

Exhibitions

30 Tones of Grey – Maggie Grey retrospective **Crafts4Crafters Show at Westpoint Centre, Exeter 29-31 January 2015**

It was a very exciting time for the Workshop on the Web team in January. A major celebration of Maggie Grey's thirty years in textiles was featured at the Crafts4Crafters Show in Exeter.



We have been attending this show for a few years now and are always overwhelmed by the support and enthusiasm of the visitors. This year was no different and we had a great turnout to come and see how Maggie's work has evolved over that time. As President of West Country Embroiderers, Maggie had a special reason for staging this exhibition in the west country.



Entitled *30 Tones of Grey* (so as not to attract the wrong kind of attention), the exhibition space was arranged so that her work could be viewed chronologically from the very beginning even including the 'ducks' kit with, according to Maggie, very poor stitching. Also shown was City & Guilds work, moving around the space and ending up in a cosy corner reserved for WoW and demos. This early work was of great interest to visitors and Maggie gave some insight into how she was started on her textiles journey by a book called 'Thread Painting' by Liz Hubbard.



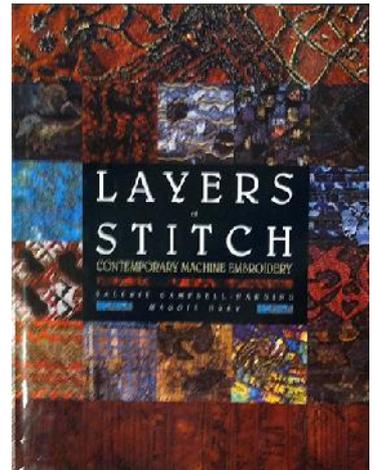
'I had always drawn and painted and the pure luck of finding this book shaped the rest of my life. It introduced me to a way of combining painting with stitch and it taught me machine embroidery. Painted backgrounds were produced on fabric or heavy watercolour paper and these were machine stitched to produce heavy textural pieces. I still marvel that my old sewing machine was so good tempered. I thought was the only one doing such weird stuff – until visiting (by accident) a City & Guilds Creative Embroidery exhibition. Needless to say, I signed up.'

Following on from this, Maggie and Clive developed ideas together and after Clive had completed a distance learning course on HTML, they set up their first website and Greytech Distance Learning was born. It offered stitching courses, assessed by mail (in the days before Dropbox and PDFs). This was an early incarnation of what was set to develop into Workshop on the Web.



Much of the work from Maggie's books was on display and it was touching to have the collaborations between Maggie and Val Campbell-Harding so fondly remembered. Maggie says:

'Layers of Stitch was the first book that Val and I wrote together. It was written in response to the advent of sewing machines with accompanying embroidery software or hand-scanners. In some ways, the book was ahead of its time but Val and I were so fascinated by the opportunities these offered that we went ahead anyway and it sold quite well. This was the first of a series of books we worked on together. Val drew the diagrams and I wrote the text. We both worked on the stitched pieces, bouncing ideas off each other. Often, we found that misunderstood phone conversations resulted in completely new directions to explore.'

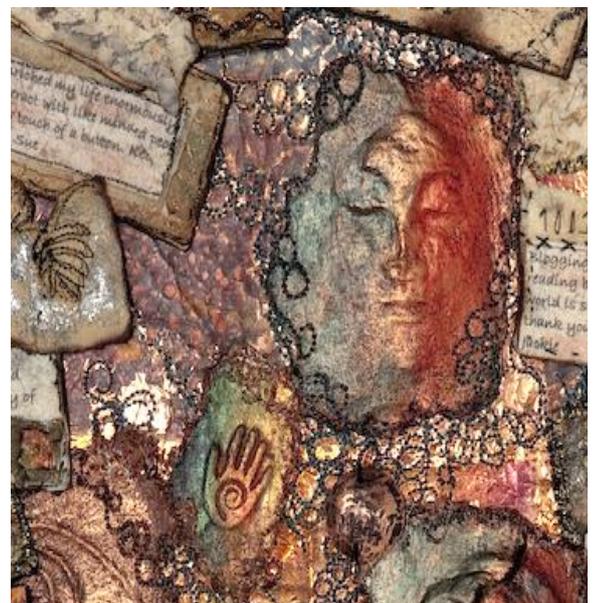
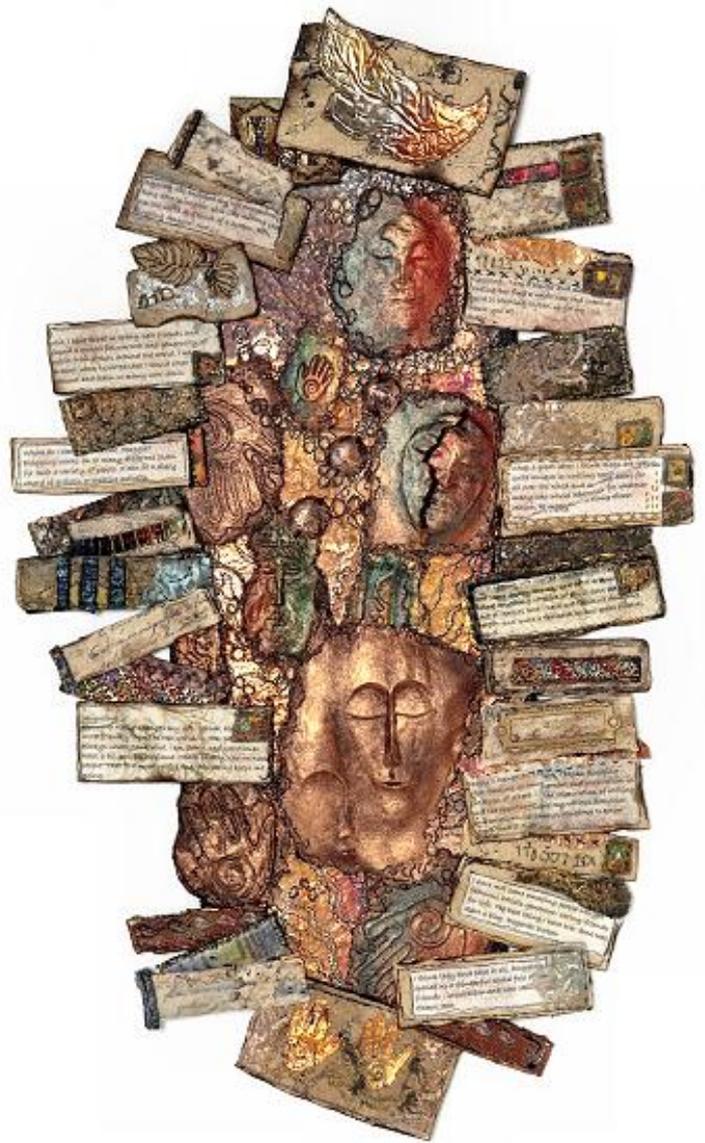


Interspersed with the books were pieces of work that Maggie was inspired to create on her travels around the world, teaching, exhibiting and (occasionally) on holiday. Viewers were fascinated by *Binary Humanity*, which was created for a major exhibition, *Cyber Fyber*, curated by Susan Lenz in the USA in 2008.

'This was based on the idea that behind every web transaction was a face and hands – a human presence. I asked my cyber friends to leave a message on my blog stating what meant most to them in their internet dealings. You can see their replies around the edge of the work. The centre was made from water-soluble paper casts of faces and hands. Metal was used for the background and the whole piece sits on a black plastic rubbish bag sprayed with metallic paint.'

What is particularly notable about this piece is that, given the advances in technology even in the past few years, the message behind it is still relevant today and is one of the fundamental truths about human interaction through the internet. Many people see the human contact and the wealth of information behind the technology as a lifeline and this is likely to remain. Maggie has a great eye for seeing the relevance of textiles in observing life and human traits.

For many people, the inclusion of *Raising the Surface with Machine Embroidery* in the exhibition was a high point. It has been Maggie's most successful book, reprinted by Batsford many times and, for many, was seen as the turning point in contemporary textile approaches.



Much of the work from 'The Batsford Years' cemented Maggie's place as a leader in textile art innovation and brought her to her current work with d4daisy, where work from books such as *Textile Translations*, *Stitches*, *Straps and Layers* and *Dissolvable Delights* were on display.

The inclusion of the work by textile artists such as Monica Morgan (below left) and Val Campbell-Harding (below right) which had featured in Maggie's books gave an added dimension to the display.



The current book, *Cut Shape Stitch*, attracted much attention, particularly *Poles Dancing*, which was a firm favourite with visitors (especially as they were placed at the front of the stand and caught a few foreheads as people passed through.).

It was a wonderful celebration of the hard work and dedication to further textile innovation and education that Maggie has espoused over the past 30 years. She continues to have many exciting ideas about the future and we look forward to sharing them with you.



The Art of the Brick

The Old Truman Brewery, Brick Lane, London until 12 April

This exhibition has toured the world and is currently on show at the Old Truman Brewery in London. Featuring a huge array of works crafted by Nathan Sawaya, you could be forgiven for thinking that this is a children's exhibition, with the brick in question being LEGO.



It is, however, a much more interesting and thought-provoking collection than you might first give it credit for. To begin with, the artistry involved in creating these pieces of work is quite breath-taking. There is a description alongside each picture or sculpture that states exactly how many pieces of LEGO were used to create it and, often running into the tens of thousands, you start to realise that this is a much more adventurous undertaking than would appear at first glance.

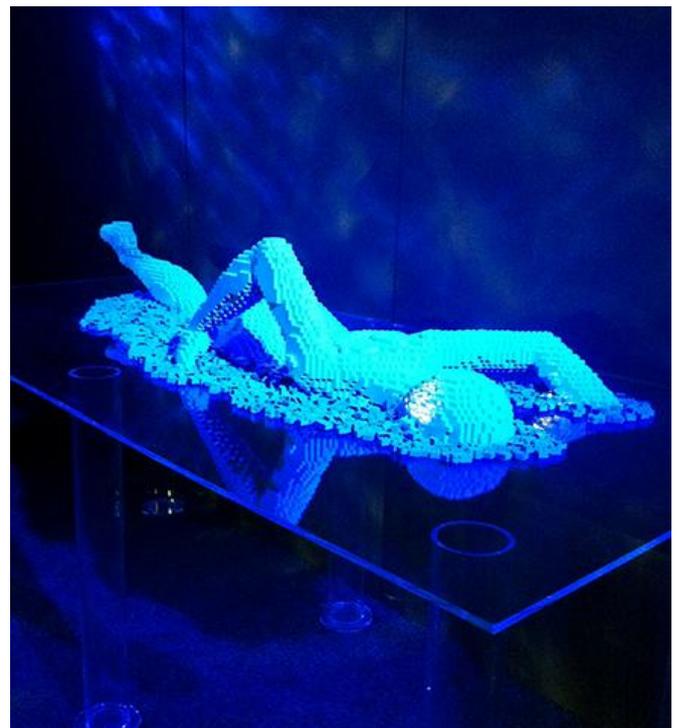
The exhibition starts with famous sculptures – Michelangelo's 'David', the 'Venus de Milo' and Rodin's 'Thinker'. Moving onto two- and three-dimensional recreations of famous paintings – Van Gogh's 'Starry Night', Munch's 'The Scream' and Klimt's 'The Kiss', there is much to introduce a younger audience into the world of art and design made from a material that most of the world finds accessible.



Although children take great pleasure in the pieces on display (what's not to like about a giant T-Rex?), the exhibition moves along to the creation of original pieces that really show off the talent of Sawaya. His depiction of the human form is awe-inspiring, and seeing a video of how he creates one figure – he just builds – you can appreciate the natural talent and confidence in showing the world that there is nothing trivial about building from LEGO. Some of the themes explored in these pieces are linked to our own feelings of frustration, creative expression and finding strength within yourself to be happy in life.



One piece, 'My Boy (below left)', depicts an adult carrying a prone child, which was a very emotive piece. To be able to convey the feeling of despair and hopelessness through this medium takes real skill and it is to be applauded.



Other pieces, such as the beautifully streamlined 'Swimmer' (above right), created calm and serenity.

Catch this exhibition if you can. If you leave behind any prejudices about the suitability of a children's toy in modern sculpture, you will be pleasantly surprised and touched by the depth of feeling it evokes.