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AN INTERVIEW WITH DENIZ KURDAK

Deniz Kurdak is a Turkish textile artist based in London. Here, Deniz shares how she reimagines traditional needlework, drawing from her personal history and cultural heritage, and details about her stitching process to create visual narratives.

CG What initially drew you to start working with needlework and textiles?

DK I enjoy adding new meaning to needlework, a practice that has long been dismissed as solely a women's craft.

Textiles have always been a means of expression for me, but it was only after relocating to London that I chose to focus on this medium. Both of my grandmothers - skilled in knitting, cross-stitch, and dressmaking - played a significant role in shaping my current practice. As a child, I spent hours going through their boxes of buttons and ribbons and trying my hand at crocheting, knitting, or cross-stitching. My first sewing machine was a gift from my grandmother during my first year at university. I took great pride in the hilariously crooked outfits I created for myself at that time.

Now, incorporating this family rooted practice into my art feels both personal and profound.

It allows me to reflect on my heritage and past experiences, which are at the core of my pieces.

CG You relocated from Turkey to London in 2016, how was this transition significant, and how has this influenced the themes in your work?



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DK For those who have left their hometowns, the state of being in-between is ever-present. We either seek a new sense of belonging or wish to return to the known, only to realise home will never be the same again. As my hometown Istanbul, rich in history, undergoes rapid urban and cultural transformation, my sense of loss and separation intensifies. This is reflected in my work, which serves as an expression of identity and nostalgia. This constant push and pull has led me to explore the human condition, particularly the complexities and contradictions that define our experiences.

A recurring motif in my work is the chinoiserie-patterned pottery reminiscent of those belonged to my grandmother. They symbolise not only my childhood but also my journey from the East to the West and the dynamics within my family. The intentionally broken and reassembled pottery represents the interplay between fragmentation and wholeness. It reflects dualities such as fragility and resilience, belonging and disconnection, truth and misinterpretation. In parallel, I enjoy exploring the juxtaposition of soft, unbreakable materials like fabric and thread—which evoke mending and resilience—with the fragility of porcelain.

As a person, I left behind my family, friends, my job at the university, my colleagues, and my entire network in the fields of design and the arts. However, as an artist, this has forced me to start anew. While it is a huge challenge, it also leads to new opportunities for which I am



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grateful.

CG With a background in animation, stage and costume design, how does storytelling play a role in your artwork?

DK As a former theatre designer and filmmaker, I'm used to transforming text and concepts into visual, non-verbal forms. As I transitioned from designer to artist, I carried forward this storytelling approach. In my art, the narrative behind each image is as essential as the artwork itself, often drawing from my personal history and relationships. I like to incorporate symbolism in my work. By choosing textile art as my medium, I reimagine the acts of cutting, sewing, and weaving, adding a concept of emotional repair and rewriting my personal narratives. I draw inspiration from the similarities between these creative processes and the nature of human memory, particularly emphasising the role of reconstruction.

CG Could you describe your working process in more detail?

DK My process begins with an image forming in my mind or a thought. From there, I follow my intuition, gradually building on it through research and sketches. Once I'm happy with my drawings, I transfer them onto fabric. Then comes the stitching phase, which feels like meditation to me. Since my subjects are narratives from my personal history, with the repetitive rhythm of the sewing machine

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as the soundtrack, I delve deeper, reflecting and discovering more of the thoughts behind my initial concept. If the earlier stages are like navigating a stormy sea, the stitching phase is when the sun emerges and the waters calm. As I stitch, I manually guide the fabric under the sewing machine's foot, fully coordinating my eyes, both hands, and my right foot to adjust the speed and flow of the stitches.

CG What led you to choose this medium, materials, and colour palette for your compositions? Have you faced any significant challenges with these?

DK When I started embroidering here in London, it was initially due to the limited space and materials I had. Later, I discovered it wasn't just that—there was a much deeper connection with this medium, as I explained earlier. Working with thread brings its own unique challenges and limitations, such as having to work with a predetermined colour palette and the rigid nature of stitches. Another major challenge is undoing mistakes; I can't simply paint over them like a painter might. Picking out previous stitches is a painstaking process. But these challenges have been valuable teachers, helping me become more accepting of mistakes.

CG What continues to inspire the subjects you choose for your work?



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DK The human condition and my personal experiences. I'm particularly intrigued by the contradictions and shifts in one's sense of identity, and the factors that influence those changes, such as memory, place, relationships, and cultural background. Psychology has always been a significant source of inspiration, especially in understanding how we reconstruct our memories over time. These themes often find their way into my work, where I explore the emotional landscapes of my personal history and repair.

CG You have exhibited your work in Istanbul and London, and most recently at the prestigious RA's Summer Exhibition. How have these affected your career?

DK Being a relocated artist and starting anew in a different country, participating in exhibitions both in Istanbul and London has been crucial for building new relationships with fellow artists, gallerists, and collectors. These connections have led to rewarding collaborations and increased my understanding of the art world. Each exhibition has broadened my exposure and allowed me to connect with diverse audiences and art communities. Exhibiting at the Royal Academy of Arts' Summer Exhibition, in particular, has significantly elevated my profile, providing substantial recognition and new opportunities.

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CG In what ways has your work evolved over time, and are there any future projects you are looking forward to?

DK As I became more accepting of my personal challenges and experiences and incorporated them into my work, it evolved and significantly improved, becoming more authentic. Over time, through dedication and hard work, my skills and technical abilities have also developed considerably.

Regarding future projects, I'm particularly excited about our upcoming group show, 'Mastering the Line,' and the opportunity to meet the other four participating artists. Additionally, I'm very enthusiastic about my time in my new studio, thanks to recently being awarded a residency at the Riverside Gallery as part of the Artists Make Space Programme, by the Borough of Richmond upon Thames. This opportunity has already fuelled my motivation and productivity, allowing me to work on larger pieces and explore new materials in a beautiful and inspiring space. I'm eager to make the most of my time here and to seek out more opportunities like these in the future.





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16 Crawford Street, London W1H 1BS