

Exhibitions

DIS/rupt The Textile Study Group
Museum in the Park & Lansdown Gallery
Stroud, Gloucestershire, UK
29th April to 28th May

As we were walking away from this exhibition, Clive said to me, 'I think that is one of the best exhibitions I have ever seen'. The fact that I agreed with him also makes this one of the hardest reviews to write as every single piece deserves an in-depth mention. There were no duds – from the small but perfect pieces of Alice Fox to Ruth Issett's immense and colourful hanging, *Spiralling Vortex* – it was all so good and rather frightening as it forced you to confront your conscience and consider unthinkable things.

Alice's work (right) celebrated the fact that gall wasps invade and disrupt natural growths and give us wonderful natural dyes and inks. She also depicted creatures of the future that might make use of flotsam such as the nylon waste littering our seashores.

Ruth's colossal hanging (below right) rotated into new formations as it spun and thus represented the effect of global warming on the weather, causing disruption and mayhem as the jet-stream twists and ripples into new patterns. The exhibition took place in two galleries across Stroud, Gloucestershire, and this piece by Ruth dominated the Museum in the Park gallery.

Other work on this topic was by Jan Miller, who was concerned with the erosion of the land, especially on England's east coast. She used the rusty rods of sea defences to dye the fabric used in her exhibit *Tide marks: Land Lines*, to great effect. An installation of found objects, resulting from beach-combing, resided on a shelf beneath the textile work.

However, this was not a comfortable exhibition, nor was it intended to be. It was a strange paradox as the work was amazing and uplifting but the subject matter was, in many cases, heartbreaking and harrowing.



I guess that an exhibition context which encouraged artists to interpret major disruptions of our time was never going to be an easy ride and certainly themes of global warming and war, with the inevitable result of mass migration, were the subjects that concerned many of the artists. What was particularly interesting was the way the individuals chose to interpret these aspects.



The response was very personal: Siân Martin had tears in her eyes as she described how a 15 year old boy was kissed on his cheek by his mother as she pushed him out of the home and told him to run. Run from a situation that had seen his father killed and his sisters kidnapped by ISIS, a story that included a fraught sea journey and time in the Calais 'jungle' before reaching the UK and a safe haven with Amnesty International.



But how can anyone ever recover from such an experience? The resulting work told his story through a monumental horizontal hanging that stretched across the gallery and depicted life for those affected – from a stable structure through to fragmentation and decay. The shadows cast formed part of the story – a huge shadow cast across an entire nation. The detail above shows the fragments of fabric, some printed with images that tell the story. The bright orange strips represent the life jackets that, far from keeping him afloat, became water-logged and achieved the opposite effect.

Dorothy Tucker portrayed a similar scenario in a very thought-provoking manner. A washing line showed a beautifully decorated dress, along with other garments – an everyday occupation – hanging out the clothes (right). However, in a ‘puddle’ on the gallery floor we see the same dress half hidden in sand with cigarette butts, old cans and other detritus. We can only imagine what happened to the occupants of the house. This symbolises the destructive nature of war but, to my mind, it also shows how quickly an everyday scene can be turned into a nightmare. Anyone who has had experience of sudden illness or loss can find their mind going back to ‘this time, yesterday’, when all was normal.



The museum gallery, in general, housed the larger pieces that required more space and here, the themes of global disruption – whether from weather or war – were dominant. Gwen Hedley worked intuitively from an aerial view of the destruction of Aleppo: a stark, monochrome testimony that drew the eye from afar (see right).



Jean Draper’s installation also dominated the space, depicting burned books which represented artefacts destroyed throughout history due to disruption and oppression. One immediately thinks of the Nazi destruction but, if you think about it, books are an excellent metaphor for all fragile things of beauty, including ideas and concepts, so easily destroyed by those who fear the unmasking of their oppression.

The burned books produced a display with a sculptural effect of carving and shaping by the flames. As an editor, writer and producer of books, I can identify with Jean when she tells in the catalogue how hard she found it to destroy the books that she used in this work. Of all the pieces in the exhibition, this was the one that I felt should be on permanent display in a museum. It speaks of the ultimate disruption, a removal of knowledge, a destruction of history and a suppression of all that makes us human. I also had a little chuckle at the thought that you’d never get such a good effect with a pile of Kindles.



Kay Greenlees' display of small beautiful books, displayed as a unit entitled *Library of Lost Causes*. There is a wonderful story behind the title which came about through Kay's absorption in a Radio 4 story about the loss of six species of moth in the UK. She continued to collect such stories of wildlife or loss in the countryside and then devoted one small book to each topic. Not only did this approach result in a wonderful exhibit but extended to a Geocaching project around Stroud which, it is hoped, will be part of a future display in the exhibition.



I was very taken with Kay's idea of extending a static piece through active and interactive exhibits and there were other works that pursued this theme. In this category were Ruth Issett's *Whirl, Wind and Weather*, five pieces that were displayed as an installation outside the museum gallery and were intended to react with the elements. They were also pretty good at reacting with passers-by and, I am sure, must have drawn lots of folk in to see what it was all about.

In the Lansdown Gallery in central Stroud, Sarah Burgess showed *Drowning by Numbers: 2 degrees* which was made from cotton organdie.

This had been stitched with the names of ten cities most likely to be affected by rising sea levels. The end of the fabric was sitting in a bath of blue dye, which was gradually seeping further up the fabric with the different threads used in the stitching affected the rate of absorption.



Julia Triston's unframed work, *To Know a Veil* used a vintage veil as a base with no-holds-barred messages in the stitching. This stitched piece was great and made perfect use of the vitriolic phrase. See right.

Another work that enabled interaction and communication, her three framed pieces were well named as *Divorce Discourse*. Julia provided wipe-away pens and an eraser pad so that comments could be written on the outer frame. Any passing irate spouses could continue the dialogue instigated by the stitched words inside the frame. At the time of my visit the words 'I wish you would'....had the message 'see me as I am', inscribed over the top.



I enjoyed talking to Jan Evans about her concern for local hedgerows as this is something I also feel strongly about. So many rural hedges are disappearing in the current 'large field, big machine farming' set up, and this is leading to the disappearance of many birds and small mammals. We used to have so many hedgehogs but, where I live, they are now quite a rarity. Jan's work was really beautiful with lift-up flaps and lots of print on the subject hidden in the work. Also hidden were references to some of the animals at risk. A deceptively clever piece (shown right).

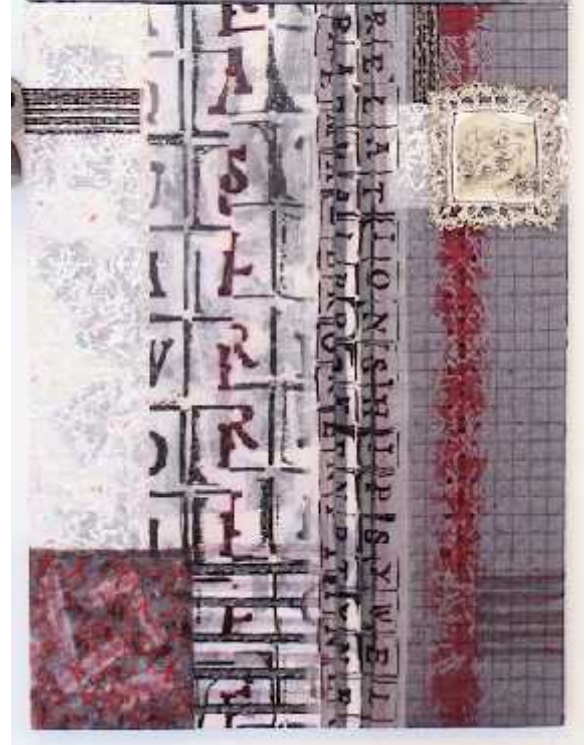
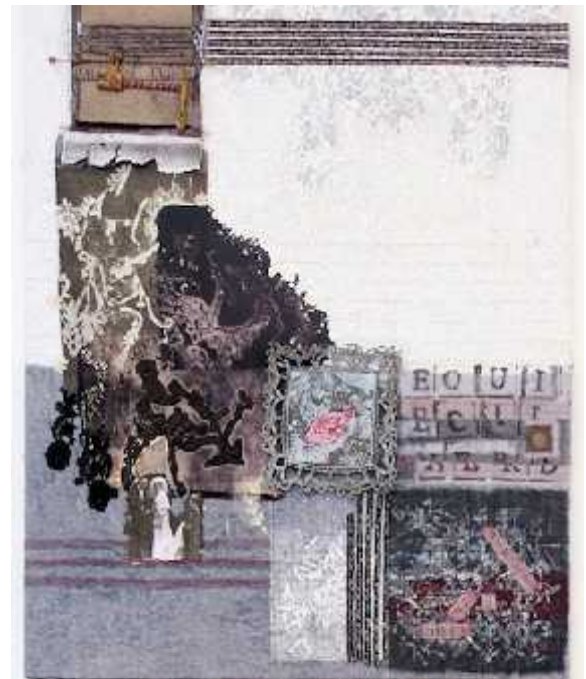


The smaller Lansdown Gallery suited the more intimate pieces displayed but there was also a great installation by Alison King, again on the disruption of emigration. This focused on the Hong Kong Chinese and their economic migration which led to so many of them building a new life in the UK based on their cuisine. A large table, covered with an amazing stitched cloth, told of the past left behind and the new life embraced – represented by the fast food wrappers, in garish colours. Between the two was a beautifully rendered impression of the sea that they crossed. Alison also questioned whether the success of their ventures has brought them fully into our communities – and would they want to be? Maybe time, and further generations, will provide the answer.



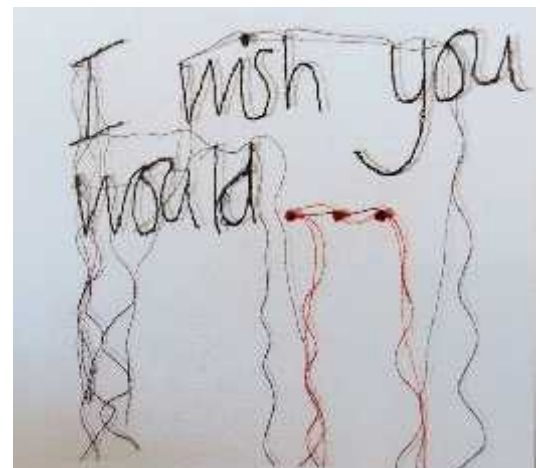
Rosemary Campbell, a favourite artist of mine whose mixed media landscape work always manages to transport me to mythical places, contrived the same effect with *Out of Tune* a mixed media collage based on the conflict and disruption caused by relationship breakdowns. I love the idea of beginning the thinking process with a word search where the words LOVE and JOY fought for attention with others such as HURT, ANGER and DISTRUST.

Fractured fabric and contrasts between the white of trust and purity – wedding gowns – gave way to the greys and black of final dissolution. Were the two bird panels turtle doves? I loved every well considered stitch. It was also possible to don headphones, embellished with a fascinator (of course) and hear Bach's *Air on a G-String* (by Catriona Eunson) played well, in the usual two-handed manner, then badly, slightly off tune and jarring and finally played with one hand only, but in tune. It was a perfect accompaniment to the textile panels.



If you haven't seen this exhibition, all is not lost as it is hoped that it will be touring. We will keep you posted on the venues.

It is an amazing experience, visually stimulating and emotionally devastating. Clive's words at the beginning of this article really summed it up – Best Ever. I think I will go back to Julia Triston's wipe off matrimonial comments and complete them. I wish you would... not always be right.



**Embroidery and Textile Art Exhibition
Ramster Gardens, Chiddingfold, Guildford, Surrey, UK
10-26 March**

I have to say that the embroidery exhibitions at Ramster just keep getting better and better. The setting is, of course, fantastic but this historic timbered hall brings its own problems to the hanging committee.

These, they overcome in a heroic manner, playing to the strengths of the setting. *Indian Summer* by Isobel Moore (see below with detail), illustrated this very well and fitted perfectly into the leaded, recessed window frame. Isobel was a great hit with her workshop in the March issue of *Workshop on the Web*, inspiring lots of comments and some wonderful pieces worked by WoWies.

Her use of silk, felt, wire and machine stitching sang out and the light filtering through the glowing colours gave substance to the well-considered design.

This was a big exhibition and I could write peons of praise about all the work. It is impossible to mention more than a small number of the delights on show so will offer just a few of the highlights



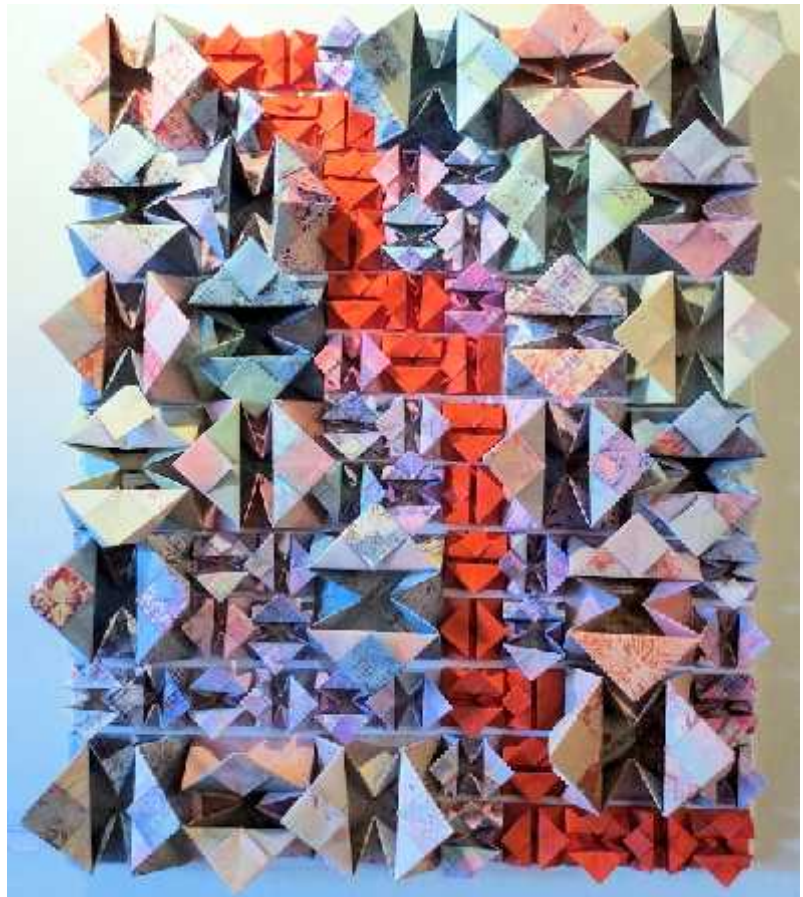
Kirsten Yeates produced two large works composed of folded Chinese boxes inspired by the thread booklets Zhen Xian Bao.

These boxes showed a masterly grasp of scale and colour and the mix of sizes, and especially the meandering red of the smaller, closed boxes in *Cultural Revolution 1* (right), led the eye through the work. The boxes contained small patterns or tiny, stitched tokens.

Another work that was entirely in sympathy with its surroundings was Jackie Cardy's stitched, felt embroidery *Floribunda* (right). Jackie's embroideries always remind me of Jacobean work, brought bang up to date by her use of colour and instinctive grasp of design and motif placement.

Her small, stitched brooches were selling at a tremendous rate too.

I loved lots of work that was impossible to photograph as the light was bouncing off glazed surfaces, but I must mention Lorna Rand's fascinating layers of translucency in *Immigration*, Peta Devine's work with water-soluble and wire, and Ruby Lever's impeccable hangings, with her humorous fish. So many wonders, so little page space.



Wendy Dolan had obligingly left one of her entries unglazed and her work in *Yorkshire Dales*, below left, was, as usual, impeccably executed. This demonstrated that a scaled-back use of colour can serve to emphasise texture and form. Wendy handles the blending of her materials so well with maps merging into areas of texture and stitch which, in turn embrace the landscape aspects such as trees and hills.

If I'd been in collecting mode, this treasure from Rebecca McPherson, below right, would have been on my shopping list. Her still life, *Freesias*, was composed of applied shapes with delicate colours, which gave a wonderfully subdued foreground. This allowed the eponymous flowers to shine out from the dark background. This was another object lesson in placing the centre of interest. Stunning.



All-in-all, this was an excellent exhibition. I am following an interesting thread on Facebook at the moment about selling textile art. More exhibitions like this one, which allows access to so many artists and attracts so many visitors, would go a long way to address the problems.

Mind you, not many stately homes have the wonderful Miranda Gunn to provide the space and organisation. It's not just an exhibition visit but a wonderful day out – unlimited art, a walk in Ramster's gardens and lunch in the tea-rooms. All boxes ticked.

CAKE
Shaftesbury Arts Centre, Dorset, UK
15 – 28 March

This exhibition, cleverly titled to reflect initial letters of the artists' Christian names – Caroline Ireland, Karen Bucket and our own Amo House (plus E for Exhibition) was a great example of how a diverse collection of work can be shown to maximum effect in a small gallery.

The work of the artists complemented each other well and this was evident in their use of colour. Caroline Ireland's pastels really sang with colour and were beautifully composed with regard to shape and form. They were a perfect partner for Karen's deft touch with landscape.

Amo's textiles were also beautifully constructed and very strong on the design side – again the use of colour was masterful, but this time it combined with texture to great effect.

I do think that combined exhibitions are interesting. Most of the stitching community love all forms of painting and it was very interesting to see the effect that Amo's pieces, especially her fossil based hanging, had on the visitors who hadn't seen 'our' form of mixed-media. Great stuff.



From Here to There
Bath Textile Artists
The Pound Arts Centre, Corsham,
Wiltshire, UK
1-29 April

Bath Textile Artists is a group of eleven, living and working in Bath, North Wiltshire and the surrounding areas. Membership is by invitation and a selection procedure ensures a consistently high standard. Current members work in all fields of textile art, including silk painting and batik, as well as weaving, stitch and paint. The group itself dates back over twenty years.

Although there are no current members from those early days, the constitution remains the same. We exhibit at least once a year in a variety of venues, generally using a common theme in order to bind the work together.



The title of the exhibition was chosen by the arts curator at The Pound as way of helping the public understand where ideas come from and how we develop them. The group discussed how we work and how the theme could be interpreted. Some of us buried fabric, threads or garments in the ground for a few months to see the changes which could occur by a kind of natural dyeing and decomposition. Some of us chose to use and embellish an item or garment which has had a previous life, such as a well worn tablecloth or panels from an oriental screen. Yvonne Auld explains.

“When I was 14 years old, my mother was throwing out a very old, twentieth-century, Chinese screen. As she started to rip it apart, I said I wanted to keep the old embroidered material showing beautiful hand embroidered birds. With this textile theme of ‘From Here to There’, I saw a chance to use both the Chinese material and the birds – something I have now had for over 50 years – by reinventing them in a distinctive way with three collages based on parts of the original screen material.” See previous page.

Heather Martin’s work for this exhibition shows the thread of an idea linking several decades. “Last year, I came across a sketchbook from my days at Art College and realised that the theme of formal gardens which I have used intermittently in recent times, was also an interest in those early days. Many trips to France, visiting Versailles and the chateaux of the Loire, have fuelled my fascination with the patterns of the parterres, the topiary and the geometry of the gardens set in the landscape.” Heather’s work is shown, right.



The exhibition is a rich showcase of our member’s work, well hung and presented in a popular and much visited venue. One of our new members, Cate Fox, described her response to the theme. “I try to produce pieces of work that I hope will make people think about hand-sewn textiles in a different way.

In this exhibition the ‘Here’ refers to the assorted antique pieces such as the damaged glass brooch, mother-of-pearl counters and carved bone fish or reused items like the brass paper fasteners. These items are the starting point of each design and I let them suggest what form the ‘There’ will finally take. Along the way, I like to incorporate metals, various foils, mirrored glass and discarded fabrics and sewing threads wherever possible, such as the badly frayed linen napkin used in ‘Apple Brooch Sampler’.

Margaret Heath made this explanation of her work. “A small collection of lacquer-ware in the Museum of East Asian Art in Bath rekindled an interest in the arts of Japan and the Japanese aesthetic which had been stirred initially by an exhibition in London in 1981. In particular, the many methods of creating the beautiful surfaces of lacquer-ware piqued my curiosity and it was interesting to work out how a similar effect might be produced on textiles. This interest in Japan has been a running thread over the years and has surfaced in one form or another in many of the textiles produced since that original exhibition.”

Heather Martin.