

THE MINUTE
EMBROIDERIES
OF RAYMOND
MATERSON
BEGAN AS A
WAY OF
COMBATING
THE TEDIUM OF
PRISON
EXISTENCE.
**AMY
FUSSELMAN**
EXPLORES
FURTHER.



ThroUgh The NEedLE: The ArT oF Ray MatersoN

above
Ray Materson at work in his New York apartment, with his palette of sock threads at hand. Photo by Frank Snider.

opposite
'A Boot Story',
2³/₄ x 2¹/₄ ins, 1995.



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It is hard to imagine Ray Materson in much of a hurry about anything. Sitting comfortably in his living room in upstate New York, surrounded by his embroidery hoop, his sewing needle, his wife Melanie, and their newborn baby boy, David Henry, he discusses a work-in-progress in a soft and musical voice.

'I'm kind of excited about old Honus here,' he says modestly, displaying his latest miniature embroidered image in his outstretched palm: it's a jewellike portrait of baseball great Honus 'The Flying Dutchman' Wagner. The magnificently detailed image, which will contain literally thousands of stitches when finished, is slated for display at HBO's executive offices in New York.

The serenity and patience that Materson exhibits has been hard won. Eight years ago, under the lash of another needle, Materson committed a crime that landed him in a Connecticut correctional facility. It was in the facility that Materson began to embroider.

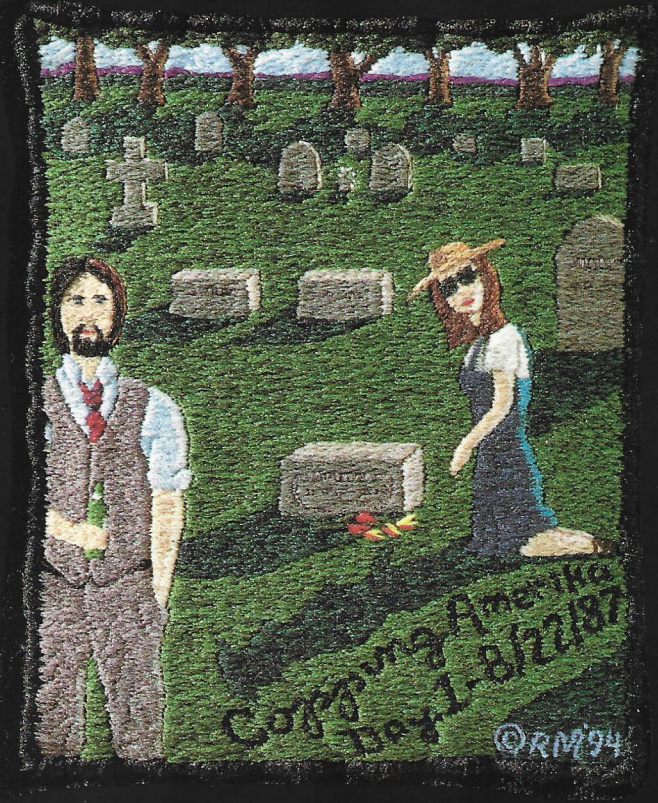
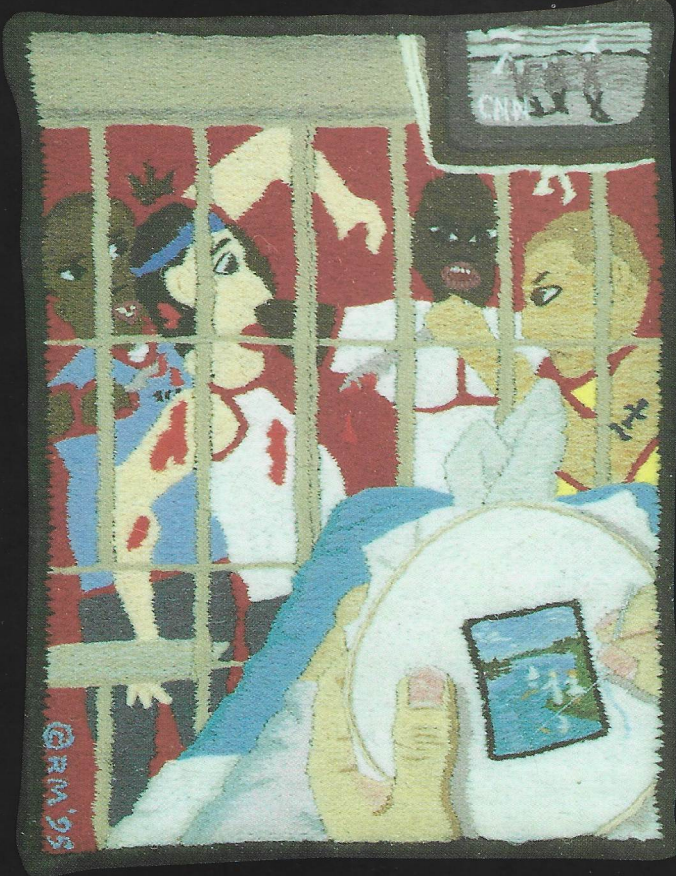
He was released this spring after serving over seven years of a 15 year sentence.

Materson smiles and nods, acknowledging his change: 'I did go from being a person who was absolutely insane with the idea and the fear of time to being an inmate, nearing the end of my period of incarceration, who could say, there isn't enough time in the day.'

Materson received a Bachelor's degree in Philosophy at Grand Valley State College in Michigan. He also studied Theatre there and performed in several of Shakespeare's plays. His tone is matter-of-fact, however, as he relates the details of his own story:

'Prison's a really horrible place, let me tell you. I deserved to go to prison, and it really helped me. When you're at the bottom of the barrel there's really no one to turn to except God, and I did, after about my first year. I turned to God, and I said please, help me to deal with this. And one day I was sitting on my bunk in my cell. It was right around Christmas





of 1988 and they were showing all the commercials for the Bowl Games. Michigan was scheduled to play USC in the Rose Bowl. I didn't go to University of Michigan but I had been to games at Michigan Stadium lots of times. Those were really good times. The stands were all packed with people and everyone was screaming and hollering. And I was remembering those times and I decided I'm going to make something for myself to identify with being in Pasadena. And this plastic bowl with a lid was sitting out on the footlocker in my cell. I looked at it and it reminded me of my grandmother's sewing hoop. I remembered how she could sit in that rocker for hours and hours and hours and make designs. I thought, I could try that.

'I took the lid off the bowl and cut it out as best I could with a pair of nail clippers. Then I took a handkerchief and drew the Michigan 'M' as best I could. And then I noticed there was a pair of yellow and blue striped tube socks hanging on the bar outside my cell. They belonged to the guy in the cell next to me, so I bought them for a pack of cigarettes and I taught myself how to take the colored thread out of the socks.

'I stitched the 'M' emblem, and I put it on a visor I made out of the plastic from inside an old cap, the elastic from a pair of underwear, and a pair of blue shoelaces. And no sooner did I put it on that guys started coming up to me and saying, (Materson alternates between a voice like Sylvester Stallone in Rocky and his own):

'Yo, where'd you get that?'

'I made it.'

'No, don't give me that. You didn't make that.'

'Yes, I did.'

'Well, make me one.'

Materson grins: 'That's how it started. And then I got my first 'order' for a Confederate flag. And then a guy wanted five Puerto Rican flags. And then it really took off and people came up to me asking, can you make me a Chicago Bears emblem, can you make me a Harley Davidson logo, a Patriots emblem, a hearts and flowers with 'Mom' on it? And I said yes to everybody.

'And I was really expecting to get satanic stuff but nobody asked me to do that. And this might sound corny but there seemed to be kind of a sacredness to what I was doing there. Because guys were real delicate. And I'm talking about really terrible people, guys that would bully and beat up and stab people in prison—and they would come up to my cell and they'd say, (Booming Stallone voice) 'Yo, let me see that.' And then I'd show them my stuff and they'd whisper, 'Can I touch it?'

Aarne Anton, the director of the American Primitive Gallery in SoHo, mounted a

one-man show of Materson's work in early 1995. 'Some people,' he smiled, 'would just stare at the images and not be able to accept the fact that they're stitched.'

Each $2\frac{3}{4}$ " by $2\frac{1}{4}$ " image takes Materson 40 to 50 hours to complete. This figure doesn't include the time it takes to create his palette. Because of their sheen and because they can be separated into such tiny fibers, Materson continues to prefer the tiny nylon/orlon threads he gets

from unravelling socks over traditional embroidery thread. The magnifying glass Anton keeps handy is proof of Materson's attention to detail. Under the glass, what looks like a patch of black in one of Materson's pieces is revealed to consist of several other colors.

Discussing the proverbial fork in the road that art presented to him, Materson reveals, 'You're not forced into sobriety in prison. There's all kinds of drugs there and the first year I pretty much got whatever drugs I could. But when I started the work, I discovered that I couldn't do both - so I opted for the art as opposed to the high.'

Ray's future wife, Melanie, saw his work. Moved by it, she wrote him a letter, and their correspondence courtship began. Melanie soon agreed to be Ray's art agent. Within a month she got him into a show at the Albany Institute of History and Arts: Norman S. Rice Gallery. ('I didn't have to do a darn thing,' Melanie says, grinning, 'but show up, keep my mouth shut, and let the work speak for itself.') The couple were married in the prison in 1993.

'It really hit me,' he says, 'one time when I was out on furlough. I was lying on the bed upstairs, trying to finish a piece for Aarne to put in the show. I was lying there and Melanie was lying there next to me and she was real pregnant. And we were talking and I was stitching and I stopped and said: I'm living the dream. I'm at home with people that I love, and I'm at home doing something that I really enjoy doing. And we can even make money doing this,' he laughs:

'I mean, does it get any better? I really don't think so.'



above
'Anywhere Next Exit',
 $2\frac{3}{4}$ x $2\frac{1}{4}$ ins, sewn from
threads of unravalled socks.

**'When you're
at the bottom
of the barrel
there's really
no one to turn
to except God.'**

opposite top left
'Conscientious Objectors;
C.C. gets hit, E Block',
 $2\frac{3}{4}$ x $2\frac{1}{4}$ ins, 1995.

top right
'Copping America; Day 1',
 $2\frac{3}{4}$ x $2\frac{1}{4}$ ins, 1994.

bottom left
'Little Green Bags',
 $2\frac{3}{4}$ x $2\frac{1}{4}$ ins.

bottom right
'Elliot George Goff',
 $2\frac{3}{4}$ x $2\frac{1}{4}$ ins, 1994.