



MAGIC MUSHROOMS

Lacking in confidence, Claire de Witte has been quietly and privately creating lifelike fungi, bark and acorn cups for nine years but feels now is the time to reveal her mushroom magic at the Knitting & Stitching Show



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Can you tell us a little about your background and how you started out on your journey with embroidery?

My mother and both my grandmothers were prolific knitters, stitchers and dressmakers and wanted to pass their knowledge on to me, but I didn't want to know. I had three brothers and preferred to climb trees and play football. It wasn't until my late 20s and early 30s that I started doing simple cross stitch and completed an A-level in textiles, and it progressed from there. Now, I think of all the things I would have learnt if only I'd sat down with Gran.

What was your work like initially and how has it developed?

I've always loved fairytales so my passion for textiles started off with creating dolls. Then I discovered machine embroidery, initially working in two-dimensions creating little badges, but progressing to creating ships which were heavily machine embroidered. Later, as woodlands have always inspired me, for the birthday of a friend who loved fungi I thought I'd see if I could make a mushroom. It's taken a lot of trial and error to get to where I am now.

Do you have a woodland nearby that provides inspiration?

I live close to both Hainault and Epping Forests and spend a lot of time there. I'm also lucky that where I work at Barking and Dagenham College there is a big woodland park just behind the campus called the Chase. Quite wild and overgrown, it has beautiful glades and ponds. I spend lunchtimes there.

What field do you work in?

I am the creative technician for art and design and fashion at the college. I get to play all day every day.

Do you find your job spurs you on in creating your own work?

It does. You've got people to bounce your creative ideas off and the students and lecturing staff are very supportive. As I am based in the fashion rooms, where there are plenty of sewing machines, when we have a spare half hour I can sit and play. Because we teach so many different elements, I'm always looking at other ways to create.

In terms of inspiration for your fungi do you refer to specialist books?

A lot of friends know about my obsession so if they're out and they see fungi or a lovely moss-covered piece of bark they will take photos for me. I take a lot of photographs, too. I tend to use those rather than pictures in books.

How important is striving for realism?

I would say it is one of the most important elements of my practice. I love the fact that my work is so realistic. When people see the fungi for the first time, even though they are encased in glass domes, they ask 'how long will they last?' as though they will eventually turn to mould. When you explain how they are made, it's really interesting because they don't believe it. That's a really nice feeling because you know you've got where you want to be.

Tell me about how you create your woodland artworks.

The bark is paper; thread and yarn which I lay out on a dissolvable fabric and stitch over to make a more solid piece. I dye this and then dissolve the paper and as it starts to dissolve I pull it apart in places so I can get the natural gaps and holes in the moss and bark. Then heat-gunning is involved to get more texture and to create more realistic crevices with the edges tattered from burning. Once I've got the shape there's a lot of free machine embroidery; then I start ripping away at some of the stitches to give the moss that fluffy texture. It seems like it takes forever! An A4 piece would probably take about five or six hours of constant work, although I do a bit each day.

The fungi caps are machine embroidered on a dissolvable base, which depending on the fungi might be one colour or two or three. The gills underneath are also machine embroidered. The stalks are



paper but dyed and some are stitched, with tattered and distressed silks to give the gills of the fungi their texture.

Which is your favourite piece?

My favourite piece is about 16 inches tall and is a branch-like piece of bark with parachute mushrooms circling around it and is in a giant glass tube like a specimen. It's the biggest thing I've ever done and I feel it's a culmination of all the techniques I've learnt to date.

What tool or material is essential in your practice?

Dissolvable fabric is vital. I've never tried creating on a fabric base but I would think you can't get the same result. According to how much of the fabric you let dissolve away, you can mould the piece into a shape that holds.

How long have you been creating fungi and bark?

For about nine years. I have a fear of failure so I've never really done any big shows before. There was an open call for the Future Icons show in London in May, and friends and family said: 'Just apply. What have you got to lose?' so I did and I was accepted.

Did that bring fresh opportunities?

I sold quite a few things and I'm in talks with a customer who would like something on a large scale. It also spurred me on to having a stand at the Knitting & Stitching Show in London this year.

What does working in textiles give you that other media might not?

I love textiles because you have the choice of two- or three-dimensions and can mould pieces. I love the feel, it's just a beautiful medium to work with. I've seen mushrooms recreated in ceramics and paper but I don't think anything can give you that gorgeous realistic look that textiles can.

What has fuelled your interest in fungi and woodlands?

I don't just create fungi, I create twigs, bark and little acorn cups. I think it's just the beauty of woodlands; mushrooms are a magical part of that and the variety is neverending.

What is the most useful thing anyone has ever said to you?

Because I tend to be a bit of a doubter, probably just have faith and enjoy what you are doing.

What would you like to be doing in 10 years?

I think I would like to have progressed and gained in confidence enough to teach others. 🍄

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