

# HAIL, HAIL TO THOSE WHO TRY

With her embroideries, graph-paper drawings and paintings, Valerie Potter has forged a life of creativity against the odds

LUCY EDEMATIE



Untitled, c. 2000, cross stitch on hardanger fabric, 10 x 7.5 in. / 25 x 19 cm  
all images courtesy: Jennifer Lauren Gallery, unless otherwise stated

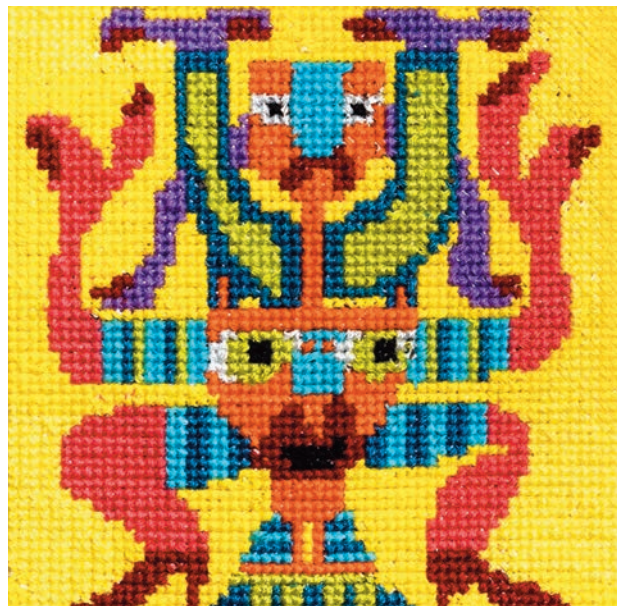
“I sent him photos of my drawings because I thought he might like to see them. I didn’t have any idea of being an artist; I was more looking for someone to connect with,” says Valerie Potter. She is talking about esteemed outsider art historian Roger

Cardinal, who was so impressed by what she sent that he introduced her to a collector and a gallerist, and organised her first exhibition.

The solo show – which was presented in 1985 at the University of Kent in the south of England – marked the



top left: Untitled, 2022, cross stitch on fabric,  
6.5 x 6.5 in. / 16.5 x 16.5 cm  
top right, below left and below right: Untitled, 2020,  
cross stitch on fabric, 4 x 4 in. / 10.5 x 10.5 cm

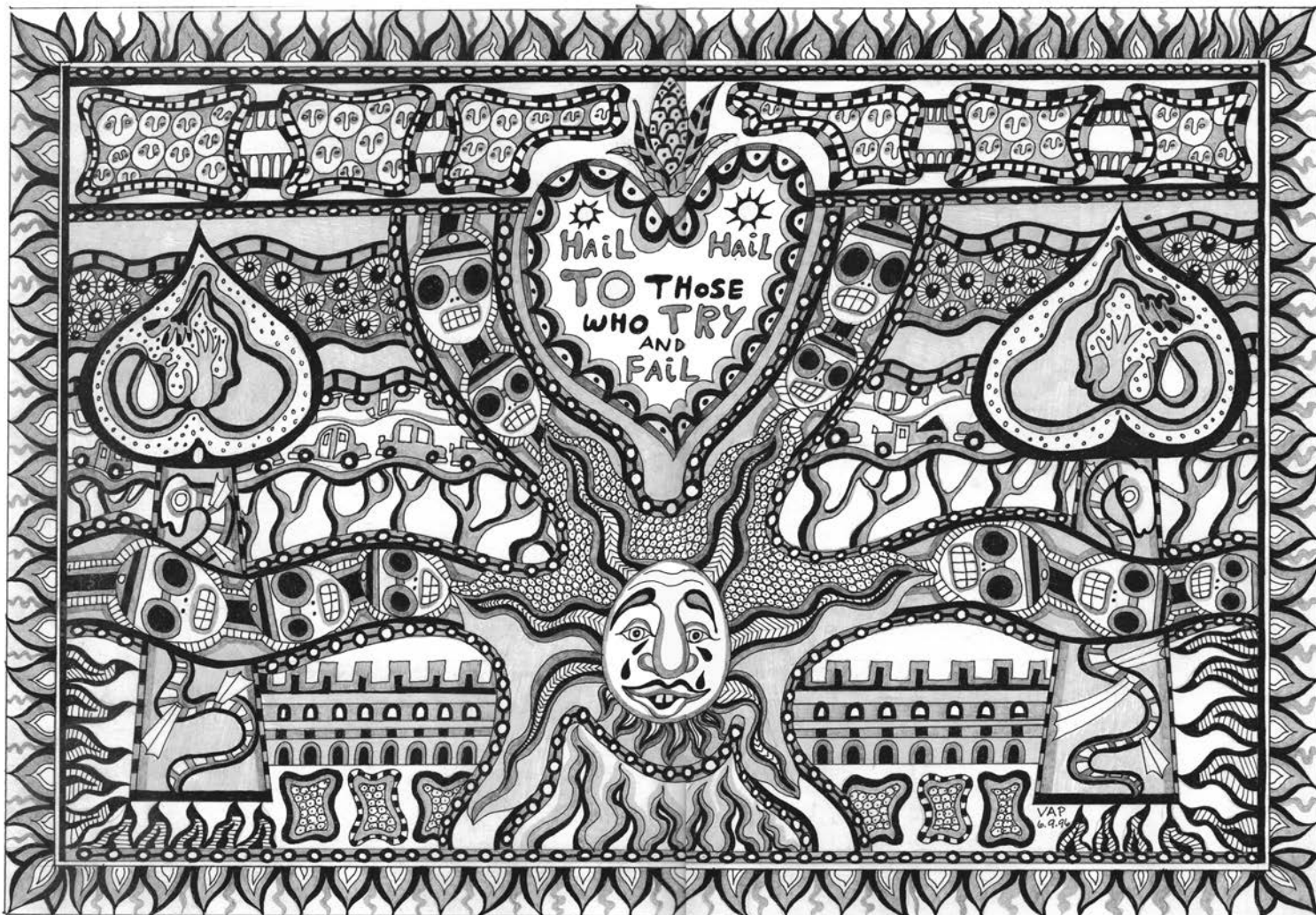


start of an artistic career that has seen Potter's drawings, paintings and embroideries exhibited at numerous UK institutions, including Dublin's Irish Museum of Modern Art, London's Tate Britain and, most recently, in 2022, Carl Freedman Gallery in her hometown of Margate, Kent. Her

work is also held in several permanent collections worldwide and around the UK, including the Whitworth Gallery in Manchester, Bethlem Museum of the Mind in Kent, and The Museum of Everything in London.

Born in 1954 in Kent, Potter spent the first seven years



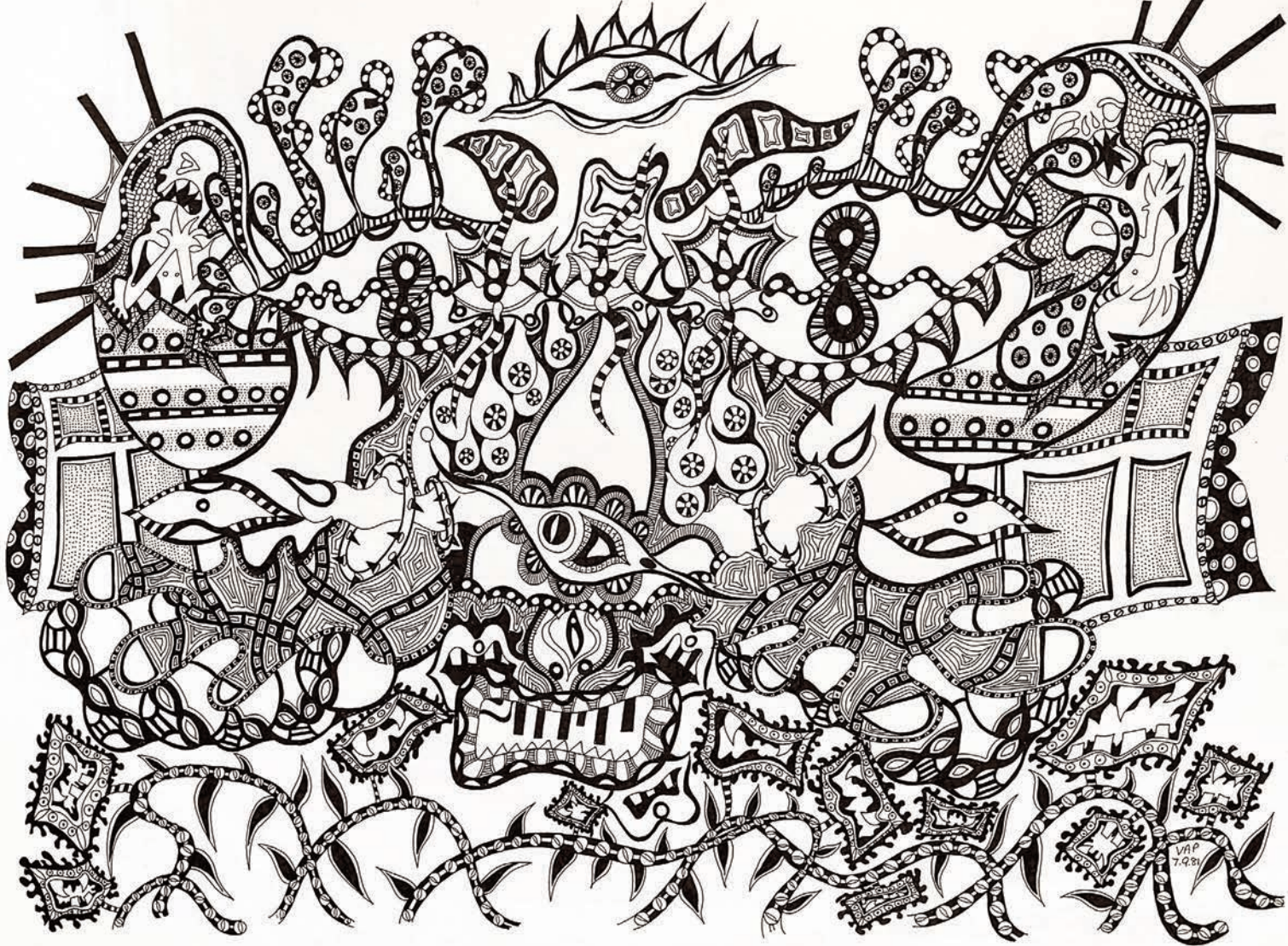


above: *Virginia Woolf Ascends to Heaven*, 1987, acrylic, ink pen and ink on board, 8 x 12 in. / 20.5 x 30 cm

Untitled, 1988, ink pen on paper, 4.5 x 7 in. / 11.5 x 17.5 cm

top: *Hail, Hail to Those Who Try and Fail*, 1996, black ink and graphite pencil on paper, 16.5 x 11.5 in. / 42 x 29.5 cm, Judith McNichol





Untitled, 1981, gouache and ink pen on cartridge paper,  
23.5 x 16.5 in. / 59.5 x 42 cm

of her life in Nigeria, where her father was the principal of a technical institute and her mother taught domestic science. After a brief return to the UK, Potter then lived in Jamaica until the age of 13. The fruit and vegetation and bright colours of the Caribbean island and of Nigeria are enduring memories for her. Orange, red and yellow are among Potter's favourite colours. With the exception of some black-and-white embroideries, vibrant hues tend to be a hallmark of her work, a fact she attributes to her early years abroad.

She was about nine when she began taking inspiration from her father's copy of *The Sunday Times*, scouring the pages for political caricatures and cartoons, and then re-creating them. Images of then-Prime Minister Harold Wilson particularly appealed. This creative impulse arose in a home where there was no interest in art. Potter was close to her mother who – although lukewarm about her daughter's art at first – became a great support over the years. This was in contrast to other relatives, especially Potter's father who wanted her to study maths and science and be a successful career woman. Potter says her art has never been dependent on interest from others.

When her passion shifted from drawing to writing,

Potter created what she characterises as "long poems full of psychotic imagery"; some of which were published in magazines. She most enjoyed the crystalline aspect of poetry, meaning that every word – and all its ramifications – has to be thought through carefully. When writing began to feel like hard work, she returned to art which she found more relaxing, but a love of language continues to find its expression in her black-and-white embroideries or "thread drawings" as she calls them. She includes images and words reflecting her state of mind, drawing them initially in pencil onto unbleached calico, then overlaying the lines in pen to ensure visibility during the stitching process, and finally embroidering them with a needle and black thread. As with writing poetry, she relishes the challenge of selecting the wordage for her monochromatic pieces; the process of working out what a picture says to her and what it will say to others. Embroidering an original poem onto unbleached calico is an idea she has considered but is not certain of realising.

A love of poetry led Potter, aged 19, to study English Literature and Philosophy at university. Within three weeks of arriving, she had what she terms "an enormous nervous breakdown" and was sent to a community





above: Untitled, 1986, gouache and ink pen on paper, 16 x 11.5 in. / 41 x 29 cm

below: Potter at the launch of "To All the Kings Who Have No Crowns" in 2022, photo: Andrew Hood



psychiatric ward before returning to her family home. The following year, she got a place at art college but, once there, was told she had no talent and was asked to leave. A turbulent period followed during which she had a long series of medical appointments and held a variety of jobs,

including as a dental nurse and a sherry salesperson, as well as a stint working on the fish docks. In her thirties, Potter obtained a degree in the History of Ideas and a postgraduate diploma in Librarianship. She worked in libraries and supported adults with learning difficulties,





Untitled, 1981, gouache and ink pen on cartridge paper,  
23.5 x 16.5 in. / 59.5 x 42 cm

travelling around the Kent area until she met and settled with her partner of almost 30 years.

It was around this time that the work for which Potter is now known, and which had so captivated Cardinal, was taking shape. When she was younger, 19 or so, she began making drawings in pen and pencil featuring imagery from the Bible stories and Greek myths she had studied as a child. Segueing into painting, she used watercolour and gouache and later on coloured crayons. She views the works in gouache as her most technically perfect:

“When I was painting, I was very focused. I was very unwell at the time, and I used to paint some of the things that I was thinking. It was such an intense time of my life. I was ill, then things suddenly clicked into place ... That’s really why I don’t do them anymore.”

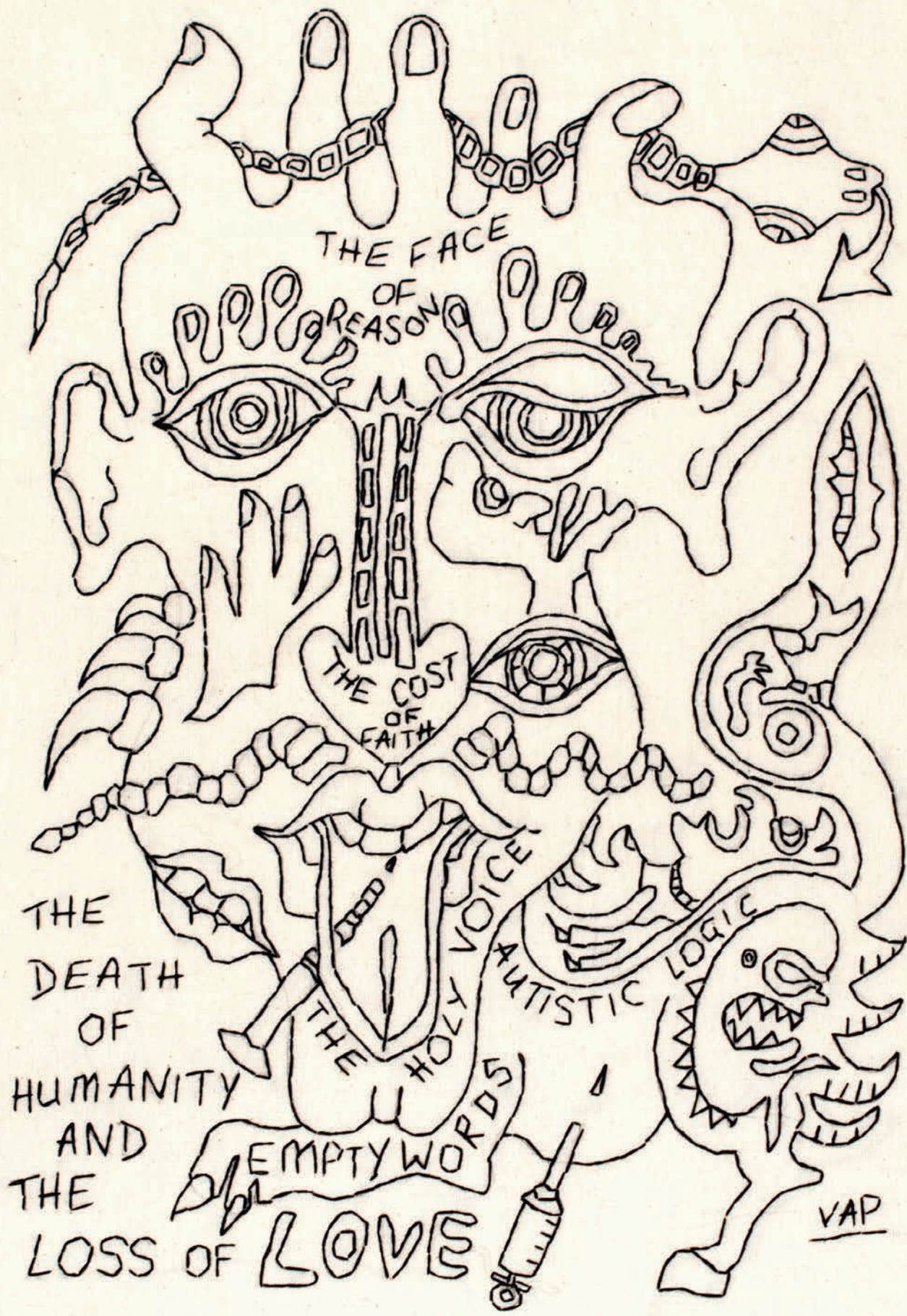
Art became so important to Potter that she wanted to do it all the time. However, it proved impractical to constantly carry paints, brushes and paper around with her. When she saw a woman doing embroidery at a train station one day, she realised its portability and her own cross-stitch embroideries were born. In 2007, she also began experimenting with graph paper, admiring the work of American artist Eugene Andolsek (1921–2008)

who used it exclusively. Potter explains that her graph-paper works require a great deal of time and focus – as she must consider simultaneously the mark she is currently making and that which will follow – but says that they have not always been well received.

In her cross-stitch embroideries, she frequently references outer space, depicting forms such as Martians and Venusians. Considering the current situation on Earth, the idea that there might be other beings on other planets appeals to Potter. She enjoys the notion of “slipping the surly bonds of Earth” – a line from a work by Anglo-American war poet John Gillespie Magee – because it suggests the chance of freedom, a new world and endless possibilities. Elsewhere in Potter’s works, foetuses are a recurring motif – because she likes to draw their shape and not, she clarifies, from any desire to have children. At one stage, the foetal form symbolised potential, reminding her that she could still develop into something else.

Potter’s work is also influenced by subjects she studied at school, for example botany and zoology for which she drew diagrams of forms she observed through a microscope. The old childhood board game Snakes





THE  
DEATH  
OF  
HUMANITY  
AND  
THE  
LOSS OF LOVE

THE FACE  
OF  
REASON

THE COST  
OF  
FAITH

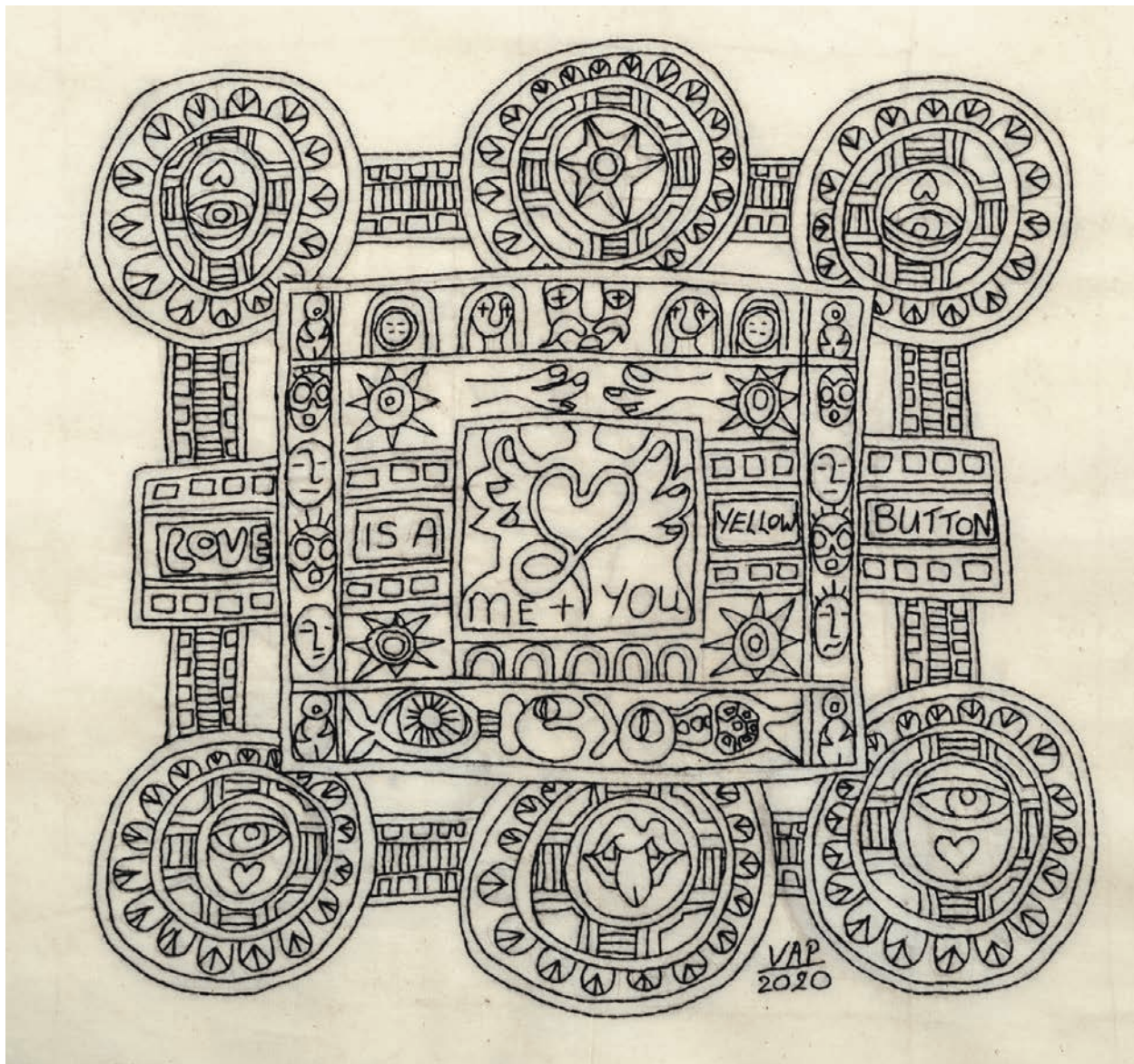
THE HOLY WORDS

AUTISTIC LOGIC

EMPTY WORDS

VAP





opposite: *The Face of Reason*, 2018, embroidery on calico, 12 x 16.5 in. / 30 x 42 cm

above: *Love is a Yellow Button*, 2020, embroidery on calico, 13 x 13 in. / 33 x 33 cm

and Ladders has provided inspiration too, used to signify life's ups and downs. Ladders appeared in her earlier works, while later pieces feature snakes to represent the physical decline that can come with age, and which Potter herself has begun to experience. She has a benign tremor, which hampers her mark-making in pen, and so she plans to find a different, more forgiving way to draw, currently experimenting with darker pencils and crayons.

At her Margate home, Potter gets up as late as possible and spends the day on activities she enjoys, including knitting, crocheting and making graph-paper pieces. Her formal working day is from 6pm to 11pm when she does what she calls the "hard stuff", such as the cross-stitch embroideries on which she is currently focused. Often working on several projects at once, Potter allows her mood at the start of the day to determine whether she uses colour or black and white. Her works are never planned, and she likes to begin creating as soon as an idea surfaces so as not to forget it. Inspiration only comes

to her if the TV and radio are on. In silence she cannot concentrate, and ideas do not emerge.

Creativity has been so central to Potter's life that she cannot conceive what she would have been without it. Recalling one of her early drawings that is titled *Hail, Hail to Those Who Try and Fail*, she says that she is interested in the psychology of failure and believes it should be on an equal par with success. It is vital that people try, and she would like to be known as someone who did. In Potter's opinion, talent alone is not sufficient for success. One must possess determination, have the drive to carry on when all else is crumbling, be immovable. She concludes: "We can't say that life has been easy because it hasn't. I'm just lucky that I kept on going and things turned out well for me."

Lucy Edematie is a curator, consultant, writer and editor. She works with arts professionals and organisations in the UK and internationally.