



Art 16

STIR > INSPIRE > PEOPLE

## Behind artists' embroideries: Varunika Saraf and Nour Shantout on their process

In the first part of this mini-series, two artists reflect on the feminist underpinnings of their intricate embroideries.

by Rosalyn DMello | Published on : Oct 27, 2023

- f
- in
- t
- e
- o

Listen to this article now

00:00 14:52

The Catholic co-education school that I attended in our neighbourhood in Kurla West in suburban **Mumbai** practised gender segregation from the ages of 10 to 12 for one hour a week. During that period, boys were offered "craft" while girls did "needlework". The boys had a kinder teacher who taught them to make thrifty craft objects. Our teacher scornfully called us donkeys and monkeys. It wasn't only her pejorative attitude towards us that I found offensive. My difficulty with accepting her authority stemmed from her callous attitude towards the back of her embroidery cloth. I would turn to my mother instead, for instruction. She would 'cheat' with me and let me shamelessly take credit when the teacher expressed admiration for how the back looked as good as the front.

Because of the gendered nature of the way I was institutionally introduced to needlework, I rejected it fervently, much like how many of my female peers rejected cooking because of the patriarchal setups in which it was performed. The only reason I loved the 'needlework' class was because it offered an exclusive space for girls to chat and have fun while pretending to work.

Through my practice as an art writer and a memoirist I have been re-engaging with stitch work. I have been reconsidering the practice through the lens of *femmage*—"practised by women using traditional women's techniques to achieve their art"—as part of my ongoing project *In the Name of the Mother*, which is invested in unearthing matrilineal forms of artistic inheritances historically rendered invisible by **modernist** and **contemporary art** canons and discourses. These columns have been the primary site for my auto-theoretical interrogations.

I found myself reflecting once again on the back of embroidered work after reading a recent **Instagram** post by Varunika Saraf, an artist whose 76-panel installation *We, The People* (2018-22) won her recent critical acclaim at the Sharjah Biennial 15: *Thinking Historically in the Present* (2023), curated by Hoor Al Qasimi. I have been eagerly following her trajectory and am frequently in awe of her intellectual prowess, writing skills, aesthetic sophistication and craftswomanship.

Saraf's paragraph-long post summarises how her mother and grandmother—both excellent embroiderers themselves—disapprove of the quality of her needlework. She learned the craft from her grandmother in secret, because her mother deeply resented needlework—just as I did, growing up. "Her version of **feminism** convinced her that needlework was pointless drudgery, a waste of the time that must be spent reading and learning. It was for the future she imagined for me, with all the possibilities that education presented," Saraf wrote. "Despite their vocal differences, both agreed that my work was not up to their standards. They have an almost identical snarky look, a look of disapproval aimed at freezing the strongest of hearts. Thankfully, I was born immune. As an addendum to the constant hum of 'Must you?', 'Think about your eyes' and 'Why can't you simply paint?', my mum never fails to inform me that my stitches are nowhere near as perfect as hers were, and right she is. Though I hate to admit it, it is the objective truth. I can never hope to be as good as my mum and my *nani* (maternal grandmother) and come to think of it, even my aunts. They were the experts."

### Similar Articles

09 mins. read

**Edifice Complex: Drawings of architecture that reveal socio-economic reality**

by Rahul Kumar  
May 25, 2023

08 mins. read

**Kunel Gaur uses everyday material in his solo presentation at Method art space, India**

by Rahul Kumar  
Mar 18, 2022



A screenshot of Varunika Saraf's Instagram post that triggered this column  
 Image: Courtesy of STIR

I wanted to continue thinking through the many memories and insights the post offered and decided to engage Saraf in a dialogue and extend the conversation to three other artists who use embroidery in their practice in radical and conceptually imaginative ways: Nour Shantout, Bhasha Chakrabarti and Elif Erkan. I'd initially envisaged this edition of my column as a space to invite further meditation on the backs of embroidered work. This first part features my conversations with Saraf and Nour Shantout, an artist of Syrian and Palestinian origin whose political practice I have been following passionately ever since I met her some years ago in Graz, [Austria](#). Here, both artists reflect on their relationship with needlework, their respective identities and how they locate themselves within the feminist history of embroidery.



Portrait of Artist Varunika Saraf  
 Image: Courtesy of Varunika Saraf and Neeta Saraf

**Rosalyn D'Mello:** What was it about the act of embroidery that made you persist, despite your immediate expert family telling you that your work didn't meet their standards? Was there something innate to the act that you were drawn to?

**Varunika Saraf:** I have a stubborn streak. I don't let people make decisions for me, nor do I let myself be led by their opinions. I try different techniques to see if they work for me. When I start learning something, I hold space for the fact that it entails a considerable investment of time. If I find something useful, I learn it with the time and care it deserves. How can I not persist?



Back of *The longest revolution, 2023*, embroidery on cotton textile, Varunika Saraf  
 Image: Courtesy of Varunika Saraf

**Rosalyn:** Do you find yourself looking at the back of your embroidery as you stitch?

**Varunika:** Yes, I do. I can't help myself, taught, as I was, that the back of the work is the real tell of the quality of the embroidery. I am sometimes led by the voices in my head, both my fears and my demons. When something is made with conviction and sincerity, fears do tend to melt away.



Varunika Saraf in conversation with the writer and curator Zeenat Nagree  
 Video: Courtesy of Kiran Natar Museum of Art

**Rosalyn: How do you decide when a work should be painted and when it should be embroidered?**

**Varunika:** I instinctively know. My choices are mediated primarily by what I want to convey. Often it is never a question of either/or. It is more about what is needed: how I can push the limits of what's possible and, at the same time, grow through learning.

**Rosalyn: What is your experience of time when you embroider?**

**Varunika:** It is pretty much the same as when I draw or paint. Some parts of the process take longer, some give me great anguish and sometimes I get so immersed in the work that I lose all sense of time. That's the thing about art practice: materials—clay, oil paint, thread, pencil, etc—are just mediums that the practitioner has at her disposal. Working entails negotiating a slightly different set of idiosyncrasies and possibilities; they are all a part of practice. It's making that matters the most, creating something with reflection, research, skill and honesty.



*We, The People* (work in progress image), 2018-22, 76 textile panels: embroidery and cochineal dye on cotton, Varunika Saraf  
Image: Courtesy of Varunika Saraf

**Rosalyn: Would you say that your inheritance of embroidery as a skill and a craft and your use of it as an art form has a matrilineal legacy?**

**Varunika:** I have not viewed embroidery as my inheritance. Since two of the most important women in my life embroider rather well, it became interesting to note their oppositional attitudes to it and understand where their positions come from. Inheritance is what we choose to follow. I could have just as well learnt to embroider at school, from my friends, at college and even from the paternal side of my family, just as other techniques that I became interested in and needed in the course of my practice. Some of my male friends also embroider: one of them, Ranjith, taught me how to stitch mirrors onto the fabric. Embroidery is a technique that comes with a history of feminist thought and practice. It brings to the fore questions about gendered notions of art and craft. I am not saying that everyone must engage with this part of its history; people are drawn to it for other reasons as well. Embroidery, for me, is a choice—a premeditated and political choice. It is relevant to me because I can use it to question norms in society and, at the same time, very consciously construct and be part of a 'feminist tradition'.



An in-progress image of *The longest revolution*, 2023, embroidery on cotton textile, Varunika Saraf  
Image: Courtesy of Varunika Saraf

I am interested in women's agency, women as makers of their own futures and agents of socio-political change. This gives me hope and relief at a point in my life when I cannot make sense of the world around me. When I thought about the hopes, beliefs and fears that I share with the women in my life, it seemed natural to embroider. My recent works attempt to constitute a tradition of feminist practice, a practice of making, thinking and doing. Traditions that appear to be old are often new and even invented, inculcating norms through repetition to establish continuity with the past (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983). In as much, most of our traditions are dangerous—dangerously patriarchal. My academic research unpacked and questioned traditions, including some which tell us that women did not and cannot paint.

Given my trajectory of critique, would I dare to constitute a feminist tradition? Yes! A yes, a million times over. Our task as women is never complete. Each generation must reclaim practices, politicising the aesthetic. I want to consciously invoke the trailblazing generation of feminists in whose footsteps I choose to follow, artists such as **Faith Ringgold** and Louise Bourgeois. And, at the same time, pay tribute to all the women who have paved the way for us. It is for my peers who hold me accountable to ever higher standards. Never have I been more conscious of an almost mycelial network of women that stretches back in time, the many challenging but rewarding feminist friendships that push me to dig deep into shared feminist imaginaries and dream of love with all the radical possibilities it engenders. After all, as bell hooks says: "The function of art is to do more than tell it like it is—it's to imagine what is possible." And to achieve this, I turn to hope.



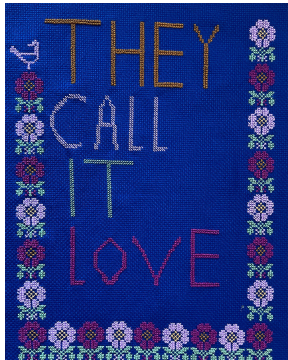
Rosalyn: How does your practice of embroidery relate to your identity?

**Nour Shantout:** Growing up with a Syrian parent and a Palestinian parent meant that I was raised in a highly politicised extended family. It is the basis for my interest in storytelling, an essential artform to Indigenous peoples: it is a way of conveying knowledge across generations, thus countering the coloniser's narrative. In the case of the Palestinian community in diaspora, one of the forms of storytelling which has survived until the present day is teaching embroidery through storytelling. So it very much relates to the way I grew up and got to learn about counter-history and counter-memory from my grandfather, before I got to know the terms coined by Michel Foucault.

Rosalyn: How and when did you learn to embroider?

**Nour:** In 2019, I went back to Damascus to learn embroidery from my grandmother and other women who were still practising embroidery. It was my way to deal with the aftermath of the 2011 Syrian revolution, which was oppressed by the Al-Assad regime; the destruction of the Yarmouk camp, "the capital of the Palestinian diaspora"; and the displacement of thousands of people. I wanted to counter-archive these events from a feminist perspective using the language of embroidery.

My grandmother sent me one of her Palestinian dresses in 2015, the year of the so-called "refugee crises", and the dress crossed many borders that she and I could not. It went from hand to hand until it got to me. I found this gesture to be very political: she sent me her dress just like Palestinian women did since the 1948 Nakba. It is a way to overcome borders and a profound way to archive the Palestinian diaspora experience. This led to my *Museum of Smuggled Dresses*, a research-based project about learning embroidery from my grandmother and other women who practise embroidery in post-war Damascus and its suburbs in order to unlearn. It looks at the representation of Palestinian embroidered dresses—"thobes"—in ethnographic museums from a postcolonial perspective, and traces the stories of my grandmother's dresses and the symbols behind her cross stitched "fallah" dresses. This fictional museum presents various stories of the embroiderers who taught me how to stitch in post-war Damascus.



*We Call It Unwaged Work*, Embroidered cotton on cotton, Nour Shantout  
Image © Nour Shantout

Rosalyn: Do you often look or consider the back of your embroidery? Does it inform your process in any way?

**Nour:** Yes, sure! I actually learned that from the embroiderers I worked with in Syria and Lebanon. The back of the embroidery is very important. I remember that one of the embroiderers from the Yarmouk camp, Huda Al-Sahly, told me that the back should look as clean as the front, and this is the way you know that a person has mastered the art of embroidery. The back also reflects my learning process, you can see a big difference in the pieces I started with in comparison to the pieces I am embroidering right now.



*Map of Military Influence in Syria* 2019, Nour Shantout  
Image © Nour Shantout

Rosalyn: What is your experience of time when you embroider?



**Nour:** Embroidery is very slow in contrast to time under the dominance of capital. Some of the big pieces I embroidered took me around three months of daily labour. I see this slowness as an act of resistance under late **capitalism** and, in the case of Palestinian embroidery, it is in fact a continuation of Palestinian embroidery as a practice of insistence against the colonial narrative, which claims that Palestine was a land without people for people without land.

I reflected on this in the piece I did in solidarity with the Iranian revolution, *A Slogan and Some Flowers* (2023): how embroidery functions as an archive of the past defeats and insists on the presence of the "now-time" or "Jetztzeit". Using this term, the theorist Walter Benjamin tells us that revolutions happen in these moments of immediacy and this is when embroidery as a "tradition of the oppressed" emerges on the front lines. My Iranian friend Golrokh Nafisi told me once that embroidery changes our perception of time, time becomes a motif; a flower or a slogan, challenging our capitalist perception of time.



*A Slogan and Some Flowers*, 2023, Nour Shantout  
Image: © Nour Shantout

**Rosalyn:** Would you say that your inheritance of embroidery as a skill and a craft and your use of it as an art form has a matrilineal legacy?

**Nour:** I actually did not inherit embroidery. Embroidery was always around me and my grandmother wears the traditional dress as a political statement. She embroiders the map of Palestine before the 1948 Nakba and hangs it in her house. She is not a professional embroiderer but she learnt it in the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) School, like many Palestinian women, and she only practises it as an anti-colonial practice. Since art education is still colonial and dominated by history written from the perspective of white men—even in Syria and Lebanon—it took me a long time, and a lot of unlearning, to include it in my work and to look at it as a way of anti-colonial knowledge production, as a language I wanted to learn.

Also read:

Part 2: **Behind artists' embroideries: Bhasha Chakrabarti and Elif Erkan on their process**

Read on: [Art Historian](#) | [contemporary art](#) | [contemporary artist](#) | [Feminist art](#) | [Hyderabad](#) | [India](#) | [Indian art](#) | [Indian artist](#) | [mumbai](#)

### What do you think?

Leave your thought or question...

Post

### About Author



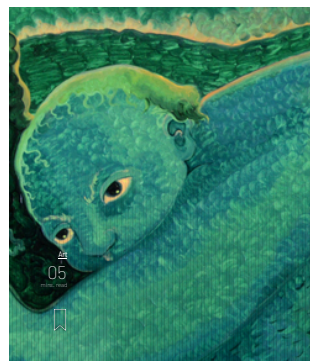
**Rosalyn D'Mello**

Contributor

Rosalyn D'Mello is a feminist writer, art critic, columnist, essayist, editor and researcher currently based in the Italian Alps. She is the author of *A Handbook for My Lover* (HarperCollins India, 2015). D'Mello writes a weekly feminist column for *mid-day*, and a monthly memoir-based a...

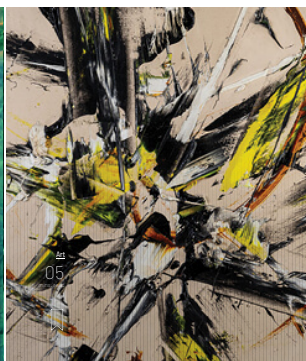
+ Read more

### Recommended



Traces of the witch in art history and of women in the Surrealism art movement

by Sakshi Sobti  
Dec 02, 2023



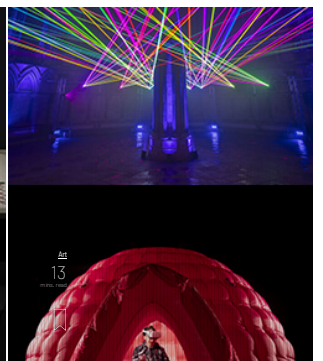
100 years of Judit Reigl: Exhibition marks centenary of artist's birth

by Manu Sharma  
Nov 26, 2023



Greek museum EMST presents the world of polymath Iannis Xenakis

by Manu Sharma  
Nov 25, 2023



Frequency Festival in Lincoln is a triumph of community and virtual placemaking

by Anmol Ahuja  
Nov 24, 2023