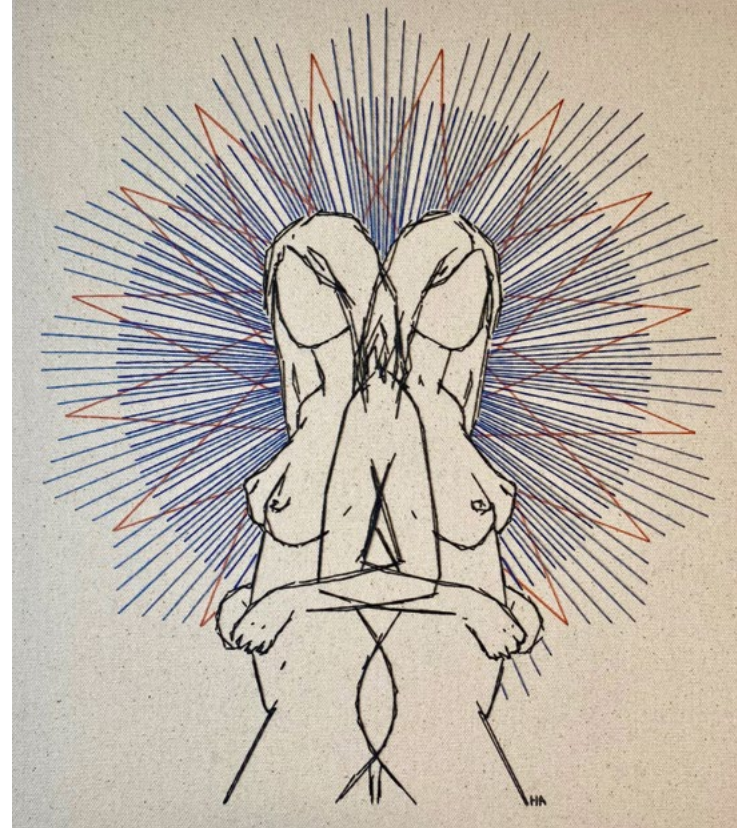


# HOLLY ALLAN

The British embroidery artist uses her work to celebrate feminine intimacy and take apart what perfection means today.



Femme, 2020



Mist ©Holly Allan, 2021

All Images by Holly Allan  
WRITER Ellen Stone

I've been in love with Holly Allan for years now. Quiet, seemingly reserved, cuttily acerbic, thoughtful and full of unabashed enthusiasm, she creates work that is a cipher for how she is as a person. Each embroidery piece feels intimate but speaks volumes, drawing you into a world of feminine celebration, asking you to put the female form first and to see each individual's body as beautiful.

The female body and embroidery have an interlocked history, a "domestic art" turned "high art"; Holly's pieces act as a response to these two worlds. "I've always been interested in what perfection means in contemporary society," she says, outlining an underlying theme across her practice. "What makes bodily perfection? What makes a work of art a work of art?"

Exploring the variety of female beauty using needle and thread, every stitched portrait or nude makes the viewer consider the feminine depictions that make up modern visual culture. Holly's women are enjoying personal moments, they are not performing for the viewer, their gestures expressing a perfection of the self. With a practice that can only be expressed through the female hand, she is an artist for a new generation of art collector. A voice for those looking for connection and empathy over grandiose gestures of brand building. Here every stitch is a political motion, a love letter to femininity and to the artistic medium, a statement of power to be celebrated.

**Ellen Stone:** How would you describe your art and your practice?

**Holly Allan:** I'm a London-based artist working predominantly in embroidery. I take pleasure in the stitch – the needle is my main tool, the threads my colour. I take inspiration from everywhere – my friends, the internet, nature and art history.

**ES:** Your mother is the world-renowned British abstract painter Rachel Howard, so you grew up in a really artistic family. Were you always creative?

**HA:** My mum always had some kind of exciting project for us to do. Whether it was sticking and gluing – a personal favourite – or rolling out wallpaper lining on the floor and getting covered in paint to make mini Yves Klein paintings. There was a time when I was about eight when I would even sew my toys to my own clothes – making up new fashion designs.

I have always been creative, it's the only thing that has really, consistently brought me solace. I was shy as a child and found refuge in making.

**ES:** Looking at your work you can see references to classical art but also it has a very contemporary aesthetic. Can you tell me a bit about your inspirations? When you're working are you looking to contemporary artists or are you drawing from a more classical art history?

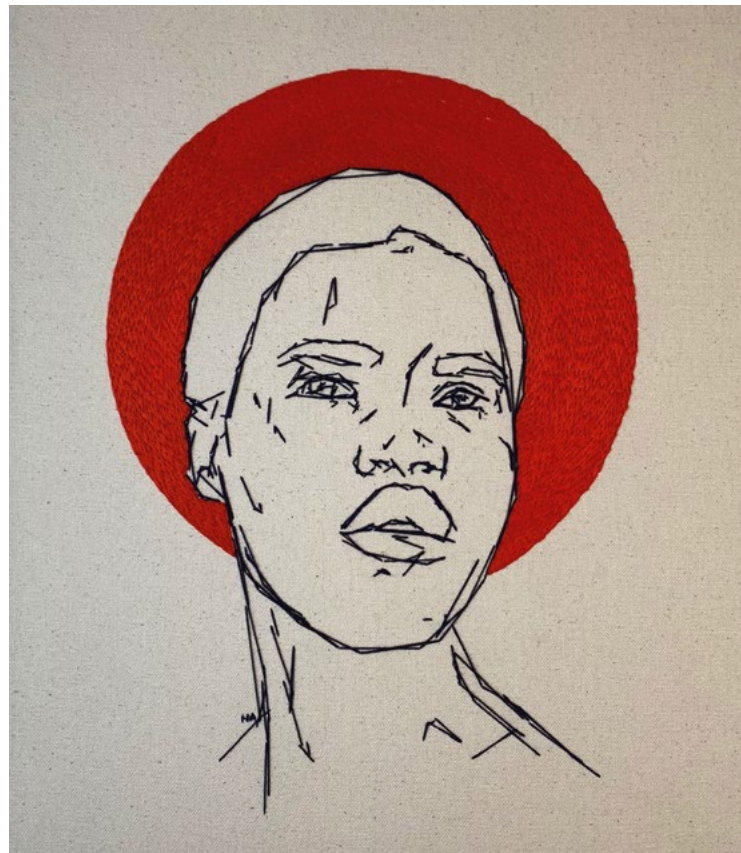
**HA:** Definitely both. I was lucky to grow up surrounded by art. Most weekends my parents would take us to galleries or museums. We grew up in a house filled with contemporary artworks and I spent much of my preschool years sitting in my mum's studio watching her paint, wrapped in my romper suit to keep the cold out. It was such a great education to have at such a young age, but also strangely normal.

I fell in love with the Renaissance when I started studying history of art for A level. I would spend hours looking and recreating Fra Angelico's "Annunciation". Then, years later, when I went to the Convent of San Marco in Florence and saw it in the flesh, it was incredible. Seeing it in real life, as opposed to in a book or online, there's nothing like it. It was a surreal and revelatory experience being surrounded by these paintings and sculptures I had been so fixated on for years in such a beautiful city.

I've also got some more esoteric influences. I'm definitely inspired by the work of Hilma af Klint and Emma Kunz – surrounding the form with meticulous geometric patterns, using complementary colours.



Antares ©Holly Allan, 2021



Nina's Halo ©Holly Allan, 2019

## “Sewing by hand is a very intimate and meditative process. It allows me to mentally release.”

**ES:** We've known each other for a long time and I've bought your work from some of your first shows up to recent projects, and it's really interesting to see how it's progressed and how you've pushed your practice. Starting out mostly with portraits, moving to figurative forms, and including more and more abstraction – what sparked this evolution?

**HA:** When I started the portraits it was fascinating to me how I could conjure up Frida Kahlo in 100 stitched lines, and how I could follow the same process but next make a likeness of Picasso. This quickly progressed to the celebration of the human form. From there I wanted to expand beyond just the physical subject and brought in geometry and other types of iconography, such as the dynamic lines – or “rays”, as I like to call them – and the halo. The more confident I became with showing my work, the happier I felt exploring new themes. My work gives me space for introspection.

Initially I was worried about focusing on one specific medium, as I thought I would “sew myself into a corner”, but it wasn't until I honed my embroidery style that I really started to see my work evolve.

**ES:** What drew you to embroidery art?

**HA:** I have always loved sewing but it wasn't until I was in my final year of university, when I was broke and all the ideas for my final project were too expensive. I found the last of some raw canvas and some cotton thread and started sewing for my final piece. It rekindled my love for the process of embroidery. It's such a meticulous process. I can spend hours doing it – true slow art!

**ES:** Embroidery is definitely having a moment right now, with more and

more people exploring it, especially after 2020's lockdown. It's incredibly intricate, and a skill, but sometimes it gets put into this idea of “a female hobby” or “craft”. Do you find there are people minimising it as a true artistic medium?

**HA:** Don't you think it's fascinating that when women do embroidery it's considered a “craft” but when a man uses this medium it would be considered fine art? A generalisation, I know, but it is still seen as “women's work”. Going to see Anni Albers' work at the Tate Modern was inspiring and I love how she changed the mindset of the difference between craft and art. So I don't find the need to put a title to the form of work I make – it's always changing.

**ES:** I've always been drawn to embroidery as a means of expression. It's particularly interesting, in that it is often seen as a very female art form. And I've got a particular soft spot for artists who can turn the domestic arts into political expression – your work really explores the female form, but also, particularly in your portraiture, there is female individuality and strength. Would you say your work is a feminist statement?

**HA:** It's a celebration of the female form. The women I'm depicting are from photographs of myself or my friends. And, no, they may not have a “perfect body”, but what is the perfect body anyway?

I love the idea of re-creating the Vitruvian Man with the female form, depicting a strong, powerful woman celebrating the diversity of the female body. Someone was saying to me the other day how they like the curves and bellies on some of the women in my work and it reminded me of when I first watched *Betty Blue*, admiring Béatrice Dalle's little belly, her breasts, her body hair, and thinking about how much women are scrutinised and how painful that is.

**ES:** Working with nudes, but in a feminine art form with a female eye, how would you describe your relationship with the “male gaze”?

**HA:** Well, what can I say, I studied art history at school and all those nudes by all those men – my relationship with the male gaze is what I was taught. The lens is shifting now – we have our own lens on our own bodies and our own experience. It's exciting. There's still a long way to go, but the more female artists become recognised for their individual talent, the more women have a voice, the more it will be normalised. Instead of letting the male gaze make decisions we can take back the power we have over our own bodies through our work.

**ES:** You do your embroidery all by hand – what is it physically like, creating your work?

**HA:** I have always been very methodical with my process, and embroidery has allowed me to have a lot of control over my marks but also gave me the freedom to let go by experimenting with different styles and techniques. For example, I overlap the neater sewing with more fluid imagery, creating an abstracted piece. A stitch will travel from the arm across the breast to the nipple. Then, with my new work, I don't plan a design, I just start sewing and see what the end product looks like. Sometimes it fails, sometimes it's amazing! But the spontaneity is challenging. To quote Paul Klee, “A drawing is simply a line going for a walk.”

Sewing by hand is a very intimate and meditative process. It allows me to mentally release – I couldn't imagine not having this outlet in my life.

**ES:** The iconography in your work is really interesting. Some women have halos while others have an almost comic book-esque explosion behind them. Where are you finding your visual language? What does it mean in your work?

**HA:** I like the mix of cultural references, high art and pop culture. I mentioned before my interest in Fra Angelico's frescoes, and it was after spending time enjoying those works that I became obsessed with halos – the visual aspect but also the symbolism, such as perfection, unity and infinity, as well as being a visually pleasing emblem. The circle pops up throughout the history of art – think [Yayoi] Kusama or Bridget Riley, or even James Turrell, as more contemporary examples – and of course the references to the natural world, especially the sun.

I also use the “pow” explosion effect as a nod to my love of animation. I spent many hours at Forbidden Planet on London's Shaftesbury Avenue flicking through graphic novels as a kid, or watching *Studio Ghibli's Howl's Moving Castle* and *Princess Mononoke* on repeat.

**ES:** There is something intimate and tender about your work, but also it contains a lot of energy and movement. How do you balance the quiet and the loud in your work?

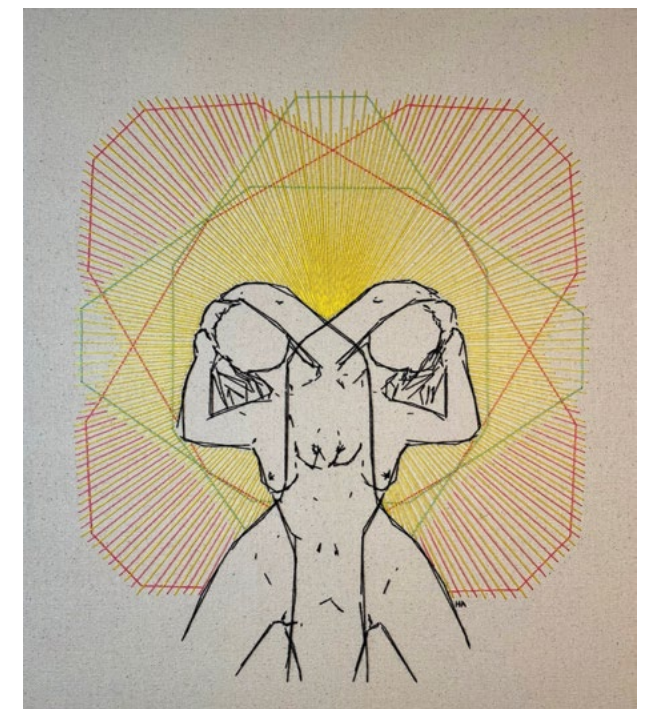
**HA:** It's important to me that the work has an intimacy. I want to capture a private moment, a kind of “dance like nobody's watching” vibe.

**ES:** What are you working on now?

**HA:** I have been working on a new series of pieces where I have started incorporating paint with my embroidery. The majority of the work from this series I have made so far focuses on nature and its entanglement with architecture. It is early days in the project, so I am still playing around with ideas and materials. But from the work I have made so far, I like how it sits alongside my nude work, because the use of colour will always be a huge part of my practice. And I am working on a larger scale, now that I have a larger studio space, which I'm really excited about.



Untitled Nude ©Holly Allan, 2021



Capella ©Holly Allan, 2021

## “I want to capture a private moment, a kind of ‘dance like nobody's watching’ vibe.”