

**PERROTIN**

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**Sophia NARRETT**

*BOMB,*

*Sophia Narrett*

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# Sophia Narrett

## by Colm Tóibín

At the 2019 BOMB Gala in New York City, there was a silent auction of artworks. I believed I had looked at all the art on display when I was approached by my friend, the novelist Lynne Tillman. She asked me if I had noticed the piece by Sophia Narrett. When I confessed that I had not, Lynne suggested I return with her to look at it.

The work was small, maybe five inches by three; it was titled *Worries* and was dated 2017. It showed a domestic scene, with a number of people perhaps sitting on a couch. They may have been looking at a television. There were two paintings on the wall behind them. The scene was contemporary, you could tell from the clothes. The piece was made with cotton embroidery thread. The fibers not only managed to capture textures, but caught expressions on faces, caught skin tone and poses and gestures. With this thread, Narrett had managed to encapsulate a whole range of feeling in this tiny work.

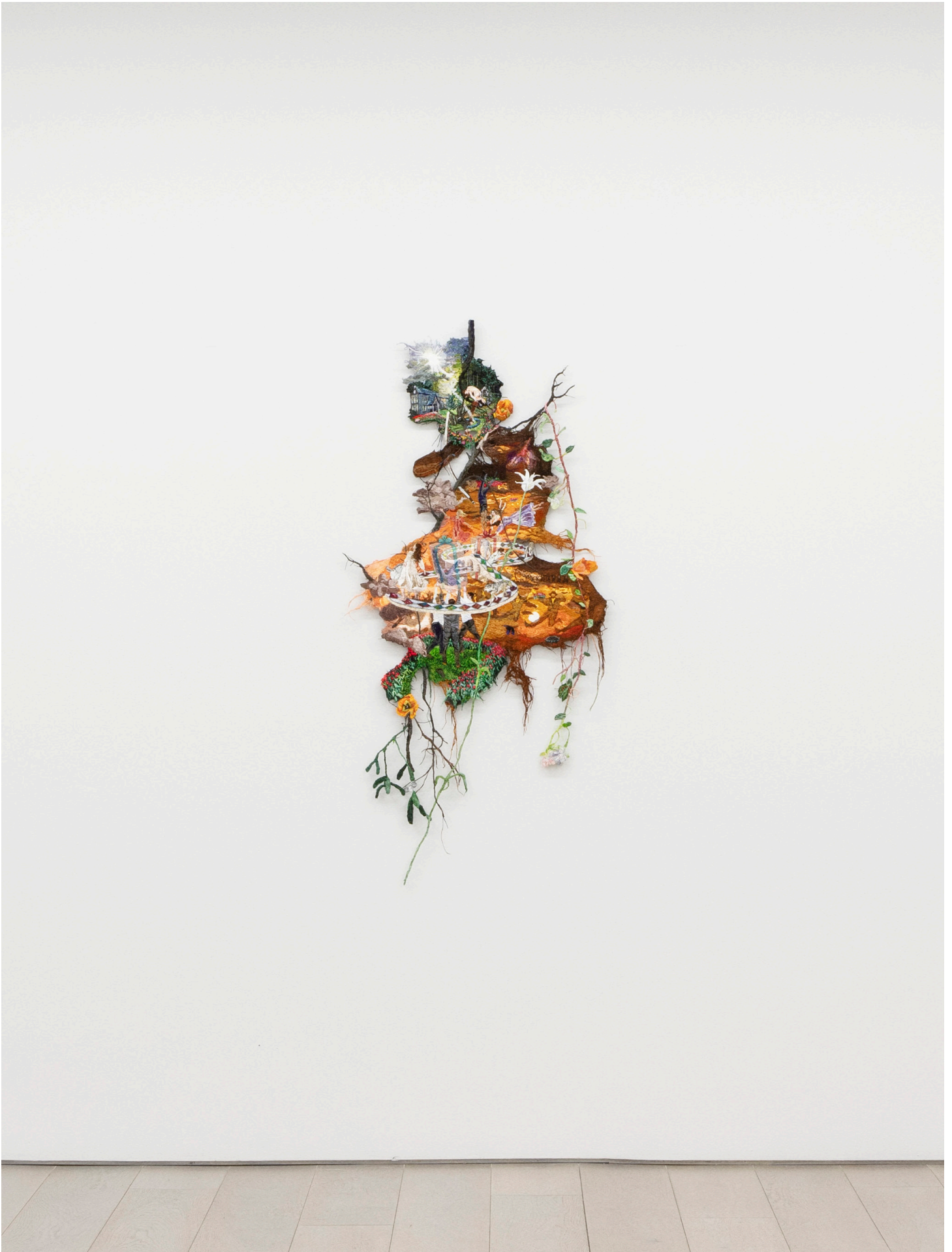
Since then, I've watched out for any new work by her. Thus, I was excited when Narrett's show *Carried by Wonder* opened at Perrotin on Orchard Street in New York City this March. These pieces were bigger and more ambitious and more elaborate in their imagery than *Worries*. They dealt with myth and ritual, with sex and coupling and desire. But more than that, they dramatized their own process, allowing the thread itself, in all its variety, to become part of the spectacle. While *Worries* used right angles and could be framed, these new artworks floated more freely, as though they had been given the right to define their own shape.



*Real Moment*, 2023,  
embroidery thread, fabric  
and acrylic, 7 × 10.75 in.  
Photo by Stan Narten.  
Images courtesy of the artist  
and Perrotin, New York City,  
unless otherwise noted.









COLM TÓIBÍN: Can you first tell us something about your own background in art? When did you start, what were your first impulses, and what were you working with when you began?

SOPHIA NARRETT: Growing up, my creativity was most focused on doll play. That was where my interest in narrative, stories, and working with the figure probably came from.

CT: Can you go into more detail about the doll play?

SN: My dad and my brother built me a doll townhouse when I was six years old, and I was really invested. Pretty much all the way through high school, I was working on decorating it and making things for it. I also did a lot of painting and drawing, but it was mostly still life. I didn't connect that to creativity, in terms of combining the idea and concept with the image-making, until college. That was a huge moment for me. But the painting and drawing were separate hobbies at the time. The real creativity was in the doll play and the fantasy associated with that.

CT: Do you associate doll play and building the doll's house with innocence?

SN: Probably, yes. I think my work still has that innocence in a way. People have often recognized a darkness in my work that didn't feel that way to me, but I see it there later. My images are always about love and beauty and the desire for connection. If there is imagery that I have a complicated relationship with, it's because I'm exploring desire, and that, by nature, is not cut-and-dry or planned out ahead of time. The fantasy I find in building narratives in art is similar to the fantasy of doll play. It's this bracketed space where you're getting away from real life, and so there is that innocence, but also a sense of permission to explore more complicated things.

CT: When did you discover that thread was the best medium for you?

SN: Around 2009. Before then, I had been working primarily in oil painting,

though my stories were in the same thematic world always. They were life-size figure paintings, so they were very different in form from my embroidery. When I worked on paintings, I was more excited by the narrative, and to do justice to the narrative through painting required more of an obligatory effort. At that time, I started experimenting with all kinds of materials. I was using tree branches and making little plaques on the wall and drawing on paper doilies. I bought some cotton thread to draw little lines and details on felt four-leaf clovers I made for an installation. The thread sat around in my studio, and then one day, I randomly thought to try doing a drawing in thread on some fabric. The second I made that first piece, even though it was on the wrong fabric and a random construction, something clicked. I loved how the image started to emerge. By the second or third piece I made from thread, I was already using the process that I use now. I have tried working with other types of thread—silk thread, yarn, thread with glitter, and others—but so far, I've returned to this cotton thread and its uniformity. When I did try to incorporate paint or other types of thread, it became more and more about the medium. I try to keep my work in a place where the medium is pushing back and having its say, but can still disappear a bit and create an image and illusion. It's been very fruitful for me.

CT: When you began working with that piece of fabric and thread, what were other people around you doing? Who was in your peer group? What were your teachers thinking when you began to work in this medium?

SN: When I began working in thread as an undergraduate at Brown, it was still just a small part of my practice. I was doing a lot of mixed media and other experiments. But when I applied to the Rhode Island School of Design for the MFA program in painting, I applied with only embroidery. It was very important to me to go to a painting department where I could locate myself in the history of painting and have a discussion based on images. During my time at RISD, I went back to mixed media work for a few reasons: one, I

*Carried by Wonder, 2022*  
embroidery thread, fabric,  
acrylic, and aluminum,  
56 × 28 inches. Photo by  
Stan Narten.

was in this amazing painting department, and I wanted to learn how to make better paintings. Two, because embroidery is so slow, in order to take advantage of the critiques and have new conversations at the pace they were coming, I couldn't be making one piece for three months. I started working in photography, sculpture, painting—all kinds of things alongside embroidery—to have these conversations about the narrative I wanted. For the most part, people were very supportive of and interested in embroidery as a medium. I think I came in a lucky time where there was a lot of openness in the art world to all kinds of materials, craft materials being one of them. It was a way for people to enter into the work, a point of access.

When I first began working in thread, I was not aware that I was choosing a craft material, or that the history of embroidery and feminist art would inform the way my work was viewed. It was just this real excitement about the material and a feeling that materials were possible art materials. As time went on, I came to understand that the history of embroidery is part of why it clicked for me, and that it contributed a lot to my ability to tell stories in the way I wanted to—with a tone of sincerity and vulnerability. The associations people have with thread tend to bring a sense of intimacy to my work. I came to understand this through critiques at RISD, and through conversations with other artists.

CT: At the very center of your recent exhibition at Perrotin, *Seven Circles* (2022) shows a woman looking off a landscape as though she's a figure out of German Romanticism. How did this work come into being?

SN: I wanted to do something with circling, which is a Jewish wedding tradition where the bride will go around the groom seven times to create a circle of protection. It's about building a home that he is the center of. There are different interpretations

but as you can imagine, many modern and Reform couples are now doing three circles each and the seventh together, or not following this tradition at all. Despite this, I felt a very deep connection to the original circling tradition. It speaks to a tension or space of being that resonates with me in terms of the simultaneous empowerment and restriction in gender roles for women. Ultimately, I found this to be a space of power and beauty where you're able to create protection for your lover.

At the time, it had been my dream for basically my entire life to go see the tulips at the Keukenhof in the Netherlands. When I finally went, it was a very intense experience. The day before, I had visited Anne Frank's house. Words will escape me to describe the experience of being in a space of the most beauty I'd ever seen right after feeling the presence of such a horrific history so close by. The idea of protecting a lover became even more urgent and intense to think about in relation to this time where there was no way for people to do that for each other.

As I started building the image, I knew I wanted to work with this circling tradition. And I knew that tulips were going to be a part of that. I've been interested in the meaning we assign to flowers for many years, especially red tulips as a symbol of endless love, the history of the tulip—the way desire has been connected to tulips—and the physical magic of them. They're sculptural and almost transparent, like lollipops!

When I began collaging, this piece started off way more complicated. Many other figures were initially there to illustrate the circles themselves, and there were different spatial constructions going on. As the image evolved, it distilled down to being about the tulips forming circles and these archetypal figures—this woman circling around her groom, who's under a tallit looking off into the distance. It became about the connection to past generations, future generations, and a greater community through rituals of love.

CT: When you use the word *collage*, what materials are you using, what size is it, and how much detail is in the collage?

SN: The collages are all made in Photoshop. They're very detailed; they usually wind up being five hundred to seven hundred different layers. More often than not, the collage is pretty close to where the image winds up, though sometimes halfway through sewing, I'll go back into the original draft and make some big changes. The edges and the sculptural constructions are not really reflected in the collages; that evolves as the image takes physical shape.

CT: The tulips in *Seven Circles* come in so many different forms, not just colors. They create perspective. Sometimes they're tiny at the forefront, then there's another that's bigger. In Photoshop, how does that actually work if you're creating that on the collage beforehand?

SN: This piece was unique in that it had more photos that I've taken myself than usual. Most of the collages are maybe eighty to ninety percent images I've gathered and ten to twenty percent images I've taken. The tulips, though, were all photographs that I took in Holland. Using a photo with a large bed of tulips, I would select flower by flower, increase the size, or change the perspective to make the ground spill forward. I was definitely arranging and choreographing each flower to build that undulating ground.

CT: Tell me how you start. What's the first thing you do? On your desk, is there nothing except a lot of thread?

SN: There's a lot of thread, yes. *(laughter)* Usually I start by musing on the narrative. My ideas are always somewhat visual, but they can sometimes be a progression of a timeline that I want to illustrate. When I have that kind of idea, I'll usually jot it down in a few notes, and then I'll create a Photoshop collage. I search on the computer while listening to music, collect screenshots online, and sift through my database of screenshots I've gathered for past pieces. I'll slowly combine the images together and construct the space. At first, the Photoshop document looks like a bunch of random figures located in a big white space, and then there'll be

a couple figures that start interacting with each other. Usually certain core images that I find captivating will lead me in a direction.

CT: I wonder then, what connection do you have with the internet as one of the sources for your imagery?

SN: The internet gives me the language I tell these stories in. I usually start with the narrative, and then I build out the reference material to illustrate the story, after which it evolves. The search algorithm is a huge part of how I find reference material for my collages. If I need a figure that looks like it's climbing up something, I might search for a person getting on a horse. I'll search for images of people doing activities that look like what I want to start building, the figure's position, clothing, or historical references. This is all filtered through what the algorithm presents. Not the randomness of it, but more so the collective subconscious, this vocabulary that's been built.

As the years have gone by, I've used more and more images to create each element of a collage; usually, a tree will be modeled after multiple trees. But even as the images get broken down and mixed together, they still—especially key ones that I reuse—retain the history of the original source.

CT: I want to ask you about the shape. In this new show, it really is unpredictable how the piece is going to hang, what sort of shape it's going to be. Do you do that in preparation, or is it part of the process where something new occurs to you and you let it hang a bit further over there or seem ragged on this side and unfinished here? The sculptural part becomes an essential element in the making of the work.

opposite: Detail of *Seven Circles*, 2022, embroidery thread, fabric, acrylic, and aluminum, 28 × 41.5 inches. Photo by Stan Narten.

overleaf: Detail of *Truth*, 2021–22, embroidery thread, fabric, aluminum, and acrylic, 32 × 22.5 inches. Photo by Stan Narten.

















SN: It is. With the Photoshop collages, some of the elements may be planned if there's a huge flower on the bottom or something else in there. But for the most part, the edges are all invented after the image is made. I'll draw an outline of the collage onto several pieces of fabric, construct them in pieces, cut them out of the fabric, cut more fabric, and add extra pieces to balance it out, which I then attach all together in the end. The last step would be the sculptural parts—the hanging threads, branches, or different elements that stick out.

As a very image-focused, narrative-based person, one of the reasons paintings weren't working as well for me was because I needed a material that was going to push back and force some abstraction into the work. The edges and moments where the limitations of the thread speak are how emotion can get into the piece as an *object*, and not just an image.

CT: One of the things that I noticed in your exhibition is the color. You're managing to get a painterly color in your work. Your choice of thread makes the colors seem alive and viscous and almost energetic. Has anyone done that before in a way that has interested you?

SN: When I first started working in embroidery, I had never seen anything where people were rendering images in this way from thread. I didn't have any history with needle arts or sewing. My use of color came from trying to translate drawing or painting into stitching.

left: *Flutter*, 2019, embroidery thread, fabric, aluminum, and acrylic, 54 × 24 × 2 inches. Photo by Stan Narten.

opposite, top to bottom: Detail of *Whisper Like a Magnet*, 2020, embroidery thread, aluminum, and fabric, 33 × 40 inches; detail of *The Moment We Met*, 2021, embroidery thread, fabric, aluminum, and acrylic, 61 × 51 inches. Photos by Karl Puchlik. Courtesy of the artist and Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles.











Since I've been working in thread, I have come across some examples—I recently saw some pieces from the 1800s in the Baltimore Museum of Art's collection, and also became acquainted with Rosemarie Beck's embroidery. In terms of fiber art, medieval tapestries have been very inspiring. I had been working in embroidery for one or two years at the time when I saw the unicorn tapestries in Paris. They completely blew me away. Of course, it's a totally different scale and way of working, but I felt so captivated by the images in the fiber, their physical presence—how they almost float—and how they have aged and show the mark of time.

CT: That makes absolute sense. When you have a collage, with its different shapes and structures, and you start recreating it in thread, do the threads themselves start doing work for you? In the same way a painter might find that, in putting on the paint, the paint starts to tell the painter what they must do next, does this happen with thread, too? Does the thread itself start playing against the collage?

SN: Absolutely. You just described my process better than I could. Part of why I find embroidery so freeing is that once I finish the collage, I can't really picture what it's going to look like in thread. While the collages do tell me spatially who's going to be where, they don't necessarily have the color information. I make a lot of those decisions in the thread. Thread has a mind and life of its own. It also has

[Detail of \*Wishes\*, 2019, embroidery thread, fabric, aluminum, and acrylic, 72 x 39 inches. Photo by Stan Narten. Courtesy of the artist and Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles.](#)

[Poem excerpted from \*A Change of World: Poems\* by Adrienne Rich. Copyright © 1951, 1979 The Adrienne Rich Literary Trust. Used with permission of the publisher, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. All rights reserved.](#)

certain limits in terms of legibility, how detailed something can get. I'm always pressing up against those boundaries, and the thread is pushing back, taking over, forming things in its own way. That's part of why I'm excited to keep making embroidered pieces; I'm always surprised at the translation.

CT: In general, people might think, Oh, embroidery, it's usually done by women, in the domestic sphere. It could be a cushion cover. It could be a bedspread. The general images people associate with embroidery are, let's say, a house, a chimney, a dog. When we think of embroidery, it doesn't have an erotic charge. What's astonishing when you stand back from your work is that dissonance—you think you know what embroidery is, but when you move closer and closer you realize, Oh, my lord, she's interested in carnality, in eroticism, in the relationship between couples, in flesh and nudity, in desire.

Visually, you have made these things really arresting, powerful, and present. It's startling in that sometimes it's so real—a face, body, flesh, color, or gesture. All of that is done with an extraordinary level of detail so that it sings out.

SN: Thank you. I'm soaking in your words—thank you so much. I thought a lot about the relationship between the embroidery to the content in that way. What you describe is the natural language I've been continually drawn to using to talk about love, which I feel is the real central human experience and the meaning of life. In terms of the relationship of the medium to this kind of imagery, people have asked whether the embroidery is protecting the images, or somehow taming them. Does embroidery make these images less threatening to people?

As humans, I think we can sense when something has been touched for many, many, many hours. Craft registers with people. I don't ever want to fetishize that time aspect of my work. It's not why I do the embroidery. The reason I do it is because it's so fun for me. But I hope that it shows the dedication I had to the images, and maybe slows people down for half a second, or gives them the benefit of the doubt toward the images. It might make

someone think, Oh, she must really mean this if she spent so long with

CT: Do you know the poem by Adrienne Rich, "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers"?

SN: I don't.

CT: Do you mind if I read it to you, please?

*Aunt Jennifer's tigers prance across  
the screen,  
Bright topaz denizens of a world of glass.  
They do not fear the men beneath their  
tree;  
They pace in sleek chivalric certainty*

*Aunt Jennifer's finger fluttering through  
her wool  
Find even the ivory needle hard to pierce  
The massive weight of Uncle's wedding  
band  
Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer's hand*

*When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands  
will lie  
Still ringed with ordeals she was  
mastered by.  
The tigers in the panel that she made  
Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid*

SN: Wow.

CT: Adrienne Rich was a great feminist and this is her poem about oppression and this is her poem about oppression. She's talking about her aunt's terrified hands, the ring weighing heavily, and the work she's making in the tapestry. It is suggesting that that sort of work is oppressive. And that it isn't quite what women should be doing. In your work, you turn that around. One of the reasons why I think the question of process for you is interesting—how much is prearranged, rearranged and how much then comes in through the making—is because you're talking about an imaginative energy at play, opposed to a suppression of the self. Your system is a way for artists to use a medium in an entirely new way. I'm wondering if, in the background, you resonate with Adrienne Rich's imagination of how, for centuries, this was work that women were confined to doing, and how it bears on your process.

SN: Absolutely, yes. This history is part of understanding why objects

embroidery made so much sense for me in a way that they didn't in painting. This history of restriction is related to the stories of love, connection, power, desire, and selfhood that I'm trying to tell. My characters are sometimes haunted by societal expectations, at other times they break free and defy them. It's impossible to understand the contemporary experience of womanhood without an awareness of this history, and the embroidery is a material nod to it even as my characters may weave in and out of it, or escape it at times. When I first started, I was very defensive about my use of embroidery. There were times when someone said to me that if this was a painting, people would respect it more. I definitely got that feedback in direct and indirect ways. It was a small reaction compared to most, but as a young artist, being self-conscious, it happened enough.

Early on, I identified a lot with an essay I read by Dennis Stevens that spoke about how—because of feminist art where artists chose craft materials specifically as a political message—recent generations of artists are able to freely work with these materials without it being such an explicitly political move. Even so, now that I have been doing this almost every day for nearly thirteen years, I do understand the weight and meaning of that history more than I initially did. When you read that poem, I got chills.

There was a novel I read several years ago called *The Future Eve* (1886) by Villiers de l'Isle-Adam. It's basically the story of Frankenstein, but with a female creation. Instead of being this creature that they gave "real" life to, they were trying to build a very believable robot. However, when the android comes to life, she gives a speech, roughly saying, Actually, I am the dark forces of the universe; I compelled the scientists to make me and controlled everything that they did; I am really alive. In the end, no one knows whether that was just what a perfect robot would say, or whether she was actually "real." I related to this "Eve." Her troubled, perhaps questionable agency spoke to me. I don't mean that to sound fatalistic, but it's very interesting to me how we don't necessarily choose aspects of our personalities, or always have control over what our own desires

are, or even how we express ourselves. Social forces can impact us in implicit and explicit ways. I don't feel I ever decided to work in embroidery, or decided that it felt right. I've become more and more interested in these ideas as I work in embroidery longer.

I think that in five or ten more years, if I keep working with thread, I will hopefully have a deeper understanding of embroidery than I do now.

CT: I was thinking about the artist Vija Celmins, who, over many, many years, painstakingly made prints, paintings, and drawings of the sea and sky. It takes so much time to build up what she does. Because I'm a novelist, I often worry that I only have one theme, and that I do it over and over again. The same houses, same families, same Irish sky. You try and break out of it, but you still go back to it and think, Am I the most limited person in the world, or is this the actual way to go?

Your themes are the erotic, the figure, the ritual of people moving away from each other, coming together, flesh, desire. And it seems to me that thirteen years is enough to say that these are likely to remain your themes. You're making what you did yesterday, but doing it in a way that is totally different to you each time. It's fascinating to me, because it gives the rest of us permission to go on repeating ourselves.

SN: I so relate to what you're saying, and I have those doubts myself. You always want to be challenging yourself, surprising yourself. What keeps me going is staying focused on making what I want to see and not thinking too hard about it beforehand. Once it's finished, I can try to understand what's going on in it, but I try to be more unfiltered and uninhibited and just go with it at the beginning.

I'll share something that a really amazing artist, my friend Lauren Comito, told me when I first got to RISD. It's a metaphor that will stick with me forever. She said that art-making is like running around a track. We're running around and coming back to our interests, and we just keep on coming back and back and back. But each time you go around the track, it's a spiral. And so you may come back

to something that you already hit, but you're more evolved, and you're spiraling up and up to something that you don't see yet. Maybe you can't go up there directly, but you're spiraling up. I loved that.

The biggest gift thread gave me was that it took away the idea of trying to make good art. When I was making paintings, I was trying to make them *good* paintings. And when I started working in thread, since I hadn't really seen images constructed that way, there wasn't this baggage of what was good or bad. The narratives and images are driven by making what I need to see and processing my own experiences, fantasies, or ideas. It's selfish in that way, where I'm not really setting out with a thesis, or, you know, the goal of designing an experience for someone. I also don't feel like I really control what they're going to be. The ideas come to me and I have to go with them. Sometimes I think, Well, that's kind of a stupid idea. But you just get that feeling. You've got to make it now that you've had this idea. You follow where it leads you.

From my own encounters with other people's art, I do hope and think that when you go within, you unlock something that is universal, something of the human spirit that other people can relate to.