

THE RED DRESS

The most frequently asked questions to Kirstie, creator of The Red Dress Project.

Who are you, and what is your story with embroidery?

I'm 42, an artist and mother to two boys Sky (11) and Bodhi (7), we live in a tiny rural village called Hornblotton in Somerset, UK. When I'm not working with The Red Dress, my artwork centres around drawing, painting and embroidery, and is influenced by the act of stitching itself, world embroidery traditions, ancient symbolism, meditation, and theories on colour. I love yoga and gardening and spend as much time in nature as possible.

I was taught to embroider at age 9, by an Indian teacher when we lived in Nigeria. I loved it immediately, and saw the potential for thoughtful expression, but also the way it slowed me down and taught me to connect to my body and mind – it's like a meditation.

How did the idea for The Red Dress come to you?

I have a fascination with different cultures (having grown up in various far-flung countries) and had a desire to create a piece of work that would unite and bring together different identities and voices from around the world, without borders and boundaries. A project that would invite connection and seek to provide a platform for voices to be shared and heard.

Did you stitch on it too?

Yes, there are lots of pieces embroidered by me on the dress, most are small additions to mark a particular event or moment in time. I also created the spiders web on the bodice back...which was couched, so as not to pin down the embroidery underneath.

Who made the Red Dress?

Myself and my teacher and collaborator Gail Falconer, who I worked with for many years when I lived in London. Gail helped me create several high impact dresses for both installation art, performance, and personal commissions.

The skirt has been reassembled 4 times over the 14 years, and the bodice twice - to incorporate all the new commissions, and make sure the overall composition remained balanced.

I was keen for the design of The Red Dress to be strong, empowered and emphasize feminine curves. Inspirations include ceremonial robes, suits of armour and military jackets alongside historic garments. The inside of the

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bodice is boned like a corset so when you wear the dress you feel very strong and regal.

Why RED?

You can't ignore red! It's a strong colour, with connections to feelings of love and passion, also anger and rage, blood and women's cycles...these are all part of our human experience and felt very fitting for a strong feminine voice.

How was the project created, organized? Who did what? How were the embroiderers contacted?

Aside from Gail helping me make the dress, Sylvia De Gregorio helping sew it together and Mark Matcham creating the website and catalogue, it has just been me working on The Red Dress. Sometimes I feel a bit like an octopus trying to keep so many balls in the air; from events, press and exhibitions to documentation, shipping, transport, social media, website, presentations, merchandise, cataloguing and maintaining The Red Dress itself...I've learnt a lot of new skills on the way.

Finding the embroiderers was an organic process - using contacts I had from the art / textile world, through friends and family, the internet and social media. Budget didn't allow for me to travel with the dress each time, so instead panels of the garment were sent out to willing embroiderers to stitch onto and then send back to me in the UK.

Practically: did you send the dress to everyone? Or pieces of cloth?

In most cases panels of the fabric were sent out to the embroiderers (via Parcel Force or Fed Ex) as the dress was too valuable and expensive to send.

I was able to secure some funding for the last few years of the project which enabled more momentum and exposure for The Red Dress, bringing more opportunity for exhibitions and travel. So, from 2020-23 the garment and I travelled to connect with the embroiderers in person, and the stitching could then be applied directly to the dress.

Did the artisans use the same threads?

The embroiderers used their own threads and chose their own colour palette and stitch type...which adds a huge amount of interest and diversity to the dress.