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# Ornamenting A Narrative: an Embroidered Portrait

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ORNAMENTING A NARRATIVE: AN EMBROIDERED PORTRAIT

by

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Bachelor of Arts – Ryerson University, 2009

A major research paper  
presented to Ryerson University  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
in the Program of  
Fashion

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2012

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## **Abstract**

My research aim was to create a portrait following a sequential practice-based process. A female face was analyzed and informed by a mug shot photograph. Lesage embroidery and beading techniques define the facial features and surroundings of the subject matter. The final representation culminates my total experience while researching this woman's image in a practical and theoretical way. This encompasses the physical procedure of sketching, painting, and embroidering her likeness with a preoccupation and self-awareness to understand the theories engaged during these processes. With this, I looked to Michael Podro's *Depiction* and the concept of "subjectification" in creating a portrait. In my studies of the mug shot I sourced Roland Barthes's theories of "essence" of a person and his concept of "punctum"—the personal and unexplained emotional response caused by a photographic image. Also, I willingly addressed the issues of agency in the subject, viewer, and image-maker relationship.

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## **Chapter One: Title and Introduction**

### **Title**

A portrait can be as simple as an accurate rendering of the subject's physical characteristics (Woodall, 1997, p. 5). As such, the depiction of the subject is recognizable. As a viewer, my appreciation of a portrait is a more intimate experience to attempt to ultimately see what is inherently distinct about the person captured in the moment of composition. The time willingly spent reading the portrait is what forms the personal connection between the subject matter and the audience (Gage, 1997, p. 129).

My research aim was to create a portrait following a sequential practice-based process with each stage having both technical and interpretive challenges in generating the visual material. A female face was analyzed and informed by a mug shot photograph. Lesage embroidery and beading techniques define the facial features and surroundings of the subject matter. The Lesage Embroidery Firm, founded in the 1920s, is a French needlework technique of embellishing fabric by hand (Shaeffer, 2001, p. 205). These methods are generally not found outside the precise and extravagant traditions of Parisian haute couture fashion (Stamberg, 2011). The decorative and ornamental quality of this media was utilized with the purpose of drawing the viewer into close proximity to explore the intricate features that compose the expression of the woman.

The final representation culminates my total experience while researching this woman's image in both a practical and theoretical way. This encompasses the physical procedure of sketching, painting, and embroidering her likeness with a preoccupation and self-awareness to understand the theories engaged during these processes. Although I did not interact directly with a living subject, my interpretation is a combination of my intimate inquiry into her image and the



self-expressive nature needed to convey my distinct impression of her person. This conflicting relationship between rendering the subject physically recognizable and still offering personal insight has been crucial to this project (Podro, 1998, p. 99). With this, I looked to Michael Podro's *Depiction* and the concept of "subjectification" in creating a portrait. In my studies of the mug shot, I sourced Roland Barthes's theories of "essence" or "air" of a person and his concept of "punctum," the personal and unexplained emotional response caused by a photographic image (Freeland, 2007, p. 102; Sturken & Cartwright, 2009, p. 18). Also, I willingly addressed the issues of agency in the subject, viewer, and image-maker relationship (Aubert, 2009, p. 7). These concepts have brought forth an intense analysis of my motives and intentions in making the portrait, eventually leading to an understanding and development of a process that revealed my own translation of my subject's emotional condition.

## **Introduction**

In this project I explored contrast, using traditional methods and techniques in an unconventional and spontaneous way. In Gray and Malins' (2004) *Visualizing Research*, this approach is explained as, "creative construction" which describes playing with opposing styles, elements, and practices to reach a "novel" conclusion (p. 155). I purposefully combined thought provoking themes with the luxurious embellishment of the Lesage embroidery. By using both in a new context, I aimed to alter the viewer's experience with both the media and the subject matter.

The portrait subject resulted from my curiosity in photos of women's faces shown in a documentary manner, specifically a historically sourced mug shot. The mug shot, like the documentary still image, catches its subject in a truthful moment (Freeland, 2007, p. 96). It serves as evidence of physical features and reveals the compromised condition of their reality

within the frame. The photograph was chosen from a publicly released database that included the criminal record that forms the back-story of the woman. The objectivity of this medium contrasted strikingly with my feelings for the person in this image. I did not see the criminal. I saw and sensed the innate beauty, vulnerability, and fragility that the camera forcibly captured in her facial features.

I initially experimented with the role of an objective researcher and technician to precisely recreate the face (Tufte, 2006, p. 47). This took place during the beginning stages of the practical research process to search for the life-like quality, the concept of “literal-likeness” described by Barthes, in the preliminary facial sketches (Barthes, 1981, p. 6). From this, I treated the photo as a case study to search for indicators or clues of her lived experience (Prus, 1996, p. 8). Through this process, I allowed my subjectivity to influence my drawings of her, and her story (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 6). The final sketch reveals my interpreted “essence” of the subject.

I have realized that through researching portraiture the methods of interpretation can differ greatly depending on the aims, objectives, concerns, and/or intentions of its maker (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 8). It is this complicated and conflicting process that I have chosen to explore in my Major Research Project. It was an exploration and critical analysis of making portraiture. This has been an enlightening study, looking into how to be mindful in visually representing a human subject and deconstructing the intentional, accidental, and hidden meaning—the coded messages and ideological associations that can appear during the transformation from photograph to interpreted portrayal. In taking on the task of portraiture in the context of this project, I have realized a deeper sense of responsibility in the complex role of image-maker. Through the course of dissecting my research objectives, I have developed a more

reflexive approach during the interpretation process in the creation of my subject's portrait. In this, I questioned the point of my interpretation of this woman's likeness. Essentially, it is my story of experiencing this woman's mug shot photograph. Although the specifics of our life experiences are not the same, I desired to visually describe how I think she felt in the moment in which her image was taken. Knowing her background and the basic facts behind her depicted condition, it was my personal feelings influenced by her expression, appearance, background, and evidentiary information that take form in the portrait. Considering this, I aimed to express how our thoughts and emotions are similar.

My role is interpreter. I do not intend to display the particulars of her story or appearance. The personal profile, history, and a detailed description backed with the actual mug shot photograph would ultimately enlighten my readers and viewers to the particulars of her emotional, physical, and social condition while examining the written research and creative outcome. The facts and fate of my subject could be revealed like a news article or documentary that pieces together the conjecture and actual public records documenting her life. Although this is a valid approach when studying a human subject it may not completely express my interpretation of her story through the portrait. I do not want this woman to be a target of collective judgment. This is not about a sensational or pitiful portrayal. My efforts were to protect and respect the privacy of the person within the frame. I want the viewer to feel something for my subject without the need to fully reveal all the exculpatory evidence, indecency, and unfortunate events that can easily be concluded from her history. With this, my challenge was to recreate and convey my experience viewing her likeness to reach a suitably impactful conclusion that can be felt by viewing the portrait.

The execution of the beading and embroidery was the final stage of the practical process. This further manipulated the representation of the face. As well, the use of a pastel palette and metallic gold and silver threads to define the facial features brings an unearthly quality to the rendition of the young woman. It borrows from the aesthetics of religious art and needlework to conjure up inklings of the spiritual world and subtly suggest death and sacrifice (Heffernen, 2011). The Lesage technique is a time-intensive craft that denotes exclusivity and high quality (Palmer-White, 1987, p. 154). It is also known for its artful yet decorative purpose (Brett, 1969, p. 36). The use of this technique as a means of visual communication to express the content addressed in this project is both unexpected and thought provoking.

I began by conducting an extensive search of exhibition reviews, gallery websites, journals, and master's and doctoral dissertations to gain an awareness of what work has been recognized publically/academically and how it relates to my Master's Research Project. Textile and craft artists are becoming more prominent in the art community (Roycroft, 1996, p. 2). Galleries are showing contemporary art, including portraiture that is made of traditional needlecrafts (Roycroft, 1996, p. 14). As of yet, I have not located anyone working strictly with the Lesage embroidery and beading methods in the art field. Another distinctive aspect of the portrait is my experimentation with an unconventional colour palette, sparse line work, and transparency. Using these methods of technique, colour, and materials, my objective was to produce a piece of work that suggests a ghostly presence and leaves a novel impression after viewing. The visual story told was created to resonate in its aesthetics and its ability to communicate the emotional content of this research.

## Chapter Two: Literature/Contextual Review

### Methodology

In the search for a methodological framework, I read Hyo Min Park's (2008) master's thesis entitled *Intersubjectivity in the Process of Portraiture*. This research was valuable in opening a dialogue between methodology, the creative process, and, specifically, interpretation and the subject and maker relationship in portraiture (p. 2). This led me to Robert C. Prus's (1996) *Symbolic Interaction and Ethnographic Research: Intersubjectivity and the Study of Lived Experience*. Prus describes the complex phenomenon of researching a human subject. He explains that there is always an interaction between the researcher and a human case study and this, with the researchers own lived experience, creates and "intersubjective" viewpoint. Prus suggests that there cannot be total objectivity in ethnographic research the observations are influenced conditionally by the researcher's feelings and experiences. It is this concept of an intersubjective relationship between researcher and subject that can pertain to the practice of portraiture. As Hyo Min Park examines, it is the process of interacting with the sitter that creates the interpretation of his/her likeness.

I became interested in this idea of intersubjectivity in portraiture to substantiate my need to interpret my subject. In the case of Park's (2008) thesis, her sitter is her husband, a living subject who she intimately knows; in this way the intersubjective relationship is more obvious and follows Prus's framework. My research is different in that my interaction was with a photograph, the mug shot of the woman I depicted. However, I did access her background and the facts behind her arrest to understand the physical clues that were evident in her image. Portions of this research were factual and provable whereas some were circumstantial, a product of my visual analysis of the photo. This process altered Park's theory of intersubjectivity in

portraiture. It created a greater opportunity for self-reflection and understanding that the portrait was a result of my subjective vision of the woman's story.

While the readings on intersubjectivity and portraiture were relevant in looking into the process of interpretation of a human subject, Prus (2008) does not support research gained by only observation (p. 2). The "inter" is representative of physically and socially interacting with the subject of study (p. 6). This aspect is problematic when dealing with interpreting a photograph. With this considered, I looked to Michael Podro's (1998) *Depiction*, in which he defines the objectives of portraiture and the theory associated with each. This resource describes the balance of representing the physical characteristics that distinguish a person and the influence of an artist's interpretation on the depiction (p. 99). Podro understands the complexity in depicting a portrait in that there is a process of subjectification that occurs. This is where the rendition must go beyond mimesis, and part of the expression comes from the artist's personal viewpoint (Freeland, 2007, p. 98). These ideas speak to my procedures in translating the mug shot to painting and embroidery. It was technique, choice, and use of media and the need to personally express this photograph visually that determined my unique representation of the woman's portrait.

Edward Tufte's (2006) *Beautiful Evidence* provided supplementary information on empirical methods of analyzing imagery. These procedures were used during the first phase of the research process to find an accurate drawing of the portrait subject. Tufte defines and provides illustrated examples (contemporary and historical) from a variety of professional fields. I was especially interested in his writings on "Corrupt Techniques in Evidence Presentation" to inform the process of data collection, analysis, and the translation of findings (pp. 143-147). This text provided tools to test and ground the theories of Podro's framework. Tufte's examples of

image mapping and measurement were implemented to gain a precise resemblance, to aid in ensuring the facial features were in proper proportion and spatial relation (Tufte, 2006, p. 45; see also Woodall, 1997, p. 20).

In finding the most suitable methodology, I needed to understand different approaches that relate to artistic practices. Joanna Woodall's (1997) introductory essay in *Portraiture: Facing the Subject* provided a useful general overview. Woodall composes an extensive survey of the positions taken and methods practiced in portraiture. Additionally, I read John Gage's (1997) article on "Photographic Likeness," which clarified the artist/subject relationship in photography (p. 119). Discussion of truthful representation in Cynthia Freeland's (2007) "Photography and Portraiture" supported my use of the mug shot photograph as source for documenting reality (p. 96).

In furthering my inquiry, I looked to theorist Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* and *The Fashion System*, wherein his analysis of photography regarding "essence, literal likeness" and "punctum" (Barthes, 1981, pp. 7, 25) served my research interests. These theories were employed when examining and interpreting the photograph in the stages of drawing and painting my subject. It was necessary to understand why I was enthralled with the photo and what was important in my representation of her likeness. For the embroidery process, I sourced Barthes's writings on semiotics embedded into textiles (Barthes, 1990, p. 226). He explains that embroidery, print, and pattern are cultural and historical identifiers and this with other signifiers combine to create meaning to be interpreted by a viewer (Barthes, 1990, p. 9). In this, we can read the fabric to understand origin, the story of its production, and the time period and social world the garment or textile inhabited. In "Textile Semantics," Sonja Andrew states there is further need for the study of semiotics pertaining to textiles. Where Barthes begins, Andrew

delves further into this by discussing, “communication techniques: visual narratives, topography, graphic pattern and color analysis” that are prevalent in textiles (Andrew, p. 34). Andrew’s article addresses the need for theoretical research in this area. My research aimed to visually articulate this need by creating an embroidered piece that is predominantly communicative and uses the media to describe unexpected and socially relevant themes.

In *The Fashion System*, Barthes (1990) addresses the cultural hierarchy intermeshed in fabric, founded in its quality, colour, content, sheen, and tactility (p. 192). Certain textiles, techniques, and materials have associations with luxury and symbolize cache; as a result, the fabricated item holds the ability to communicate prominence (p. 193). Barthes’s theory of semiotic reading and societal judgment of fabric was adopted and manipulated in the conceptualization of the portrait. With this, exclusive materials and techniques were used ironically to create a pointed contrast with the harsh reality of the subject matter.

An integral part of the research process was attending technique classes at the renowned Lesage School of Embroidery in Paris, France. I completed a composition depicting a flower arrangement in a vase that is designed to teach level 1 technique. It utilized a gold, champagne, white, and beige colour palette reminiscent of the gilded illuminated manuscripts of the European Arts and Crafts movement (Heffernan, 2011). The regal and ethereal quality created by the metallic gold thread provided some inspiration for the final embroidered composition. It led to the research of historical examples of embroidery in religious contexts. I looked at Heffernan’s (2011) article “Liturgical Robes in New Zealand,” which explained the use of somewhat glitzy and luxurious materials and techniques to decorate the sacred garments worn in the Roman Catholic Church in the mid 1800s. My interest centered on the heavily and unabashed decoration applied to the religious robes to symbolize the wearer’s faith. It was the belief that the



embroidery on these robes was “necessary to be precious and sumptuous” in order to communicate the celebratory and revered occasion of worship (Heffernan, para. 12). I have incorporated the aesthetics of the described embroidery to suggest a ceremonial, spiritual, or mystical tone in the embroidered composition. In my finished portrait I sought an ambiguous symbolic connotation with death and sacrifice in using gilded thread, pastels, and ornament inspired by religious art and needlecraft traditions.

### **Contextual Review: Photographers, Painters and Textile Artists**

Photographers Nan Goldin and Diane Arbus and painter Chuck Close played a pivotal role in influencing the conceptual development of this project. They are considered because of their personal interpretation of a realistic image. Nan Goldin is known for her intimate and respectful documentation of people in a raw moment of truth (Costa, 2001, p. 7). She is ethical in her treatment of vulnerable or marginalized subjects to reveal a sad, yet beautiful spirit (Costa, 2001, p. 17). I appreciate Goldin’s ability to connect the viewer to subversive stories. Similarly, Diane Arbus’s photographs represent her insightful relationship with a social group that could be considered outside of the realm of “normal” (Stallabras, 2007, p. 74). She transgresses the image-maker and “other” relationship to capture her mutual bond with the person. This approach creates a fascinating, intimate, and inclusive representation. It asks the viewer to look closely and connect, but not stare in judgment (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009, p. 178). I looked to both Goldin and Arbus to provide an example of emotionally impactful portrayal with ethical consideration of their subjects. With the portrait artist Chuck Close, it is his use of colour and surface texture that was relevant to my research aims. Close creates an even emphasis of importance over the entire surface area of the composition (Storr, 1998, p. 88). The Close block print portraits use a dominating surface texture that has the potential to overwhelm the definition of the painting.

However, he is able to define the resembling details of the facial features in his portraits (Storr, 1998, p. 90). His technique of manipulating colour and surface texture influenced my experimentation with these challenges in the embroidery process of my final composition.

In placing my research in context, I looked at other craft artists who challenge similar theoretical, technical, and aesthetic areas. Through my research, I was introduced to an embroidery artist from the modernist era named Margritte Zorah (Reiss, 2008, 181). She depicted figurative portraiture that was expressive and was said to “elevate embroidery craft” to gain acceptance in the fine art field (Fowler, 2002, p. 13). After surveying her work, I was inspired by her ability to communicate the current condition of her societal and cultural surroundings. It is this aspect of her work that encouraged my intention of transferring a craft technique to a mode of artistic expression. Embroidery was and is considered a decorative art. As in Zorah’s work, I strived to use embroidery as a contemporary expressive media. Ideally, this research aimed to expand the audience of embroidered work and create new connections relating textiles, craft, and artisan practices with the areas of design, illustration, and fine art.

Practitioners of portraiture and the decorative arts were searched to position my research within the professional and academic field. The Textile Museum of Canada (2009) website is an online resource of past and present collections. *Skin & Bone* by David R. Harper (April 9–October 17, 2010) is most closely comparable to my artistic concept. He creates embroidered human portraits, which provide a strong social commentary. His work differs in that the images are tonal. The embroidery is executed on animal skins, sometimes juxtaposing taxidermy with portraiture (Textile Museum of Canada, 2009, para. 1). Other embroidery artists exhibited at the museum concentrate more on an animated style. There is also a prominence of politically driven feminist work in needlecraft art. These artists depict evocative feminist imagery as the

predominant feature in their portraits. Although my portrait does involve political, social, and gender issues, my primary focus was to study the subject's image and circumstance specifically.

Finally, Colette Whiten is a prolific Canadian artist that works in painting, sculpture, installation, embroidery and beading portraiture (Centre for Contemporary Canadian Art, n.d.). She first started exhibiting her embroidery in 1986 (Roycroft, 1996, p. 14) and her beaded images in 1994 (Roycroft, 1996, p. 12). These works are portraits executed in a pixilated grey scale from newspaper images. Whiten's work explores the use of a decorative craft to illustrate contemporary societal issues (Roycroft, 1996, p. 19). While sharing attributes, I have differentiated my portrait stylistically, technically, and with choice of materials to the above mentioned embroidery artists including Whiten and Davis's work. The Lesage method of application can facilitate minute detail that is distinct to the technique (Palmer-White, 1987, p. 137). As well, the skill of the Lesage method is not a domestically practiced craft. It is from the atelier tradition where techniques are passed on from a master (Palmer-White, 1987, p. 136). This type of apprenticeship learning protects the mechanics of the practice against being taken and compromised. This results in a rare and exclusive skill set. As a practitioner and researcher, this is an opportunity to introduce a revered handcraft to a new genre and purpose.

## Chapter Three: Methodology

### Portraiture

The methodology chosen was the result of an extensive search starting with the practice of portraiture. The defining principle of this genre is the artist–subject relationship and how this affects the outcome (Woodall, 1997, p. 22). “Intersubjectivity” was a commonly acknowledged framework analyzing this aspect of the artistic exchange during the development of a portrait (Park, 2008, p. 7). In *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, Woodall explains the “artist” and “sitter” relationship is formed through their interaction, and the sharing of experience during the sitting process has an influence on the artist’s representation (p. 22). This concept of interpretation born from the subject–maker interface is the premise of the intersubjective theoretical framework in portraiture, and this has been a major factor guiding my project intentions.

Robert C. Prus’s (1996) *Intersubjectivity* stresses the idea of an “empathetic” relationship between the researcher and subject (p. 23). I believe this idea of empathy was crucial to a deeper understanding of my subject matter and executing a respectful research process. However, Prus is adamantly against the use of hard science to examine subjects of humanity (p. 8). He concluded all researchers that study human behavior are subjective to varying degrees (p. 8). To employ the model of Prus would contradict my early aim of observing the woman’s physical structure objectively to collect the initial visual data. My procedure was to map her facial features through a series of realistic pencil drawn studies. I assumed that this approach was necessary before allowing myself to interpret her appearance to maintain an identifiable rendition in the final stages of the portrait. I believe that it was this tension between the attempt to depict the ‘literal-likeness’ from the mug shot and acknowledging the subjective need to express my

emotion response to the woman's image that was the premise of this project (Barthes, 1981, p. 8).

The core concept of intersubjectivity was problematic for my particular research in that I related to a photograph—the woman's mug shot—and not the actual person. Prus (1996) would not classify this as an intersubjective process without human-to-human interaction (p. 10).

Although intensely intimate, the mug shot of the subject is an image of her likeness not her living presence, therefore no matter how vehemently I searched for understanding of her person in the photograph my interpretation could only be subjective.

To specify the theoretical framework of subjective interpretation in portraiture, Michael Podro's (1998) *Depiction* became the most significant resource for my purposes. Podro dissects the process of portrait making and acknowledges the dual and conflicting task of portraying a subject (p. 112). He creates defined objectives, placing equal importance on achieving an "elicit recognition" of the subject, the "possession of cohesion and complexity of sustaining that recognition," and the artist's interpretative input or "expressiveness" in the representation (Podro, 1998, p. 112). This is the process of "subjectification" created by the maker, subject, and viewer relationship (Freeland, 2007, p. 98). By understanding and accepting the contrasting and dependent aims in Podro's *Depiction*, it was applicable to the stages of transformation in sketching, painting, and embroidering my subject's likeness. In this way, it was the major theoretical framework to envelope my process of interpretation in all phases of the practical research procedures.

### **Phase 1: "Elicit Recognition" in Pencil Media**

The point of departure for the practical process was Michael Podro's concept of "elicit recognition" (Podro, 1998, p. 112). Working with pencil on vellum, I physically researched her

distinguishing traits through the act of sketching (Tufte, 2006, p. 12). This stage was important in understanding all the unique details, proportions, and asymmetries that were essential to attaining the aim of Podro's framework. Edward Tufte's (2006) writings on visual mapping served as a secondary resource to inspire precision in the life drawing techniques. In Gray and Malins's (2004) *Visualizing Research*, Leonardo da Vinci is used to exemplify the ultimate creative "visual researcher" (p. 93); da Vinci spent years sketching to form his concepts of the human structure (p. 94). These references supported the exploratory procedure of finding physical accuracy through the practice of sketching. The pencil drawings of the woman's face served as the foundation of the portrait's composition. More importantly, this process provided an understanding of what aspects of her appearance I found personally compelling. These features became the focus for visually interpreting my subject. It facilitated a natural progression from objective to subjective researcher. From drafting the woman's expression, an innate sense of what I wished to communicate emerged.

## **Phase 2: Interpretative Expression in Watercolour Media**

A colour scheme was created through studies in watercolour paint on paper and Mylar. The desired outcome of the colour and the media was to heighten the final composition by playing with a surreal palette, transparency and an illuminated effect.

In the Podro portraiture structure, the maker's "expressiveness" carries equal significance to depicting an accurate recreation of the subject's appearance. To further that, it is a deeper conceptual directive that inspires an intimate and innovative interpretation. In the secondary phase, expressiveness became an essential initiative in my research process. To guide the analysis of the mug shot, I used the theories in Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*. Barthes's photographic concepts of capturing the "essence" or "air" of a subject and "punctum," the ability

for an image to inflict a powerful emotional reaction were the basis of my personal expression (Barthes, 1981, p. 108). Additionally, I looked at various ideas of agency and the ethical considerations of interpreting a human subject's likeness. In asking myself to consider these theories, my interpretation was found in questioning my thoughts, feelings, and intentions during the practice of creating the portrait. This examination formed the transition from sketching to a watercolour rendition. In watercolour media the portrait became a manifestation of my personal response to the mug shot and the humanity of my subject.

**Theory: “Essence” or “air” in likeness.** During the process of interpretation, I was guided by a search for the “essence” of the woman from the mug shot's image. Barthes explains this concept as an unexplained phenomenon where a person within an image is known to the viewer intimately beyond physical appearance (Barthes, 1981, p. 107); the image exposes the qualities that are crucial and specific to the total experience of knowing the photographic subject (p. 107). Ultimately, this is the goal of a portrait (Stallabras, 2007, p. 73). Whether in painting or photography, capturing the inner nature of the subject holds privilege over other objectives of the portrait genre and it has been argued that either media has more potential of capturing this particular desired effect (Freeland, 2007, p. 98). It has been stated that the objectivity of the camera makes the magic quality of essence more challenging and the painter has a greater possibility of conveying the intangible characteristics through the freedom of artistry and subjectivity (Freeland, 2007, p. 105). Freeland (2007) discusses this quandary by quoting Ernst Van Alphen, who explains that in portrait photography, “the essential nature of the sitter can only be captured by the artist, not the camera” (p. 106). It is the hand of the photographer or painter in conjunction with the interpretative process that reveals more than the physical. In successful or meaningful portraits, the viewer gains or connects to the subject intimately; it is not

just about visual recognition. It was this concept of essence that guided the early progression of sketching and then painting my subject's likeness contained in her mug shot. Within the task of subjective reconstruction of my subject's physical features, I attempted to express who I believed she was and aimed to convey her story visually. The portrait communicates my search to translate her essence to an audience.

**Theory: "Punctum" in photography and painting.** The woman's mug shot made a strong and lasting impression. It addressed another interesting theory of Barthes: the ability for a photograph to produce a sense of "punctum" in a viewer. Barthes categorized the idea of the photograph's objective quality as "studium" (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009, p. 17). But Barthes also spoke of the photographic myth, where each image is "culturally and socially inflected," obscuring the reading and ultimately the meaning displayed in the photographic image (Sturken & Cartwright, 2007, p. 17). To Barthes, the photograph is not completely objective because of this contextual influence (Barthes, 1981, p. 14). In addition, Barthes describes the ability for a photographic image to "pierce the viewer's heart" or cause the sensation of "punctum" (p. 15). In this, the photograph emotionally touches the viewer; Barthes explains punctum as a "magical" and personal response to an image that seems to defy analysis of how or why this phenomenon occurs (p. 15). Roland Barthes's theories of photographic myth, studium, and punctum seem to exemplify the simultaneous contradiction of accurate and interpreted meaning in photography. I believed the probing nature of Barthes's theories was appropriate to challenge my creative process during this phase. It speaks to my initial requirement of realistic accuracy in my exploratory sketches and then an acknowledgment of the need to express my compassion while depicting my subject matter. I sought to discover if I could recreate the intangible and spontaneous quality of punctum described by Barthes in a media outside the practice of



photography. In this project I aimed to translate my feelings in witnessing the raw and arresting visual image presented in the original source—her mug shot. While considering the concepts related to rendering the essence and punctum of the photographic image, the watercolour composition of the portrait emerges. With these theories the portrait-making process went beyond mimesis and facilitated the opportunity to develop an intimate and substantial subjective interpretation of the woman.

**Theory: Agency, the other, and ethics.** As I searched pertinent theories to inform and substantiate my methods of developing the mug shot portrait, greater and more demanding questions surfaced. What are my motives? Am I intruding? These were questions that concerned me deeply. I was afraid of accusing myself of exploitation and disrespect. In questioning myself ethically, a crucial understanding of why my making this portrait is relevant to greater issues of representation merged to thoughtfully deconstruct the traditional power dynamic between artist and subject. I aspired to present a co-dependent and self-reflective position. I interpreted her likeness from a place of acceptance and intimate understanding of commonality, not “other” (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009, p. 111). In “What’s in a Face,” Julian Stallabras (2007) creates an important dialogue concerning the idea of agency, saying that the only participants who can maintain a level of control over the meaning of an image are the artist and the viewer; the subject cannot truly have agency (p. 88). It is this imbalance of power that I had to constantly acknowledge while creating the portrait.

The concepts of “other” and the exploitative nature of “agency” were the guiding principles behind how I visually expressed this young woman. I have previously explained my reasoning for my process, media, and aesthetic choices that come from a place of synthesis and personal expression. These interpretative choices and intentions were also framed by the

unwanted and inflammatory nature of misrepresenting my subject. I thought of the photographic portraits taken by Diane Arbus, in that her subject matter was often categorized as “freakish” or “other” (Stallabras, 2007, p. 74). Although seemingly “normal,” Arbus had an affinity to the people in her photos enabling her to capture their unique, sometimes strange qualities (Stallabras 2007, p. 74). In her portraits, instead of judgment the audience is treated to an unfolding of the subject’s person in a curious, yet relatable way. Arbus’s approach and her sensitivity to the visual impression she leaves is the inspirational principle I considered in my role as interpretive agent in this process. As I painted the woman’s expression, it was an intensely reflexive process that I had to enter ethically. My interpretation stemmed from the recognition and necessary understanding of a common struggle that is worn on this woman’s face.

### **Phase 3: Intention, Communication, and Expression With Embroidery Media**

The final watercolour composition was transferred to embroidery on silk organza. The portrait was crafted by hand using stitches in thread and sequins executed in the newly acquired Lesage technique.

**Method: Lesage Embroidery.** The success of the portrait relies on the techniques used to communicate the described theoretical concepts. The Lesage technique is specific to an embroidery firm located in Paris, France (Shaeffer, 2001, p. 205). The school has been in existence since 1992, and the Atelier has embroidered clothing for Yves St. Laurent, Chanel, Christian Lacroix, and Givenchy since 1927 (Kamitsis, 2005). The process is time intensive with individual sequins and stitches applied by tambour (small crochet) hook (Palmer-White, 1987, p. 158). Its technical demands provide a refinement and sparkling quality (Shaeffer, 2001, p. 205). The choice to exhibit this method outside the community of haute couture fashion aims to increase the audience and awareness of this renowned practice. This research intends to take this

craft beyond exquisite decoration. It was applied to depict a raw and arresting image. My intention was to use this method of embroidery in an inclusive, modern, and communicative manner to generate a broader appreciation of the skill, artistry, and origins of the Lesage technique.

The aim was to attain a level of competency that represents the skill and sensitivity required to present my envisioned female face. I hoped that the rare execution of embroidery would have an impact on the fashion and art community, borrowing traditional media from each to be utilized in a unique context. The finished portrait has the potential of increasing the visibility and admiration of this Parisian decorative art outside the field of fashion and the social environment to which it is known. More importantly, there was an inherent element of social commentary that was engaged by the choice of researched subject matter. The subject was extracted from the image of a mug shot and then interpreted into a heightened aesthetic reality. The aim was to create an image that transcends the normally perceived ugliness of the subject matter's condition (Wilson, 1985, p. 158), to render her uncommon beauty, telling more of her story than just her disgraced state at the moment of arrest. This information established a striking contrast between her representation in the mug shot and my interpretation of her portrait. This dichotomy is at the core of expressing the mysterious social context of this project.

Theory: Semiotics, embroidery beyond decoration. Roland Barthes's (1990) *The Fashion System* and his writings on semiotics in textiles framed my analysis and led to the creation of the embroidered content. Barthes explained that the symbols carried in textiles, with other referents, create meaning to be interpreted (p. 7). We can read the fabric, colour, texture, print, and pattern as a form of communication that through looking the viewer forms a message (Andrew, 2008, p.

35). This was a crucial aspect of creating the composition, materials, and techniques to build the embroidered picture. This directed my creative process to ground the intention of the imagery.

**Theory: Hand embroidery and the “aura” of a singular artwork.** The idea of handcraft and the time needed and taken was an immensely important factor in making the portrait. I referred to Walter Benjamin (2008) and *The Work of Art and the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* to ground my investigation into the differences between the singular artwork and the photograph. This premise supported the translation from mug shot to embroidered portrait. His theory of “aura” differentiates a mechanically produced picture from handmade singular imagery. This aura is “a presence” that cannot be duplicated and is solely a product of the maker’s hand (p. 220). Benjamin also discusses the positioning of original work as “esteemed,” “sacred,” or “ritual” (p. 220). I have purposely used the ideas of Benjamin to comment on the social status of my subject; the time spent scribing each stitch by hand to craft a singular work infers the subject is worthy of our attention. The detail and delicacy inherent in this method created a reason and compulsion to look intently. In this, I ask the viewer to admire this woman’s appearance, presence, and aura by representing her in this haute couture method.

This project involved a multi-method approach that relied heavily on practical exploration and techniques. The theoretical research opened the dialogue between concept and execution. I used visual language to tell my story of the subject. Motivated by the theories of Podro, Barthes, and Benjamin, I invite the audience to witness this subject through the distinctive aesthetic qualities of the media. Through this process, I have worked reflexively to understand my effect on this representation. My aim was to create a visual expression that is personal yet relatable to common human experience.

## Chapter Four: Analysis and Findings of the Creative Process

### Phase 1: Pencil Sketches

The selected mug shot photograph was analyzed for the physical plot of the facial features and expression. This was an invaluable procedure in the portrayal of “elicit recognition” that was defined by the Podro portraiture framework (Podro, 1998, p. 112). The method allowed for an appraisal of all discerning attributes crucial to reconstructing the subject’s appearance and the time taken was beneficial in understanding how these details served as visual clues in developing my interpretation of her image. Referencing Edward Tufte’s (2006) *Beautiful Evidence*, the photograph served as a concrete record of the woman’s likeness to generate the visual data, the pencil sketches (p. 45). The series of drawings were executed on vellum with 2H, HB, and mechanical lead pencil. Concentration was placed on the shape, size, proportion, naturally occurring shadow and highlight, and texture that influenced a realistic depiction. Through sketching, the facial asymmetries and imperfections became important in gaining physical accuracy. These flaws shaped my concern and attraction for the subject and I was able to understand how to convey what was personally compelling about the subject matter.

The sketches were then studied and interpreted. The narrative quality of the portrait was explored to reach a representation that evokes an emotional connection with the subject. The act of sketching documented and established the persona of the woman. From that the final compositional drawing emerged.

The purpose of the creative process was to recreate my emotional response to the mug shot photograph of the young woman. I knew her solely through this image. I then discovered height, weight, age, ethnicity, and alleged crimes from other sources. Initially, I felt I could reproduce my sensation through the process of sketching her face, drawing her features in exact

proportion and using the light and shadow and minute detail as contained in the photograph. I was certain that if I captured the visual image that haunted me, I would successfully capture the emotional impact I had felt as a viewer. In attempting this, I realized that the physical map of her likeness was not what was integral to my portrait. The perfect rendering of her facial structure was already present in the photographic image. The search to visually represent my reaction through the sketching exercise forced me to recognize what Barthes meant by essence. Essence is personal to the viewer (Barthes, 1981, p. 109). In understanding the importance of the subjectivity of essence, I realized it was the synthesis of my feelings for her image that facilitated an impactful portrayal of my subject matter.

## **Phase 2: Watercolour Portrait**

The pencil composition was then explored in watercolour media on Mylar (see Figure 1). Mylar was used for its luminous, malleable quality and smooth surface texture. It allowed the application of sheer layers of colour to build a subtle and transparent representation. This process was to pointedly exhibit juxtaposition between subject matter, media, and application. The watercolour methods were aimed to go beyond the expected treatment of the mug shot image to find an ethereal depiction that palpably displays her physical wounds. This was a crucial process in conveying my translation of essence and punctum in the portrait.

As my research moved beyond the attempt for realistic recreation I found that the colour palette and medium allowed me to express a personal interpretation that captured the essence and the emotional potency I felt when looking at her picture. I asked myself what impression I wanted to achieve in my depiction. I then applied Claude Monet's diffused colours and methods of describing form to my subject's face to create a soft, tonal refinement of her features. This allowed a unique expression of this young woman. With pale pinks, blues, peach, and mint green

watercolour pencil, the transparent layers and unrealistic colouring provided an intentional contrast to the harsh physical scars and flaws I purposely included. The tinted floral palette connoted a ghostly beauty. By indicating details that commonly mar a woman's appearance in delicate colours and application, an unusual and ambiguous method of describing how I related to her image was disclosed. In this, I revealed my inner connection to her person in a deeply empathetic understanding of the reality of her condition. Regardless of her circumstance, I saw a vulnerability and purity of presence that was beyond the implications of her physical imperfections. The attempt to show a poetic representation of her outer wounds exemplified a collective experience of struggle. The colour palette and medium was my interpretative language to aesthetically express a visual manifestation of our shared humanity.

### **Phase 3: The Embroidered Composition**

The final portrait is a colourful composition of a female face rendered entirely from Lesage embroidery (see Figure 18). This was executed on a stretched piece of ivory silk organza fabric. Organza provided the desired sheerness and luxurious impression. The technique and materials were chosen for an impactful and decadent presentation. In the third phase the woman was depicted with a sparse selection of realistic detail to thoughtfully stitch the depth, definition and expressive features that hold prominence in the previous studies in pencil and watercolour. A sequined background further developed the hyper-real quality in colour and light reflection. The incorporation of an unrealistic palette, light, and textural aesthetics of the materials was decided to create an image that is simultaneously real, surreal, and fantastic. It allowed the composition to have humanistic detail and a glowing, three-dimensional quality and impressionistic style.

My translation of the woman's face from mug shot to watercolour dictated the choice of embroidered techniques and thread colour. I wanted to express a soft watery application of line

to delineate the contours of her facial structure. The painting was adapted to a coloured line drawing and took on a ghostly sparse feeling. The areas were scribed using a row of stitches with each one measuring less than a sixteenth of an inch to form the embroidered chain. This process was accomplished by luneville/tambour hook technique in fine rayon thread. Taking various shades of blue, pink, and green from the pastel palette of the watercolour media stitch lines built and blended the colour composition. I intentionally left her skin transparent, carefully choosing the stitches and thread to describe the essential qualities of her likeness. Although the focal point of my composition, she maintained a soft, sheer, and eerie quality of the watercolour image. This required careful planning in the embroidery stage. In this phase, I wanted my viewer to be aware of her fragile condition and ultimately her fate (see Figures 2-11).

Surrounding the woman is a background symbolic of my interpretation of her story. I have included a deer that fades in and out of the subject's surroundings, hovering above her joined by delicate loosely drawn birds sewn in silver (Figure 12). The fawn's features were stitched in metallic gold thread with ivory and gold pearlescent sequins. It was my imagined inclusion, indigenous to her background. The comparatively large eyes, lashes, ears, and nose and the vibrating shine created by the materials are meant to describe the stature and texture of an innocent and defenseless baby animal (Figure 17). This was to suggest a mystical presence in order to create ambiguous associations to prey, death, and sacrifice. The surroundings implied associations with a peaceful, yet ominous wilderness. These supporting elements in the background create mystery and suggest dark connotations of this women's real life journey.

The final element of the composition was conceived in the embroidery phase of the creative process and came out of problem solving the issue of sourcing sequins. Originally the background was to be inspired by the heavenly aesthetic of the renaissance religious paintings.



The effective execution of the sky and cloud taken from this genre requires varying shades and tones of blues, whites, and grey. This would be exorbitantly expensive and complicated to acquire the quality and colour of sequins needed to accomplish this idea successfully. Instead, I gathered the sequins I had bought while training in France at Lesage and created a leaf motif that suggested the origin of the woman and her story. This became harshly depicted leaves engulfing the subject and supporting characters (the fawn and birds) of the narrative. They are overly embellished, thickly encrusted in brightly coloured sequins. I conducted the Lesage technique of applying flat 3mm individual sequins, each secured by a crochet stitch with the hook tool and cotton thread. To ensure the proper method was accomplished, an overlapping was needed to cover the hole and stitch of the sequin previous. This technique creates the surface texture and reflection characteristic of Lesage embellishment. I purposely contrasted the soft and sparse nature of the woman with the materials and application in the background to create an off-putting combination that is intended to communicate my poetic version of her story. The leaves are pink, yellow, and brown. This colour combination was selected to create a surreal and expressive depiction of fall leaves before they decompose in the winter months (see Figures 13-16).

Upon completion of my portrait, I conducted an intense analysis of my motives and my feelings as expressed aesthetically through the creative process. Admittedly, I intruded in some ways on this woman's life and likeness. Significantly, I used the words capture, caught, and taken to describe how the camera recorded her image. Although I have no intention of sharing the sensational details of the subject's background or the crimes that are implied in her mug shot, this all-imposing information was used to influence my depiction of the subject. In this way I invaded her privacy. It was imperative to handle this research with care and remind myself at all stages of the need for ethical responsibility in the treatment of the visual image. In asking why I

chose this woman, and why I imagine the portrait in colourful Lesage embroidery, I have come to the realization that my effort was to see beyond the obvious physical and factual cues. I wanted to source the familiar in her intending to visually explain through the delicacy of the methods and materials the collective experience of being a scared and vulnerable young woman caught in an act resulting from poor decision. I sensed this from her mug shot. In film theory it is said we know ourselves through the gaze of others, society, institutions, and surroundings (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009, p. 102). There is self-consciousness to the way we identify and feel about ourselves. It defines how we perceive ourselves through our interactions with others in our society. We all understand the human conditions of shame, regret, fear, and hurt. These ideas of the shared human experience and universal feeling guided the interpretation of my subject's portrait. This was an intentionally inclusive process in which I attempted to share authorship with my subject's likeness to describe my interpretation of her story to convey her essence, emotions, and most importantly her humanity.

## **Chapter Five: Conclusion**

Throughout this research there has been a constant interaction between academic theory and the creative process. Without this interplay the content and aesthetics that formed the final portrait would not have been reached. The challenge to visually articulate theory with a willingness to respond allowed the creative process to move in unexpected and innovative directions. Through this portrait, I have learned that the marriage of scholarly research and studio practice can serve as a tool to continually stimulate my quest for new creative expression.

I explored several different art, illustrative, and craft media to develop an incremental process that ended in a novel and personal articulation of media and genre. Embroidered illustration, needlecraft fine art, and haute couture portraiture are all plausible descriptions of the end result. The final embroidered portrait exemplifies a mix of media, meaning, and genre to create an interesting blend of art and fashion. It has always been my belief that fashion is communicative. Designers use textiles to sculpt their point of view (Wilson, 1985, p. 158). As with other art forms, these cloth creations are read and used by the wearer and society to send and deduce messages (Andrew, 2008, p. 35). This research explored a particular method, Lesage embroidery, renowned in the fashion community, and found an avenue to incorporate the practice in a new context. While the placement of stitches and sequins on material historically meant decoration and ornamentation, my goal was to convey feeling and thought. The portrait intention was not simply to produce a glittering version of her image. The Lesage embroidery has been utilized as a tool to comment on social themes. With these objectives, I have aimed to create an imagined moment with the ironic merge of high fashion techniques and materials and a selection of explicitly honest impressions from her mug shot photograph.

Prior to beginning the embroidered portrait, I knew this project should be part of a larger series. However, to execute the detail and technical demands of this media with the dexterity and the level of care needed, time constraints made it impossible to consider multiple pieces. Attempting this would have resulted in compromising areas of research and artistic conception and execution. Recognizing this, it was decided that one portrait truly exploring the Lesage technique, the theories addressed, and my visual language was the final project goal. Upon completion, I believe the concepts, methods, and techniques warrant further study and expansion. I am just beginning to understand Lesage embroidery and its uses in my illustrative style. As areas of the portrait progressed, I conceived of different ways of manipulating the media. This has generated an enthusiasm for future academic endeavors that could extend the innovation of this artistic method. This research topic has been all consuming, my time, thoughts, and technical skills have been stretched beyond my expectations. This process has provided a valuable opportunity to discover. Potentially, the application of Lesage embroidery in portraiture could push the boundaries of expected scale, materials, and setting. In large format the surreal and fantastical quality of this project and its physical presence would be further exaggerated. Embroidery of sizable proportion would dramatically consume space with the reflective, textural, and extravagant properties inherent in the Lesage tradition. Presently, I would like to continue my exploration with the smaller scaled portrait that focuses on the communication of the social and aesthetic concepts addressed.

In conclusion, the final culmination of this research is a portrait in embroidered language describing my personal vision of a woman's likeness. My intentions were for my subject matter to be evocative. Selecting the mug shot, its subject, and the ethical challenges of interpreting a real woman's circumstance required a constant acknowledgement of my responsibility during the

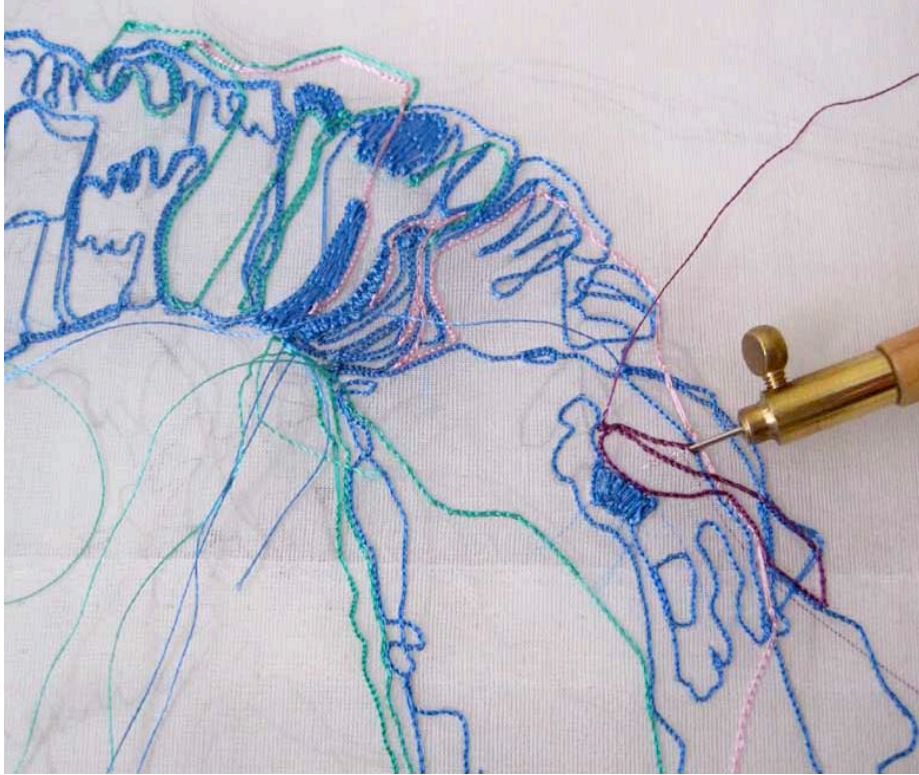
exercise. I realized not only that was it imperative that I understand my intentions, but also that I had to transparently explore, explain, and research other artists' work who took this approach with their subject matter. The result is a portrait representing my personal feelings of her beauty. In celebrating a person that may not be considered socially or physically acceptable, my motivation is to offer an alternative vision to the stereotypical image in fashion culture. My inspirations are the raw, arresting, and curious photographs taken by Nan Goldin and Diane Arbus that capture the honesty of society's perceived deviance in a way that is relatable and visually stimulating. I prefer the portrait be deemed compelling than simply beautiful. In exploring the phenomenon of "essence" and "punctum" of the subjected mug shot, I allowed myself to reach beyond physical reconstruction and manicured perfection to truly understand how to visually express my complex feeling for my subject matter in the genre of portraiture.

## Appendix: Figures



*Figure 1.* Phase 2: Watercolour pencil on mylar (9" x 12"). December 5, 2011.

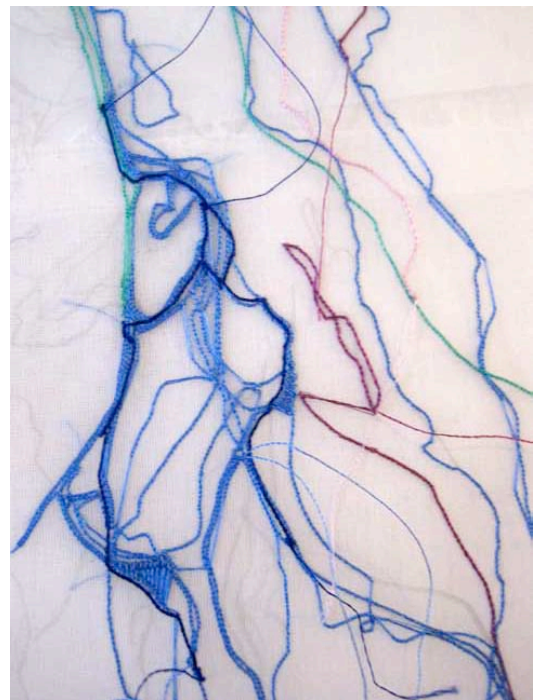




*Figure 2.* Phase 3: Embroidered composition; development of the hair. January 2012.



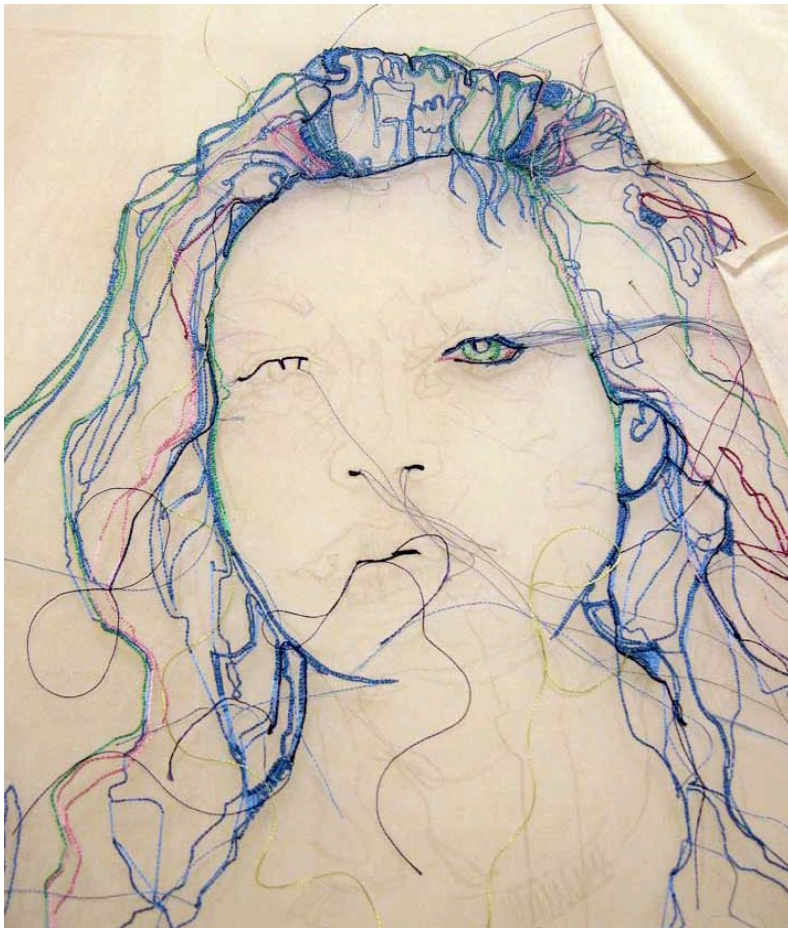
*Figure 3.* (Left). Phase 3: Embroidered composition; development of the hair. January 2012.



*Figure 4.* (Right). Phase 3: Embroidered composition; development of the hair. January 2012.

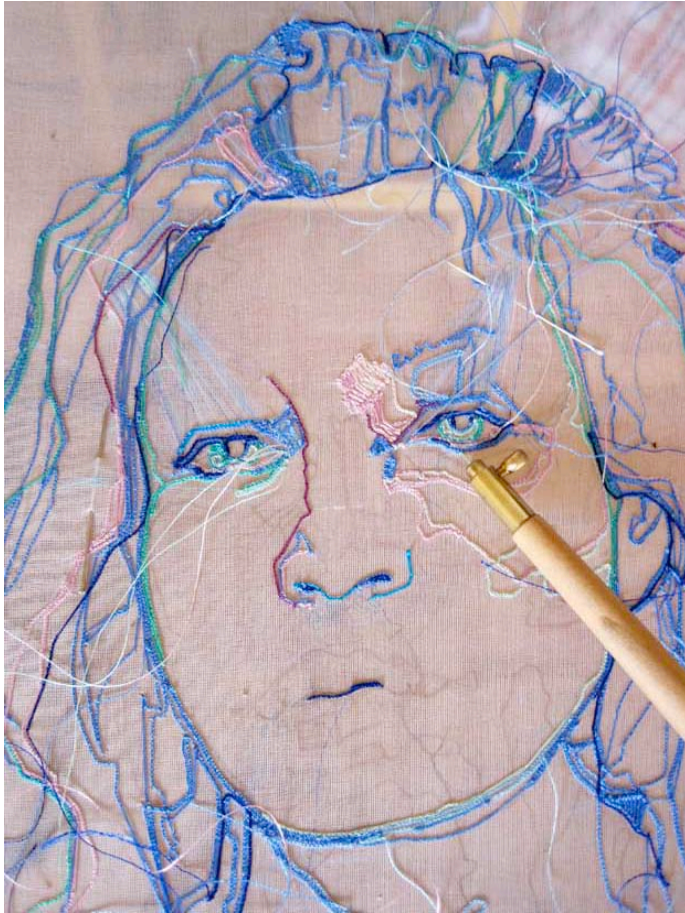


*Figure 5.* Phase 3: Embroidered composition; development of the face. January 2012.



*Figure 6.* Phase 3: Embroidered composition; development of the face. January 2012.



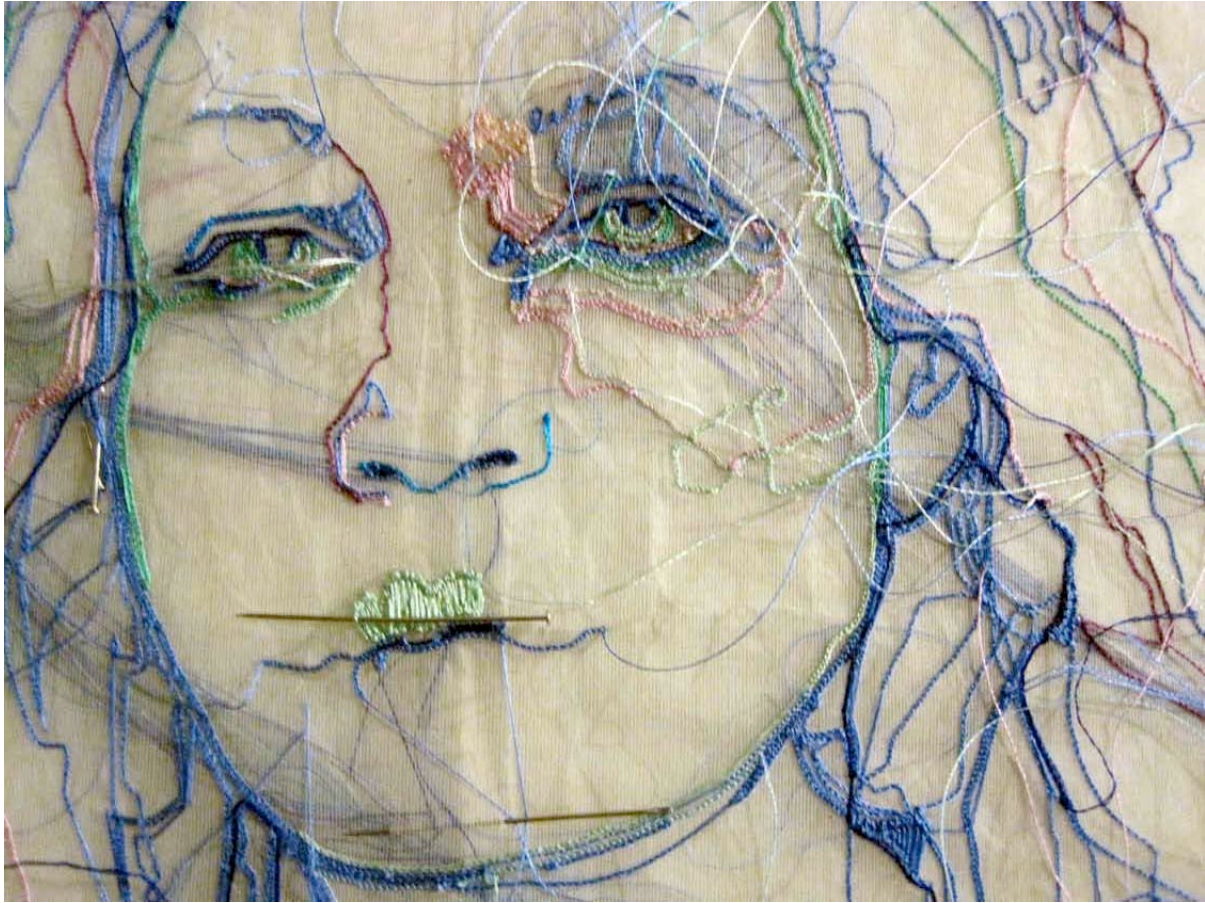


*Figure 7.* Phase 3: Embroidered composition; development of the face. January 2012.



*Figure 8.* Phase 3: Embroidered composition; development of the face. January 2012.



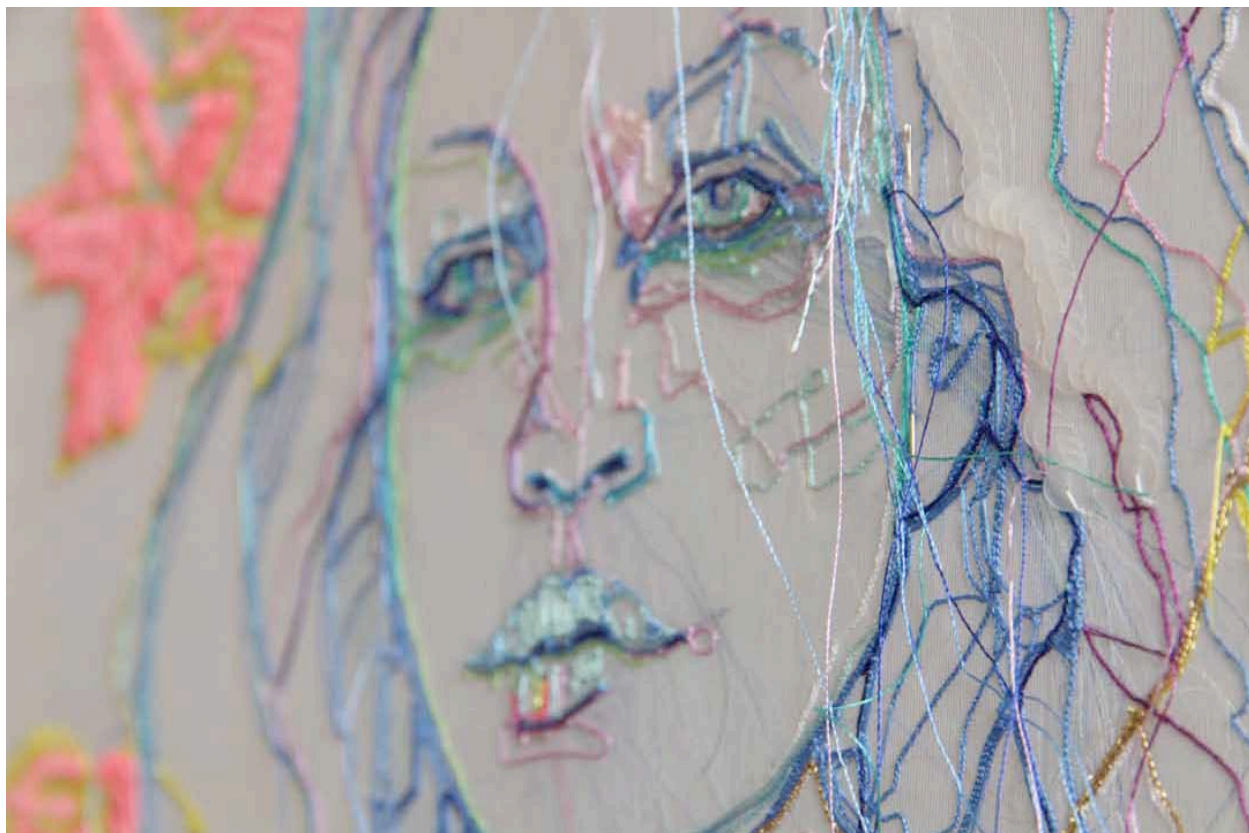


*Figure 9.* Phase 3: Embroidered composition; development of the mouth. January 2012.



*Figure 10.* Phase 3: Embroidered composition; development of the mouth. January 2012.





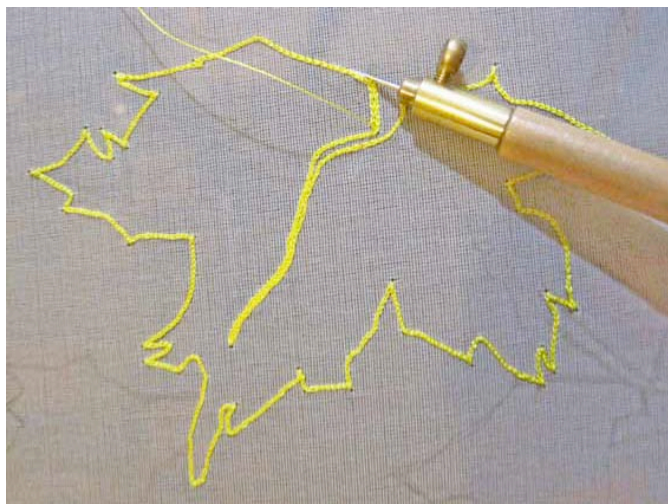
*Figure 11.* Phase 3: Embroidered composition; facial composition. February 2012.



*Figure 12.* Phase 3: Embroidered composition; development of the birds. February 2012.

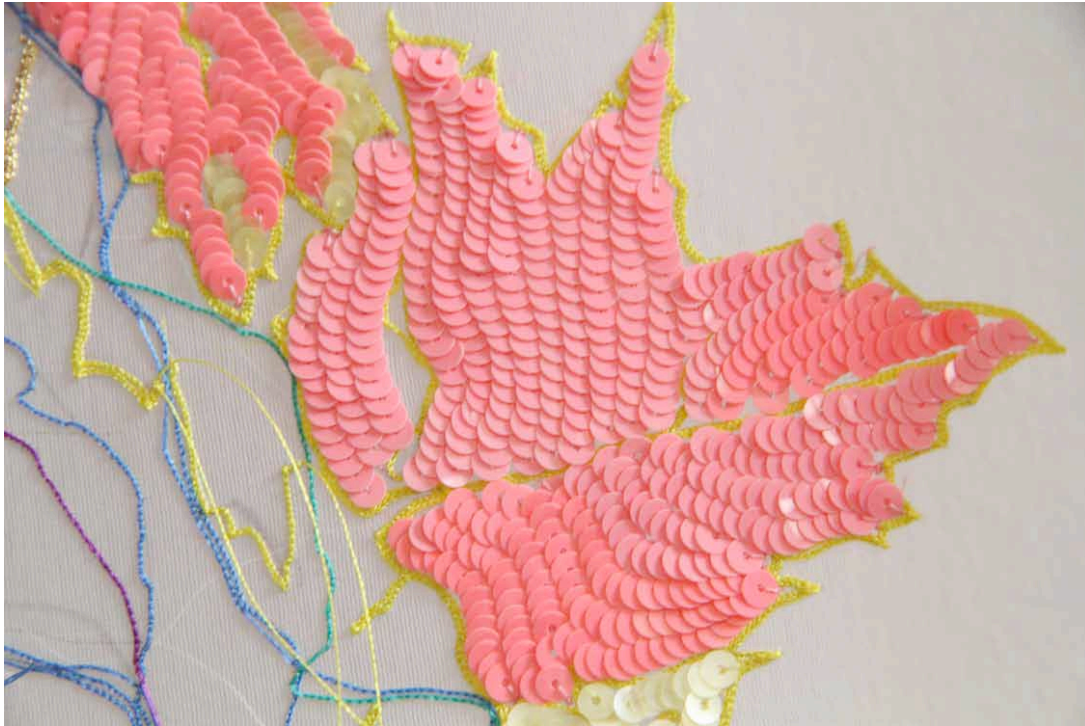


*Figure 13.* Phase 3: Embroidered composition; development of the leaves. February 2012.



*Figure 14.* Phase 3: Embroidered composition; development of the leaves. February 2012.





*Figure 15.* Phase 3: Embroidered composition; sequining the leaves. March 2012.



*Figure 16.* Phase 3: Embroidered composition; sequining the leaves. March 2012.



*Figure 17.* Phase 3: Embroidered composition; sequining the deer. March–April 2012.



*Figure 18.* Phase 3: Embroidered composition. April 2012.

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