

Exhibition

Drawing with Thread Shire Hall Gallery, Stafford, England 5 March – 1 May

This was a fabulous exhibition and, if anyone knows of a gallery looking for a decent show, they should contact curator Kim Gould at Shire Hall Gallery, Stafford, to see if they could take over this one. She has put together a wonderful collection linked by the common thread of drawing and the ability to express art as stitch. The show is built around a big, site-specific installation by Debbie Smyth. Debbie works with pins, using them to hold threads in place to draw her lines. Her brief was to depict areas of Stafford with this method. To do this, she took photographs around the town, translating them into line drawings which were projected onto the walls of the gallery. She then set to work with her pins and black thread to capture the main lines. These were filled in to add deeper tones and more texture. As you can see, the results were amazing.

The translation of the finely drawn lines to thread makes a real difference. A line drawing on this scale would look too 'thin' but, fleshed out with thread, it works perfectly.



Opposite this main installation and perfectly sited so that each artist's work complemented the other's, was Rosie James. I have always enjoyed her work. Her simply stitched outlines of people doing what people do, shopping, going to galleries, taking a walk, catch expression and moods with just a few deft lines. 'Berlin, Chatham, Paisley' achieved this with a print of shops and carefully crafted details of the shoppers. The Paisley print background had depth and provided contrast to the sketchy lines of stitch. 'Louvre Art Lovers' was like a page from a sketch book, with all the figures using cameras or camcorders to record the exhibits. It captured perfectly the art-sated confusion of those who had seen too much and were so busy recording it that they didn't have time to experience the emotions which the art should arouse. The piece based on Manet's 'Olympia', titled 'Olympia Tourists', showed the challenging gaze of Olympia herself failing to inspire the audience of bored youth (below).



Alison Mercer, one of our past celebrity interviewees, showed her drawing skills in a variety of ways from the densely-stitched dress, entitled 'Shroud', through her three-dimensional 'Broody Ladies' series, to delightful stitch drawings of flowers with embryos or babies in their centre, comparing gestation of seed or human. The use of trapunto quilting and kantha-like filling is perfectly judged to enhance the linear drawing. A detail from 'Fecund Thoughts' is shown on the right.

The textiles of Cos Ahmet are exquisite, the background printing allowed the line of the figures to continue through the beautifully worked applied woven fabrics. This both enhanced and shadowed the figures beneath. Scenes of sexuality and the self are evident in his work, with the male figures suggesting an unspoken dialogue. Single figures seem incomplete – dialogue replaced by loneliness, perhaps.



The six large panels, which made up an installation by Cas Holmes entitled 'Imperfect Plants', showed her use of found materials, paper, dye and stitch, to its best effect. The loosely-hung panels wavered in the draught, creating shimmering surfaces.

Her interest in human impact on plants and the environment was taken into these textiles in a very sensitive manner, appealing to the emotions through delicate layers of flora.

Cas also exhibited three panels which were beautiful. 'Winter Sun' was my favourite – oh for more room to show them all.

Wowies will be familiar with the work of Cas Holmes – she was at her best in this exhibition.



Trevor Smith's narrative panels told the story of fox hunting, the poor fox, tongue hanging out, close to exhaustion, the elegant huntsman with the trailing threads turning his horse into a strange grotesque creature which could run forever. The hound also had trailing threads, emphasizing its running ability. His work at this exhibition was inspired by 'The wolf and the seven little kids' by the Brothers Grimm and the rather weird elongations suited the grisly theme. The materials used came from charity and tailors' shops in accordance with his fascination for tailoring and apparel.



Morwenna Catt also told stories in her work and new pieces from her shows a trio of heads bringing her previous work on phrenology and combining it with the Red Riding Hood fairy story, so we had 'Phrenology: wolf, big enough to eat you' and 'Grandma: old enough to know better', followed by 'Red Riding Hood: small enough to be eaten'. I love the humour and the fact that granny was tempted by the basket that contained Librium, Cinzano and face cream.

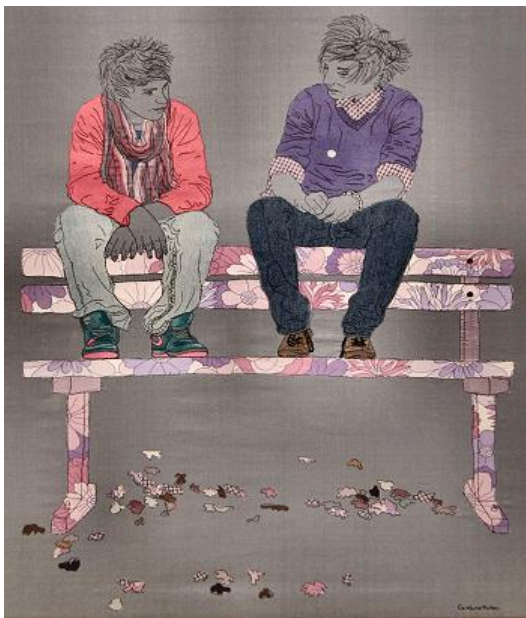


The flat planes of her other work, 'This is not a love song', have been enhanced in 'Charred Black, Weighed and Measured' (see below) by the seriously creepy effect of the 3D crows with beaks dribbling text.



Following on from Alison Mercer's 'Broody Ladies' and babies, we had studies of teenagers from Caroline Kirton and of the elderly from Georgie Meadows. Both of these artists demonstrated clear and sharp observation of their subject.

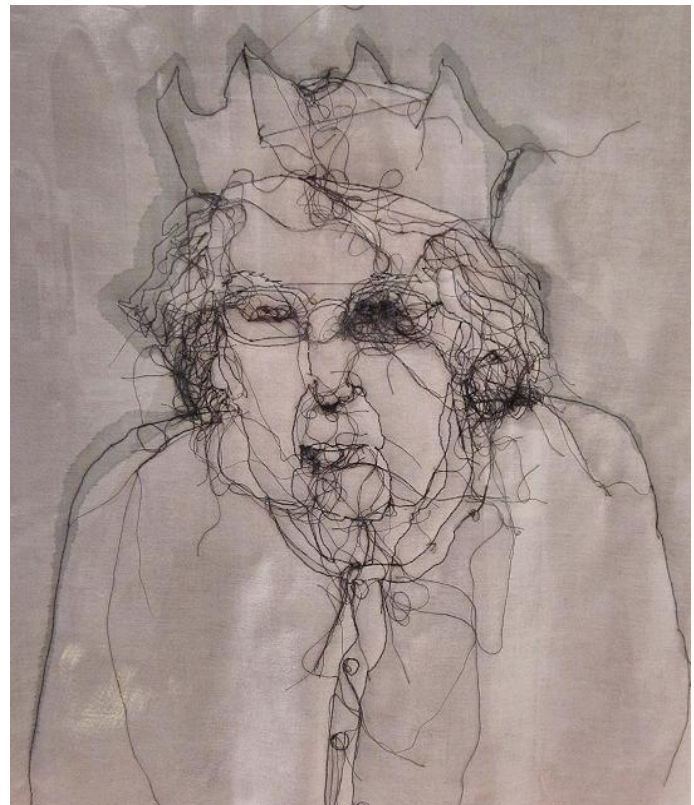
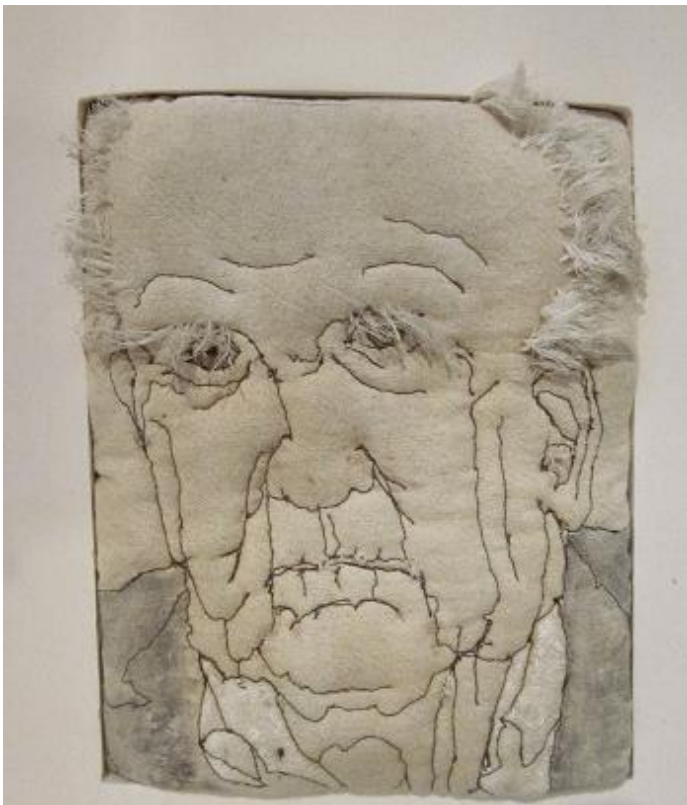
Caroline's teenagers showed empathy while at the same time poking a little wry fun. Anyone having anything to do with teenagers, especially girls, would be quite unable to resist the scenarios presented and we don't really need the printed by-line to tell us what the characters are saying. 'I think this will be OK for sixth form' (right), is just so typical. 'My mum's a proper weirdo' is shown below. It's easy to overlook the tremendous skill shown in these appliqué and machine embroidery pieces.



At the other end of the time-scale, Georgie Meadows's elderly people brought a lump to the throat. Their stories, told in a paragraph next to each portrait, focused on the difficulties faced when failing physical and mental health combine with a diminished role. The artist says that she wishes to salute the courage of those who are facing such challenges.

This 'Woman with party hat' really didn't want to go to the party – and why should she? In an inspirational display, it is possible to see the back of the work and you feel this gives a more honest likeness, the black bobbin achieving a sketchy look which speaks of character.

The chap below had lost the power of speech. He would continually try to converse but always failed. Framing him in a plaster cast reinforced the feelings of trapped helplessness.



This was an amazing exhibition in which drawing, so often only seen early in a design, was given centre stage in the textiles themselves. This 'bare-bones and clean lines' approach calls for skill levels far above the average. You could spend all day at this exhibition and still find more to see on a subsequent visit.