

Ries Niemi: The Mute Project

As an artist, I work simultaneously in two different areas.
Many people are aware of my metalwork, particularly in the area of Public Art.
I began working with metals in the early 1980s.

However, I began working with textiles in the 1960s, when I learned to sew, knit, crochet, embroider, batik and weave.
And I have never stopped working with textiles.

In 1993, when Thurgood Marshall died, I began doing portraits of people I admired or thought were important- in metals, textiles, and sometimes even paint. The first 40 or so were limited editions of portrait chairs, sittable and sold to people around the USA.

I have continued to do portraits to this day.

In April, 2020, I began a series of portraits of musicians, globally, who have died from the Corona Virus. This has become a large part of my week. Every day, more amazing musicians have been dying from the virus. Musicians in every genre, in many different countries, ranging in age, style, and degree of fame.

To me, they are all equally important, are all Royalty, and are all being Muted by the virus before their time.

Hence, the Mute Project.

I have currently made more than 50 of these portraits, with a current backlog of at least 20 yet to do, and new subjects being added daily.

This has been an amazing journey, learning about the lives and music of so many disparate musicians, some of whom I was familiar with, many of whom I was not.

All of these pieces are machine embroidered on various handmade papers.
I purchased my first CNC embroidery machine in 2004, and have made hundreds of pieces with this technique, inventing new ways of misusing the machine.
All of them begin with hand drawn imagery, sometimes drawn on a tablet, sometimes on paper.
Then, they proceed thru 3 different computer programs, refining and redrawing, before they are

loaded into the computer of the sewing machine, and sewn. The average piece is 40,000 stitches, and may take several hours just to sew.

The machine acts as a randomizer- it is kind of like making a monoprint, where each image is unique, even if I tried to duplicate it, I could not. Every portrait varies a bit, with some designs that carry across all of them, but with different paper, layout, and thread choices.

I have been collecting handmade papers for decades, and many of these are either hemp or Lokta, a Nepali paper made from a bush that only grows at high altitudes.

I hope to have an exhibition of all of these together at some point in the future, accompanied, of course, by a soundtrack of the wide range of music these people made.

To me, the biggest joy is how every single one of these musicians was unique, interesting, and talented, regardless of fame or success.