

Artist



Have you ever kept a diary? In this article we find out all about **Mathilde Renes** who lives on a houseboat in the Netherlands along with a number of chickens, cats and dogs. She has kept a remarkable diary, cataloguing and illustrating her life in daily drawings and embroideries.



Text and images by Mathilde Renes

## Mathilde Renes

Firstly, to understand my embroideries, I'll have to tell you about my illustrative work!

The subjects of my embroideries - which I have been making for about a year - are based on my diary illustrations. I started my diary seventeen years ago, in 1997, as a daily drawing practice to improve my skills. I searched for a topic but couldn't think of one, so I began by drawing

what had happened the day before, assisting at my daughters' school. Since that day, I have been making a drawing every day about yesterday's main event. There are short interruptions where I did not draw at all and some short periods of time when I thought I'd had enough and I wasn't inspired anymore. But during each interruption I realized shortly afterwards I couldn't stop drawing. Now I have accepted it is part of my life and that it is the main project of my art: in a way I'm illustrating my own life.

To understand the diary I have to tell you about me. I live on a houseboat near Haarlem in the Netherlands, surrounded by nature and with a fantastic view over a large lake. I have a husband and four children, two sons and two daughters, all grown up. In 2011, I even became a grandmother of two little girls.

Our boat is right next to



Above: *Cleaning All Day*, Mathilde Renes, illustration



Above: *Laundry*, Mathilde Renes, embroider

our large garden, which I love to work in, or actually love to create in. I flourish when it's flowering. We have chickens, cats and used to have two pugs we loved very much but who unfortunately died last year. The subjects of the diary are about common things happening in daily life, such as doing the laundry, tidying up, shopping, cooking, holidays, maintaining our houseboat, the garden, our pets, our children (and now grandchildren), yoga, reading books, and much more. But it is also about the creative process of my other art work, presentation, framing and preparing exhibitions and so on.

A lot of subjects repeat every year or season and one can see us getting older. Although... in my drawings I usually draw things as beautiful as I want them to be, or as I am able to draw.



Right: *At the Museum*, detail, Mathilde Renes, embroidery





From top left: *Embroiderer in the Garden*, detail, Mathilde Renes, illustration

*In the Garden*, detail, Mathilde Renes, embroidery

*Had a Nice Walk with the Dogs*, detail, Mathilde Renes, illustration



So it makes my friends and me very happy to stay slim and young for eternity in the diary. Nowadays I try to draw little wrinkles in my face and make myself a bit heavier but that's difficult since I am used to drawing myself in a certain way. Because the subjects are so common and ordinary everyone recognizes a lot in the diary, which is why people enjoy looking at the drawings; at least that's what I'm often told.



My textile art is also very important to me and requires some introduction. In my artwork I have always been fascinated by women, often just a part of the body or clothes. I also have always been attracted to textile materials. I used to knit a lot when I was young and made my own clothes and also took some courses to obtain more skills in textiles. In my artwork, however, I mainly created paintings. Though the subjects were often 'textiles', I never really got into creating

textile art. For example, I made a series of paintings, collages and graphics called *The Dress* and *Little Skirt*. I created paintings with only a torso with shawl or hat or pearls. I even experimented with using fabrics in my paint work, but I felt it never really succeeded very much. I remained fascinated by textile and textile art, but I struggled with how to apply it in my own work. This all changed a few years ago when I started with knitting sculptures and vases. The sculptures were inspired by my paintings and I knitted them without any preparation, free handed and by improvisation. In the meantime, I basically neglected painting and was only focused on knitting.

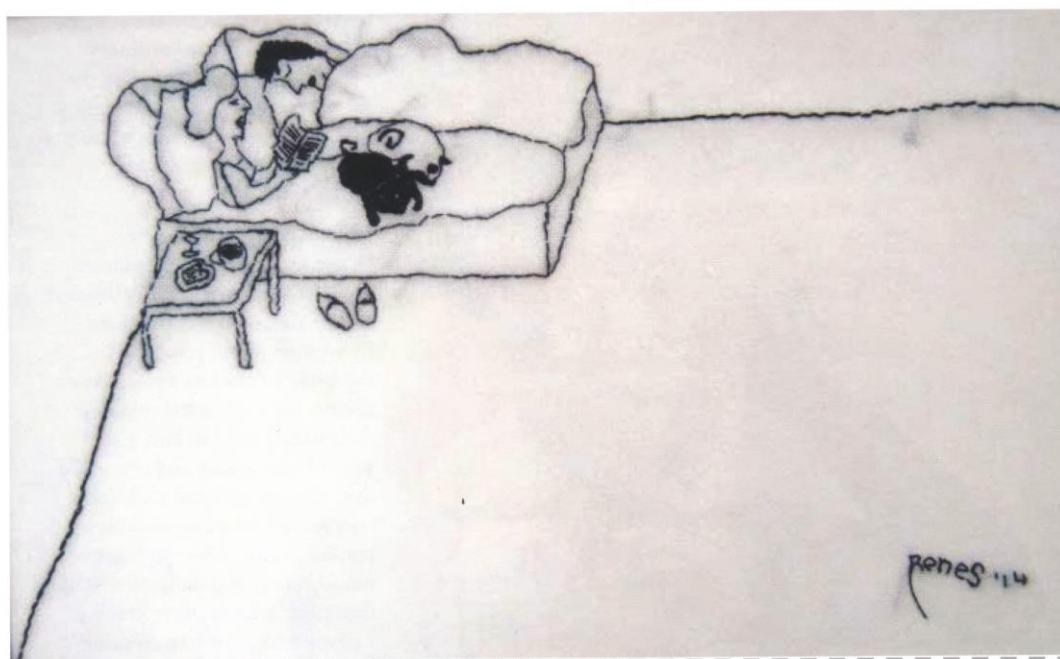
During the creation of my knit art I took pictures of the process.

I used those pictures and edited them digitally before printing them. One day I got the idea to print those pictures on special transfer paper and iron this on fabric. The ironing didn't work out very well: actually, it was a disaster! Regardless I started to embroider on and around the printed fabric and so I created my first embroidery, called *Damage Control*.

I was so enthusiastic about embroidery that I wanted to do more. I had inherited a lot of embroidery materials from my late aunt, so I could use the threads and fabrics to experiment.

I started with my first little piece and got the idea to use the subjects of my illustrated diary and then I was hooked! Of course I have an enormous supply of

Below: *Breakfast in Bed, Black*, Mathilde Renes, embroidery  
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drawings that want to be embroidered, so for the next couple of years I'll be very busy.

While I am working on one embroidery, the next one is already popping up in my head. In a way I make a drawing with my needle and thread. I start with a black thread just as I start with a black line in my illustrated diary; I don't want to make a design in advance, because I like it to be sort of primitive and not very precise. I try to experiment, for example I sometimes make just a black and white version, instead of my usual coloured ones.

Next to my diary-inspired embroidery I also like to do some other subjects and styles of embroidery - some of my work is self-portraiture, for example *Angry* and my latest one *Golden Years*.

Honestly, I do love embroidery so much I'll continue, one way or the other, and will not only go on illustrating my own life on paper but also in creating it in textile. It's such a pleasure to find out that a lot of people all over the world create the most beautiful textile art and also do love my work, which is very stimulating and inspiring.

Facing page: *Golden Years*, Mathilde Renes, embroidery Above: *The Day After*, Mathilde Renes, embroidery