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LOCAL STORIES MAY 26, 2022

Daily Inspiration: Meet Susan Hensel



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Today we'd like to introduce you to Susan Hensel.

Hi Susan, can you start by introducing yourself? We'd love to learn more about how you got to where you are today?

It seems that I have been an artist forever, ever since I started coloring on walls in Ithaca, NY in the 1950s. I was exhibiting art by the age of 14.

Art is hard-wired into who I am and how I live my life. No other way of life feels possible or satisfying to me.

The way of the artist is one of constant learning and discovery. It is propelled by the "I wonder" questions and the sudden experiences of wonder! Like athletes, we experience endorphin highs when our skills and creativity sync. Those highs do not happen every time we touch materials. It takes constant practice, consistent training to achieve.

I suppose one could think of my life as a life of following wonder. As a child, I was often lost in wonder as the family moved onward in the museums and the hikes and would need to double back to find me staring at a painting or following the trail of an ant or tying together sticks with blades of grass. My family got to double back to find me soaking up wonder whenever we traveled, all over the world.

That wonder eventually propelled me to college at the University of Michigan, where I received a Bachelor of Fine Arts and a top flight academic education and finally, many years later to Minnesota. I moved to Minneapolis when my child was nearly finished with college, needing to live in a larger community where the arts were valued as a key

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when I returned to the studio full-time. I now run the gallery on artsy.net, representing a small stable of midwest artists, exposing them to the broader global market.

I'm sure you wouldn't say it's been obstacle free, but so far would you say the journey has been a fairly smooth road?

Life is hard. That is not a cliché. But it is also full of joy.

I am a woman born in the 1950s and drawn to a career where women were not expected to prosper. I had professors who refused to teach women and my art history books had no women nor any artists of color. I have experienced all the usual misogyny, interruptions, health crises and personal tragedies of a long life. But my creativity has never been seriously hampered by these experiences. It has been a healing support, a balm, a system for understanding/withstanding the inexplicable and it has given me the strength to endure.

I continue to seek wonder and find joy in sharing what I do.

Thanks – so what else should our readers know about your work and what you're currently focused on?

I was trained primarily in the material sciences of sculpture. I make sculptural textile work, transforming personal experience, private and public spaces, with experiences of beauty, through the alchemy of color, scale, lighting and placement. I combine mixed-media practices with fabric and embroidery across digital and manual platforms.

“Why?” you might ask. Let me tell you the story.

Some years ago I discovered a “blue” unlike any blue I had ever seen before. I had never considered myself a colorist or a color hoarder... but I had to possess that blue! That “ultra” ultramarine blue was being stitched out on a computer-aided embroidery machine at the Minnesota State Fair. It took several years of grant writing and loans to buy the equipment, get the training, and put in the hours of experiment, discovery, failure, and success to get to where I am today: at play in the fields of color perception!

I design images on the computer using specialized software. It is a form of drawing in stitches that combines aspects of both Adobe Photoshop and Adobe Illustrator. I transfer the design to the embroidery machine, assign the colors and stitch. The stitch-out creates a “module.” From the “module(s)” I proceed to create the final piece, using



This work combines my love of the physics of light with technology and materials to create uplifting experiences for people. My goal is to create a compelling viewer experience: one of puzzling beauty, playfulness and sometimes awe. The work invites people to slow down, engage in a place of wonder, enter a more contemplative state, giving themselves time to fall in love with this world and each other again.

I work in this field because of the revolutionary (mind-blowing) color possibilities. Each thread provides multiple tones of a single color because of the unique triangular structure of the thread. When the thread-color choices are made in relation to other threads and the background color of the fabric, colorwork unlike anything I have ever worked with is available.

Using a minimal number of colors and basic techniques I create sparkling, changeable chromas. I exploit the physics of light as it interacts with the structure of the triangular embroidery thread. The light scatters in multiple directions off the sides of the triangular thread, creating different tones and saturations of the base color. I also exploit the science of optics, relying, like the French painter Seurat, on our brain's ability to optically mix spots of color in close physical proximity with one another. Further relying on the principles of color as taught by Joseph Albers and Johannes Itten et al, I exploit the vibratory effects of complementary colors and close saturation split complements. All of this creates a real-time, changeable optical environment activated by the viewer's movement from side to side as they view the artwork.

Historically, flatness is a key characteristic of most embroidery. My work breaks ground by engaging with sculptural space. I use thread and fiber techniques to shift light and perception through structures in the real world. Relying on my extensive knowledge of materials, I create small to large-scale hard-edge sculptures from soft fabrics that paradoxically keep their crisp form with minimal armatures.

Are there any books, apps, podcasts or blogs that help you do your best?

I rely on [artnet.com](https://www.artnet.com) and [Hyperallergic.com](https://www.hyperallergic.com) for the most in-depth and up-to-date art market news. It is important to keep on learning. I have studied art market economics with Christie's Auction House education department. I have studied with Praxis Center for Aesthetic Studies. I



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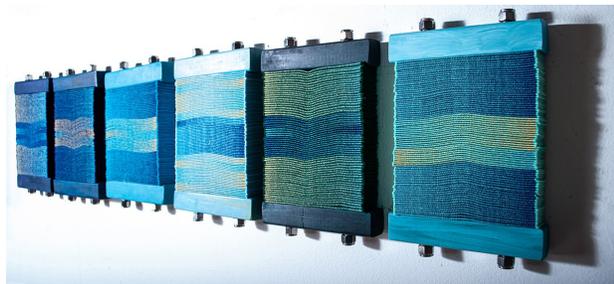
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invisible Embrace, by JOHN O DONOHUE is my favorite book to sink into, right up there with the mystics Rumi, Hafiz, Meister Eckhart and Hildegard of Bingen, who are also never far from me.

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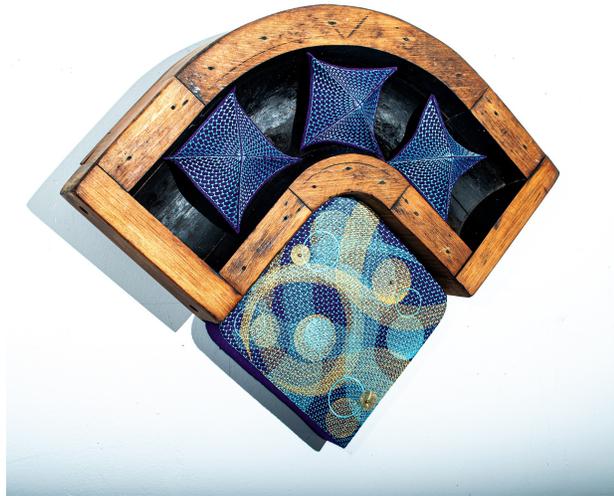


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