

# □ Cube Gallery

## AN INTERVIEW WITH CATHY BRICKHILL

*Cathy Brickhill* is a New Zealand born, award winning textile artist based in Dairy Flat near Auckland, celebrated for her intricate three-dimensional sculptural embroideries of native flora and fauna. Here, we explore more of Cathy's background, techniques, passions and processes.

**CG** Coming from a creative background, from studying the craft of embroidery, fashion, and illustration, what led you to creating these wonderful, woven sculptures?

**CB** My creative processes take a lot of my time patiently experimenting with different types of threads and styles, and this experimenting has led me to create my unique style. It's so exciting - I always have a sketch of my envisioned finished product, but my work organically evolves and always turns into something unexpected and unpredictable. This is the exact approach I like, as the artworks form naturally to match the piece of nature they are mimicking. Each artwork uses fine pins and glass beads that lift the piece off the backing board, creating shadows that are needed to be seen in person. These shadows move during the different times of the day, giving a whole new three-dimensional effect. This creates life to the piece.

**CG** Your technique which involves hand-stitching, machine-embroidery, and other mixed media elements appears to be painstakingly intricate and beautifully detailed. How long did it take you to develop these methods, and what makes it unique?

**CB** These methods are basic skills that I learnt at a young age where I taught myself how to design a garment from start to finish, using patterns and creating the finished product. My artwork is basically creating an organic fabric which I like to warp / stretch / tease / burn and adding layers to give the effects I want to achieve. I have always loved to sew, using a sewing machine or using needle and



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thread. It has taken me around 15 years of constant practice through trial and error to get to this stage of developing artworks.

**CG** With your passion and interest in the natural world, including the effects of decay and damage, what would you say is important about making this a part of your design and general concept?

**CB** It's the non-perfect finish that captures my eye, as that's how nature is in itself; leaves curl up and decay at the edges, butterfly wings have little tears and rips, a flower's petals are never flat and are always changing shape depending how the wind blows or may have damage inflicted by insects. I think these small details show the viewer what I see as incredibly beautiful, and make my work aesthetically unique from other artists. Particularly as all of my sculptures are created from inspiration of species found only in New Zealand.

**CG** You've mentioned before about your volunteer work at a bird rescue centre and time spent on a bird sanctuary, could you explain a bit more about this and how it influences your current / future work?

**CB** I in my early 20's I decided to become a volunteer for the Department of Conservation (DOC) during my holiday break, having the chance to work alongside passionate conservationists and people who spend their time doing pest eradication, to help the NZ brown Kiwi. I got to hold a wild Kiwi



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in my arms - to feel the feathers and to know that this opportunity most New Zealanders never get the chance to experience. I then went on to volunteer on off-shore islands which is like a 'bird paradise', where I worked alongside scientists and PhD students who were studying gecko and Tuatara species on the island. I was able to study all these species and gain more knowledge of how extremely important a place like this is. It was these initial experiences that have shaped my creative thinking for my artworks today. I like to explain to people when I exhibit my artwork that I am part artist, part biologist. In my spare time I like to hike solo with my camera and tent into New Zealand's dense rainforests, and it's these areas I get most of my inspiration for new artworks, as they are usually wild, untamed, remote parts of the country.

**CG** Each piece of yours is unique due to the nature of your subjects, can you walk us through your process of creating them from choosing the right colours, to the material and thread choices?

**CB** Each artwork always starts off as a detailed sketch or photograph that gives me insight into the correct choice of colours needed to create the piece to create realism in thread. Next to my sketch I add samples of thread colours, sometimes using up to 20 different thread choices for an artwork. The types of thread are usually polyester (I use a high grade embroidery polyester thread) that comes on huge reels, as I use metres of thread per artwork. I also like to use vintage cotton thread, crochet thread, and thick rayon threads that have to be hand-wound onto the bobbin of my machine to provide added texture



to my works. These threads are usually difficult to use and I'm attracted to the challenge. The more layers a piece has, the more time it takes me and the more difficult it becomes to create. I thrive on challenges.

**CG** As a child you liked to explore nature and collect bits of ephemera you've found along the way. Is this still an active pursuit of yours, and if yes how do they impact your understanding of nature, and the making of your work?

**CB** Absolutely, this is definitely the way I like to collect ideas for new sculptures. I like to exercise daily, so every morning I'm either out walking or running, and gathering ideas. I think being outdoors, especially in all types of weather and changing seasons, makes a person more in line with nature, that you feel a deeper connection to sounds, the smell of the forest, the names of different fungi, beautiful shells that wash up on the beach, the textures of bark on mature trees, and the many amazing bird species. I always learn something new from nature as I step outside the door. My home backs onto untouched native bush that spans for several acres, and I have sheep, chickens and cockatiels that always make living here more interesting in so many ways.

**CG** Any exciting projects that you're working on at the moment?

**CB** Yes, I'm currently working on a large colourful array of New Zealand fungi species, as well as a large flower series – depicting many flowers found throughout our country. I'm also experimenting with very fine wire where I'm crocheting organic forms of nature. I am also creating a 'mountain series' and creating more giant leaves.

**CG** And to finish, what is the message you would like to share with people that encompasses the meaning behind your work?

**CB** Delicacy, movement, shadow-play and an awareness of the species both big and small, that play such a crucial role in our ecosystems.





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*Cathy Jane Designs*