

Press Review

stir world, Rosalyn DMello, 23 November 2023



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

In part two of this mini-series, two artists discuss the feminist weaponisations of embroidery within the domestic mundane

by Rosalyn DMello | Published on : Nov 23, 2023

The second part of my ongoing conversation-based series on embroidery zooms in on the intricacies of Bhasha Chakrabarti and Elif Erkan's artistic practices, both of which remain heavily influenced by feminist appropriations of textile and embroidery art. An Indian-origin Yale School of Art MFA graduate who grew up in [Hawaii](#), Chakrabarti's ideology is centred on notions of "mending", repair and repurposing while critiquing the legacies of [colonialism](#) and their continued sway. I enjoy the erudite nature of her meticulous work and how she chooses her mediums and materials in order to advance her intellectual propositions in a manner that is articulate and cohesive.

Born in Ankara, Erkan currently lives in [Vienna](#). She is one of those artists who works quietly and meditatively. You are unlikely to catch her "on the scene" or networking, and she usually sustains herself through full-time work (she's currently a kindergarten teacher) so she can maintain integrity within her work. Erkan is currently preparing for her upcoming solo show *In Bloom* at The Pill in [Istanbul](#) slated for November 30, 2023. "The exhibition will have at its core [Turkey](#) in the early 2000s and its relationship to a very particular performative understanding of [modernism](#), which will be presented by paintings that are rusted, photographs from my personal archive, marble houses on naked concrete plinths and large balls of blond hair," she informs us.

In a conversation with STIR, both Chakrabarti and Erkan reflect on their ongoing work and how it relates to embroidery, time, [feminist](#) histories and ideas of continuity.

Rosalyn: During our last conversation, you talked about embroidery being a central part of your upcoming show. Could you tell me more about that?

Elif Erkan: For my upcoming show, I have been using embroidery to display and contextualise letters that were written to Haydar Dümen, a Turkish sex therapist and columnist. I was intrigued by those letters, because I grew up with those that were published daily in the newspapers. They were, for me, always a reminder of what place and time I was living in as a woman, since most of those letters were written by men, yet the main readers of this paper were women. I chose embroidery as medium because embroidery has this story of keeping women's hands busy to not think of sex and to masturbate. So, while embroidery should practise abstinence, it is highly sexual and sensual. For me, embroidery was, here, the right medium to bridge the male authors of the

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Elif Erkan

Image: Elif Erkan & The Pill; Courtesy of Elif Erkan

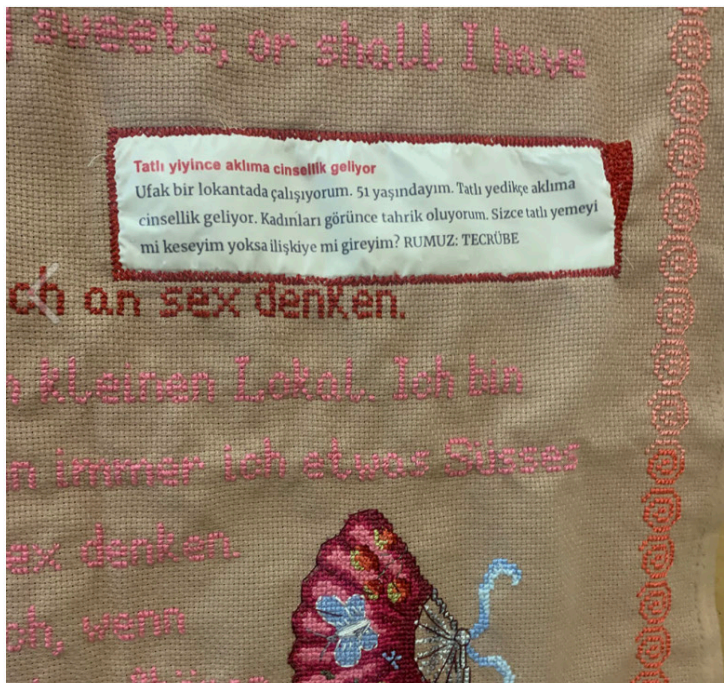
Dümen was a psychiatrist who was born 1930 in Turkey. He is one of the first psychologists to research Turkey's relationship to sexuality. He gained attention by saying publicly in an interview that 60 per cent of Turkey's population is bisexual: a very scandalous statement in a very heteronormative and misogynistic society. Since the 1960s, he was giving answers to readers regarding sex in his column *Ask About Your Sexual Problems* in various different newspapers. The most asked questions in this column centre around the thoughts "Am I normal?" or "Help me, I think I am not normal!" Dümens' answers, though, would always be very far off from therapeutic advice. His answers would always be tinted with the current political climate and wrapped into poetic prose. The newspapers he would be writing for would be considered "yellow press", trash. His column would be sandwiched in between gossip, crossword riddles and dietary advice.

Rosalyn: How do you decide when a work should be painted and when it should be embroidered or whether to incorporate embroidery in your work?

Elif: When I look back at my textile work, it was always text-based. For me, a text is tied to a voice, and a written text is tied to a hand. Of course, painting follows a similar rule...

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

Elif: Time flows differently when I embroider. Faster, yet slower. When I don't have a watch, I completely lose track of time. I guess I get into a state of flow.



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?

Elif: Women around me in my childhood were often occupying themselves with needlework. It was around specific times of the day: after lunch or after dinner, to relax, calm down or to just keep one occupied. When I started to do needlework, it was to be part of that female circle. When I went back to do embroideries, it was mostly for me to create a quiet space and space of recreation within my home for myself. In my work, I use embroidery to highlight images that are directly tied to an individual looking for a quiet, peaceful state of mind.