YANIS MILTGEN defying eternity

A FLOWER THAT NEVER FADES, A MEMORY THAT REFUSES TO DISAPPEAR, A STORY THAT CONTINUES LONG AFTER ITS STORYTELLER IS GONE. FOR TEXTILE ARTIST YANIS MILTGEN, EMBROIDERY IS MORE THAN CRAFTSMANSHIP. IT IS A WAY OF CONFRONTING MORTALITY, TRANSFORMING INTIMATE MEMORIES INTO EXTRAORDINARY SCULPTURAL WORLDS WHERE NATURE, IMAGINATION AND HUMAN EMOTION INTERTWINE. THROUGH THOUSANDS OF METICULOUS STITCHES AND HUNDREDS OF HOURS OF PATIENT CREATION, HE GIVES PERMANENCE TO THE EPHEMERAL. YET BEHIND THE DELICATE BEAUTY OF HIS INSTALLATIONS LIES SOMETHING PROFOUNDLY HUMAN: THE FEAR OF BEING FORGOTTEN AND THE DESIRE TO LEAVE A TRACE. HIS WORK IS NOT SIMPLY ABOUT RECREATING LIFE, BUT ABOUT GIVING ITS MOST FLEETING MOMENTS A LITTLE ETERNITY.

WORDS **FRANCESCA CONTINO**





Your studies in Paris and the South of France gave you formal training in embroidery and textile arts. Was there a specific moment during those years – a success, a teacher, a project, a failure – that made you realise embroidery could leave the frame and become sculpture?
I have to say that those years were marked by encounters that profoundly changed my life and the way I approach textiles.

The first was with Marylène Eyral, founder of Studio Eyral, who taught me embroidery and textile creation. Above all, she taught me that there are no real limits in the creative process and that we should constantly seek to push the boundaries of textiles. It was through her that I began to understand that a traditional technique could become a genuine field for experimentation.

Then, Patrick Teypaz, my Master's professor at Atelier Chardon Savard in Paris, taught me how to channel this abundance of ideas and give them form. It was largely through his teaching that my textile explorations began to move beyond the surface and come to life through volume and sculpture.

Finally, meeting Luc Schroeder, who runs the gallery that represents me in Luxembourg, marked another essential step: bringing my work into direct contact with the public. Through this encounter, my works were able to be exhibited, gain visibility and, above all, fully inhabit the space in the presence of visitors.

So I don't think there was one single moment when I realised that embroidery could become sculpture. Rather, it was these successive encounters, each in their own way, that gradually enabled me to cross the boundary between textile, volume and sculpture.

Your most recent collection, The Symbiose, is built on the idea that a sculptural artwork can take any shape and volume because the pieces are entirely flexible, with each artwork consisting of at least four 9.5-metre branches. As an artist who spends hundreds, sometimes more than a thousand hours creating a piece, what does it feel like to surrender control over its final form? Is letting go part of the work?
I have to say that it is quite paradoxical, because I am someone who loves to have control over everything in my life and in my work. In fact, this is the first time anyone has ever asked me this question, and thinking about it now, I realise that the flexibility I give my works is probably, unconsciously, a way for me to let go from time to time.

I spend hundreds, sometimes more than a thousand hours on a single work, approaching every detail with an enormous amount of precision. And yet, once it is finished, I accept that it does not have one single definitive form. It can evolve depending on the space, the architecture and the way it is installed. Ultimately, there is something quite liberating in this contradiction: I control every detail of its creation, but then I allow it a certain freedom.

That said, I don't completely let go! I still like to install the works myself in my clients' spaces. It is important for me to accompany the work into its new environment, to understand the space and to find the form that will allow it to fully exist there. Perhaps, then, letting go for me is less about giving up control and more about accepting that a work can have several lives and take on several different forms.

Your artwork Yoshino tells the story of Aiko, a young girl who discovers an ancient cherry tree whose blossoms are more vibrant than the rest, and learns the trees are guardians of memories and stories. What drew you to Japanese folklore and sakura imagery specifically for this chapter of Symbiose?
Japan is a country that has always fascinated me, both for its culture and for its relationship with nature, time and craftsmanship. With Yoshino, above all, I wanted to convey a kind of "beautiful nostalgia", that feeling which is both gentle and melancholic, like looking back on a happy memory.

The sakura came quite naturally. Its blossom is spectacular, yet extremely fleeting. This beauty that appears, reaches its peak and then disappears almost immediately resonated deeply with what I wanted to express: our relationship with time, with memories, and with the things we sometimes wish we could preserve.

This is also where the story of Aiko and the ancient cherry tree as a guardian of memories came from. I loved the idea that nature could silently preserve a trace of what existed before us, as though each new blossom could bring fragments of past stories back to life.

With Yoshino, I was therefore not simply trying to depict a cherry tree in bloom, but rather to give physical form to a very particular feeling: the beauty of a memory that we know can never be experienced again in exactly the same way.

Another notable artwork from this collection is Opéra d'Automne, which follows a singer who performs in Vienna, walks into the forest, and experiences a complete merging with autumnal nature – only to wake in a hospital bed and face the day of her death with Vivaldi's Autumn. That's an emotionally enormous arc. Why does mortality enter your work through something so beautiful? Do you think beauty helps us approach things we might otherwise be afraid to look at?
Death is actually present, in a more or less hidden way, in many of my works. I think that, in a sense, I am trying to confront my own fear of death through my work. Creating allows me to approach it, question it, and perhaps make it a little less frightening.

In Opéra d'Automne, death is omnipresent. Throughout the story, we witness something gradually fading away, but always surrounded by immense beauty. Autumn was therefore particularly important to me: nature dies, the leaves fall, the colours gradually disappear, and yet it is probably one of the seasons we find most beautiful.

It is precisely this contradiction that interests me. With this work, I did not want to present death solely as something inevitable or dark. I wanted to try to look at it differently, almost as a passage, something that can be accepted and that forms part of a larger cycle.

I do believe that beauty can help us look at things that frighten us. It does not erase them or make them any less real, but perhaps it creates a certain distance that allows us to confront them. In Opéra d'Automne, beauty therefore becomes a way of speaking about death without it being solely synonymous with fear or an ending.

Your mother, Maryline Miltgen, contributed the crochet work to Opéra d'Automne. Textile knowledge has historically been passed from hand to hand and generation to generation. What happens emotionally when someone so close to you enters your artistic language? Did her hands bring something to the work that yours could not?
In fact, my mother contributes to all of my works that involve knitting and crochet. She is the one who taught me how to crochet, and even today, she oversees almost the entire knitted aspect of my work. She therefore plays a much more important role in my creative process than one might imagine simply by looking at the finished pieces.

I think that working with her is one of the most beautiful aspects of my work today. It is an incredible privilege to have

my mother among the people with whom I create and imagine my works. There is something deeply moving about the fact that a craft she passed on to me has become one of the languages through which I now express myself as an artist.

Her hands inevitably bring something that mine alone could not, because they carry a different history, a different experience and, above all, that sense of transmission. When we work together, it is no longer simply a technical collaboration: there is a continuity between her gesture and mine.

Ultimately, part of my work literally carries the gestures of my mother. I find that particularly beautiful, because behind the thousands of stitches that make up some of my sculptures lies something much more intimate: a family story and a craft passed down from one generation to the next.

Your Histoire d'une Vie collection is instead described as the starting point of your works – each piece refers to someone you know or an event in your life. How do you decide which personal moments are meant to be shared through textile rather than kept private?

In reality, I think it happens quite naturally. When I am creating, I don't really ask myself whether a story is too personal to be told or whether it should remain private. Ultimately, there are very few things that I keep entirely to myself.

I even think that drawing directly from my own life, from the people around me and from what I feel is deeply connected to the way I work. If I constantly created a distance between my emotions and my works, I don't think I would have the same level of dedication, or perhaps even the same technical mastery.

When something affects me personally, I want to translate it as accurately as possible. It pushes me to go further technically, to spend hundreds of hours on a work, and to redo an element until it corresponds exactly to what I want to express.

Ultimately, textile may be my way of sharing very personal things without having to explain everything explicitly. The story is present within the work, but it is transformed. The audience can see my own story in it, but they can also project their own onto it. I think this is the point at which something deeply intimate can become universal.

In The Words' Weaver, forgotten books are slowly reclaimed by nature until words and living matter become almost inseparable. We live in a culture that produces, consumes, and forgets at extraordinary speed. Are you afraid of forgetting? And is making art, for you, a way of resisting disappearance?

Yes, I am afraid of being forgotten. I believe that art is one of the most beautiful ways of creating fragments of eternity. This is inevitably connected to my fear of death, but perhaps even more to the fear of disappearing without leaving a trace.

When I spend hundreds, sometimes more than a thousand hours creating a work, there is probably, behind this obsession with gesture and detail, a desire to build something that can outlive me. I love the idea that a work can continue to exist, to provoke emotion and to remain in people's minds even when its creator is no longer there.

In The Words' Weaver, this idea takes on a particular dimension, because books are themselves objects of memory and transmission. In the work, they are gradually reclaimed by nature, but their words never truly disappear: they merge with the living world and become something else.

Ultimately, creating is probably my way of resisting disappearance. I know that I cannot become eternal, but I hope to create fragments of eternity that will continue to tell something when I am no longer here.

Some of your works require hundreds or even more than a thousand hours of repetitive handwork. What happens inside your mind during all that time? Is repetition meditative for you, obsessive, exhausting, comforting? And are there thoughts that only appear after working with your hands for many hours?

In reality, it is a little bit of all of those things at once. Repetition can be meditative and comforting, but it can also become obsessive and sometimes extremely exhausting when you repeat the same gesture for tens or even hundreds of hours.

But I think it is precisely during these long periods of manual work that my mind is at its most active. When my hands know a gesture well enough to repeat it almost instinctively, my mind begins to wander elsewhere. I think, I imagine, I construct.

Very often, while I am still creating one work, I am already imagining the next ones. New forms appear, new combinations of materials, new stories. One work feeds into another.

It is quite paradoxical: my body can spend hours repeating exactly the same gesture, while my mind never stops. Ultimately, those hundreds of hours are not simply production time. They are also an integral part of my process of research and creation.

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“Even a form of life that may seem insignificant, strange, or unpleasant to us remains wonderful when we truly take the time to observe it.”

You've won the Hand & Lock Prize and the Comité Colbert prize – two very different recognitions, one focused on embroidery craftsmanship, the other on luxury and innovation. Has success ever created a new kind of fear: the fear of repeating what people already recognise as Yanis Miltgen? How do you protect experimentation once expectations begin to surround your work?

I actually think that being recognisable is a very good thing. As an artist, developing a visual language that is personal enough for someone to recognise my work without even seeing my name is, to me, something very precious.

So I am not afraid of certain forms being immediately identified as “Yanis Miltgen.” In fact, I want to preserve what has become one of the fundamental principles of my work: these long, modular and entirely flexible branches, capable of transforming and adapting to the space in which they are installed. They have become a kind of language, a foundation from which I can continue to build.

The pressure perhaps comes more from the fact that people now expect to see works and installations that are increasingly developed and ambitious. But I find that expectation stimulating. My goal is not to abandon what makes my work recognisable simply to prove that I can do something else. On the contrary, I want to see how far I can push this principle.

Experimentation therefore lies in the techniques, materials, volumes, the stories I tell, and the ever-changing ways in which these branches can inhabit a space. I can preserve this structure that is uniquely mine while constantly evolving everything that grows around it.

Ultimately, protecting experimentation does not mean escaping my artistic identity, but continuing to expand it.

Looking across the pieces you've created – Yoshino, Opéra d'Automne, The Words' Weaver, Le Meurice vases – there's a recurring thread of storytelling, memory, and preservation. Do you see yourself primarily as a storyteller who happens to work in textiles, or as a textile artist who happens to tell stories?

I really like the idea of defining myself as a storyteller who creates sculptural installations. I think it ultimately reflects the way I work quite well.

Textile is, of course, essential to my work: it is my language, the one I have learned, mastered, and constantly seek to push further. But technique alone is never enough to bring a work to life. At the beginning, there is almost always a story, a memory, a person, an emotion, or sometimes something I am afraid of losing.

So I do not create a flower simply because I find its form beautiful. It belongs to a larger story. Behind the thousands of flowers, leaves, stitches and textile elements that make up my installations, there is always something I am trying to tell or preserve.

Perhaps this is why the sculptural scale has become so important in my work. It allows me not only to tell a story through an object, but to create a space that the viewer can physically enter, move through, and develop their own relationship with the narrative.

So yes, if I had to choose between the two, I would probably say that I am a storyteller who uses textiles to give physical form to his stories.

Experimentation is central to your practice, which also means that failure must be part of it. Can you remember a material, technique, or artwork that simply refused to become what you imagined? What does failure teach you that mastery cannot?

Strangely enough, no. I cannot remember a material, technique or artwork that I would truly consider a failure.

Of course, many experiments do not immediately produce the result I had imagined. I might try a technique, start again, alter a material or completely change the direction of a work. But I do not really see that as failure. It is simply part of my process.

I think there is a certain stubbornness in the way I work. If something does not work the way I want it to, my first instinct is not to abandon it, but to find another way to make it work. Sometimes the final result is very different from my original idea, but that does not necessarily mean the idea has failed; it has simply evolved.

Ultimately, experimentation has perhaps taught me that failure and mastery do not need to be opposites. Mastery gives me the tools to create, while difficulties force me to invent new solutions. And very often, that is precisely where something interesting begins to emerge.

You recreate flowers, branches, fruits, and organic forms through extremely meticulous human labour. What can an embroidered flower express that a real flower cannot? And has spending so much time reconstructing nature changed the way you look at the living world?

Eternity, quite simply. A real flower is born, blossoms, and then disappears. When I reconstruct it through textiles, I can preserve something of it, almost suspending that cycle. It no longer fades. It becomes a lasting trace of something that, in nature, is by definition ephemeral.

And yes, spending so much time observing and reconstructing nature has profoundly changed the way I look at the living world. When you spend dozens of hours trying to understand the shape of a petal, the curve of a leaf, or the way a branch grows, you begin to notice details that you might never have paid attention to before.

Above all, it has made me realise just how extraordinary life is. Even a form of life that may seem insignificant, strange, or unpleasant to us remains wonderful when we truly take the time to observe it.

Perhaps that is also what my work is ultimately about: taking something that nature allows us to see only for a moment and trying to give it a little eternity.