

ART MARKET

Sotheby's is at the centre of a stitch-up – but it's all for a good cause

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21 FEBRUARY 2020



Stitchers working on Wolfgang Tillmans' *No Man is an Island* (2019). Courtesy Fine Cell; © Wolfgang Tillmans

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It is heartening to see auction houses turning empty salerooms over to a good cause during the gaps in the auction calendars and offering the services of their auctioneers at high-profile charity events. Next week, from 26 February to 3 March, Sotheby's Bond Street premises in London will be given over to the organisation Fine Cell Work and its exhibition and online auction called 'Human Touch', which consists of new textile works designed by contemporary artists and stitched by prison inmates, the latter trained by the volunteers from this 23-year-old charity and social enterprise.

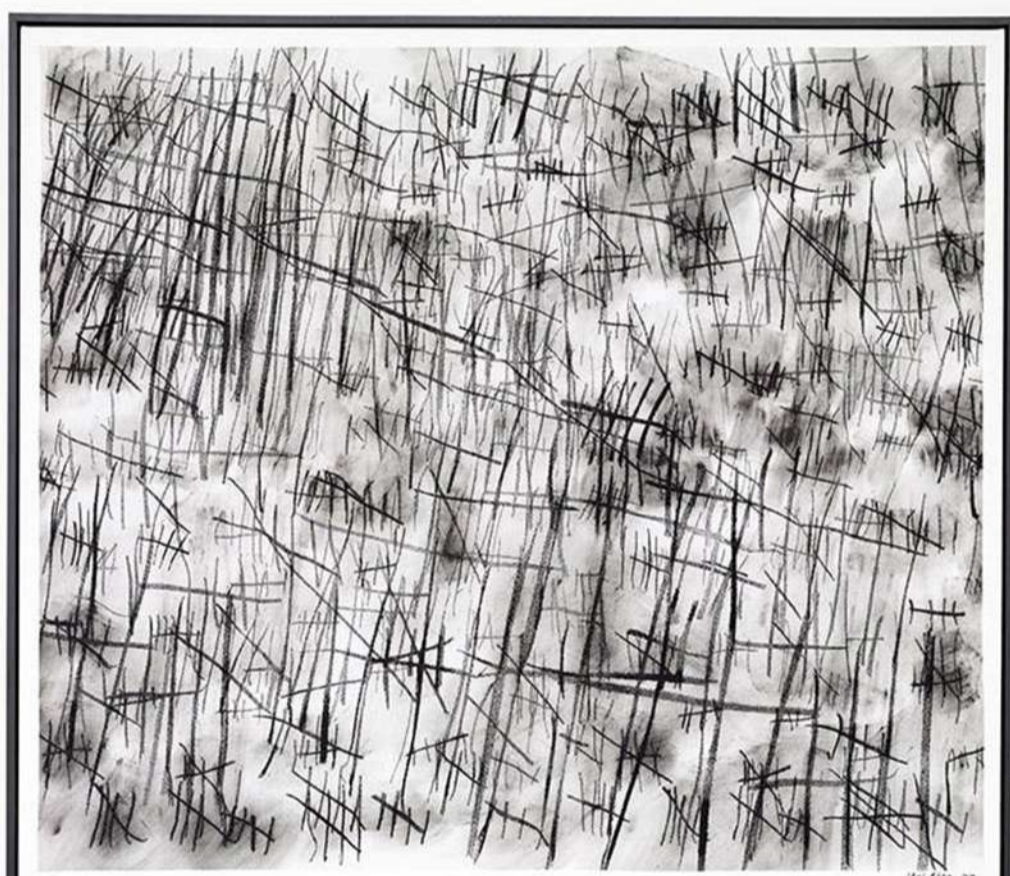
For the Chinese artist and dissident Ai Weiwei, one of the eight participating artists, the project has particular resonance. As he explains in the accompanying film, 'I have been in secret jail, and also many, many of my friends have been put in jail – are still in jail. To take away the liberty of an individual is a pitiful act.' He chose to make a design of 28 embroidered panels, joined together with plain panels in a variation of a Log Cabin-style quilt, each panel digitally printed then embroidered in stranded cotton using a wide variety of techniques. The subject is the 'very powerful topic' of the refugee and mass migration – a frieze of walking figures, bowed in their blankets, carrying children and their meagre possessions.



Odyssey in Quilting (2019), Ai Weiwei. Courtesy Fine Cell Work; © Ai Weiwei

Odyssey in Quilting (2019) was realised by 13 stitchers working in eight prisons. As Ben, who worked on five of the panels, explains: 'The sections took over 200 hours to complete [...] For this piece of work to be allowed to be stitched by people who have their own battles and struggles truly shows what this piece is about.' Robert, who worked on three panels, says: 'I most enjoyed sewing the smaller, more intricate parts of the design, the faces, taking real care to capture what the artist had drawn [...] Fine Cell Work has helped me to get through over 12 years behind a cell door. Showed me that I am not worthless, not useless, that I can learn, I can be creative, I can make things of beauty that other people appreciate.'

As the remarks suggest, most of the more than 600 FCW stitchers active in over 30 participating prisons are men – 95 per cent to be precise – some of whom spend 23 hours a day locked up. An average of 24 hours each week is taken up by needlework, for which a small payment is made. To some it may sound like exploitation but, as the film makes clear, the participants benefit from the activity – as well as the charity's various projects, which include a training workshop for ex-offenders.



Numbers, a hand-sewn photograph (2019), Idris Khan. Courtesy Fine Cell Work; © Idris Khan

What else will visitors find at Sotheby's? Idris Khan, for instance, offers *Numbers, a hand-sewn photograph* (2019), a framed silk-screen fabric piece stitched by a single hand which makes reference to the tallies marked on cell walls to mark the passage of time. Photographer Wolfgang Tillmans has repurposed his famous anti-Brexit poster 'No man is an island. No country by itself' as a design for a large needlepoint cushion, and needlepoint is also the medium of Bob and Roberta Smith's vibrant word piece, *Art Makes People Powerful* (2019). Cornelia Parker presents *Bitter/Sweet (verso)* (2019), while Annie Morris has conceived a chaise longue ornamented with an embroidered doodle of a design wittily titled *Hope from a Thin Line* (2019). Carolina Mazzolari's wool piece was stitched by both artist and prisoners, while Francis Upritchard has selected glowing Italian silk as the ground for her embroidered paravent or folding screen, *The Artists* (2019).

Bidding has already begun online for the silent auction on www.humantouchexhibition.com. Minimum bids begin at £3,000.



The Artists (2009), Francis Upritchard. Courtesy Fine Cell Work; © Francis Upritchard

'Fine Cell Work: Human Touch' is at [Sotheby's London](#) from 26 February–3 March.

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