Hand stitching or embroidery is a skill in which artists use needle and thread to stitch into cloth. Often done within a hoop or a frame in the past, contemporary embroidery has now escaped this boundary and it’s now common to see the deliberate use of loose threads and ‘imperfect’ stitching, along with traditional techniques such as darning and mending being incorporated in to the work. Some artists like to work by hand (slow stitch) and some prefer to work by machine, using thread as a painting medium. Ana Teresa Barboza and Sarah Benning use a stitching practise that incorporates the standard embroidery hoop, while others like Danielle Clough and Severija Incirauskaite-Kriaunviciene use unconventional canvases. Clough stitches bright and colourful florals on to tennis rackets, and Incirauskaite-Kriaunviciene cross-stitches designs into metal objects such as plates, shovels and even the bonnets/hoods of cars. Do look up these artists.
I hand stitched a lot during my late teens but work life took over and I let it go. When I returned to working with textiles in 1996, stitch was (mainly) absent from my work whilst I concentrated on mastering the wet processes of surface design, but found its way back in my life during a detox retreat in India in 2013. Since then, hand stitch is once again a key process for me as evidenced through the body of work ‘In the Fullness of Time’. Everything about hand stitch resonates with me. The way thread makes marks on the cloth in as much as a pen or a brush might, but with the addition of literal texture. The choices involved as to what kind of mark is sought and in what weight. The consideration of thread colour, type and weight and of course, the physical act of stitching - ‘needle in, needle out’.

But, I don’t consider myself to be an ‘embroiderer’ as although hand stitch is a vital element in the work, I don’t use it in an ‘embroiderly’ way. As such, I’m presenting five artists who hand stitch, but aren’t embroiderers.

DOROTHY CALDWELL (www.dorothycaldwell.com)

Caldwell is one of my favourite artists and I am lucky enough to own a substantial work by her: Map of Tenderness. When we down-sized from a large house to Potter’s Farm, James and I knew we’d need to let go of many pieces of art as the wall-space available would be much reduced. One of the pieces we were completely resolved to keep was Map of Tenderness, and its place in the barn was determined at an early stage.

Dorothy Caldwell ‘Between Tree & Lake’

Caldwell’s work is a map of land and memory. She has always been interested in the landmarks that give a sense of place, and how humans mark and visualise the land. Living in Canada, Caldwell found that the early surveyors measured and structured the land mathematically, in the squares of the grid. As they mapped, they made notations on things such as rare plant growth and unusual geological formations, along with other points they were personally drawn to.
Much of Caldwell’s practice is dedicated to being ‘in place’ whether that be the Canadian Arctic, the Australian Outback or closer to home. She says “Stop. Walk. Gather. Know where you are”. Her skill lies in gathering the essence of the landscape by observing, identifying her own personal landmarks, touching, collecting and recording. It’s a physical, sensual process that enables her to create a sense of place. Spending time with Caldwell in almost any environment reminds you to re-open your eyes, really see things as they are and how they fit in to the overall.

Marks and mark-making matter to Caldwell and are very evident in her work, as is shape. The drawn mark, the rubbed mark, the painted mark, the thread mark. Rhythm and repetition are also important, as evidenced in her handbooks that serve as rich source material for developing the textile surface, and her stitch. This ‘vocabulary’ is also drawn from studying textile traditions and ordinary stitching practices such as darning, mending and patching. As I am, she is drawn to cloth that has history, is worn in places and is sometimes repaired and re-constructed.
On one of her visits to the UK we went to visit Polly Lyster, from whom I buy my large pieces of antique hemp. Dorothy and I fell in love with a very tatty French grain sack, full of darns, patches and holes. Dorothy insisted I have it as she knew I’d stitch it ‘whole’, whereas she prefers to use small, beautiful fragments to add accents to her pieces. Once Polly understood the desire for scaps, she dragged out two scrap bags and told Dorothy to “help herself”. Thus a happy couple of hours of delving, chatting and drinking coffee took place, part of “an ongoing process that encodes time and the richness of lives lived”.

Dorothy Caldwell, fragments of cloth
MATTHEW HARRIS (www.matthewharriscloth.co.uk)

Matthew Harris has “never been interested in perfect textiles”. He says “it’s the interruption of the patterned surface that excites me. Cloth made imperfect as a result of patches, tears, darns and frayed edges held together with purely necessary stitches; these are the qualities that motivate me to make my work”.

Generally using simple, basic cloth such as cotton twill dust sheets, his process employs dyeing, assembly, cutting, folding, piecing, patching, and hand stitching. Harris is “primarily concerned with abstract imagery and the translation of drawn marks on to the cloth and aims to create pieces that explore repetition, pattern and the disrupted or dissonant journey of line and image across and through the surface of cloth”. Working initially with paper and drawing allows Harris to use this output as an agent for change a means by which an initial image can be altered, adjusted and then responded to.
It allows for “unwanted imagery to be buried, for shapes to be altered and for lines to be broken and disrupted in their journey across a surface of the paper. By folding a drawn or painted image I am able to interact with it as an object and examine it from all sides in the hope of discovering something new and unexpected about the information it contains”.

Matthew Harris ‘Lantern Cloth’

When working with cloth, folding gives Harris cloth that has strength and weight as it becomes transformed into a multi-layered, compressed stack. More importantly, folding provides the means for visual information to become embedded, creating a strata of trapped colour, mark and line exactly similar to a rock face. This strata can then be dug into and excavated in order for their contents to be revealed. He says “this process of digging and sifting allows me to move the visual material back and forth; to turn it over and examine it in close proximity, to expose what is hidden and to cover over what is no longer needed until each piece finds its place and an image emerges”.

I own two small pieces of work by Harris, one in paper and one in cloth, neither of which I’ve framed as I like to handle them, particularly the cloth piece. Handling enables me to really appreciate what he achieves; feeling the bulk and thickness of the layers, running my fingers across the stitched marks and pondering the secrets embedded within. Secrets that will never be revealed to me but which are integral to the look and feel of the work, and that ignite my imagination.
HILARY BOWER (www.hilarybower.com)

I first experienced Bower’s work back in 2000 and I wish I’d invested in her work back then, as I’m sure it would be on my wall now, regardless of restricted hanging space. For me, her work has an ‘industrial’ feel that would be perfect for Potter’s Farm. But, it’s never too late as she’s a dedicated practising artist. Bower’s father was an art teacher and her mother knitted, made clothes and home furnishings; a great combination of curiosity, knowledge and skills to have in ones parents! She remembers enjoying the feel of fabrics, their textures and the smell of new fabric waiting to be made into a garment.

Hilary Bower, ‘Spaces Held’
Texture was a key element in attracting her to art textiles; “the interplay of differing surface qualities and materials which could be embraced and manipulated, and the richness of colour and pattern within many ethnic textiles”.

After working mainly with fabric and thread for many years, Bower is now perhaps best known for her ability to incorporate paper, wire, metal, wood and found objects into her work. I have included her in my (hand) stitch selection as stitch, whether as a means of construction or as a drawing tool is still critical to her work and making. Bower feels that her work “straddles fine art, textiles and drawing and isn’t easily categorised”.
She focuses on the ordinary and seemingly insignificant elements of life, being inspired by the small things observed around her. The notions of silence, stillness, waiting, matter and marking, materiality, shadow, and light, and exploring ways to make these intangible things tangible are her current focus.

CAROLINE BARTLETT (www.carolinebartlett.com)

I remember being with Leslie Morgan at a lecture given by Caroline Bartlett in the formative years of Committed to Cloth. After the talk, Caroline shared some of her work with the audience and Leslie and I spent some of our virtually non-existent profit on a piece, which Leslie still has hanging in her home today.

I will forever mourn not being able to make it up to see the Cloth & Memory exhibition, curated by Lesley Millar at Salts Mill, Bradford. But, a friend went so at least I got to see images of the work and Stilled, where Bower uses stitch in conjunction with imprinted porcelain and embroidery hoops, really captured me. The specific location was critical to the work, as Bartlett describes: “…the huge now silent spinning hall, a place suffused with atmosphere, still smelling of its former life with oil stained floors and bits of yarn caught in cracks and crevices; an unreconstituted space”.

Hilary Bower ‘In Silence’
On the plus side, I did get to see *Backwards, Forwards* at the Stroud International Textile Festival and was intrigued by how Bower ran stitches under the ‘skin’ of the cloth (in this case, fine wool) rather than on the surface.

Bartlett took a Post Graduate Textile Diploma course at Goldsmiths, where she started to explore print in combination with methods of manipulation. She went on to develop a vocabulary of marking, printing and imprinting, erasing and reworking, pleating and manipulating. Bartlett found that the cloth retained the workings as ‘traces; an alchemy of materials and processes.
Bartlett has become increasingly interested in what textiles can do through their behavioural properties, and what they can say through their materiality, tactility, associations with the body and the domestic, and with the colonial and industrial past. As we’ve already discovered, all of us have a strong connection to textiles and know they are a powerful trigger in stimulating memories.

DEBBIE SMYTH (www.debbie-smythe.com)

Although Debbie Smythe doesn’t work on cloth, I’ve included her here as I consider her to be a hand-stitcher. She is an artist who makes ‘thread drawings’ on the wall created by stretching a network of threads between accurately plotted pins. Her work beautifully blurs the boundaries between fine art drawings, art textiles, flat and 3D work, illustration and embroidery. It literally lifts the drawn line off the page in a series of ‘pin and thread’ drawings. She says:
“On first glance, it can look like a mass of threads but as you get closer sharp lines come into focus, creating a spectacular image. The images are first plotted out before being filled out with the thread, the sharp angles contrasting with the floating ends of the thread. And despite the complexity of the lengthy process I try to capture a great feeling of energy and spontaneity, and, in some cases, humour”.

Smythe enjoys playing with scale, creating both gallery installations and works for domestic interiors. Her unique style lends itself to many environments from corporate and public spaces, window displays, set design, graphic design and illustration; “I feel as if I am taking thread out of its comfort zone, presenting it on monumental scale and creating an eye-catching, and in some case jaw dropping effect”. I’ll say!