manchester Metropolitan University, Louise then graduated from Goldsmith's College, London with a Textiles BA (Hons) in 1994 and later in 2001 she completed an MA Illustration back at Manchester Met. After yo-yoing between the big smoke and the North West, Louise secured a studio in Bristol, enabling her to develop larger scale, more ambitious projects and work full-time in an artistic community.

Louise combines the exciting and intricate medium of free machine embroidery with her passion for drawing and says she can drive a sewing machine 'like an Aston Martin!'



Louise Gardiner

The Embroiderers' Guild awarded Louise one of its annual Scholarships for her embroidery in 2005 and she continues to exhibit nationwide. She has been selected for Art of the STITCH, Origin and recently, the Pfaff Embroidery awards.

Louise regularly works to private commission producing one-off bespoke pieces across the UK for a variety of clients. She has completed several large scale public commissions including *The Wacky Races* for The Gloucester Royal Hospital and an interactive project *Birds of Paradise* working with the women's PICU Unit at Blackberry Hill, Bristol. Last year she received a Parliamentary award for the embroidered book, *Saggy Boobs and Other Breastfeeding Myths*, to promote breastfeeding in the UK. SJ



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I'd draw them with my sewing machine, straight on to canvas. I never thought I'd see myself drawing flowers but these are spinning, fizzing, rolling fireworks of flowers.'

The first piece she produced in this new crop of work was entitled *The Way You Make Me Feel*. 'It is about happiness,' she says, 'like a seed pod exploding madness.' It was snapped up straight-away. 'For the first time in years, I felt really proud,' she says. 'I'd felt good about other pieces but when I sold this one, I burst into tears.'

A private commission followed. 'A lady in Scotland asked me to do these massive panels,' she says. 'They are now in a hunting lodge in Scotland. It changed my career in lots of ways: she twisted me and I've got a lot to thank her for.'

The success of her new work blossomed even further when she took part in Art in Action, near Oxford last year. The annual event gives visitors the opportunity to see artists and craftspeople demonstrating their skills and working methods.

'It was a really good show,' says Louise. 'I did it because I needed people to make the connection with how my work is made and how long it takes me.'

'I have the innate desire to be creative and produce things that make people happy,' says Louise. 'But I'm quite demanding of my audience: if I'm not making them laugh, I want to make them cry.' She finds it easy to talk to people and considers this to be a real benefit when marketing her work. 'Maybe I am a bit of a show-off,' she says, 'because I love people to love what I do. But I'm not interested in being flattered. I'm one of those all-or-nothing people.'

A desire to inspire

Louise is planning to diversify and to raise her profile at the same time, by producing a range of greetings cards and prints and to have some of her designs printed on wallpaper, giftwrap and stationery.

'There's a fine line between surviving and selling out,' she says, 'and because I'm naturally cautious and because I run my business myself, it's not an easy move to make. At best, it'll make me super-famous and will increase the value of my work. I see that as a lovely thing because my work makes people smile.'

This year's travel itinerary includes a visit to France where she will take part in an exhibition, and trips to New Zealand and Japan.





'I am ambitious,' she says. 'I want to do bigger, really fabulous work. I want to get embroidery on the map. In this country, where modern art is the vogue, I'll be damned if I don't try to make embroidery The New Black.'

Then she pulls a face. 'What is this embroidery thing anyway? Apart from the fact that it's the most beautiful, rich and tactile, intuitive, spontaneous medium there is, why do people do it?'

In honour of my visit, she has bought some delicious-looking chocolate cake. She offers me a slice and then, with her mouth full, she says: 'To be honest I don't give a stitch!' 🍷

Susie Johns

www.lougardiner.co.uk

WORKSHOPS & EXHIBITIONS

★ **Funny Bones** Exhibition at Craft in the Bay Gallery, Lloyd George Ave, Cardiff, Wales. 25 September-8 November 2009

★ **The Great Northern Contemporary Craft Fair** Manchester. 22-25 October 2009.

★ **Celebrating 20 years of the Gorstella Gallery**, Chester. 13-22 November 2009.

★ **In Stitches workshop**, Victoria and Albert Museum London. 3-7 November.

★ **In Stitches workshops** Alston Hall Lancs. 27-30 Nov & 29 Nov-1 December.

★ **Bluecoat Display Centre, Liverpool** Three-woman show with Jamaica Street artists Sophie Woodrow and Rose Vickers. 23 January-27 February 2010.

★ **Contemporary Embroidery Exhibition** The Oak Farm, Styal, Cheshire. 10 May 2010