



# Anna Torma

## Permanent Danger

### Exhibition Guide

August 7, 2020 – March 20, 2021

Curated by Sarah Quinton

Textile Museum of Canada

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*Anna Torma: Permanent Danger* is a major exhibition by internationally acclaimed Canadian artist Anna Torma, winner of the 2020 Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts – Saidye Bronfman Award. She creates large-scale embroideries, using a unique drawing style that incorporate hand stitching, appliqué, and collage. Her materials range from fine silk to raw hemp; she works with new materials and thrift store finds and frequently dyes her own silk thread. Many of the pieces consist of multiple layers of fabric stitched together, representing the many fragments from which a life is made.



Torso (2011)  
Hand embroidery on cotton fabric, silkscreen print, found embroidery and applique, 60 x 60 cm  
Courtesy the artist

## About the Artist

Born in 1952 in the village of Tarnaörs in northern Hungary, Torma learned embroidery from her mother and grandmothers. She studied Textile Art and Design at the Hungarian University of Applied Arts in Budapest, choosing to work in this medium because she felt it would allow her greater creative freedom. Since textile practice was not considered a fine art, it was not so closely monitored by the Hungarian communist government. Recalling how her ancestors stitched when they had bits of spare time, she switched from print design to embroidery to balance artmaking with raising young children. In 1989 she immigrated to Canada with her family, eventually establishing deep roots in New Brunswick. She works full-time as an artist in her home studio in Baie Verte. Her artwork reflects her passion and commitment to living a full life.

Over the 40 years of her practice, Anna Torma has demonstrated the storytelling capacity of textile traditions, inspired by autobiography, mythology, and dreams. This exhibition is timely as it addresses human vulnerability and intimacy in our fragile world. Climate change and the global pandemic reinforce how humans are interconnected with the natural world, a theme that persists throughout Torma's work. Each work encourages us to take a closer look at the details, find references to our own lived experience, and imagine new paths forward.

# Landscape



*Landscape near Baie Verte*  
Image Credit: Sarah Quinton

"Landscape is my long-time interest," Torma noted in an interview with the Beaverbrook Art Gallery in 2015. "I take it in a broad sense; cultural landscape, rural and cultivated, from the undisturbed nature to refined gardens... Humans as a biological specimen and cultural, social participants of the inhabited land." Torma references the rural landscape that surrounds her home, her garden, and the house plants in her studio. While the landscape where she lives now is very similar to the one where she grew up in Hungary, cultivation of her garden and

establishing relationships in the local community further help her to feel at home as an immigrant. Her work acknowledges how a landscape can be disorienting or threatening due to relocation or a loss of knowledge about its flora and fauna.

The exhibition's title work *Permanent Danger* (2017) shows humans at their most primeval. Nude and



*Permanent Danger* (2017)  
Hand embroidery and reverse applique  
on three layers of linen fabric, silk thread  
206 x 125 cm. Courtesy the artist

semi-clothed figures are surrounded by dense foliage, fire-breathing dragons, and serpentine monsters. The male figures are clearly sexually aroused; female figures pose seductively and suggestively nearby. Torma acknowledges the biological function of sexuality while celebrating the beauty and sensual pleasures of the reproductive system by placing her figures in this lush garden setting.

The comfort and joy of the humans is threatened by what surrounds them. Does the crowned female figure stand outside this scene, or does her confident pose and regal stature represent acceptance of life's challenges? Hard work and attention are required to keep nature and its terrors at bay, but the garden can also be a place of relaxation, contemplation, and escape from the human realm.

Torma sees no distinction between nature and human culture. "A bestiary is a catalogue of beasts," Torma wrote in the June 2004 issue of *The Walrus*. "The idea dates back to the ancient Greeks: they classified living creatures, but they gave equal rank to mythical creatures too."

## Human Vulnerability

Mythological creatures and monsters appear again in *Fight 1* (2018) and *Fight 2* (2018). While they appear menacing, they make reference to a grounding force in the artist's life, her family. The monsters are based on drawings made by her sons Balint and David as children. "I observed how my children used their drawing skills to communicate from an early age," Torma shared in an interview for *American Craft Magazine* in 2013. "I found it quite poetic, how they used a mix of dragons and imaginary creatures, texts and schoolwork, to work through their negative emotions and make sense of the world."



*Fight 2* (2018)

Hand stitching and reverse applique  
on two layers of linen fabric, silk thread and commercial  
prints

130 x 140 cm. Courtesy the artist

Her children are now grown up, and have established their own careers as artists. Torma has held onto many of these drawings despite their deterioration. "Children draw because the desire is there. With embroidery, I can save the desire in this format; it's forever," she wrote in *The Walrus*. "I want to steal the intensity behind them. They drew quickly and powerfully... I wanted to make something powerful, not just decadent and pretty." Embroidery is very much the opposite way of working; one piece can take Torma about two months of working forty or fifty hours a week. She marks passages of time and change with each stitch.

## Feminism



*Gardens 1* (2018)  
Hand embroidery and applique  
on silk fabric, silk thread  
100 x 100 cm. Courtesy the artist



*Gardens 2* (2018)  
Hand embroidery and applique  
on silk fabric, silk thread  
100 x 100 cm. Courtesy the artist

The floral motifs embroidered and appliquéd in *Gardens 1* (2018) and *Gardens 2* (2018) were subject matter deemed appropriate for women to stitch in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Rozsika Parker writes in *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, the



feminine ideal of this period was associated with the virtues of innocence, chastity, and submission. Women demonstrated their domestic skills and family's economic status by decorating their homes with time-consuming embroidery and needlework projects. As a separation emerged between fine art and craft, art represented the intellect and individual expression of the (male) artist, while craft represented the decorative, mundane daily tasks and the collective experiences of the (female) home. Feminist artists working in the 1960s and 1970s challenged these notions, reclaiming textiles as a medium to question sexual mores, women's intellect, and art world hierarchies. Like many of her contemporaries, Torma celebrates sexual intimacy and pleasure in its many expressions from a female perspective. In *Dionysia*, oral sex is being enjoyed



*Dionysia* (2020)

Hand embroidery on several layers of transparent silk fabric, silk thread  
105 x 180 cm. Courtesy the artist

in the garden; blossoms and branches morph into genitalia creating a lush, sensual landscape. Even the monsters on the periphery of the scene are aroused. The application of a pink ribbon, lush silk fabrics, and the dense stitching in *Party with Dionysos* reinforce the sensuality of the imagery. The formally dressed figures in *Dionysia* could reference the idealized modesty of past eras, but perhaps they too have arrived to join in the revels?

## Science

Torma's interest in biology persists in *Pedagogical Charts 1* (2016), addressing how science attempts to create order in the world around us. She considered studying medicine before pursuing visual arts, and her interest in the human body can be seen in the detailed scientific drawings featured here. Words are stitched into the cloth that reference human ancestors – "Homo habilis," "Homo erectus," "Australopithecus" – situating humans within the animal kingdom. Text reading "Charles Darwin" and "On the Origin of Species" reinforces this evolutionary history. The swirling lines in the head of the figure lying at the bottom of the piece evoke human intellect and emotion.

*Pedagogical Charts 2* (2016) presents language as another discipline that creates order and meaning from the world. Text and images near the top of the piece mimic English language learning resources. Uppercase and lowercase letters are followed by simple words that start



*Pedagogical Charts 1* (2016)  
Hand embroidered collage  
on linen fabric, silk thread  
143 x 166 cm  
Collection of Michel L'Heureux



*Pedagogical Charts 2* (2016)  
Hand embroidered collage  
on linen fabric, silk thread  
143 x 166 cm  
Collection of Galerie Laroche/Joncas

with those characters. Torma's artist husband, Istvan Zsako, follows a similar approach in one of his paintings, demonstrating their shared joys and challenges of learning another language and, by extension, another culture. "I use stitches as my first language of self-expression," Torma notes. "I feel fluent and articulate using stitches instead of trying to paint or draw. The stitching itself must be my language, the first – the cozy one – similar to my Hungarian."

Zsako finds his own medium of expression in bronze, and references to his sexually suggestive sculptures can be found in many of Torma's pieces. Torma also includes nude and semi-clothed female figures, referencing pin-

up models and fashion plates that point to another ideal of femininity depicted in popular culture from the 1950s. Sexuality and reproduction are again linked through biology and social contexts.

## Heritage

The *Personal Ribbon* series incorporates found textiles that are stitched onto a long horizontal strip of hemp. These fragments that were collected, gifted or part of earlier work, contain layers of personal meaning. Like her children's drawings, many of them have deteriorated, making them no less precious to her. They represent her connection to a larger human story. In the June 2004 issue of *The Walrus* she wrote "When I touch silk, I think: 'Ohh, it came from China, and they raised the silk worms; it was probably a family business.' There are endless stories in a little piece of fabric."



Personal Ribbon 1 (2020)  
Handwoven hemp base with found textile objects  
50 x 450 cm  
Courtesy the artist



Personal Ribbon 2 (2020)  
Handwoven hemp base with found textile objects  
50 x 350 cm  
Courtesy the artist

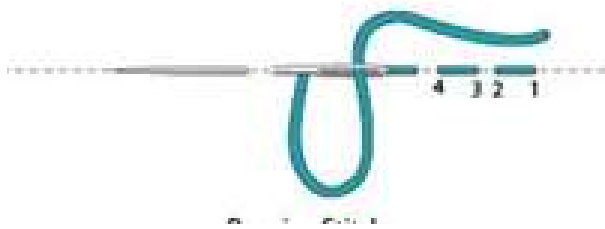
Torma's own family ancestry is referenced in *Personal Ribbon 2* (2020) with the inclusion of traditional Hungarian embroidery, characterized by red stitching on a white background. Different styles of embroidery are distinguished by work from different regions of the country. Some of the most renowned embroidery is by the Matyo people from the town of Mezőkövesd and its vicinity. The Matyo style is characterized by stitching that is so dense that the base material is not seen, a trait seen in much of Torma's work. Torma works primarily in satin stitching (see "Techniques" below), influenced by both the Matyo style (northern Hungary) as well as the Kolcsa style (southern Hungary). Both these regional styles were well-known in her village of Tarnaörs. These new works demonstrate the continuity within her own practice and connection to her Hungarian heritage.



Cover from Mezőkövesd, Hungary. Embroidered plain woven cotton, mid to late 19th century, L 62 cm x W 28 cm, from the permanent collection of the Textile Museum of Canada, T85.0367.

# Techniques

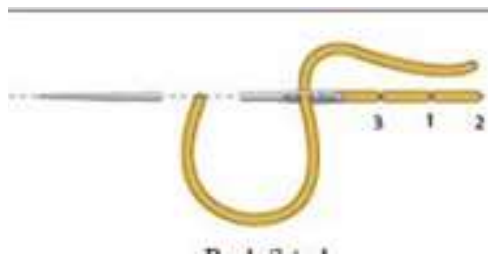
Embroidery is the technique of embellishing fabrics with decorative stitching using needle and thread. Running stitch, stem stitch, and back stitch are often used to define the shape of a motif.



Running Stitch

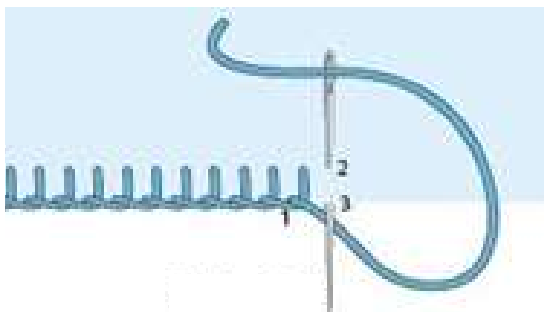


Stem Stitch

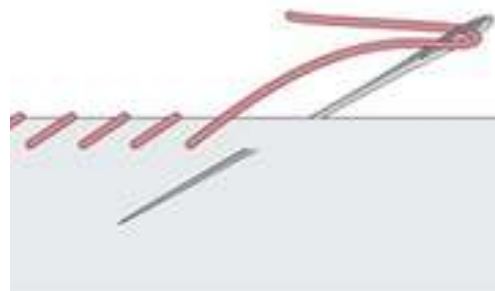


Back Stitch

Blanket stitch and whip stitch are used to secure edges and add texture to a design. They are often used for borders or at the edges of appliquéd figures.

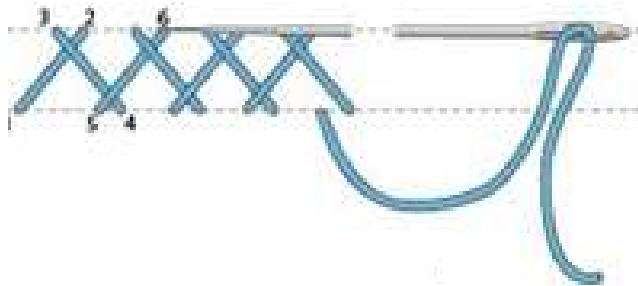


Blanket Stitch

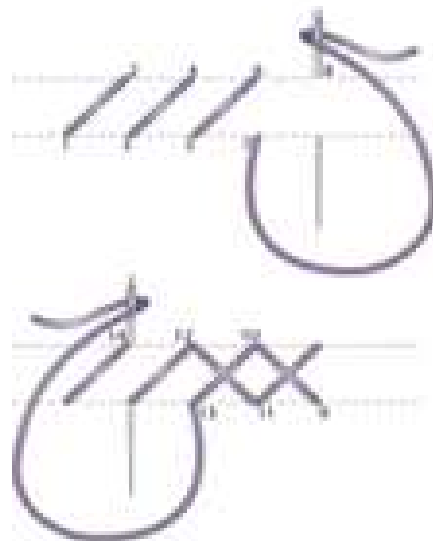


Whip Stitch

Herringbone stitch and cross stitch are used to create decorative details or fill in a design when used in a group. They are often used on woven fabric where the weave structure is clearly visible as a guide for the placement of stitches.

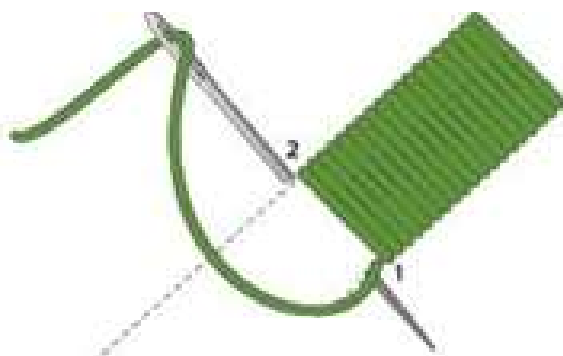


**Herringbone Stitch**

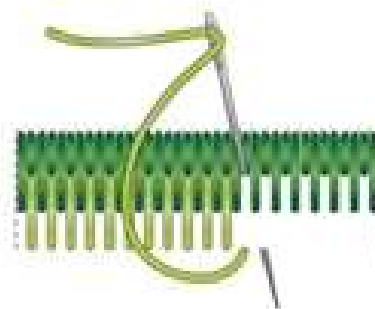


**Cross Stitch**

Satin stitch and long and short stitch are used to create shading or fill in the inside of a motif.



**Satin Stitch**



**Long and Short Stitch**

**Appliqué** is a surface design technique that involves the application of a piece of fabric onto the surface of another. Stitching or adhesives are used in this process. This technique can allow for more expensive fabrics to be stitched on to stronger, more serviceable materials, making it more utilitarian than traditional embroidery. In reverse appliqué, the top material is cut away to reveal the layer of cloth underneath. The edges are secured through stitching to connect the two materials.

## Discussion Questions

1. Choose an artwork in the gallery not referenced in this exhibition guide or an artwork from Torma's website <https://www.annatorma.com>. How does its imagery reference the themes highlighted above?
2. In the catalogue essay for the 2011-2012 exhibition *Anna Torma: Bagatelles* at the New Brunswick Museum, Torma's garden is described as "a place of good and evil, where there is the possibility that optimism will triumph over cynicism." Do you agree with this statement?
3. Following Torma's example in the *Personal Ribbon* series, what textiles might you incorporate into a personal collage?
4. How many of the techniques highlighted above can you identify in the exhibition?



## Resources

This video interview with the artist profiles work that was included in the exhibition *Book of Abandoned Details* held at the Esker Foundation in 2018.

<https://vimeo.com/282107353>

Curatorial Director Sarah Quinton nominated Anna Torma for the 2020 Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts – Saidye Bronfman Award. Watch a short video interview with the artist and learn about the other 2020 recipients of the Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WgHVvfjaCDk>

This video interview features a tour of Anna Torma's home studio that was filmed by the Owens Art Gallery in 2013.

<https://vimeo.com/67273802>



Views of Artist's Studio  
Photo Credit: Sarah Quinton