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NATURE EMBELLISHED

Artist Hillary Fayle's botanical embroidery evokes connection and wonder.

By Constance Costas

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Magnolia liliflora,
Magnolia virginiana, 2022;
embroidery thread and
Southern magnolia leaves.

It was just a few leaves, but they changed the course of **Hillary Fayle's** life: "I had a thread and needle, and I saw these tough oak leaves," says the artist. "Right away, I realized I could combine the two things I loved most in the world."

While completing a degree in fiber design, Fayle spent a year studying embroidery at Manchester Metropolitan University in England, where she fell under its sway. "I really got obsessed with it, as well as stitch work," she notes. "It wasn't until I studied it that I was able to see the depth—the history and complexity—of needlework. I also really love that you can make the most complex work with the simplest of tools. Just a needle and thread can do so much."

Her other passion, nature, was sparked during childhood summers at Camp Rushford, an environmental conservation camp in Caneadea, New York. She loved to draw, too, but that wasn't it, exactly. She itched to create something tangible and tactile.

Returning from England, she took a summer job as Rushford's camp cook. There, nature and needlework collided. Who would think to poke a needle through an oak leaf, embellishing it with intricate stitchwork? Fayle did, creating a breathtaking artistic mashup. ▶

Following a few years of artistic experimentation, Fayle entered the graduate program in Craft and Material Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). Two years later, she had her masters of fine arts in hand and Richmond's Quirk Gallery came calling.

Would she agree to an exhibition? Yes, Fayle said, she would. "I can't take credit for discovering Hillary's artwork," says Quirk co-founder, Katie Ukrop, "but once I saw it, I was crazy about it—and her. She's a dream to work with."

The Quirk show left Fayle feeling Richmond's embrace. "I'll forever be grateful for the opportunity to establish myself in this community," she says. "Quirk believed in me and my work before anyone else."

While her art evolved through trial and error, Fayle always knew its purpose: "to make the connection between nature and the human hand," she notes. "At the heart of my work, the stitches touch on connection, repair, and wonder."

While the leaves appear fragile, Fayle applies a non-toxic preservative to strengthen and protect them before she gets to work. "I have no doubt that these leaves will outlive me," she laughs.

"Everyone left the gallery in amazement," says Diana Nelson of Fayle's exhibition at Quirk.

Fayle's work has attracted a deeply appreciative audience. "People generally respond with positivity and surprise," she says. "It's two things that are familiar, brought together in a surprising way. I see it as a metaphor for what can happen when we're thoughtful and gentle while interacting with nature."

She has exhibited in galleries around the world, many of which have added her pieces to their permanent collections. She credits a 2014 *Buffalo Spree* magazine cover, "that really began the snowball rolling."

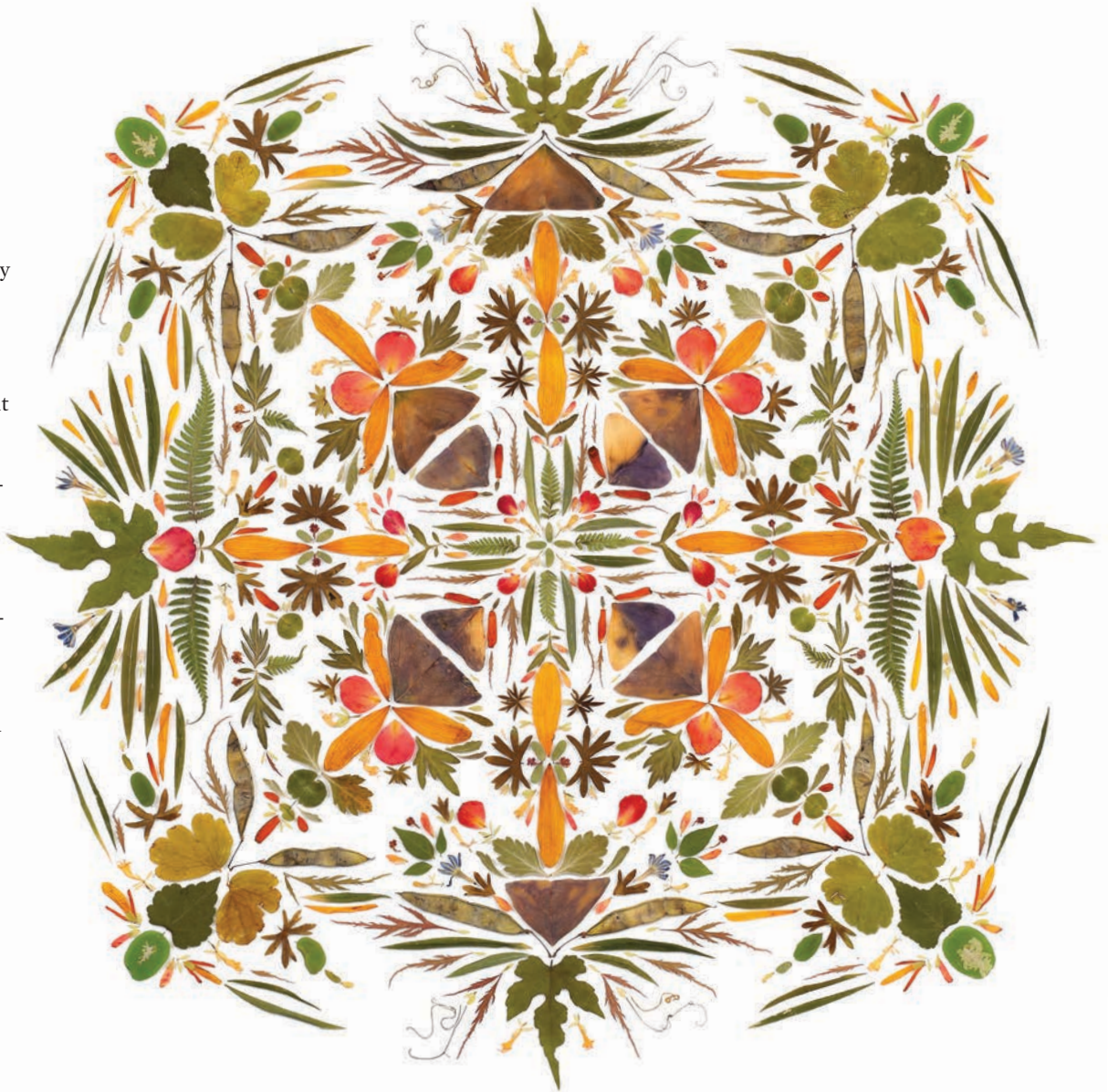
Today, you'll find her pieces in the U.S. Embassy in Sri Lanka; in Belgium, at the Kalmthout Arboretum & Botanical Gardens; and in Buffalo, New York, at the Burchfield Penney Art Center.

Now an assistant professor and head of Fiber at VCU, she still enjoys teaching and has made Richmond her home—drawn by a deep sense of community and the abundance of local magnolia, ginkgo, and camellia leaves, her favorite canvases.

Eye-catching as her embellished works are, her more restrained pieces beguile by



Lotus Rising, 2021; Embroidery thread and eucalyptus.



"focusing on the leaf itself," dressing its organic beauty in spare, subtle stitches and tiny knots. And as private collectors snap up her enchanting work, she's inspired to new creative heights.

"I didn't always know where I was going," she says, "but I believed in it, and I just kept following the path." Along the way, she adopted a technique called "couching," using tiny stitches to tack lengths of colorful thread to a leaf's surface. With fewer needle punctures, couching lets her stitch onto "materials that can't withstand high thread tension," she notes.

Fayle's most recent exhibition, *State of Bliss*, debuted at Quirk's Charlottesville Gallery and speaks to her intimate relationship with nature.

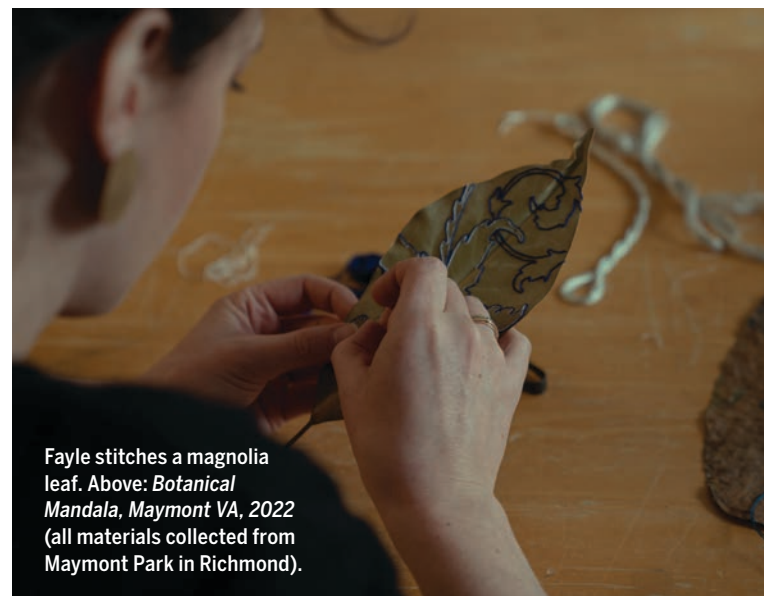
"Gardens must begin with intimacy—our hands touching the earth," she says. "They stand as symbols of community."

When the exhibition opened in June, Quirk Gallery manager Diana Nelson noted the crowd's response. "It was entertaining to watch visitors become so enamored with the same leaves and petals they encounter on a daily basis," she said. "Everyone left the gallery in amazement." HillaryWFayle.com 

Constance Costas is the editor of Virginia Living. She has written for Southern Home, Self, Harper's Bazaar, Skirt!, and Parents.



Hillary Fayle



Fayle stitches a magnolia leaf. Above: *Botanical Mandala, Maymont VA, 2022* (all materials collected from Maymont Park in Richmond).