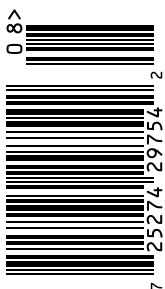


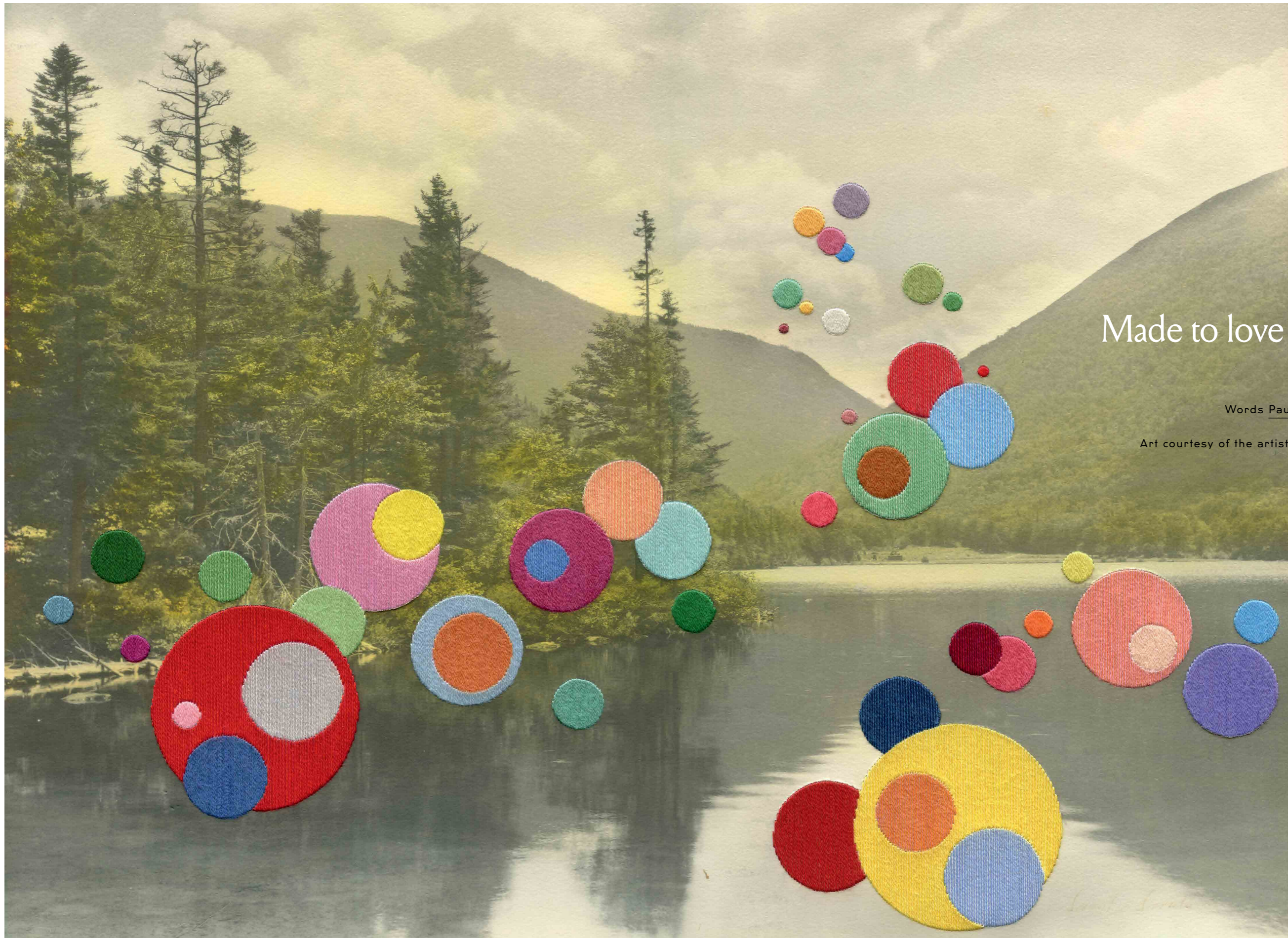
# UPSTATE DIARY



## HOME IS WHERE THE ART IS

Mickalene Thomas / Sean Kelly / Judy Pfaff / Mary McCartney / Donald Judd's *Casa Perez*  
 Terhi Tolvanen / Brice Marden / Letha Wilson / Georgie Hopton / Kirsten Owen





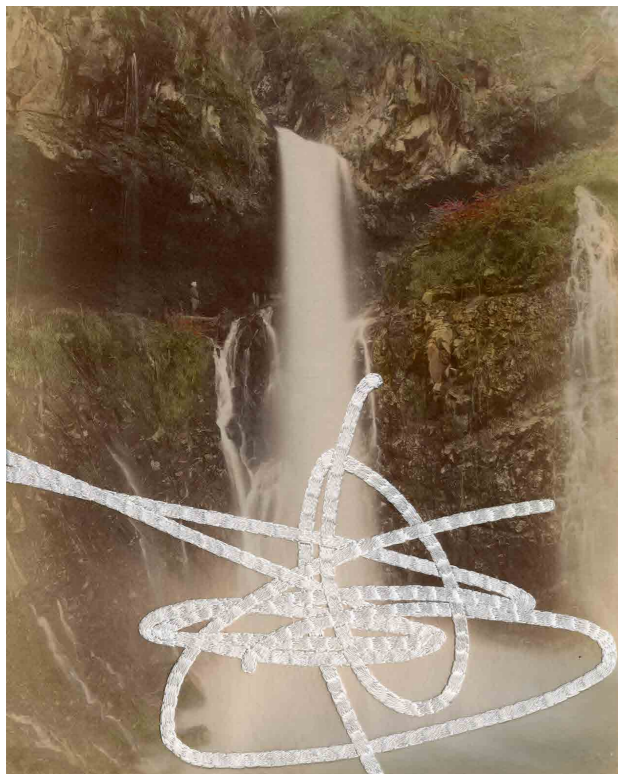
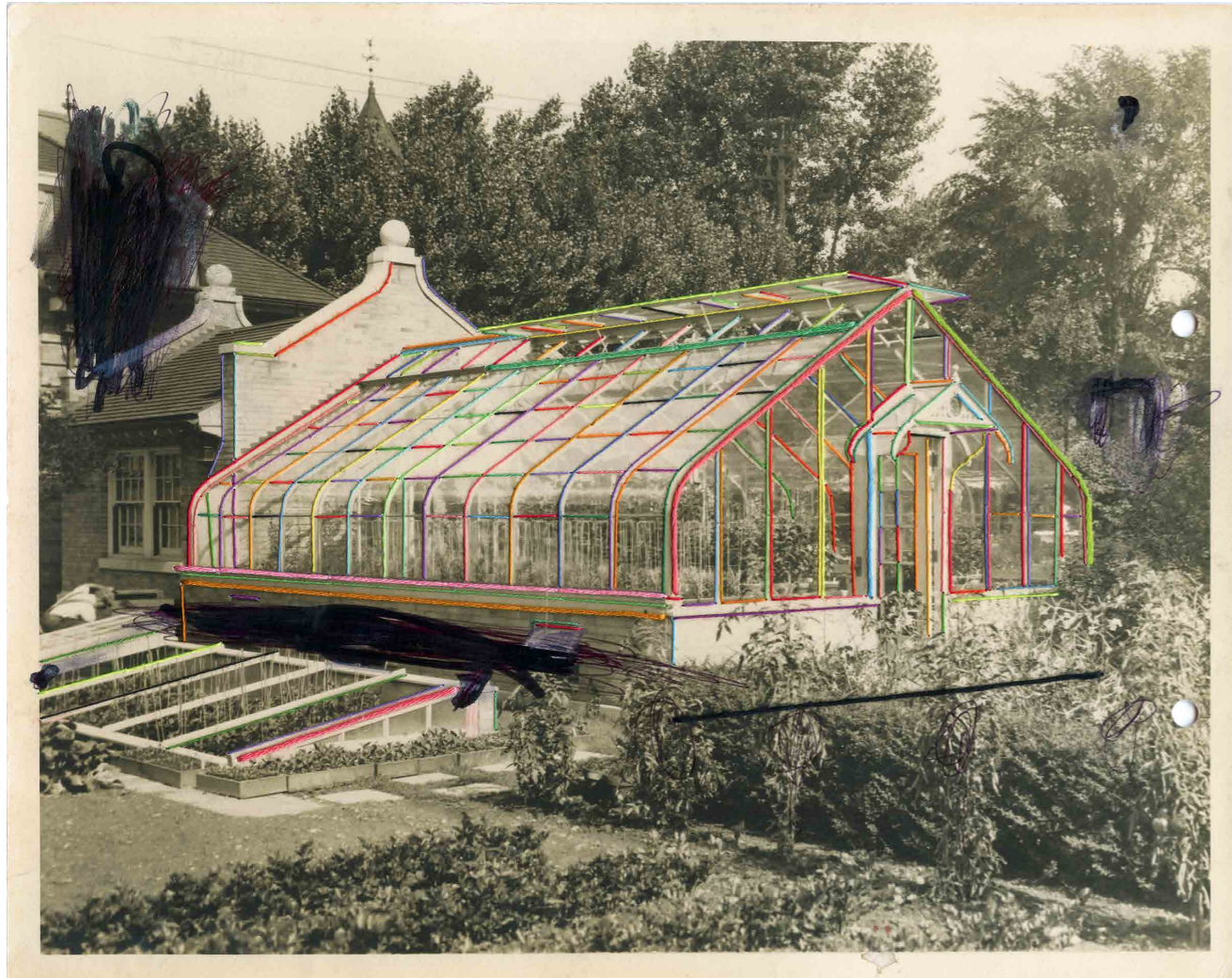
Made to love **not just like**

Words Paul Tierney

Art courtesy of the artist ©Julie Cockburn, 2019

*A Poem*, 2018.





**Julie Cockburn's work is not to everyone's taste.**

To some, it's up there with the best of British art. Others are violently triggered. "A man gave me a terrible time at a private view once. He was quite aggressive. 'What's wrong with the original photograph?' he barked at me. I think he thought I was claiming to improve it, and that isn't my intention at all. I call it having a conversation. I found an image and was reacting to it."

If you're not familiar with her work, Cockburn's re-appropriation of vintage photographs and found images using hand-done embroidery is a thing to behold. Portraits of anonymous sitters, gleaned from flea markets and car boot sales, take on new life cloistered in stitches, faces obscured by geometry, color and shape-shifting form.

"They could be anything," she says, "a map or a book, a postcard or a photograph. There's something about the found image I find immensely compelling. You're not just faced with a blank canvas, you're already having to react to something, and I love that."

This is a modest, self-effacing woman who struggles to explain her oeuvre. It's as though talking about it might somehow break the spell. The word 'magical' is used more than once this afternoon, and it's hard to disagree that there's an alchemy at play here between the physical and the spiritual,



Opposite: *The Mother Ship*, 2015. *Splash 3*, 2017. Above: *Front Yard*, 2016. Left: *The Homestead*, 2013.



the digital and analogue.

“I’m doing something really three-dimensional,” she winces, wary of her words — “physically going through the dimensions of the object if you like. There’s a thing in Japanese culture called ‘Ma,’ which is used when they make Ikebana, their very compositional flower arrangements. The ‘Ma’ is the space, the negative space in between. When I talk about balance and composition and the formality of the image I’m making, it’s because I’m working with a found image that has its own presence already. If I’m going to add something then it has to work formally. It’s a balance.”

We’re in London’s Arnold Circus, just far enough away from the throb of Shoreditch to hear ourselves speak, musing on art, life and the conundrum of urban living. She moved to Woodbridge, in Suffolk, earlier in the year — a verdant oasis of calm by all accounts — and is still basking in the honeymoon glow of it all.

“I needed to escape the rat race. Where I used to live in Hackney is fabulous, but as I got older it got younger and trendier, and I became more intolerant. The noise levels went up! And I wanted to be able to go outside and be under the sky and not have to be with people, in whatever respect that is. I couldn’t afford a garden in London, basically.”

The capital, for all its brittle glamour and networking possibilities, is no place for the faint-hearted. “I won’t miss the private views,” she ventures, ‘but what I don’t want to do, I don’t want to be this ‘London kicker’. I feel like I’ve been, not battling with London, but I feel like I was waiting to get married, have kids, and then we would move to the country and I would have the barn door etc. And none of that happened.”

Perhaps she doesn’t realize it but Cockburn is effectively married to her job. The embroidery is a grueling process that renders her stiff and tired, but she is dedicated to the craft and has amassed a staggering body of work that is devoured by collectors and fans the world over. Perhaps best known for her astonishing portraits, she also threads magic around pastoral settings and the sedately non-physical. The bonny lochs of Scotland, valleys of Scandinavia, and white picket fence suburbs of America have all given her disco-lit threads a place to burrow and outline.

“There’s this thing I want that’s kind of universal,” she says, looking at photos of her work on my phone. Scrolling through past glories, she beams with an endearing pride, as though this is the first time she has seen them and is only just realizing their worth. “I find it really difficult to talk about my work. I think what I’m trying to do is give things a bit of tension. All the background images are very archetypal, you

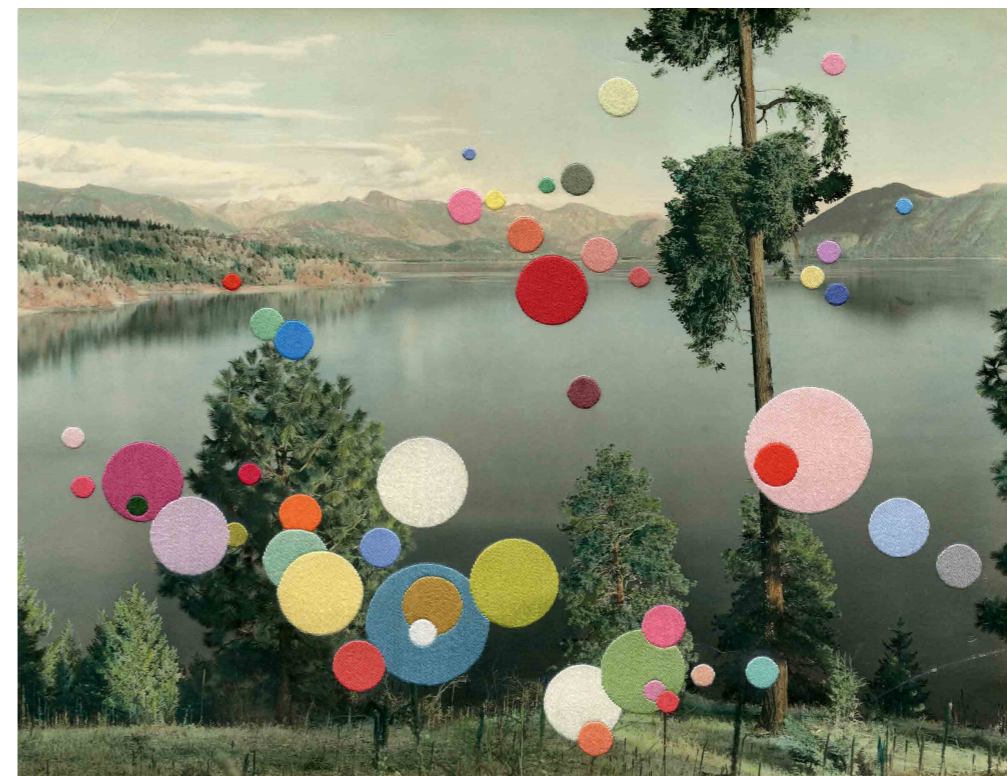
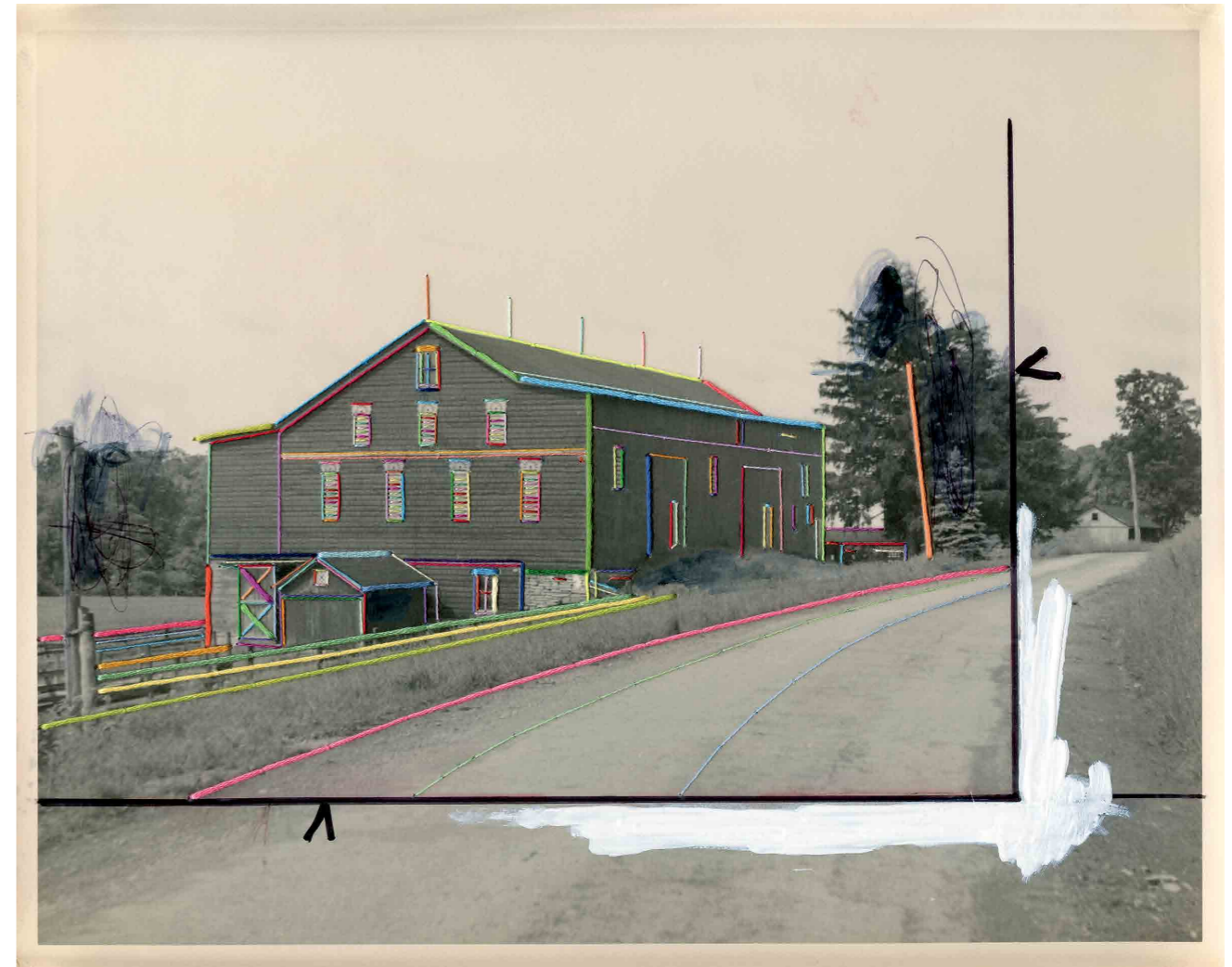


know? A house is a HOUSE, like a simple childhood impression. It gives me space and order to add to the story.”

We both know this is not embellishment for the sake of it, and yet her art can sometimes be dismissed as decorative. “They are decorative, yes, unapologetically decorative, and I think that’s a dirty word in the art world. But I’ve been doing this for a really long time and I think the reason it’s having some resonance now is because of the way photography is going. We’re looking at this on your iPhone, and all this is planned on a computer and then translated back into an analogue thing. I can’t speak for everyone but I think people hanker for this type of duality.”

In the digital whirl of *Instagram*, Photoshop, and a constant stream of images, Cockburn likes the idea of integrity and the slow burn. When one can modify images at whim, her old-school skills and no filter attitude provide a tangible and nostalgic punch over latter day pixels. “Oh, I love that thought,” she smiles, drifting off into an internal world. “I suppose I’m making changes. And really, physically.” ■

Julie’s Insta feed @juliecockburnartist. Paul Tierney is a regular contributor to UD, The Independent, The i, The London Evening Standard and Neue Luxury @paultierneysees.



Opposite: *Ma 2*, 2018. Above: *Afternoon Off*, 2015. Left: *Midday*, 2016.