

# Great Scott!

By Scott Goodman



Scott Goodman, owner of Sewing Machine Warehouse & Kneedle.com has been servicing the sewing public since 1976.

## Stitch Alchemist

Urban Threads came on my radar over six years ago. They are a prolific design house with keen, cultural trend awareness. I was immediately attracted to their subject choices and digitizing techniques. Curiosity and awe, brought me to Niamh.

Niamh O'Connor 31, (pronounced Nee-ev) joined Embroidery Library as an intern while completing her studies at Minneapolis College of Art and Design. Almost immediately, she started pitching crazy ideas of what embroidery could be, always asking the question, "Can we do this"? Experimenting with, and merging art with science, she created new ways to abstract contemporary subjects into embroidery stitches. Pitching her business plan to company executives, led to the birth of Urban Threads.



Niamh's official title is "Evil Genius", and she uses that genius to lead a (very) creative team. Her "trifecta" includes fellow art student/lead digitizer, Danielle Pebbles, and Marketing Director, Karline Koehler. "Danielle and I bounce ideas on how to render art into stitches and Karline is the level-headed, ring-master. When I come up with ideas like, "Let's shoot bunnies into space", Karlene brings us down to earth".

I had a chance to speak with Niamh and ask questions about her work, influences and design process. Our conversation:

**Great Scott!:** Your designs look quite different from other embroidery designs.

**Niamh:** We experiment a lot on techniques and have come up with amazing ways of playing with stitches. We discovered a technique, we call "painterly", that uses open fills and layered shades of color, that gives designs a watercolor feel. Our Baroque and Baroque Punk designs feature layers of chiseled satin stitches that add unique dimension to our designs.

**Great Scott!:** How do you approach the design process?

**Niamh:** Art doesn't always translate into embroidery well. An oil painter doesn't worry how it will sew out. We appeal to a younger crowd whose first machine may only sew smaller designs. With that in mind, we stay within the limitations of the most popular hoop sizes, but are always trying to "break the hoop", creating designs that are forgiving; meaning that they only have to be in the ballpark when connecting or overlapping. We want our customers to have a real good embroidery experience.

**Great Scott!:** You are quite supportive of young designers and entrepreneurs.

**Niamh:** Many of our customers have shops on Etsy, and ebay, so we feature a

lot of support on our blog, for instance, tutorials and techniques on how to photograph your projects to make them more appealing.

**Great Scott!:** Many of your designs include Steampunk themes.

**Niamh:** The audience is much broader than I ever imagined. For instance, an older fan in a local nursing home wanted to go to a steampunk convention that we attended, but was frustrated that none of the residents would accompany her.

**Great Scott!:** Like many fashion companies, you continually publish a "look book".

**Niamh:** We publish our monthly look book, in-house. It is a free magazine, that features new trends and a free project. This is another place of inspiration. Not just pictures of designs, but projects. We are expanding into themed look books, like weddings, Halloween and Christmas.

**Great Scott!:** Some of your designs seem influenced by contemporary artists like Gary Baseman and Takashi Murakami. What artists speak to your creative side?

**Niamh:** Alexander McQueen, I love looking at skulls in fashion, playful, improvising, combining two unexpected things. He really broke the mold about alternative ideas. Alexander was the first runway designer that went dark, before it became cool. I get a lot of inspiration from the Hand & Lock Competition and

seeing what student designers do taking embroidery out of quaint needlepoint.

**Great Scott!:** You have collaborated with other artists, like tattoo artist David Hale, comic artist Greg Dean and fabric designer Tula Pink.

**Niamh:** We have collaborated with about a dozen artists converting flat, 2D, regular paper art. Once we explain the limitations of embroidery, the results are amazing. This thing is really powerful art.

**Great Scott!:** Your design ethos include many contemporary themes. One of your recent free projects was a dice bag that would appeal to gamers. Your designs include contemporary themes from (Scott taking a deep breath...), steampunk, goth, magick, roleplaying games, Dungeons and Dragons, kawaii (Japanese cuteness), Pluto-as-a-planet, hacker, maker, Goth, Jules Verne, tattoo, dark fairytales, and adult coloring books. Tell me about your own cultural influences?

**Niamh:** I am a Millennial and part of a culture that came of age as the economy failed. Influenced by the millennial world culture, we make it fit. Our generation is driven a lot more by passion. We are more inclined to take risks on careers and ideas. We watched people that followed all the rules only to lose their job, so why not take a risk? The hacker-crafter-maker movement is a result, repurposing as an effect of the economy. We want to be self sufficient.

**Great Scott!:** I have noticed many world-inspired designs; foreign travel, mehndi, sugar skulls...where have you journeyed to, what places are in your dreams, and where will you go, next?

**Niamh:** I love travel. My family is from Ireland. It is easy to use Ireland as a jumping point to see Europe. I am planning to see Barcelona, South Korea, Norway and New Zealand. This year, I will go to the Burning Man Festival, for my first Burn.

**Great Scott!:** What does the future look like from Niamh's perspective?

**Niamh:** I am intrigued by 3D printers, but what's the point if it replicates itself?

**Great Scott!:** Back to "Bunnies in Space". Tell me about the Giving Bunny Project.

**Niamh:** This is my favorite project, inspired by straight-up guerrilla street art, yarn bombing, and craft art in unexpected places. It's something easy to make and leave, just a nugget with two ears, eyes and a nose. It's fun to watch how ready people are to collaborate and spread joy.

**Great Scott!:** Speaking of spreading joy, I have taken great joy in watching you abstract our pop-culture. I can't wait to see what comes next.

**Niamh:** This has been a fun ride. I love what I do. I never guessed that I would be in embroidery.

*Instructions for "The Giving Bunny Project" can be found on the StitchPunk blog at UrbanThreads.com. Make one or more and let them multiply.*

*Give it your best shot and send me a bunny selfie. Most unique wins a prize and will get a mention on the Great Scott! Facebook page. GreatScott@kneedle.com, or Facebook.com/GreatScottSews.*