

New nostalgia: Q&A with embroiderer and artist Danielle Clough

 By [Ruth Cooper](#)

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Cape Town-based artist Danielle Clough's vibrant and unique embroidery creations have seen her gain significant attention both locally and internationally. She's worked with major brands such as Gucci and Nike and shown her work across the globe.

We got in touch with the 2016 Design Indaba Emerging Creative, also known as Fiance Knowles, her VJ name, to chat about the revival of the artisan, contemporising craft and her advice for aspiring creatives.



Danielle Clough

What have been some of your ultimate career highlights?

I have a few obvious ones that stand-out such as working with Gucci, Instagram, David Letterman, Netflix and Adobe and being featured by the *New York Times* and CNN. I have had the opportunity to travel with my work to New York to film a class, Australia for a workshop tour and the UK for a street art festival. These few career highlights that jump out are wonderful but often I tend to feel 'as good as my last piece'. The most consistent gratitude or pride I feel is with the connection to the community that I have through my career. I have met the most amazing people and anyone taking the time to mail me and tell me something kind about how I or my work makes them feel is warming and wonderful. In this attention economy, where we are satiated with imagery and content, I am most grateful for the time people give me.

▣ ***Can you tell us more about your online classes and workshops?***

I have an online workshop with Skillshare. It is a Skillshare Original, so produced and supported by them. The online class has a similar structure to the live workshops, which is geared towards learning the basics and instilling confidence to find and explore your own voice in the medium of embroidery.

▣ ***What are you currently working on?***

Short term, I am working on a collection of rackets for sale and a guitar collaboration. I am experimenting with different objects and trying to work big! Long term, I am chipping away at a body of work for a series called *Midnight Names*.





■ ***If you had to describe your thought processes, in terms of a design or artwork, what would it look like?***

It's hard to pinpoint exactly as it changes with what triggers an idea. A fabric, character, colour, material or memory. Mostly the thought process stems from a feeling of challenge. The challenge of using a new tool, surface, scale or subject matter. Although I find this usually happens out of boredom. Nothing is hard to achieve with social media and the constant stimulation we have around us. My most recent challenge is finding comfort in boredom and the courage to cultivate it.



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What is it about the medium of embroidery that appeals to you?

It is a slow, meditative indulgence in colour.

How do you choose your subject matter?

My projects tend to jump between subject matter and that's because of what I feel like celebrating; whether it's a pop icon that sparks nostalgia from my '90s childhood, a colour I want to swim in or finding something that will translate onto a challenging surface or subject.



Was it a conscious decision to contemporise this traditionally quite old fashioned art form?

I used to make plush toys when I was a student for extra beer and pizza money. I would sew on the details and this grew into 'drawing pictures with thread'. For a very brief moment, I thought I had invented a new art form! When I started sewing more regularly it had no connection to traditional embroidery or its stigmas. I loved drawing with thread and as these thread sketches evolved, so did my understanding of the medium. I avoided any knowledge from people who had experience because I didn't want to be told how to play. I think because I am self-taught, I created a contemporary version of the art form but that's purely out of stubbornness, not intent.

I feel very differently now and research the history of needlework continually, which is so fascinating and dates back to paleo man and needles made of fishbone. We dub this medium old fashioned, only because of the value we have given it and its dips in popularity over time. We don't consider painting old fashioned because unlike painting, which is consistent, it goes in and out of style. Despite this, I feel like it will always be around. Our innate desire to embellish cloth has been around for centuries and crosses into every culture. It will always have new forms of 'contemporary' as we go on.



■ ***Why do you think there has been such a revival in the appreciation of crafting in general?***

I think a lot of 'artisanal' disciplines are coming back. You can see this with hand-painted signs, gold gilding, analogue photography, craft beers and hand-poked tattoos. We have such a high turnover of digital stimulation that feels really disposable. Because of this, the appreciation for a time-consuming craft that comes with a story is growing. Embroidery and craft also have a nostalgic element to a lot of people ('my granny used to do that'), which I think adds to its appeal. There is an awakening to people realising the value of working with their hands. Craft gives a space to do without the pressure that 'art' has. With craft, you can be anywhere on the spectrum of creativity, you can follow a pattern or freestyle to express your deepest desires and there are space and support for that.



■ ***What are your thoughts on our local creative scene? Which local designers, artists and creatives are you inspired by?***

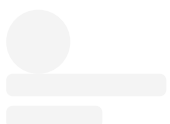
South Africa is bursting at the seams with young creatives. With the internet and social media giving space for self-promotion, I think the growth is going to be exponential. There isn't the same need for galleries, agencies and platforms to gate-keep these talents. Because of this, I feel that the 'scene' and industry is shifting rapidly and I'm really excited about what's next.

At the moment, I'm really loving the paintings by [Mfundo Mthiyane](#) and [Andrew Sutherland](#).

■ ***What would be your advice for other creatives wanting to use Instagram or social media to market their work successfully?***

Much like people, food and money, we have a relationship with social media. How much power we give it, time, how it makes you feel and dependence. It is so important to work at maintaining a healthy relationship with it and treat it like a tool in your toolbox. It cannot be your only link to your worth and audience. Instagram has changed so much in the past few years, it has become a very unpredictable tool. You should always spend more time on your craft than you do telling people about it. Like any relationship, it's about balance.

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[View this post on Instagram](#)



A post shared by Danielle Clough (@fiance_knowles)

🎲 ***What would you say is your design philosophy?***

I don't think I have one! Maybe it's as simple as: 'Make it, share it, carry on.'

🎲 ***If you had to describe your personal style as a song or song lyric, what would it be and why?***

"Over and over and over and over and over,
Like a monkey with a miniature cymbal,
The joy or repetition really is in you.
Under and under and under and under and under,
The spell of repetition really is on you"

- Hot Chip, Over and Over

ABOUT RUTH COOPER

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