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BA Photography in The Arts

Module: ADAA5009 Visual Enquiry 2

Lecturer: Estéfani Bouza

Theme of the book

The title of the book *exactly what you run from you end up chasing* refers to a track of the same title from Tyler, The Creator's album *IGOR*. The lyrics include a piece of spoken word by Jerrod Carmichael:

Exactly what you run from, you end up chasing

Like, you can't avoid, but just chasing it and just like trying

Giving it everything that you can

There's always an obstacle

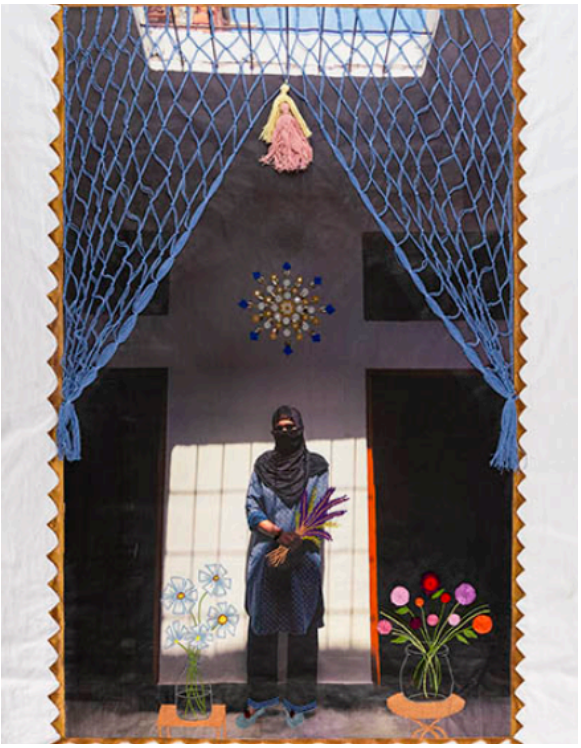
The book delves into my complex emotions and connections to my homeland Poland, the mix of nostalgia and suppressed anger I experience as an immigrant in the UK. Through a series of 10 photographs captured in places significant to my life, I aim to create narratives on detachment and lost belonging.

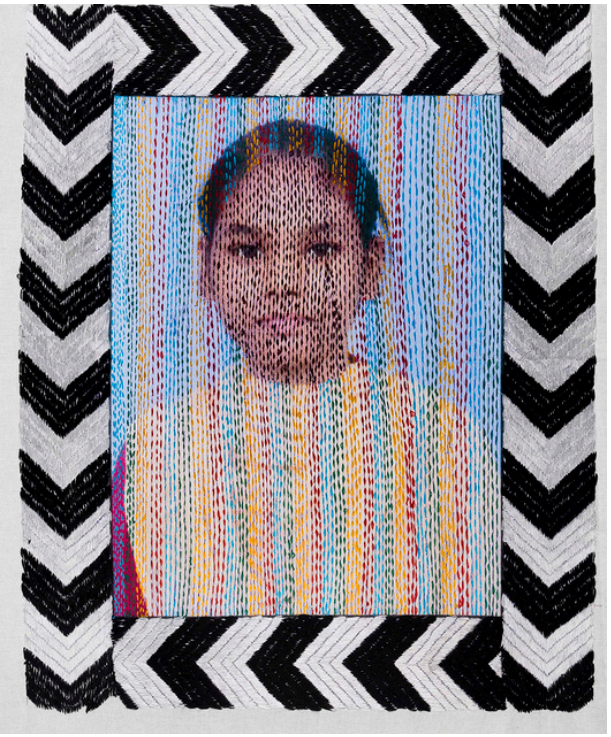
The themes I had in mind whilst working on the book were: feeling foreign, unseen stories, liminality, connections, mending (textile).

Research

Initially, my idea for the book was to combine mixed media writing and photographic print. I experimented with writing over images, both digitally and with an acrylic pen, in reference to photographers Geloy Concepcion and Jim Goldberg. However, my attempts at this felt too polished. Following a tutorial with lecturer Estefani Bouza, I felt inclined to try a different approach, as she had suggested doing something I would not do usually. I decided to tear one of the images and stitch it back together. This led to taking inspiration from my own practice in sashiko - a Japanese tradition of mending and strengthening clothing with lines of running stitches. It was at this stage that I decided to change the original idea and follow the route of embroidering over prints.

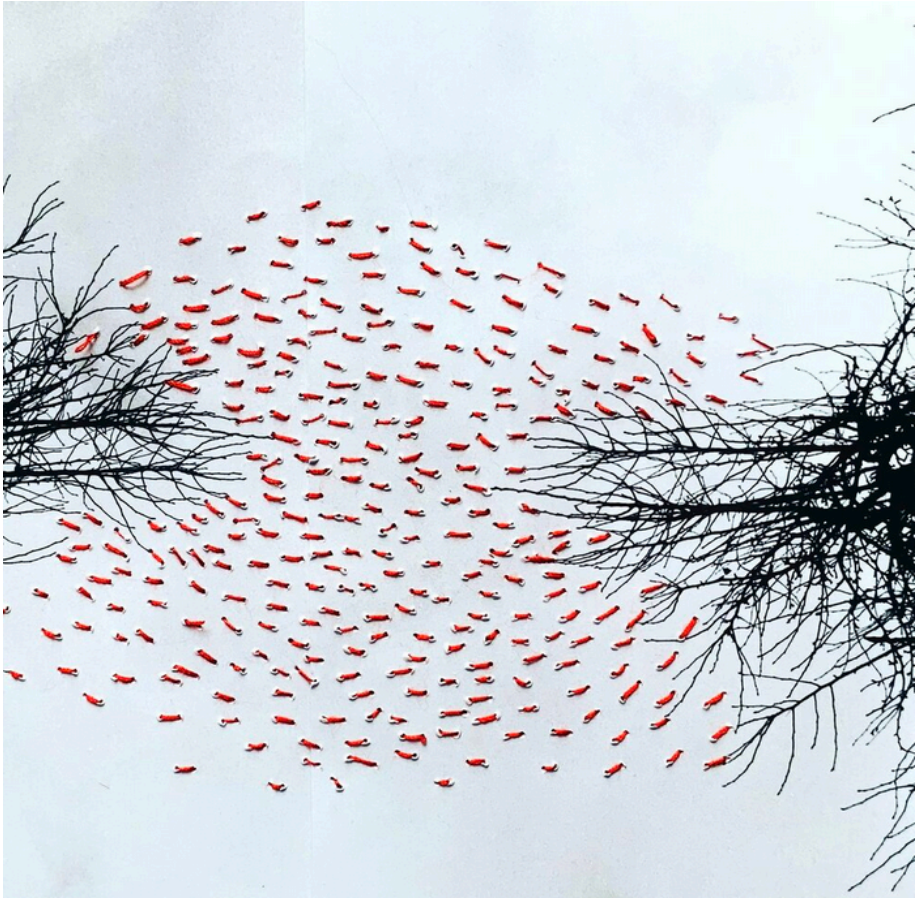
In my research, I have looked at a variety of artists working in both textiles and photography. My starting point was an interview with Spandita Malik as seen in the British Journal of Photography. Her work combines embroidery and photography to bring into light a very serious problem in India - misogyny and violence against women. This was important for me to consider due to the weighty subject matter and creating visual stories with the style of stitching.





Spandita Malik, *Nari 2020* (on the left) and *Rajni Mehra II* (right)

Next, I looked at Kim Gisoo's art practice, who is a Korean artist living and working in Germany. Gisoo's works re-imagines connections, real or surreal, by bringing images together using yarn. I tried to reference the use of sashiko style of stitching in my own practice.



Kim Gisoo, as seen in their website

I also read Cas Holmes' book *Stitch Stories: Personal places, spaces and traces in textile art* as a means of further exploring the practical side of this project. In her book, Holmes explores connections with nature, both through imagery and tools used, such as fabric, natural dyes and thread. The book also references various sewing methods including sashiko. This book features the works of James Hunting, who in particular focuses on the connection between material, stitch, and artist, creating pieces focused on emotions rather than function.

Right Selection of stitch samplers, including a cloth and paper sampler book. Note how the dynamic of straight stitch changes with a sheer fabric and the stitch is visible as a softer line from the back.

Below: Stitch graphics. From the left: irregular straight stitch; couching; diagonal straight stitch with increasing spacing; curved straight stitch; fly stitch and straight stitch; knots and straight stitch.

Making samplers using a variety of cloth surfaces and threads is a good way to explore different approaches to hand stitch. It is also a direct way to introduce gestural line and texture, which reflects the maker's hand or 'signature'.

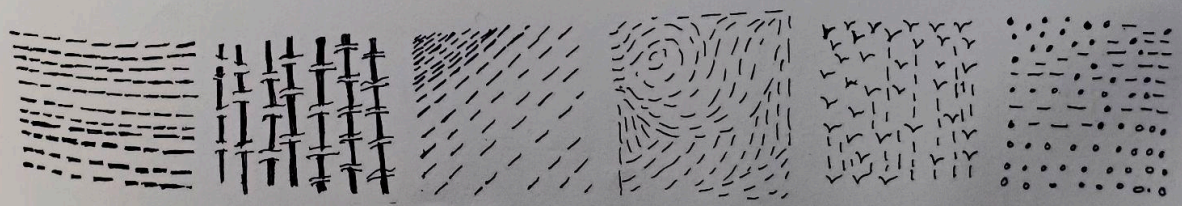
Try not to plan, but rather react to the material itself. Working with a few of your preferred, or often used, embroidery stitches such as backstitch, French knots or running stitch, invent your own marks based on everyday things. For example you could use ticket details saved from a regular journey, or patterns and shapes based on signs, logos and trademarks collected from places you visit.

Consider the surface qualities of the simple backgrounds found in canvas, calico or linen and experiment with different colours and weights of thread. Manipulate the fabric and explore different methods of attachment and piecing. Include non-traditional materials, pull threads from the weave, tie things off, leave loose ends, or fold and pleat work to add an extra textural dimension. This enables you to develop a visual and physical response to your ideas in respect to the marks you make and the different feel they leave in the cloth.

James Hunting

Artist James Hunting refers to his process of working as engaging with 'the emotion of the stitch'. James has been exploring and developing his understanding of stitch and textile media since graduating in 1986. He talks about the legacy of hand stitch in particular as being 'hidebound' and 'prejudged' by the historical legacy that encourages focusing on technique rather than expression in the mark:

There is a tendency to focus on technique and the visual demonstration of historically misunderstood accepted norms



of process. The 'understanding' I talk about goes beyond the technical reproduction of acknowledged named stitches and is an exploration of the emotional and gestural effect one can achieve using needle and thread. I do not 'draw with the needle', a phrase which I believe belittles the act of stitch, but I use the physicality – the interaction of cloth, needle, gesture and brain – a very different act to laying down marks on an often inert substrate. If the viewer's first response to a piece of work is 'What stitch is that?', or 'How did you do that?' then the piece is a failure. I want the first reaction to be 'What is he saying?' or 'That makes me feel/think/sense ...'

James draws upon personal experiences, desires and 'memory codes' in which the work is not explicit in content, but suggestive and acts as an invitation:

The male form is present in my work as an object of desire. Often features are missing, [but] I know who they are; the viewer can bring their own characters to the piece. I have an almost physical hatred of the word 'nostalgia': to me it is a negation of reality and an easily used word conjuring up a domestic utopia that never existed. Memories, however, are painful, embarrassing [and] uncomfortable, but they make us and cannot be ignored. They guide my work. The act of making and ... the joining of the fabrics with embroidery enables me to relive, think and contextualize my life. Once the piece[s] ... [are] completed, my relationship with them changes. They become visually responsible: are they pleasing to the eye? Do they draw the viewer back again and again?

The pieces are layers of life, mine and the viewer's, and are worked as such ...

James works directly on to the cloth. He adds or removes colours and layers as he works, leaving traces of the threads he removes still evident in the surface marks.

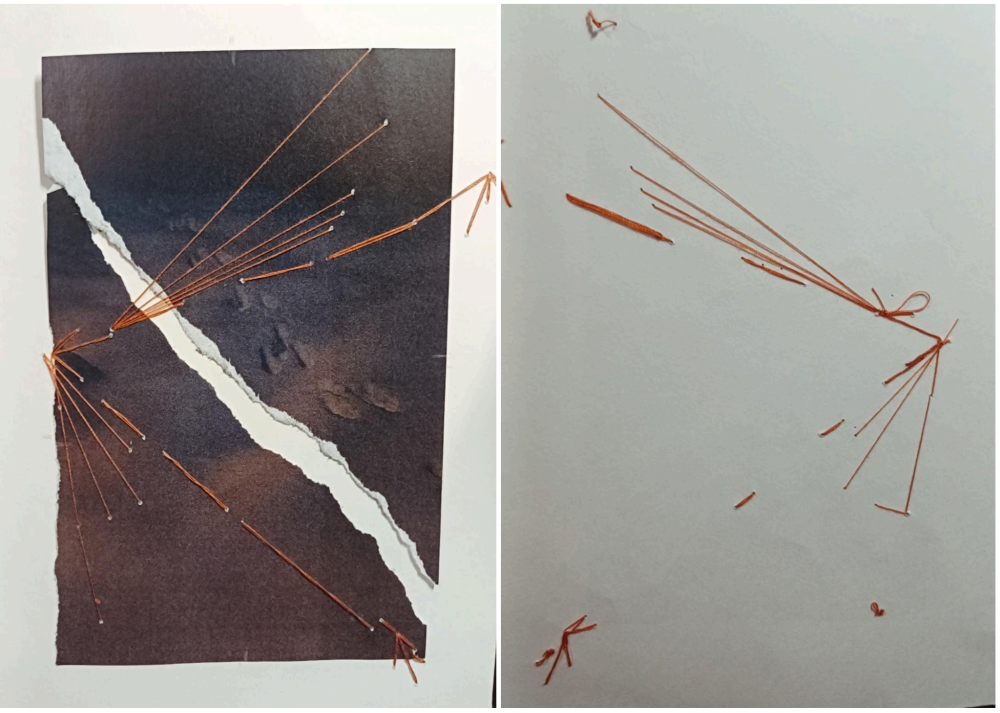
Below James Hunting, *And There Will Be Your Heart Also*, 2012, 75 x 60cm (29½ x 24in).Vintage and found fabrics, hand stitch.

Right *Lace Weeds*, 2014. Four pieces each 110 x 12cm (43 x 5in). Stitched and distressed surfaces incorporating lace, fragments from a book on lacemaking, conservation tissue and curtain fabric. The handstitch details include curving running stitch and French knots.

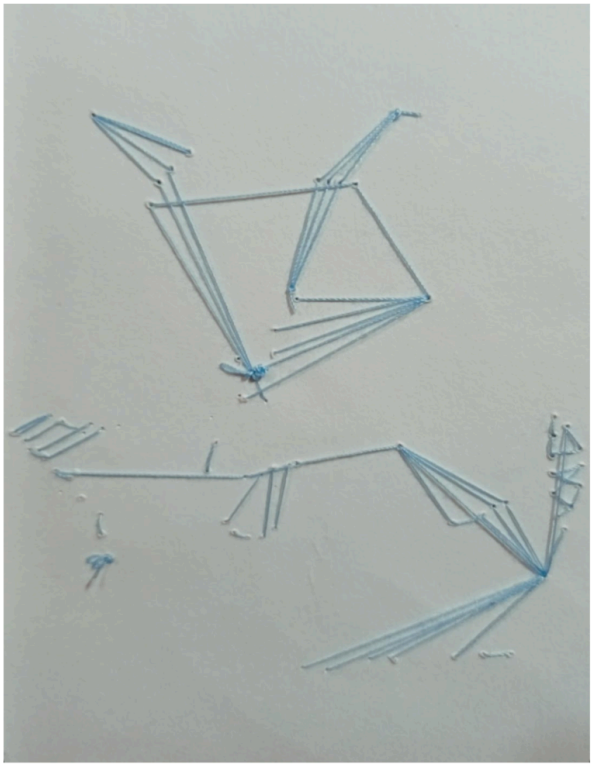
Sashiko from Atsushi Futatsuya's article at selvedge.org

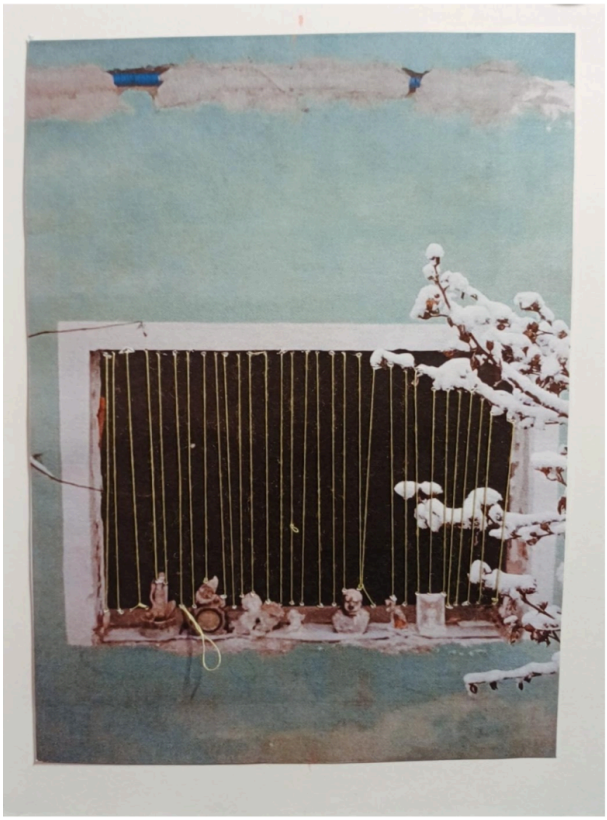
Experimentation and development

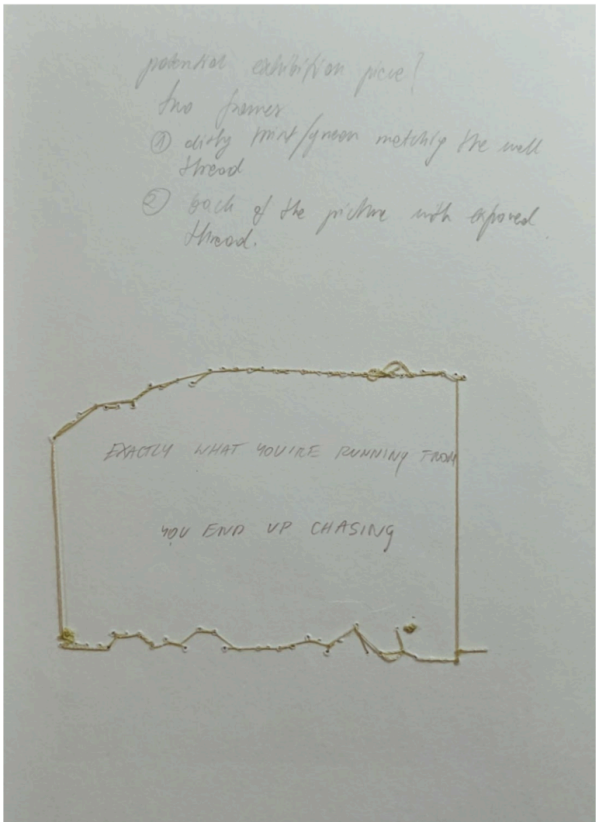
Following a tutorial with lecturer Estefani Bouza, I decided to tear one of the images and stitch it back together using a handmade sketchbook as a backing.



This then led to more experimentation with embroidering over images, and following research into using stitching over photographic prints.





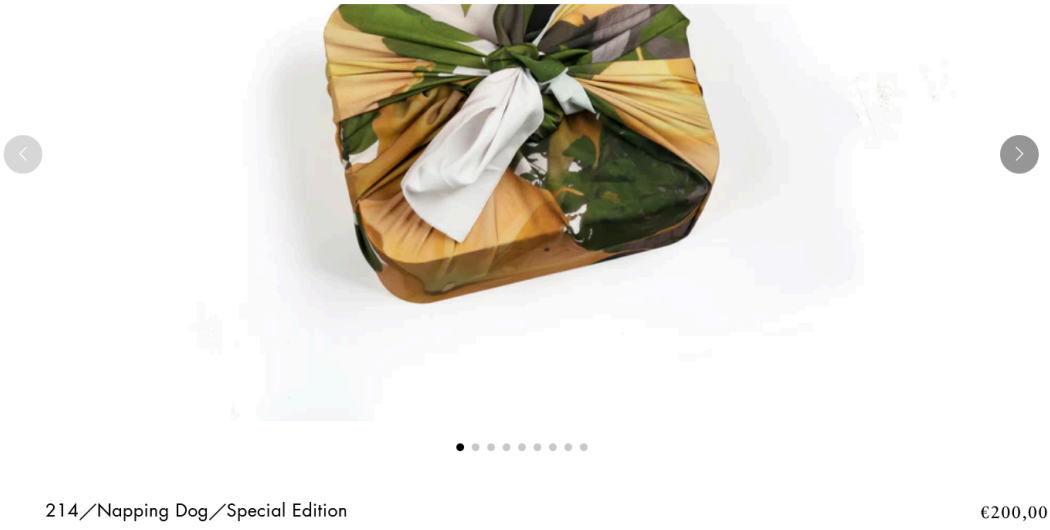


This is also where the initial idea for the exhibition overlaps with the book project - the green print was supposed to be exhibited as a set of two 30x30cm frames, one showcasing the ‘front’ of the piece, and one for the back. I later decided against it and opted for producing a triptych independent of the book project.

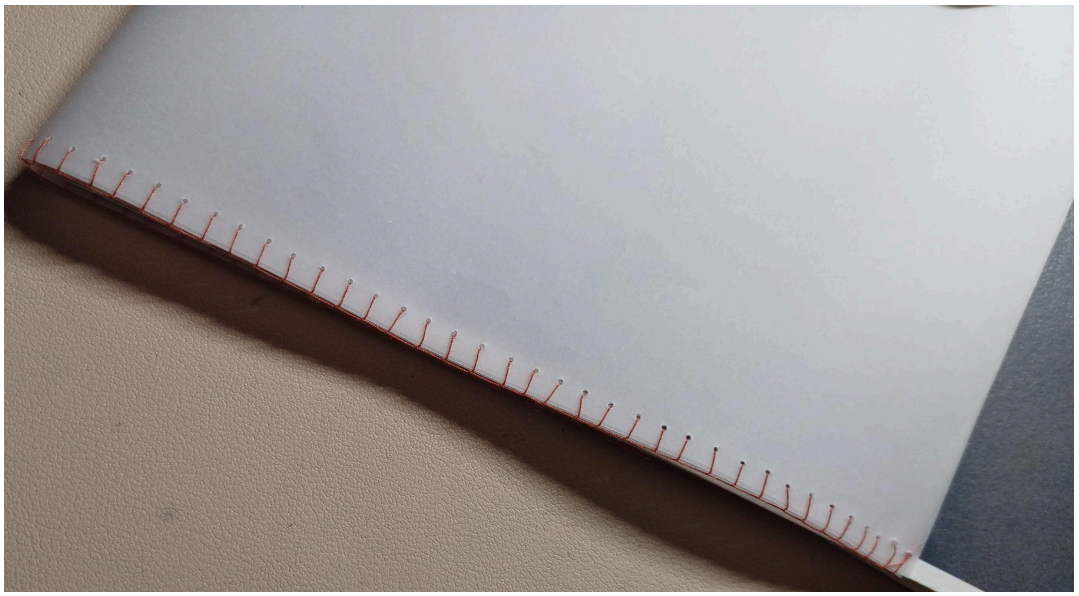
At this stage I was considering how to bind the book. Using traditional binding methods would allow me to rip the paper and have something to stitch them back onto, however I didn’t like the idea of a fixed order in which the images would be seen. Although there is a pre existing theme to the images where half of the subject matter visually represents winter and the other half spring, I felt the order in which images appear is not of key importance and it would be more interesting to leave it to the viewer - and to see how they see patterns throughout the project, in which order do they feel the works look best in. Therefore, I decided on not binding the images into a book.

This also created another issue, which was the cover. Due to the book not being binded, there were only a few options on how to hold the book together. Having observed previous publications within the University, one that particularly stood out was the *In search of ground* by UWTSD Photography students graduating in 2021. The book is co-published by Folium, and it is an interesting spin on photo books or photo boxes. It includes images from the group of students, individually printed and folded, with information on the other side.

Since I decided against binding my images into a book, one matter remained unsolved, which is the cover, or casing. Looking at Asian photography collectives I was familiar with, not many artists chose loose images for their projects. The closest to what I was interested in was 214's *Napping Dog,* and it's usage of wrapping fabric around a box in which the physical book lies.



Personally, I was not interested in presenting my publication in a box form as I felt it would be, again, too formal. I decided to take a trip to a local arts and crafts shop in Krakow, and browse their selection of paper. I came across large sheets of tracing paper, and purchased a few. I really liked how a few of those sheets layed on top of my images, giving them a frosty finish with enough opacity not to give everything away at first glance. To better tie the images to the cover, I decided to sew three sheets of tracing paper together on the free edges using a blanket stitch.



Embroidery process

In Photoshop, I created simple sketches of what I envisioned for my embroidery. Those were only meant to be visual guidelines for sewing.

When it came to sewing, I quickly learned that I would have to pierce the paper from one side only, and stitch very carefully as the paper was too thick and had the tendency to create fuzz. Due to the thickness of paper, the holes made by even the smallest of needles would be visible. It mattered most on pieces where I used single piece thread instead of double. This could have been avoided if I conducted more research on paper types prior to printing.

Conclusion

This book project allowed me to step outside my comfort zone and experiment further with mixed media, which in the recent year has become especially important to me. While I'm generally happy with creating this book, there are a few things I would change or approach differently.

Firstly, I learned that thinner paper and special embroidery needles could work better for thick matte paper over 250gsm. Secondly, printing more dummies on different paper types would have been helpful in identifying what to avoid, leading to better looking results. Printing on fabric could have been interesting as an experiment, and I imagine would help in tying the concept together thematically. Aditionally, I would have liked my book to include objects similar to how Kim Gisoo produced the 'flat sculptures'. I think my work would have benefited from experimentation with geometry and texture, or more in-depth visual

storytelling using stitching. This would be only possible with more practice prior to production.

List of websites:

https://spandita-malik.com/

https://gisookim.de/

https://www.selvedge.org/blogs/selvedge/sashiko-and-mending

https://jiazazhistore.com/products/214-napping-dog-special-edition