

ARTnews

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Artists' First Influences

John Cage:
The Sound of Silence

The Ever-Notorious
Marc Quinn

AIDS in the Art World





Landscape with Mountain, 2013, features brightly colored circles embroidered on a found photograph.

Delicate and unnerving, Julie Cockburn's photo-based collages embellish and distort vintage images using tools that range from embroidery to Photoshop. To begin each piece, Cockburn trolls junk shops and garage sales for old photos, often studio pictures from the middle of the last century. She scans them and uses the computer to plan what she wants to do. Then she transfers the digital sketches back onto the original, and proceeds to cut or sew or draw or paint. The results subvert the decorum of the tidy portraits and landscapes she favors, making something strange and beautiful.

"I love Photoshop," admits the London-based artist. Its vocabulary can be detected in the shapes that appear in her work, from narrow vertical ovals cut from a portrait that call to mind the program's elliptical marquee tool to the copy-and-paste feeling of perfect embroidered circles floating across a pastel landscape. Cockburn learned Photoshop while working for an Internet company in the 1990s, and she says that her digital skills occasionally outpace what she can do in real life. "Sometimes I spend a week stitching something and it just doesn't work and I throw it away," she says.

A keeper is *Love at First Sight* (2013), which began as a studio portrait of a lovely woman looking over her draped shoulder. Her rouged lips and cheeks stand out against the soft, dusky tone of the paper, and Cockburn has added her own color to the image, in a rainbow ring of embroidery that encircles the woman's face. The hollowed starburst shape of the stitching highlights the masklike quality of the subject's mild expression, which peeks through at the center of the composition. "It's very specific what I'm looking for," says Cockburn about her source images. "They have to have a nothingness around them," she adds, describing a certain archetypal blandness the images share.



Julie Cockburn.

Although Cockburn says her work hasn't changed much since she finished art school, her place in the art world has shifted over time. She studied sculpture at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design in London, and was offered a British Crafts Council grant when her work was discovered in an Exmouth Market shop. "In the interview, the guy said, 'If you accept this grant you'll never be seen as a fine artist,'" Cockburn recalls. Unconvinced, she took the grant. And, despite his warning, she has lately been embraced by the photography world. The Photographers' Gallery in London showed her work in 2012, and today the artist is represented by Flowers Gallery in London and New York and by Yossi Milo Gallery in New York, both of which focus on photography. Her works range in price from \$3,500–\$6,500.

Like many contemporary photographers, Cockburn is concerned with photographs as material objects. Old photographs have a "touch and a pattern" to them, she insists, adding, "there's even an odor." As far as how to describe her work, she says, "I call it collage—that's the closest I can get to it. But basically I'm just making things." —*Rebecca Robertson*

Rebecca Robertson is photo editor of ARTnews.

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