

Prisoner-made artworks designed with stars from Ai Weiwei to Wolfgang Tillmans on sale at Sotheby's

"It has shown me that I am not worthless. I can make things of beauty that other people appreciate"

By Ros Weaver

26 February 2020 • 11:11am



A quilt designed by Ai Weiwei and realised by prisoners | CREDIT: Fine Cell Work

Today, work embroidered by prisoners but designed by eight well-known contemporary artists goes on show and online auction at [Sotheby's, London](#).

Human Touch is the result of a project organised by Fine Cell Work, the charity that sends embroidery instructors into prisons. They are best known for their pretty needlepoint cushions which go on sale at the Old Chelsea Town Hall each year to fund their work. The prisoners who embrace the craft, many of them serving long sentences, find solace in stitching and some have become very skilled.

The exhibition presents an opportunity to make a socially responsible investment in extraordinary art, made with contributing artists Ai Weiwei, Idris Khan, Carolina Mazzolari, Annie Morris, Cornelia Parker, Bob and Roberta Smith, Wolfgang Tillmans and Francis Upritchard.

Each artist has built a long-distance working relationship with a prisoner, or group of prisoners, to produce a piece of work. The result is a stunning and thought-provoking miscellany that shows off the stitchers' skills to fantastic effect.

The headline piece is Ai Weiwei's huge quilt composed of 28 panels embroidered by many hands and depicting the transition of migrants across the globe, a theme that has dominated his recent work.

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It's been a slow process. The artists have communicated with their assistants remotely, through the charity's trainers using sketches and videos. "What isn't shown on the work but is very real is the communication, trust and understanding of the process and joy of making pieces like this," says Weiwei.

Robert, one of the many embroiderers who worked on Ai Weiwei's quilt 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. I was always thinking about how the other panels would work and what the whole completed piece would look like."



Annie Morris, Chaise Longue | CREDIT: Fine Cell Work

It's remarkable how learning this patient skill has benefitted the prisoners in the programme. The reoffending rate amongst Fine Cell Work's trainees, 95% of whom are men, is only four percent compared to a national average of 48%.

"Fine Cell Work has helped me to get through over twelve years behind a cell door," says Robert. "It's given me a sense of purpose and taught me so many new skills. It has shown me that I am not worthless, not useless, that I can learn, I can be creative and I can make things of beauty that other people appreciate."

Artist Carolina Mazzolari, herself a skilled embroiderer, whose work Void was stitched by a prisoner known as Ben, is a great admirer of the charity's work. "They employ people who couldn't have a job otherwise," she says. "To know that their work is exhibited at Sotheby's will have an impact on their self esteem."



Wolfgang Tillmans, Work in Progress | CREDIT: Fine Cell Work

Ben also worked on Idris Khan's piece, Numbers, a hand sewn photograph, much of which is executed in tiny 'seed' stitches that took him over 200 hours to execute. The piece that Khan asked him to embroider resembles tally marks scrawled on a wall, and the relevance of this was not lost on the embroiderer. "I counted tallies for the amount of time it took me to do this piece," he says.

Investment-worthy art in this unique sale includes Cornelia Parker's Bitter/Sweet (verso) 2019, from her Opposite series, with intricate hand embroidery on linen and Bob and Roberta Smith's piece Art Makes People Powerful, a large contemporary needlepoint sampler. Other one-of-a-kind art includes Francis Upritchard's paravent featuring embroidered Italian silk panels and Annie Morris's intricately embroidered chaise longue.

All works will be sold by Fine Cell Work with offers invited over a guide price.

26 February – 3 March 2020, W1A 2AA; finecellwork.co.uk/humantouch

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