



STITCHING *without borders*

Kirstie Macleod's Red Dress project has enabled women from all over the world to 'have a voice' through stitch. By Karen Kay.

When artist Kirstie Macleod was commissioned by Art Dubai in 2009 to create a piece with a very open brief, the concept came to her almost immediately. "I sketched it on a paper napkin in a café. I wanted to make a dress, worked on by as many different artisans as I could find, drawing together identities and voices from around the world – without borders or boundaries, creating a single piece of work celebrating individual expression..."

Growing up in various locations around the world, it was natural that Kirstie ➡



TOP LEFT Kirstie working on the Red Dress in her Somerset studio. **LEFT** FanSina artisan Farhana Gabaly stitching a small flower into the centre of the spider's web stitched by Kirstie on the back of the bodice. FanSina is a social enterprise based in a little village on the Sinai Peninsula, which supports Bedouin women in poverty through the creation of beautiful, embroidered handicrafts which are now sold worldwide.



ABOVE The central floral panel above was worked by Mexican artisan Zenaida Aguilar and shows flora and fauna from the area (including cocoa pods!) created entirely in French Knots. When Kirstie returned to Aguacatenango with the completed dress, Zenaida invited her students to come and see the dress and add a little embroidery of their own, supervised by Kirstie. One of the artisans, Vanessa Aguilar Juarez, said that, wearing the dress, she "felt... connected to all the other women around the world who had worked on the dress..." (see page 21).



would take inspiration from global communities. "When I was eight or nine years old I did a craft class in Nigeria, where we lived at the time, and discovered the joy of textiles and embroidery for myself," she recalls from her studio in Somerset, in England. "I love the processes of piecing and stitching: the way it puts you into an almost meditative state. There's intention in every single stitch you make: the in-and-out of the needle through fabric, and it is such an accessible pastime. In all the countries I have ever lived, I have witnessed and appreciated stitching, whether it was someone darning socks outdoors in a shanty town or creating fine embroidery in an upmarket atelier."

A degree in Textiles opened Kirstie's mind to working with a variety of materials "beyond the predictable", inspiring her to continue her studies with an MA in Visual Language and Performance.

"There were just six of us on the post-graduate course at Wimbledon, including an architect, an actress and a film director, affording me the opportunity to bring my work to life with soundscapes, film and lighting, often featuring different interpretations of large-scale garments. It led me to produce installations for galleries and events, often involving me wearing the pieces I'd created and becoming part of the work."

The Art Dubai 2009 Red Dress commission was initially funded by the British Council, with subsequent support pro-



TOP Gisèle, Esther and Espérance, artisans with KISANY, DR Congo, 2018. www.kisany.com

ABOVE Embroidery students of Zenaida Aguilar adding stitches to the Red Dress in Aguacatenango, Mexico. **LEFT** Artisan Hilaria Lopez Patishtan wearing the dress in San Chamula, Mexico 2020.

vided by the Arts Council Lottery Fund and the British Embassy in Kosovo, and was supposed to span a decade. After a couple of years, it became clear to Kirstie that the project was becoming something more than the 'without borders' ➡

vision scribbled on the back of a napkin. This hit her forcibly when one of the artisans thanked Kirstie for giving her a voice. "I realised that the project had acquired an added dimension, that the women sending back these embroidered panels were speaking of their experiences through stitch, and I felt an ever more pressing need to get more voices heard. I sourced embroiderers using whatever

networks I could, using social media or the contacts of people I knew."

Many who worked on the Red Dress were established embroiderers, but many were stitching for the first time, and all were encouraged to express not only their own cultures but their individual identities and experiences. Some of the women have rebuilt their lives with embroidery, enabling them to earn a living, often through self-help projects, social enterprises and initiatives supporting women in poverty such as Kisa-ni in Rwanda and FanSina (Art of Sinai) in Egypt, or the Sister Stitch group in Kosovo.

In Kosovo, Kirstie met the Deputy Leader of the Kosovo Parliament, Saranda Bogujevci, and clothed her in the Red Dress. One of five survivors of a massacre in Podujeva, Bogujevci survived six-

teen bullets and lost fourteen members of her family. Two women from her town stitched one of the most beautiful panels of the dress, striking in its simplicity, a flock of white birds, carrying stitched messages (opposite). The meetings between Kirstie, Bogujevci and Feride and Fatime Halilli, members of the Sister Stitch embroidery group in Kosovo, were intensely moving to Kirstie. "The

piece has incredible energy: in Kosovo, it brought an intense sense of comfort and joy alongside the memories of the horror of war. I've seen many women shedding tears in its presence."

At times, Kirstie feels overwhelmed by grief when the panels are returned. "It's not my own grief, it's for someone else, the grief of the feminine, everything these women have been through..."

It is now thirteen years since the first panels were cut, and in that time a global community of nearly three hundred and forty-three embroiderers from over forty-six countries have worked on eighty-four panels of blood-red silk, each pieced together to create an imposing dress comprising a fitted, long-sleeved bodice and a sweeping, theatrical skirt that pools onto the floor in an ➤

"...even if these groups of women never meet each other, there's a connection through the dress and the language of embroidery that is very poignant."





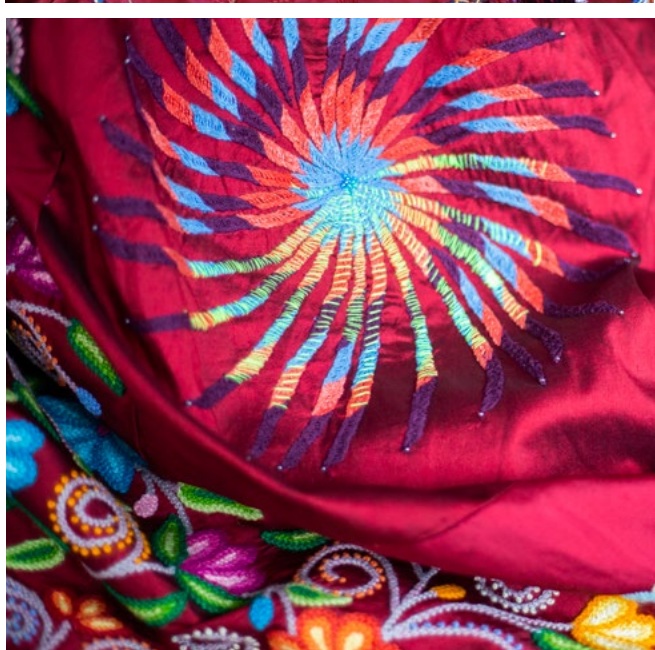
RIGHT Panel embroidered by Hilaria Lopez Patishtan, from San Chamula in Mexico. It is worked in traditional San Chamulan style, with row-upon-row of densely stitched circles and fan-shapes worked in buttonhole stitch, interspersed with bands of what looks like single Brussels stitch. The scalloped hem of the dress is very striking. Kirstie sourced the first roll of red silk dupion through a Paris atelier from which one could also commission machine embroidered extras. The fine gold tracery visible on some panels of the skirt was added to the initial roll, as were the machine embroidered scalloped edges, which Kirstie cut from both sides to create the hem. It is this area of the dress to which sewing groups or audiences at events may add small embroideries, seated in a circle around the dress. Kirstie supervises the placement, but people may embroider what they wish.

ABOVE Sharmin Faeq Sadiq at a Red Dress embroidery event in Swansea. Born in Kurdistan, she came to the UK 5 years ago. She has been supported by the Swansea Asylum and Refugee Support Group.

enormous circle. Kirstie turned to dress-maker Gail Falconer for help with the pattern, wanting something that was 'feminine but also strong and empowering'. The finished piece showcases a breathtaking array of embroidery techniques representing cultures and communities in the UK and as far flung as Kenya, Kurdistan, Kosovo, Colombia, Canada and China, Pakistan, Poland, Peru and Palestine. Traditional patterns and motifs, flowers, birds, figures in national or tribal costume, flags and words were worked in a huge variety of threads onto the lengths and cut panels and returned to Kirstie to assemble. Experienced embroiderers have added more complex designs; other contributions are simpler: Blanka Berta Kolkova from the Czech Republic used only a rudimentary backstitch with which to write *sesterstvi* (sisterhood) on a sleeve panel. All fifteen students from Kirstie's Foundation Year class at the Royal School of Needlework contributed to the dress, as well as embroiderers from Hand & Lock.

All the commissioned artisans were paid and will continue to receive a portion of the fees from exhibitions as the assembled Red Dress now embarks upon a global grand tour, stopping off in galleries, museums and cultural centres, and visiting women's groups and stitching communities, accompanied by a short film documenting the story of its creation. ➡➡





One of Kirstie's personal contributions has been the recent addition of a heart with a Ukrainian flag. She knows that the Red Dress project, as conceived, is complete, that the dress really can now 'stand alone' and she should move on to new creative ventures. And yet – she has been liaising with a number of NGOs in the hope of taking the Red Dress to Warsaw to work with Ukrainian refugees on this remarkable textile document for all time. **KK**

Visit www.reddressembroidery.com, where you can see where each part of the dress was embroidered and read about the artisans. The short film *Thread*, by Caitlin Akass, is particularly moving. Kirstie is currently compiling the Red Dress Catalogue.

EXHIBITION

The Red Dress can be seen as part of the *Crown to Catwalk* exhibition (see page 56) at the Fashion & Textile Museum in London until 4th September 2022 before being sent on its travels to exhibitions in Egypt, Pakistan, Columbia and various venues across the USA. www.fashiontextilemuseum.org

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT
The Red Dress (details).

RIGHT The Red Dress worn by UK artisan Freya Lusher. Part of the bodice was worked by women in Afghanistan.

