

Painting with stitches



Tom Wallace, Dml - Star Tribune

Artist Julie Crabtree takes stitching to a new level with the Landscape works she produces.

Silk and mohair threads become lupine and pines in the hands of Julie Crabtree-Pfannes, a Wisconsin artist who redefines embroidery.

By **KIM ODE**, Star Tribune

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It isn't so much that Julie Crabtree-Pfannes cringes at the word "embroidery" as that she sighs.

She knows that embroidery is what we call the pretty stitching on party dresses, cloth napkins, baby blankets and blouses. Grandmas embroider. So do 4-Hers toiling

away at junior needlework projects for the State Fair.

Crabtree doesn't dismiss embroidery. She has a four-year degree in it -- no kidding -- from the Mansfield College of Arts in Nottinghamshire, England, where she grew up. "But I prefer the term 'stitchery art' because I want people to think of it in a new way, as a way of painting with stitches."

Crabtree, who settled in western Wisconsin after immigrating here, is the featured artist this month at the Textile Center in Minneapolis. Her work is part of the center's Holiday Show and Sale, which runs through Dec. 30.

From across the room, the wall of the center does seem to be hung with paintings. But the stand of birches, the periwinkle of lupine, a scarlet smudge of sumac all are created from layers and layers of stitching thread and fabric into landscapes with a subtle texture that makes the word "embroidery" seem too small.

Crabtree brings together several media, beginning with a base layer of paint on her cotton canvases. For certain effects, she'll use a sewing machine almost like a paintbrush, stitching the effect of a sturdy

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window frame or a tree trunk. Fabric is sewn and sculpted to look like a rock. Different threads and yarns lend the effect of shadow or sunlight. Bits of fabric are frayed to resemble a bush. She spins, weaves and dyes most of her fabrics and threads before they land on canvas. On many pictures, she wires together tiny sticks to make a small slatted fence -- one of her trademarks.

For much of her work, she can name the particular place that inspired her: Bayfield, Wis.; Sylvan Lake in the Black Hills; Split Rock Lighthouse on Minnesota's North Shore; South Dakota's Badlands, or even where she takes a daily walk.

"There is never no inspiration," Crabtree said, describing how a field of cornstalks or a rusty granary can have a beauty that begs to be stitched.

"It's a wonder I haven't driven off the road," she said.

It's also one reason that she answers the usual (and sometimes irksome) question of "How long does this take?" with an honest, "Years."

Her work frequently is named "best of show" in art fairs and festivals across the Midwest.

The prices for some landscapes run into the thousands of dollars. One reason for her success is her level of detail. The wintry scene on Sylvan Lake shows ice floating on the lake, looking more like the hoarfrosted shards they are meant to resemble than the fabric and thread they actually are.

While she loves doing landscapes for the calming effect they have on viewers, as well as herself, Crabtree said she's starting to experiment with more urban cityscapes. She's playing with felted fabric these days, which gives a canvas even more depth. Stitching a building, she said, is not much different from actually building it, "because I stitch each brick until it becomes a wall."

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