

CRAFTS

THE MAGAZINE FOR CONTEMPORARY CRAFT

WOOD WORK

Why Bethan Laura Wood's star is rising

COLLECTOR'S ITEM

Garth Clark on his obsession with clay

MOVIE MAGIC

The making behind Aardman's "The Pirates!"



NO 235
MARCH/APRIL 2012
UK: £6.20 | US: \$12.95



BRING THIS AUGMENTED
REALITY COVER TO
LIFE WITH AN
iPHONE!
SEE PAGE 3 FOR
DETAILS

62 AT 50

In an edited excerpt from her book celebrating 50 years of the radical textile collective 62 Group, Lesley Millar explains why it remains so vital

It is so hard, from where we are now, to think back to the position of textile art in the middle of the last century. In the early 1960s the discipline was in more or less the same position it had occupied before World War Two. Embroidery was placed within the ecclesiastical, while in terms of weaving, modern tapestries were designed mainly by painters and woven by anonymous artisans. As current 62 Group member and former chair Audrey Walker asks of the period: 'Where was the contemporary work in Britain? It seemed to be invisible.' Thus it was in 1962 that certain embroiderers decided to band together as both a pressure group and a support system, believing that united they might achieve a public profile where individually they seemed to be struggling. A collective voice may be louder than a single one. This was the founding of the 62 Group, initially under the umbrella of the Embroiderers' Guild, latterly as an independent organisation.

These were women of amazing talent and strength of purpose. They were determined to place the best of textile art within the context of the best art practice, while never losing sight of the high quality skills and material understanding that was at the root of their work. These standards have been the guiding principles for the Group since its formation, and are applied with the same rigour today – which probably helps explain its longevity.

**Downed, Al Johnson, knitted, stitched textiles,
timber, forged steel, 4.25 x 3.64 m**



There is a rolling exhibition programme, to which all members must submit work for selection. Failure to submit or rejection of submitted work for three consecutive exhibitions means membership is forfeit. This is a hard line to take, but it has maintained quality, the commitment of the members and relevance to contemporary ideas.

Back to the 60s and the early days of trying to promote new and exciting textile art when no one outside the field was interested – in fact, cracks were appearing in the edifice of fine-art conventions. Elissa Auther in her book *String, Felt, Thread: the Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art* (University of Minnesota, 2009) charts the art world's assimilation of fibre and fibre's contribution to its history. The book takes us from Eva Hesse's struggles with the male-dominated, 'Greenbergian', American art world of the 50s and early 60s through to the context-led work of Elaine Reichek, Anne Wilson and Ghada Amer.

Elsewhere, the Lausanne Tapestry Biennale began the promotion of contemporary tapestry in 1962 and by 1971 textiles were moving off the wall into areas previously defined as the territory of sculpture. Japanese textile artists were showing that traditional skills and material understanding could create previously undreamed-of contemporary responses to the space within the built environment. Artists were using textiles in Eastern Europe to create subversive work that would go unnoticed by the Soviet Union's censors.

The period of the 62 Group's existence has coincided with an intense wider debate concerning the relative positions of craft and art – with textiles somewhere in the centre, and textile artists choosing, at different times, to place their work within or outside the category of textile art. A survey of the labels assigned to textile-art practice during this period confirms this to-and-fro: decorative artists, fibre artists, designer makers, artists, studio practitioners... It is a debate which – as Audrey Walker commented in her foreword to the *Stitched Textiles* catalogue in 1990 – has 'merely led, time after time, to a reinforcing of the privileged position of painting and a needlessly defensive position for textile work.' In reaction, as we moved into the 21st century, textile artists stopped looking to define their output against other art forms, instead choosing to research, describe and celebrate the work for its own sake. This has led to the realisation that pieces need neither justification as art nor defence as craft.

Step by step, refusing to give up, the members of the 62 Group have infiltrated their work into the mainstream, and made their presence felt. The record of exhibitions organised by the group is exceptional, a testament to the singularity of purpose of its members. But organisations must develop in response to changing attitudes, interests and possibilities. It is incumbent upon any art form to explore and expand its own tensions, and this tensile nature provides much of its excitement and interest: a static art form is a dead art form. Textile art comes with its own inner tensions partly as a result of what the writer and academic Sarat Maharaj once described as its 'undecidable' location. The 62 Group have responded to the 'new', by broadening its constituency to include constructed textiles in all their many manifestations.



Clockwise from above: *Home-Land*, detail, Maggie Henton, leaves, bark, pins, chair, 2008; *Lost and Found*, Joanna Kinnersly-Taylor, dyed and screen-printed wool with reactive dyes, discharge and pigment, 1.34 x 2 m; *Untitled* from *Fragments* series, Helen Banzhaf, mercerised cotton threads on calico, 17 x 12 cm; *And what is it you do?*, detail, Colette Dobson, bristle and thread, 40 x 7 cm



This inclusivity has provided a continuing dynamic, a 'radical thread', derived from the movement between tradition and innovation.

Roots/routes

These various journeys between tradition and innovation – the roots and routes of the members of the 62 Group – are worth further investigation.

After all, the strengths of the Group lie in the similarities and the differences of its membership. In thinking how to describe and understand the Group within the context of the book I felt it important to begin at the beginning – the start of each member's interest in cloth. With the sheer number of members (57), it was impossible to visit and interview each, so I devised a questionnaire to be completed by all.

The 62 Group identifies itself as being one of textile artists, and the questionnaire had a very particular focus: to identify the role of textiles in the development of the work of each of the artists. To draw out personal memories and the importance of an involvement – or lack of it – in some aspect of textiles within the (extended) family. I included questions about traditional practice and its role in the development of work. These questions could

be categorised as the 'roots'. But I was also interested in the routes taken by the members to their current ways of working. For example, whether a formal training in textiles had been involved or not. And how important it was for each that the work was recognised as having emerged from a textile route/root by the viewer. Third, I asked for information about each member's involvement in the 62 Group, and their thoughts about it.

Not surprisingly, the answers to these questions were as diverse as the ways in which the members approach their work. Responses varied from several thousands of words to single-word answers. The integrity and honesty of the answers were extraordinary, and in many cases, extremely moving; the themes that emerged were as strong and delicately precious as silk thread.

Roots

Far and away the most important influence is the involvement with cloth in some way during childhood. On one level this is unsurprising, given the universality of cloth in our daily lives. But it is the centrality of the experience in its influence on later choices that is so marked. Growing up surrounded by textile involvement is cited again and again.

Many members came from families committed to what we now call re-cycling, in earlier days known as 'make-do-and-mend'. In this context of thrift, collars were turned, a piece of cloth might migrate from curtain to cushion to duster or soft toy, while scraps were collected and used over and over.

The tools of making, particularly the sewing machine, occupied a central position in the house. As Hilary Bower remembers: 'My mum made our clothes and I was always aware of the feel of the fabrics and the smell. I loved to see her open up the dining table and lay out the patterns and start to cut.' Knitting, that other staple of homecraft, was always in progress. Throughout my own childhood, I recall my grandmother patiently knitting mittens, which from one year -end to the next I always lost. Our internal 'photograph' of certain members of

the extended family is inextricably bonded to an activity. 'I can never remember my paternal grandmother without knitting in her hands,' confirms Amanda Clayton, 'and the same with Aunt Kate and her crocheting.'

Not all were so happy to acquire the traditional skills. And some take this unhappiness into an aversion. Jan Beaney is a good example: 'I remember being made to work a Union Jack flag in chain stitch when I was about six, and I loathed anything to do with stitch all through my school years!'

The work of many members is clearly identifiable as emerging from a textile origin, and one that is central to their practice. As Colette Dobson puts it: 'The work has its roots in textile history and practice, the language of cloth and stitch being the pivot, around which aspects of social history are expressed.' With some this root is less obvious, but still it is important for the artist that the viewer is aware of it. For others it is sufficient that the textile root is there. 'I do feel all my work does have some sort of textile root, even the carved stone reliefs and drawings, but it is not important to me that the viewer recognises this,' explains Clyde Olliver.

Routes

The routes taken by makers to their current practice have often been influenced by their close involvement with textiles while growing up, sometimes consciously. '[T]he tradition of making,' says Elaine Megahey, 'had an impact on the choice I made when going to art college. Studying textiles felt like familiar territory.' And for some it was a revelation. 'I first studied fine art painting, then went to Goldsmiths to do a postgraduate diploma in textile art. My epiphany came as I sat at the machines with the realisation that thread had the potential to transport me anywhere, and need have no function,' says Alice Kettle.

However, when they set out as artists, certainly not all planned to use textiles or textile-related techniques or ideas in their practice. Nevertheless it seems that deep familiarity with cloth eventually emerged, in one form or another. As Jae Maries elucidates: 'Originally I trained as an oil painter... [but] all those years of handling cloth and selecting fabrics left an indelible impression, so the later decision to become involved with textiles can be seen as a natural progression in my work.'

Traditional practice is embedded in the approaches that members take to their work. This sense of being part of a continuum – however radical the personal outcome might be – is what underpins so much of the practice within the group. Kay Smith is one such example, writing: 'I love the long tradition of weaving and the suggestion that by weaving – and encouraging others towards weaving – I am a part of continuing that tradition. Weaving permeates so many avenues, from technology, cultural traditions, language and mythology – which for me enriches the craft.'

The traditional influences range from the international (Navajo blankets, Peruvian back-strap weaving, embroideries from Gujarat, basket weavers in Alaska, New Zealand and Canada – the list goes on) to the local (Irish crochet work, Yorkshire rag rugs, braid making, button holes). Yet the concern is not with reproducing any given traditional practice, but with understanding and trans-

lating it into contemporary material responses to life as experienced now. As Michael Brennand-Wood puts it: 'I've always been interested in contested areas of textile practice, embroidery, pattern, lace and recently floral textiles. I've pioneered new ways of researching and developing ideas sourced from textile history.'

Conclusion

Textile art has provided a counterpoint to the 'end of art' as heralded by Duchamp and the Ready-Made: the beginning of approaches in which the artist searches for the unpredictable, often rejecting traditional skills as a means of achieving the outcome. The best of textile art emerges from highly skilled material and technical understanding, which is then translated into work that may sit within or outside the current areas of discourse, but which nevertheless satisfies the need for texture, narrative and the haptic experience.

The 62 Group has acted as both a focus and a catalyst for change, radical change, in the perception and the actuality of contemporary textile art. Over and over members have underscored the importance of being in the company of their peers, the opportunities to discuss and compare ideas, to be valued and supported, and the sense of identity within the group. For the future, the next 50 years, the hopes and aspirations as expressed by the members are for the group to maintain this radical thread connecting the roots, routes and outcomes. Thriving, as Jennifer Harris identified in the essay *Ourspace: Tradition and Innovation in Contemporary British Textile Art*, 'on the freedom found in the interstices between the two ideas of tradition and innovation'. Such a route requires courage and confidence and, as Rozanne Hawksley has written: 'Good luck and clear thinking to us all.'

'Radical Thread', ed. by Lesley Millar is published by Direct Design Books. 'Interventions', the first of three anniversary exhibitions, is at Platt Hall, Rusholme, Manchester, until 19 May. For details, see Crafts Guide. www.62group.org.uk



KINNERSLY-TAYLOR PHOTO: RUTH CLARK

