

Helen uses fabric, yarn, paper and porcelain to create her ocean-themed botanical landscapes

Helen Wilde

THE MULTIDISCIPLINARY EMBROIDERY ARTIST BEHIND OVO BLOOM TALKS TEXTURE, CREATIVE LEGACY – AND HER EVER-GROWING SEASHELL COLLECTION

Words by Becca Parker



The lessons Helen from the New York textile industry continue to inform her creative practice



Helen Wilde is obsessed with the ocean. As we chat over Zoom, it's hard to miss the seascape hanging behind the Derbyshire-based embroidery artist. "There's a clam shell up there that's the size of my head!", she laughs, pointing offscreen and gleefully describing how the postman is delivering seashells for her collection at an increasing rate. This is no mere infatuation: "Our dog is up at seven in the morning for her breakfast, and I think: 'Fantastic! I can go and finish that scallop!'. I'm downstairs sewing from half past seven in the morning. It can get to half ten at night and I'm going, 'Oh, I'll be done in a minute – I'm just going to finish this one. It's not a chore because I love it!'"

Right now, Helen's embarking on a collection of ocean floor embroidery pieces for her business, Ovo Bloom. With Jacques Cousteau's *Ocean Odyssey* playing in the background as she stitches, and surrounded by books on coral reefs, she's fully immersed in a subject matter she can't get enough of. "I'm constantly thinking about it, so it's quite an organic thing really. These things grow in my head and then I just have the ability to make them."

The ease with which Helen conjures underwater worlds is quite something – but her pieces are the result of artisan skill and a wonderfully varied career. Sewing began early: "My mum used to come to my school and do sewing classes when I was about five or six," Helen remembers, explaining that her mother designed and made the Paddington Bears at the Paddington Bear factory. "Then, growing up, my dad was the only registered master

saddler in the whole of Nottinghamshire", she continues: "He made a living from hand sewing saddles, bridles, and Shire horse collars. A lot of people ask about particular pieces of equipment I use: I've got needles that are 12 inches and I use them to make incredibly long bullions – but 20, 30 years ago my dad was making collars with them. There's a big family link to sewing."

The Decorative Arts degree she took at Nottingham Trent University meant she was well-versed in everything from textiles and glassmaking to metalwork and papermaking, equipping her for all kinds of creativity. "I lived and worked in New York for a while," she says, "and I was spending a lot of time with people weaving fine silk jacquards – and the textile industries and the fashion houses, and how they make things."

Previous jobs have included everything from accessory design to paper flower installations for high street stores. "I've worked with some absolutely incredible people" Helen tells me. "I've been very fortunate that they've shared that knowledge. And I've absorbed it, and am →

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EMBROIDERY HOOP AND STITCH CLOSE-UP IMAGES © HELEN WILDE



implementing it in what I'm doing now."

The star-crossed union of a 1950s Anchor threads cabinet and a nasty bout of the flu got Helen back into embroidery, and she hasn't stopped since. Today, her pieces are rich with texture and use a unique mixed-media approach that make them instantly recognisable. Which is just as she intended. "There's so much embroidery out there, I just wanted to create something that was a little bit different," she shares. "I wanted to utilise all of those skills that I've either learned during my education or have been shown to me."

The idea of legacy looms large in Helen's world, as she's recently completed her most prestigious project yet. "I was commissioned to create just over 20 pieces for arguably one of the most iconic establishments," she discloses. "The people that are involved with and go to this place are some of the most famous people in the world. They've not changed anything for the last 50 years, so I think this body of work might even outlast my lifespan."

The top-drawer client in question? It's The Dorchester, London's iconic five-star hotel in Mayfair: their new contemporary British art collection curated by VISTO is about to be unveiled. "The last 12 months of my life have been for them. My fingers have bled. It's been a combination of paper embroidery, ink on paper and embroidery, paint on paper and embroidery, and then a series of canvases with paint and embroidery." It was quite

literally a huge undertaking. "Absolutely enormous. Not small pieces. Eight pieces were 40cms – a combination of paint and embroidery, thousands and thousands and thousands of French knots."

Helen was ready for a palate cleanser after working to that brief all year – and, as ever, she was inspired by the natural world and the seasons. "It was a case of thinking: what do I want to do? What do I enjoy the most? And it was the ocean floor. There has never been a series like this. These are all completely different, and I plan to stick with it".

Amid intentions to set up a ceramics studio in her new home, and with collaboration on the cards with fellow artist Claire Mort, Helen has endless enthusiasm for her beloved sea flora creations. Her Instagram followers are sending her seashell specimens from across the globe to keep her inspired. "There'll be plenty more ocean floors! The more I make, the more people get involved and are interested, the more people ask for them – so the more I'll make!"

"I don't ever plan to retire: I will just sew less. But I will happily do this for the rest of my life. I was talking about it to my parents, and I said: "If I don't die with a needle in my hand then I've not done it right"."

You can see Helen's latest ocean floor pieces at ovobloom.com



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