



FRAGILE STRENGTH

In this exclusive interview for Be Creative, Amanda McCavour takes us into her world of delicate but strong embroidered installations and her inspiration behind them

interview | MARY BENNELICK

our work is instantly distinctive and unique Amanda; tell us about the concept behind your embroidery.

In my work, I use a sewing machine to create thread drawings. By sewing onto fabric that dissolves in water, I can build up stitched lines on a temporary surface. The crossing threads create strength so that when the fabric is dissolved, the thread drawing can hold together without a base. With only the thread remaining, these images appear as though they would be easily unravelled and seemingly on the verge of falling apart, despite the work's stitched strength. I am interested in thread's assumed vulnerability; its ability to unravel, and its strength when it is sewn together.

Through an exploration of line and its 2D and 3D implications, stitch is used in my artwork to explore various concepts such as connections to home, the fibers of the body, and more formal considerations of thread's accumulative presence. I explore embroidery's duality – its subtle quality versus its accumulative presence, and its structural possibilities versus its fragility. Many of my pieces are about memory.

I have been working on a series of installation works based on my rental apartments in Toronto since 2010. These pieces are flat embroidered life sized couches, chairs, and items found in my apartments that are shaded to create the impression of that object. These pieces are then hung from the ceiling and arranged in layers to create the illusion of an interior. I am interested in the vulnerability of thread in relation to ideas around home, as both things feel temporary and fragile. Making these pieces requires me to revisit, remember, and recreate spaces that I called home but are no longer mine.

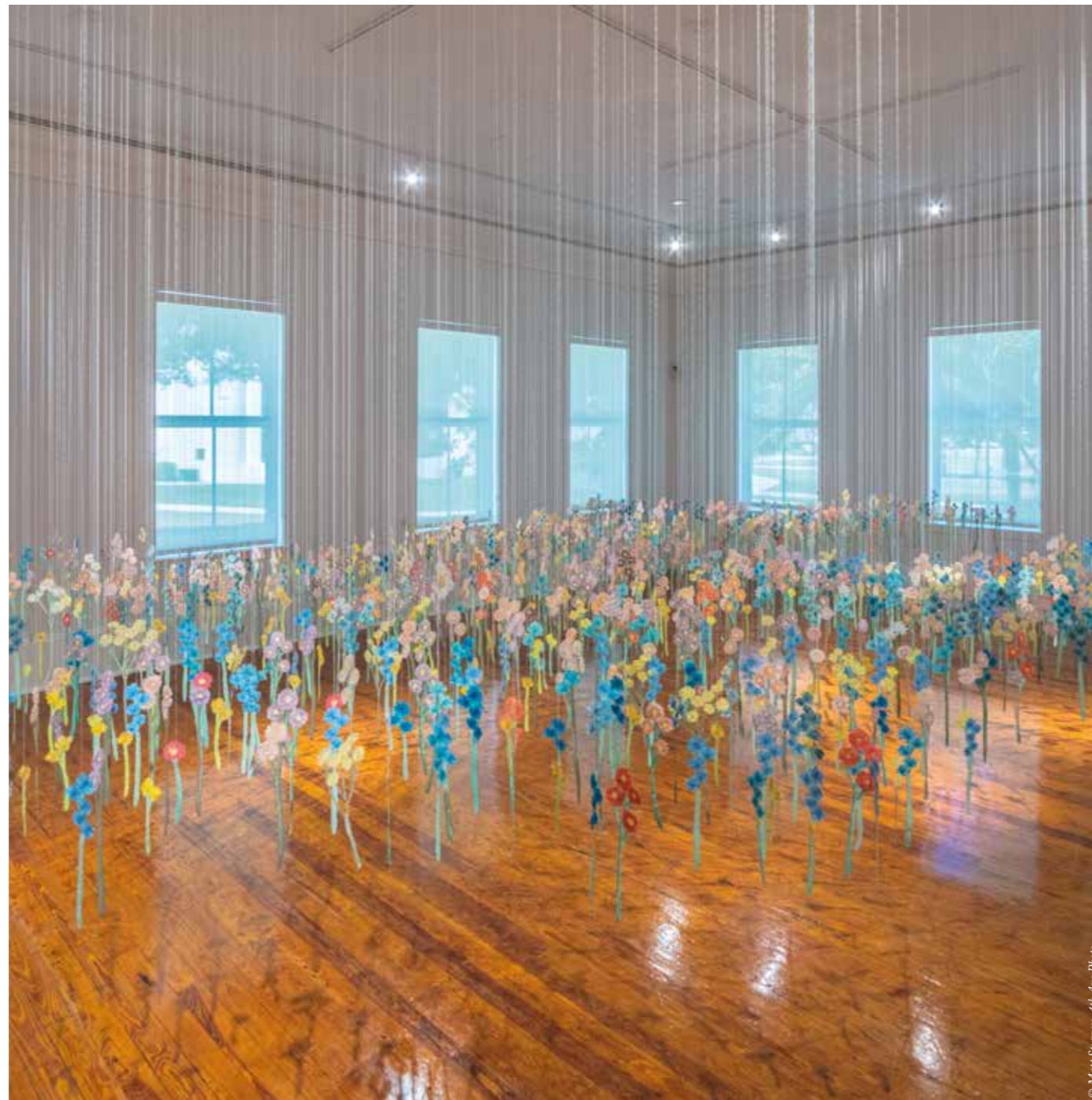
In my newest installation, 'Poppies', I explore the fleeting nature of this delicate flower by rendering and preserving the moment of the poppy in bloom in thread. Shifting the perspective of a traditional garden, viewers are invited to walk underneath the poppy field. I invite the multiple associations of the poppy and its symbolism, from sleep, to remembrance, and death. This surreal moment suspended in time looks to garden spaces while also suggesting the repeat patterning on floral fabrics or wallpapers.

I am interested in the properties of thread; its delicacy, how it can be a line. I'm interested in how embroidery can relate to touch and how my work is an accumulation of time and material to create a final product.

Why have you chosen embroidery as your medium?

Transparency: I like thread's fine nature. Creating images and installations out of embroidered parts allows me to create ephemeral and transparent pieces that are both in a space, but also seemingly on the verge of not being there. They are relatively light which allows them to move slightly with the air currents in the room, and adds to the installation pieces.

Touch: I like how thread can remind you of touch. We feel fibres often; they are right next to our skin when we are wearing clothes. I like that this might be in the back of people's mind; that looking at an embroidered piece also becomes about the memory of touch,



Previous page and left: *Poppies*, 2018 - Ongoing, 12' x 40" x 30", Thread, Machine Embroidery, Gallery Stratford, Stratford, Ontario. Images © Cheryl Rondeau
 Above and top right: *Floating Garden*, 2012 - Ongoing, 14' h x 30' w x 20' d, Thread/ Machine Embroidery, Cornell Museum of Art, Delray Beach, Florida.
 Top middle: *Plates*, 2017, 12" x 12", Thread, Machine Embroidery.
 Right: *Poppies*, detail.

of touching something soft.

History: I like the history of use related to fibre – although my pieces are not functional, they still carry with them a reference to functional things – napkins, blankets, pillows, hankies, gloves. Some of these things relate to covering the body, to comfort in the home, to cleaning up messes. I find all of these associations to be very interesting.

Strength: Another thing that I think is really interesting about fibre is how strong it is. Although the work appears to be quite delicate, it actually has a lot of strength that is created through the intersecting sewn lines. The unravelled strength of the work is quite surprising. I'm sure I will probably find more reasons to be interested in thread as I keep working with it.

Flexibility: For practical reasons, I like how I can roll and pack up pieces made from fibre. Most of my installations can be brought as my carry-on baggage on a plane as they pack down very small. Almost

like breathing in and out, these pieces can expand to fill whole rooms and then contract to fit in a small rubbermaid bin that gets stored underneath my sewing table.

Possibility: It seems to be that the possibilities for fibre are endless and that the role it might play is one of expanding and broadening the boundaries between art, craft, and design.

How did you get started on your current creative path?

I came to using sewn lines through an interest in drawn line. In 2006, I was taking a drawing course at York University with professor Michael Davey, where drawing was defined simply as 'line'. I thought that threaded line would be interesting to use because it was similar to drawing on paper, but had more of a presence. Finding links between the fibers of the body and fibers of cloth sparked my first series of work with >>



Main image: *Living Room*, 2010-2011, 10' x 10' x 10', Thread/Machine Embroidery, Produced with the support of the Ontario Arts Council.

Top right: *Sample Wall*, 2007-2019, Thread, Wool Roving, Organza, Wire, Linen, Pins, Ah! Gallery, Warkworth, Ontario.

Middle right: *Hands*, 2007, 15" h x 22" w, Thread/Machine Embroidery.

Bottom right: *Sample Wall*, detail.



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embroidery. This shift in materials – from lines made on paper to embroidery – marked a turning point in my practice.

In this same class, I thought that it would be interesting to make a drawing that only existed out of thread, with no base, but I needed to find a way to do this. That is really where my interest in the medium began.

I didn't really learn the technique of working with water soluble fabric. Instead, I had a visual problem or challenge for myself that I wanted to solve. So my questions were: How do I make a piece that exists only out of sewn line? What materials would allow me to do this? How much thread is needed to hold a work together? And, maybe, later on, what does the material mean and what is its relationship to the image? I have always loved drawing and when thinking about line in its simplest sense – as line – I began to think about how threaded line is interesting because it appears flat, but it is actually a sculptural line.

Where did the idea of the floating installations come from?

For a long time, I was making work that was based on images of hands making and unmaking things. These pieces were on the wall. I worked on a collaboration with jeweller, Margaret Lim, while I was doing a residency at Harbourfront Centre. In this collaboration, we hung things in small cases and this was when I first started to think about hanging things from the ceiling. I liked the movement that was created by hanging the work this way and the feeling that the pieces were floating.

How do you use lighting to best effect in your installations?

Every gallery is different so lighting can be a challenge. Often, we light the pieces as we go because there are many areas where I wouldn't be able to reach the lighting once the whole installation is put up. At Centre Materia in Quebec City, the gallery was equipped with stage lighting so we could light the pieces with one strong light. This created amazing shadows that almost looked like pencil drawings on the walls and floors of the space. Now, when I'm lighting pieces, I think about the shadows that they cast as well.

Do you have any specific criteria when choosing a venue or space to display your work in?

Not really, but I do think that the space the work is put up in has a big effect on the final outcome. I love the challenge of working with different spaces as it makes every installation unique.

Once an exhibition is confirmed, the first thing I speak to the curator about is their ceilings and I often request an image. There's a lot of problem solving that goes into putting up artwork in spaces.

The beauty in the detail is really impressive in your work given that it is on such a large scale – how do you achieve and plan for that?

I often build my installations by repeating small units hundreds of times to create a larger impression or feeling in a space. Working this way allows me to focus on smaller parts and assemble them into a whole. >>

How do viewers respond to the interactive nature of your work?

Viewers are invited to walk through paths that I create in the installation works. They are also invited to lie underneath the pieces and look up at the artwork. Generally, viewers like this option for interacting with the piece in different ways – through movement, or a different perspective on the floor. Often, viewers will blow on the embroideries and they will move in the air. The works start to spin and move as you walk around them.

How does your environment influence and inspire your work?

I have created a series of embroidered works based on my various rental apartments I have lived in. In these works, I recreated many of the objects that existed in these spaces like chairs, side tables, and other nick-nacks out of thread, mimicking the space in my old home like a stage set or enlarged shoe-box diorama. The objects act as a trace or record of a space that used to exist. Part shrine or monument, the thread drawings act as a tribute to a room that once was. I think creating something physical that references the intangible satisfies a desire to keep what is no longer in some solid way. These spaces, although created and obviously not the real thing, will keep living on.

These works are 3D objects that have been flattened and rendered like a drawing using the sewing machine and different coloured threads to create the impression of depth. This display method embraces how the embroideries can be seen from both sides. By moving flat embroideries into space, you are able to see them from many angles. The room installation pieces are, in many ways, a lot like a drawing in that there is an ideal place to stand, but installing my flat embroideries in space allows people to move around the work and really see its flatness. I think that something interesting happens when moving around the piece when it is installed in a way where there is space between the embroideries. If you are looking at the work from the side, it sort of disappears and the image falls apart. Then, as you continue to move around the piece, the scene comes together again.

What do you hope your art will achieve?

I want my works to bring viewers into an imaginary, dream-like space filled with line, colour, and texture.

What's next for you creatively?

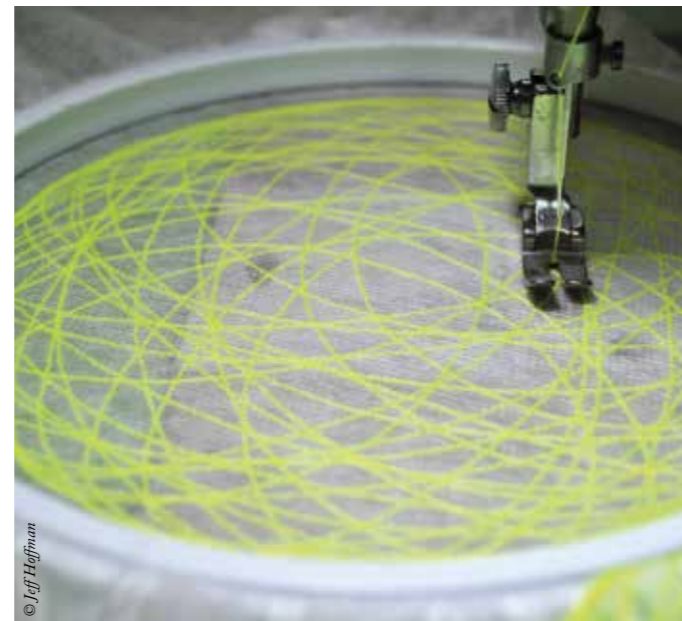
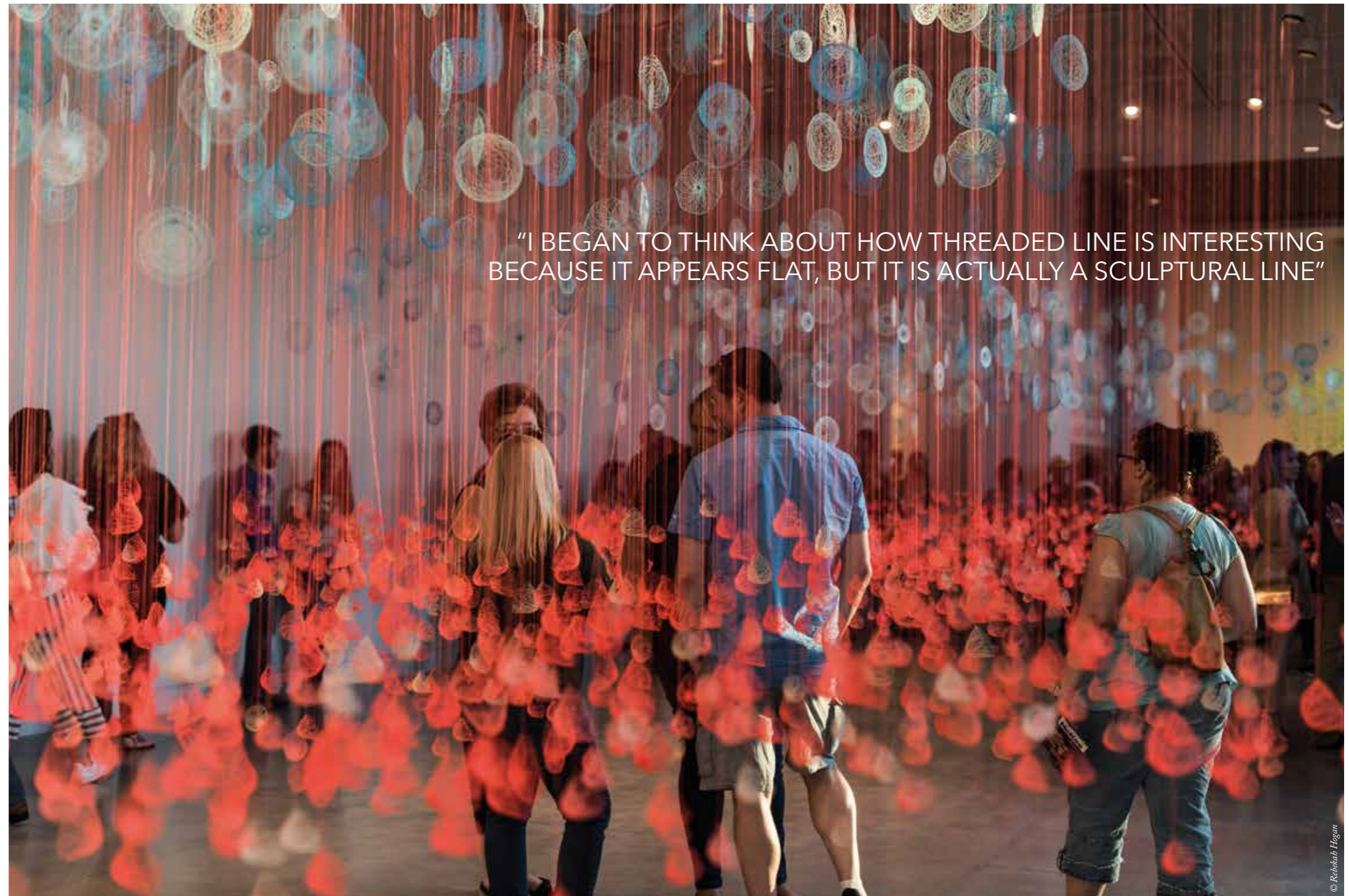
In the next year, I will be working on a large installation that will be three stories tall. It will be a lot of embroidery! Keep an eye out for the exhibition – it opens September 2020. 📍

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Right and bottom right: *Pink Field Blue Fog*, 2016 - Ongoing, 14' x 40" x 80", Thread, Machine Embroidery, 108 Contemporary, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Below right and middle: *Neon Clouds*, 2016, 35' x 40' x 10', Thread, wire, foam/Machine Embroidery, Taubman Museum of Art, Roanoke, VA.

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