

SUPERSTAR STITCHER

Some people wait for life to take its course, others get up and make things happen. Louise Gardiner has both feet in the latter category as Jo Hall finds out during a visit to the artist's Cheshire studio

There's a common misconception that embroiderers are a timid lot, but I doubt there's anyone alive who could dispel this myth faster than Louise Gardiner. Within minutes of meeting, I am caught up in a whirl of energy and, as we settle ourselves into her studio, we are joined by her lively new assistant, Billy Fox, who appears promptly at the sound of the biscuit tin being opened.

Billy, it has to be said, isn't much use as an embroiderer's assistant (too many paws and unpredictable table manners) but he's the perfect companion and, like Louise, is good at spotting an opportunity. Billy turned up early one morning outside Louise's door, starving and very lost, but he's been part of the family ever since. Likewise, Louise has been hungry to seek out opportunities over the last 20 years, establishing a career that's involved everything from working on commissions to exhibiting, lecturing and teaching. And if she has anything to do with it, it won't be long before she adds interior designer and author to the list.

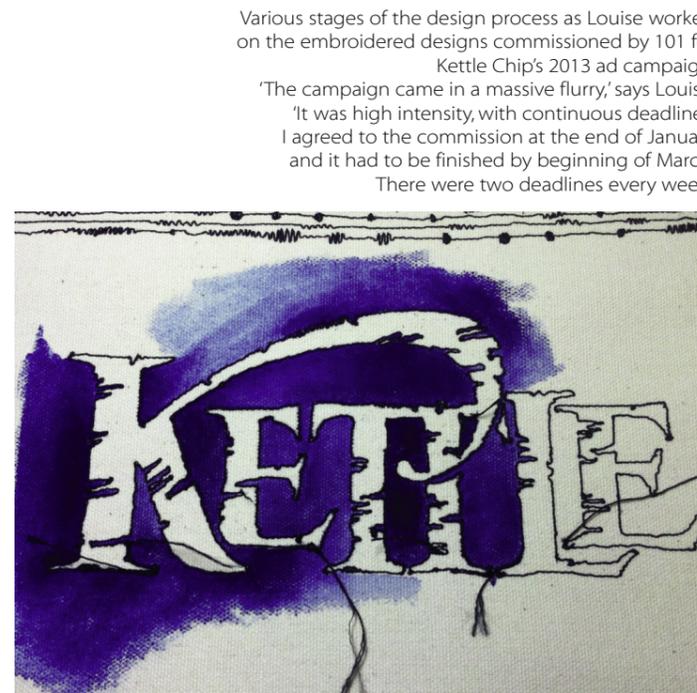
However the most recent addition to the list is as TV ambassador for embroidery. If you're eagle eyed, you may have spotted her on the small screen. First there was her 2012 appearance on Kirstie's Homemade Home in which she gave the star a masterclass in free machine embroidery, after which Ms Allsopp declared machine embroidery was 'the crack cocaine of craft', such was her joy.

Then came last year's TV ad for Kettle Chips, which captured various crafts makers, amongst them a blacksmith, stonemason, glassblower, wood sculptors and, of course, Louise. Each produced an examples of their wares in one day whilst being filmed. Nothing was faked. Everything was shot continuously on a long lens (so the cameras didn't interfere in the creative process) and by the end of the day, they had crafted a table, benches, glasses, decorations, lampshades and a table runner embroidered by Louise. They then sat down and tucked into a glorious hand-cooked meal.

The journey to that day had started in Christmas 2012 with a phone call. The design agency 101 had discovered Louise's website and loved her work. Would she be interested in working on the editorial campaign? 'Yes! And I threw everything into it,' she says.



Various stages of the design process as Louise worked on the embroidered designs commissioned by 101 for Kettle Chip's 2013 ad campaign. 'The campaign came in a massive flurry,' says Louise. 'It was high intensity, with continuous deadlines. I agreed to the commission at the end of January and it had to be finished by beginning of March. There were two deadlines every week.'



In little over two months, she designed and stitched approximately 30 embroideries, mainly of Kettle's crisp packets, as well as embroidering images of all their popular ingredients. 'It was high intensity, with continuous deadlines.

It was like a still-life project except the brief was to I had to keep the embroidery very raw – very handmade – with a tactile look to the whole thing.' She adds, laughing: 'Then they designed the [editorial print] advert of my embroidery and retouched the hell out of it so it didn't look like embroidery! But it was still fun and an interesting learning curve.'

When 101 visited Louise in her studio to make a short film of her producing the work, they mentioned the possibility of a TV advert and, a few months later, asked her to do it. What she didn't realise was that they interviewed around 50 people for the ad. 101's campaign's creative director, Mark Elwood and the director Joanna Bailey were determined to include only interesting people with the right attitude.

'I figured that it would be good exposure,' says Louise, 'and it was another arena to place embroidery, which I'm always interested in doing – pushing the boundaries of where you see embroidery and sewing machines. If I can promote it as a fun, colourful, contemporary medium, then I will.' Kettle agreed, and later the company purchased the entire collection of Louise's embroideries.

Whilst the ad campaign promoted the values of a bygone era – of a time when communities worked together and things were largely made by hand, it was the internet that actually brought 101 to Louise's door. 'I do social media,' she says, 'mainly Twitter, as I can post photographs and get a bit of feedback. It's a fantastic medium and a free tool that you can use to connect. When you work in isolation, as I do, it's important. I've got followers from around the world, and I wonder how else would they have found me? It's amazing: the world shrinks.'

As well as her talent, it is undoubtedly Louise's social nature that has driven her business and her artistic life forward. 'What was challenging with the [Kettle Chips] project was that I had to let go of my work. There was a specific brief and very tight deadlines. I had to let go of the design element, whereas I'm used to working on, for example, large commissions for hospitals where I'll go and meet people, do lots of research, digest it all and then make an artwork. With this, I had to make all these elements, post them off and I had no control over what it was going to look like. It was difficult for me to let go of it.'

Since then, Louise has been working on a series of private commissions as well as *Love is Everywhere*, a commission for the Royal Oldham Hospital. It's a whimsical piece that pictures small seeds, dragonflies and butterflies as symbols of love and life. Louise incorporated tiny pieces of nurses' old uniforms from both Rochdale and Oldham hospitals, which had only recently amalgamated. It's a work that speaks not only of healing for the patients who will view it, but the staff who had endured much upheaval during the change. Another commission is on the way for the A&E Department soon.

Her current project is something of a departure. It's impossible to think of Louise as anything but youthful, her energy always to the fore but it's not always going to be so, she says. 'With most embroidery

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Above: In May 2012 Louise exhibited five large embroideries in the Project Space at Collect titled *You Blow Me Away* (pictured opposite). The fifth in the series, *Tumbleweed No5* is pictured above, with No4 to the right.

Below: A detail of *You Blow Me Away Tumbleweed No5*. Embroidery and appliqué on Taffeta



artists, your body starts to fail on you and it's worrying. I started to notice it working on the Collect exhibition [in 2012, Louise was one of the artists invited by the Crafts Council to create new work for its Project Space at the Saatchi]. I did five massive embroideries, they really took their toll on my hands, so now it's a case of doing a lot less and focusing on special commissions.'

It also sparked the idea for a new range of luxury textiles. 'Last year I started to take my designs onto silk and velvet and have started producing a small bespoke range of products based on all the artworks I've made over the years.'

Louise has produced 14 different scarves, printed on crepe de chine silk and based on her original embroidered designs. There are also large velvet floor cushions and plans for a range of upholstered furniture that she's working on with Munna, a Portuguese company that snapped her up during the London Design Festival.

'It's really exciting to see your work translate onto new fabrics. It's all a new venture. I'm also embroidering back into the print, reworking them with leather, more fabric, sequins and thread lines – it's almost like a new way of quilting.'

Rolling them out in the studio, the colours are clear and bright, the printers having retained all the exuberance of the originals. Even Billy Fox agrees. Our backs turned, he snuggles down on a spare sample that's been left out. It's a rare case of the assistant temporarily upstaging the boss.

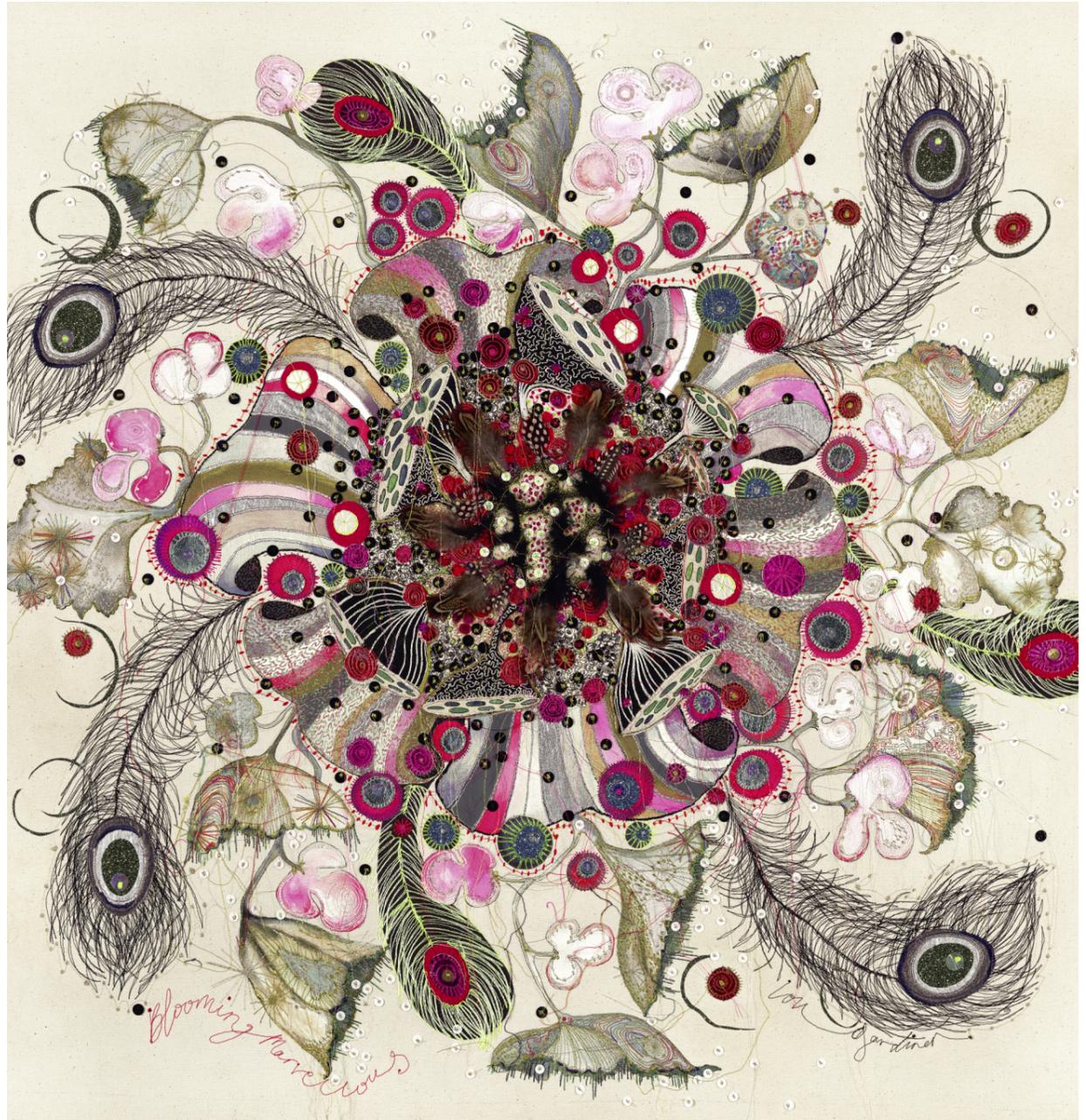
The new line will do more than boost the bottom line though. 'It's not just about the business side for me. I don't just want to be sat in a studio for the rest of my life: I want to be out there meeting people. That's exciting. For lots of embroidery artists, it's like you're almost on your own. I've worked hard for 20 years, doing what I do but also teaching it and sharing it with other people. I don't want to get students in to do work experience for them to go away thinking I've got the coolest life because there's very little to support people [embroiderers] and if it wasn't for being savvy and hungry and outgoing, I would have failed a long time ago.'

With Louise, ideas and enthusiasm seem to travel at 100mph. She makes it look simple but is the first to acknowledge that life as a freelance embroiderer and artist can be a rollercoaster. 'It's not that I find it easy. You need to break the ice and involve people – that's what they want.'

'I am my work: I am what I make. It's mine and I want to share it with people. It's my way of communicating to the world how I feel and what's going on in my life. Yes, I want to talk to people about it. I've been stuck in the studio for 400 hours making it, so it's: 'Right, come and look at it!' 🍷'

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Above: Model wearing *You Blow Me Away* square silk scarf

Left: *Blooming Marvellous*. Embroidery, paint and appliqué on canvas. 110cm x 110cm

Below l-r: Bespoke velvet cushions by Lou Gardiner; *You Blow Me Away* printed Tumbleweed with embroidery on velvet cushions; Louise in her studio with one of her sumptuous designs on velvet

Opposite, top: *Because I Love You* velvet and silk 'Big Boy' cushion and *Because I Love You* silk scarf worn by Lydia

Below: Caught in the act – Billy Fox modelling this season's must-have designs!

VIDEOS

KETTLE® Chips & Kirstie Allsopp Craft Challenge! (featuring Lou Gardiner)
www.youtube.com/watch?v=UGLL1NJ60Y

Louise Gardiner COLLECT 2012
www.youtube.com/watch?v=I9Vb6lrsCwc

WORKSHOPS

STOP the Stitchy DISCO!
Create an original piece using paint, embroidery and appliqué under Louise's watchful eye. 14-16 May. £345.
www.nationaltrust.org.uk/quarry-bank

Superstitchers
Create a Circular Embroidery Experiment with machine embroidery, paint, appliqué and sequins with Louise Gardiner. 24-26 June. £345.
www.lougardiner.co.uk

