

Dreamweaver

WHEN DANIELLE CLOUGH, 29, FIRST PICKED UP A NEEDLE AND THREAD SHE DIDN'T EVEN REALISE WHAT SHE WAS DOING WAS EMBROIDERY. SIX YEARS LATER SHE'S A PROFESSIONAL, AND HER WILD, SELF-TAUGHT STYLE HAS GAINED HER THOUSANDS OF FANS

WORDS **ANDREINA CORDANI**

Old tennis racquets stitched with a pattern of tropical flowers; a battered pool table triangle used as an embroidery hoop and a genteel antique frame with a beautifully stitched portrait of... Chewbacca from *Star Wars*. These are just some of Danielle Clough's playful and subversive embroidery projects on found objects, which are becoming hot artistic property – she has 100,000 followers on Instagram alone. Her Cape Town studio is crammed with vintage bric-a-brac and tapestries awaiting a makeover and customers are clamouring for more. As she recalls, it's been quite a ride so far.

How did you start out with embroidery?

My mum taught me to sew but I had no formal training – I actually studied art direction and graphic design. While I was at college I made extra cash by making plush toys for fellow students and by working at a gallery. One day at the gallery I needed a way to pass the time. All I had in my bag was a needle, thread and a scrap piece of felt from the toys so I just kind of 'drew' a rabbit in the felt with stitches. I liked it, so I did more of them. I called them thread sketches – I didn't

even think of it as embroidery at the time!

I'm self-taught and so my technique is quite different; I learned through a sequence of mistakes and opportunities. Embroidery normally follows a pattern but I use it more like colouring-in, like painting but with thread. If we don't know what the rules are, we can't break them. I do know some traditional stitches now but it's all stuff I learned after developing my style.

When did you first use found objects in your work?

I've always worked with them, probably because I've always been broke! It's important for me to be resourceful, I like finding something, playing with it and testing it out. To me, problem solving is more stimulating and inspiring than going to the shop and getting the right fabric and the right thread – getting those ready-made kits which seem to tell you: 'this is how it's supposed to be'.

As my thread-sketching improved I wanted to do more portraiture and at the time I lived opposite a coffee shop. They had all these Hessian coffee bags lying around and so I asked if I could use them to sew on. They were great, and yes, all my work smelled of coffee. So from the beginning I've always worked with scrap fabric that I've found lying around. It's still my favourite coffee shop! ♦♦



Peony on a vintage Slazenger tennis racket, part of Danielle's 'What a Racket' collection.



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Danielle creating one of her distinctive pieces.

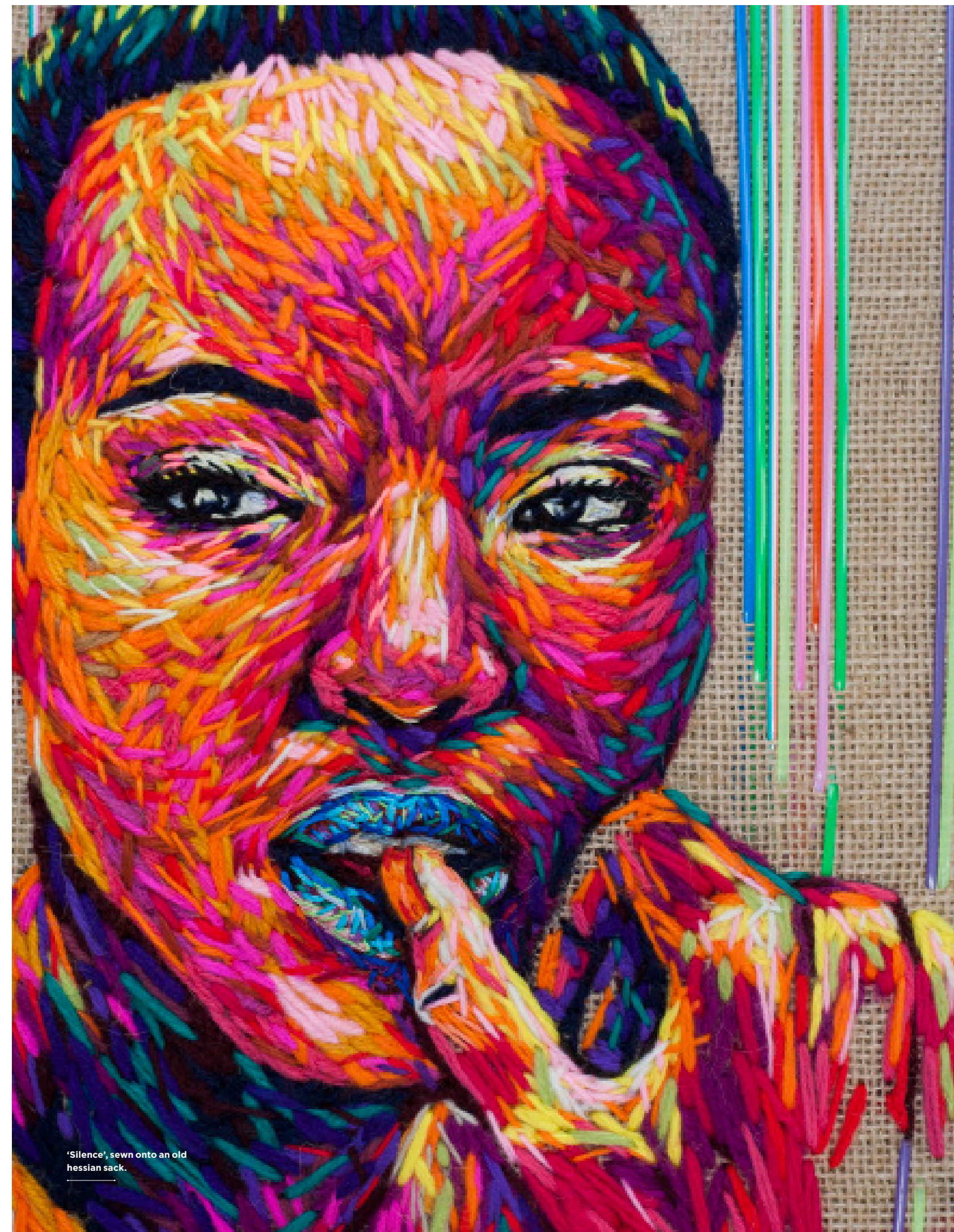
What inspired you to start working on vintage tennis racquets?

My friend showed me one with hearts woven on it on a kids’ DIY website and said, ‘look, how cool is that?’ and to me it was just like some kind of challenge. I knew I could do something really great with that idea. Next day I went to a market, found some old tennis racquets and worked something up. I put the result on Facebook, just saying ‘I made this today’ and a friend said she had to have it. So I sold it and made another one. It just worked, so I kept doing it.

When did embroidery become your career rather than a hobby?

I’ve always worked a bunch of different jobs including

photography and graphic design, even a bit of waitressing. I actually had another business plan: I had collected lots of vintage embroidered tea-towels, some were naïve, simple designs and others were really quite beautiful and complex, and I was going to upcycle them into jewellery. But at the end of 2015, just as I was preparing to launch, my embroidery was featured on Instagram’s #explore page and I picked up loads of followers and commissions. From there word began to spread. When something goes viral and grows so quickly then you suddenly have to make these big decisions – did I want to take all this on? For a while I juggled it with other work, including my day job in design, but just over a year ago I finally quit to work on this full time. I never thought I’d be giving up a job so I could watch bad TV and sew all day, but that’s what I did! ↔



‘Silence’, sewn onto an old hessian sack.



(left) Princess Leia from *Star Wars* and (right) Chewbacca. The contrast between the antique frames together with characters from popular culture create these compelling works.



(top) A swallow that Danielle stitched onto a rusted gate in a burnt out building, for the United Nations World Humanitarian Summit.
(bottom, right) A portrait of artist Jean-Michel Basquiat, framed in a vintage pool triangle.
(below) Proteas on a vintage Dunlop tennis racket.



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Is Instagram still important to your business?

In terms of marketing it’s the most essential tool for me, it’s my notice board and my shop front. I was so grateful for the demand and all the likes the images were getting, it helps you figure out what works and what doesn’t, but at the same time it removes you from the creative process as you’re relying too much on other people’s opinions. It’s a balancing act – the best things are the things I just do for me, not trying to impress anyone.

Tell us about your creative process.

I’m at my most creative when I have freedom from deadlines. Then I go somewhere that’s out of my comfort zone – a new market or a small town I haven’t been to before. I go into vintage furniture shops to find the weird stuff they have lying around. I’ve even embroidered on fences and rusted iron gates. Or sometimes I’ll find a colour that I get excited by – I’ll see a beautiful pink wool and think ‘I need to use this on something.’

Recently I went away to a small fishing village with my boyfriend. There were all these abandoned fisheries – and there I found a plastic ring of mesh, which I think was for catching shrimp. It’s held together with twine and has still got shells and stuff stuck to it; to me it’s the perfect thing to sew on. That will now sit in my studio until I have some more free time and headspace to think of what to do with it. I’m always hoarding things like that.

What’s next for you?

I’m busy working on a side business called DoubleTap, giving old tapestries a second life by turning them into bags. We’re not quite launched yet – I’m designing things, getting my corporate ID together and trying to find the right people to employ. The main goal for me at this time is to create jobs and make something new and exciting. 🍷

» Find out more about Danielle at danielleclough.com or Instagram @fiance_knowles