



HELENE JUND DEN BOER

Photography by Suzanne Camarata



HELENE LUND DEN BOER

lives in the Appalachian Mountains with her husband, daughter, and two Boston terriers. She has lived in various places around the world since leaving her native country, Denmark, in 1996. Every move has taken her art in a new direction, and now that she is settled in Western North Carolina, her focus is on textile paintings and embroidered women's portraits.

I grew up in the 1980s on the west coast of Denmark, close to the North Sea. It was a very artistic environment, and I was surrounded by teachers and mentors who were very supportive of the arts. My parents were also very supportive, and I remember them taking me to art shows from a very young age, and I loved it. Visiting artists in their studios was so exciting.

At the age of 9, I started taking art classes from a local artist. She was an extraordinary person, and I often think of her and all the things she taught me. Being allowed into her world was a gift I still carry with me. She taught me so much—not only about art and techniques but about life, history, and culture. Her house was full of stories, of heirlooms, very bohemian, and it was always full of lovely people. She had a rocking chair she claimed had belonged to H.C. Andersen, and perhaps it had! In many ways, it was a fairytale house.

After finishing high school, I spent a few months in a Danish folk art school, and there, I was introduced to a far more contemporary and experimental approach to the arts than the more traditional style I was used to. It was both an interesting and intimidating experience, but essentially, it inspired me to apply to an art school in the UK. I was accepted into the BA course in Fine Art at the Norwich School of Art and Design, and in 2000, I finished my MA in Sequential Design/Illustration at the University of Brighton. I enjoyed both colleges immensely because they let me experiment and push myself in various directions. Looking back, though, the common thread throughout my whole career has always been my interest in a narrative, storytelling, and the female figure.



My husband and I met in Oxford, UK, in 1993, and over the years, his job in the US Air Force has taken us around the world. My biggest dream from a very young age was to travel and to see the world, a dream we had in common and have been very lucky to live out together.

At first, we moved every three to four years, and every new home gave me a different work space with a fresh view of the world. The differences between the cultures we were thrown into were huge. In some way, it's as if each new place we've lived added another layer to my work. The differences in environments and inspiration in the given place have pushed my work in directions I

could never have imagined. My husband has always been extremely supportive of my work, and together, we've been able to make some sort of improvised work space everywhere we lived. It was an important base, a home for my creativity. My first "studio" was a dusty utility room in an apartment building in Tacoma, Washington, with a tiny window overlooking Puget Sound. Then, a small bedroom in a condo in New Jersey became my work base. And in Guam, I worked in a tiled (and very hot) room, all windows, overlooking the jungle behind our house. I feel very privileged to have been able to live and create in such vastly different cultures and surroundings.



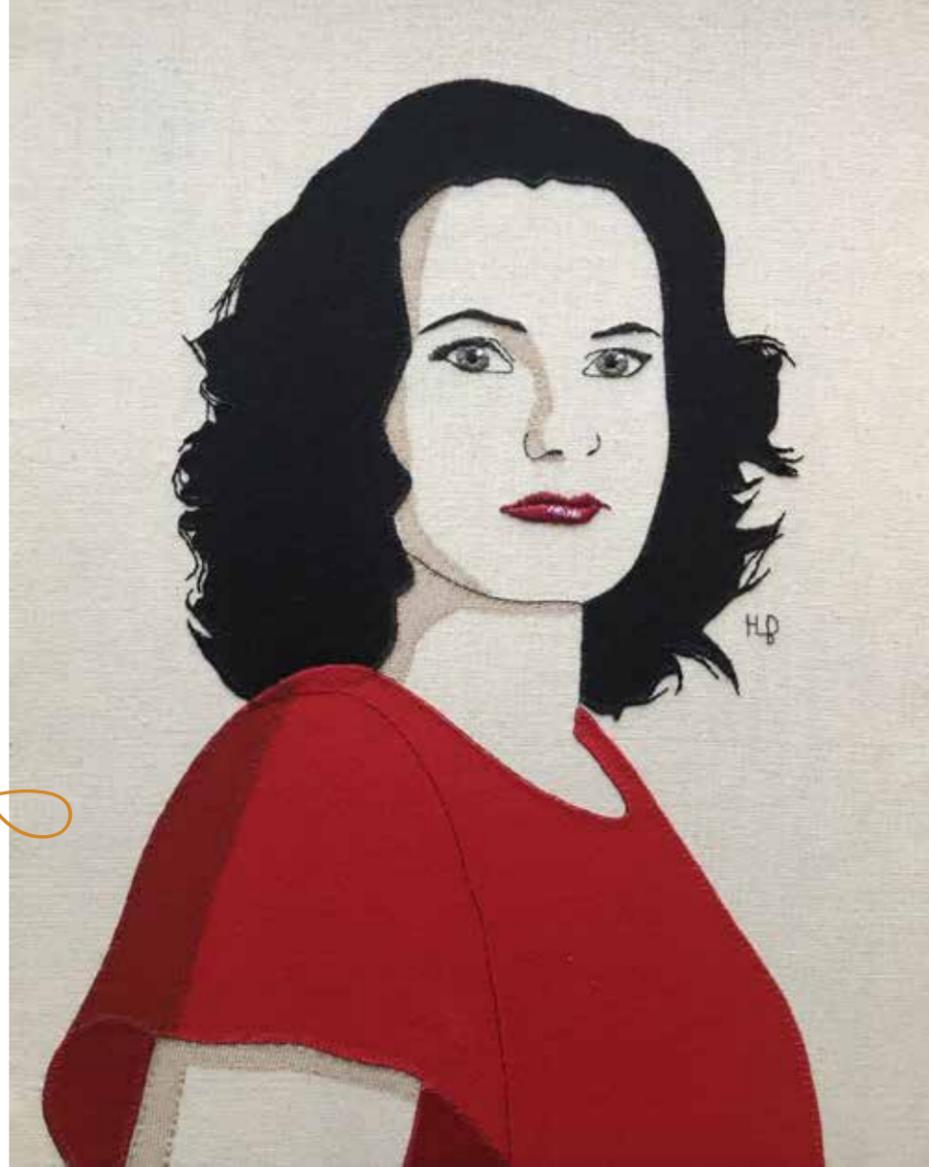
After 26 years in the USAF, we landed here in Hendersonville, NC. My studio on the first floor is open and light, with trees outside the window, and there's room for all of my books, memories, and materials. I feel absolutely at home in this studio.

ART WORK

Creating has always been in my blood. Storytelling has been my main focus and interest as far back as I remember. Drawing and painting were my favorite mediums, and later on, collage was added. More recently, my focus has turned to fabric. This happened soon after we settled here in the mountains. I don't think there's necessarily a connection, just simply a new environment and different surroundings, which inspired a new beginning and a new direction.

When I was around the age of 11, I remember playing with my mother's sewing machine, and I made a few crude textile portraits. I forgot about them until a few years ago, when I found them tucked away in my parents' house. I took them home with me and hung them in my kitchen, and I look at them daily. I think these may have sparked this newfound interest in fabric. So much has changed in all those years, but it's an interesting realization that my interest in women's portraits in some ways has stayed the same.

The beginning of my fabric venture has been by trial and error. I've never taken any sewing or embroidery

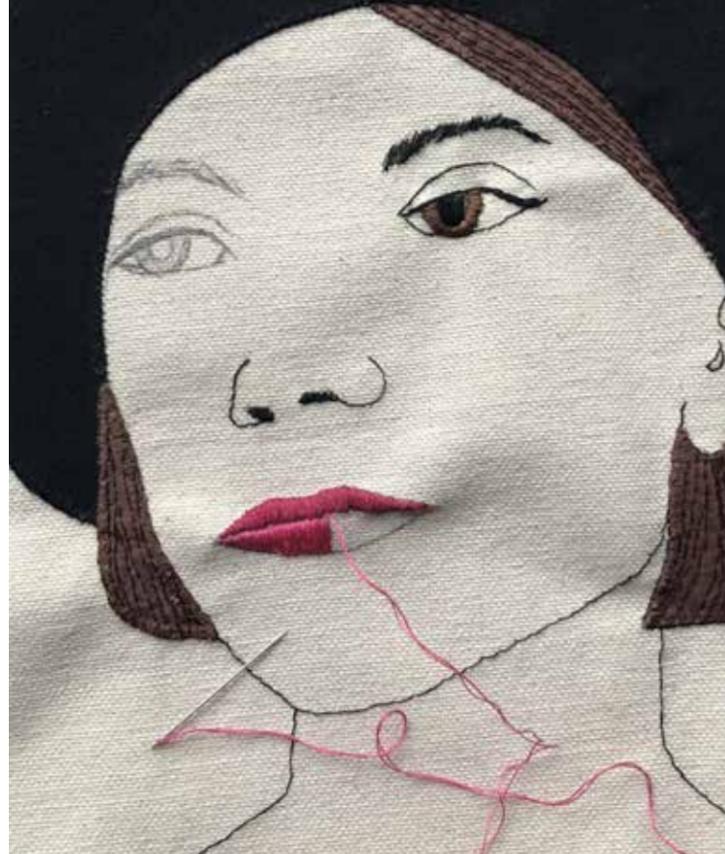


classes, so I was learning by doing. It took a while to get the hang of it, to get a feel for the materials, and to figure out what they could do, as opposed to paint. I am still learning, and hopefully that will continue. In many ways, I am trying to achieve some of the same effects as in painting, such as light and shadow and a sense of 3D. Yet, the process is very different, and the fabric has a simplicity to it, which I love. It feels calm and pure to me. This may be my true medium; I just went on a long journey to realize it. When painting, I could spend days debating if a painting was finished. There was always a shadow, a nose or a fold that could be better. The fabric has a far

more defined way of shutting me out, letting me know when I am done with a piece. I am never in doubt.

I basically work in two different styles within textile: larger, machine-sewn "paintings" that have some simplicity to them. That is essentially how my textile work started. Then, during the pandemic, my daughter and I went to Denmark for six months, and without my sewing machine, I had to work and think a little differently. That became the beginning of my hand embroidered portraits. These are a mixture of embroidery and appliqué, and I enjoy experimenting with new approaches to the materials and techniques.





PROCESS

1 Each of my pieces starts with a drawing. I keep it quite simple at this stage; details will be added in the sewing process. The drawings are based on photos I take, pictures in old magazines, my life drawings, etc.

After finishing the drawing, I have it blown up to the desired size, and then I trace the drawing onto the linen or canvas using my light table. This can be a bit tricky since fabrics aren't always transparent. So, some guesswork is involved when transferring the sketch.

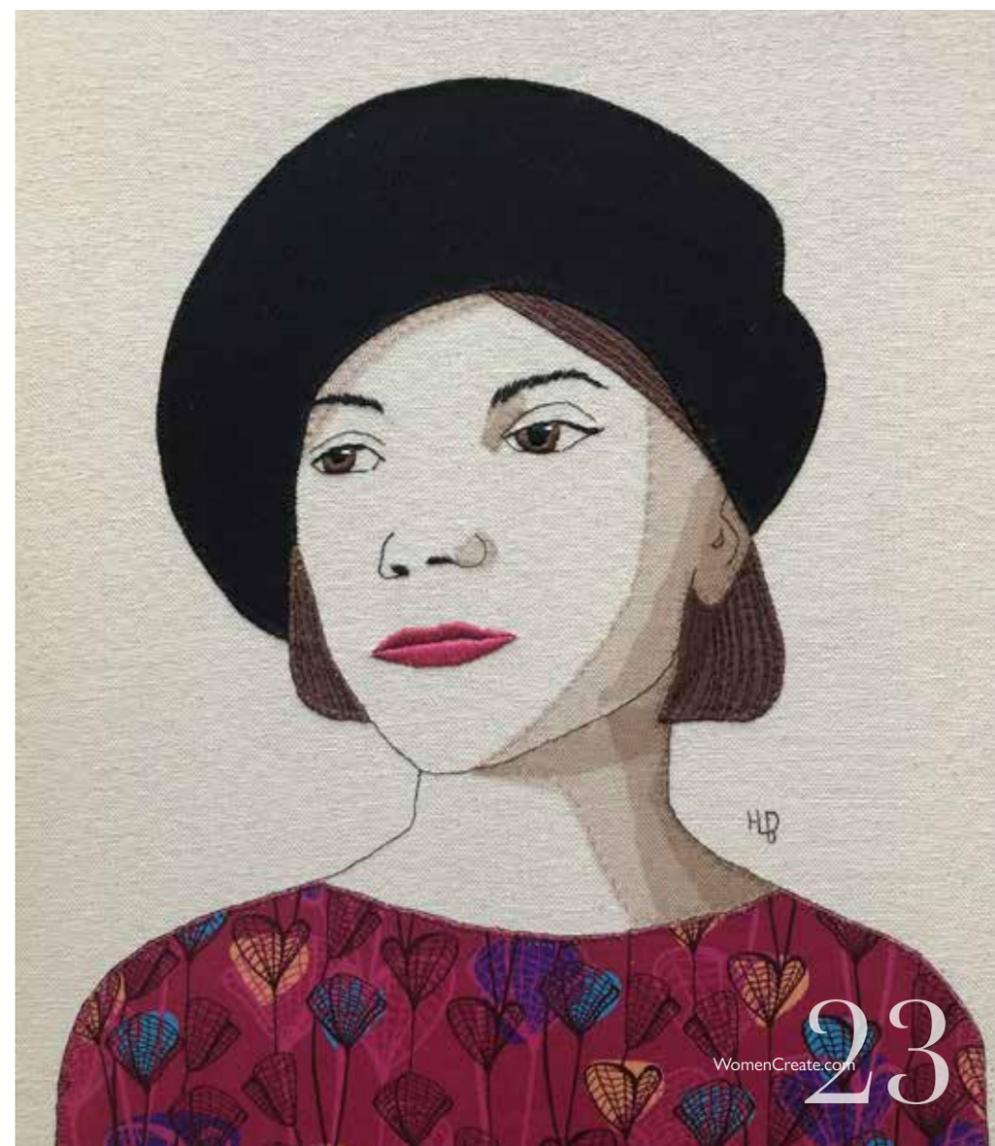
2 I always add the appliqué fabric first and sew it on. This provides a good overview of the image.



3 Then, I start on the shapes of the face. I usually embroider with sewing thread, but I also use embroidery floss, especially for parts I want to have a certain texture, like hair.

4 The last step, if applicable, is the shadow, and I use tulle for that. Sometimes felt also works, depending on the motive and the effect.

5 Each piece takes a really long time, but I enjoy the process and think of ways to accomplish a certain effect. I always work on a few pieces at a time, in case I get stuck or can't find a solution for a technicality. That gives me time to consider various options while I continue to work.





INSPIRATION

When it comes to inspiration, my mind is always alert to anything of visual interest, probably like all artists. Ideas can hit anytime, anywhere. I may see a hummingbird in my garden or come across a vintage poster of a circus performer. Something can suddenly spark the beginning of something.

I am not much of a sketch maker; instead, I tend to use words describing ideas for a piece. I have a document with words of inspiration. I've had it for years, and words come and go. Some find their way into a title; others become a visual part of a piece. It's almost like a puzzle where I'm hunting for the right pieces to put together a story. I enjoy the hunt immensely, and it's a big moment when idea, motive, and fabric come together as a whole.



“ART IS A WAY OF SURVIVAL.”
-YOKO ONO

PIXIE & BOWIE

Tale of Two Boisterous Bostons!

My studio is on the second floor; it's light and roomy. My two studio Bostons add life and color and so much cheeky energy to this space of creativity and serenity.

Pixie and Bowie (Boston terriers and partners in crime) keep me company every day while I think, sketch, and sew. They are cuddle monsters and absolutely not morning dogs. I am usually already up and working when I hear eight little paws slowly come up the stairs. They sleepwalk right into their big "igloo," where they both fit very comfortably. I usually get a few moments of peace, trying to stay busy, as I know that soon enough, they will be awake and energized as they pop their heads out of the basket, restless, jumpy, and have a look as if to say, "Playtime right now, lady!" The minute I give in and stand up, they get crazy, whine, and jump around in circles.

That is the sign it's time for Mr. Squeak, a random red rubber squeaky toy they go catnip for. When I throw it into the backyard, Bowie is off like lightning. Pixie stays behind, keeping a focused eye on Bowie. The second he has it in his mouth, Pixie's on her way towards him. They fight over it for a while. Pixie, being the Alpha she is, takes it from him and brings it back to me. Same pattern, every time. This is the chemistry, the pecking order between them, and they both seem very happy and content this way.

Soon after moving to Western North Carolina, Pixie moved in with us. She was just a puppy, but she is an old soul and has such a funny grumpy personality, and her love of food is legendary. We felt she needed a companion, and the following year, Bowie joined our family. A Boston as well, but with a very different temperament: skittish and juvenile and quick like a bunny. He has one blue and one brown eye. These two are the ultimate dream team, and it's quite touching how much they love and care for each other. They are very conscientious watchdogs and put on quite a show when the doorbell rings.

They can definitely be a handful at times, dying for love, play and attention just as I get heavily into a project, but they add so much life and humor to my days, and I never feel alone. Without these two, the studio would be a lot less lively and atmospheric...

■ Helene

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“THE MEANING OF LIFE IS TO FIND YOUR GIFT. THE PURPOSE OF LIFE IS TO GIVE IT AWAY.”
-PABLO PICASSO



A twist of fate in the form of an abandoned brown dog on the side of a country road steered the life path of **SUZANNE CAMARATA**, formerly a longtime freelance photographer based in Boston, to the mountains of Western North Carolina. From that fateful road trip when these soul sisters found each other, Brown Dog (aka “Charlie”), joined forces with Suzanne in 2015 to establish The Gallery at Flat Rock, where they help folks find beautiful art treasures for their homes. A consummate gallery greeter, Brown Dog also often models for promotional photos.

Suzanne, a native of South Korea who was raised in Japan, studied photography at the Art Institute of Boston and has taught photography at MIT. Travels throughout India and Mexico resulted in photographic essays documenting those journeys. Her work is included in both private and corporate collections. Suzanne still flexes her freelance photography skills with projects like Porch Portraits, which has chronicled dozens of families in portraiture during the pandemic, all while raising funds for the State Theatre of North Carolina—the Flat Rock Playhouse—a neighbor of The Gallery at Flat Rock.



Suzanne
www.GalleryFlatRock.com
www.FlatrockTogether.com/good-news/suzanne-and-brown-dog
INSTAGRAM: GalleryFlatRock, TravelsWithCharlieGirl, CamarataObscura