



EMBROIDERED LIFE

THE ART OF SARAH K. BENNING

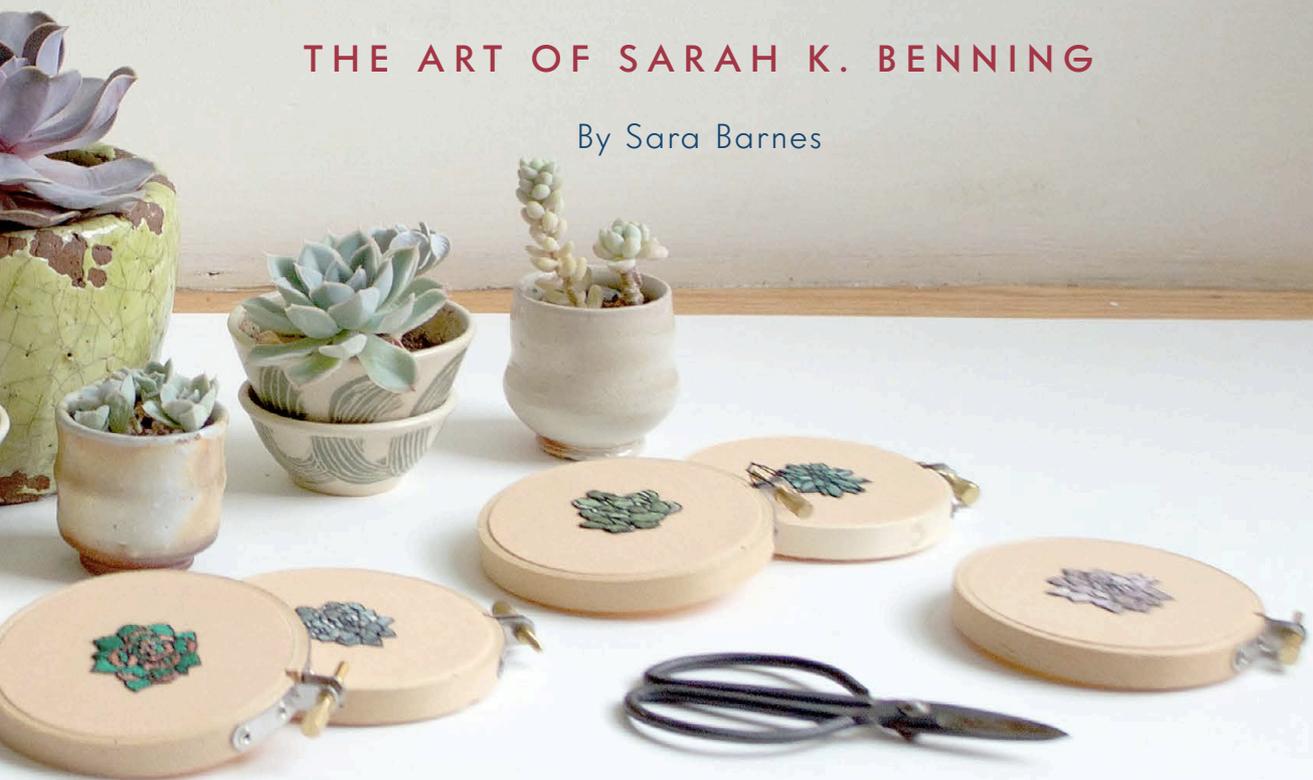
By Sara Barnes



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INTRODUCTION

When the subject of embroidery is brought up in casual conversation, one common refrain emerges: “Oh, my grandma does that.” While that may be true, this dismissive sentiment belittles the art of embroidery (not to mention the awesomeness of grandmas).

Embroidery has been around for a very long time and stays alive, in part, by being passed down from generation to generation. Traditionally, we humans have stuck close to home and carried on the customs of our ancestors. It’s how our personal histories stay alive—recipes get passed down and stories of kooky relatives become legends (or cautionary tales). So if you’ve tried embroidery, your first encounter was likely through an immediate family member, relative, or friend. Depending on whom you’ve learned your techniques from, it might seem like that’s the only way to stitch. But, embroidery is much bigger than our small communities or even countries. Embroidery has touched every part of the world.

It would be impossible to describe all of the embroidery approaches from different places around the globe in just a few pages. Doing so would make this book a giant tome. Instead, we can look to a couple of embroideries and techniques to illuminate some of the defining works of the craft. These pieces have shaped contemporary embroidery in a couple of important ways: firstly, by demonstrating how the craft can be a celebration of color, texture, and material; and secondly, by using thread to illustrate a story.

Embroidery existed in ancient worlds. Although much of it is gone, a few pieces have survived to give us clues as to how the craft was used so long ago. One early form of



embroidery was used in clothing. For common folks, this included the mending of garments. But for royalty, the stitching had another purpose—it was a way to show status and display wealth through adornment. With just one look, it became clear that someone wearing an embroidered garment was held in high regard.

The tomb of Egyptian pharaoh Tutankhamun gives us some clues to how this would have looked. When it was unearthed in 1922, archaeologists found some of the oldest surviving embroideries inside. Tutankhamun was buried during the fourteenth century BCE, and some of the stitched garments had been reduced to dust. But the array of surviving textiles represented an incredible cache of embroidery. Dr. Gillian Vogelsang-Eastwood and her students at the Stitching Textile Research Centre, part of the National Museum of Ethnology in the Netherlands, began cataloging the collection in the mid-1990s and found more than one hundred loincloths, a dozen tunics, two dozen gloves and shawls, various head coverings, and socks (designed to be worn with sandals).

We often think of embroidery as stitching with only thread, but it can also incorporate glass, metal, seeds, and beads. Tutankhamun's wardrobe featured beaded aprons and tunics—some so heavy with baubles that it's hard to believe the young king (who died when he was about eighteen) wore them on a regular basis. Other decorative needlework—including the appliqué technique—was used to embellish two pairs of wings (believed to be worn to imitate winged Egyptian gods), skullcaps, and more.

These Egyptian textiles demonstrate a decorative approach to embroidery, where the imagery and designs aren't necessarily telling a story or adding to the function of the design. Rather, they are enjoyed for their aesthetic qualities.





The eleventh century Bayeux Embroidery, on the other hand, exemplifies the illustrative, storytelling potential of embroidery. You might know this piece by its other name, the Bayeux Tapestry—but technically it's not a tapestry but a detailed work of embroidery. Measuring more than 230 feet long and nearly 20 inches tall, the piece illustrates 72 scenes that provide an account of the Norman conquest of England in 1066. In addition to events pictured, there are medieval Latin inscriptions, called *tituli*, that narrate each scene.

Completed by a professional embroidery workshop, many hands stitched this journal in thread. It was sewn on nine linen panels and features six sections that use the crewel work approach—a form of embroidery using worsted yarn in two twisted strands—in muted shades of greens and blues, as well as terracotta, buff, red, and yellow. A combination of stitches helped complete this massive undertaking; the couch stitch helped to fill the solid areas, while the outline and stem stitch were employed for the contour lines and text.

Everything in Bayeux Embroidery is the work of stitching, from the figures to the animals (220 birds and 41 griffins) to the decorative borders that line the text. This eleventh-century piece demonstrates that a needle can be used in the same way as a pencil or a paintbrush to tell a story that reflects events real or imagined.

The popularity of embroidery has waxed and waned over time, but it experienced a resurgence in 2009. Rozsika Parker, in her book *The Subversive Stitch*, finds that the boost in embroidered activities often corresponds with financial





recessions—from which the world was still recovering in 2009—citing 1984 as another example of the phenomenon. When the economy tanks, the desire for “homecrafts” rises; embroidery provides hours (upon hours) of entertainment and allows you to upcycle used items by adding decorative embellishments, thus breathing new life into them. The renewed interest in the craft after our recent global recession helped set the stage for Sarah K. Benning to start her practice and eventually her business.

Sarah is not a typical embroiderer. Largely self-taught, she has abandoned traditional rules and techniques. “I never did an embroidery pattern,” she explains, “and I abandoned the stitch encyclopedia I bought pretty quickly. It felt stuffy and difficult and frustrating. And dated—instantly dated.” Affording herself this freedom from the rules of the craft allowed her to explore it from the perspective of an artist. “I decided that I was more interested in using thread as any kind of medium.” Her first pieces weren’t even on fabric—they were on paper. In thinking of her practice in this way, she subverts traditional notions of embroidery—they are not grandmas completing a counted cross stitch (although let’s applaud the ones that do). In some ways, she views herself as an outsider to the field. “I don’t always think of myself as fitting into an embroidery-specific narrative,” she asserts, “because I’ve always approached it as image making that happens to be in the technique of embroidery. I think of it as illustration practice that happens to be in thread.” Sarah’s radical decision to bypass typical techniques helped to usher in an era of contemporary embroidery. Even now, most of her work is comprised of a single type of stitch.



In 2013, when Sarah was just starting out, “contemporary embroidery” wasn’t a phrase people were regularly using. “I’m sure I didn’t invent the phrase ‘contemporary embroidery,’” she recalls, “but I did, when I opened my Etsy shop, carefully research and look for taglines or phrases [that were being used].” She found several instances of “modern embroidery,” but that didn’t exactly fit the style of her work. “Contemporary embroidery” felt just right for the work she was producing.

Through her color selections and her choice of subject matter, Sarah has tapped into beautiful aesthetics that fans of her work admire quite vocally. Some of her most popular pieces chronicle gorgeous spaces with geometrically patterned rugs and a ton of plants. The figures in these tranquil interior scenes are often dwarfed by the lush green that surrounds them. They are aspirational in the way that a perfectly curated home magazine is—you want to live in these spaces, or mimic them as best you can. We are inundated with these types of images on social media. Sarah has channeled this into her work. “I think of most of my compositions, especially as they get more complicated, as visual collages from inspiration on Pinterest or things I’ve seen on Instagram or home-decor sites,” she reveals. “[I] pick random elements from different sources and then slam them together in these imaginary situations.” It’s easy to recognize this feeling and Sarah’s response to it; her stitching is an analog reaction to all the pinning and adding to carts we do. She sums it up by calling the scenes in her embroidery the “slowest wish list ever.”

Finished embroideries go from her hands into your home and on your wall. This is Sarah’s design; she often describes her pieces as decorative—she’ll frequently layer stitches just to build texture, not cover the fabric—and she finishes them in their hoops. Each comes ready to hang.

**“I think of it as
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happens to
be in thread.”**



Whether it was Sarah’s doing or not, the phrase “contemporary embroidery” has exploded in recent years. Both hobby crafters and professionals are using it to describe what they do. They’re taking the embroidery we’ve seen in the past and putting their own spin on it—be it through subject matter or technique.

If you tell Sarah that she’s helped usher in the contemporary embroidery trend, she’s quick to dismiss her significance. “I’m just feeling my way through this world of business, creating imagery, and exploring this realm of materials, [and] sometimes I get a little uncomfortable when people talk about my work as being influential in some way,” Sarah admits. “I know what I’m doing, but sometimes what I’m doing doesn’t really feel like a sure thing.” In fact, she is humbled by those who perceive her as a driving force in the field. “[I] don’t think I’m anything but the tiniest blip on embroidery at large,” she says, citing the cultural universality and long history of the craft. But she takes her role as a contemporary embroidery artist seriously and has diversified her business to teach others and provide them with the same creative outlet she fell in love with years ago. Throughout this book, you will get a look into those endeavors as well as other parts of her embroidered life; it’s sure to inspire you to carry on this timeless tradition.



A circular embroidery hoop with a light-colored wooden frame. The fabric inside is a pale yellow color with a repeating pattern of small, stylized yellow leaves or floral motifs. The text "SARAH K." is embroidered in a black, tall, thin, sans-serif font on the top line, and "BENNING" is embroidered in the same font on the bottom line. A metal clasp is visible at the top of the hoop.

SARAH K.
BENNING



Sarah K. Benning has known that she wanted to be an artist since she was a little kid. “I was very serious about it,” she remembers. Lucky for her, while her mother was not artistically inclined, Sarah encountered other professional artists and creative role models throughout her childhood. These important people in her young life taught her from a very early age that pursuing your passion for art was both possible and admirable.

Sarah lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts, for the beginning of her life as her single mother finished graduate school. “I have a really early memory, maybe [age] five,” Sarah recalls, “[of a] really good friend who lived across the street from the apartment my mom and I lived in.” The friend had an au pair who lived with them and who happened to be an art student and had a painting studio in the family’s garage. “Sometimes, she would bring us into the painting studio and show us what she was working on . . . I look back at that now and think about how generous that was of her.”

Sarah didn’t stay in Cambridge for long. She and her mother moved to Baltimore, Maryland, when she was in elementary school and settled into a neighborhood where a lot of artists lived. Across the street from her was a sculptor who created casts of human bodies and owned a mannequin factory. During this time, she attended a co-op elementary and middle school that allowed parents the opportunity to teach classes based on their knowledge. There were working-artist parents who imbued the students with creativity. When it came

time for high school, Sarah applied to the rigorous Baltimore School for the Arts (BSA). She had to gather a portfolio and have a review with a handful of teachers. “It was very intimidating,” Sarah remembers. “Especially at thirteen years old.” And once you got in, it wasn’t guaranteed you’d make it through to graduation. “Sophomore year, my class went from twenty-one [students] to fifteen [students].” The demands of BSA proved integral to Sarah’s later success as an artist, providing her with a strong foundation in observational drawing and painting.

BSA was an extremely rigid school. It was only in the last year that Sarah and her fellow students were allowed to experiment with media and subject matter. When it came time to select a college, she continued to pursue more experimental fine art at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC). The school focused a lot on interdisciplinary work and conceptual thinking and less on developing formal skills. She combined the techniques she had learned in BSA, along with a willingness to experiment, to create meticulous fiber work projects. One of the few pieces she kept from this time is a paper sculpture that, at first glance, looks like a piece of fabric. Its surface is pierced with tiny holes that give it a leather-like appearance, and stitched elements add to the illusion. She didn’t know it then, but this idea—of puncturing paper and stitching it—would be the start of her embroidery career.

After years in the Midwest, Sarah’s time there ended with a whimper; she left a day after receiving her diploma. “I basically fled Chicago,” she says, “and didn’t want to identify as an artist or think about being an artist.” She landed in Albany, New York, where her husband Davey was in school. She felt that she had “arted





herself out” and turned to craft while becoming a nanny for two children in the Albany area. It was at this point that she began to dive deeper into embroidery.

It might surprise her followers to learn that she did not start out stitching plants. Her first embroidered works were sewn on paper, an unforgiving canvas, and featured simple geometric designs that focused on nonrepresentational hues and shapes. These first iterations included no text—they were meant to be enjoyed simply for their aesthetic qualities. To make them marketable, Sarah eventually used the designs in greeting cards she sold on Etsy starting in July 2013. It took about a month and a half to make her first sale. “That was such an exciting day,” Sarah recalls. She was preparing for her nannying job around five thirty in the morning and checking her e-mail when she got the notification of her sale. “I was so pumped that I ran back into the bedroom and woke up Davey and told him, ‘Davey! I sold something to a stranger!’”

After her first sale, Sarah continued diligently working to grow her business. She went to craft fairs and made products that she sold on Etsy. She took advantage of the marketplace’s homepage—the perfect billboard for her work—by observing how to make her product images look professional and appealing. During this time, she shifted from just paper to hoops. The imagery in her hoops still utilized geometric forms that were often paired with short phrases ideal for decorating your space. “It’s Good to Be Home” and “Be True to Yourself” offered positive stitched mantras that reflected the general disposition of Sarah herself. During this time, she saw her embroidery as a separate activity that wasn’t part of the rest of her art. But it’s clear from these works that they were—even when she didn’t intend them to be.

**“I didn't want
to identify
as an artist
or think
about being
an artist.”**

The shift from geometric shapes and minimalist letterforms to blossoming botanicals occurred with a job change. After leaving her nannying gig, Sarah briefly worked at Whole Foods. “In my short time there, I became the buyer for the floral department, so I got to shop for flowers and plants at the store.” She also bought and took a “ton of plants” home to care for them—until tragedy struck. “Our first winter in Albany, they all died,” Sarah laments. “I started stitching the plant pieces as little replacement and memorial pieces.”

This body of work coincided with the beginning of Sarah’s Instagram account. She began sharing the plant pieces on her social media account to an overwhelmingly positive response. “It was just this lottery moment,” she recalls, “where I was so into it and it seemed like the people that were seeing it were so into it.” She quit Whole Foods after just one week of making more money selling her embroidery online than working her day job.

Sarah was encouraged to let the series bloom, and plants remain a subject she’ll never grow tired of. “I love plants as a source of inspiration,” she explains, “because there’s just so much variety in terms of color and shape and pattern and texture. It seems like there’s an endless pool of options.”

In the fall of 2015, Sarah moved her business across the Atlantic. She and Davey had both applied to be English-language teachers and were assigned to teach in Menorca, Spain. Menorca is one of Spain’s Balearic islands in the Mediterranean Sea, and it’s host to idyllic views of crystal clear waters. Sarah’s Instagram account suddenly included her embroidery as well as snapshots of her life in this beautiful place. It attracted even more attention to her work; now, she was not only creating eye-catching embroidery, but she

was living a lifestyle many people dreamed of—escaping to a new, faraway place and focusing on making art. It wasn't all so glamorous, though. Sarah dealt with many of the issues that come from living abroad, including language barriers and loneliness. “No one saw me crying at the post office,” she says of this time. After living there for a year and traveling through parts of Europe, Sarah and Davey eventually made their way back to the United States.

Abroad or at home, Sarah's materials remain largely the same—that's the beauty of an embroidery practice. Her thread of choice is DMC embroidery floss; with nearly five hundred colors, she has a ton of different greens available to stitch any plant she likes. Each strand comprises six individual threads, which can then be pulled apart and used to vary the thickness of a stitch. Outlining calls for a different thread. “I like to use black [DMC] Pearl cotton string,” Sarah says. “Unlike the floss, you don't have to take anything apart.” When sewn, the cotton string looks neat and uniform.

While Sarah remains constant in her thread choices, fabric is one area where she can experiment a little. Her general rule is nothing synthetic and nothing stretchy; jersey material (the type T-shirts are made from) tends to move too much in the hoop. But beyond those two stipulations, Sarah admits that she's flexible. Throughout the years, she's tried a lot of things and narrowed it down to the textiles she likes. This includes buying new fabrics that are 100 percent cotton. In craft stores, she'll typically head to the quilting section, where there are bolts offering a myriad of solid colors.

Sarah also embraces sustainability in her embroidery and tries to be conscientious by using secondhand textiles. She has started a fabric collection that includes a “stockpile of

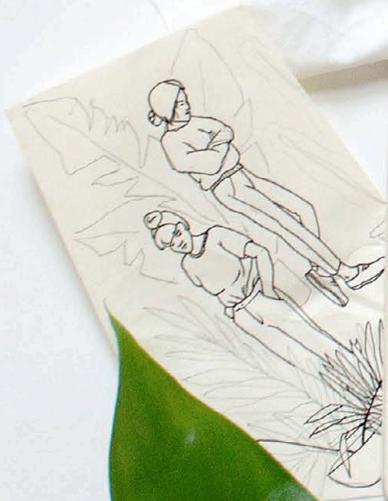
“I started stitching the plant pieces as little replacement and memorial pieces.”



handed-down linen scraps” as well as vintage fabrics that originally belonged to Davey’s grandmother. She also scours thrift stores for bedsheets and clothing. Once they are washed and ironed, they’re as good as anything you’d find new.

In early 2018, Sarah and Davey bought their first home in a small New Hampshire town. Their home is much larger than anything they have lived in before, and it demonstrates just how much her business has grown since she made her first sale. Sarah has two rooms dedicated to her craft. One space acts as a staging and storage room; much of her supplies are kept in here, and it’s where the finished pieces are on display. Although Sarah uses this room less, it’s still cozy with a large area rug and plenty of plants lined up along the windows. It also has something embroidery nerds will love: a complete color chart comprising tiny swatches of actual thread. The massive chart hangs trailing down one wall.

The other room is where Sarah spends the bulk of her time—it’s an airy, bright room with a red couch as the centerpiece. This couch is an embroidery-only piece of furniture where Sarah can “pepper the arms with needles” and it’s perfectly okay. Surrounding the sofa is a collection of design objects and artwork that she has amassed from other makers. “I try and support self-employed people,” she notes, and her shelves are lined with items that have a botanical bent to them—from felt cacti to quirky planters. This is in addition to the plants that line the walls. If she’s been stitching for a long time and needs a break, she will often study how her plants are growing. Sarah’s art might not always imitate life, but in this room, it can come pretty close.



A circular embroidery hoop with a light-colored wooden frame. The hoop is filled with a light pink fabric that has a fine, white speckled pattern. The text "SARAH'S EMBROIDERY PRACTICES" is written in a black, hand-drawn, uppercase font across the center of the fabric. The hoop is positioned against a plain white background.

SARAH'S
EMBROIDERY
PRACTICES

SARAH has always worked in her own home. Sometimes this was easier said than done—she resided in apartments in Albany, New York, and Menorca, Spain, and had to consolidate working and living space. She's come a long way since then and has settled into a home built in the nineteenth century that's large enough to accommodate two studio spaces. This one is her staging/storage room, where she snaps marketing photos of her work as well as stores finished pieces. Her photography setup is not fancy, but it's effective; she lays her embroidery and props on a sheet of clean white paper in natural light.









EMBROIDERY is known for its tedious nature. If you've ever embarked on a stitching project, you probably know the hours that go into finishing a single hoop; the amount of time can be staggering and even crazy-making, so it's with good reason that Sarah declines to clock how long a single piece takes her. Still, she has some idea. *Breathing Space*, the work shown on pages 26 and 27, was completed over the course of six months (between working on other projects), and it features elements that are now staples in Sarah's work—the collection of plants (there's even a king protea hiding in there), a patterned rug, and a figure. The woman, whose face is partially obscured by an elephant ear plant, is only outlined and not filled in—a deliberate choice that only makes her stand out more. And as the name of the piece implies, the outlined woman gives our eyes some breathing space of their own.



IN SOME traditional embroidery circles, the back of a hoop—aka the “wrong” side of a design—should be neat and have minimal stitches showing. Doing this requires patience and it isn’t as quick or as comfortable. In Sarah’s contemporary approach, the back tells its own story; one of visual mayhem. This is because when she sews, she will pull the thread to the back of the hoop and enter the fabric in another space within the hoop. In doing so, she creates stitches on the back that form a skeleton of the finished design.



FOR SOMEONE who has made a whole career out of her embroidery, Sarah has very little variation in her stitching arsenal. After tossing out her stitch encyclopedia, she concentrated on the satin stitch, a basic technique that uses a series of flat stitches to cover the fabric. In the detail shot seen here, you can find elements of the satin stitch throughout—from the long lines of the floorboards to the tiny details in the planters.





ONE OF THE BIG trends in contemporary embroidery is to leave the work in the hoop and have it double as a picture frame. In recent years, Sarah has departed from this aesthetic by stitching in a rectangular or square format. She creates the frames herself (a skill she learned at the Baltimore School for the Arts) using duck canvas and pulling it tight over wooden stretcher bars. The fabric is then stapled to the back. It's a technique that affords you a lot of room for customization. "You can buy stretchers in almost any dimension from art supply stores," Sarah explains, "and you can use any kind of fabric you like!"

WHILE IT'S HELPFUL to have the design drawn on the fabric beforehand, it's important to remain open to the possibilities as you stitch. "I like to experiment and make marks," Sarah explains, "combine colors and textures, and really just use a few very simple techniques to build layers of texture." This practice is evident in the prickles of the cactus, which feature up to three layers of stitching on a single form: one is the base color, whose directional lines go one way; another is short prickles that signify the root of a cactus needle; and finally, lines—some stubby, some long—that represent the needles.

This detail shot of *Cactus Collection* showcases two different approaches to the satin stitch. One is the meticulous layers contained within a single plant, and the other is a way to offset the dense stitching so that it doesn't overwhelm us while we look at it. Sarah does this by adding rigid geometric motifs filled in with solid colors in the background and on the planters. Their relative simplicity pulls us away from the cacti, even if it's just for a moment.



THE EMBROIDERY pictured here is an example of Sarah's early foray into potted plants in 2015. Although many of the plants featured still show up in her work today, this piece isn't as outline-heavy as some of Sarah's more recent works. The planters are traced, but they aren't as pronounced, and the leaves and cacti don't even have an outline.

Through trial and error Sarah has settled on a thickness that works for her. But when she's teaching, she encourages you to find what feels right for you. "It becomes a personal preference," Sarah explains, "where you can play with the thread count and use more strands of thread for a more pronounced line or use fewer if you want to be very dainty."







ONE OF SARAH'S most successful projects is her monthly pattern program that gives crafters the opportunity to stitch one of her original illustrations. Here, Sarah works on one of the most popular designs in her pattern program that features a large elephant ear plant anchored by a patterned rug. This particular motif was released a year after her program started, and it represented the most difficult monthly design to date—a turning point for Sarah's patterns. It was the first appearance of a floor covering; before that, Sarah had kept this subject limited to her personal work. Her one-of-a-kind pieces are like her playground, where she experiments and further hones her artistic voice. The pattern program is a distillation of her voice in a form that anyone can try to replicate for themselves.

SARAH SHOWS two variations of her completed *Elephant Ear and Rug* piece. Because this design was part of her pattern program, she will typically stitch more than one variation of it. Although both are largely the same, they represent one of the larger ideas behind Sarah's work—using thread to experiment with the formal aspects of an image. Though this illustration started as a pattern, those who prefer to buy finished originals can do so in Sarah's regular shop updates.









“There is always something to learn from my materials, even the ones I have become so familiar with.”

PLANTS ARE OFTEN the centerpiece of Sarah's embroidery, but she's careful not to ignore other parts of her composition. The background pictured here has textures different from the leaves of the plants. Though these might resemble special stitches, they aren't complicated. To create the wallpaper, she first made long vertical satin stitches and then punctuated them with short horizontal marks. The key here is consistency—to produce the look and feeling of wallpaper, all of the horizontal tics must be the same length. Additionally, these stitches can't be pulled too tightly or else they will cause the vertical lines to curve inward and expose breaks between the nice long marks.



THE PATCHES of green on Sarah's *Look Out* embroidery were just the beginning. After the base colors were filled in, Sarah transformed the green forms into a full-on prickly pear. She improvised here, instinctively deciding where she should place the forms and how each one fits into the overall design.





SARAH STARTED this Mahón-inspired architectural piece based on her time living in Spain. It's a rare exterior scene whose composition was decided on the fly without the aid of sketching utensils. "Usually, I use pens and pencils to draw my plans right on the fabric," she said, "but they were all a bit too clunky for what I had in mind. Instead, I tried out a little freehand thread drawing and really loved the spontaneity of it. There is always something to learn from my materials, even the ones I have become so familiar with."



SARAH'S WORK embraces the joy to be found in intimate, everyday objects and small, personal treasures. The October 2017 subscription pattern was inspired by the flower crown Sarah wore at her wedding that fall. It was made by Apotheca—a café, gift, and flower shop in Goffstown, New Hampshire, that she loves to frequent.

SARAH'S PATTERN program took a short break in early 2018 as she let herself enjoy a month free from posting new designs while she traveled to Mexico and South America. The *Plant Lady* pattern was her first advanced design after the hiatus. Like all of her patterns, it features color guides to give stitchers ideas for which threads to use. *Plant Lady* has inclusivity built into its instructions; stitchers who download the pattern have a range of eight suggested skin tones to choose from.



THIS FAMILY OF PLANTS on a bench was created in early 2016—an important year for Sarah's work. The foray into expanded scenery represents a shift from a single planter in a pot on a stand, and it was stitched during her time in Menorca. "We were living in a furnished vacation rental apartment with IKEA furniture," Sarah recalls. Looking back, the image is her longing for "something homey" like the objects pictured here.





THIS IS A PEEK into Sarah's process from her November 2017 *Plant Party* pattern. To begin a piece, she draws the image on the fabric using an ordinary pencil; Sarah doesn't worry about the pencil lines showing through because they will eventually be covered up with thread. Then, she typically loads her needle with three strands of DMC thread folded onto itself—making six strands total. This can vary depending on how thick Sarah wants each pass of thread to be. The more strands, the higher their volume when they sit atop the fabric.

All the stitches pictured here are the satin stitch, which is a technique that comprises nearly all of Sarah's embroidered pieces. While this approach may seem simple, she adds complexity to her pieces by focusing her attention on color relationships and creating visual interest. One way that she does this is by simply changing the direction in which the stitches are sewn. Every leaf extends from its own center seam so that it comes together in a V-like form, just like you'd find with a real one. To add even more personality, Sarah regularly stitches on top of her designs to add complex details that are a feast for the eyes.





SARAH is never alone in her studio spaces; she always has the company of plants! In this room, she has a favorite. "I've been obsessed with my angel wing begonia," she says (pictured in the white angled floor planter next to her stacks of hoops). Adopted in spring 2017, it has thrived—doing so well that Sarah eventually replanted it into a bigger pot. Speaking like a proud plant parent, "Now it has branches and flowers all the time."

SARAH'S STUDIO wall is an ever-changing collection of her finished work. Acting as her own private gallery, she stores her pieces this way. Some will stay on the wall for just a little while until they're sold in her shop. Others are used as examples in her workshops and travel with her. Once she's back home, they return to their rightful place among the plants.







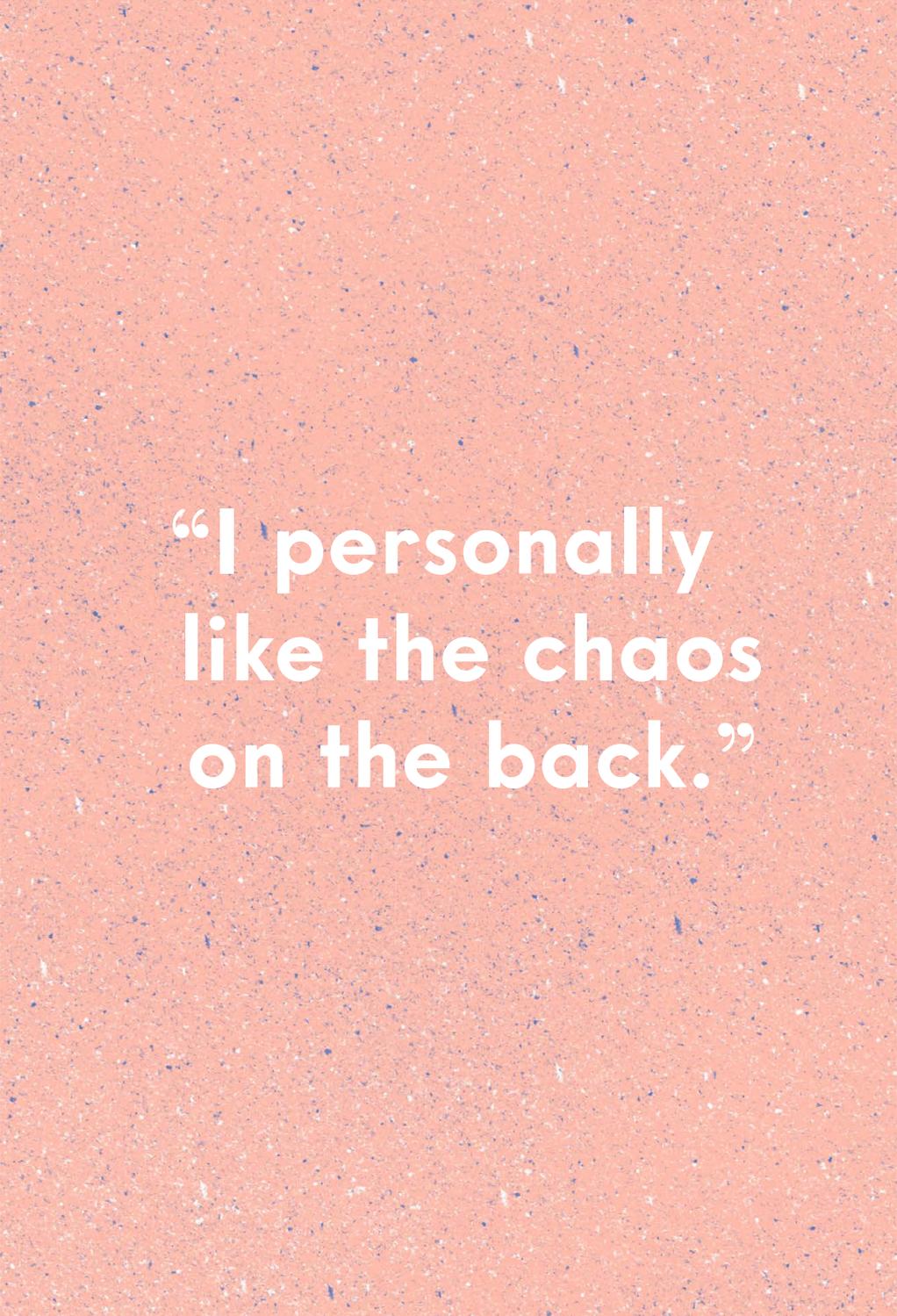
THIS JOVIAL summer scene, stitched in 2017, was created during a particularly happy time in Sarah's life. She had returned from Menorca and settled into a farmhouse in Warren, New Hampshire. Though it was an isolated location (the nearest grocery store was half an hour away), it didn't feel lonely. She regularly had visitors to her home and enjoyed the warm weather and green leaves of the summer season—all reflected in this hoop.





IT'S EASY to make a "mistake" with the satin stitch. The technique, when done correctly, is intended to be a bevy of parallel lines of thread, set together in a smooth, even layer. But it's easy to lay some strands closer together than others or make the edges of a shape look jagged, like they're out of place. To fix any minor errors and clean up her edges, Sarah uses a couch stitch, in which a long piece of thread is fastened in place with small stitches in a perpendicular direction. Typically, couching is done with a single strand of black thread. It allows her to hide any blunders while helping to further define and separate the colors, shapes, and textures that comprise any given scene. With the black outline, her work is easier to "read" and admire.





“I personally
like the chaos
on the back.”

SARAH ADMITS that she's probably the least particular person when it comes to scissors. "If it cuts, it's fine" is her attitude. Using thrifted woven baskets, she stores a variety of scissors and thread snips alongside her color-sorted thread. The smaller amounts of floss are wrapped around themselves while the larger quantities are wound around paper tubes.





THROUGHOUT her years of working, Sarah has found that keeping bundles of threads in baskets is the best system for keeping things organized. Once she's taken a skein of thread out of its package, she wraps it in a butterfly shape and places it in a color-specific bin. More recently, she's improved upon this idea and dedicated entire baskets to all the thread she's using in a specific piece. This is particularly helpful because she doesn't keep note of the DMC thread numbers for each color she's using unless she's writing a pattern for others to follow. In her own work, as long as the thread color matches, it's fine.

SARAH CREATED this embroidery, titled *Together*, through a much more intuitive, experimental process than her usual one. Rather than carefully sketching the whole design on the fabric, she started with just a drawing of the two women, leaving everything else around them blank. Then, working from the top to the bottom of the hoop, she filled it with plants.

If you look closely, you can see that the overlapping leaves are physically overlapping rather than simply appearing to overlap thanks to illustration techniques like foreshortening. Things that appear larger and closer to us were stitched on top of something else. Sarah remembers this project as "truly dimensional stitching," and by the time she reached the base of the hoop, the thread was a quarter of an inch thick. She ultimately decided that this approach was not sustainable because, most importantly, it hurt her hands to push a needle through that much thread.



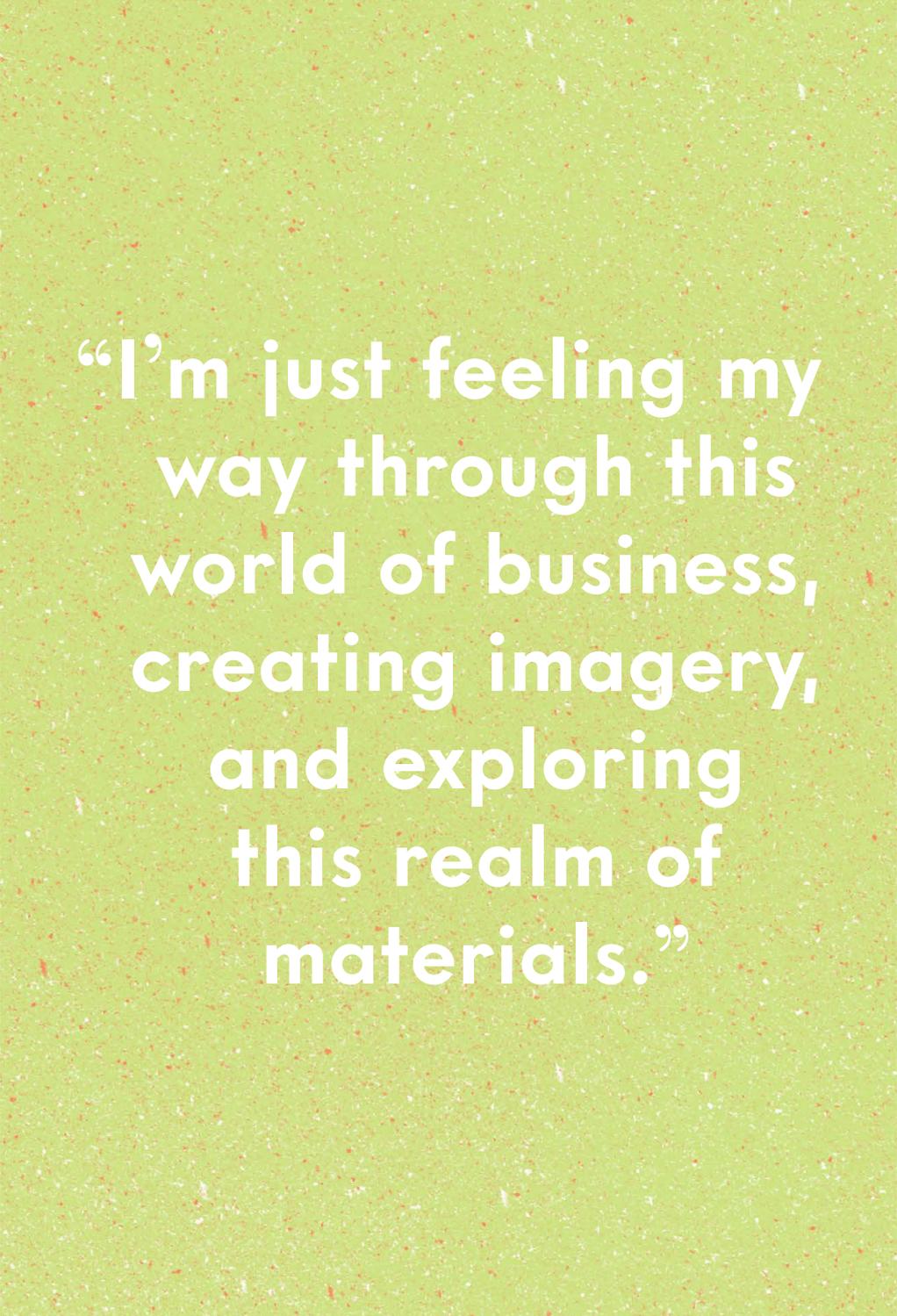


FIGURES first appeared in Sarah's work in the spring of 2016. At the time, she didn't know why she started stitching them, but looking back she now understands their significance. *Woman with Plants*, like many of her other figurative embroideries, features someone who is alone, with her face at least partially covered.

At the time of stitching, Sarah was living in Spain with very little grasp of the language and was feeling increasingly isolated. She and Davey were staying in Menorca during the off-season—when the people her age had left the island—so the population mostly consisted of young families and older adults. She felt as though she had few peers and not a lot of opportunity to socialize. This was also the time when her Instagram really took off and people were admiring both her work and the paradise she was living in. Sarah felt pressure to keep up a happy appearance on social media. The women in her embroideries were her way of subtly expressing her loneliness during this challenging time in her life.







“I’m just feeling my way through this world of business, creating imagery, and exploring this realm of materials.”

SARAH IS ALWAYS pushing herself to achieve increasingly complex drawings. This often takes the form of overlapping elements in her compositions, with the foreground, middle, and background filled to the brim with people and plants. The ongoing quest to make her embroidery more involved has driven her to grow her practice year after year.





SARAH'S HOOP storage is on her wall. To avoid an excessive amount of nail holes, she ties a short strand of string around the screw of the embroidery hoop and affixes it to the wall using Japanese washi paper tape. Although it might seem like the hoops would fall a lot, Sarah swears that this is a rare occurrence, and when they do, no damage is done.

WITH SARAH'S pattern program, you never know what you're going to get from month to month. Depending on the occasion, Sarah will create designs that correspond to a particular season. The standing fireplace on a checkered floor is aptly called *February Fireplace*, and it proves the perfect companion to cold weather days and a mug of hot cocoa.







THIS WORK PILE offers a start-to-finish look at what Sarah does. The piece in progress is one of her unique embroideries, and it reveals how nearly all of her pieces begin—as drawings on fabric done in pencil or pen. She allows herself to make mistakes at this stage, and the areas where the lines appear thicker are where she has drawn over one line to correct herself or indicate details. Once that's done, she begins to fill in the image with a first layer of thread, and it immediately starts to take its final form. The finished hoops scattered alongside it use this same process, and they show just how detailed Sarah's plants can get when two or even three layers of stitching are added to them.

**“Practice
makes
comfort.”**



SARAH WAS GIFTED this wooden rack, and at first she wasn't quite sure how to make use of it. She rarely uses spooled thread, so she figured out another way to store her floss on it; she hand-rolled many paper tubes and wound the thread around her own make-shift spools. The paper spools fit on the rack, but she's found that the rack itself is one of the least efficient ways to store her supplies; it has, however, come in handy for staging her work.

THIS ELABORATE plant scene is in the process of being stitched onto one of Sarah's thrifted shirts. Having started in winter 2016, Sarah admits that embroidering this garment is a slow process. She's planning on a lush, dense display, and as with many of pieces of this magnitude, the piece can take her many months or even years to complete. But by executing projects like these, she's demonstrating to people the other practical ways in which you can use your own embroidery.







FANS OF SARAH'S pattern program might recognize this as a detail from her Glass House design in March 2017. In another instance of art imitating life, she created the design in the spring after spending part of her 2016 winter traveling throughout Europe—specifically in Amsterdam, Berlin, and Copenhagen. Sarah remembers the temperatures as being frigid, but she and Davey found some reprieve by spending time in botanical gardens and greenhouses. "Berlin," she recalls fondly, "had an incredible cactus collection."

BEFORE SARAH created her Glass House embroidery pattern, she developed the design through her one-of-a-kind works. This is the first instance of her personal work directly influencing her patterns, but it wouldn't be the last.

Stitching on dark fabric can be tricky, especially if you're trying to get a drawing to show up. Sarah learned the hard way what materials to use when sketching on fabric like this. She started with a white-colored pencil, as pictured here. The problem with this tool is that the drawing will eventually fade—the same goes for tailor's chalk. Now, Sarah recommends using a white gel pen. Although it's less forgiving than the pencil or chalk, you can be sure that your lines will stay visible until you cover them with thread.





EMBROIDERERS got a special surprise on Valentine's Day 2018—Sarah released a pattern with the lifestyle company A Beautiful Mess. Featuring a motif of heart-shaped cacti, the beginner-level design offered a do-it-yourself way to commemorate the occasion—even if you feel prickly about the day.

When creating this pattern, Sarah was thinking about versatility. If you want to complete the full pattern in the hoop, that's great, but you could also take the heart-shaped elements and embroider them on items like clothing or a tote bag.





WE ALL HAVE that table in our homes that acts more like storage than it does for anything else. This desk is one of those places for Sarah. Calling it the "desk where everything gets stacked," the surface holds the centerpieces of her creative life: work in progress and piles of thread (and a plant, of course).





THIS IS ONE of Sarah's multigure embroideries.

Although the composition is similar to her single-person pieces, the dynamics of the image change by the inclusion of an additional woman. In single-figure embroideries, the focus is on the connection between the stitched person and the viewer. Here, Sarah has focused on the relationship between the two people, leaving us out of it.

Sarah started this embroidery as she left Menorca. It had been a challenging year of teaching English, navigating language barriers, and feeling isolated. And as with many of her pieces, it took her months to finish. She was working on it when she returned to the island months later to visit Davey. The piece hadn't changed, but her perception of the place had—after taking valuable time to focus on her mental well-being, Sarah had a "refreshed" feeling of the place where she used to live.

SARAH FOUND incredible inspiration when she lived and traveled abroad. The decorative concrete blocks around Menorca and Lisbon caught her eye. Their visual influence has made its way into her work; this detail shot highlights the beautiful patterns of these blocks. They are also integral to the composition, and they offset the large swath of green leaves with intricate design elements.





SARAH TOOK A BRIEF hiatus from her pattern program in April and May of 2018. After the two-month break, she returned with a new facet of the program. In addition to her monthly designs, she started creating "add-ons" that complemented the main patterns. They are intended for participants who want to challenge their skills or increase the visual complexity of the pattern.

The succulent pictured here was part of Sarah's July 2018 pattern, and the additional design featured more succulents of different sizes and shapes. It was a choose-your-own adventure in embroidery. Participants could vary the composition and placement of the small plants and create their own succulent gardens within their hoops, or they could stitch them to pieces of summer clothing.

SARAH STITCHED this potted-plant duo as an example for her embroidery workshops. She enjoys teaching others for many reasons—a big one being that it gets her outside her studio. Another reason, illustrated here, is that it affords her the opportunity to look beyond her standard color palette. Sarah often finds herself surprised by the participant's color choices, as they select brighter hues and create combinations she normally wouldn't try. These bold choices rub off on her. After teaching workshops, she'll find that her work mimics the palettes she has seen there.





SARAH IS ALWAYS challenging herself to create increasingly complex compositions. This work-in-progress embroidery is the first of a new direction for her. It features all the trappings of her stitching and includes a figure standing atop a patterned rug surrounded by lush plant life. But in this piece, she's also included shadows.

Incorporating depth to this composition has been a challenge. "It's an invented scene," Sarah explains, and getting the shadow correct has meant that she's been tweaking the design ever since it was first drawn on the fabric. While this might make some nervous, the slow pace of embroidery gives Sarah plenty of time to refine her sketch—something you can see in the loose, wispy lines and darker, more assured marks.

The addition of a shadow also points out the limitations of color inherent with thread. In a painting, you can mix any hue you like, but with embroidery, you've got a defined set of thread colors to select. Sarah views this fact as a new and fun way to work with color in her hoop art.

THIS EMBROIDERY was produced as a series of three for a show at the Rare Device gallery in San Francisco. It also marked an experimental moment for Sarah. Each piece created for the exhibition had the same elements: one woman, one plant, and an outline. Sarah typically fills in her one-of-a-kind hoops, but here, she decided to use the black thread in the same way you would a pen. She now calls this a "baby step" toward a new approach to stitching her scenes. "It's a way I can work at a larger scale but still keep some of the detail."







A circular embroidery hoop with a light-colored wooden frame. The fabric inside has a repeating floral pattern in shades of orange and cream. The text "SARAH'S BUSINESS" is printed in a black, hand-drawn, sans-serif font in the center of the hoop. A metal clasp is visible at the top of the hoop.

SARAH'S
BUSINESS



With the advent of social media, it's easier than ever to be inspired and to get your creative juices flowing. "That's the beauty of the Internet," Sarah says. "It makes art accessible to everyone, and that's great." The flipside of this seemingly endless inspiration, however, is that makers are in danger of having their work plagiarized. Sarah was not immune. "I was dealing with a lot of plagiarism," she recalls. As her embroidery career began to take off, her colorful images caught the eye of people who decided to recreate it for themselves—much to her dismay. They weren't subtle about it either; people were proud to tag her on Instagram with their copied embroideries.

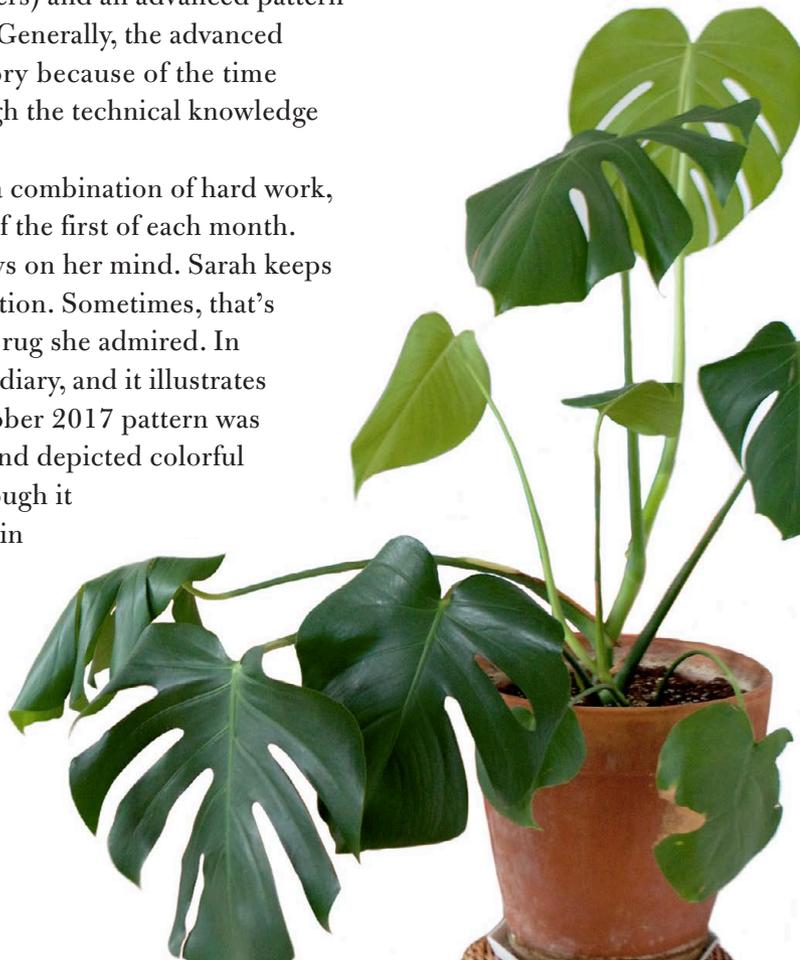
What do you do when that happens? Do you respond to those who are essentially stealing your work? Share less of your work and life? Sarah was determined to turn the unfortunate situation into something positive; instead of trying to chase down all of the people who were plagiarizing, she gave them the opportunity to replicate her thread illustrations on her terms through a new pattern released each month. "I hoped that some of the people copying my designs would rather copy the designs with my permission," Sarah explains. Fans of her one-of-a-kind work could become patrons who would provide her with another source of income to allow her to continue her career as an independent maker. "I couldn't keep up with the demand for stitched work," she said; it was the perfect moment to launch her new endeavor.

On March 1, 2016, the pattern program was officially underway. The first design called *March Minerals* intended

to set the tone for the entire pattern program—stitchers could expect the unexpected with regard to subject matter. Although plants are a primary focus in Sarah’s visual language, they are just one facet of her interests—she didn’t want to be tied to replicating them month after month. And the crystals made sense from a technical perspective—they were accessible for embroiderers of many skill levels. Comprising four colors and a black outline, familiarity with the long, straight satin stitch allowed anyone to successfully complete the inaugural design.

Sarah figured that if she sold ten patterns, the whole thing would be worth it. When it came time for launch day, the response was much greater than she had expected. As orders continued to roll in to her Etsy shop, she felt like she had won the lottery. Now, she has two types of patterns she sells: a monthly edition (great for beginners) and an advanced pattern that’s released a few times a year. Generally, the advanced patterns are placed in this category because of the time commitment they require, although the technical knowledge needed is more or less the same.

Designing a pattern requires a combination of hard work, spontaneity, and a firm deadline of the first of each month. The subject of the pattern is always on her mind. Sarah keeps her eyes open for possible inspiration. Sometimes, that’s a leafy plant from her home and a rug she admired. In other instances, a pattern is like a diary, and it illustrates something from her life. Her October 2017 pattern was a departure from cacti and ferns and depicted colorful blooms arranged in a circle. Although it started as a plant, she scrapped it in favor of another idea: the flower crown that Sarah wore at her wedding that September.





Technically, the process remains the same from month to month—it all starts with sketching. When Sarah first started the program, she was creating her drawings the old-fashioned way with pencil and paper. This proved to be a challenge, however, because she was often away from her home studio during the beginning of the month. (She’s completed some of the monthly patterns while visiting her mother or abroad in an Airbnb.) If she had a scanner nearby, she’d scan the drawing onto the computer that way. When she didn’t have one at her disposal, it was trickier and required a combination of photography and creative editing on the computer to make sure that the drawings were suitable for a pattern. Now, Sarah has upgraded to an iPad Pro and uses Apple’s pencil stylus to plan her patterns.

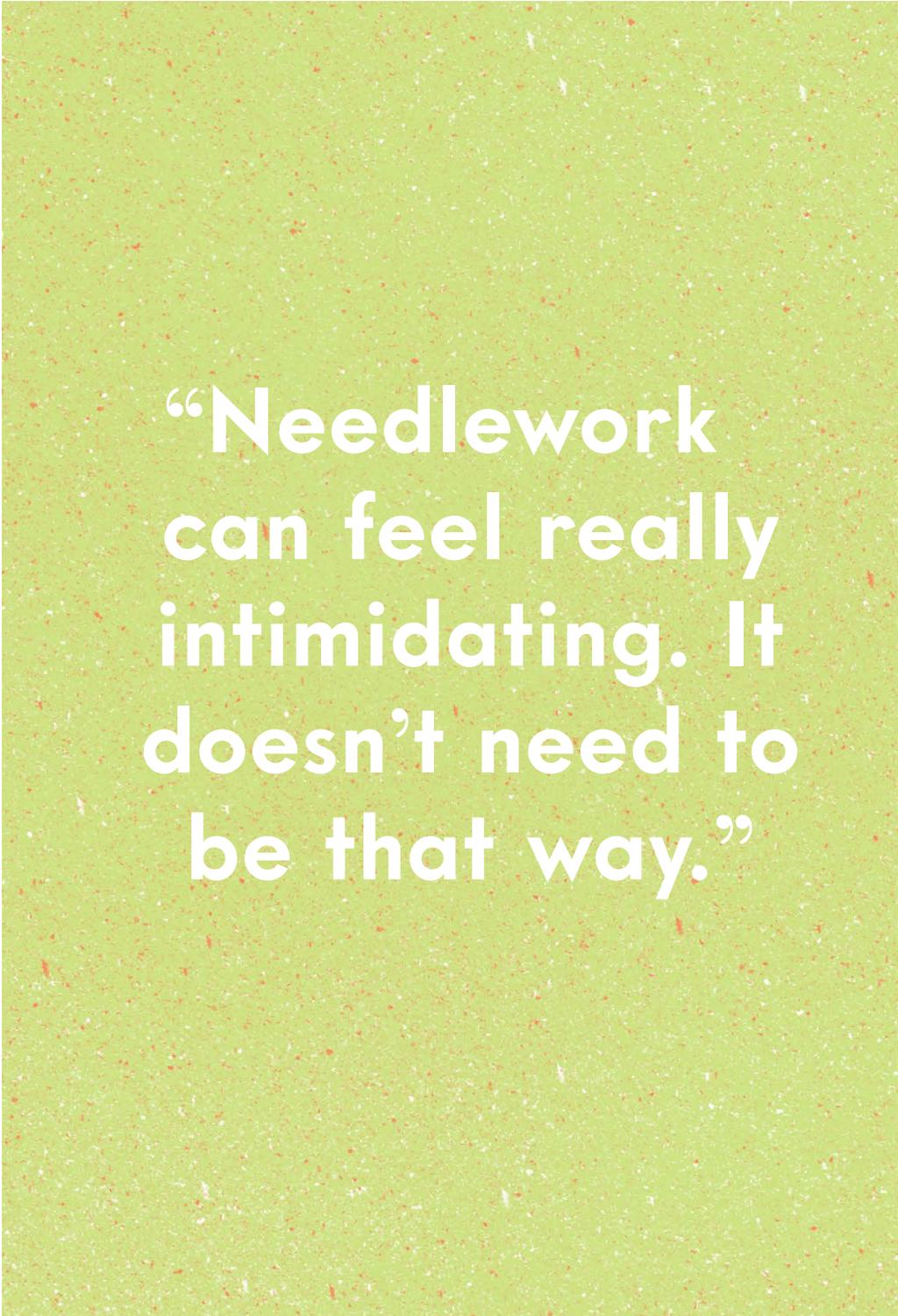
Once the design has been finalized, Sarah approaches the hoop art like any of her personal pieces. To help you visualize what you’ll be stitching, she completes an entire sample. This, however, is rarely done just once. “I usually don’t work out the colors [of the design] first.” There are many variations of the same image that don’t end up as the final pattern. But this too has its purpose—you can envision the design in a variety of colors, which is exactly what Sarah wants you to do. Preaching an open-ended approach to her style of embroidery, she encourages you to select the colors of thread that you want. After stitching at least one completed pattern, she

stages it in a photo shoot that she'll use in marketing the design for that month.

When you receive a pattern from Sarah, you're not just getting the design; you're receiving a host of other helpful information. Each month, you'll learn the inspiration behind the design, allowing you to get inside the artist's head. Then comes the pattern with a color guide specific to DMC thread and a stitch diagram that demonstrates the different directions to angle your stitches. There are general material tips (avoid stretch fabric) and instructions on how to transfer the image from a piece of paper to your hoop. To complete the package (and your stitching), Sarah explains how to finish the hoop once you're done. Regardless of how challenging the design is for that month, the overall tone of each pattern is encouraging and conveys the sentiment that is at the heart of Sarah's work: "Needlework can feel really intimidating. It doesn't need to be that way."

Sarah has completed over thirty patterns and is working on more each month. With that many completed designs, you'd think it's hard for her to pick a favorite. But there are a few designs that stand out in her mind for reasons that go beyond how the hoop art looks; they are memorable to Sarah because they represent a breakthrough within the scope of the pattern program.

One of Sarah's favorite designs came about a year into the program; it was the first advanced pattern she released and akin to the type of embroidery we're used to seeing in her one-of-a-kind pieces—the illustration depicts an interior space. Called *Elephant Ear and Rug*, it features a leafy elephant ear plant in a planter on a table sitting atop an ornate rug adorned with various geometric designs.

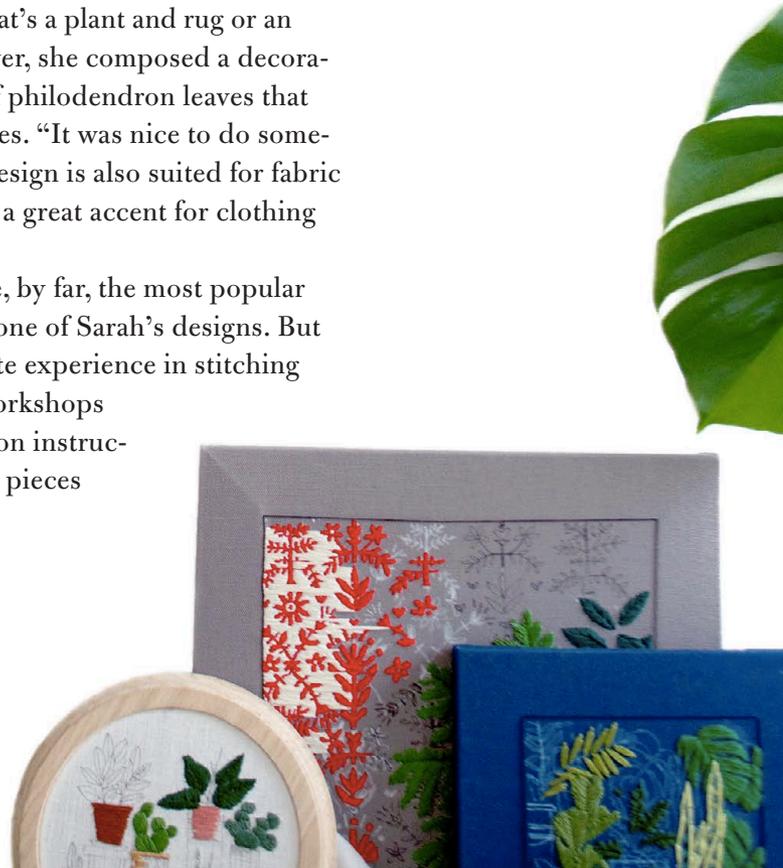


“Needlework
can feel really
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be that way.”

After a year of relatively bold, simple patterns, people were clamoring for something more complex. “I was really reluctant to make the rug pieces,” Sarah recalls, “which were semi-new when I started the pattern program. They still felt too precious to me, and I was still working through that . . . and was still exploring.” The elephant ear pattern came at the time that Sarah began incorporating figures into her work—something she hadn’t done before.

While the elephant ear pattern represents a new direction personally for Sarah, the October 2016 pattern represents a gamble that paid off. Devoid of cacti and potted plants, this month features majestic pine trees under a slim crescent moon. “This one was sort of a step outside my comfort zone,” Sarah explains, “and it sort of felt risky, but people were really into it.” Their enthusiasm over the design confirmed to her that it’s all right to experiment. She relied on this same attitude when designing the January 2018 pattern. Typically, Sarah’s patterns feature a scene, whether that’s a plant and rug or an ocean scene. For this month, however, she composed a decorative pattern that depicts a variety of philodendron leaves that are different sizes, colors, and shapes. “It was nice to do something different,” Sarah says. This design is also suited for fabric beyond the hoop; its cluster makes a great accent for clothing or your favorite plain tote bag.

Digital embroidery patterns are, by far, the most popular and accessible way to try stitching one of Sarah’s designs. But for those looking for a more intimate experience in stitching them, Sarah hosts small one-day workshops around the world that offer in-person instruction on how to complete one of her pieces from start to finish.



The way that Sarah began giving these workshops was serendipitous; she never set out to teach in person. It was the result of her move to Spain. During that time, there was interest in her work from people and publications centered there, and she had become friendly with a woman who ran a craft space in Barcelona. “I had done an interview for the Spanish DMC thread blog,” Sarah recalls, and this woman invited Sarah to host a class. Sarah nervously agreed to try it.

She had a lot of anxiety surrounding the workshop, but it turned out to be a great experience. She connected with people who liked the same kind of activity and who were patient with her teaching. “They were willing to put up with me talking at them in English.” Finding the experience fun and rewarding, she has since taught folks in locales around the world—from the east coast of the United States to Mexico to Chile.

Sarah structures her events into teaching punctuated by plenty of stitching (and socializing). As a participant, you are provided with everything you’ll need to successfully complete the workshop, which averages between three and four hours long. Sarah has designed two exclusive patterns that are one part of a kit provided to each participant; you can work on either one during your time with her. The kits also have fabric, a five-inch embroidery hoop, scissors, and a small pencil for tracing the pattern. The only thing they lack is thread, but the reason for that is twofold: Sarah wants you to pick whatever colors you like, and she has a myriad of hues available. Spread throughout the worktables are an array of greens, blues, yellows, and other DMC threads—it’s an embroiderer’s paradise.

Since you’re spending the afternoon or evening with a small group of people—Sarah’s workshops are limited to a dozen



participants or so—she makes time for introductions at the very beginning of a session. Sarah breaks the ice by going first and setting a relaxed tone. “Embroidery is supposed to be fun and enjoyable,” she explains, “and, to me, getting too wrapped up in technique becomes paralyzing and takes the joy out of it.”

The first thing you learn in the workshop is how to transfer your pattern onto the fabric. It’s easy and very low-tech; you simply put your fabric in the hoop, tighten it, and lay the hoop onto the design you want to stitch. Then, you trace the pattern onto the back of the fabric with a pencil. Once complete, unscrew it from the hoop and flip it to the front.

After you’ve picked your design and it’s ready to stitch, Sarah gets down to basics. She starts by explaining the materials—paying special attention to the thread. “If you’re unfamiliar with the DMC thread, the number on the label is the color identity. Some of them are so similar to each other that you should double check the numbers to make sure they’re the same.” Material talk leads into a demonstration of the satin stitch. “It makes up probably 99 percent of what I do,” she speculates.

At this point, Sarah starts to thread her needle. She begins with an arm-span length of floss and then separates that piece into three strands of thread (each DMC thread is made up of six strands). The instruction is peppered with handy tips and tricks that can only come from someone who has sewn a lot—even down to the most mundane things. Sarah admits that to separate the thread, she finds it helpful to hook a full strand





around her toe and pull from there. “Having some tension on it helps.” And when it comes to the dreaded knots, she’s got a three-second rule. “I have three seconds to undo it, or I cut it. Embroidery takes long enough without dealing with tangles.”

Sarah begins to effortlessly pull the thread through the taut fabric and describe, in detail, what she is doing. Like her threading demonstration, she offers tips and adjustments you can make to the satin stitch itself. Essentially, there are two ways you can pass the floss from one side to the other. The way that Sarah normally sews is by pulling the thread through one side of the fabric and then moving her needle to the other side of the shape. When she’s on the back of the fabric, she does the same thing—bringing the needle to the opposite side and repeating. This, she notes, is faster, but it uses more thread because you’re sewing the back, too. Once done, the “wrong” side of the embroidery looks a lot like the front. After making several passes of the needle using the first approach, she shows an alternative. “It takes more practice to get the hang of and really get comfortable with,” she explains, “but rather than going in loops, you come out right beside where you just came in.” When the embroidery is flipped over, there are hardly any stitches—the shape an outline rather than filled. Though there’s less thread used, that doesn’t impress Sarah. “I personally like the chaos on the back.”

When you learn a technique, you’re often eager to try it out right away. After the satin stitch is shown, participants return to their seats and start sewing. During that time, there’s music, food, and conversation; the atmosphere is relaxed yet determined. About an hour later, Sarah gathers everyone to share the next phase of her embroidery process—embellishments. This

is the most exciting part of the entire workshop. The fine details, like the needles on cacti or the geometric designs on a planter, are what make Sarah's work so visually satisfying. Despite how intricate they are, she creates all of her embellishments using the satin stitch—partially as a work-around for the more complicated stitches like the French knot.

With ornamentation, Sarah advocates freedom. “This stage is more intuitive than filling in the satin stitch, because we aren't relying on a drawn pattern,” she says. “If that makes you super uncomfortable, you can use a gel pen and make spots [on top of the completed stitches] to guide yourself.” Overstitching uses the same principle as the satin stitch; as Sarah pulls through the fabric, she makes smaller marks that sit atop the stitches already there. “The stitch is going in a perpendicular direction to the satin stitch below. That way the stitch sits on top like a little saddle over the thread beneath.” It's easy to know when you've made a mistake, like sewing in the same direction as the base satin stitch, because the mark will disappear.

After some more sewing time, Sarah preps you for the finishing touches. While it's extremely rare that you'll finish a single pattern over the course of several hours, you'll come away from the workshop understanding how to complete the hoop art when the time comes. The post-adornment phase involves a lot of outlines. Sarah is known for tracing the edges of leaves in black thread, which gives them a flattened, stylized appearance in keeping with their intended use as decorative objects. The tracing stitches, done in black string, are knotted single-ply on one end with the other side open. But that's not your only option when outlining. “If you want something more subtle, you could match the colors, or play with the colors that way.” For this, Sarah recommends two or three floss strands.

**“Embroidery
takes long
enough without
dealing with
tangles.”**



The outlining requires a couch stitch, which is simple and effective; it covers a lot of ground in a little bit of time. You start by pulling the thread through the fabric and assessing where you want that particular section of outline to end. Depending on the curve, it might be long or it might be short. Once you've determined that, pull the needle to the back of the hoop. Don't make the stitch too tight or too loose—let it rest on the top of the fabric.

At this point, you've got a straight line that's not outlining anything. "Loop the needle underneath that first stitch and go right back into the hole where you first came out," Sarah instructs. "[You're] catching that first stitch and dragging it over to the edge." Repeat this anchoring technique as many times and as many places as necessary to follow the contour of the shape. The result looks like a thin pen line.

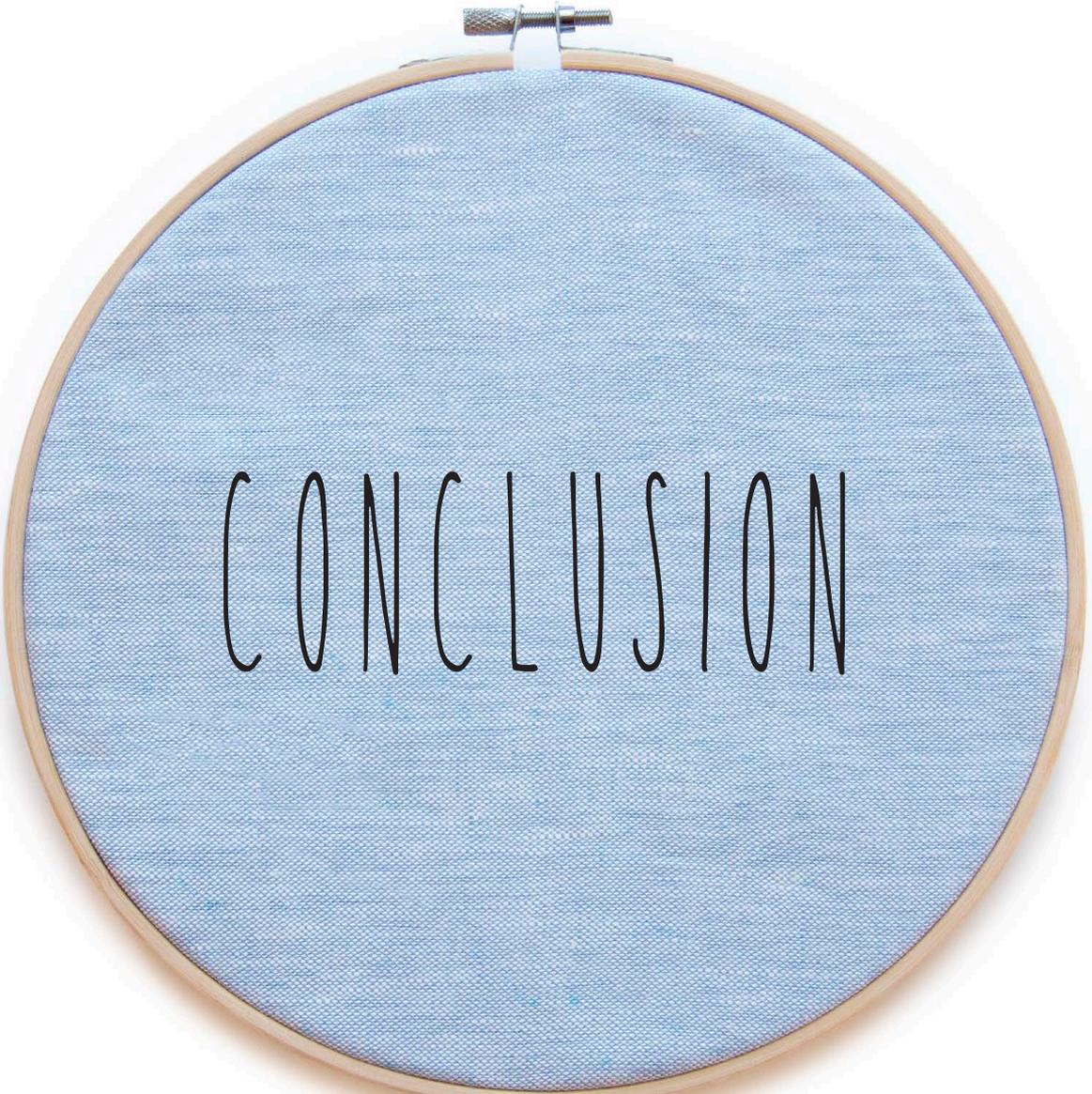
Most of the demonstrations that Sarah shows in her workshop are practical and can be applied to any embroidered scene—not just plants. She does showcase one technique, however, that has a particular use. Some of her cactus embroideries are flowering, and to create the texture, Sarah makes tiny pom-poms that sit on top of the fabric. It's similar to producing a pom-pom like you'd see on a knit stocking cap, but on a much smaller scale. Using a pencil as a guide, she holds it slightly above the fabric and loops the needle around the pencil; make sure that you have twelve strands threaded through the single needle and cluster each stitch as close together as possible. The closer they are, the fuller the pom-pom will appear. Once the area is filled, cut the loops and gleefully run your fingers over the strands. While this approach is not as secure as a regular stitch, it provides a tactile accent to finish the piece.

“Embroidery is supposed to be fun and enjoyable, and, to me, getting too wrapped up in technique becomes paralyzing and takes the joy out of it.”

One of Sarah's final bits of wisdom is how to prep your embroidery to hang in your home. "You can trim off the extra fabric down to a quarter inch, give or take, and at that point, with glue, I [squirt] a line around the inner edge [of the hoop] and pull the fabric over." She recommends tacky glue because it is water soluble, and you can use a damp sponge to release the glue if you need to remove the embroidery at some point.

From beginning to end, the workshop offers tools for how to embroider like Sarah. But above all, she stresses experimentation and finding your own language in embroidery—just as she has.





CONCLUSION



Embroidery has been practiced for thousands of years, and yet it continues to feel fresh and exciting as time goes on. Sarah has shown that through some of the most basic techniques, it's possible to create hoop art that's wholly original and true to oneself, without worrying about the massive amounts of embroidery that have come before.

Sarah's journey with embroidery demonstrates that it's impossible to know where something will lead you when you begin. "I didn't set out to do any of this [embroidery business]," she notes. "It's all been reactionary to situations and just going with it." Like many of us, Sarah felt compelled to express herself visually, and thread was the medium she chose to use. She allowed herself to chase a whim and take a chance on her artistic practice. The result is greater than she ever imagined it could be.

But taking the first step is often the hardest part. Perhaps this is what you're struggling with; whether you're a first-time embroiderer, or an old hand looking to reclaim your love of the craft, Sarah has sound advice: Don't wait to pick up your needle and thread. "Just try it," she implores.

As you stitch, don't aim for perfection. Perfection is something that Sarah actively avoids —because who knows what "perfect" even means. Instead, she has tweaked a familiar mantra to something much more attainable: "Practice makes comfort." The more you repeat a stitch, the better you'll be at it. Eventually, the techniques that once intimidated you will seem like a breeze.

While you prick the hooped fabric hundreds (if not thousands) of times, there's a good chance you'll start to feel relaxed. Knitters often talk of the meditative qualities the activity has, and how the act of moving the needles back and forth along the yarn allows them to take a step back from the hustle and bustle of everyday life. This repeated motion is similarly comforting.

Beyond the reliable repetition, embroidery provides us with perspective, both figuratively and literally. The small stitches give us something to focus on, and the pass-and-repeat method invites moments of reflection that are increasingly rare in our screen-obsessed culture. As we seek healthier relationships with our technology, returning to these analog activities helps set important boundaries. Sarah's approach to embroidery offers a reminder that things don't have to be perfect to be beautiful. You might fret if a stitch appears out of place; but when you hold your work at arm's length, the perceived flaw will disappear. Eventually, you won't even remember it's there.

Remember that you too can practice these same attributes in your own life. You might not be quitting your day job or moving to Spain, but by embracing the experimentation and openness that embroidery offers, you too can forge your own path in a creatively fulfilling way.

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—Sara Barnes

Special thanks to Davey. We are best friends, and we share everything.

—Sarah K. Benning





THIS IS NOT YOUR GRANDMA'S EMBROIDERY.

These lush illustrations created with a needle and thread are completely contemporary. Whether you're an embroidery enthusiast, an art lover, or a gardener, these beautiful botanicals will give you a whole new appreciation for the craft of needlework. Rather than relying on a formal pattern or stitch encyclopedia, self-taught fiber artist Sarah K. Benning improvises her own designs and invents her own techniques. In this book, blogger and curator Sara Barnes sheds light on Benning's innovative approach to this traditional art form and offers a rich, behind-the-scenes look at the practice and work of this talented artist.



SARA BARNES is a freelance writer and artist. She holds an MFA in illustration practice, and she celebrates the latest and greatest creative talent on her blog *Brown Paper Bag* (www.brwnpaperbag.com). This is her first book.

SARAH K. BENNING is a contemporary embroidery artist. She creates highly detailed, hand-stitched works inspired by nature and interior design, writes DIY patterns for other embroidery practitioners, and teaches workshops all over the world.

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