

# MELISSA ZEXTER

WITH A CAMERA IN ONE HAND AND SEWING NEEDLES IN ANOTHER, NEW YORK-BASED SHUTTERBUG MELISSA ZEXTER BREATHES NEW LIFE INTO BLACK-AND-WHITE PORTRAITS BY STITCHING INTRICATE PATTERNS ON THEM. EACH OF HER EMBROIDERED PIECES IS A WAY TO PONDER OVER THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN HER SUBJECTS AND HERSELF; AS SHE AIMS TO CONNECT MOMENTS PAST WITH EMOTIONS OF TODAY, BRINGING A NEW DIMENSION TO MEMORY PRESERVATION.



ARTY 88

## First up, why photography with embroidery? What sparked that idea?

My background is in photography and I've always been interested in experimenting with 'alternative' photographic presentations and processes. By accident in 1999, I began to combine sewing with photography after a fellow artist taught me to make handmade paper. I discovered a sewing section at the hardware store with a large selection of threads, bought some, and began to sew pictures onto the handmade paper. Soon after, I tried sewing on larger photos of anonymous figures and the sewing acted as a map or grid over them. I was also interested in how the thread blended in and reacted to the photographs. The combination of sewing and photography brings together two very different processes that I love.

## What is the message behind this medium of work?

I am very interested in the relationship between photography and memory. The embroidery on my photographs is a way to add an intimacy of touch to the photographs. It brings the photograph that was taken in the past back into the present.

## Talk us through the process of creating one of your pieces.

Some of my photographs are digital prints and others are gelatin silver prints that I make in a darkroom. I take the pictures first and then decide how I am going to transform them

with the addition of sewing. My first goal is to make a strong photo that can stand alone. Once I print my photos, I'd imagine an image or pattern that could work with the specific picture. It always grows and changes once I get started and takes me much longer than I had planned to get it right.

## So how long exactly does it take for you to complete a piece?

Weeks...sometimes months. It depends on the complexity of the pattern and if things go as planned, or if they need to be changed as I go along - which is what happens most of the time.

## Who are the people in your photographs?

Majority are friends and family members. Using someone else's pictures seems too easy and boring. It's more of a challenge to take your own pictures and to figure out ways to alter them. I like to feel connected to my images. It has always been about documenting someone or somewhere that I've had a relationship with, whether it was for a fraction of a second or for a longer period of time. The stitching serves as a deeper link to that person or place.

## You live in Brooklyn so where in NYC do you go to take photos?

Two of my favorite neighbourhoods to photograph in are Red Hook and Sunset Park. New York has changed so much since I moved

here over 20 years ago. I like to find places that still have some character. Many of the pictures taken in these neighbourhoods are not part of my sewing/portraits series. I take most of my portraits either in my studio or in Rhode Island, where I am originally from.

## If you could photograph anyone in this world, dead or alive, who would it be and how would the image look like?

One person I could imagine photographing is Barbra Streisand circa 1976 in *A Star Is Born* where she sported a curly updo. I would do something wild with thread to blend in with her wild curly hair.

## We really love 'Cardinal'. Tell us the message behind that piece.

Death and rebirth. I made it soon after my father passed away.

## Lastly, where's your favourite haunt in NYC?

The Frick Museum in Manhattan; because it's not crowded and you can relax on comfortable furniture while looking at Rembrandt and Turner paintings. Also, Sunset Park in Brooklyn. This park is the second highest point in Brooklyn where you can sit on the grass and feel like you are on the top of the world. **J**

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