

The artist Julie Cockburn uses traditional techniques such as needlework and collage to transform orphaned images into artworks. Here she explains her craft

EMBROIDERING REALITY



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y lifelong heroes and heroines include Lieutenant Columbo, the shambling LAPD detective, and Margo Leadbetter, from the classic BBC sitcom *The Good Life*. Like them, I am a bit of a nosy parker. While others scroll through the social-media feeds of their friends and families, I scour the internet for old photographic prints of forgotten faces and places, making up stories about them as I search online. These orphaned photos are my canvases, on to which I stitch, collage and paint using my own visual language.

I have always preferred pictures to the written word. As a young girl, I would devour National Geographics and 1950s movies. When I studied sculpture at Central Saint Martins in the 1990s, we were encouraged to use anything and everything as our materials - a lack of funds made charity shops and skips our favoured sources. I explored the printed image as object and for my degree show I made three-dimensional, wall-hung works from mail-order catalogues, old magazines and postcards.

My current artistic practice has evolved over the past 10 years. Using traditional craft techniques such as collage and embroidery, I reinvigorate old, patinated, generic ▶

Above from left: 'Feed the Birds Man', 2019, and 'Feed the Birds Woman', 2019 (both C-type prints of found photographs, glass beads)
Facing page: 'Blue Face Man', 2019 (enamel on found photograph)



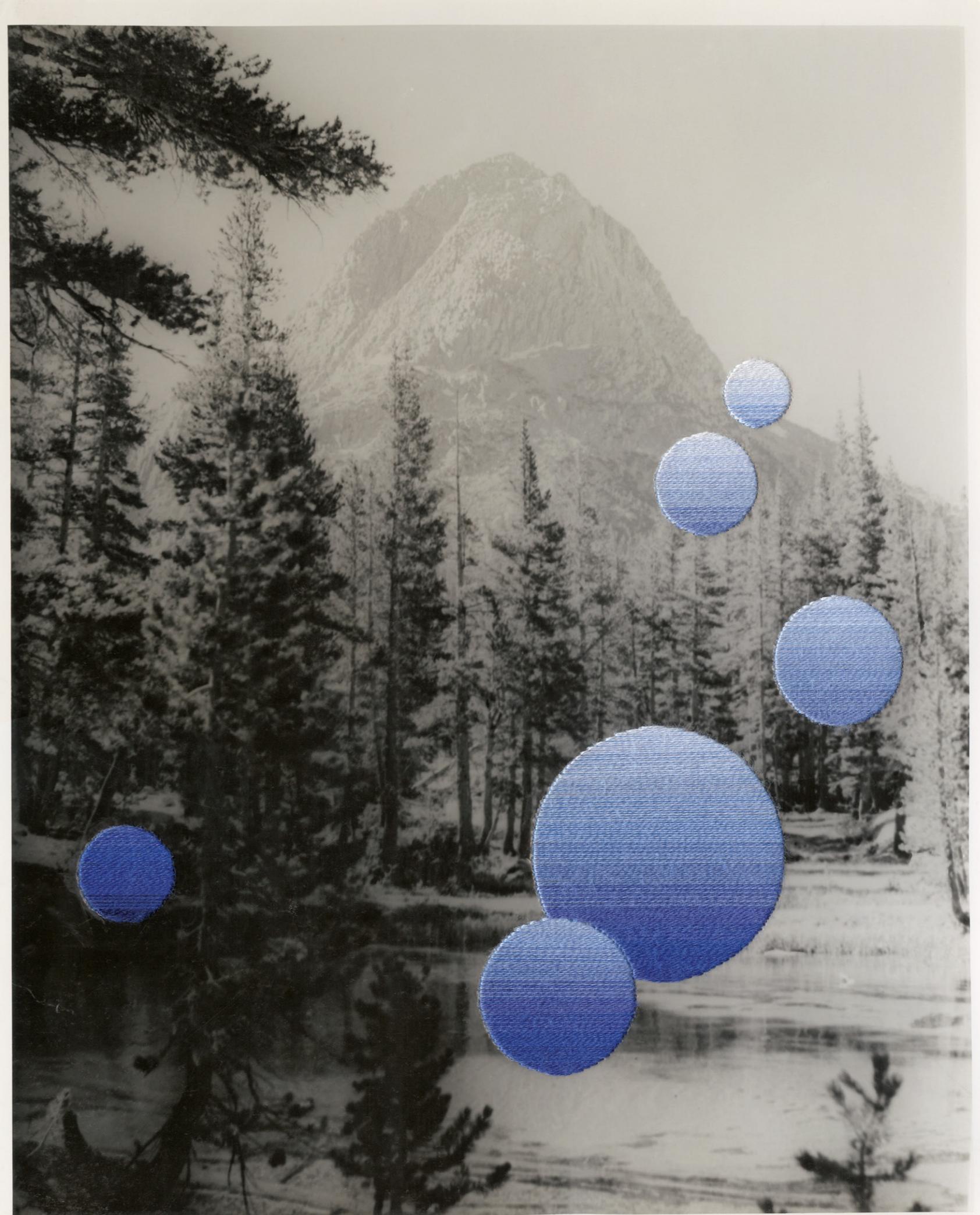
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◀ photographs with graphic computer-generated designs. Working with found imagery is like entering into a conversation with something that already has plenty to say. I look for the nuances in archetypal images and react to a particular pose, colour, composition or texture. I can sit with a photo for years in my studio and then, one day, a new series that I am working on will embrace it.

The work is methodical. Once I have scanned the original photograph so that I have a facsimile to sketch on to, either digitally or using a physical print-out, I try different designs and motifs, honing them until they somehow feel like they belong. I then transfer that design to the original by pricking or sticking on a template, and the labour begins - each embroidery can take anywhere between five days and two weeks to complete. It's surprisingly physically demanding work for something that looks so dainty and it can be brain-numbingly boring. So I try to mix it up a bit. Once I have finished a piece I might spend a day or two experimenting with ideas, materials and techniques. Often these experiments go in the bin, but sometimes another thread emerges that will lead to a new body of work. ▶



Above: 'Hamlet', 2014 (hand embroidery, ink and household paint on found photograph)
Facing page: 'Singing in a Pinewood Glen', 2018 (hand embroidery on found photograph)



From far left: 'Cable Car', 2019 (hand embroidery on found collaged photographs); 'Qualm', 2019 (hand embroidery and inkjet on found photograph); 'Maiden Mother Crone', 2015 (hand embroidery on found photograph)



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◀ Sketching the images on my computer has a loose, playful aspect to it. Hand embroidery is intensive and repetitive, and I become absorbed in it, working alone in my studio. Once I have committed to the designed image, the needlework has to be perfect - there is no longer room for play or error. The result is that each embroidered motif is a gesture of integrity that becomes a part of the old, often dilapidated print.

I'm not always working on my own. For large-scale pieces, I swap embroidery for screen printing and collaborate with Suki Hayes-Watkins at The Print Block in Whitstable, and I collaborated closely with my French publisher to give my new book a gently humorous narrative. Exhibiting offers a further exploration into the way each of us responds to photographs; how we subjectively interpret images according to our own personal stories. **FT**

"Julie Cockburn: Telling it Slant" is at Flowers Gallery, London E2, September 12–November 2; flowersgallery.com. Her new book "Stickybeak" is published by Chose Commune in September; chosecommune.com.