

PHOTO FINISH

Manya Goldman's needlepoints evoke patchy photos, questioning how we remember and our notion of time. By Anneka French

Manya Goldman's needlepoints seem to shimmer. Her skill in colour-mixing reveals her background in painting, but her practice also operates in dialogue with photography. Each of her hand-embroidered works in silk on canvas is usually inspired by photographs taken by her father during her early childhood in Cape Town, South Africa.

'I had a very creative background,' reflects Goldman, who grew up in London and is now based in Brighton. 'My father was an architect; my mother made ceramics. After studying textiles, I wanted to refine my creativity and started using very fine

silk yarns. I experimented with portraits as I wanted to find a way to integrate stitching with the way I painted, which was often conceptually and on a small scale. I've always had a fascination with the miniature, and portals to other worlds, such as in *Alice in Wonderland*.'

Goldman explains that her repetitive approach to stitching and the way we interpret surface patterns enable her work to reference digital pixelation. The same stitch is used over and over, dotted across the canvas backing to create a kind of illusion that allows our eye to slide across her surfaces. 'I wanted to create some uncertainty. I noticed that people

who saw the work from across a room, with no preparation, for instance at the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition, were unsure about what they were seeing,' says Goldman. 'I enjoy creating those depths of field. People tend to think my work is a painting. Painting is usually on canvas, it's just that I'm making the actual fabric as I stitch,' Goldman explains. 'I hardly ever use one colour, but usually a palette of three thread colours, mixing them just as you would with paint.'

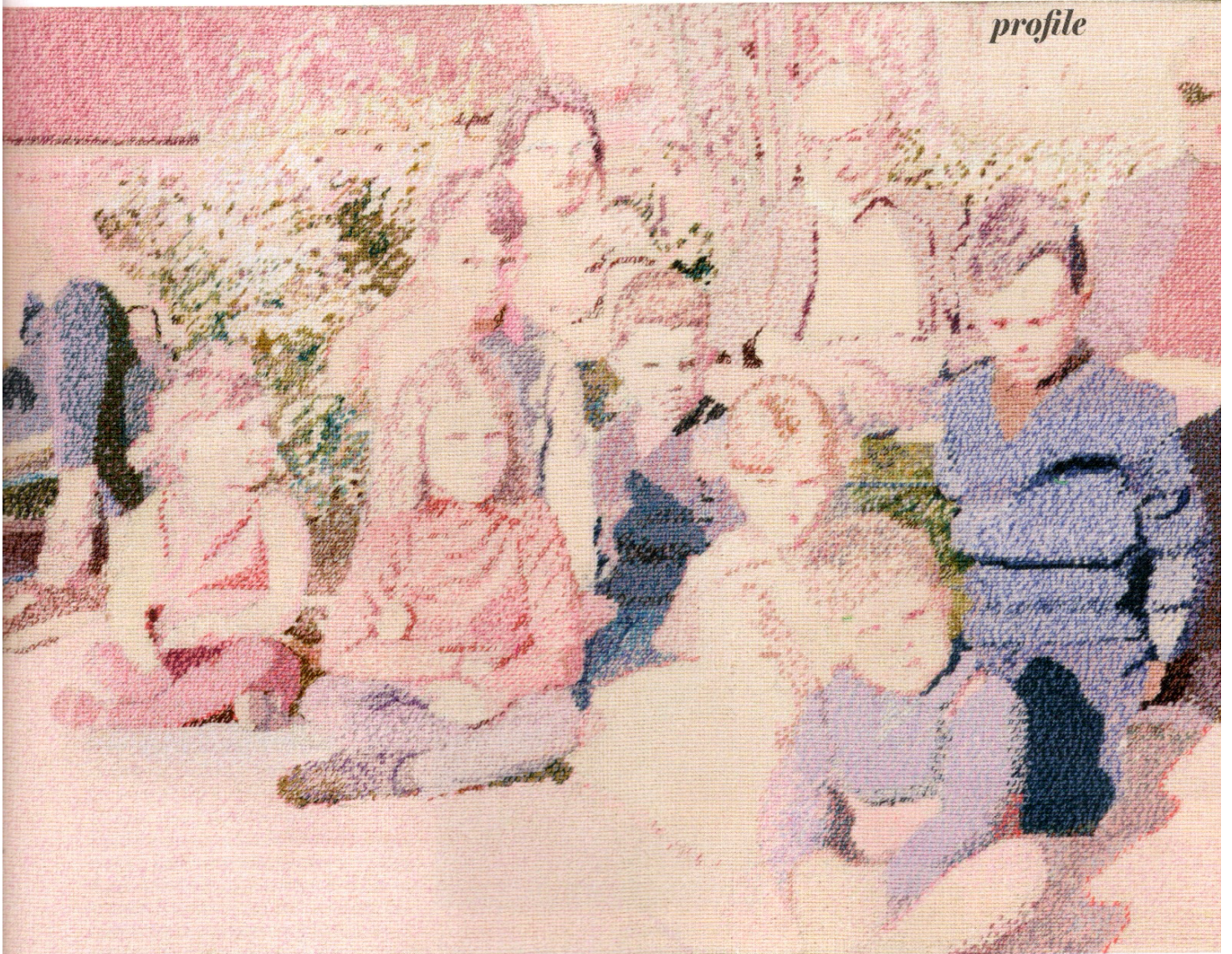
While Goldman is keen to retain that connection to painting, she feels freedom comes from using textiles, a field so often associated with women makers. 'I felt



'I'VE ALWAYS HAD A FASCINATION WITH THE MINIATURE, AND PORTALS TO OTHER WORLDS, SUCH AS IN ALICE IN WONDERLAND'

something lift when I stopped attempting to paint. I didn't have that history of the patriarchy on my shoulders,' she reveals. 'When I stitch, I can do what I like. I'm free; I've got permission to work as I wish.' Photography is a medium heavily associated with memory. Goldman, keen to explore networks of memory, meaning and belonging, often includes depictions of people who have passed away within her works. 'I wanted to bring someone into life again, I wanted them to be present,' she states. 'Perhaps this sounds uncomfortable or scary but it's an evocation of a presence, not only of people but of times and places too. There's often a light that I'm referencing from my childhood in South Africa that is very different to the UK. And that light that I'm remembering is different from the experience of it at that time. I want the works to take on an atmosphere, almost as if you could put your hand into that place.'

A good example is the piece *Beside* (2021), which features a five-year-old Goldman standing next to her nanny, Lillian. 'There are few photographs of Lillian. I wanted



Opposite page: Manya Goldman, *Warm Water* (2025), 37cm x 30cm. Hand embroidery in silk on canvas. A faded-out beach scene encapsulates hazy memories of golden sunshine and happy days.

Above: Manya Goldman, *Light and Dust* (2025), 21.8cm x 29.6cm. Hand embroidery in silk on canvas. Memories of life in South Africa, from where the family, active in the anti-apartheid struggle, had to flee as refugees.

Left: *Arcadia*, (2019), 19.8cm x 26.4cm. Hand embroidery in silk on canvas. Despite the idyllic setting, the child in the yellow dress looks shocked by something. Goldman is keen to include elements that jar to disrupt her images.



Left: *Beside*, (2021), 30cm x 25.2cm. Hand embroidery in silk on canvas. The image shows a five-year-old Goldman standing next to her nanny, Lillian, in South Africa. Goldman wants the images to promote the feeling you could almost be there, using art to remember people close to her.

Above: *The Fire Next Time*, (2025), 32cm x 29.6cm. Hand embroidery in silk on canvas. A collage of photographs. This image creates a feeling of unease at the orange sky behind the children.

'I HARDLY EVER USE ONE COLOUR, BUT USUALLY A PALETTE OF THREE THREAD COLOURS, MIXING THEM JUST AS YOU WOULD WITH PAINT'

to be with her again, to bring her into my present,' she says. Goldman also reflects on the context of the image, explaining that it reveals something about her relationship with her father, in that he took the original photograph knowing that the family were fleeing the country as refugees active in the anti-apartheid struggle and understanding that Goldman would cherish this photograph. 'My father had all already died by the time I realised this,' she says. 'But when I looked at the photograph I realised there was a whole relationship I could see through his eyes; that I could find out more about him through this too.' Though there is a tendency with representational artworks to look only at the people or subject(s) shown, the relationships between those depicted and the maker of the image is significant too.

For instance, in *Warm Water* (2025), the perspective of the children in the sea is shown from their eye level, as Goldman's father bent right down to capture their portrait intimately.

Goldman returns over and over to photographs from this period of time, sometimes cropping, collaging or making marks on copies before using them as the basis of her needlepoints.

Each needlepoint can take up to three months to complete. The slow tempo at which she works means she rarely returns to the same photographic starting point. These inspirations, though, form the heart of a long-term, ambitious body of work from which Goldman does feel that she will eventually move on.

Goldman is currently working on another family group piece. Several of the people in the image are no longer alive. What becomes key in these cases, is for Goldman to leave an opening or doorway, to allow an entry point for something to come into the frame or to allow some other kind of ambiguity that moves the work beyond any sense of rose-tinted, romanticism.

The Fire Next Time (2025), for instance, is a piece in which the colours and title

create a sense of complex narrative, using a collage of photographs to combine a group of children and an intensely vibrant orange sky suggestive of a blaze behind them.

In *Arcadia* (2019), a child on the left of the scene stands open-mouthed, as if aghast at something she has seen. Goldman is keen to include uncomfortable elements within her works. These serve to disrupt the image: 'In *Arcadia* it's the juxtaposition between the hyper-vigilant child, and the lounging, unthinking, nonchalant adults nearby. I like that combination.'

Goldman points out, though, that despite these works being personal, they retain a sense of wider, even universal, reach. Goldman observes: 'Even when my family members say, "Oh look, there's me!", I want to say it's not you, or not only you, but instead a conduit for something else. 'I hope my works allow viewers to bring to mind their own memories, relationships, places, emotions or losses.'

manyagoldman.com

[Instagram.com/goldie...m](https://www.instagram.com/goldie...m)

Manya Goldman is showing work in *For the Love of Textiles*, until 28 June, at Sunny Bank Mills, Farsley, Pudsey. sunnybankmills.co.uk