

NEWS

An extraordinary collaboration between prisoners and artists goes on sale

The pieces were designed by the artists and embroidered by prisoners across the UK, before being put on display in Sotheby's Bond Street this week



BY CHARLOTTE MCCAUGHAN
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WATSON

For 23 years, Fine Cell Work has been doing valuable work with Britain's prison population, offering them the chance to learn new skills, be paid for their work and take part in a project that will give them direction upon release. They work with over 600 prisoners in around 30 UK prisons, each given a pack of thread, a needle and a project to work on, be it a needlepoint cushion, embroidery or chain stitching. Now, they are presenting a landmark collaboration between eight contemporary artists and top stitchers across their incarcerated network called *Human Touch*. An impressive and varied roster of artists have taken part, including Ai Weiwei, Idris Khan, Carolina Mazzolari, Annie Morris, Cornelia Parker, Bob and Roberta Smith, Wolfgang Tillmans and Francis Upritchard. The eight pieces created as a result of this partnership will be auctioned online and the pieces are available to view in Sotheby's Bond Street until March 3.

For *Human Touch*, once the eight artists had designed their pieces, Fine Cell Work then broke them down into sections and provided the stitchers with lengths of thread (pre-cut as scissors are not allowed in prison) and detailed plans so that the inmates could create the final piece. In some cases, a number of sections were then put together (such as Ai Weiwei and Annie Morris' works) and the artists may have added some final details.

One stitcher, named Ben, has been in prison for 17 years and said of the opportunity afforded by Fine Cell Work: 'It is not just an achievement or honour to work on commissions but also a very therapeutic hobby. I say that you can't stitch angry or annoyed as it will show in your work... When you do start to sew and settle down into the flow, you become more relaxed. Your thought patterns change.'

finecellwork.co.uk



Ai Weiwei, *Odyssey in Quilting*, quilt

From afar, this work looks like a lovely homemade quilt depicting life at sea. However, the closer you get, the more you can appreciate the intricate embroidery of the piece but also the shocking truth of what Weiwei has screen printed onto each of the 28 sections; far from a bucolic sea scene, Weiwei shows the plight of refugees crossing the seas, showing the harrowing image of a baby washed up on the beach, tumultuous seas and storms. The piece was stitched across eight prisons by 13 stitchers, including Attila who said 'I was told that I would be given one of the Ai Weiwei pieces and I felt I had to tell my family straight away. I felt proud that I could have the chance to collaborate on such a special project,' and Andrew - 'My mind wanders constantly while I'm stitching. It helps pass the time, especially if I am depressed or upset about something.'

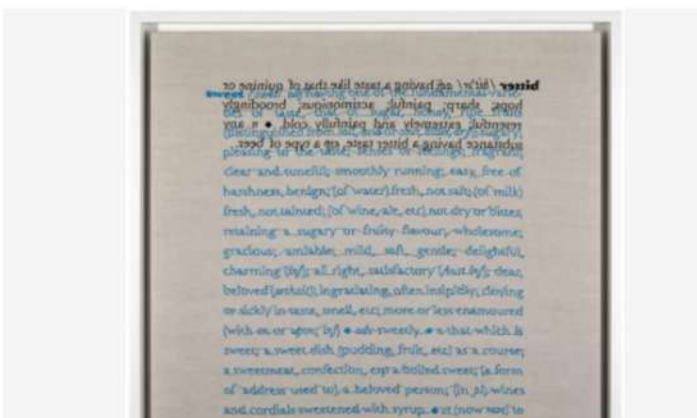
Starting bid: £70,000



Annie Morris, *Hope From a Thin Line*, antique chaise longue

Annie Morris drew the design that appears on this chaise longue freehand. It was split into sections of fabric to go to four stitchers in two prisons who then returned them, at which point they were sewn into one covering for the chaise. Annie added the coloured embroidery herself at the end of the process. Winnie, one of the stitchers, noted 'Feelings overflow me, and stitching allows me to unload my heart and soul, and help my mind to process my emotions... I would tell anyone bidding at auction to for it as a lot of love and affection has gone into the pieces.'

Starting bid: £8,000



Cornelia Parker, *Bitter/Sweet (verso)*, framed wall-hanging

As a longstanding collaborator with Fine Cell Work, Cornelia has been supporting the charity for years now. For this project, she chose to embroider two opposing dictionary definitions onto a single piece of linen, asking the stitcher to do it in a manner 'to look like someone has penned the work,' explains Lee, who is responsible for the entirety of the embroidery work. It forms part of a series by Cornelia entitled *Opposites* and really proves the worth of Fine Cell Work, as Lee explained 'without the work I don't think I would have been able to get through my sentence. It helps me to keep my mind strong.'

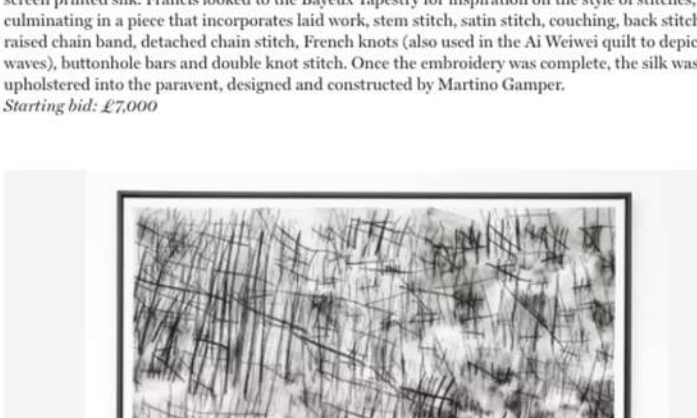
Starting bid: £8,000



Francis Upritchard, *The Artists*, paravent with upholstered silk panels

This piece was undertaken by six prisoners in four locations, who hand-embroidered cotton onto the screen printed silk. Francis looked to the Bayeux Tapestry for inspiration on the style of stitches, culminating in a piece that incorporates laid work, stem stitch, satin stitch, couching, back stitch, raised chain band, detached chain stitch, French knots (also used in the Ai Weiwei quilt to depict the waves), buttonhole bars and double knot stitch. Once the embroidery was complete, the silk was upholstered into the paravent, designed and constructed by Martino Gamper.

Starting bid: £7,000



Idris Khan, *Numbers - a hand-sewn photograph*, framed wall-hanging

'There is a long history and images of tally marks made in prison to mark the length of time someone is in a cell,' says Khan. 'I really thought it was an exciting idea to make a stitched relic to represent the time it took Ben [the stitcher] in his cell to make the artwork.' Khan screen-printed the fabric which Ben then embroidered over, taking over 200 hours to finish the piece, which is perhaps the most evocative of the nature of *Human Touch*.

Starting bid: £20,000



Bob and Roberta Smith, *Art Makes People Powerful*, framed wall-hanging

A single stitcher created this fine needlepoint work using wool on a canvas background. Keiron was supplied with a chart of the design and the crewel wool and then stitched the work in a basketweave tent stitch, which gives the artwork a graphic structure. Keiron approached the challenge in a unique way, saying 'When looking at the size of the piece, it was quickly apparent that the work wouldn't fit any commercially available frame. "Free-stitching" would have made maintaining the tension a real challenge, so I took it upon myself to build a custom frame with the help of another Fine Cell Work Stitcher.'

Starting bid: £4,000



Wolfgang Tillmans, *No Man Is An Island*, cushion

Taking one of his most recognisable works, Wolfgang Tillmans decided that he wanted to turn it into a cushion through this project, saying 'The many painstaking hours of stitching has yielded fantastic results.' This embroidery is so meticulous and complicated that the work is currently unfinished. It is being exhibited in Sotheby's and will be returned to prison to be finished before being made into a cushion. Nine threads of DMC stranded cotton are used to fill each gap and Fine Cell Work spent a long time matching each colour to the myriad in the original artwork.

Starting bid: £10,000



Carolina Mazzolari, *Void*, framed wall-hanging

A single prison inmate used stranded cotton and crewel wool to embroider this work, which is a continuation of Carolina's *Void* series. The artist added some of the finishing touches herself, but she changed course from her original plan - 'Originally I had planned to add to it but I was very impressed with what the stitcher had done, so I decided to let that area be the main embroidery. I finished the work myself with a pen instead.'

Starting bid: £3,000

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