

## Allegory

Alice Kettle with Stephen Dixon

The Craft Study Gallery, UCA, Farnham, Surrey, England

Until 13<sup>th</sup> March

Alice's work frequently touches on allegory and her large-scale figures often represent characters from classical mythology. A major theme in this exhibition is her response to the Poussin painting, 'A Dance to the Music of Time'. Her huge textile, 'Pause, Reclaimed', detail below, which features the artist and her daughters, strikes you as soon as you enter the gallery; this massive and colourful reaction to the Poussin, occupies most of the far wall. It works tremendously well when seen from a distance; the relationship to the original and the movement of the figures are immediately apparent. Closer examination reveals some of the construction, intriguing glimpses of smaller motifs and scraps of fabric from Alice's mother's dresses, among the swathes of machine stitching.



Further translations of the painting have been derived in a series of pieces in paper, watercolour, stitch and fabric. These big, colourful combinations continue to draw the viewer into the allegory and to question the 'who' and the 'why'. The pieces work well as a whole and closer inspection reveals the intricate details that link them to the Poussin. I would have liked to have seen these pieces mounted closer to the large 'Pause' but I guess this would have diluted the dramatic effect of the piece.

The Craft Study Gallery is a good exhibition space, large enough for the work to 'breathe' but still retaining an intimacy. After the drama of 'Pause', the first piece to catch my eye was an amazing stitched face, monochrome and three-dimensional, a continuation of Alice's 2009 Knitting & Stitching Show theme. Composed of darker stitching on white fabric, the construction was extremely clever and belied its random appearance, (below, right). The lines of straight stitching gave the view of a sketchbook 'come to life' and translated well from the drawings, which were also shown. These drawings were finished pieces in their own right, three-dimensional and haunting (see below, left).



The 'Janus Head' by Stephen Dixon was a masterful 'pieced' effect of pattern, giving the impression that this solid ceramic object had been created patchwork-style. Alice's collaboration with Stephen Dixon (her colleague at Manchester Metropolitan University) was highly successful, not only in this piece but in the shards of ceramic that appeared in some of the other work and culminating in an amazing artist's book entitled 'Allegory'. This concertina book of collaged drawings ran the centre of the gallery on a raised plinth. Each page of this book was a masterpiece, complete in itself, as you can see in the pics below.



Last year's Knitting & Stitching Show gave an idea as to the direction in which Alice's work is moving and a number of machine stitched heads showed the earlier steps in this process. The heavy stitching again adopted a collage-style, three-dimensional effect, an abstract approach which was both colourful and engaging.

Relating this to allegory, the catalogue suggests that the heads represent Alice's response to the dancing figures in the Poussin painting which are thought to represent the 'human condition': poverty, labour, riches etc.

I rather feel that they represent an interaction, a conversation with the viewer and a link with the Janus head which stands before them, looking both out at the gallery and back toward the heads. Perhaps all is not as it seems.



PHOTO BY JOE LOW

The next two pieces, 'Dance', below and 'Caesura', detail bottom, were again fusions of paper, paint, drawing, fabric and stitch. Composed to give a layered, multi-dimensional effect, some figures were clearly abstractions from the Poussin while other faces appeared from a web of threads. These pieces showed amazing planning in the way that the eye was encouraged to read them and they repaid meditative study.



Due to adverse weather conditions, I had waited a long time to see this exhibition but it was well worth the wait.

