

Profile: Artist Johannah Miller, Creator of the Crossroads Collection

Johannah Miller began creating art as a child, when she received a simple piece of paper and a pen from her mother, also an artist. She studied ballet and music, but decided to focus on illustration and design, further developing an interest in ceramics and textiles and how to combine different mediums. Now an in-house designer at DEMDACO, Johannah strives to make lasting objects that help people feel joy. That joy can be because it is something they find functional day in and day out, because it was a gift from someone special, or simply because they find it to be beautiful.

While she contributes her talents to several of DEMDACO's collections, Johannah's [Crossroads collection](#) is the first that she developed from concept all the way through the reproduction process. Here's what she had to say about creating the striking work in her popular collection that consists of pen and ink drawings and stitched red accents:

What inspired you to create the Crossroads collection?

The inspiration behind Crossroads comes from myself having moved a few times as a child, quite often as an adult, and having what I consider a global family. "Home is where the heart is" isn't always as straightforward as it seems. I wanted to create artwork that reflected the complexities of home existing in many places, not just a building. My home is with people like my mom and dad, neither of whom live in the house that I grew up in, it's with my pets and it's with my close friends who live in Germany. I created Crossroads for people who are similar to me in that home is wherever they find it.

What gave you the idea to mix pen and ink with threadwork?

I wanted to find a way to make the pieces more dimensional, to really pop off the page. I had done some paper embroidery in school and always liked the look of it. My mother is a quilter, so I asked her to help me create the first mockup with stitching on the paper and sewing the hearts on initially. I knew I could do it myself, but I also love collaboration and often ask her to help me execute things that I know she will get perfectly the first time.

Have you worked in these mixed media before?

Yes, in school I did some experimenting with stitching on paper, but it wasn't nearly as successful as Crossroads! In fact, I don't think I even kept the pieces since they didn't turn out how I imagined. Luckily I revisited the process and it turned out much better!

When did you make the first piece?

I made the first piece while in a brainstorm for other collections at DEMDACO. My boss looked at the doodles I was doing of a house and intersecting streets and said, "That. I want you to

explore this idea.” Which is how the [“Faith and Family”](#) piece came to exist and from there I just kept drawing!

Is there any significance to the black-white-red color palette?

There’s not any real significance, I keep my color palette in life pretty minimal. My clothes, my house, my art all tend to be neutral with an occasional pop of color.

What emotions do you hope to convey through Crossroads?

I really hope to convey the idea of home and the type of love that goes along with it. To me, home has sort of a cozy love, somewhere you can snuggle up under a blanket and be yourself. People can evoke this feeling too, like your partner or a best friend, someone who you are just unabashedly yourself around. So whether the piece is about a literal place or about a relationship, I hope people get that warm and blossoming sense of love only home can evoke.

What was the experience of going through the reproduction process?

It’s very interesting, since you have to gather together your thought processes and ideas more so than when you’re the only one working on a project. I sent over paper that I liked with my own initial drawings and stitching on it for reference; I sent a frame that I love the color of, and I had to create a lot of the artwork over and over again to get the exact thing I wanted. This is helpful to do upfront so our team in China knows exactly what you’re trying to achieve and have the process go along smoothly.

How did you feel when you saw the first reproductions? What’s it like to see work that you created by hand, reproduced by others?

It was exciting! Our partners in China are such amazing people and craftsmen with attention to detail, I really trust that they are doing everything to a high standard. I think I still can’t wrap my head around all the work they do on each piece and how much care goes into them and just how beautifully the team has helped me execute my vision.

What is next for the collection?

The next collection is going to feature a few more pieces of wall art but also some ceramic pieces as well! I’m very excited about these since a few times when I moved I couldn’t take large pieces of art with me, but I could take a vase or a mug while I kept my other possessions in storage. The idea of being able to take a piece of home with you anywhere is what inspired these ceramic pieces for the next iteration of Crossroads.

How often do you experiment with new styles and media?

For DEMDACO I am always pushing myself to try new styles and mediums such as sculpting things in clay or getting out some inks to do more brush-like artwork. For my personal artwork, I go between my favorite medium of colored pencils for a minimal style, pencil for some renderings and digital art if I want to have fun.

What are you working on now?

Right now I'm working on drawing a series of printers tools for my partner who is a letterpress operator and mechanic. He has a collection of bits and bobs all around our house, most of which I only have a vague idea of what they are or do. This is a really enjoyable thing to work on right now since I'm doing it in a style I don't often do — a semi-realistic graphite rendering of the tools.

How do you get ideas for new work?

I spend a lot of time looking at interior design blogs and magazines, probably more than I look at other artwork and illustrations. I also love to watch movies and travel vicariously through them. I love spaces and how they reflect the people who occupy them. My passion is objects and how those objects exist within a space, whether it's a group of items I love that I put into a still life drawing or a silhouette of a coat that I draw over and over again.

Are there things you do to keep yourself engaged and challenged to try new things, or does your work follow its own natural evolution?

I love trying new things, from throwing pottery to teaching myself how to knit, I am always trying to gain another skill. I think trying lots of things and being artistic in multiple ways helps my artwork evolve naturally. It really took a big step when I accepted that I didn't want to draw illustrations in the same way my classmates were in school. Once I started accepting that it was ok to just draw what I wanted, my collection of jewelry or just a beautiful vase I had seen in a museum, my artwork began to evolve in a way that felt a lot more natural to me and it continues to do so.

Are there any parameters you set for yourself when creating new pieces?

I'm rather regimented in the way I create artwork, honestly. I like to have a mood board of images I like, from film stills to street fashion shots to just colors I want to incorporate, as I start sketching for new personal pieces. For something like Crossroads I try and think about home and how else I can express that feeling of coziness I mentioned. Would a drawing of a comfortable couch with blankets work? Probably not, but I have to draw it to get it out of my head before I can move on to better ideas!

Did you ever consider that your work would reach such a wide audience? What's that like?

I never anticipated this at all, especially that it would be my illustrations! I have typically found more success with my artistic endeavors reaching people when I create ceramics or take photos, but I love that people are receptive towards my illustrations and the concept behind them. It's so nice to hear people's reaction when I explain what the collection is about — I don't think I've had anyone respond negatively to its story. I love having created something that so many people can relate to and feel like they want to have in their house. This was the goal from the very beginning so it's very exciting for it be successful.