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FRAGILITY AND STRENGTH IN TIMES OF WAR: A SERIES OF EMBROIDERED
WATERCOLORS

by

Alisha B. Whitman

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Interdisciplinary Media Arts
at
Lindenwood University

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FRAGILITY AND STRENGTH IN TIMES OF WAR: A SERIES OF EMBROIDERED
WATERCOLORS

A Project Report Submitted to the Faculty of the College of Arts and Humanities
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Fine Arts
at
Lindenwood University

By

Alisha B Whitman

Saint Charles, Missouri

March 2025

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: FRAGILITY AND STRENGTH IN TIMES OF WAR: A SERIES OF EMBROIDERED WATERCOLORS

Alisha B Whitman, Masters of Fine Arts/Interdisciplinary Media Arts, 2025

Thesis Directed by: Dr Brandelyn Andres, Professor of Art History, Yavapai College

This final project report follows the production of a series of embroidered watercolors that explore how war disrupts and can destroy the values which people manage to somehow both hold dear and take for granted. These values, such as peace and freedom, are fragile, and yet they can provide great strength in dark times. This dichotomy is explored through this body of work using the materials of painted paper and thread as symbols of both fragility and strength. Choosing to work with materials and methods historically seen as feminine work add additional meaning to that symbolism. Additionally, Jewish iconography and teachings from the artist's heritage are used as she reflects in particular about Russia's invasion of Ukraine, where her family emigrated from, and the conflict in Israel which erupted on October 7, 2023. While the project centers on highly charged conflicts, it is less about politics than it is about people; it is about our shared humanity. Combining traditional techniques with contemporary style, the artist explores what is lost during wartimes and what we cannot afford to lose, such as hope, connection, and the ability to value all human life. While doing so, the artist uses the repeated imagery of trees to represent people, tradition, and resilience while uncovering the importance of roots and connection. As she contemplates dark and discouraging times, the artist encourages viewers to join her in slowing down and thinking critically about how individuals can promote peace, overcome differences, have the courage to stand up for others, protect children, and continue to hope for a better future.

Keywords: embroidered watercolor, art about war, Jewish symbolism, symbolic art, tree paintings

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Introduction/ Background Information

Peace is fragile. Those who have lived their whole lives in countries unthreatened by war on their soil cannot fully understand this, but it should not be taken for granted. World geo-political events of the last couple of years have made this clear. My father, working in international law, was on the phone with colleagues in Kiev, Ukraine one day, and the next could not get a hold of them because they had fled with their families when the Russian army advanced with alarming speed. One day life seemed normal, and the next that illusion was shattered. On October 6, 2023, I was celebrating the last night of Sukkot with my family. Unprompted, my elderly grandmother expressed her gratitude for the state of Israel. She had never lived there but gave thanks that “there would always be one place Jews would be welcome and safe.” The next morning, we awoke to the devastating news of the October 7th attack by Hamas. The juxtaposition of her comment with the tragedy of what happened continues to haunt me.

My artwork has always been about sharing joy and beauty, but in response to these events I felt a need to create something different. My great-grandparents fled anti-Semitic Russian pogroms in Ukraine, and my family, like all Jews, cares deeply about Israel; thus, despite never having stepped foot in either country, I felt personally connected to these wars. I decided to lean into that and better connect with my roots by creating a series of artworks responding to the conflicts that drew on Jewish symbolism and embroidery techniques. Having been a professional watercolor artist for the last 18 years, using my medium was an obvious choice, but I chose to do something new by adding embroidery to the paintings. I am comfortable using the paint, but the embroidered element pushes me into a state of discomfort fitting the topic. All the materials I am using – the paper, the watercolor paints, the thread – are fragile, and over time become brittle, fade, or deteriorate altogether. Paper fibers and threads are small, individually weak, and prone to

unravel; they can snag, tear, or rip unintentionally or intentionally, acts which can reflect both physical and emotional pain. Yet, this same thread is used to bind and protect. In fact, when woven or stitched together, the strength of the thread grows. Additionally, while they last, watercolor paintings capture, express, beautify, and preserve, whereas embroidery conceals, binds, embellishes, protects, repairs, and crosses boundaries.¹ I feel like thread is the perfect medium to use to enhance my paintings about the conflict in Israel. War always reminds us how fragile peace, family, home, and life itself are; everything can be taken away in the blink of an eye. Forcing us to face our own mortality also reminds us to hold onto, protect, and strengthen that which is most precious.

Louise Bourgeois wrote, “I have always had a fascination with the needle, the magic power of the needle. The needle is used to repair damage. It’s a claim to forgiveness. It is never aggressive, it’s not a pin.”² I have always been more drawn to brushes and paints but am increasingly pulled by all that a needle and thread can say. The complicated history of needlework being associated with women and femininity plays off Bourgeois’ statement. Fair or not, it has often been left to women to nurture and “repair damage.” Kathe Kallowitz’s 1922-1923 lithograph, *The Mothers*, comes to mind. These unnamed mothers cling together in grief, protecting the young children and holding each other up – powerless yet stronger together. I see the women in my family praying over the Shabbat candles and inviting my daughters to join them. I think of the hope desperately held by the family members waiting for the hostages to return home – hope that can be crushed in a second but for now keeps them strong. My project, “Fragility and Strength in Times

¹ Denise Jones, “Articulating the Threatened Suffragette Body: Suffragette Embroidered Cloths Worked in Holloway Prison,” *Women’s History Review* 29, no. 6 (2020): 4.

² J. Gorovoy and P. Tabatabai, *Louise Bourgeois Blue Days and Pink Days*, exhibition catalogue, (Fondazione Prada: Milan, 1997).

of War: A Series of Embroidered Watercolors,” contemplates this dichotomy. While it centers on highly charged conflicts, it is less about politics than it is about people; about our shared humanity. With a paintbrush and needle I explore what is lost during wartimes and what we cannot afford to lose, while encouraging reflection, understanding, and critical thinking from my viewers.

Literature Review

Embroidery has long been dismissed and overlooked by the fine art community as “craft” instead of “art.” Finding the line that differentiates art from craft, however, and the definition of craft itself is tricky and transitory. In her seminal book, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, Rozsika Parker suggests that it is not what art is made with but who is making it that has traditionally differentiated art from craft. She explains the following:

The art/craft hierarchy suggests that art made with thread and art made with paint are intrinsically unequal: that the former is artistically less significant. But the real differences between the two are in terms of *where* they are made and *who* makes them ... embroidery and crafts associated with ‘the second sex’ or the working class are accorded lesser artistic value.³

Regardless of the reasons, embroidery falls into a bigger conversation about what is art and what is craft. On one side there are “enthusiasts who argue for craft as a nonhierarchical, democratic activity, open to all and necessary in a world supersaturated with impersonal consumables,” while the other side takes a far different approach: “craft is a pejorative term, too often associated with kitsch, macrame, stoneware pots, and DIY (do-it-yourselfers).”⁴ Beginning in the early twentieth century, as conceptual issues came to dominate the way we think about art, craft became eligible for this kind of thinking-about-making approach. To be art, especially what would be considered fine art or high art, it needs to be more than decoration; it is “an idea that

³ Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc., 2010), 5.

⁴ Edward S. Cooke, “Modern Craft and the American Experience,” *American Art* 21, no. 1 (2007): 2.

transcends discipline [and] pertains with equal relevance in pottery and architecture.”⁵ According to Howard Becker in *Art Worlds*, art contributes something which is unique and expressive beyond what is seen in craft.⁶ He claims that craft is more beholden to the client and is judged on function, skill, and beauty while art is intended to exist outside of commercial demands (although living in the real world does not always allow that philosophical high ground) and is judged more on innovation and originality.⁷ Vlad Glaveanu adds that art and craft differ “in terms of the sources they draw from (traditional forms vs. oftentimes a contestation of these forms), their audiences (the general public vs. a cultivated public), and their uses (related to the practical aspects of life vs. aesthetic enjoyment).”⁸

Due to the sources or traditions they draw from, “craft works on a sliding scale between what the mid-century English theorist David Pye called ‘workmanship of certainty’ and ‘workmanship of risk.’”⁹ According to Wendy Ross and Glaveanu, craft is seen as lesser because there is less risk and less creativity. They write, “the craft-art dichotomy is reinforced by the misplaced notion that craft processes are routine while artistic processes are idiosyncratic.”¹⁰ Likewise, Keith Negus and Michael J. Pickering write about how the type of tradition or custom which is passed down through craft is seen as “the very opposite of creativity.”¹¹ Craft has been

⁵ Maria Elena Buszek, “Labor is My Medium: Some Perspective(s) on Contemporary Craft,” *Archives of American Art Journal* 50, no. ¾ (2011): 69.

⁶ Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds* (University of California Press, 2008), 272.

⁷ Becker, *Art Worlds*, 275-276.

⁸ Vlad Glaveanu, “Creativity and Folk Art: A Study of Creative Action in Traditional Craft,” *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts* 7, no. 2 (May 2013): 141.

⁹ T’ai Smith, “The Problem with Craft,” *Art Journal* 75, no. 1 (2016): 80.

¹⁰ Wendy Ross and Vlad Glaveanu, “The Constraints of Habit: Craft, Repetition, and Creativity,” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* (2023): 1-2, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-023-09902-5>.

¹¹ Keith Negus and Michael J. Pickering, *Creativity, Communication and Cultural Value* (Sage, 2004).

seen to exhibit, at best, little-c creativity, while art has been connected with big-C kinds of expression.¹² However, scholars¹³ have more recently come to see this distinction as questionable and not useful, even when it expands to include mini-C and pro-C creativity. That is because, as Mark Runco explains, there is no evidence that any difference exists in the type of creativity used. The only differences reside in things that exist outside of the individual's creativity, such as reputation, recognition, opportunity, and fame.¹⁴ Glaveanu's model of habitual creativity, on the other hand, which is influenced by Baldwin, Dewey, and Bourdieu, asserts that all creative work, whether it be craft or art, is built off of and open to more possibilities because of habit and repetition; and, for all their focus on innovation, artists repeat things like brushstrokes or techniques as much as a craftsman does. And when the creator is confident in their work because of the habits they have built, the execution requires them to put less thought and effort into the techniques and thus frees them to be more creative.¹⁵

Another important factor to consider in regards to embroidery is its history of being viewed as "women's work." It is so closely tied, in fact, that Rozsika Parker stated, "to know the history of embroidery is to know the history of women."¹⁶ Facing an uphill battle to be taken seriously, and with the art world's general prejudice against "craft," female artists in the early nineteenth century saw aligning themselves with anything, like embroidery, which was designated

¹² Vlad Glaveanu, "Creativity and Folk Art," 141.

¹³ Examples are Mark A. Runco, Garrett J. Jaeger, Peter Merrotsy, Jonathan Plucker, Ronald A. Beghetto, and Gayle Dow.

¹⁴ Mark A. Runco, "'Big C, Little c' Creativity as a False Dichotomy: Reality Is Not Categorical," *Creativity Research Journal* 26, no. 1 (January 2014): 131–32, doi:10.1080/10400419.2014.873676.

¹⁵ Vlad Glaveanu, "Habitual Creativity: Revising Habit, Reconceptualizing Creativity," *Review of General Psychology* 16, no. 1 (2012): 78-92.

¹⁶ Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, ix.

as a “woman’s art” to be a “dangerous association.”¹⁷ Artists such as Miriam Schapiro, Faith Ringgold, Louise Bourgeois, and Judy Chicago changed this forever when they “recognized that their own reticence to be associated with a gendered woman’s craft – knitting and sewing and others – was a prejudice handed down by men and dishonored their own female heritage.”¹⁸ They committed themselves to elevating women’s craft traditions and values as a way to elevate women themselves. Miriam Shapiro came up with the term *femmage* to describe artwork that combines traditional women’s techniques using fabrics and paper; and by using these methods generally seen as existing outside the art world, “women sought to expand the definition of fine art and include a wider variety of artistic perspectives.”¹⁹ Judy Chicago helped establish the first feminist art program at California State University and incorporated embroidery and needlepoint into her iconic 1979 “Dinner Party” a few years later. With artists such as those pioneers, “textile art came of age and has remained a central element of contemporary art, made by men as well as women.”²⁰ Contemporary fiber artists such as Nneka Jones continue Chicago’s legacy by taking up the role of artist-activist as her hand-stitched works are “commenting on social and environmental injustice and speaking up for the protection and celebration of girls and women of colour.”²¹ Peruvian artist Ana Teresa Barboza stitches and weaves natural fibers to physically

¹⁷ Tanya Harrod, “Craft Matters: While the Greater Prominence of Craft is to Be Welcomed, the Art World’s Desire to Fold the 20th Century’s Most Important Makers into the History of Modern Art Often Ignores What Was Truly Innovative About Their Work,” *Apollo* 197, no. 717 (2023): 2.

¹⁸ Clare Hunter, *Threads of Life: A History of the World Through the Eye of a Needle* (Abrams Press, 2020), 284.

¹⁹ Sunanda Rani et al., “Embroidery and Textiles: A Novel Perspective on Women Artists’ Art Practice,” *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 13, no. 4 (2021): 5.

²⁰ Rani et al., “Embroidery and Textiles,” 292.

²¹ Anna Black, “Nneka Jones: Stitching Social Justice,” *Textile Artist*, accessed on February 28, 2025, <https://www.textileartist.org/nneka-jones-stitching-social-justice>.

and metaphorically add dimension and layers to her images, relating (primarily women's) manual, artisanal work to natural growth processes and in doing so encourages discussion about climate change and our connection to the land.²² Portuguese artist Vanessa Barragão uses a variety of textile techniques with recycled yarns as a vehicle to raise awareness of climate change while spreading hope.²³ Michelle Kingdom draws with thread to explore dichotomies such as “truth and illusion, loss and expectation, belonging and alienation.”²⁴ There are many others today²⁵ continuing to explore how to use textile art to provoke conversation about important and relevant topics.

Fiber art has, in fact, often been used, particularly in America, as a form of activism or as a way to affirm identities for a variety of causes. Suffragettes of the early 1900s embroidered banners, handicrafts, and art textiles to promote their cause.²⁶ At least four embroidered works were even completed inside Holloway Prison between 1911 and 1912 by suffragettes who had been arrested for their activism. These works were autobiographical records created at great risk which served as covert acts of defiance and resilience while their autonomy was extremely limited.²⁷ In the 1960s, African American women living in Boykin, Alabama, or Gee's Bend,

²² Teresa Matos Pereira, “The Embroidered Skin, Body and tangible time in Ana Teresa Barboza's work,” *Studio 9*, no. 22 (April-June 2018): 110-112.

²³ “About Vanessa Barragão,” *Vanessa Baragao*, accessed February 28, 2025, <https://vanessabarragao.com/about>.

²⁴ Victoria Sambursky, “Embroidery Artist Michelle Kingdom Writes Stories With Thread,” *Rogue Habits*, accessed February 28, 2025, <https://roguehabits.com/embroidery-artist-michelle-kingdom-writes-with-thread>.

²⁵ Such as Janaina Mello Landini, Victoria Villasana, Magdalena Abakanowicz, El Anatsui, Sophia Narrett, Diedrick Brackens, Annette Messenger.

²⁶ Miranda Garrett and Zoe Thomas, *Suffrage and the Arts: Visual Culture, Politics and Enterprise* (Bloomsburg Publishing, 2018).

²⁷ Denise Jones, “Articulating the Threatened Suffragette Body: Suffragette Embroidered Cloths Worked in Holloway Prison, 1911–1912,” *Women's History Review* 29, no. 6 (November 2020): 970–99, doi:10.1080/09612025.2020.1745403.

kept the quilting traditions of their foremothers alive and founded the Freedom Quilting Bee. While they never meant them to be such, their quilts are now recognized as important works of modern American art.²⁸ More recently, in 2017, the exhibition “Entangled: Threads and Making” at Turner Contemporary in England showed how the needle and thread have been tools of rebellion and symbols of female unity.²⁹ While Hinda Mandell was working on editing the anthology *Crafting Dissent: Handicraft as Protest from the American Revolution to the Pussyhats* in 2018, she helped organize the creation of over 2,000 knitted, crocheted, and painted Stars of David to be hung throughout Pittsburgh in response to the fatal attack at the Tree of Life synagogue.³⁰ The exhibition, “Material Power,” at Kettle’s Yard, Cambridge in 2023 showed how clothing has served as a form of political protest for Palestinian women.³¹ The 2024 exhibition at the Barbican Art Gallery in London, “Unravel: The Power and Politics of Textiles,” revealed how textiles ask “charged questions about power” relating to gender and sexuality, labor and class, histories of oppression, trade, ecology, and ancestral knowledge.³² These are just a few examples of fiber arts’ recent forays into the fine art world and there will hopefully be many more.

Embroidery also has a long tradition with many religious faiths and practices, and I chose to draw on my family heritage and to use, as much as possible, Jewish embroidery and symbols

²⁸ Michael J. Prokopow, “Material Truths: The Quilts of Gee’s Bend at the Whitney Museum of Art: An Exhibition Review,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 38, no. 1 (March 1, 2003): 57–66, doi:10.1086/382162.

²⁹ Sunandi Rani, “Embroidery and Textiles,” 6.

³⁰ Toby Tabachnick, “Jewish Hearts Spread Message of Love Throughout City,” *Pittsburgh Jewish Chronicle* (Pennsylvania), November 29, 2018.

³¹ Alice Fisher, “Liberty, Equality ... Embroidery: the Political Power of Textile Art; A Series of Exhibitions This Summer and Autumn Highlight the Protest Woven into Stitchwork,” *The Observer* (July 2023): 2.

³² Deborah Nash, “Unravel: The Power and Politics of Textiles in Art,” *Selvedge* no. 118 (December 2023): 91.

to convey meaning in my works. Academic literature is scarce on this topic but, in Jewish tradition, the *hiddur mitzvah* is “the beautification or enhancement of a commandment,” which is seen in decoration of a ritual object such as a *chuppah*.³³ Also, as embroidery “during the twentieth century, has become increasingly categorised as the ‘art of personal life,’”³⁴ it is a perfect medium for autobiographical work. It is also an ideal medium, with the repetition of thousands of stitches involved in each piece, to parallel the repetition found in the Torah and throughout Jewish life and practice.³⁵ Embroidery artist Rachel Braun points out this parallel and connects it to a quote by Gertrude Stein: “I first really realized the inevitable repetition in human expression that was not repetition but insistence.”³⁶ Jewish embroidery can be seen as an insistence: an insistence on tradition and belief, an insistence on remembering, an insistence that Jewish voices be heard, an insistence on celebrating resilience.³⁷

It is through a study of Judaic textiles that we better understand that insistence—a study that would be incomplete without looking through the lens of material culture theory. Material object and craft theorist Glenn Adamson explains that “material object study helps us to create a more complex picture of history,” and “what a culture takes for granted, or will not allow itself

³³ Jodi Eichler-Levine, *Painted Pomegranates and Needlepoint Rabbis: How Jews Craft Resilience and Create Community*, (The University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 6.

³⁴ Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, xv.

³⁵ An example of this kind of repetition plays out every Shabbat as candles are lit and the same prayers are offered or every Passover as the same history is recounted. The words of blessings and the tunes to which prayers are sung are learned not with sheet music but by singing them again and again and again. For thousands of years Jews have been reading the same words from the Torah and observing the same holidays in the same ways. Tradition has held them together through every kind of persecution and dispersion.

³⁶ Rachel Braun, *Embroidery and Sacred Text: New Designs in Judaic Needlework* (Argamon Press, 2017), 9-11.

³⁷ Braun, *Embroidery and Sacred Text*, 9-11.

to speak aloud, might be found precisely in those areas that are less self-conscious.”³⁸ Leora Auslander wrote, “Objects ... act and have effects on the world ... They express feelings beyond the written word.” She continues, “Human beings need objects to effectively remember and forget; and we need objects to cope with absence, with loss and with death.”³⁹ While many forms of art are used to express and address these issues, embroidered works might more directly connect in these ways as they are more likely to be appreciated up-close, instead of from a distance. Embroidered pieces are interacted with; they are created to be used as ritual or ceremonial objects, or passed on as gifts, heirlooms, or memory carriers. They are more often displayed on the walls of a home than in a gallery. They are worn, handled, beloved. “Objects are not just objects; they are objects that have touched other hands, carrying with them the essence of another living being,” and when made with the intention of being given to another, they are “love made tangible.”⁴⁰

Along those lines is the idea that “to create objects is to engage in a quest for continuity.”⁴¹ That is particularly poignant for Jews who have so long struggled to survive. Many American Jews, like my family, come from Ashkanazi ancestors who were driven from their homes, immigrating around the turn of the twentieth century. As terribly poor refugees, they brought little with them in the way of heirlooms. Barely a generation later, countless more lives and heirlooms were tragically destroyed in the Holocaust. A founder of the Pomegranate Guild of Judaic Needlework’s West Los Angeles Chapter explained, “a lot of Jews and their pieces

³⁸ Denise Jones, “Articulating the Threatened Suffragette Body: Suffragette Embroidered Cloths Worked in Holloway Prison, 1911-1912,” *Women’s History Review* 29, no. 6 (2020): 976.

³⁹ Lou Taylor, “Beyond Words: An Embroidery in Memory of Anna Binderowska, Married 1864,” *Textile* 11, no. 3 (2013): 302.

⁴⁰ Eicher-Levine, *Painted Pomegranates*, 90.

⁴¹ Eicher-Levine, *Painted Pomegranates*, 153.

were burned out during the Holocaust. It was time for us to make more pieces, the contemporary ones.”⁴² With the alarming modern acceptance and spread of antisemitism, these purposes and needs feel particularly relevant. Creation is a powerful way to respond to such a legacy of trauma and to face current attacks. Mere survival is a victory; creating is something more. It is overcoming. It is insistence.

There is also a long history of artists creating artwork in response to war. Maya Lin’s Vietnam Memorial in Washington D.C. (1982) or The Arc de Triomphe (1836) in Paris, France are well-known examples of works created to memorialize and honor heroes and those who have fallen during battle. Propaganda posters, such as those of Rosie the Riveter were created to stir up national pride, duty, and loyalty as were grand paintings such as Jacques-Louis David’s *Oath of the Horatii* (1784-1785). Others, like Picasso’s sweeping painting *Guernica*⁴³ (1937) or *The Third of May* (1808) by Francisco Goya, protested and highlighted the horrors of war instead of glorifying it as had so often been done in the past. Charles Bell’s anatomically correct paintings of wounded soldiers (he was also a doctor) sought to educate and instruct surgeons on operative techniques while exposing the real-life results of battle.⁴⁴ Yet others, such as Roger Shimomura’s *Shadow of the Enemy* (2006), seek to highlight our common humanity while others, such as Lorenzo Quinn’s *Building Bridges* (2019), attempt to mend relations and stop endless cycles of hatred and violence. Some of these works, and others such as Franz Marc’s *Fate of the Animals*

⁴² Eicher-Levine, *Painted Pomegranates*, 153.

⁴³ Michael Young et al., “Notes on Picasso’s *Guernica* in Context,” *European Legacy* 29, no. 1 (2024): 37–50.

⁴⁴ Andrew Uffindell, “A Surgical Artist at War: The Paintings and Sketches of Sir Charles Bell, 1809-1815,” *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* 84, no. 338 (2006): 199–200.

(1913) and Morris Kestelman's *Why Have You Forsaken Me?* (1943) are also examples of art created as the artist faced and processed the effects of war.

It has been recognized in various fields, from education, to psychotherapy, to art history, that creating art can help people confront the trauma they have experienced. In a study of Holocaust survivor artists published by Shira Diamond, Natti Ronel, and Amit Shrirra titled "From a World of Threat to a World at Which to Wonder: The Self-Transcendent Emotions Through the Creative Experience of Holocaust Survivor Artists," they explain that creating art helps people recontextualize painful memories. "Expressions through art ... may provide a path where none existed previously, on the one hand inducing access to nonverbal memories and on the other hand, transferring these into more verbally accessible visual images."⁴⁵ Furthermore, they surmised that creating art allowed victims to step back and the act "enabled terror and anxiety to make way for something else, to move outward beyond the boundaries of the personal experience, uniting with the world and with others."⁴⁶ In Nurit Cohen-Evron's article about five case studies of art education in Israel (where students are regularly faced with violence and conflict), after explaining that responding to war by creating was a "natural means for the expression of feelings," and a way to regain control, he postulated that "working with images was found to be an extremely helpful medium for people to process and make sense of their experience. This may be the only way to speak about or find a voice for the tragedies."⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Shira Diamond et al., "From a World of Threat to a World of Which to Wonder: Self-Transcendent Emotions Through the Creative Experience of Holocaust Survivor Artists," *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy* 12, no. 6 (Sep 2020): 610.

⁴⁶ Diamond et al., "From a World of Threat," 612.

⁴⁷ Nurit Cohen-Evron, "Students Living Within Violent Conflict: Should Art Educators 'Play it Safe' or Face 'Difficult Knowledge,'" *Studies in Art Education* 46, no. 4 (Summer 2005): 311.

Interestingly, in the article “Teaching about War and Political Art in the New Millennium,” Simone Alter-Muri asserted that “Art can be a connection to a former identity and a bridge to the future.”⁴⁸ Using examples of artwork created by psychiatric patients in insane asylums in the 1890s, citizens of New York City in the wake of 9-11, displaced Spanish children during the Spanish Civil War, and children and educators in the Jewish ghettos and concentration camps, Alter-Muri established definitively that the need to create is not lost during desperate times.⁴⁹ This point is confirmed by Janine di Giovanni’s article “The Art of War” about the Iraqi pavilion artists who went to great lengths to travel to show their art at the Venice Biennale art fair. Tamara Chalabi, the organizer of the group, explained, “There is not much space for art or intellectual life when people fear going out, because getting caught in traffic might mean being blown up by a car bomb,” and yet, despite this, “the drive to express yourself during times of war is huge.”⁵⁰ My work responds to this drive. I see it as insistence.

⁴⁸ Simone Alter-Muri, “Teaching About War and Political Art in the New Millennium,” *Art Education* 57, no. 1 (Jan 2004): 17.

⁴⁹ Alter-Muri, “Teaching About War,” 16-17.

⁵⁰ Janine Di Giovanni, “The Art of War,” *Newsweek Global* 162, no. 15 (April 2014): 106.

Research Methodology

I have created my series using a qualitative methodology to reflect on the war in Ukraine, the October 7 attack by Hamas on Israeli citizens, and Israel’s military response in Gaza. After choosing my subject matter and the materials I would use, along with their symbolic meaning, I researched why art is created about war. While there are many reasons, as outlined previously, my project, “Fragility and Strength in Times of War: A Series of Embroidered Watercolors,” mostly focuses on using visual art as an invaluable medium to help process the complexity of war for both myself and my viewers. I explored questions such as, how does war affect us? Why does this keep happening and why does the world care more about politics than the people impacted? How are some of the values which are threatened by war both fragile and strong? How are misunderstandings of these current conflicts creating more division? How can we learn from these tragedies and do better? I agree with art historian, sociologist, and one-time Marxist Arnold Hauser when he said “art gives us an interpretation of life which enables us to cope more successfully with the chaotic state of things and to wring from life a better, that is, a more convincing and more reliable, meaning.”⁵¹ Jodi Eichler-Levine coined the term “generative resilience” to refer to creating that helps makers cope with the world.⁵² This series became my exercise in “generative resilience,” with the additional hope that my pieces would encourage thought and discussion about these important issues.

To be prepared to do this with my embroidered watercolors, I researched the place of embroidery within the modern art world and then completed a paper on contemporary artists who embroider on paper. This research made me more aware that I benefit from feminist theory and

⁵¹ Vernon Hyde Minor, “The New Art History and Visual Culture,” *Art History’s History*, 156.

⁵² Eicher-Levine, “*Painted Pomegranates*,” 13.

feminist artists despite the fact that when I began this process, I did not consider the work that I was creating to be feminist in nature. Like many fiber artists before me, I was motivated to create my series based on a feeling of responsibility or moral obligation to say something. While it has always been an issue, since October 7th there has been a drastic rise in the circulation of misleading and blatantly incorrect information about Israel. Social media echo chambers, so-called “thought leaders,” and moral relativism has led to an alarming disregard for facts and a misunderstanding of history. Somehow in a society that increasingly claims to value tolerance and being an ally of the oppressed, antisemitism has reached shocking levels of public acceptance. My art has never before been politically or socially minded but I felt a need to use my voice for good. In considering how best to do so, I was acutely aware of the divisiveness of the political arena, which has expanded into most areas of life. Listening to other views is not actually valued when people are proudly “unfriending” anyone who voted differently than they did. This is in part why I chose to take an iconographic approach. Using symbols requires viewers to slow down, consider tradition, search for meaning and explore interpretations. I do not want to exclude people from the conversation by offending them at the door, nor do I wish to shy away from difficult but necessary conversations. I have sought to encourage people to think critically for themselves, learn, and have a conversation. I studied Jewish embroidery and art, filling a sketchbook with designs, images, symbols, and meanings. As I did so, I ventured into a cultural anthropology methodology focusing on Jewish culture and then more broadly on human values. I decided that I wanted each piece in my series to focus on things or ideas that we see as something people have a right to and which is threatened or taken away by war; things that we who have never lived in a war zone think are sufficiently strong, but are really so fragile.

Production and Analysis

Figure 1. Alisha B. Whitman, *Peace: Under the Vine and Fig Tree*, mixed media, 37" x 28", 2024.

Many of us take peace for granted, but the abrupt eruption of war reminds us that no matter where we live, peace really is fragile and must be protected. On February 24, 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. On October 7, 2023, Hamas attacked Israel, and Israel responded. Despite the world's calls for peace, both areas remain locked in conflict.

The top section of my piece as seen in Figure 1 is an unfinished painting of an olive branch on rough paper, which has been torn, burned, bent, and clumsily stitched back together, representing unsuccessful peace attempts of the past. They have failed because one or both parties were insincere, unrealistic, greedy, hateful, dishonest, or uninterested in peace, among other reasons. Outside influences and woefully uninformed people in and out of power around the world demand peace without understanding how complicated the situations truly are, only making matters worse. For example, calls for a ceasefire from Israel are rarely accompanied by a demand for the release of the hostages. And regardless, a ceasefire is not peace, but merely a pause when one's neighbor is intent on your oppression, or worse, your extermination.

The middle section is a representation of ideal peace, drawing from Micah 4:3-4 which reads, "...nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree; and none shall make them afraid..."⁵³ This Messianic ideal is that when weapons are one day put down in earnest, people will be able to relax enough to sit down and enjoy the fruit of their vine and the shade of their tree. The fig tree is an interesting choice due to its importance around the world. It is featured in every major religion and "in mythologies in the Amazon and in Africa, across the Mediterranean and the Middle East, and from the foothills of the Himalayas to the islands of the South

⁵³ Micah 4:3-4 KJV

Pacific.”⁵⁴ Throughout the world figs feed around 1,274 mammals and birds, “far more than any other type of fruit.”⁵⁵ In Judaism the fig tree is seen as a symbol of peace and prosperity and, as a native plant, it is connected with the Jewish people’s identity and history. Thus the fig tree is a fitting choice to use specifically and generally, as peace is needed by and benefits all people.

I used hand-dyed silk threads to stitch the vine, with glass beaded grapes to emphasize that true, lasting peace will take our very best efforts. On the other hand, I used affordable cotton thread hanging down as the shade that will be enjoyed by and will benefit everyone. These threads which are fragile, yet stronger together, hold up and offer a real olive branch, the nearly universal symbol of peace.

With this artwork, I encourage viewers to think about what real peace looks like, to put themselves in the shoes of those who are in impossible situations and recognize the beauty and value of peace as well as how quickly it can be lost. Additionally, stepping back from the world stage to a more personal circle, I encourage viewers to ask themselves, are you promoting and seeking peace or destroying it? And what is the cost of peace?

⁵⁴ Mike Shanahan, *Gods, Wasps and Stranglers: The Secret History and Redemptive Future of Fig Trees* (Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2016), 9.

⁵⁵ Shanahan, *Gods, Wasps*, 7-8.



Figure 2. Alisha B. Whitman, *Courage: Friends, Allies, and Good People*, embroidered watercolor, 30" x 27", 2024.

In Israel there is a dedicated place called the Avenue of the Righteous Among the Nations at Yad Vashem. It is a place which honors the heroes who put themselves at risk to save the lives of at least one Jew during WWII. In the early years of the program, a tree was planted for each hero, though because of space constraints, they are now honored with a plaque.⁵⁶

Inspired by this notion, I painted an olive tree to represent those willing to stand up for others in need. It is surrounded by billowing mists of darkness, portending trouble. I chose an olive tree both because it is the kind of tree that was often planted at Yad Vashem, but also because they are incredibly hardy, drought tolerant, and can grow in rocky or poor soil. In other words, olive trees, like the memorialized heroes, can withstand difficult or threatening circumstances. Not everyone has that kind of courage or integrity. There are pencil drawings of trees on either side of the main painted tree, representing those who fade away when it becomes tough or unpopular to do what is right.

The stitched white lines forming triangles pointing upwards represent our imperfect attempts to help and lift others, which is why some of the lines are intentionally clumsily stitched. The scene seems to unravel at the bottom, indicating that the work of courageously standing with others is unfinished. On one side, triangular coral beads point upwards while yellow beads point down, while on the other side, triangular yellow beads point upwards while coral beads point downwards. Sometimes we are the ones lifting others, and sometimes we are the ones who need to be lifted. It reminds me of the poem, "First They Came," by Pastor Martin Niemoller, which I first saw on the wall of my eighth-grade classroom. It reads,

⁵⁶ "The Righteous Among the Nations," Yad Vashem: The World Holocaust Remembrance Center, accessed April 3, 2024, <https://yadvashem.org/righteous.html>.

First they came for the Communists
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Communist
Then they came for the Socialists
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Socialist
Then they came for the trade unionists
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a trade unionist
Then they came for the Jews
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Jew
Then they came for me
And there was no one left
To speak out for me.⁵⁷

Learning that the pastor actually began the war as an antisemitic Nazi supporter but ended it in a concentration camp only adds to the significant meaning.⁵⁸ We should not support others expecting a quid pro quo (or a pat on the back) but the truth is, if we do not stand for others, who will stand for us?

⁵⁷ “First They Came – By Pastor Marting Niemoller,” Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, accessed April 3, 2024, <https://www.hmd.org.uk/resource/first-they-came-by-pastor-martin-niemoller>.

⁵⁸ “First They Came.”

It often takes courage to speak up for others. Few of the Righteous Among the Nations set out to be heroes but when opportunity knocked on their door (sometimes literally), they stepped up and saved lives. I used the words “friends, allies, and good people” in the title because they all apply. We may not know somebody well enough to be called their friend, but we can be their ally. Some of the people honored in the Avenue of the Righteous Among the Nations did not even like Jews. But killing them or allowing them to be killed crossed a line that they could not cross, which is why I added “good people” to the title.⁵⁹ They were not friends, nor would they have called themselves allies, but they were good enough and courageous enough to help those in need when the opportunity arrived.

I hope viewers will consider the unfinished work of helping those in need. Ask yourself, who do you, or who should you, stand up for or stand with? The opportunity has arrived. Do you have the courage it takes to stand with those in need, even if you stand alone?

⁵⁹Peter Hellman, *When Courage Was Stronger Than Fear* (New York: MJF Books, 2004).



Figure 3. Alisha B. Whitman, *Freedom: Let My People Go*, embroidered watercolor, 26" x 40", 2024.

There are many different types of freedoms, many of which Americans take for granted. There are physical freedoms as well as spiritual, emotional, and mental freedoms. There is freedom from hate and discrimination, and the freedom to be oneself. This painting was designed specifically thinking of the hostages who were taken by Hamas and who, when I painted this, still had not been released, as well as thinking about the uptick in antisemitism spreading around the world and noticeably across college campuses in the spring of 2024.

The ancient-looking olive tree I painted represents the House of Israel or the Jewish people. Mordecai Paldiel said of the olive tree, "It may grow crooked, it suffers, but it never dies.

It is a symbol of the Jews.”⁶⁰ Olive trees are fascinating because they can become hollowed out, cut down, or completely break in two, but if their root system is good, they will continue to grow and produce.⁶¹ Jews have faced oppression, captivity, extermination, and persecution time and time again over the centuries and yet they have survived, and their traditions remain strong. One such tradition is the ancient prayer, “*Acheinu*.” Translated into English it reads,

Our family, the whole house of Israel, who are in distress, or in captivity — who stand either in the sea or on dry land — may the Omnipresent have mercy on them and take them out from narrowness to expanse, and from darkness to light, and from oppression to redemption, now, swiftly, and soon!⁶²

The prayer has become a bit of a rallying cry since October 7th, 2023, and was repeated by many at Passover tables the following year. When my cousin stood and shared it at our table, I knew immediately it provided the imagery I needed for this painting. The cerulean blue represents the sea while the roots are firmly on dry land. Both the side borders and the chains themselves fade from dark to light, and the gold light shining down represents the mercy and redemption we seek. All the stitching is a type of chain stitch (Knotted Chain, Cable Chain, Interlaced Chain, and Roman Chain), as chains are a fairly obvious symbol of constraint, captivity, or oppression. The olive tree has been freed from many chains of the past but three of the lines of chains remain

⁶⁰ Hellman, *When Courage Was Stronger*, xviii.

⁶¹ Naomi Bosch, “Wisdom of Tree series: Resilient as the Olive Tree,” *Plentiful Lands*, accessed April 3, 2024. <https://plentiful-lands.com/wisdom-of-trees-series-resilient-as-the-olive-tree>.

⁶² Rabbi Elie Kaunfer, “Acheinu: A Prayer for Freeing Captives,” accessed April 3, 2024. <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/acheinu-a-prayer-for-freeing-captives>.

unbroken, representing the hostages, their families, and Jewish people around the world who are in distress.

This painting is a plea to not forget the hostages, to remember those in captivity and those in distress. It is a supplication to think of those Jewish college students who are being told in actions, if not in words, that the freedom of speech of others is more important than their safety or their freedom to not be discriminated against based on religion, nationality, or race. Are we really thinking about the meaning of the words being used, especially before repeating or reposting them? Imagine not knowing if you would ever see your loved ones again. How would you feel in their shoes? How much does freedom really mean to you? How much would it mean if it was taken away?



Figure 4. Alisha B. Whitman, *Homeland: Connection with the Land of Our Ancestors*, embroidered watercolor, 20" x 28", 2024.

One of the terribly disruptive things about war is how it displaces people from their homes and homelands. Their safest spaces are turned to rubble, people are forcibly removed, and other times families choose to leave homes behind as they search for safety and a better life elsewhere. Whether the separation has happened recently or generations ago, there are many seen and unseen effects that come from living in the diaspora. Some people stay strongly connected to their heritage no matter how far away they go, while others intentionally (in an

effort to assimilate) or unintentionally (with distance and passage of time) lose track of where they are from, losing a chunk of their identity in the process.

Living in such a mobile and globalized society where so many have become disconnected with their familial background, most Americans may not understand how important the land of Israel is to all Jews, regardless of whether they have lived there. This connection dates back to ancient times when God made a covenant with Abraham, promising him blessings, posterity, and the land of Israel.⁶³ These covenant promises, which include the land, are still central to the identity of the Jewish people because they believe that what God has done for their fathers, He has done for them. Throughout the thousands of years since Abraham, there have always been Jews living in Israel, even while the majority were conquered and carried off into captivity by Babylonians, Assyrians, Romans, and others.

In this painting I shared that connection to the land of their forefathers. In general, food is one way we often connect to our family's heritage. The seven images here are even more meaningful, as they are the Seven Species,⁶⁴ which are common Jewish visual symbols. In one tradition, during *Tu B'Shvat*, people eat fruit of these seven species as a way to celebrate, give thanks, and connect with the land of Israel.⁶⁵ I used designs from the Seven Species stamps of

⁶³ Genesis 12:1

⁶⁴ The seven species are first mentioned in Deuteronomy 8:8, which reads, "For the Lord your God is bringing you to a good land ... a land of wheat and barley, (grape) vines and figs and pomegranates, a land of oil-producing olives and honey (from dates)." They represent the necessary nutrients, and each have corresponding qualities that each soul can possess. Wheat is kindness, barely is restraint/strength, grapes are harmony, figs are perseverance, pomegranates are humility, olives are foundation, and dates are royalty.

⁶⁵ Jo Ann Gardner, "Why We Eat the Seven Fruits on Tu B'Shvat," *Forward*, accessed January 2016, [https://forward.com/food/330692/why-we-eat-the-7-fruits-on-tu-bshvat/#:~:text=In%20this%20way%20the%20Seven,\(Deuteronomy%2011%3A14\)](https://forward.com/food/330692/why-we-eat-the-7-fruits-on-tu-bshvat/#:~:text=In%20this%20way%20the%20Seven,(Deuteronomy%2011%3A14).).

1958⁶⁶ and embroidered the sides to look like the perforated edges of stamps. Using the image of stamps scattered across a world map seemed fitting as stamps indicate the need to cross a distance to connect. I want viewers to think about how we metaphorically cover that distance when we are separated from our ancestral homes. Is there a hole or a longing that can be filled when we better know where we are from and who we are? What difference does it make when you stay connected or are able to re-connect? My piece encourages viewers to think about these questions, and about what happens when those connections are broken or forgotten. In places the thread is fraying, representing the difficulty of staying connected as time passes. Yet the threads are still there and more have been stitched so that if one fails, there are other connections that will remain strong.

⁶⁶Jacob Richman, “The Seven Species Stamps” Jacob Richman’s Home Page, accessed April 3, 2024, <https://jr.co.il/stamps/7species-stamps.htm>.



Figure 5. Alisha B. Whitman, *Homeland: Sacred Spaces*, embroidered watercolor, 11" x 15", 2024.

The conflict in Israel is due in large part to two groups of people viewing the same place as their homeland, or the land of their fathers. The media today misrepresents and oversimplifies the issue, but no matter how many times it is said, problems did not begin in 1948 with the establishment of the state of Israel. There are literally thousands of years of history playing into the conflict during which Israel has been considered a holy land by both Jews and Muslims. They trace their common ancestry to Abraham, who, as previously mentioned, was promised that the land would be given to his posterity.⁶⁷ Not only is it important to them because their ancestors have lived there, but because the land is full of places where sacred things have

⁶⁷Genesis 13: 14-15, 15:18, 17:8 KJV

happened that are central to their religious beliefs. I painted an oak tree on Mount Betarim, as Jewish tradition has Abraham sitting under an oak tree and some believe that this may be where God made his covenant with Abraham. This site is also revered by Muslims who refer to it as the Sacred Site of Abraham's Birds.

The painting is divided nearly in half with the oak tree painted on the left and cross stitch, a traditional Palestinian embroidery, covering the right half. The embroidery, stitched over the painting, sits in harmony while providing a different way of viewing the scenery. It makes a viewer wonder how the two groups can ever peacefully coexist. How can they overcome the long history and cycles of violence? How can hatred be untaught? I certainly do not have the answers for people living on the other side of the world engaged in a complex conflict I have only read about. Perhaps it would be more useful to look inwards and ask, how can we better live in harmony with those around us? How do we overcome generational or even new trauma, bias or prejudice? In an increasingly divisive and dismissive climate, will we make an effort to reach across religious, political, or cultural divides?



Figure 6. Alisha B. Whitman, *Strength Through Connection* embroidered watercolor, 15” x 29”, 2024.

During a recent trip to Redwoods National Forest in Northern California, I was astounded by the magnitude and longevity of those ancient trees. Being from Oregon, I have always lived among tall trees, but nothing makes you feel as small as standing next to a Redwood giant—some of which have been growing for upwards of two thousand years. Few people know that while Redwoods can grow to be over three hundred feet tall, fascinatingly, their roots only go six to twelve feet deep. One would think that would make them incredibly unstable and top-heavy; the first storm should knock them right over, and it would if not for the way their roots connect with each other. They intertwine and wrap themselves around each other, hunkering down or anchoring together, so that a wind would have to be strong enough to knock them all over, which it simply cannot do. Redwoods that grow alone or far from the forest do not reach impressive heights or ages. While their genetic code provides the potential, only their connection to community helps them reach it.

We can learn much from such trees. Remarkably, they also use their root connections to communicate warnings and share nutrients and water with sick or damaged trees. They “synchronize their performance so that they are all equally successful.”⁶⁸ Why would they act so selflessly? Forester Peter Wohlleben wrote,

A tree is not a forest. On its own, a tree cannot establish a consistent local climate. It is at the mercy of wind and weather. But together, many trees create an ecosystem that moderates extremes of heat and cold, stores a great deal of water, and generates a great deal of humidity. And in this protected environment, trees can live to be very old.⁶⁹

Inherently aware of this, trees take care of each other because losing their weaker members would make even the strong ones vulnerable. When feeble trees fall, there are gaps and disruptions to the unit which allow hot, drying sun and stronger winds to reach lower into the forest, disturbing the delicate balance. Foresters used to intentionally thin forests by felling or girdling, thinking that trees needed more room to grow and less competition for resources such as sunlight and water. They discovered, however, that the trees were considerably less resilient when they lost connection to their close community.⁷⁰ Are we that different?

Throughout the creation of this series, I have thought a lot about the Jewish people’s connection to their homeland and the importance of such a connection. I began to also think about the many other people experiencing separation from their communities and homelands. The world today is experiencing a massive refugee crisis. According to UNHCR, there are “at least 117.3 million people around the world who have been forced to flee their homes.”⁷¹ That is

⁶⁸ Peter Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees* (Greystone Books, 2015), 15-16.

⁶⁹ Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees*, 4.

⁷⁰ Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees*, 14-17.

⁷¹ “Refugees,” *United Nations*, accessed April 3, 2024, <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/refugees>.

hard to grasp. With so many people currently experiencing this trauma, in addition to the diasporas and exoduses of the past, what effect is this going to have on our world? On individuals? On rising generations?

Refugee Crises

The current and previous conflicts in Israel and the surrounding region have tragically created many refugees and internally displaced persons on both sides; however, despite Western media's focus on the conflict, there are many other, often overlooked, areas experiencing refugee crises. To help bring attention to some of these other areas and people, as well as create context for and connection with the outside world, I chose to include five smaller pieces representing some of the regions of the world which are experiencing the greatest refugee problems today. While the conflicts are ugly, these are homelands that people love and hope to return to, and they are connected with rich traditions and cultures. I represented each group of people with their country's national tree (or one of their most common trees) as a connection to their homeland but also because when trees are dug up or transplanted it is a great shock to their system. In this fragile state, if they are not properly cared for, trees will weaken, stop bearing fruit, or even die. Moving, under the best of circumstances, is one of the most stressful life events people can experience. What about under the worst of circumstances? What is lost when people are forced to leave? In such a global world, is it important for people to be connected to their roots? My pieces encourage viewers to learn about and care about these people too.



Figure 7. Alisha B. Whitman, *Refugee Crisis: Syria*, embroidered watercolor collage, 11” x 14”, 2024.

The refugee crisis in Syria began in 2011 when teenagers were arrested for protesting with anti-government graffiti. Public demonstrations erupted across Syria in support of the young people, which the government violently suppressed, leading to full civil war. Recent earthquakes have added to the devastation as more than 14 million have had to leave their homes. Ninety percent of the population lives below the poverty line.⁷² With the violence and instability persisting over the last 13 years, there is a whole generation of children and youth who

⁷² “Syria Refugee Crisis Explained,” *UNHCR*, accessed March 13, 2024, <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/syria-refugee-crisis-explained>.

have never known peace. This latest regime, however, was just another face on an old problem. Syria is, after all, one of the most diverse countries in the Middle East with many different ethnicities and religious groups attempting to live side by side. Even among the Muslim majority there are Sunnis, Shias, and Alawites who have fundamental disagreements and more often see each other as enemies than as brothers.⁷³ Syrians understand the challenge of overcoming long and complicated histories.

For this piece I chose to paint a pistachio tree, which in the past has produced such a valuable crop in Syria that it is referred to as “a golden tree in a poor land.”⁷⁴ The trees take 12-15 years to produce fruit, so recovering crops and rebuilding lives will not be easy. The tree I painted is not bearing fruit, but it is alive. For the stitching I drew from Syria’s strong traditions with embroidery. Styles differ throughout regions in Syria, and are so distinct that older women can often identify what village a person is from and possibly even who the embroiderer was just by looking at an embroidered dress.⁷⁵ I cross-stitched with red and white silk threads on black after the traditions of the as-Sukhna and Saraqib regions where it was believed that the colors possessed “magical qualities” and protected from spirits and the evil eye.⁷⁶ This seemed appropriate as protection is something greatly needed by refugees.

⁷³ Jennifer Holleis, “Syria’s Ethnic and Religious Groups Explained,” *CW*, December 18, 2024, accessed February 28, 2025 <https://www.dw.com/en/syrias-ethnic-and-religious-groups-explained/a-71014065>.

⁷⁴ Firas Makdesi, “In Syria, a ‘golden’ crop struggles to regain its shine,” *Reuters*, August 11, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syria-golden-crop-struggles-regain-its-shine-2022-08-11>.

⁷⁵ John Gillow, *Textiles of the Islamic World* (Thames and Hudson, 2015), 104.

⁷⁶ Estibaliz Sienna Iracheta, “The Threads of Life: Syrian Textile Ornamentation,” *Syrian Heritage Archive*, 2013-2019, accessed November 26, 2024, <https://syrian-heritage.org/the-threads-of-life-syrian-textile-ornamentation>.



Figure 8. Alisha B. Whitman, *Refugee Crisis: Ukraine*, embroidered watercolor, 11” x 14”, 2024.

The current crisis in Ukraine escalated drastically in 2022 when Russian troops invaded their country. There are now nearly 7 million Ukrainian refugees with nearly 4 million being internally displaced. The missile and rocket attacks have led to a loss of 65 percent of energy generation capacity throughout the country.⁷⁷ Ukraine has repeatedly surprised the world by withstanding, holding on and even pushing back the Russians. They are proud of their country and are willing to fight for their freedom because they remember their past. They have not

⁷⁷ “Ukraine Emergency,” *UNHCR*, accessed November 27, 2024, <https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/ukraine>.

forgotten the Holodomor, when Stalin created a man-made famine that starved 7 million or more Ukrainians.⁷⁸ This is not just a matter of pride. They are defending their right to life.

To represent the Ukrainian people, I painted a *Viburnum Opulus* or guelder rose tree. In Ukraine it is believed that planting one outside your home will bring health and good fortune and the tree's red berries are a symbol of nationhood and independence that are commonly stitched onto *vyshyvanka*.⁷⁹ The *vyshyvanka*, Ukraine's national costume, is seen as the clothing of a free people and is known throughout the world for its embroidery. For my piece, I drew from traditional patterns that would be seen on *vyshyvanka*, using a variety of techniques to represent the many different regions. As refugees have left the safety and security of their homes, I stitched poppies, which are seen as a talisman, and black crosses in the diamond borders, which were traditionally thought to ward off evil spirits. Incidentally, embroidery in general has actually been considered to be a talisman that protects from harm and brings good luck to the wearer.⁸⁰ The colors of the Ukrainian flag are reflected in the blue dripping sky and yellow wheat, and while the borders have been breached (representing the territory Russia now controls), they are not completely overrun. Likewise, threads hang down and reflect a loss of strength but the embroidered designs are still there.

⁷⁸ "Holodomor," *University of Minnesota College of Liberal Arts Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, accessed November 26, 2024, <https://cla.umn.edu/chgs/holocaust-genocide-education/resource-guides/holodomor>.

⁷⁹ Brendan Keegan, "Plants, Identity, and War in Ukraine," *Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University* online, November 30, 2023, accessed November 26, 2024, <https://arboretum.harvard.edu/stories/plants-identity-and-war-in-ukraine>.

⁸⁰ "What is Ukrainian Vyshyvanka?" *Brand Ukraine*, August 19, 2022, accessed November 26, 2024, <https://ukraine.ua/faq/what-is-vyshyvanka>.



Figure 9. Alisha B. Whitman, *Refugee Crisis: Venezuela*, embroidered watercolor, 11" x 14", 2024.

According to the UN Refugee Agency, 7.7 million Venezuelans have fled their country in recent years - which is 20 percent of the previous population.⁸¹ Many have not been able to officially register as refugees, which would qualify them to receive vital assistance, because they left behind the proper documentation when they escaped. Their crisis does not come primarily from outside forces but internal ones. Decades of government corruption and authoritarian control by dictators Hugo Chavez and now Nicolas Maduro have led to economic collapse,

⁸¹“Venezuela Humanitarian Crisis,” *UNHCR*, accessed November 27, 2024, <https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/venezuela>.

widespread violence, poverty, and gang warfare, with inflation and the shortage of food, medicine, and services exacerbating the problems. It is the largest displacement crisis in Latin America's modern history.⁸²

I painted the national tree of Venezuela, the Araguaney tree, whose bright yellow blossoms are a perfect representation of this tropical country with Amazon rainforests and Caribbean beaches. Around that beauty I painted a stormy backdrop to represent the turmoil and danger. The top fifth of the interior is cut out to represent the 20 percent of the population that has left, searching for a brighter future or merely striving to survive. Unable to find much of a history of embroidery for the country,⁸³ I turned instead to their centuries-old tradition of weaving. Using natural-colored wool yarn, I employed more of a weaving technique throughout the background around the tree. Many traditional Venezuelan textiles are brightly colored and patterned, and may even tell stories through geometric representation. However, I kept mine plain to represent all the stories and opportunities being suppressed by a government that does not allow dissenting voices. The repeating lines form a stylized spider web, a nod to a common legend among Venezuela's indigenous people, the Wayuu, that weaving traditions came from "Wale'keru," a spider who taught women to weave.⁸⁴ The tree, which represents the people, is caught in the middle or trapped in a web.

⁸² "Venezuelan Humanitarian Crisis."

⁸³ Academic literature on embroidery traditions for any of these countries facing refugee crises was sparse, if it existed at all. In an effort to truly honor the different countries and their cultures, I did not want to Westernize their conflicts, but sought to include symbolism and techniques that would be meaningful to them.

⁸⁴ Laura Erazo Santanilla, "History in Threads: Exploring Wayuu Mochilas," Textile Arts Center, August 18, 2017, accessed November 26, 2024, <https://textileartscenter.com/feature/history-in-threads-exploring-wayuu-mochilas>.



Figure 10. Alisha B. Whitman, *Refugee Crisis: Myanmar*, cut embroidered watercolor, 11” x 14”, 2024.

One of the least well-known refugee crises is being experienced by the Rohingya people of Myanmar. I wonder why Western media cares so much about some conflicts and completely ignores others? The Rohingya are a Muslim people that arrived in Myanmar, which was part of the Arakkan kingdom, as early as the fifteenth century. Many others arrived while the area was part of British India in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They differ from the majority of people around them ethnically, linguistically, and religiously, and despite having lived there for hundreds of years, successive governments have now refused to recognize them as an official

ethnic group. They are labeled illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, despite many never having lived there, and have been denied citizenship in their own country. Thus, they are a stateless people and, having been deprived of opportunities afforded to citizens since the 1980s, are called a “lost generation.”⁸⁵ Starting in 2017, renewed cycles of genocidal violence have forced a mass exodus from their homes and whole communities have been burnt to the ground.⁸⁶ While many want to return, what is there to return to?

I painted the padauk tree or Myanmar rosewood, on which also blooms the national flower of Myanmar. It is seen as a symbol of strength, endurance, and it represents the beauty of the nation.⁸⁷ I cut out the trunk to both represent those who have had to leave and those whose right to be there is denied in the first place. The trunk whose roots seem to levitate above the ground speak to a “stateless people” who really have no homeland, no place to plant their roots. According to Myanmar’s official website, the national flag has a yellow strip along the top that indicates the “happiness and unity of all races amicably.”⁸⁸ In my painting the yellow drips down, revealing the failure to uphold that standard. The triangular stitching represents the mountains that surround the area they have always lived in as well as a fence that should protect them but more often serves to keep them on the outside.

⁸⁵ Eleanor Albert and Lindsay Maizland, “The Rohingya Crisis,” Council on Foreign Relations, last updated January 23, 2020, accessed November 27, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/background/rohingya-crisis>.

⁸⁶ Albert, “The Rohingya Crisis.”

⁸⁷ “Trees in Myanmar Meaning I,” Age Well Every Day, accessed November 27, 2023, <https://agewelleveryday.org/2023/12/07/trees-with-meaning-in-myanmar-i>.

⁸⁸ “National Symbols,” Myanmar National Portal, accessed November 27, 2024, <https://myanmar.gov.mm/national-symbols>.



Figure 11. Alisha B. Whitman, *Refugee Crisis: South Sudan*, torn embroidered watercolor, 11” x 14”, 2024.

The largest refugee crisis in Africa is currently being suffered in the young country of South Sudan. Its establishment in 2011, when voters chose independence, ended a 28-year-old, horribly bloody second civil war between the predominantly Muslim Arab north and the poorer Christian and Animist south. Tragically, just two years after gaining independence, a new conflict broke out in South Sudan, creating an increasingly complex and dangerous situation for its citizens. Floods and droughts have only made things worse. Many older refugees are fleeing

for the second or third time in their lives; even more tragically, 65 percent of the refugee population are children, many of whom have been separated from their parents.⁸⁹

I painted Sudan's national tree, the umbrella thorn acacia tree, and tore the paper in half to represent the civil war. In the background I painted black and red, colors from their flag that stand for their country's history and the bloodshed of martyrs. For generations, the women have passed down the knowledge of how to embroider on *milayas*, or bedsheets, which are used for important celebrations and as wedding gifts. They are so prized that many women arrived in refugee camps with nothing but the clothes on their backs and *milayas* they had made and brought with them. There is not much literature about their embroidery traditions, but they appear to predominantly use satin stitches and stem stitches, which I endeavored to also use despite the fact that it was an incredibly risky process as the paper can only take so many punctures that close together before it will break. I took inspiration for the imagery from one of the women involved in the Milaya Project, who said, "I embroider the beauty that is in my head and not the dead trees around me."⁹⁰ The dead trees on the left appear like a barren waste, while the red flower is that beauty that can be imagined through art with a flying bird to represent their hope and search for a better future.

⁸⁹ "South Sudan Refugee Crisis Explained," *UNHCR*, July 24, 2023, accessed November 27, 2024, <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/south-sudan-refugee-crisis-explained>.

⁹⁰ "South Sudan's Embroidered Bedsheets Shed Light on the Art Heritage Lens in Gender and Resilience Research," *Gender Focus*, September 29, 2022, accessed November 27, 2024, <https://genderfocus.org/2022/09/south-sudans-embroidered-bedsheets-shed-light-on-the-art-heritage-lens-in-gender-and-resilience-research>.



Figure 12. Alisha B. Whitman, *The Children*, embroidered watercolor and charcoal, 16" x 24", 2025.

In an ideal world, all children would be safe and well loved, nurtured as they grow into the people they can become with education opening doors of possibility. But this is not an ideal world. Despite this, the desire to provide a better life for their children is something parents around the globe have in common; as is the assumption that your children will outlive you and be your most important legacy. War unapologetically disrupts the dream. And children are the ones who so often pay the highest price. As a middle school teacher during the COVID-19 pandemic, I got sick of hearing people nonchalantly dismiss the challenges kids were facing with the refrain, “kids are so resilient.” Their physical wounds may heal more quickly and easily than adults, but why do people assume their emotional and mental ones will? Children suffer, even if their suffering is temporarily invisible—like a shadow, it follows them.

I created this piece thinking about children and the many doors closed to them during times of war. Children should have a right to protection and shelter and to a childhood, and I can only imagine the heartbreak of parents who cannot provide that for their children. I thought of children taken hostage; children who are indoctrinated and encouraged or forced to fight; children who are put in danger, even being used as human shields, when they should be playing innocently. Children are so vulnerable during times of displacement. Unaccompanied refugee children are easy targets for abuse and human trafficking, and most spend significant time without access to education. We all lose when some are held back. Which of those young people could have grown up to be the next Einstein or Michelangelo? Could one have discovered how to cure cancer if given the chance? What kind of fruit can a tree bear when it is planted in those kinds of soil? How can children who have seen such things possibly learn to hope again? Illustrating this process in this piece is the lifeless, dormant tree that begins as a dark drawing but slowly turns into an embroidered almond tree beginning to blossom.⁹¹ The embroidery adds beauty as I think being able to see and appreciate beauty is one of the first steps to recovery. It reminds us that there is still good in the world. Additionally, the young girl in front offers a young seedling, inviting viewers to help the children plant a fresh start. So how do we begin? How do we restore hope that their future will be better than their past? How can we open doors previously or currently closed? How can we ever make it up to the children if we fail?

⁹¹ Almond trees are seen as a symbol of hope and renewal since they are the first tree to bloom each spring.



Figure 13. Alisha B. Whitman, *Each Life is a Universe*, embroidered watercolor and charcoal, 44" x 24", 2025.

One of the unfortunate results of hearing refugee statistics or casualty reports shared on the news is that we become desensitized. The numbers of people affected or even killed become less and less shocking and we lose sight of the fact that each number represents a real person with a name and a family and a stolen future. It is easy to forget that every death is a tragedy to someone. With this desensitization comes a devaluation of human life.

We cannot let war take this from us. There is a Jewish saying, “each life is a whole universe,” which speaks to the profound and far-reaching influence that each individual can have on the people they meet, not to mention future generations. This piece was inspired by memories of my elderly grandmother praying over her Shabbat candles each week. I inherited these candles upon her passing last year, may her memory forever be a blessing. At her funeral, my cousin shared that she once asked Bubbe why her prayers took so long and she responded that she was praying for each of us by name. We have a big family, so that took a long time! She could have lumped us all together by just praying for her family but we individually mattered to her so she took the time to pray for us individually. I painted an imagined still life including her Shabbat candles on the brilliant royal blue carpet from her home in front of an empty doorway, and stitched each of our names around the border in gold thread. I honestly tried to come up with a less laborious idea but realized that the fact that it would take so long to embroider each name perfectly supported the idea. Each name, each person was worth the effort. The stars painted around the open doorway refer to Psalm 147 which reads, “He telleth the number of the stars; he calleth them all by *their* names.”⁹² Each one matters. So does each life. This painting is a plea to remember that; to remember the value of every life.

⁹² Psalms 147:4 KJV



Figure 14. Alisha B. Whitman, *Sharing Light and Hope*, embroidered watercolor, 42" x 22", 2025.

Despite all of the tragedy and darkness, and how depressing and discouraging a world at war can be, I had to end my series on a hopeful note and express my belief that we can do better. I am neither naïve nor blind. I see the gaunt faces of the released hostages and their suffering hurts my heart, as do all reports of the horrible things people do to each other. During war, there are too many such reports. Hope in humanity, however, is another thing we cannot let war take from us. Such hope is fragile, but our humanity can be our strength. I know that our respective spheres of influence are small. Perhaps whole countries or humankind on a global scale will not do better, but individuals can. We can start small and make a difference to someone, even if it just begins within the walls of our own homes. Within every tragedy are found the helpers: the firefighters who rushed into the Twin Towers and those who later dug through the rubble; the teacher who shields their students during school shootings and makes space for them afterwards; the individuals who pass out bottled water to homeless people during a heat wave. They are the ones who restore our faith in humanity. We can choose to be those helpers. To illustrate this idea I painted a menorah, which is associated with light. The middle candle is used to light the others and is called a *shamash*, which literally means “helper.” If I could leave us with a blessing it would be, may we grow to be helpers with a reach as far as a mighty redwood is tall. Let us share light.

I firmly believe that light begets light. I love the idea of paying it forward where a simple act of kindness can spread to bless many lives. Even if the light is more like a seedling than a giant redwood, it can grow when shared. Even one act of kindness can make a profound difference, which is represented by the honeycomb pattern meticulously created, one stitch at a time, across the background. I chose this design despite the time-consuming, often-painful repetition it required because honey is seen in Jewish tradition as a symbol of hope and

happiness; and frankly, hope and happiness does not spread quickly or effortlessly, they take work. Additionally, honeycomb evokes thoughts of bees, who are some of nature's ultimate helpers as they are vital pollinators, contributing to Earth's food sources. A nod to the bee's essential role to people all over the world, the honeycomb design fills this painting's space. Hope might just be every bit as important to our survival.

Conclusion

Developing this series has led to significant introspection and growth. Some elements of the project proceeded according to plan and others surprised even me as they evolved. One unplanned aspect was the heavy reliance on trees as a recurring theme, though this should not be wholly surprising to anybody who is familiar with my body of work. I have always been inspired by trees. I love how they reach upwards and how their leaves and branches dance in the wind. I love how that dance is in rhythm with the grass and clouds and water around them. I find their presence reassuring and use them to mark the change in the seasons. Old, gnarled trunks and even dead, white-washed, nearly branchless trees captivate my imagination as I wonder what they have seen and what stories they could tell. I do not always understand people and how they can do some of the atrocious things they do, but I find solace amongst the trees.

I think, however, they were an appropriate symbol beyond my personal preference. Trees commonly represent life and connection to God. We speak of family trees and “our roots” tends to refer to our ancestry or background; how our experiences, values, and predecessors have helped shape us into who we are. Trees also play an important part in Jewish traditions. There is even a special holiday for them – *Tu Bishvat*, The New Year for trees. A popular Talmudic story about Honi the Circle-Maker may perfectly explain why trees were the right symbol for this project. In the story, Honi encounters an old man planting a carob seed.⁹³ Honi asked him how long it would take for the tree to bear fruit and the old man answered, 70 years. In surprise he pointed out the man’s advanced age and asked if he really thought he would be around to enjoy

⁹³In some retellings it is an old woman, and in others it is Honi himself planting the seed.

the fruit of his labors. The old man replied that he had found carob trees in the world. “Just as my ancestors planted for me, I too am planting for my descendants.”⁹⁴

Many aspects of this project have led me to think of all we have inherited from generations past, and the legacy we are leaving for those who will come after us. Repeated references to my sweet grandmother show ways that I am remembering and honoring her memory. Then there were the endless generations of women using creativity, and embroidery in particular, to make sense of the world and to create a more beautiful place. I learned, as discussed earlier, how artists like Miriam Shapiro decided to honor their female heritage and stopped buying into the art world’s male-centered bias against that which had traditionally been considered “women’s arts.”⁹⁵ Likewise, I have chosen to honor the many women who have gone before me and those who continue the traditions today. Stitching by hand is a painstaking, emotional labor that connects and binds together, a fitting symbol of women who are so often the ones spending more time nurturing, holding and bringing family together. During wartimes, or other times of danger or unrest, women are called on to do this as much, if not more than ever. I have chosen to work with a needle and thread not because there are no other options available to me, but because I see it as a viable and meaningful addition to my paintings and a way to further connect with my roots, an option open to me because of the women who have led the way. I grew up with a mother who sewed. She does not consider herself as much of a creative, but she worked with her hands to add beauty to our lives, to repair torn or worn-out articles, and to provide comfort. She created aesthetically and physically useful objects as a way to express her love. Likewise, I have created aesthetically, intellectually, and socially “useful” objects (or

⁹⁴ Bavli Ta’anit 23a: 15 (The William Davidson digital edition of the Koren Noe Talmud)

⁹⁵ Clare Hunter, *Threads of Life: A History of the World Through the Eye of a Needle* (Abrams Press, 2020): 284.

artworks) as a way to express my thoughts and feelings and in an effort to encourage discussion about difficult but critically important subjects. This project is my contribution to the field and to the legacy of women like my mother and grandmother. While this particular project has come to a close, it has sparked many more ideas I plan to pursue. There will certainly be more embroidered watercolors using symbolism and iconography in a contemporary way.

Clearly, not all that we have inherited from the past is good. Researching these conflicts has seriously challenged my belief in both the inherent goodness of people and my optimism for the future. This series of embroidered watercolors has helped me process this friction. It has also provided a productive outlet for the grief I experienced observing the suffering of so many and the growing dismay I feel watching much of the world's response to Israel and Jewish people everywhere. This opportunity to slow down, search for understanding, and figure out how to "cope more successfully" has been possible partially because, with watercolor, there is no rushing the process. You literally have to wait for the paint to dry. And embroidery is even slower. Once I know how and where to do the stitches, embroidery is all about repetition (or insistence) and it leaves my mind free to ponder. These pieces encourage viewers to likewise slow down, reflect, and seek deeper understanding. They encourage critical thinking, which takes effort and time. This project, "Fragility and Strength in Times of War: A Series of Embroidered Watercolors," has explored the good and the bad. It has drawn from my roots using Jewish symbolism and storytelling. It has used specific materials, such as thread, as a symbol of both fragility and strength. With my paintbrush and needle I have analyzed much of what is lost during wartimes and have become even more certain of all that we cannot afford to lose.

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