

# Overnight sensation

KAREN NICOL'S EMBROIDERY



In certain situations embroidery loses every vestige of its delicate, ladylike associations. This is no gentle past-time: when it comes to bespoke embellishment for top name designers, the pace is frantic and the workload heavy...

**You work with established fashion designers on their seasonal shows. At what stage do they involve you in the process?**

I design with up to seven or eight fashion designers a season. They will call me around six weeks before the shows to discuss ideas.

**Do you have to be versatile to meet the demands of different designers?**

Every fashion designer has their own unique handwriting and I have to tailor my work to suit. You learn to read their style, likes and dislikes. They are all completely different when it comes to giving direction: some provide fantastic research with pictures, mood boards and description – this season Betty Jackson wanted me to imagine a railway station in the 1940s; dark, smoky and damp with a young woman clutching

a bedraggled bunch of roses as she tearfully bids farewell to her lover going off to war... she wanted those roses. Others will just say something infuriating like they want something 'funky'. Often because they know nothing about embroidery they ask you to do the impossible, which is a great challenge but can create some interesting results because you think outside the box.

**When you've received a brief, how do you start?**

I return to my studio with arms full of beautiful fabrics and begin to sample. I usually only have two days per client and aim to produce 15-20 rough designs. It's a real 'what if' time exploring ideas. After sampling we photocopy the embroideries and pin them onto the garments to see where to place them and what scale to use. I then take them home and embroider them.

**How do you find fresh ideas?**


It is interesting to let the visual information 'invent' the stitch or technique you use. I explore the qualities of an image, whether rough, dry, matt or light and try to communicate its essence. I try to think laterally with absolutely no rules. Originality is always an issue and trying to find the unexpected makes life more exciting. I produced a board of samples for Clements Ribeiro on the theme 'Frida Kahlo and Singapore whorehouse'. To get the rich flowers Frida wore in her hair I melted sequins on a ruched chiffon flower.

**Is it difficult to manage your work load?**

Things get extremely hectic: I can be creating up to 30 pieces for each designer's show. To make it worse some designers need 3 copies of everything to go to America, Japan and Europe. ▶







In the last weeks before the shows I work a 15-17 hour day. Some designers seem to wait until the last moment hoping a panic induced adrenaline rush will inspire me! They don't want to accept that embroidery is time consuming. I once received a coat at 4pm from Clements Ribeiro to design the embroidery and execute it by first thing the next morning!

**Do you have anyone to help you?**

My husband is a collage artist and we have turned the ground floor of our home into a studio space. I have one main assistant and a flexible work force of college graduates. We almost set up production lines of embroidery – a group of people may be cutting out a couple of thousand petals whilst others are sewing

them down and yet others may be finishing by hand.  
**These days do you encounter competition from foreign producers?**

In the last decade the competition from India and China for production has changed the business totally: at first quality was an issue but now this has been addressed and they can charge very low prices for beautiful embroidery. They don't have the design skills that suit the western market yet so I still design as much but a lot of the production is done overseas now, leaving us with the more complicated pieces at the 'couture' end of the market. When sampling you must always take into account the cost of the embroidery. For production this can be multiplied by seven by the time it reaches the shop. £10 worth of embroidery adds £70 to the final cost which I find quite astonishing.

**Despite the many pressures, do you enjoy your job?**

It's fabulously exciting. I get a real buzz from it and – almost – feel disappointed when the shows are over. ●●●

John Rocha



Clements Ribeiro





