



STITCHES OF FREEDOM

**MONICA HAMAKAMI
SUSAN KAMARA**

JENNIFER LAUREN
GALLERY

INTRODUCTION

Join Alice Kettle and me in a celebration of the work of two refugees that Alice met whilst working on *Thread Bearing Witness* in 2018 – Monica Hamakami and Susan Kamara. Since that time, Alice has stayed in touch and continued collaboration and support for these two artists, helping them to realise their talents and giving them an outlet for their emotions and life stories. *Stitches of Freedom* showcases newer and older works, alongside two new collaborative works made specially for an online presentation through the Jennifer Lauren Gallery. It has been made more accessible through the use of BSL interpretation online for the introduction by Rebecca Vaughan, as well as audio descriptions of several works by Harry Baxter.

Both artists will join Alice and Jennifer for an online talk, as well as an online and in-person textile workshop, the latter to be held in Manchester in August 2022. See the website for further details.

Here, Alice shares a little more about her relationship with the artists and her wish to have a legacy for the artists beyond the *Thread Bearing Witness* project.

Alice:

“I met Susan and Monica whilst I was working on the Thread Bearing Witness project. This was an art project that used textiles as a process of learning about, connecting with and responding to refugees and others who are seeking asylum. The project reflected a willingness to listen, and to be led and changed by the events and people surrounding us. Creativity and stitch are used as a common language for supporting and welcoming into our communities those who have fled from danger.”

I came to know Susan through the Southampton and Winchester Visitors’ group. We meet regularly to draw and make together. She told me stories whilst making extraordinary paintings and textiles, which were included in Thread Bearing Witness. She also introduced me to her friends and other refugees at the Centre and encouraged them to take part in the Stitch A Tree project (part of the Thread Bearing Witness project). This was inspired by the Refugee Resilience Collective, who drew on Gillian Hughes’ Tree of Life, a strength based narrative therapy tool which uses the tree as a creative metaphor on which people are invited to map out their lives, from root to the fruits; from cultural histories to future dreams. We each stitched a tree, which became a collective Forest.

I met Monica through Refugee Action, where we ran workshops to invite contributions to the SKY embroidery, one of the main panels in the project. Monica’s drawings are represented in the embroidery. I discovered that both Susan and Monica are extraordinarily creative and have used their artwork to express their personal stories and experiences. We have continued to work together separately and collaboratively. I introduced them to each other and they have made new work together that expresses this shared new friendship. I am inspired by their integrity, the skill and vision of their work. I continue to learn from them and value them highly as artists and as friends.”

Alice Kettle, Artist and Professor of Textile Arts at Manchester School of Art, Manchester Metropolitan University.

Jennifer Gilbert, Jennifer Lauren Gallery

MONICA HAMAKAMI

Born and raised in Brazil, Monica Hamakami has lived in Japan and Iran, first coming to the UK in 2009. After deportation, she returned in 2012, now being granted permission to stay. Due to her status as an asylum seeker, Monica was only able to do voluntary work, but found a role volunteering with refugees, supporting others in similar circumstances. It was through this role that Monica first met acclaimed textile artist Alice Kettle, who has been a source of support and inspiration since. At that time, she was in a deep depression, but Alice gave her hope and inspiration to continue with life.

Art gives Monica a sense of belonging and is good for her wellbeing – it is like a therapeutic activity, but one in which Monica wants to create a better life for her and her family. The act of creation brings Monica great pleasure, allowing her to share her feelings through her artwork. Through being part of Alice Kettle's Thread Bearing Witness project, Monica was encouraged to believe in herself and her talents. Following this project, Monica continued to make art at home and has since been to College to receive a qualification in Art and Design Level 2 and is currently studying on a Professions in Art Access Course.

Her art features animals, flowers and often women's faces. She likes to showcase women's strengths and weaknesses and share what she has been through as a female refugee. Eyes feature heavily, as Monica believes that eyes tell powerful stories of what people have been through or seen. Doodles also feature daily as this helps alleviate anxiety and take her mind off life struggles.

Monica often creates her art using embroidery, but more recently has used materials like charcoal and acrylic paint, as she has been learning this through her studying. For Monica, art is like a flower and she wants to see it bloom, so that others can appreciate it and take joy from it too. Art has given Monica a drive and provided a light, and she cannot wait to see what happens next.



SUSAN KAMARA

Born in Uganda, Susan Kamara came to the UK in 2009. Growing up, Susan was surrounded by creative family members, including her grandmother who engaged with embroidery, basket and mat weaving. Inspired by them, Susan studied art, gaining an A level in it, but was then not allowed to be creative until she came to the UK, where she started it up again immediately. She says she has learnt further from observing others, and creating through trial and error.

Susan works across all media, not wanting to be restricted by one medium or another. Much of this comes from watching her family over the years working across different disciplines, and also, her feeling uncomfortable if restrictions are brought in. Being curious, Susan likes to continually try new things, but of late seems to favour thread, using it on anything, such as fabric, canvas or paper. A motif that always features in Susan's work is the spiral – for her it is a symbol of hope and of change, and also of being on a never-ending journey of new knowledge.

Susan is inspired by fellow mixed media artists who are not afraid to venture into unknown territories with their works, and textile artist Alice Kettle is a huge inspiration and driving force. Susan likes being out in nature for walks and to feel inspired, and alongside her art creation she advises an acting group called World Stages Now. She also works for the NHS, with much of her recent artwork reflecting on the impact that the pandemic has had on staff and patients.

Susan doesn't want to stop her creation, as she fears it will take her back to a dark place, where there was no colour in her life, and her mind felt empty. She therefore tries to be creative as often as she can

and gets lost in it for hours. For her art brings about feelings of calm, love, and happiness. Susan says, *"My work is all about diversity, integration and embracing other cultures. We are all here to learn from each other as I always say 'I am a tree with many branches.'"*



NEW COLLABORATIVE WORKS

Alice and me thought it would be lovely to have Monica and Susan collaborate on two new works for the online presentation, echoing the collaboration that has featured throughout their work with Alice and others. Here are the two new works, and information about them. Each artist worked on their piece for two months, then worked on the other's work for another month once they had swapped pieces.

Monica's new work

Bouquet, 2022, Embroidery on cotton, 48x52cm. Photo by Ellie Walmsley.

Bouquet is a piece of art which represents women's freedom. Unfortunately, in some religious countries, women are forced to wear a compulsory hijab. *Bouquet* is inspired by many women who cannot show their beautiful hair. In *Bouquet*, the hair is embroidered with blue threads, which for me implies sadness, oppression and weakness. Women are seen as second-class citizens with no rights to choose their feelings in these countries. The flowers represent each woman's fight for her freedom. It highlights their hope for equality. For me, *Bouquet* shows the inspiration of brave women who risk their lives for dignity. In addition, I used sashiko stitch in rounds and pastel coloured threads, which for me implies patience, serenity and determination. There is hope for justice.



Susan's new work

Steps of Joy (Orunyege / Entogoro dancer), 2022, Embroidery on cotton. 37x55cm. Photo by Jennifer Gilbert

Orunyege dance, from the Bunyoro Kingdom Uganda, is a dance performed by both women and men. The work depicts a female dancer decked in vibrant colours and rattles on her feet. The sound of the rattles (Ebinyege) and vibrant colours combine to bring joy to all that gaze upon the dancer. Gyrating, stamping and the rhythmic sound from the rattles takes away the pain for the moment, and brings joy once longed for. This is usually performed at weddings as a courting dance, but can also be performed at different gatherings to bring joy to the afflicted.

This piece was hand dyed, using natural dyes from Eucalyptus leaves, bark and onion skins in a dye bath. For the second layer I added Derwent Inktense pencils. It was completed with embroidery, including running stitch and French knots.





Monica Hamakami, *Magnolia*, 2022, Embroidery on cotton, 54x64cm. Photograph by Ellie Walmsley



Monica Hamakami, *Diversity*, 2019, Embroidery on cotton, 98x72cm. Photograph by Ellie Walmsley

SUSAN KAMARA WORK



Susan Kamara, *Beauty for Ashes*, 2018. Print, felting, beadwork and embroidery on cotton. 230 x 120cm. Photograph by Joe Low

Alice Kettle explains the previous project further:

Thread Bearing Witness was a process of learning about, connecting with and responding to refugees and other individuals seeking asylum, using creativity and stitch as a common language. Invitations were extended to groups and individuals to participate in a variety of ways, which included the gift of drawings for me to translate into stitch. Both Monica and Susan were involved in this project from the outset.

The embroideries – GROUND, SEA and SKY – were surrounded by other artistic contributions. The diversity of the collective creative group is reflected in the diversity of the exhibitions. The collection of works used thread to examine the interconnected social world we live in at a time of increased people movement in Europe, as a consequence of conflict. *Thread Bearing Witness* simultaneously represents universality and individuality. It utilises metaphorical and physical common threads to create a common ground, that we can all be a part of. SEA speaks of the perilous sea passage made by migrants as seen through the lens of the media. GROUND and SKY reflect other perspectives on a journey and reproduce original drawings in stitch.



All these works were shown in the exhibition at the Whitworth in Manchester and in various other venues around the UK subsequently. At the core of the project was a willingness to be guided by refugees. The thread of continuity between these varying perspectives stems from three core elements: human connectivity, textiles and the creativity of people. The project continues to evolve through various activities and with individuals and groups.

More information: www.threadbearingwitness.com

Thread Bearing Witness and *Stitch A Tree* were originally conceived for the Whitworth, the University of Manchester and the Discovery Centre, Winchester. It was financially supported by Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester Metropolitan University and public funding from the National Lottery through Arts Council England, Heritage Lottery Fund. *Thread Bearing Witness* was also supported by Hampshire Cultural Trust. It originated and was influenced by the work of Tamsin Koumis and others in the refugee centres in Calais and Greece.



Image credit above (detail) and left (full): SKY, 2018, from *Thread Bearing Witness* project. Stitch on printed canvas. 8m x 3m. Photo by David Oates. This work had contributions from Monica, amongst many other refugees.

REFUGEE SUPPORT LINKS

Southampton and Winchester Visitors Group

SWVG is a group of volunteers who befriend and support adult asylum seekers and refugees in the Southampton area. They do this by:

- Befriending and offering one-to-one support to asylum seekers and refugees
- Offering modest financial assistance to those who are homeless and/or destitute
- Giving one-to-one English teaching for asylum seekers
- Helping people to find and work with a solicitor to further their asylum claims
- Providing activities for asylum seekers
- Getting legal guidance for specific cases
- Working with other Southampton refugee charities who run a weekly drop-in Centre in the city
- Reaching out to churches, schools and community groups who can help them
- Campaigning for a fairer, more efficient asylum system in UK.

www.swvg-refugees.org.uk

Refugee Action

Refugee Action in Manchester has supported refugees and people seeking asylum since 1981. Refugee Action helps people who have survived some of the world's worst regimes, by getting them the basic support they need to live again with dignity. Then they help them successfully build safe, happy and productive lives in the UK. Its vision is that refugees and people seeking asylum will be welcome in the UK. Refugee Action stands alongside them to call for change and empower them to realise their aspirations.

www.refugee-action.org.uk

