

Bring Me Sunshine

Sunflower art cushion

Kathryn Harmer-Fox



I am an artist who paints and draws with fabric and thread. My work is representational rather than abstract and whether the figures in my work are human or non-human they, rather than their surrounds, are always my focus. Believing that the ability to draw frees you as an artist and as a teacher, drawing, like reading, is an acquired skill rather than a gift. Every Saturday morning, I teach drawing from my studio overlooking the ocean in South Africa.

Materials

23½ x 23½ in (60 x 60 cm) piece of cotton duck canvas (for the cushion face).

23½ x 25½ in (60 x 65 cm) piece of cotton duck canvas (for the cushion back).

21½ in (55 cm) zip in a sky blue colour.

21½ - 23½ in (55 - 60 cm) squared cushion inner.

Various and assorted scraps of fabric and reels of thread which are similar in colour to the source image.

Various shades of blue for the background sky (enough to cover both the face and the back of the cushion).

Equipment

Sewing machine (you must be able to drop the feed dogs; a couple of my students have stuck tape over them and said that it works just as well).
Denim/jeans needle (a strong needle is required to punch through the increasing layers of fabric and thread).

Embroidery/darning foot.

General sewing foot.

Zipper foot.

General sewing materials (pins, sharp scissors, tape measure).

Toothpicks (for holding little snippets of fabric in place beneath the foot whilst you sew it into place - keeping your fingers well clear of that previously mentioned stabbing needle!).



General Information

Before starting to sew, I fill at least four bobbins each with black and white Metler Seralene thread, as it lasts twice as long as ordinary thread, using the white when sewing lighter tones and black with the darker ones.

Set up for free motion stitch by setting your sewing machine's top tension to "0". Until I start sewing the cushion together, my criteria remain focused on the surface appearance rather than any strength required. Preferring to lessen the impact of the bobbin colour popping through as much as possible, I tend to ignore embroidery threads for a similar reason. Their desire to pop and shine often hinders my vision more than enhancing it.

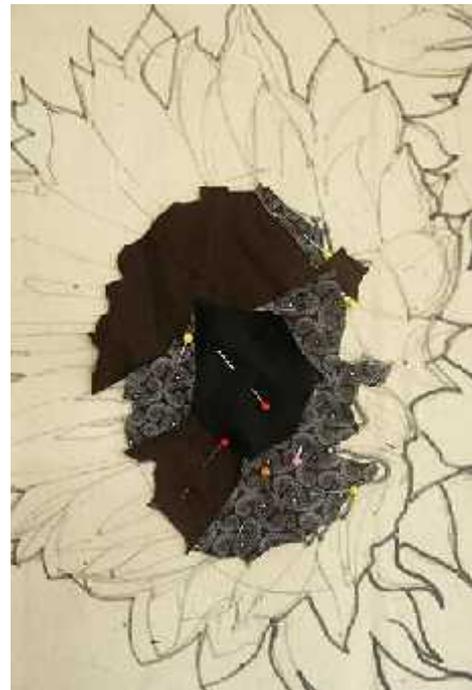
When setting up my sewing station, I surround myself with my choice of fabric swatches to the left of my machine; my reels of thread to the right with all my sewing materials, propping my source photograph up against a standing frame of sorts in the middle, where it is clearly visible throughout the process.

Transferring the image to the canvas

If you are unable to draw free-hand, trace the image onto the canvas. A light box is a very handy piece of equipment but should you not have access to one, enlarge your photograph and placing it beneath your canvas, tape both to a window (this only works during the day) and trace the outline. Your arms may get tired but the image will be clear enough to copy. Alternatively you can have the image printed directly onto your canvas by a fabric printing shop or service (you could find out more online).



Take your source photograph to your fabric stash and start pulling swatches of fabric that match the image (don't forget to check the 'wrong' side as well as the colours within patterns). Do the same with your thread collection and bring everything to your sewing station. You may find it helpful to 'scrunch' up your eyes, filtering out all unnecessary detail and allowing you to view the essential effect.



Start cutting shapes similar in proportion and colour to your drawing and source photograph, pinning them into place on your drawing (don't be too prescriptive or finicky, remember, this flower stands tall in the full sun; it is blown about and shredded by wind; birds and insects feed from it and make it their home). Look for the underlying tone and shape – the essence underneath all that pesky detail; you can hone in later.

Thread your machine with a colour that is the least noticeable on your pinned shapes and using a meandering stitch (with your feed dogs disengaged), sew the shapes to the canvas.

This stitching is in no way descriptive; its sole purpose is to hold the fabric shapes in place (otherwise the build-up of pins becomes very prickly and somewhat painful).

Throughout this process of pinning and stitching, you will be continually changing your top thread (to the least noticeable of tones) and alternating between black and white bobbins.



Continue appliquéing fabric snippets onto the canvas, allowing the general shape of the sunflowers, their foliage and the sky to emerge – at this stage, you are laying down the foundation for your art work.



You can also play with little bits of fabric and fibre, scattering them across your surface, placing a bit of coloured netting on top to hold them in place and then stitching the whole lot down – the little bits add interest and the coloured voile adds another tone.



You can alter your art piece to your heart's content but in order to make the assessment, pin it up, stand back and look at it at regular intervals. Check the overall composition and the individual shapes and colours.

Please do not make the mistake of *judging* – there is a huge difference between *judging* and *critiquing* an art work; the former is comparative and can be overly emotional and destructive; the latter is objective and helpful. Make sure you are always giving yourself a hand rather than biting it. (Turn it upside down to get a different view point or scrunch your eyes up to delete extra details.)

Once you are satisfied with the overall appearance of the work and you have completed the hard slog of covering the whole surface, you can start to have some fun.



Let your needle loose and allow it to run around and over the edges of the fabric pieces – sew a line drawing of the sunflower and its foliage but don't allow yourself to become obsessive with sticking to the edges or describing it exactly – be expressive and play.

I usually use a navy blue, deep maroon or forest green thread colour for outlining – these colours have more oomph than plain black.

Outlining the work lifts you out of the chaos of cut shapes, giving sense and meaning to the form. Now you can start changing the thread colours. Continue the technique of free motion machine embroidery begun in the outline, stitching but driving hard back and forth across some shapes and dancing lightly over others. Add little descriptive squiggles and scratches in colours that add meaning to your image.

Cut little strips of fabric and holding them in position with a toothpick, stitch them to your image, doubling the impact of the thread drawing in terms of colour and texture. I call this technique 'fibre embedment' rather than appliqué – the fabric is blended into the image rather than lying on top of it.

Remember that even at this stage, if something doesn't work then cover it up.



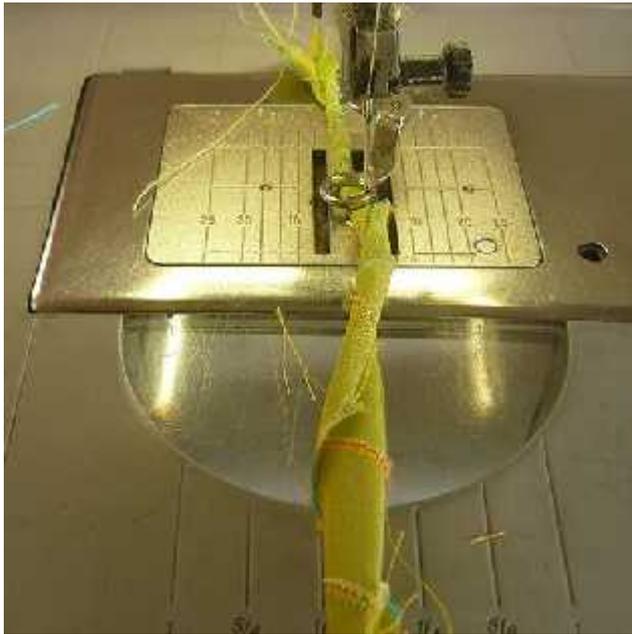
Complete the face of your cushion and then continue the technique used to create your background onto the larger piece of canvas for the back, adding the zip when it is completed.



Making the wrapped cording and sewing the cushion together

Cut long, narrow (about 1-1.5 cm wide) strips of fabric from plain, textured or patterned fabric that makes the most of your sunflowers and sew them together so that the total length circumvents your cushion at least couple of times.

Thread both your needle and bobbin with similar colours (as both will be visible) and set your machine on the widest zig-zag stitch. Twist the strip until you have a coiled cord beneath your embroidery foot and holding one end of the strip in your left hand behind the foot, pull it back whilst guiding it with your right hand so that the needle strikes either side of the cord, thereby wrapping the thread around it (below left).



Keep your stitch density quite loose on the first wrapping - you can always run it under the foot a second or third time (changing the thread colour if you like to add more variety).

Square up the front and back pieces of the cushion and sew the wrong sides together using zig-zag stitch.

Inserting the cord

Place your wrapped cord tightly up against the edge of the cushion and with your machine still set on the widest zig-zag stitch and guiding the needle into both the cushion and around or into the wrapped cord, affix the cord to the outer edge of your cushion, continuing on even when you are affixing the cord to itself (you can do this as many times as you feel necessary – each orbit will add width to your corded border).





Add your cushion pad and throw this little bit of joy onto your couch or chair – it will brighten up and add cheer to any space.

Kathryn Harmer-Fox is an artist based in South Africa. She teaches a number of different workshops both nationally and internationally (she will be teaching in Australia, Tasmania and New Zealand in 2017). Kathryn has just completed a little booklet relating to her fibre art workshop 'Using Your Sewing Machine as a Creative Tool'.

She accepts commissions (the exchange rate with the South African rand is very attractive at the moment!) and although she has not travelled as much, her work has settled in many private and public collections; also appearing between the pages of quite a few publications.

Kathryn's 'A Life Lived in Ink' received both the Grand and the Clover prizes in the 'Reflections' competition hosted by the European Patchwork Meeting in 2015 and can be seen on their website.

Kathryn's Facebook Page can be found at www.facebook.com/kathryn.art or she can be contacted via e-mail at Kathryn.kathy@telkomsa.net

Suppliers

Duck Canvas from Whaley's www.whaleys-bradford.ltd.uk

Mettler Seralene thread from Minerva Crafts www.minervacrafts.com

USA and Canada

Cotton Duck Canvas from Dharma Trading www.dharmatrading.com or

Fabric Time www.fabricktime.com

Mettler threads from www.fabric.com or www.scrapbooking.ca

Australia and New Zealand

Cotton Duck Canvas from Takaruna Art Supplies www.tasart.co.nz or

www.duckcloth.com.au