DO NOT TOUCH

by Freddie Robins

Making, in particular knitting, is my way of interpreting, communicating, and coming to terms with the world we inhabit. It sits between me and my internal world, and the physical world around me, like some form of comfort (or rather discomfort) blanket.

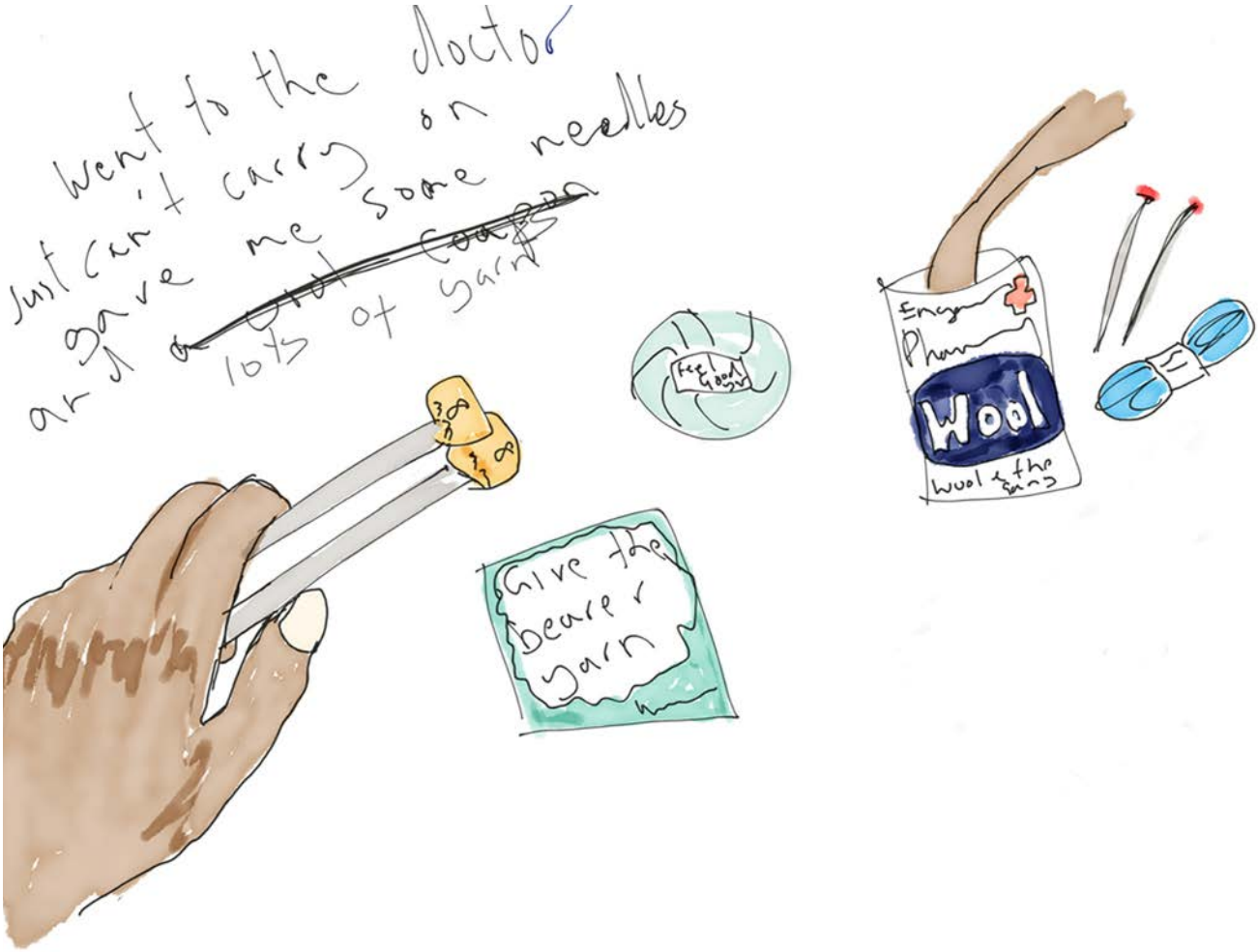
Tension

The British physiotherapist and personal well-being coach, **Betsan Corkhill**, talks about the knitting of a throw, which soon became a comfort blanket after the death of her mother, in her interview "Knit One, Heal One" on BBC Radio 4 a few years ago. She said, "I truly believed that it helped me heal."

Corkhill has been researching and using knitting for its therapeutic benefits since 2005. She has been developing it as a tool to improve well-being, physical, emotional and social, and to manage long-term medical conditions in mainstream healthcare. As Corkhill went on to explain in her interview, "What raises knitting apart from other creative activities is the fact that it employs both hands. It is a two-handed (or bilateral), coordinated pattern of movements that cross the midline of the body. This makes the brain work very hard so it has less capacity left to pay attention to issues that may be detrimental to your well-being: problems you may be mulling over, or danger signals that may be coming from your body that may eventually be outputted as pain."

There has however been one big barrier to the work that has been done regarding therapeutic knitting—the word *knitting* itself. Knitting comes with so many preconceptions that Corkhill has had to adopt a "scientific" name to replace it with: bilateral, rhythmic, psychosocial intervention. In the medical world knitting was "literally too woolly" to be considered seriously.

Inspired by Corkhill, **Royal College of Art**, student **Lorna Hamilton-Brown** has been exploring the role that knitting can play in maintaining good mental health, easing depression and anxiety. Through her *Tension Birds* project she encourages



people to engage with the materiality of knitting to relieve stress. "Tension" refers to both the square that you knit to ensure that your item will come out the right size and the stress that you feel when you are under mental or emotional strain. The positive results of making a tension bird are illustrated through the video *Knitting the Blues,* performed by Hamilton-Brown's alter ego, **Rapper Lorna H-B**, and featuring a cameo performance from the textile craft artist **Kaffe Fassett**. Hamilton-Brown's hope is that her project will "change the world one bird at a time."

It is interesting that knitting, an activity given very little serious consideration by most sectors of society, has been found to be so beneficial to those suffering from mental health problems—a health issue, that until relatively recently, was also afforded little serious attention.

Magic

I love the "magic" of knitting: by passing a length of yarn between two sticks, or across a bed of needles, you can create a piece of fabric or a three-dimensional form. I love the term "magic"—for me it conjures up images of all-powerful witches, and it also brings to mind the self-knitting needles that Mrs. Weasley uses in the film ***Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*** (2002). The word magic can do the knitter a disservice. In reality what knitting requires is skill, dexterity, and patience. The handling of the material you knit with is part of the pleasure of the knitting process. When you knit by hand, every single inch of the yarn is touched (unless you are using Mrs. Weasley's needles), providing a full-on tactile experience. This experience comes not only from the yarn but also from the handling of the needles. These can be made from a wide variety of materials but most commonly metal, wood or plastic. Metal is more durable, smoother, and

Left page: **Lorna Hamilton-Brown *Yarnless*** 2018, still from *Knitting the Blues*. Photo: Phoebe Corker-Marin.

Right page: **Lorna Hamilton-Brown *Gave Some Needles*** 2018, digital illustration.

therefore faster, but arguably noisier, than other materials. I also have a pair of blunt, thick needles made of glass. Often referred to as "witches' knitting needles," they were sold at country fairs in the 1800's. They could be used to conjure up curses or revenge magic when used in the knitting of black wool in certain stitch and row combinations, repeating spells as you worked stitch by stitch—the rhythmic, repetitive process of knitting being used for negative purposes, as opposed to its positive use in the work of Corkhill and Hamilton-Brown.

Protection

Knitting has strong associations with the beginning and end of human life. It brings to mind stereotypical images of the elderly grandmother, knitting for a newborn: the lovingly, or dutifully, knitted blanket or clothing forming material protection around the newly arrived in the world. Another Royal College of Art student, **Ruby Smith**, explores this concept of knitting for protection. Smith is a multidisciplinary artist and designer, with an interest in craft and society. Her thinking is in line with craftivism (craft + activism = craftivism), a term coined by American writer **Betsy Greer** in 2003 advocating the use of creativity to make the world a better place. For her MA Final Project Smith produced a series of tabards using craft processes, "To be worn in protest." In her tabard *The Bread Dried, The Rose Died* she knitted the text and images in Kevlar—a high strength, heat resistant fibre with many diverse applications. It is a well-known component of personal armour, combat helmets and bulletproof vests, as worn by the military, the police and other security forces during demonstrations. The text, *The Bread Dried, The Rose Died,* refers to the 1911 poem by **James Oppenheim** celebrating the movement for women's rights, which later became an anthem for labour rights. Smith wore the tabard to the Processions Women's March, London in June 2018.

Subversion

Whilst my work often contains humor I am a very serious artist and I take my skill with, and use of, knitting seriously too. Though the preconceptions that accompany knitting are usually negative, knitting is a common art—everyone has some form of relationship with it and it is this commonality that makes it such a powerful medium for self-expression and communication. My work subverts these preconceptions and disrupts the notion of the medium being passive and benign.

Ruby Smith ***The Bread Dried, The Rose Died*** 2018, Kevlar, cashmere, machine-knitted. Photo: Phillip Barnes.

In a recent series titled *Someone else's dream,* 2016, I address a genre of hand knitting: the "picture" or "novelty" knit popular in the 1980's. These garments grew to great acclaim through their association with celebrities, not least **Diana, Princess of Wales**, but have since completely fallen from fashion, becoming an indicator of bad taste. The jumpers that I have been working with are what I call "countryside jumpers," hand knitted sweaters that portray idyllic rural landscapes: farmhouses and animals, little villages complete with churches, pretty streams, rolling hills, blue skies and fluffy white clouds. In *Someone else's dream* I have Swiss-darned (an embroidery stitch that mimics the knitted stitch) on top of the countryside scenes, altering the idyllic scenes to those of misery that can, and do, happen in the countryside. Some of the scenes I have embroidered are from personal experience; some from news stories; all have happened in the countryside. I have embroidered a car crash, a figure hanged from a tree, a house fire, a body drowned in a river, fly-tipping and a crime investigation scene complete with white tent, DO NOT CROSS tape, police van, car and helicopter. The use of distressing or violent imagery when presented through a domestic, seemingly passive and benign object such as a hand knitted jumper subverts our expectations of both the object and the medium employed in its production—making the imagery initially less painful but ultimately much more disturbing.

Hands-off

We live in an image-dominated era, where sight is privileged over all other senses. I am primarily drawn to materials because of colour. One of the reasons that I love working with yarn is because I get to work with a specific color from the beginning. In my series *The Perfect*, 2007, I worked with a Shima Seiki Whole Garment machine (a computerized, automated, industrial V-bed flat machine, which is capable of knitting a three-dimensional seamless garment). I was curious if the machine could knit a whole body—give birth to a knitted skin. I was interested in manipulating the technology and somehow thought it might be less painful than "giving birth to them" on my own domestic machinery. Working with a technician,

Freddie Robins *Someone else's dream* 2016, series of reworked hand-knitted jumpers. Photo: Douglas Atfield.

a computer program was written that enabled the machine to knit bodies that simply dropped off the machine, finished and technically perfect. This sounds painless, but it wasn't. It was very time consuming, and very expensive. It was deeply unsatisfactory on a physical level as there was no interaction with materials or process, and no touching; the machine took that pleasure away from me.

When you make gallery-based textile work, as I do, there is a perverse relationship with the haptic. The maker gets to indulge their sense of touch whereas the receiver of the work can merely look at it, only imagining what it might feel like to run their hands over the surface or what it might have felt like to manipulate the material in the construction of the piece. Artists do sometimes make work that the audience can physically handle but as we all know, and the gallery signage is forever telling us, "Please do not touch the works of art on display. Even clean hands can damage surfaces."

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Left: **Freddie Robins** ***… dances like*** 2017, wool, cherry wood, machine-knitted. Photo: Douglas Atfield.

Right: **Freddie Robins** ***The Perfect – Alex*** 2007, wool, acrylic yarn, machine-knitted, 23″ x 36″. Photo: Damian Chapman.

Right page, left: **Freddie Robins** ***Collection of Knitted Folk Objects – Mither*** 2014, wool, reclaimed wooden walking stick with metal badges, stones, machine-knitted, 41″ x 6″ x 4″. Photo: Douglas Atfield.

Right page, top: **Freddie Robins** ***Bad Mother*** 2013, yarn, mixed media, machine-knitted, maple wood shelf, 30″ x 6″ x 6″. Photo: Douglas Atfield.

Right page, bottom: **Freddie Robins** ***Collection of Knitted Folk Objects – Pocky*** 2014, wool, reclaimed knitting needles, machine-knitted, 27½″ x 16″ x 5″. Photo: Douglas Atfield.

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