Unpicking the narrative: difficult women, difficult work

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Notes on contributors

Freddie Robins is an artist who challenges our perception of knitting as craft. Her work is internationally renowned, her practice crossing the boundaries of art, design and craft. She lives and works in Essex and London and is Senior Tutor and Reader in Textiles at the Royal College of Art.

Lucy Day and Eliza Gluckman are Directors of A Woman’s Place Project, CIC and are currently curating a South East wide two-year project, which presents a series of participatory events in 2017 before launching six new artists commissions at National Trust’s Knole, Sevenoaks in 2018. The project is supported using public funding by the National Lottery through Arts Council England., The National Trust, Trust New Art and other partners.

Abstract

Freddie Robins discusses her practice with curators Day+Gluckman in the context of textiles, feminism, heritage and art practice. Using examples of her work and exhibition profile they will consider how her career and practice has developed as an artist working with textiles and whether she consciously considers it to have a feminist voice; whether gender still has a pivotal role in how textiles are read and how Freddie’s work continues to contribute to that debate. Linking to recent Day+Gluckman exhibitions that have included Freddie: *Concerning Matter* in 2009: *Fifties, Fashion and Emerging Feminism* in 2011 and more recently, *Liberties: reflecting on 40 years since the Sex Discrimination Act* the conversation will look at how textiles have been curated into exhibitions, for example *FABRIC* (2014) and *Entangled*  (2017); examining curatorial hierarchies and whether there is a perceived or actual fear in displaying objects that don’t hold their shape. We will also discuss the propensity of echo chambers in the art world and beyond - *are we only talking to each other?!* How as artists and curators do we identify our audiences and is there a gendered snobbery about the ‘right type’ of audience?

Keywords: Textiles; Art; Knitting; Gender; Feminism; Hierarchy; Value; Tribes

## D+G: We have talked in the past about there being a fear of objects that don’t hold their shape – what are your thoughts to there being a link to how female bodies are viewed and an inherent need to control ‘shape’?

FR: The work that I produce is mostly soft and floppy. This is great for storage, even a very large sculpture can be rolled up and stored in a box. However, it requires so much work when it comes to installation and display. In the past I have spent a lot time constructing invisible internal structures and fiddling around with suspending works from monofilament. Becoming frustrated with this process I have then filled the knitted forms to make them rigid and self-supporting. This does bother me though as it is denying the fabric it’s inherent fluid, shape-shifting qualities. I have also become frustrated with the number of exhibitions that market themselves as exhibitions of textiles when the work is stretched flat and hung on the wall, like a traditional painting. After all, all exhibitions of paintings on canvas are also exhibitions of textiles. Whilst battling these contradictory positions it dawned on me that this question over the control of material also related to the way that the material of a woman’s body is supposed to be controlled. We are constantly trying to keep the fat under control, or at least in place, through diet, exercise, the wearing of ‘Spanx’ and for the extreme a ‘tummy tuck’. A large number of swimming costumes contain ‘tummy control panels’. I heard an interesting comment on the radio from an elderly woman who had asked a swimming costume retailer why they couldn’t stock swimming costumes without these panels as they were uncomfortable and gave her a rash. The reply was that normal women wanted these panels. She said “but I’m in my seventies and I don’t care if my stomach isn’t flat”. Why would you have a flat stomach if you had lived that long, gravity and childbearing would definitely make that an impossibility for any woman of that age, and more importantly why should you care if you are fit enough to swim? Why are we so scared of the soft stuff?

D+G (Lucy Day): Yes, when curating shows involving textiles, or any ‘floppy’, flexible, sculptural work it is always interesting to see whether artists have worked the ‘display’ element into the work itself. On occasion we are left to work it out ourselves, which gives a lot of (too much?) creative license. There is though something inherently prosaic about going for a very conventional 2 – dimensional hang, and that’s as much bound up with a perpetuated confusion over textiles’ ‘place’ in the art world I’m sure! I wonder how this might be considered in relation to ‘Mad Mother’ that we showed in *Liberties,* where the work was laid flat, firstly on the platform in the London show and then on a plinth at The Exchange in Cornwall. I am really fascinated in this linking of the shape of things and the female form. Both questions lead into issues of control and the hierarchies of power.

## D+G: It would be good to talk about the hierarchy of value and the gendered nature of materials, Is art which uses textiles still so gendered we can’t move on from this?

FR: I desperately want to answer “no, everything is viewed and measured equally, we have moved on”, but the reality is that textiles are still so strongly associated with the feminine that whenever a male artist employs the medium it is viewed as unusual. This exhibition, *Entangled: Threads and Making,* is a perfect example of how gendered textiles remains. The curator, Karen Wright, did not set out to curate a show entirely made up of female artists, it “evolved over time”. The exhibition is focused on “the experimental hand and the process of making” (Wright 2017, 9). The focus on artistic quality in this area of practice, as opposed to focus on gender, still led Karen to the all female line up. In my teaching on MA Textiles at the Royal College of Art we have very few male students. Currently nine, this is less than 13% of the total number of students on the programme. This number is slightly less than when I was a student there nearly thirty years ago. Karen quotes Eva Hesse with her statement, “Excellence has no Sex”, whilst this is undoubtedly true textiles still does. Personally I have no serious concern about the gender imbalance in the discipline, and the gendered nature of textiles, but I do have very serious concerns about what this means in reality for those of us who practice through the medium. We continue to live in a male dominated society. The patriarchy looms large and usually fills and controls the purse. And whilst the patriarchy might appreciate textiles for the most part it doesn’t value it enough to invest in it. The hierarchy of value continues.

D+G (Lucy Day): And the gender difference still looms large in the art world. The East London Fawcett Society’s 2013 *Great East End Art Audit,* which was followed up by later research by Freelands Foundation showed this very clearly. So if we add your observations alongside these and other similar pieces of research you can see how problematic it becomes to be a female artist working with textiles! Now might be a good time to mention The Telegraph review for *Entangled: Threads and Making*. At the end of very positive review Mark Hudson writes: “*At a time, indeed, when women artists are everywhere, it might seem odd to mount an exhibition of art solely by women, celebrating “feminine” ways of making things. This is, however, a lively and consistently entertaining show, which will be particularly instructive for the male visitor. There is, in the very tactility of this art, an unmistakable whiff of oestrogen that is for the male quite alien, but undeniably life-enhancing”.* Without a doubt more work needs to be done to shift this kind of attitude and create new spaces for conversations.

When we curated *FABRIC* (Collyer Bristow Gallery, 2014) it was the result of observing the increasing numbers of artists using or incorporating textiles in their work. We weren’t looking to work exclusively with artists who called themselves textiles artists, and several were artist who we had spotted when selecting for Exeter Contemporary earlier that year. It was incredibly useful to speak with you about whom, from the RCA Textiles programme, you might recommend, (Henry Hussey for example), as we may well have not accessed them so easily without your introduction or insight.

One of the things we (Day+Gluckman) love about your work is its ability to slip seamlessly between the different ‘tribes’ – fine art, fashion, textile. The list has no bounds. Your works hold their own space so well that they never need to adhere or conform to the more rigid values that some disciplines seem to provoke. This notion of ’tribes’ is an interesting one. Great cheers went up when the ‘textiles tribe’ was flagged up at the conference and I can really see the strength that people gain from the shared experiences. Eliza and I felt like intruders at a party! I know that the art world is bursting with tribes, you could also describe them as echo chambers, and I wonder how this translates to audiences and how we as curators, as artists, can move beyond the familiar into these new conversations that feel increasingly urgent.

## D+G: Echo chambers - Are we talking to the converted? Is it a conversation that happens between likeminded people? (‘Tribes’ like feminism, new media…. Are we tribal?)

FR: Yes we are all tribal, even if we don’t like to think of ourselves as such. I don’t believe that it is a question of choice. Even if you do not want to be part of a particular tribe you are simply co-opted by the other ‘members’. I do not think this is a conscious act by the other ‘members’. It’s just a natural behaviour to do with common interest and self-protection. Obviously this claiming of ‘members’ is particularly strong when the tribe feels undervalued or overlooked and needs to prove it’s worth or strength to those outside of the ‘tribe’. I don’t think that the tribe is necessarily a visible thing. It only becomes so when the ‘tribe’ is together. As you said you felt like outsiders at the symposium. I had not thought of you as being outsiders before you said this but I was aware of the presence of the ‘tribe’ in full force. Obviously the ‘textiles tribe’ is the audience most likely to attend an exhibition or symposium related to textiles, and the people most likely to submit a relevant paper, but this does mean that we are predominately talking to the converted. For me one of the big challenges is to get people from outside of the ‘tribe’ involved in a conversation about textiles, (or at least not put off by it), but I think the most realistic way to achieve a broader conversation and greater challenge for myself is to put myself out there amongst another ‘tribes’. Submit and present a paper at a conference related to other aspects of my practice, be the outsider myself. This is obviously uncomfortable and requires much more work, as I will have to seek out those opportunities. I won’t be invited to join another ‘tribe’ in conversation. They are too busy talking to themselves too.

I am interested in the fact that there are very few ‘textiles tribe’ members exhibiting in *Entangled: Threads and Making.* The curator, Karen Wright’s curatorial rational was not driven purely by the medium. It developed out of the studio visits and interviews that she had made over a number of years, and an observation of the making methods that she witnessed. I wonder if she felt like an outsider. I was consciousthat only one of the exhibiting artists was present at the symposium and that none of them presented. Here we have a subsection of the ‘textiles tribe’, the ‘academic textiles tribe’. Encouraging non-academics to submit and present at symposiums of this nature is also a challenge but if we don’t the conversation gets even narrower.

D+G (Lucy Day): There is clearly a plethora of tribes: of painters, sculptors, feminist to name only a few….I have talked to other artists working in new media for example who have similar problems exhibiting work in exhibitions that aren’t specifically related to the media they are working in. It is interesting where these ‘tribes’ intersect and where they don’t and where those barriers lie. This speaks also to audiences. We have talked before about how exhibitions of textiles attract huge audiences, predominately women. Nonetheless despite the increasing push for institutions to increase their visitor numbers it’s comparatively rare to see exhibitions that specifically consider Textiles. In this instance *Entangled: Threads and Making* is a relatively rare example. We have talked about the ‘gatekeepers’ and this ties closely to the ‘tribal’, both in terms of who is shown, when and where ….. and who to.

## D+G: So, is there an inherent or historic misogyny in institutions around audiences and the  ‘quality judgment’ accorded to certain forms of art (by men?) over others (by women)?

Yes misogyny is still a problem and was acknowledged as such in a recent move by “some of the most powerful women in the art world (who) came together at Tate Modern to call for better representation for female artists” (*Evening Standard,* September 29, 2017). Whilst money is not everything it is obviously a very real, measure of value. The top auction price for a female artist (Georgia O’Keeffe at almost £35 million) is less than half that of a male artist. Seeing as the majority of artworks made using textiles are made by women it really is a lose-lose situation in the current system. I was interested to see that in the overview of Sheila Hicks’s work on the Alison Jacques Gallery website there is no mention of the word ‘textiles’ or ‘fibre’ in relation to her work, despite her having worked almost exclusively with these materials for over fifty years. Her work is described as ‘installation’ and ‘site-specific’, with a focus on the ‘large-scale’ and ‘monumental’. Is her use of material so insignificant in this context or is it simply that the words ‘textiles’ or ‘fibre’ are such a turn off to those outside of the ‘tribe’? I know that I sometimes omit the fact that I studied knitted textiles when I am in an environment that holds narrow views of disciplines, mediums and materials. But if you do study a design or craft based discipline, which is not housed in a Fine Art environment, how do you get to know the ‘right’ people, the artists that will be your professional peers, or the curators that will exhibit you? You are excluded simply because you are not in the ‘right’ place as opposed to because you are not making the ‘right’ work. What you studied, as opposed to what you make and how you think categorize you. As you have already said you would not have found Henry Hussey if I hadn’t introduced his work to you.

## D+G: In the lead up to the talk at Turner Contemporary we spoke about the difference between working with textiles, and thinking through the medium, as you are making. Could you expand a little on your thinking around this?

Often artists are cited as working with textiles but this is very different to thinking through the process of making with textiles. I do not believe that a piece of work is necessarily more valid if the artist has made it with their own hands, as opposed to by someone else’s hands, but it does give the work another meaning, especially if the artist has never experienced the processes involved. Despite being committed to the making process I have employed other people’s hands in the past when making hand knitted works. I could have knitted them myself, and understand the thinking and making process from first-hand experience, but I am simply not prepared to take the time it takes me to knit them. I am an impatient maker. Despite the making of textiles involving relatively slow processes I am not interested in the ‘slow movement’. Through the physical act of making and the handling of materials, the work takes on an authentic voice and an authority, which a piece conceived of by the artist, and then manufactured by someone else does not. The act of making enables ideas to develop in different, often unexpected directions. The movements of the hands allow the thought processes to flow, giving ideas time to develop. I have found past projects, where I have explored making through automated, computerized knitting machinery, deeply unsatisfying on both a physical and creative level. I have struggled to take full ownership of these works.

**D+G:** As we pull this conversation together it’s clear that there are a number of hierarchies, layers if you like, that need considerable investigation. The contradiction inherent in the fact that the ‘hand made’ in textiles appears to hold greater weight perhaps than works that are outsourced, whereas in sculpture or printmaking this is commonplace; the attention given to one audience over another and the underlying tensions around gender. Textile based work and display seems to encapsulate all of these issues, and your work in particular is a wonderful example of how those barriers can be dismantled. It has been fascinating having these conversations with you, both in the lead up and during the talk at Turner Contemporary. Without a doubt over the years you have encouraged and rightly challenged us as curators to look at textile based work in a new way.

Thank you

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Figure 1. Installation view of Liberties, 2015, The Exchange, curated by Day +Gluckman. Photo: Steve Tanner

Figure 2. Freddie Robins. Mad Mother, 2015, (installation) Liberties, 2015, Collyer Bristow Gallery, curated by Day +Gluckman. Photo: Stephanie Rushton

Figure 3. Freddie Robins. He’s Behind You, 2011, commissioned for Fifties, Fashion and Emerging Feminism 2011, Collyer Bristow Gallery, curated by Day +Gluckman. Photo: Stephanie Rushton

Figure 4. Freddie Robins. Untitled I, 2006. Photo: Freddie Robins

Figure 5. Freddie Robins. Bad Mother, 2013. Photo: Douglas Atfield