

Cristiana De Marchi Practice

By Simon Coates



Identity, 2011. Embroidery on passport covers, approximately 19x14cm each. Courtesy of the artist.

Born in Turin, Italy and based in Dubai and Beirut, Cristiana De Marchi is an artist who traces the hinterland. Whether it's the environs and ambiguities of translated vocabulary and the pitfalls therein or the literal defined and redefined edges of countries in a slow-motion flux, her artwork is the velvet-gloved finger that points out the anomalies of regions divided by common language and shared ground.

Following the advent of free global positioning tools in the last decade or so, artists have started to include mapping in their practise. Plus, big data - data gathering and listing - has become a dominant force in social aggregation. This information, when mixed with mapping, has meant artists have become free to point out facts that - up until recently - had been hiding in plain sight. Cristiana's approach to, and use of, mapping differs fundamentally. Couching her studies in video, performance and three dimensions, rather than just collecting information and reframing it, her practise includes making tangible, touchable charts to pinpoint the absurdities and anomalies that mapped boundaries are otherwise supposed to patrol. Embroidery figures often in Cristiana's pieces. In the Words and Days

series from 2013 what at first appear to be documentary photographs of graffiti in Dubai and Beirut on closer examination reveal lines embroidered directly onto the photographic paper over the cursive, spray-painted letters splattered on walls and in alley ways. For 2012's *We Know All This Is A Lie* Cristiana embroidered the sentence we know all this is a lie but one we believe in onto thirteen *L'Orient-Le Jour* newspaper pages, themselves presented on a set of flat white squares. For her 2013 Dubai-based solo exhibition *Weaving the Gaps* she created beautifully sewn and embroidered maps. In the exhibition notes Cristiana explains her interest in the language of propaganda, and her works explores how it relates to feted land. To what extent (if any) does this language change from territory to territory? Is part of the irony of such language the fact that is often the same, or very similar?

It is indeed, and most of the works point at this similarities, be the propaganda language a visual language - flags, iconic images - or a spoken one: national anthems, prefabricated formulas obsessively repeated. Perhaps it's the nature of things in a region where artistic expression is differently abled to the majority of



Doing & Undoing (The Nation), 2013. 5 channel video, 4 mins. 38 secs. Originally commissioned and produced by the Dubai Culture and Arts Authority.

the rest of the modern art world, but Cristiana's work has the feel of ideas presented for consideration rather than delivered in sledgehammer blows. Does her work feature comments on artistic freedom? How different would her work be if she was making art in, say, London or New York?

Indeed it would be quite different. I have been living in the Middle East for the past 20 years and undeniably my point of observation has permeated my work, my poetic, and my main focus. Environments are a very strong dialectic element in our individual development, especially in creative fields. We tend to react to and interact with different contexts in significantly different ways and that is a priori condition. Whenever I am in a different context I find myself interested in aspects of those realities, which are specific to them, especially being quite attentive to social and political issues as I am and to the language, another strong variable.

I wouldn't address the issue as a lack of artistic freedom: there are indeed different conditions to artistic expression in this regions but I also see it as an "exercise", for artists are constantly facing the need to convey messages in a way where the formal aspects of a work

become as intrinsic to it as the conceptual ones. Pristine white canvases and embroidery threads. The household objects that Cristiana uses in her work. Carved lines in pale bars of soap create a map of Lebanon for the 2013 Soap Opera piece. These are materials that suggest cleanliness and purity. From there it's easy to start contemplating the stereotypical role of the housewife (cleaner, organiser, mender). How much does Cristiana align her work with feminist viewpoints?

There is no intentional alignment to the feminist positions. Purity is a widely and multi-faceted concept and it is not necessarily relevant only to the domestic sphere. Soap was once again functional to my idea, as I have linked three neighbourhoods in Beirut and precisely the Sunni, the Christian and the Shia communities, which are contiguous but traditionally divided just like Lebanon's political system is based on confessionalism. This map, Soap Opera, is paralleling even in the technique the profoundly engraved divisions that characterize this country - that is indeed emblematic of many other similar situations but is absurdly a stereotype for cohabitation.

In other works, where I used household objects, my main



Untitled (MENASA), 2013. Embroidery on canvas, 34.8x44.3cm. Courtesy of the artist.

interest was on language, on the opposition between the high and the low registers, on the metaphors and the possibilities implied by overlapping the physical and the linguistic dimension, respectively referring to the tangent and to the figurative meanings of words.

The physical properties of the white-on-white embroidered flags and maps as reminiscent of braille and, as such, could be felt rather than seen, much like the themes of the work itself. Is this a fair supposition? This is correct, as I also use performance and I appreciate artworks that are able to evoke a multi-sensorial experience. I started developing my own way of using embroidery years ago and the visual disappearance was one of my main focuses as I needed it for my concept. I often address political issues in a way that is not overtly

provocative. A minimal approach, if I may use the word: I prefer the audience to feel the need to get closer and inside, to start their own exploration and questioning.

Besides, I have used braille and embroidery in a series of works that I started in 2012 and I am currently developing: works related to rights violations or their negligence, to issues of inaccessibility of elementary and theoretically granted rights. There are several directions in the contemporary conceptual work and a significant one is more oriented towards the use or the implication of the physical sphere. I am thinking of works of Walter de Maria or Alighiero Boetti, just to name some of the artists who based a consistent part of their works presuming a physical involvement of the audience.

The white flag is traditionally the flag of surrender, of

giving in. Is the use of the white flag in your works intended to portray surrender? Hopelessness, even?

The very act of removing the colours from the flags, as colours are often the most characterizing element of them, implies the creation of a certain homogeneity by removing the differences and emphasising the common aspects. Ratios and fields distribution in flags are often repetitive and, once the colours abolished, it becomes difficult to identify oneself with the national symbol, to even individualize it among many others. I ultimately question the legitimacy of divisions that are historically dated and basically artificial.

Well-executed political and socio-political artwork will always have a root or two in indignation and frustration. Anger, even. Would it be fair to say that Cristiana's own artwork contains an element of suppressed anger? There seems to be an undercurrent here; the feeling that what is being said is only part of the story.

There is something true in what you say, meaning that my works are often an abstraction, as I work by reducing elements of interest into their essentiality. This way I intend to create layers, either exposed or removed, and the removal is as significant as the superposition, the addition. It is not appropriate to say that I would like to say more, rather it is an issue of saying more by showing less. I would definitely refuse the reference to "suppressed anger": I mostly witness realities, which I propose under different shapes or from different angulations and perspectives.

Cristiana's Untitled (Cacophony) sound art piece sounds to me like a whole heap of national anthems playing at the same time. It also has a faintly absurd feel to it; I can picture marching bands bumping into each other on a parade ground. Kind of like the finale of the 1812 Overture played backwards. Is that something she intended? To prick pomposity?

The work is indeed a superimposition of anthems from the MENASA region and it does address issues of self-representation in the perspective of national identification and propagandistic discourse. Since several years I am working on the vocabulary of propaganda, the visual and the spoken one: the use of audio is just yet another aspect of my exploration.

It is curious how so many people reacted in a very unexpected way and found the audio "harmonious in

its disconnection". I believe this depends on a kind of homogeneity, as if political rhetoric would ultimately rely on a common background, which turns a bit into hilarious as these - anthems, flags... - are supposed to identify and distinguish national affiliations with no hesitation. Speaking of local and regional identity, I'm constantly amazed by how many artists based in Dubai create work that in some way comments on Dubai. Far more so than, say, London-based artists make art about London, Parisian-based artists make art about Paris etc. Why does Cristiana think that is?

I personally try to make works that, by abstracting from the specific, tend to generalize a topic and to make it universal. I don't see much difference in that from artists based in other parts of the world. I see this happening also in many works of fellow artists based in the region. The local culture undeniably influences our choices, just like American artists are referring to a certain visual culture and German post-World War II artists tended to comment on the then recent history. Probably, if a reason must be found, Dubai is shaping itself as a historically relevant model and it tends to be considered as such, which might determine number of "speculations" and commentaries, also in the artistic field. As her artwork is poetic by nature, it comes as no surprise that Cristiana De Marchi also writes poetry. The artwork she makes is a compendium of wistful, intelligent commentaries that bounce from one medium to the next raising comments on futility and paradox. Nations' crises of identity, the gaps between words spoken and words understood or social inequities; her messages are conveyed in ways that are simultaneously delicate and lyrical yet forceful and didactic. Cristiana De Marchi creates works whose lines of enquiry are the whisper of strong words softly spoken.

About the writer

Simon Coates is an English artist, writer and curator living and working in Dubai. His most recently curated exhibition was 'Peace In An Open Space', the UAE's first ever show dedicated to sound art. He also manages the Dubai Community Theatre and Arts Centre (DUCTAC), the region's only built for purpose, non-profit arts centre.