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Susan Boardman in the living room of her historic Ash Lawn home. In the background is Boardman’s embroidered narrative, “A Wanderer,” representing the life of Eliza S. Brock, the wife of a Nantucket whaling captain.
fter doing laps through the town I have lived in since I was 7 years old, I finally found it, Ash Lane, a tiny ventricle of a street hidden in the heart of Nantucket. The wind and rain walloped our little island that day, even sandwiching me in the car door in her driveway, but she was there waiting for me, welcoming me out of the cold with a cup of peppermint tea. I followed her up a set of stairs to a room nestled with books on all sides and in the center was a long wooden artisan's table where Susie Boardman makes history one stitch at a time.

My eye wandered across the table to pieces of muslin with drawings of intricate design, to a pile of miniscule leaves in varying hues of green, to an embroiderer's stand across the room where Boardman's newest creation was still being crafted. Glancing behind me, I noticed a line of framed pictures just above eye level. "Perhaps you'd like to see my work," she offered. When she pulled down one of her finished pieces, I knew I was in the presence of not only an artist but a storyteller.

A whale hunt jumped off the cloth canvas. Even the spray from the whales as they crashed against the sea's surface bubbled with energy. A whaling ship pitched in the background. Yet this dynamic scene edged in gold leaf drew attention to four lines of verse stitched next to an ivory whale and a subtle bouquet of wildflowers. They read, "Lovely mercy we do love thee/ you were the first discovered by me/ now your voice of life is over/ I shall never behold you more." These words were written on March 8, 1854 in the journal of Elizabeth Morey, a Nantucket woman who sailed the seas with her whaling captain husband on the ship Phoenix, and wrote poetry about the whales that imbued her life with meaning.
“Lovely Mercy” tells the story of Elizabeth Morey, a poet who traveled the world with her husband, a Nantucket whaling captain.
"She was fascinated by the whole process of going out on the ships and hunting whales," Boardman said, "and she was fascinated by the whale giving its life to them." To mark this sacrifice, Morey named one of the whales "Mercy," for whom she wrote the eulogy which is the focal point of Boardman's embroidered narrative.

This work which spins the true tale of Morey's life is part of a collection of 13 embroidered narratives that Boardman is displaying in her second exhibition with the Nantucket Historical Association, which opened June 21 at the Whitney Gallery.

Boardman, who has been sewing stories since 1998, was inspired by the Nantucket women she read about when volunteering for the Nantucket Historical Association's library. She came across the watercolors and stories in the journal of Susan Veeder, the wife of a whaling captain of the ship Nauticon. Boardman's first embroidered narrative celebrated Veeder's life.

"It started off really because I wanted women's history on Nantucket to get attention. We know a lot about the men on Nantucket and very little about the women," Boardman said. "It is a way of stirring up the interest in women of the past and the present and their contributions. They are as much a part of making Nantucket what it is today as their partners. And that's what it is about."

Boardman, who has a master's degree in education from Simmons College, considered teaching her vocation but had always been interested in art. She studied via correspondence from Boston at the Nantucket School of Needler with Mary Ann Beinecke from 1968 to 1969 and attended the American Institute of Textile Arts at Pine Manor College in Chestnut Hill, Mass. in the late seventies and early eighties. Although she no longer stands at the head of a classroom, she teaches through the eye of her needle. Her subject goes beyond the traditional categories of history, literature and philosophy, but is rather a merging of all of the above within the context of a real human being's life.

"I thought wouldn't it be wonderful to illustrate women's lives through embroidery."
I love how the layers of embroidery fit with the layers of women's lives,” which is especially fitting, says Boardman, “since embroidery began as women's work. I often like to bring traditional techniques into my work and do them in a modern way. I pull together my favorite things – 17th century raised embroidery called stumpwork, illuminated manuscripts where the border intertwines with the text and the gold leaf.”

Boardman incorporates these traditional styles to shine light on what has become dim, making these women’s lives resplendent to the viewer. Her use of stumpwork highlights key images or objects in the woman's life whether it be a home, a whale or a tractor belonging to Nancy Chase, a long-time friend of Boardman’s and the subject of a contemporary embroidered narrative. Boardman’s adaptation of illuminated manuscript design, a style used principally by monks in the Middle Ages to bring honor and enlightenment to Biblical texts, brings honor and enlightenment to her subjects by setting their story within a border that illuminates who they were and are today.

Around the border of her piece on Mary Ellen Pleasant, Boardman embroidered a blackbird which symbolizes Pleasant's courage as an activist in the face of cultural opposition. Pleasant, a young African-American woman who came to Nantucket during the 1820s to work for the Hussey family when she was only 9 years old, became an entrepreneur, a philanthropist and an abolitionist. She started a thriving laundry business in San Francisco, gave money to fund John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry, desegregated the trolley cars in San Francisco and bought a farm in Canada that served as a stopping point on the Underground Railroad. Boardman chose blackbirds for the borders in reference to a song which Paul McCartney wrote to
encourage a black woman during the civil rights movement. Its lyrics read, “Blackbird singing in the dead of night, take these broken wings and learn to fly. All your life you were waiting for this moment to arise.”

The borders used in her embroidered narrative not only tell the stories of how historic women have arisen above adversity, they also illuminate Susan Boardman, who has flourished on an island defined by borders. She and her husband Bill moved to Nantucket in 1994 after 20 years in Washington, D.C. “The history attracted me and the isolation attracted me, that the island has a border. I love that there’s a border around,” Boardman says. “I like village life as opposed to city life. I like the pace of it, the intimacy of it. I like being on an island. I guess I like the boundaries. I like things that fit into things.”

Boardman fits herself into a long legacy of artisans which includes her great-grandfather, an embroiderer who immigrated from Switzerland with an embroidery machine in tow, and even further back, Boardman says, to 1066 when the Bayou Tapestry, one of the first embroidered narratives, was made.

“When I started this whole process of the way I do my artwork, I wanted to start with tradition being the parameter and making it contemporary,” Boardman says. “I am interested in the art-making process of the past and that is sort of my border and I work within that border to try to make it contemporary.”

Although Boardman has found the proper melding of the traditional and the contemporary in her work, she cherishes the pace of the past, shunning the hurry of modern life. Even stepping into her home, built in 1765 by a cooper, Benjamin Barney Jr., was like stepping onto a page of Nantucket’s history. Antique model ships and nautical paintings, hand-woven lightship baskets by Boardman herself, and artist Kevin Paulsen’s first residential murals

Beside beeswax and an ivory needle case is Boardman’s piece on Mary Ellen Pleasant, an African-American entrepreneur and abolitionist who worked on Nantucket as a girl in the 1820s.
that depict whaling days with scenes from Nantucket to tropical ports of call recall the dilatory tempo of bygone days.

"I liked embroidery from the start because it's slow. I like taking my time with things. We live in such a fast world. Such a frenetic world with fast food and fast technology," she says, after admitting to being one of the last people she knows to not own a cell phone. "It's nice to have slow art. A piece will take four to six weeks to do — to think about a woman or a family, to be involved in it."

The art is also something that the viewer must mull over time. Unlike an impressionist painting, where one has to stand back to view the whole, Boardman's work demands attentiveness with its multilayer detail. Her piece on Susan Veeder is designed with three scenes that Boardman replicated from watercolors in Veeder's journal. Boardman, with painstaking effort, traced quotes from Veeder's journal, imitating her penmanship exactly. "People keep coming back to it and finding something new," Boardman says. "The detail makes you look, and I am hoping that your blood pressure goes down, that you can get away for a little while." Boardman's meticulous work demands pause, pulling the observer back to a slower, more deliberate past.

Boardman approaches the craft of her work with a sense of ritual. She begins her day by taking time early in the morning to lie in bed, thinking about what she is going to do that day, and then takes her daily walk. "I walk three or four miles around town and think about what I want to accomplish and by nine o'clock I am working," Boardman says. "I can't imagine living any other way."

Boardman uses only simple and pure elements in her embroidery and uses only three kinds of stitches — needle lace, split stitch and French knot. "One of the things I did when I came here, I said whatever I did, I didn't want to have to find it. The materials are very simple: cotton embroidery floss, unbleached muslin, and dyes which last forever. It's all very self-contained."

Although Boardman keeps to the basics in her materials, her process is anything but simple. "I do a drawing and make it exact," she says. First she makes up the dye pattern, and then she traces that pattern on the muslin using tracing paper over a light-box, a device which allows the design on the tracing paper beneath the fabric to be seen. Next she dyes the fabric. Then she takes her drawing and makes an exact replica of it on tracing paper from which she draws directly on the fabric using the light-box.

"It goes to the light-box twice," Boardman said. "After that, there are a couple of different stages." Once the design is drawn, real gold leaf is laid. Then she begins the embroidery and finishes the sewing stage by quilting it with diagonal stitches.

"The whole process brings me so much joy, from the drawing, to the painting, to the stitches, all of it, parts of the whole in my way of illustrating a narrative. I find it really interesting to do," Boardman says. "There are so many different techniques involved that you can go from one to the other and never be bored. I love to find out how to illustrate the various ways to use the object. It's fun to think about that in the process. What way would be best in the design to illustrate that? It is just fun to figure out."

She finishes by ornamenting the work with her characteristic accent pieces. For the raised embroidery, she embroiders on a scrap piece of material, then uses a stitch called needle lace which allows the embroidery to be removed from the fabric. She then transfers the design to the embroidered narrative. For many of the houses in her pieces, she will lay needle lace over mica windows which gives the pieces texture, shine and depth. She also uses ivory pieces which she carves herself, a skill she learned from Nancy Chase, an expert Nantucket scrimshander. "She taught me how to do very rudimentary scrimshaw, and that's all I wanted. I wanted to keep it folkly and not get fancy," she says.

Her folk style also bonds her work to the lives of the women she commemorates. "I try to connect the stories of women, which was my first subject matter with using things that traditionally women had used," Boardman explains. "I think women have made folk art anonymously forever, at least in the history of our country, trying to express themselves without training, or were lucky to have had some training. But they did it so beautifully without training. Think of all those things that are beautiful which didn't have to be. They did it for the joy of it."

Boardman, like the women before her, embroiders for the joy it. When I asked her if it was hard to give up a piece after she had been steeped in the work for at least a month, she answered, "The process is as important as the end product. I get to have all the fun with it. I spend so much time with it and it is such a joyful time. When it's done, it's done, and it should be someone else's. It's the joy in the making."

Boardman's joy comes not only from expressing the lives of historic women but also contemporary women. Many of Boardman's works will be exhibited in the NHA library depict the lives of women that one might pass on Main Street like Mitchell's bookstore owner Mimi Beman, gardeners Jane Stroup and Joan Manley, ornithologist Edith Andrews, or Nantucket Looms owner Liz Winship, along with her longtime friend, Debbie Fraker.

Boardman's work continues to evolve in her commission pieces which she does in tribute of women as well as men and families. She will often be requested to design an embroidered narrative of someone's life by their family or friends. "I get to do pieces that are going to be gifts for people, the fact that their loved ones are taking the time to do something about their ordinary lives makes them not ordinary. It is part of the joy of my work — taking a life and putting it in a form that will last for a long time."

Boardman tells the stories of human beings past and present that otherwise might remain untold. "Most of these women are not famous, but their lives have meaning and they have value and they are all passionate about what they do and what they did."

Boardman carries on their tradition, validating the history of Nantucket women by faithfully telling their stories. She, herself, is a part of that history, chronicling their narratives with needle and thread.

"It's making history today," Boardman says. "It continues on."