

Selvedge

DESIGNER EDGE



JESSICA SO REN TANG

Step inside any Asian supermarket and you'll be transported with the sights, smells and sounds of the exotic East. You'll find bunches of fresh Asian greens, aromatic spices, Maneki Nekos (lucky cat figurines), colourful sweets and, of course, the instantly recognisable blue-and-white and red-and-yellow china. These wonderful pieces of dinnerware often feature iconic imagery of pagodas, cranes and Chinese characters. So too Jessica So Ren Tang's needle-and-thread translations of these classic ceramics. Her sculptural works feature the ubiquitous patterns of Asian crockery and food packaging.

"I look for objects that are nostalgic from my childhood and items that have Asian and American significance," says the USA-based artist. From Chinese takeaway boxes to teapots and sweet wrappers – Jessica replicates these objects with fabric and dense stitching. Her work interweaves her different cultural backgrounds. As she writes on her



website, "With embroidery, I explore my Asian-American identity – the dualism of being too Asian to be American, and too American to be Asian."

Like many great ideas, Jessica's embroidery style came about as a solution to a problem. "I was given a college assignment to experiment with techniques. One experiment involved sewing onto a cup noodle container. The thread I used while sewing into the cup ended up cutting through the material. I decided to switch to fabric but kept the imagery of the cup noodle," she says. "I liked being able to replicate all the cup details and looked for other objects to replicate."

Different construction techniques are used to achieve the shape and size of the objects (they range from one to six inches in height). "When I started my Chinese-bowl embroidery, I drew up a pattern that sort of looked like a sun, with a circle in the centre and long triangular shapes radiating outward. I found that I had to repeatedly adjust the shape to achieve the round shape of the bowl. I also referred to tutorials on how to make a fabric bowl, most of which were too geometric," says Jessica. "For more complex pieces, like the teapot, it was mostly experimental. I cut and taped shapes I thought would match the original object and constantly adjusted until I was completely satisfied with the result."



These days, to create her patterns, Jessica flattens the packaging (like a box of sweets) and traces the template onto fabric. Or, for more sculptural objects, such as a teapot or bowl, she creates and assembles a paper craft pattern in the same size as the original object, before flattening the pattern and transferring that onto fabric. Back, satin and split stitches, with the occasional French knot, are used for the richly embroidered surface.

Jessica finds the whole process calming and meditative. "Except when the thread gets knotted up or the colour is wrong or the text isn't clear. But when I can get into the flow of embroidering, it's relaxing. When I put many hours in, it's nice to take a break, step back and run my fingers across the thread. Sometimes, when I'm stitching a large area, each stitch feels like an inhale and an exhale."

This artist's work has set us thinking about the design possibilities to be had from a mere visit to the supermarket. Shelf life takes on a whole new meaning and appreciation for 'what's in store'. But we don't claim to have the design skills to turn something utilitarian into a work of art, as Jessica So Ren Tang does. That's a different league altogether.

To see more of Jessica's work, visit jessicasorentang.com and follow her on Instagram, @jessicasorentang.

– Janai Velez

