



THE PAINTER'S NEEDLE

The want of a cushion or two for her new apartment led Katrin Vates to swap the paintbrush for a needle and thread, with spectacular results.

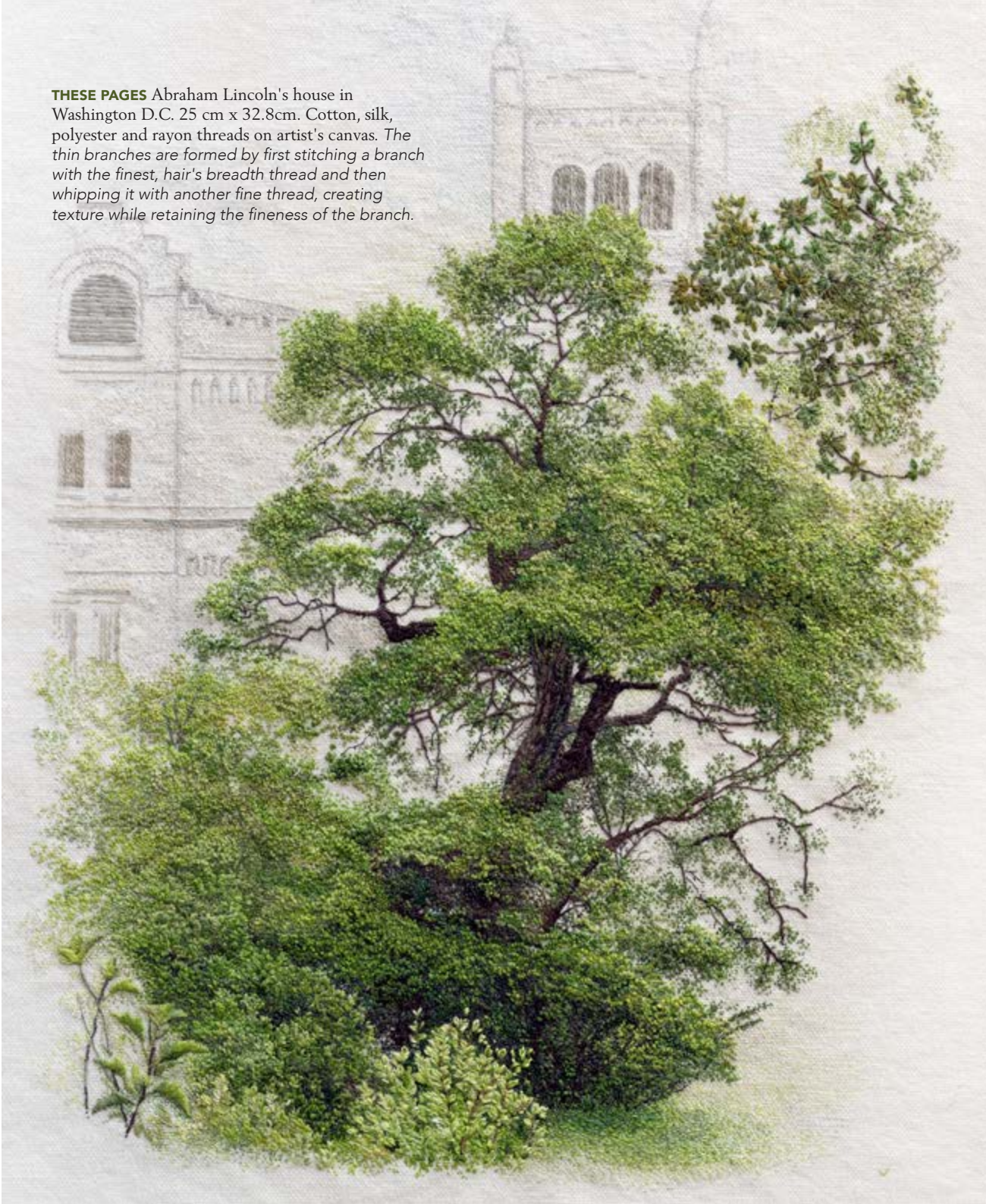


When Katrin Vates dreamed of moving from her native Siberia to the USA, she imagined a world of skyscrapers forming Manhattan-style skylines, in stark contrast to the vast, largely uninhabited landscapes of her homeland.

Today, only four years after settling in Rockville, Maryland with her husband, Aleksei – who secured work as a software engineer to fulfil his ambition to emigrate with his family – and their two sons, she is delighted to find her vision of American life was unrealistic.

Though only a few miles outside Washington DC, Rockville life is centred around grassy piazzas, dotted with ➡➡

THESE PAGES Abraham Lincoln's house in Washington D.C. 25 cm x 32.8cm. Cotton, silk, polyester and rayon threads on artist's canvas. *The thin branches are formed by first stitching a branch with the finest, hair's breadth thread and then whipping it with another fine thread, creating texture while retaining the fineness of the branch.*



ponds and fountains and enveloped by 'brownstones' filled with shops and apartments. The surrounding tree-lined streets create a shady canopy for al fresco café culture in the summer and during the winter months there is an outdoor skating rink. Parkland abounds across town, and these community spaces as well as the private patches of green, viewed from the windows of her apartment or as she goes about her daily life, have inspired Katrin's second career as a hand embroiderer.

"Many of my pictures show what surrounds me in everyday life," explains the forty-seven-year-old, choosing words carefully in her adopted tongue. "I look at a neighbour's yard, some trees by a gas station, a clump of woodland in a children's playground: places that ordinary Americans see all the time, walking close to home or running errands. The urban greenery can be just as beautiful as wild, natural landscapes and was the reason I first began to embroider as I do." One cannot help wondering if the appeal of these ordinary and, crucially, peaceful suburban scenes lies in the contrast to those of her childhood in Grozny, the capital of Chechnya and, later, in Siberia, where Katrin – sometimes, even now, also known by her full name, Ekaterina Sinchinova – trained as an illustrator at the famous Art School in Krasnoyarsk, one of the largest cities in Russia with a rich and multi-layered cultural and architectural history. Katrin lived there for ➡➡



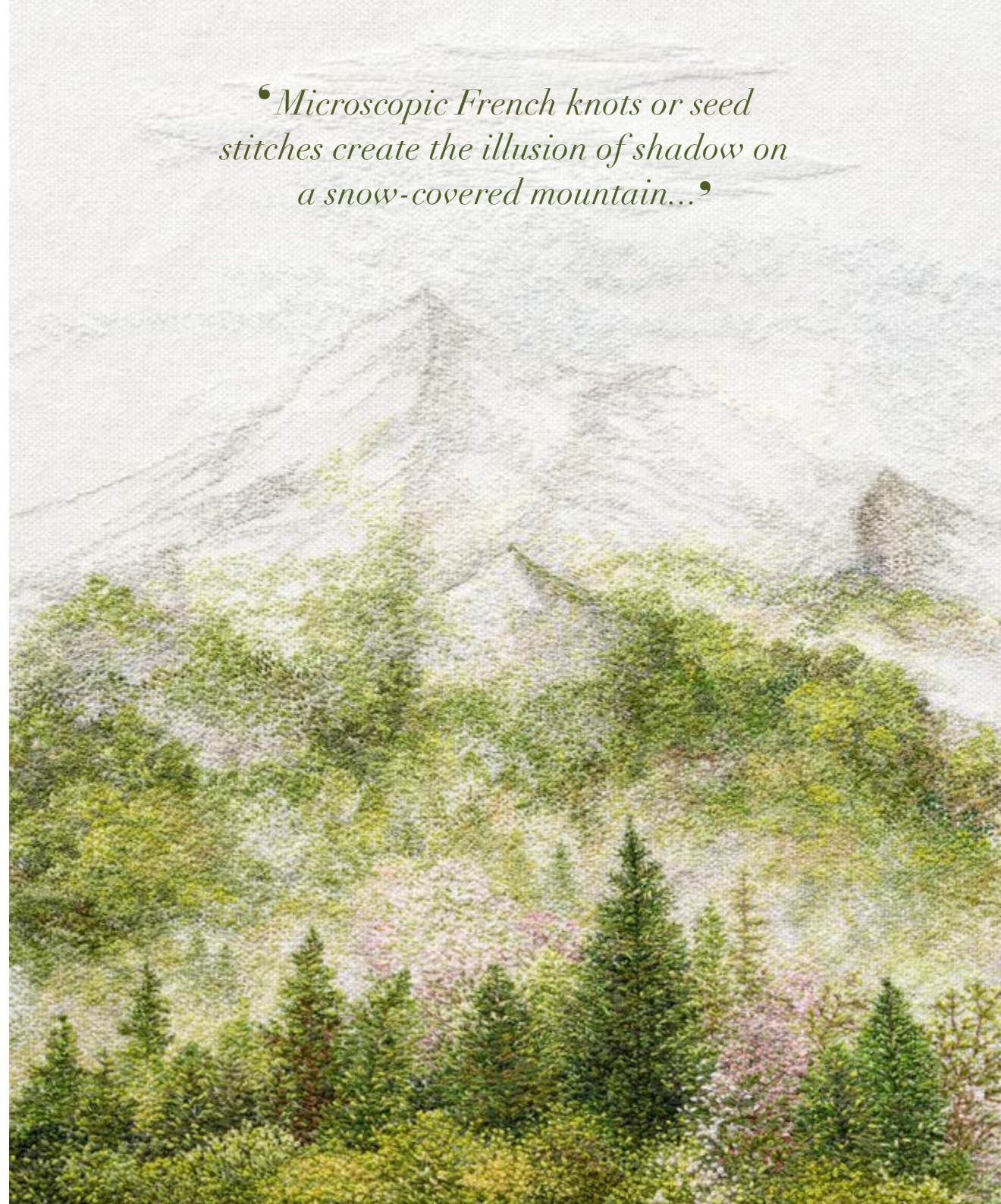
ABOVE

The House Next Door.
23 x 27.5cm. Cotton, silk, rayon threads on artists' canvas.

OPPOSITE

White Mountains. Silk and rayon threads on artists' canvas.
It is spring in the mountains, hence the hint of blossom. Katrin wanted to suggest 'dewey wet greenery' on the trees in the foreground with the tiniest droplets of stitch using DMC E-703 from the DMC Light Effects range. You can read about this range on the DMC website: the trick is to condition it with beeswax prior to stitching, and use a very short thread to avoid tangling.

‘Microscopic French knots or seed stitches create the illusion of shadow on a snow-covered mountain...’

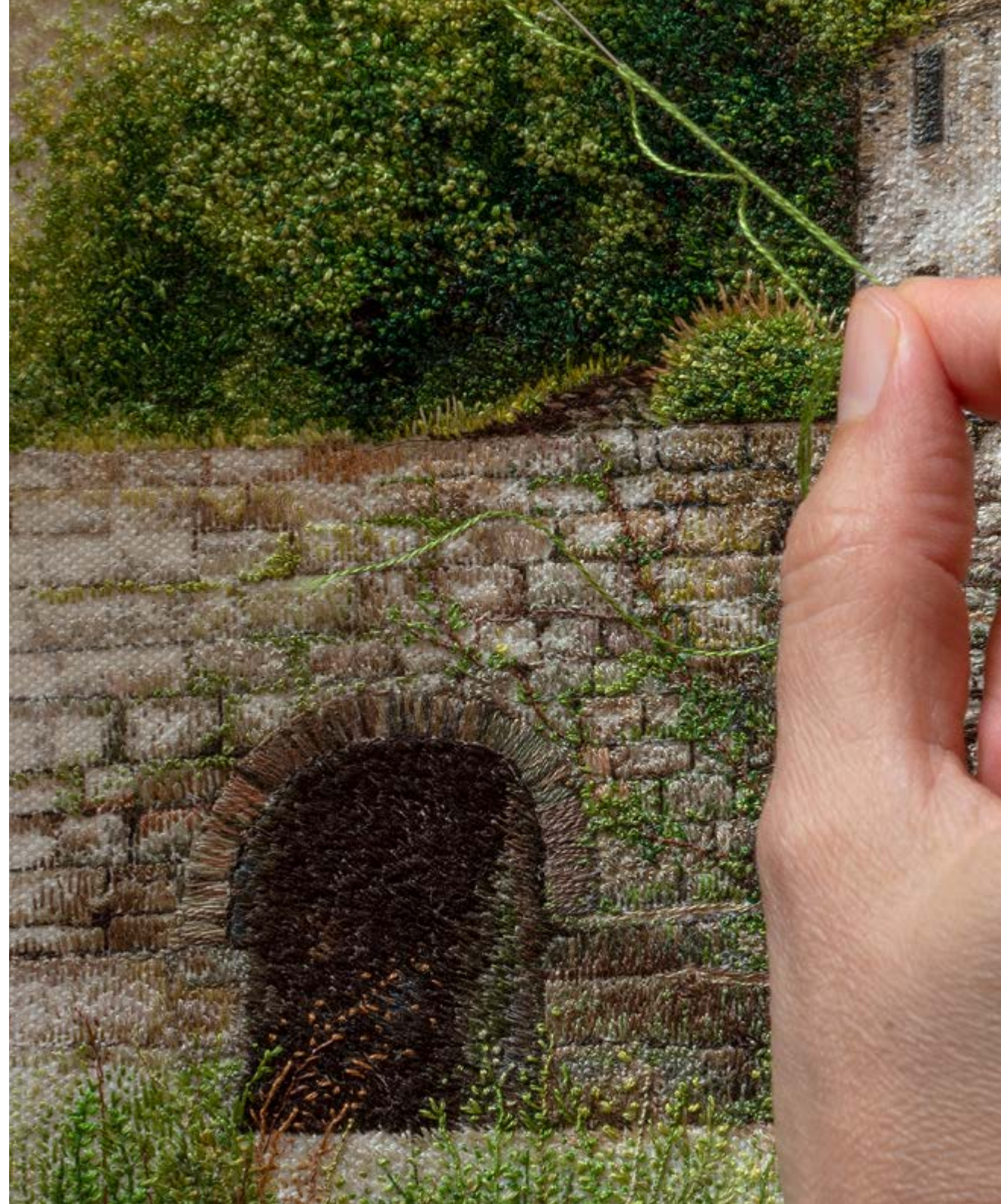
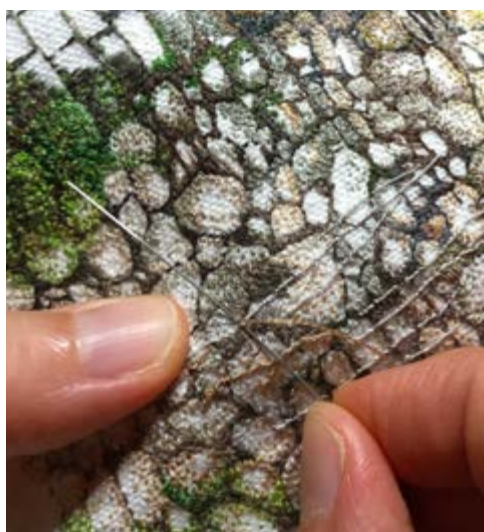


a number of years, working as a graphic designer and developing an interest in *manga* illustration and *animé*. *Manga* is the term for Japanese graphic novels, while *animé* is a form of Japanese animation, typically aimed at adults. Working in these fields developed her artist's eye for illustration, colour and composition which has fed into Katrin's style of embroidery. As an active child who rarely sat still, her mother taught her the rudiments of folk-style chain stitch embroidery but the traditional geometric designs of her homeland didn't appeal when she took up embroidery later in life. The painterly way that Katrin embroiders now is the result of thousands of hours of experimentation with needle and thread and started about a year before she left Russia, following the birth of her second child. "I was at home on maternity leave and wanted to make cushions for our apartment," she recalls. "I spent hours online looking at embroidered pictures, particularly liking the very fine cross-stitch pictures I found on Pinterest. The pieces I really liked were very intricate and so very expensive. I thought that because I had done illustration, I could design some myself, but I quickly realised counted cross-stitch wasn't for me. It was too structured and limiting." Picking up a needle and a selection of random threads, Katrin began to experiment with a more instinctive form of mark-making on fabric. Without formal lessons and unburdened by the constraints of ➡



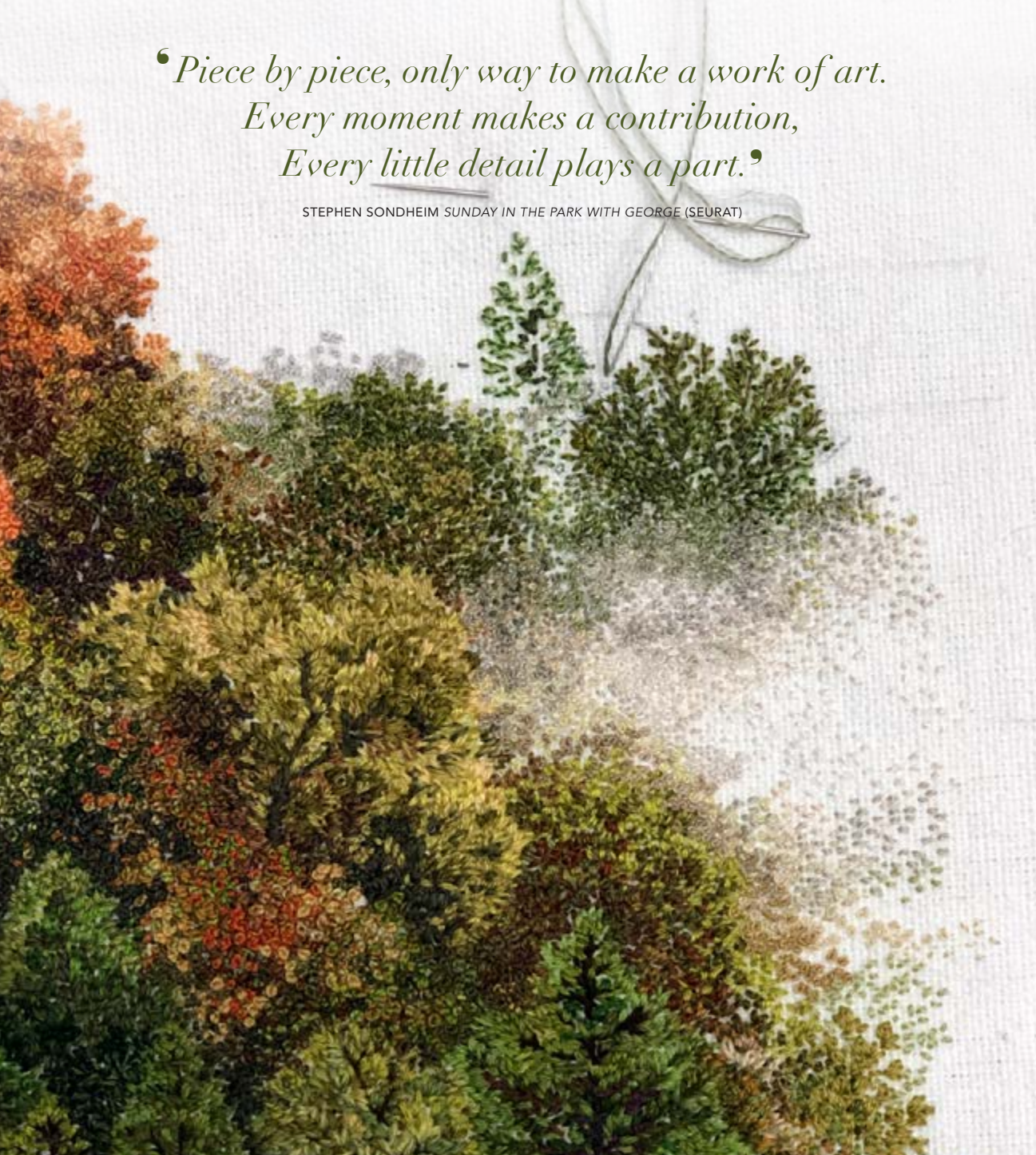
OPPOSITE, ABOVE & BELOW

The Stone House at historic Harper's Ferry in Jefferson County, across the Potomac from Maryland in the Shenandoah Valley. There is over one hundred hours of work in this piece. Katrin shares her processes very generously on Instagram and watching her transform the pencil sketched brick and stone walls, filling the crevices with moss, using countless shades to shape the stones, truly is a masterclass.



*‘Piece by piece, only way to make a work of art.
Every moment makes a contribution,
Every little detail plays a part.’*

STEPHEN SONDHEIM SUNDAY IN THE PARK WITH GEORGE (SEURAT)



ABOVE Detail showing how Katrin builds up the layers of her work. She always embroiders the darkest areas first, and varies the colour, size and direction of the stitches to create subtly different textures.

classic embroidery techniques, she enjoyed a freedom to use stitch to capture trees, grass and woodland landscapes.

“At first, my intention was to embroider lots of flowers but then I began to observe trees and shrubs, with their many textures and shades of green and other colours. Then I discovered French knots, and I thought they were very beautiful, and the perfect way to represent a mass of foliage. I learned how to do them, and I loved the effect I could make with them. First, I made some very simple pictures, then I practised and practised, sometimes for several hours every day, in the best daylight, for two years, to improve my skills.”

Today, Katrin’s work is extraordinarily intricate, using what she calls ‘nano-stitches’ amassed densely, rather like Georges Seurat’s pointillist dots of pure colour, to represent the extraordinary variety of textures and colours in the natural world. It is interesting to note that Seurat’s painting technique had its roots in the solution to a problem experienced by Gobelins, the famous Parisian tapestry firm. They called upon a chemist, Michel Eugène Chevreul, because they felt their dyes were too weak. Chevreul showed that the dyes were fine and that the perceived weakening of colour was in fact due to weaving bright colours together. He demonstrated that choosing the wrong adjacent hues will diminish a colour’s brilliance whereas the right juxtapositions will enhance each colour

and yield striking results. Seurat and his followers drew on Chevreul’s discoveries, switching thread for paint, to create effective, striking works from dots or points of pure, unblended colour which fuse only in the viewer’s eye, avoiding the ‘muddiness’ of palette mixing or blending colours on the canvas.

Katrin works mostly on an unbleached artists’ canvas she found in a local supplies store. It has become her base cloth of choice (although she occasionally uses a tightly woven Belgian linen), which she soaks prior to any stitching to avoid shrinkage later. Soaking the canvas tightens the weave further. [Ed. The canvas resembles the linen-cotton mix antique French sheets we call *métis* and looks tougher to embroider on. Perhaps Katrin doesn’t find this because she is using a fine beading needle. It might be a way of avoiding the puckering one gets with antique linen or hemp.]

Katrin finds that working outwards from the middle of the canvas makes the embroidery less likely to pucker. She eschews the use of a hoop, finding them restrictive and disliking the way the hoop squashes the layers of knots she has already stitched.

Her repertoire of stitches is small: French knots of all sizes, long (though it’s all relative)-and-short stitch, chain stitch, whipping and seed stitch, all worked using a long and very fine beading needle under the amplification of a magnifying glass.

“Some of the stitches I use are ➡➡➡

made-up: I just use the needle to make the thread achieve the effect I want.” Her ‘any length’ stitch consists of long, smooth split stitches where the split is really the tiniest stitch catching a thread of the stitch, rather than splitting the stitch through its middle, so you cannot really see how the stitches are fixed down at all. Katrin uses it for portions of sky or the smooth surface of water or velvety fields. Sometimes she passes her needle under a few of the fibres of the canvas, so the resulting stitch is like a shadow under the top layer of the cloth, a technique inspired by certain Asian artists who paint on the reverse of their work to create a more subtle colour on the front. Indeed, Katrin cites Asian art – mostly Chinese, Korean and Japanese – as an influence in the composition of her stitched landscapes, with their undefined borders and unstitched areas of the canvas as part of the design. Much like watercolour artists, who create faint washes on paper, Katrin might scatter microscopic French knots or seed stitches to create the illusion of shadow on a snow-covered mountain or the palest summer sky. At first glance, the viewer might imagine that Katrin has used paint on the fabric, but these effects are all created with needle and thread. A key moment in the evolution of Katrin’s work was the discovery of ‘Sulky’ machine embroidery threads, often made from rayon in a vast range of shades. Much finer than hand-embroidery threads, they enable her to achieve more ➡



ABOVE Forest Waterfall (late Fall)

29cm x 19 cm

The non-primed artist's canvas has been painted before Katrin stitched the dark areas behind the stones and in the cracks first, always working from the middle of the canvas outwards. Fine threads with a sheen were used for the water. This piece took forty-nine hours to complete.

OPPOSITE Autumn 27cm x 34.5 cm

The mist hovering between the trees has been created by stitching tiny French knots and seed stitches in grey-brown shades around the edges of the trees and then leaving the canvas base (note that this time it has been bleached white) with only a few stitches.



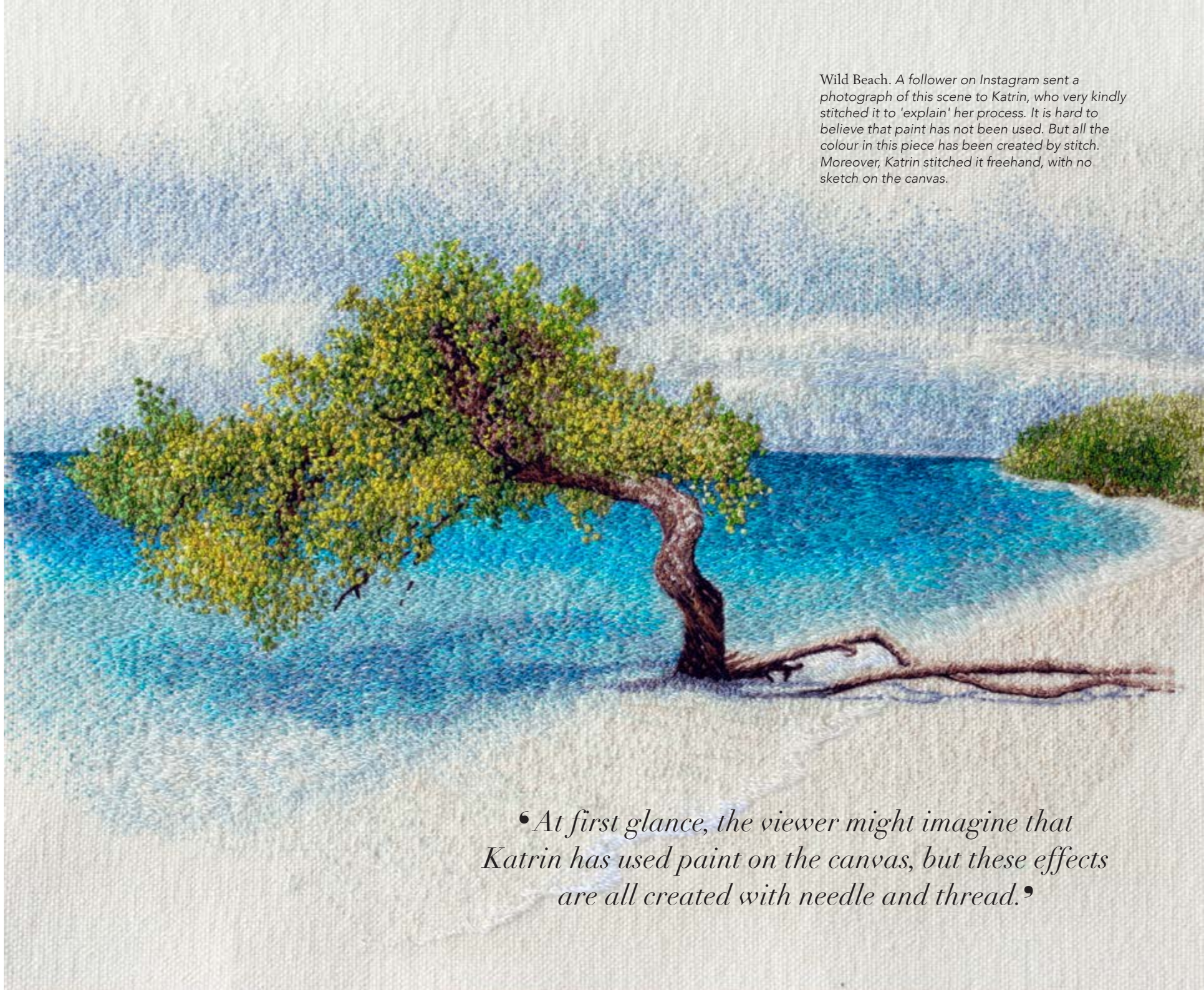
delicately textured results with subtly nuanced light and shade and a sense of depth to the composition. To date, her largest embroidery is approximately twenty-five by thirty-five centimetres, and took her almost two hundred hours of painstaking stitching to complete, not including any unpicking.

“If I have a section I am not happy with, it can take an hour to unpick five square millimetres of French knots, because they are so tiny and intertwined.”

Beyond the confines of Rockville, the dramatic scenery of the north-eastern seaboard has provided Katrin with endless inspiration. Detailed pieces include a view of Abraham Lincoln’s cottage in Washington DC, Longwood Gardens in Pennsylvania and the flame-coloured forests that stretch for miles each Autumn.

Generously informative online videos, depicting Katrin’s stitching in progress, are mesmerising to watch and have attracted a vast following on social media. It was never her intention to become a professional embroiderer but, deservedly, her works of embroidered art now sell for thousands of dollars and will doubtless become collector’s pieces. ✚

📷 @katrin.vates



Wild Beach. A follower on Instagram sent a photograph of this scene to Katrin, who very kindly stitched it to 'explain' her process. It is hard to believe that paint has not been used. But all the colour in this piece has been created by stitch. Moreover, Katrin stitched it freehand, with no sketch on the canvas.

“At first glance, the viewer might imagine that Katrin has used paint on the canvas, but these effects are all created with needle and thread.”