

Stitch in Time

The Fabric of Contemporary Life

The use of textiles as a creative medium stretches back to the earliest civilisations. Traditionally, there was a separation between fine and craft art practices, but in the early 20th Century, the Bauhaus advocated the importance of design in everyday life, and embraced the use of fabric as part of their experimental approach to visual culture. *Stitch In Time* looks at the ways in which artists have used traditional fabrics and weaving methods to explore contemporary identities.

The fabrics of Anni Albers (1899-1994) presented here exemplify the innovative possibilities within traditional forms of craft. Having enrolled in 1922 in the Bauhaus, the groundbreaking teaching institution that transformed modern design, art and architecture, she was nevertheless only allowed to join the school's weaving course. However, Albers soon embraced the possibilities of textiles, experimenting with new materials and abstract compositions throughout a long and distinguished career. The exhibition includes pieces created throughout her life, including reproductions of her 1930s hand-woven Bauhaus diploma textiles, window coverings from her 1999 retrospective in Venice and the wall hangings she created for the AT&T Building in New York.

Sarah Browne's project *A Model Society*, 2007-09, originates from a sense of utopian idealism similar to the progressive aspirations of the Bauhaus. Her initial impressions of Iceland as a harmonious society found a correlation in the knitwear catalogues depicting the traditional lopi sweater. These nostalgic and romantic images – of models posing against

sublimely austere landscapes – were the basis for Browne’s own photographic works. She advertised for knitwear models to complete a survey on their everyday lives, expectations, and ambitions. Their responses, including comments like ‘no war’ and ‘awesome daycare’, were knitted into sweaters worn by the models, while the resulting photographic prints were given to them as a form of payment. In her installation for *Stitch in Time*, Browne’s images are projected as slides, accompanied by an artist book that details the knitting patterns used for the sweaters.

The notion of exchange and collaboration also informs Jeremy Deller’s series of protest banners, designed in partnership with different community groups and hand-sewn by his regular collaborator Ed Hall. These works, displayed throughout the exhibition, stipulate demands that are alternately provocative, humorous and poetic while recognising the wider social history of such banners used by trade unions, campaign groups and protest movements. Deller’s works have a similar social function, as represented in his accompanying video work *Procession*, 2007. This ‘self-portrait’ of Manchester, a collaborative project that was developed for the Manchester International Festival, culminated in a march through the city that celebrated individuals and community groups from boy scouts to Big Issue sellers.

Slavs and Tatars, in the works *Love Letters no. 1* and *Love Letters no. 2*, based their designs on the drawings of the Russian artist, playwright and poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, whose embrace of the Bolshevik revolution led to him being declared “the people’s poet” during the Russian Revolution. However, Slavs and Tatars use woollen yarn in their carpet-based artworks, suggesting a connection between the utilitarian ethos of Soviet ideology and Mayakovsky’s own gradual disillusionment with Stalinism – leading to his eventual suicide at the age of 37. The caricature-like imagery of the *Love Letters* describes the forced imposition of a unifying alphabet, first Latin then Cyrillic, upon the Muslim populations of the new Empire. In the former work, a simply drawn figure stands surrounded by broken and discarded letters, while, in the latter,

the tongue itself is shown imprisoned behind bars. As the artists state: "letters are likened to shackles, keeping the tongue in check and placing restrictions on its movements."

Angela Fulcher's works also reveal her interest in the historical and social associations of textiles. In *Untitled (Crystal Cabinet #5)*, 2012, a length of printed fabric hangs draped across a horizontal wooden bar, while a triangular platform displays a textured, carpeted surface of mottled brown and gold. The colours, tones and patterns of these found materials are resonant of domestic settings from the 1960s, and indicate the artist's research into the largely undocumented role of women in the design and production of 1960s hippy communes. Employing incisions, folds, drapery and insertions, Fulcher reconfigures these objects so that new aspects of their material are revealed. This subtle manipulation of everyday materials evokes an uneasy tension between the functional and the decorative, the familiar and the uncanny.

The juxtaposition of the ornamental and the political informs the works of Sissi Farassat, whose glittering, appliqued designs belie their provocative subject matter. In the *Passport* series, 2009, the artist's expired travel documents are embellished with sequins and beadwork, transforming a prosaic, functional item into a unique statement of her identity as an Austrian-Iranian artist. Over the course of the passports, one sees the artist photographed at various stages of her life. These portraits are embedded within a mosaic of abstract designs, Iranian flags, and stylized emblems that recall the ornamental aesthetic of her Persian heritage. This approach is also captured in *War Carpet*, 2011, a canvas encrusted with vibrant, multicoloured crystals that depict cruise missiles and military helicopters. Despite their content, Farassat's technique imbues these images with an enticing and seductive visual appeal.

Ideas of national and personal identity come together in Grayson Perry's *Comfort Blanket*, 2014. Based on a £10 note, this large tapestry incorporates elements of Britain's national heritage – embroidered references to the Magna Carta, the BBC and the National Health Service – alongside the stereotypical

traits associated with the British – ‘A Nice Cuppa Tea’, complaints about the weather, and a love of curry and pints. Presiding over the composition is a cartoonish portrait of The Queen, rendered as a kindly and familiar character instead of the imposingly regal monarch depicted on banknotes. Perry’s choice of vivid colours heightens the sense of both dissonance and celebration, of shared and contested national values that come together in this portrait of a historic and multicultural Britain.

The inherent attributes of textile arts – the required labour and craftsmanship, the relationship to domestic settings and household furnishings, and their specific graphic or illustrative qualities – set it apart as a particularly egalitarian and communal medium. Throughout *Stitch In Time*, artists use fabrics as a means of direct communication, whether by collaborating with specific partners or by drawing on a shared understanding of its history in design and politics. These works demonstrate that this connection remains just as pertinent today.