

Exhibitions

The Knitting and Stitching Show

There was a general agreement that the exhibitions that formed part of this show were more amazing than ever this year. The draw of major artists such as Alice Kettle, Cindy Hickok, Rozanne Hawksley and Louise Baldwin alone would have most people rushing to London but, when you add the two major exhibitions – Pfaff and the Guild's Art of the Stitch – it's going to be hard to better this in future years. That's without mentioning all the other 'white space' stars and groups.

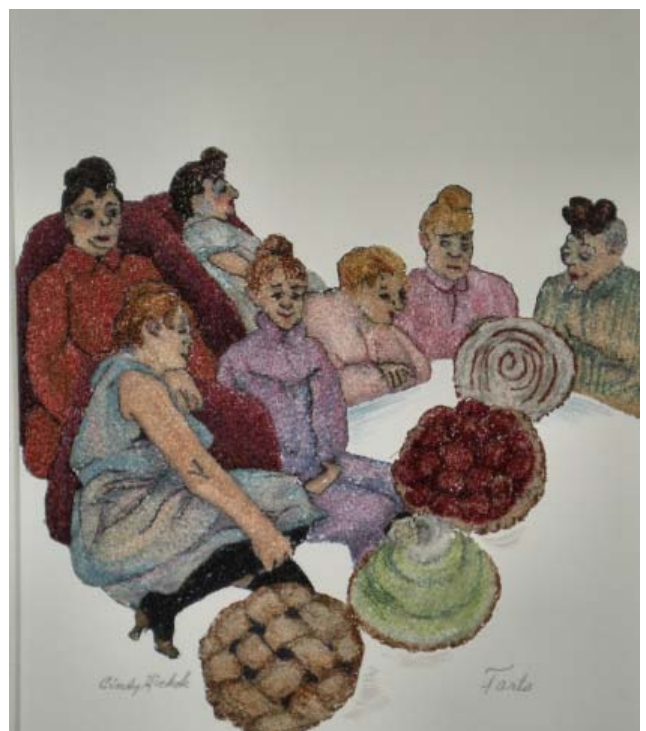


It all started in the foyer where this knitted boat sailed majestically through the palm trees. Even more amazing is the fact that it has actually been to sea. With support from the Cultural Officer at South Tyneside, funding was found and lead artist (and big-time knitter) Ingrid Wagner took up the challenge. Big knitting, big idea, big fun – loved the seagull.

Fun was certainly on the menu and I'm going to start with Cindy Hickok, who has got the combination of design, stitch and humour off to a fine art. Pun intended, as all her work is based on the great artists. She skilfully lifts subjects from the work of famous artists and translates them into machine embroidery, where they play their part in a comedy enacted for us, the viewers. The naming of the piece is an essential part of the dialogue.

For instance the figures from the brothel paintings of Toulouse Lautrec are shown gazing at a range of exotic deserts and the title given is 'Tarts' (right).

The medium used for the message is machine embroidery on water-soluble fabric and Cindy's technical skills are legendary.



The piece on the right is from a series with the title 'Her Mother Told Her'; this one is ...to save for a rainy day.

If I seem to be over-raving here, it is because she is one of my absolute favourite artists and I think I was one of the first people to become a big fan

I brought some of her work to the UK in 2000 when I curated an exhibition for the Embroiderer's Guild at Voirrey Embroidery's gallery in the Wirral.

More of her humour was apparent in the life-size cut-out figures which were shown examining one of the embroideries.

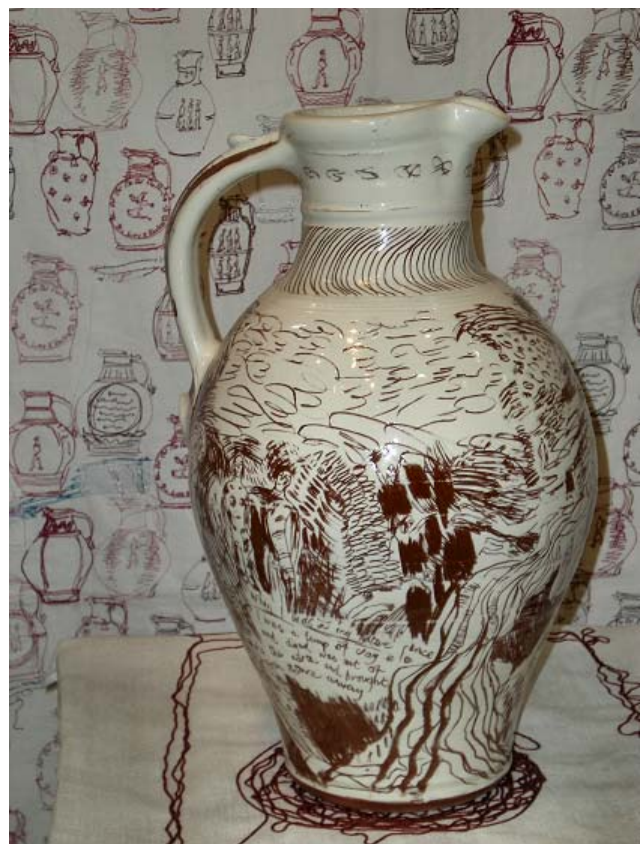


I think that Andrew Salmon and his team put this show together just for me, as another of my favourite people is Alice Kettle. Here she was collaborating with Alex McErlain and Helen Falcey. Alex is a ceramicist and senior lecturer at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU).

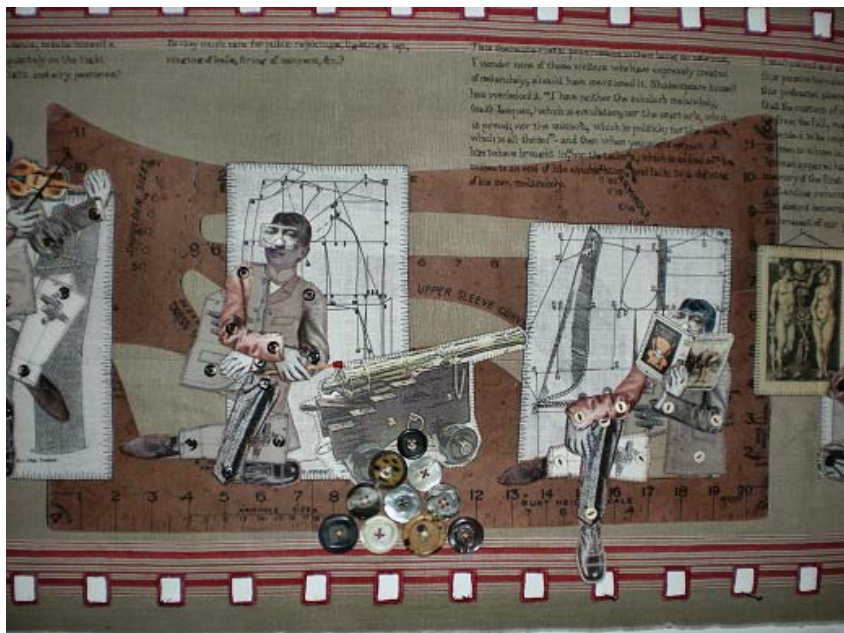
The collaboration with Alice saw the artists working together on the pieces displayed with Alice's drawings scratched into the bowls and jugs – I loved this jug see right.

Helen Falcey, also from MMU, works with bone china and basalt. One of the main pieces in this exhibit was part of the 'Place Setting' dialogue with Helen's tableware on a cloth made by Alice which links objects by thread and concept.

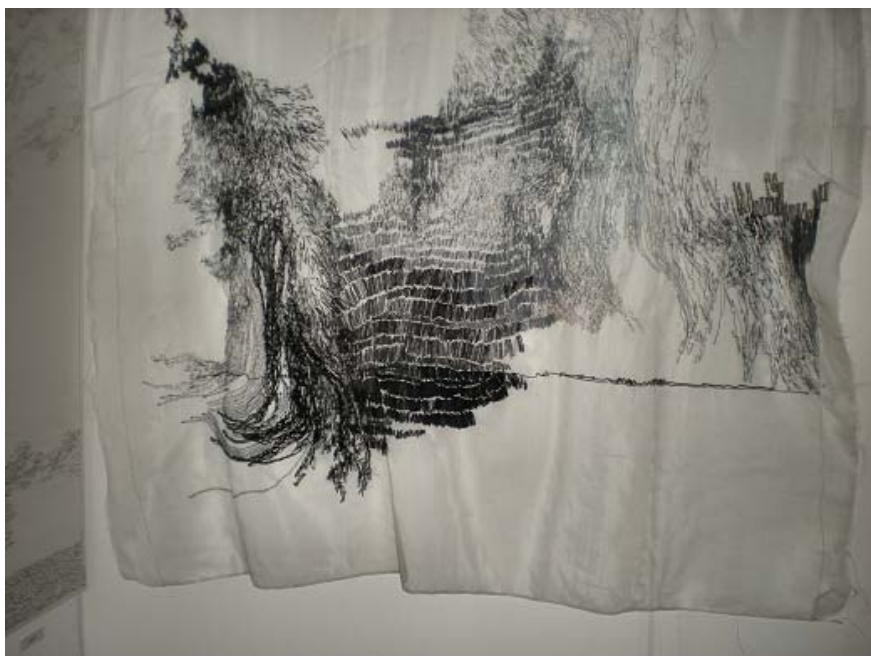
It was Alice's three-dimensional face studies that really got to me, one in particular - a graphic black and white piece of enormous power. Now how can I convince Clive that our pension fund should start investing in art?



The Graduate Showcase has often been the area of the show that appears at the end of a review, like a postscript. This has never been deserved and this year it would be a positive crime so I've promoted it to centre stage. The sponsorship of the Embroiderers' Guild, who select the graduates, has always resulted in some interesting work and this year must rate as the best ever. Everyone was talking about it at the show. The work was so varied, from the delicate tracery of Judy Drysdale's jewellery to the charming animation and mixed media pieces of Susie Vickery. Below you can see a detail from The Tailor's lament. I'm going to try to get an interview with her for the next issue.



Roanna Wells produced pieces of deceptive simplicity showing just what can be done with simple stitch and fabric when design skills are brought into play. This piece, below right, really excited me.



Every single artist is worthy of mention and it was so good to see Katie Almond's evocative 'High Tea' settings (above left) of paper and porcelain selling so well. Wish I'd got there earlier – I'd have purchased one. We have an article by graduate Trish Vickers in this issue and her work was causing a stir

Roz Hawksley's labyrinth of an exhibit was amazing, creepy, scary, though-provoking, beautiful and very sad, all at the same time. She really forces you to look mortality in the face and that is sometimes not pleasant. I saw her installation 'A Treaty has been Signed' (concerning the futility of war) some years ago in Swansea and was intrigued by the comments that schoolchildren had written in the guest book. Although it was quite gruesome, those children totally 'got' the idea. Elements of that exhibition were shown here, combining with new work to make a macabre but unforgettable whole.

The detail shown on the right is from a larger installation entitled 'veterans'. This looked from a distance like a shelf of delicate porcelain figurines which proved, on closer study, to be small maimed, bandaged figures – the war veterans of the title.

It wasn't all doom and gloom – there were some lighter moments but it was all very atmospheric and her drawing is superb.



I also enjoyed the smaller exhibitions with great displays by artists such as Janice Gunner and Dionne Swift. These two were delightful opposites with Dionne showing a monochrome palette, as you can see on the right.

Her use of the quirky Knitting and Stitching cabinets for small three dimensional pieces and sketchbooks worked well with the integrated work above them.



Janice's area was bursting with colour. You can see examples of this below, with a detail from the Fragile Earth quilt and Serendipity 2 on the right.



All the groups were good and I particularly liked the work from MaP (Makers and Practitioners). One piece from Sue Shields struck a chord. Beautifully stitched, it was called 'The Banker's Wife had Jam Today'. Enough said.

Kerry Mosley's drawing with wire and stitch was much admired, as was the work of Guild Scholar Jill Flower with her ruffs and colourful layers.

Louise Baldwin had an interesting range of work and I love her use of the ephemera of life. Labels, adverts, washing instructions – all grist to the mill, all colourful and mostly fun. The title of her exhibition was 'Life is Strange and Difficult and Funny'. Great title.

The piece on the right is a detail from 'Trying to Remember', which I felt was a softer, more reflective piece than we usually see from her.

Then there were all the individual stands - the Textile Gallery was awash with talent. Where else can you see all the big names – Jan and Jean, Val Holmes, Alys Midgellow-Marsden and many, many more.

Then there was the wonderful Pfaff exhibition which deserves a page to itself. Read on.



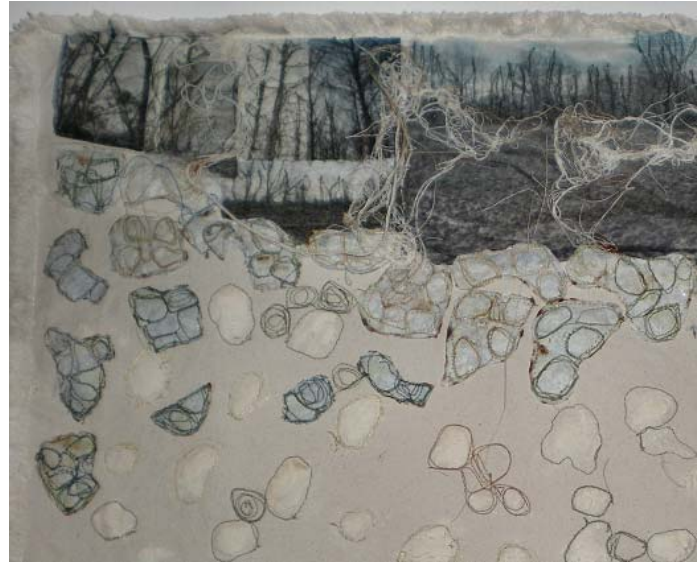
The Pfaff Art Embroidery Challenge

This exhibition gets better and better. Because the concept is pure machine embroidery, it satisfies the desire that many viewers have: 'let's see some stitch'. This doesn't mean that it's all solid stitching (although there are many such pieces - all wonderful) as there is a great deal of innovation going on here.

The theme of 'Landscape - Let us Travel' is the third in a series exploring genre in paintings: portrait, still life, landscape. In some ways, this has encouraged a painterly approach as can be seen in this work 'Landscape with Oildrums' by Adinka Tellegen, which takes the subject of a vast breaker's yard and looks at the power of nature forcing its way through.

Then there are the pieces in which landscape becomes abstracted, leading to such delights as 'Twilight' by Jane Kenyon from Canada, who is another big favourite of mine. I was delighted to see that this piece had won the grand prize. Below this is a detail of her other exhibition piece as it is in close-up that her work can really be appreciated





Tiziana Tateo always produces interesting surfaces and I must confess an interest here as she was a student on one of my distance learning courses, way back, and has gone on to do great things. Above left is a detail from 'River Pearls' inspired by the pale stones that border the Ticino river which runs through her home city in Italy.

Of the heavily machined pieces where skill and stitch are subservient to strong design skills, I loved 'Fire' by Carol Shinn from the USA.. Strong colours make the impact in a very free piece which contrasts the beauty of fire with the devastation it can cause. See above.

This is an exhibition where every piece of work counted, where we met skilful stitchers from other countries and really needed to get the catalogue. Every so often, there are rumours that machine embroidery is dead and no one wants to make big, time consuming pieces any more. This exhibition gives the lie to that and makes one itch to get the machine out. Kathryn Harmer Fox from South Africa gave us 'Handkerchiefs' and entreated us to come to a land where exotic animals are as common as hankies.



Two final artists: this installation by Sian Martin entitled 'Tread Softly' (from the Yeats poem) resounds with symbolism – the tiny footsteps, growing larger, the mosaic effect of the path hinting at archaeology and the wonderfully understated colour scheme all worked together.

The three-dimensional feet could have looked clumsy but were worked with a light touch and the piece came together perfectly.

The work of another winner: Karen Richard from Australia was on the theme of ruined forest, no doubt with thoughts of the awful bush fires. Although the forest was indeed ruined, it has a strange haunting beauty that will stay with the viewer, even when the more bold and colourful pieces are forgotten.

You can see this piece below.

What an exhibition – what a show!

