



"Todd" looks regal and distinguished in his stitched-for-fur



"Paula" has been given some psychedelic-inspired accessories

An interview with...

Stacey Page

This embroidery artist attacks discarded photos with a needle and thread, creating bizarre yet intriguing characters

Interview by Jessica Bateman

With their intricate headresses, animal-inspired masks and variety of curious accessories, there's something strangely macabre yet comic about Stacey Page's stitched portraits. The self-taught artist scours backwoods auctions in the southern US, seeking out discarded photographs that she can breathe new life into. We asked her about the stories behind her work...

Tell us a bit about your background as an artist

I was raised in Arizona and moved to Georgia when I was 13. More recently I've been living and working in St.

Augustine, Florida. I studied for a couple of years at Atlanta College of Art (now SCAD) but I'm mostly a painting major drop out. I went on to experiment with a variety of other mediums including wool, wood and clay before picking up the needle.

How did you first learn to stitch, and why do you choose to use this medium in your work?

I'm self-taught. I first learnt embroidery through experimenting with replacing paint with yarn on canvas - I created some large needleworked bargeolo-type works that I dragged around everywhere, using them as some sort of diary. I was experimenting with the grid and how

it made the image I started with more graphic. Once I tried using the needle and thread on photographs, my work became more sculptural and the size more intimate. Using a short needle brings the skill closer to the body, mind or idea.

Stitching photographs isn't as fluent as embroidering directly onto fabric - it's more similar to sculpting. I'm building up and breaking down the paper to transform the medium. When I draw, it can be difficult to commit to one line, but the thread deletes that hesitation without the permanence of ink. My favourite thing about working with a needle and thread is how clean and safe it is. There's no time frame with the medium and it's easy to pick



up and put down. It's also a very accessible medium that travels well.

Where do your photographs come from and how do you choose them?

I look for portraits that are for sale or have been discarded. I'm not interested in people who are famous or well-remembered. I've become very specific about the type of photographs that work best for me, and I look for a captivating individual that sparks a conversation. Some of my best finds have come from backwoods auctions in the south. These are places with dumped possessions and questionable characters that exist on the edge of civilization. If you truly question the



"Bobby's" flame red headress is wonderfully textured



“My favourite thing about working with a needle and thread is how clean, safe and accessible it is”

worth of something, take it here and it will put all possessions into perspective.

Can you describe your creative process - how do you develop the masks and headresses?

I have tried several different approaches. Usually I start with

a sketch that adapts and evolves with the stitching. If I'm feeling daring then I will attack the photo directly, and the subject responds. I enjoy pushing the limits and the fact there are no rules other than my own. Stitching a small space allows for a continuous relationship with the work.



'Jason' is one of many characters discovered in backwoods auctions



'Henry' and his brocade-inspired white and gold headress



Who or what inspires you?
My inspiration comes from the desire to have a conversation and control.

Are there any characters you've created that you have a particular affiliation with or fondness for?
I have a relationship with each work – it's easy to create personas and insights for portraits. I hold respect for each life lived and, because of that, I find myself reflected into each character. The process is entertaining but I often find the end result unenjoyable – it's very hard for me to decide to stop stitching and I would quite happily continue to stitch them into oblivion!

“It's very hard for me to stop stitching – I'd quite happily stitch each piece into oblivion!”

Do you ever make up names or stories for your characters?
Absolutely – I cannot ignore myself, the photographer or the subject. I feel they all contribute towards finishing the work, and once the conversation is over I'm left with whatever I have to show for myself. My favourite relationship is always with whatever project I'm currently working on, and the conversation might go something like this: "Oh 'June', you'd better wear a mask because we've found out you

have walking pneumonia. And here's a monarch butterfly shield to protect you from the elements – no, now it's a breast plate to show which family you belong to. We're really got to do something about that hair because the photographer didn't shoot it in focus. And what did you do back them to protect yourself from things like pneumonia? Are you sure it has to be a monarch – there are better butterflies. What a beautiful necklace! You're just like a cocoon, ready to transform.”



Who are your creative heroes and what do you admire about them?
I drool over anyone who has exceptional skills, especially when dealing with a needle. For example, I think it'd be amazing to talk to a busy facial plastic surgeon. I also hold a deep admiration for outsider or self-taught artists. I also tend to enjoy artists who are exploring ideas of the self and dealing with portraiture.

What are your favourite blogs and magazines?
I enjoy regularly reading www.needlethread.com and [\[www.outsiderartmagazine.com\]](http://www.outsiderartmagazine.com) *Raw Vision*.

Stacey imagined 'June' suffering from pneumonia and wearing a family crest



How do you like to spend your time when not creating art?
I seek and organise threads, photographs and materials, and I like to keep up with science, fashion, and entertainment. I also enjoy leaving the house to wander round my neighbourhood collecting modern day archaeology, such as a torn up note or a discarded shopping list.

What are your current favourite trends in the world of stitching?
I think it would be cool to give each other stitched tattoos if we could find the perfect thread and a safe way of doing it. It would have to be similar to

body piercing, and it would probably be way too painful over too long.

What is the best piece of creative advice you've ever been given?
There are a couple: 'Leave it alone!' and 'You're going to make a lot of crap before you don't.'

What's next for your work?
I would love to be more involved in the photographic process. I'm also currently working with antique threads, printing my own photos, and getting back to the grid I started with.

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