

# IMAGE

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WINTER 2022

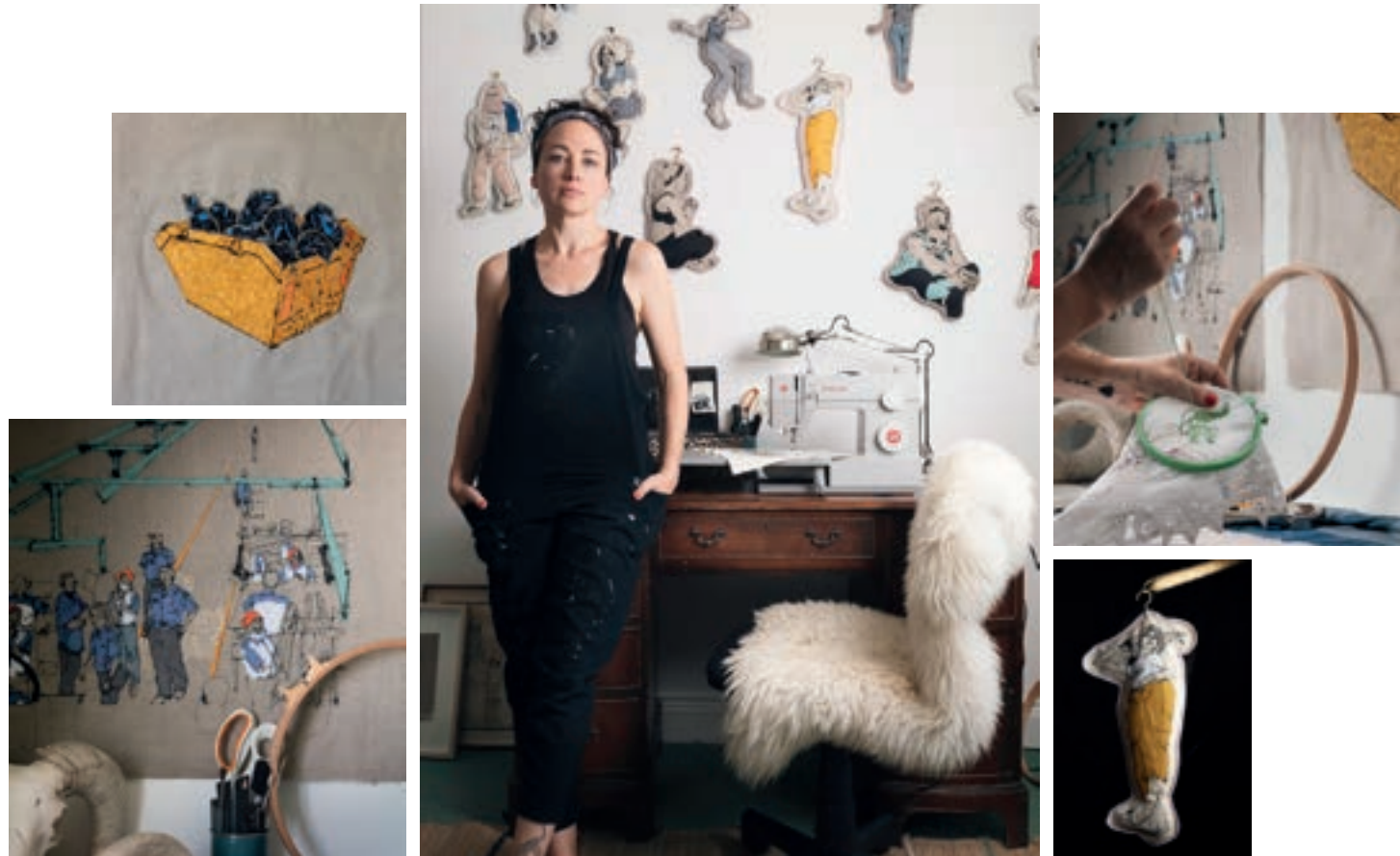
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## the subversive stitch

Irish visual artist Ciara O'Connor on how she's using the traditional art of embroidery to explore the changing pattern of women's lives.

in conversation with Nathalie Marquez Courtney photography Lynda Kenny

**I completely lost my confidence after art college.** I really thought that to be a good artist, I had to be a good painter. At the time, textiles didn't even appeal to me. I didn't have the confidence to pursue art and so I did lots of other things over the years, but I stopped calling myself an artist, which was strange because it was what I had wanted my whole life up until that point.

**It wasn't until I found embroidery that my confidence started to grow again.** I was at home with my son when he was young and I didn't have a lot of time, so I needed something that I could drop quickly if needed, and it was just something I thought I'd try to satisfy my need to be creative. I wasn't thinking of it being anything else.

**It felt right, I really felt like myself as an artist.** It's very meditative in nature. I then started to notice lots of other artists using embroidery, and that opened up a whole

world. I realised it didn't have to be quaint, it's whatever you want it to be. So I started to think of it as an art medium as opposed to just a craft or a pastime.

**I call my work thread drawings.** To me, free motion embroidery is just drawing using a sewing machine. The needle acts as the pen, except you move the material around the needle to create the image.

**I can't help thinking of Mum and Nana** when I'm slow stitching in particular, and how different their experience of being a woman in the world must have been. I love the idea of honouring the crafts and labours of the past, but to also use them as a sort of gentle protest, a way of questioning our current roles in society and to process my own emotions around this.

**I don't consider myself an activist,** but I'm fascinated by feminist themes and on my own journey of healing. I get to work through and

process my emotions through my work. A lot of the trauma that I deal with happens to be things that are currently being talked about in society. I love the idea of my work helping someone else, even if it's just helping them feel seen or heard.

**I called my first solo show *Brazen*** because it's a word that stands out to me as one that can have such negative connotations (ie, the hussy), but if you take it at its dictionary definition – bold and without shame – then what a way to live your life. *Brazen* was my attempt to stand loud and proud and say, "Yes, this thing happened to me, but it doesn't define me and it wasn't my fault – and if it happened to you, it wasn't your fault either."

See Ciara's work at Grilse Gallery's mixed winter show in Killorglin, Co Kerry December 3-24, which brings together 19 established and emerging Irish artists, [grilse.ie](http://grilse.ie). Follow Ciara's work on Instagram @thewitchstthread

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Work in progress titled "20 Minutes of Action". Ciara in her studio. Working on a piece titled "Illuminate the Nos". Detail from "We Get What We Get and We Don't Get Upset". Work in progress titled "Welcome to the Club".

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