

FaceValue

Lotus Peles Chen's haunting portraits take a refreshingly different approach to the transience of her material, says **Jessica Hemmings**

We read newspapers and magazines fleetingly, often scanning headlines to glean the main story, then dispose of the material on which the stories are printed without much further thought. The embroideries of Tel Aviv-based artist Lotus Peles-Chen accept this transience, even as she adds hours of labour and detail to the printed page. Working not only with cotton thread and cloth, but also paper, packing foam, wood and cardboard, Peles-Chen subscribes not to the traditional order of hand embroidery but to the expressive potential of textile-related materials.

Much of Peles-Chen's embroidery work is based on existing photographic portraits, which are accentuated and rendered uncannily by her selective stitches. Facial hairs dangle free, and grow from unexpected, illogical areas such as the rims of eyeglasses or lips. Elsewhere thread is used to bind elements together,

often in a colour that highlights rather than conceals its presence. Her most recent work uses distressed paper acquired from old magazines and books. In spite of the short life of these materials, she remains resolutely philosophical about the longevity of her work, explaining that they are only made 'for the here and now, ten years from now does not concern me.' Often, she explains, the newspaper yellows and crumbles even while she is stitching the piece. When this happens, the newspaper's stories, at

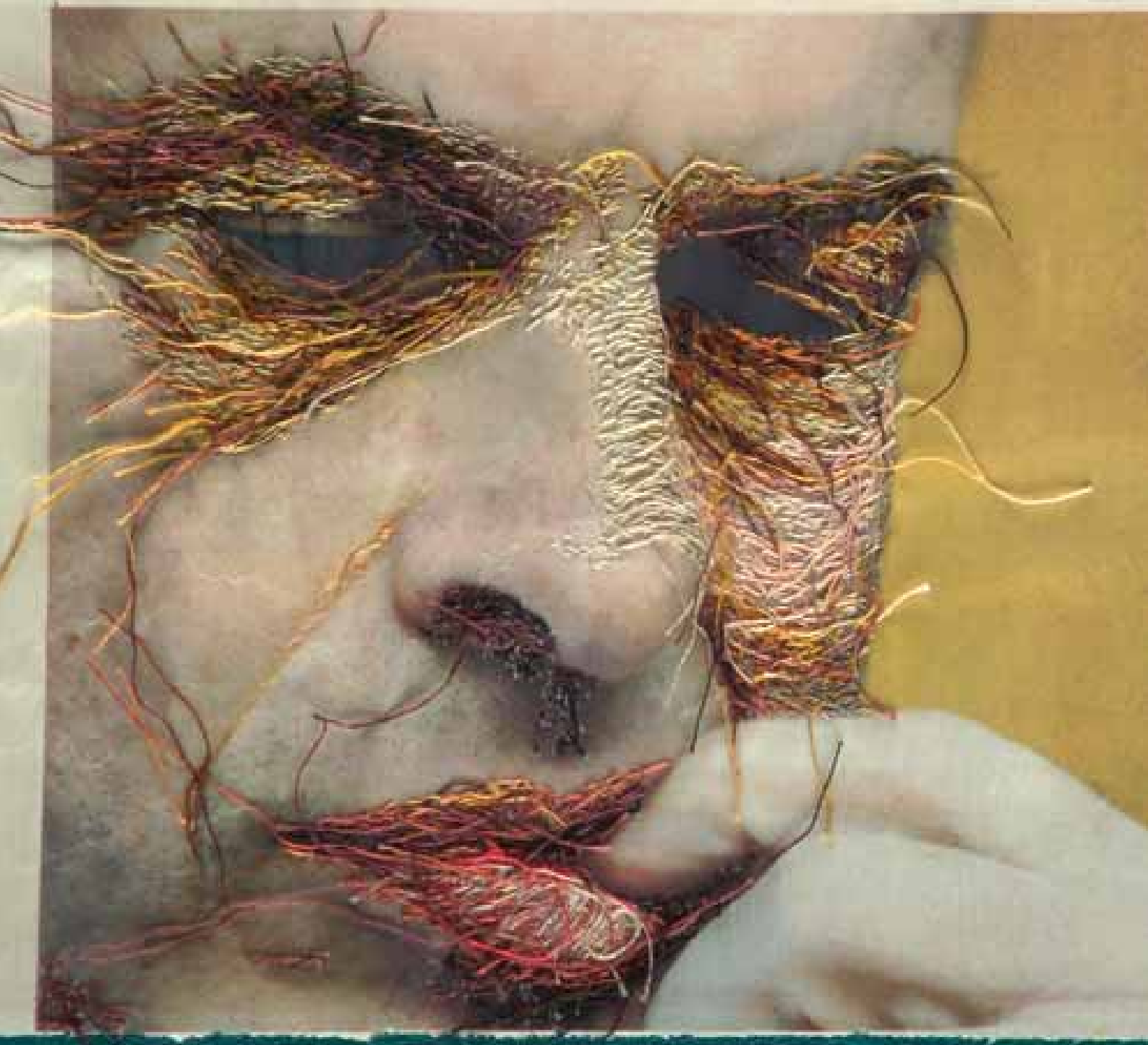
In Archaeolog a rogue thread jumps from one nostril to the other. It is the sort of stitch one would expect to find on the back rather than the front of a cloth

least in some small way, live on in her stitches.

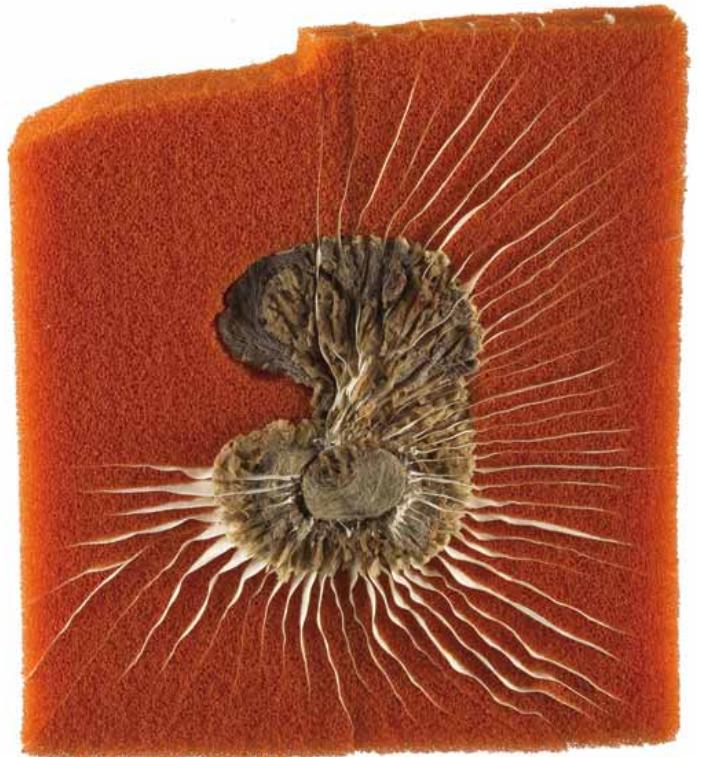
Five or more pieces at a time are often under construction in Peles-Chen's Tel Aviv studio, but she only adds to a piece when the need becomes clear. The months that may pass before she revisits a work again are far from fruitless. Instead she feels that each unfinished work informs the decisions that she makes in her studio. In a sense, her practice is handled as a collective whole, with each work influencing and enhancing those around it. Some pictures 'give a certain feeling' from the outset and colour and pattern are quite clear. Others reveal their needs and requirements with time. Her portraits in particular seem to use stitch to age the face, accentuating lines of worry or the roughness of skin so that it looks scared and distressed. On close inspection, her technique is far from seamless. Knots and loose threads often hang from the face. In *Archaeolog* a rogue thread jumps



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from one nostril to the other. It is the sort of stitch one would expect to find on the back rather than the front of a cloth. But instead of acting as a flaw, the line draws attention to the nostrils and, by association, the breath of the pensive subject.

Many of the images that Peles-Chen embroiders come from Israeli newspapers and include Hebrew text. She explains that for those who can read the text, there is often a contradiction between the 'hard or

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difficult content' of the newspapers' commentary and the beauty of the embroidery she introduces. I ask her how she feels about those in her audience, such as myself, who cannot read the Hebrew text and she explains that, even when not understood, the text remains an 'integral part of the composition.' Still I wonder (aloud) what I am missing because I am unable to read the Hebrew script?

Her response likens my viewing of these text-based pieces to her viewing of a Chinese or Japanese screen that includes script. She concludes that the text, whether the viewer is aware of its message or not, is always part of the composition.

Peles-Chen's artistic practice began during her studies of Textile Design at the Shenkar School for Higher Education in Textile Sciences in Israel, graduating with a BA in 1992. But in spite of her education in design, her work has long engaged with conceptual rather than functional concerns. It is an approach that continues to define her practice today and may, in part, be responsible for the distinctive look of her work. She has drawn rules for her practice that protect it from becoming rote or redundant. For instance, she refuses to create work based on a time schedule such as a gallery exhibition or commission. Instead waits until she 'feels she has something to



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show' and, as her husband explains, when this moment arrives the museums and galleries are usually waiting. Recent work has been shown at London's COLLECT, held annually at the Victoria & Albert Museum, and SOFA in Chicago, through the Association of Israeli Decorative Arts

Considering the expressive power of these embroideries, it comes as a surprise to hear that thread is just one of a variety of materials in Peles-Chen's artistic vocabulary. She explains that her artistic practice is an ongoing exploration of all materials, from photography and oil paints to collage and stitch. Yesterday it was paper and thread, but tomorrow she may have moved onto something entirely different. Still, I worry about the fragile paper she invests so much time in stitching and ask if she has ever considered treating the paper to prolong its life? She shuns the idea, explaining that the inescapable fragility of her materials is an aspect of the work that she has come to accept. I wonder if this attitude is, in part, borne of the political instability of the region in which she lives and the newspapers' constant reminders not only of how easy it is to destroy material possessions, but also to take away life. But I also sense a less clichéd reading of her attitude, one possibly grounded in a quiet confi-