



MAGGY ROZYCKI HILTNER

SEEING LIFE
THROUGH ART ONE
STITCH AT A TIME

In her second-story studio a stone's throw from Rock Creek in a quiet span of forest outside of Red Lodge, 36-year-old Maggy Rozycki Hiltner uses a traditional craft—embroidery—to put forth fresh, thought-provoking ideas about social mores, self-expression and the emotional landscapes of relationships, memory, childhood and parenting.

Maggy's images, often montages of her own handwork with vintage textiles she has found in antiques stores around the country, are hand-stitched in exquisite detail using lush, happy colors. What makes her artwork so striking, so unusual, is the ironic contrast of its beauty with its subversive undertone and its sometimes unsettling social commentary. Maggy's usual protagonists of choice are Dick and Jane-like characters who, at first glance, appear happily immersed in play, but upon closer inspection are acting out the moments of isolation, fear, and anger that most of us recall from childhood. In one vignette, her cute characters are playing a disturbingly vicious game of tug-of-war. In another, entitled "The Monsanto Twins Try a Little Genetic Engineering," two boys, again cute and innocent at first glance, wave "gene guns" at one another.

BY ALEXIS M. ADAMS PHOTOGRAPHY BY BECKY BROCKIE

"Even though my art features children acting out the scenes, it isn't just about children," Maggy says. "Dick and Jane and all of their friends are mostly stand-ins for me and sometimes other folks. Interpersonal relationships can be challenging at any age. With my art, I'm recalling stories and feelings from my past, stories I've heard from others, and situations that come up today and I am trying to convey them in the universal language of American kitsch. As a child, I had wonderful times and times that weren't so fun. Artists try to look at things as honestly as possible and celebrate all of it."

Many of the stories Maggy recalls took place in suburban Phoenixville, Pennsylvania where she grew up. After high school, Maggy studied art at Syracuse University where she majored in sculpture, but spent much of my time in the Fibers Department." That's where she met her husband, David Hiltner, a graduate student in ceramics at the time. After completing their degrees, she and David went from Syracuse to Powell, Wyoming, where David taught ceramics for a year before moving on to head the Ceramics Department at Wichita State University in Kansas. In Wichita, Maggy taught for an organization called Arts Partners, working with K-12 classroom teachers to teach their curriculum through quilting. In 2005, David left his tenure-track teaching position at Wichita State and the couple moved to Red Lodge to establish the bustling Red Lodge Clay Center, which features a residency program, workshops, community classes and an impressive gallery of work by nationally-known artists.

During the couple's time in Powell and Wichita, Maggy was deeply involved in exploring her work. Looking back, she sees that the pieces she created in those communities not only reflect her evolution as an artist, but also offer some insight into the history and culture of each place. During this time, Maggy integrated the textiles she collected from thrift stores and antiques shops in Powell and Wichita into her work. In Powell and the surrounding area, she found the textiles of the homesteaders: petticoats, white lace, kid gloves and doilies. The work that

resulted was mostly white-on-white and somewhat abstract in its ideas and imagery. In Kansas, her textile collection overflowed with colorful Midwestern kitsch: dancing teapots, dishwashing kittens and vibrant flowers. This is when Maggy developed her Dick and Jane-like characters, as well as her collage techniques. In Montana, she has continued to hunt for brightly colored household embroidery in antique shops and thrift stores, and Western iconography—horses, cowboys and the like—is now making its way into her work.

Because of her unique and head-

turning style, Maggy's work has been exhibited in New York, Los Angeles and many cities between the two, and has garnered attention from critics and writers from many national publications, including in the New York Times. This summer, the prestigious Textile Museum in Washington, DC featured Maggy's work as a part of a show entitled "Green: The Color and the Cause." Of the show, she says, she is "absolutely honored to be included," and finds herself compelled to "work harder to earn a part in the rich history of textiles."

As the mother of two girls, Maggy

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says her 8- and 3-year-old daughters are always a source of inspiration for her work. "These kids of mine are a reminder of the extremes of human emotion and feeling. Adults are so polite. My daughter can be kissing me up one minute and screaming in fury moments later... I guess I feel that way sometimes too. Adults are just big children trained to be quiet. Maybe we just have a teensy bit more self-control. But to feel with the intensity that children do, that is enviable. I'm glad to have my art to express and explore these ideas in."

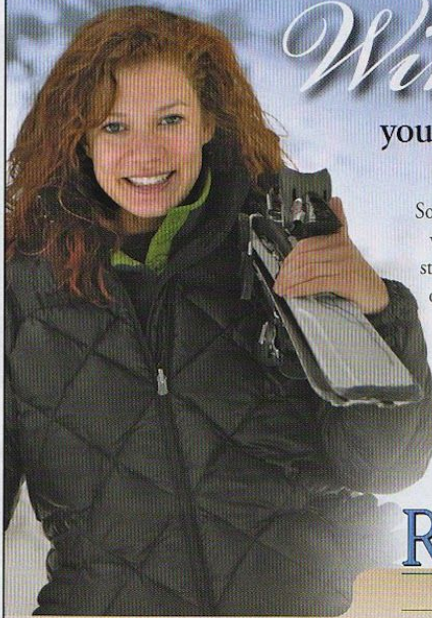
She explores the challenges of being a mom in her humorous Mad Mom series. Topping a finely stitched image of a 1950s-style housewife with a roughly stitched head inspired by a child's drawing, she reveals the feelings inside the idealized image of a homemaker. Hiltner says, "I especially love a Mad Mom with angry eyebrows and a smile. We've all been there, gritting our teeth and trying to keep it all together."

On balancing work and family, Maggy describes the conflict many of us experience: "As a mom, I feel guilty when I'm in my studio—I should be with my kids—and guilty when I'm with my kids—I should be in my studio. I would love to shed that guilt! I do want to make sure to be an example to my girls that I'm an artist and a professional as well as a mom."

Despite the challenges Maggy faces in trying to balance art and mothering, she manages to bring these two strands of her life together nearly every day and in many ways. At the country school her children attend outside of Red Lodge, for example, she coordinated the art program for preschool through 4th grade for several years. This involved planning the curriculum, supplying the materials and teaching every week of the school year. This year she is working with the school to expand and support an arts program to ensure the availability of visual art, music and foreign language instruction for all of the school's students for perpetuity. At home, she and her girls are nearly constantly creating, whether they are making homemade birthday party invitations, decorating cupcakes, or drawing images that may someday end up depicted in one of Maggy's fantastic embroideries.

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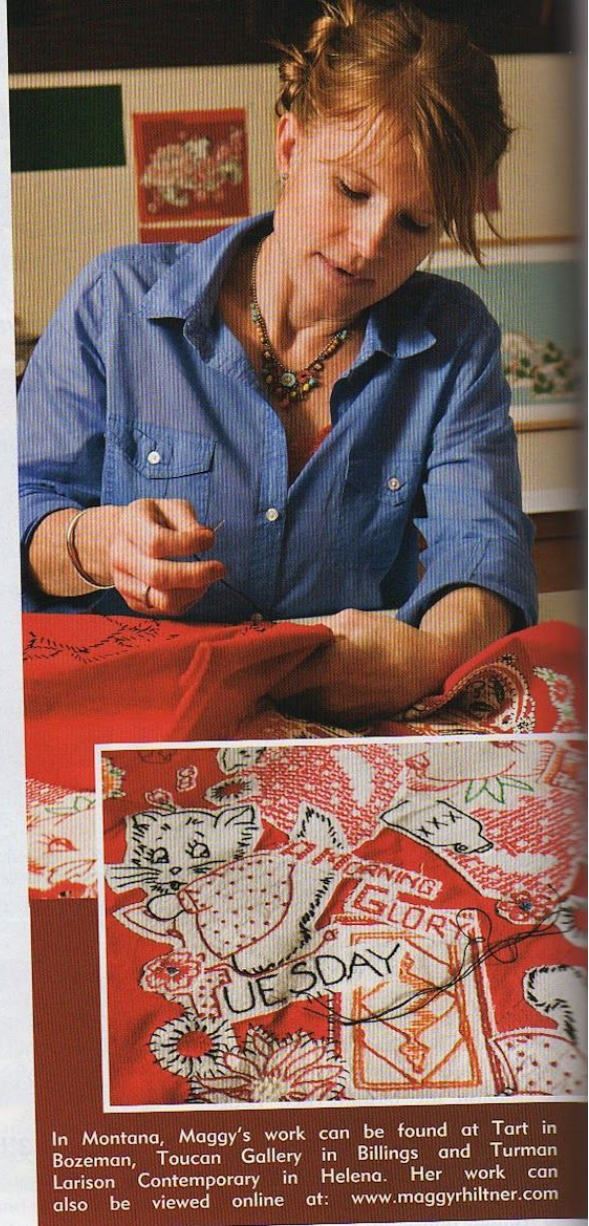


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