



Thames & Hudson



Thames & Hudson



I.

IMPACT

I.

IMPACT

The ongoing debate about whether textiles have artistic clout has gained momentum over the last fifty years. Some still recognize divisions between textile art, design and craft, distinguished as conceptual, mass-produced and handmade. Yet the very nature of textiles defies such boundaries. Their imagery ranges from abstract to pictorial and, however made, their artistic message is not limited by their end use; rather, it is often enhanced by the roles textiles play. This was once understood. In the 17th century it was more prestigious and costly to own a fine silk garment or tapestry than a painting by Sir Peter Lely.¹ Industrialization, with its consequent gentrification of a burgeoning middle class, and the 20th century's Modern art movement – which pushed decorative arts into a subcategory labelled 'frivolity' – solidified the tenet that textile arts were feminine and thus less important. Subsequent and serious financial investments in painting and sculpture further rendered the status of textiles questionable. Restored appreciation has been emerging slowly since the 1960s, when two things occurred. First, the International Tapestry Biennial was founded in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1962, and until 1995 it showcased autographic, as opposed to reprographic, tapestries, as well as three-dimensional fibre works. And second, as temporary art installations and the use of non-monumental and often impermanent materials flourished, the breakdown of traditional distinctions between the various arts was recognized.²

Writing in 1972, the critic Hugh Kenner captured the significance of this period: 'Then suddenly the strategy shifted. Instead of art that could only go into museums, art began to be turned out that museums couldn't get at. Earthworks, for instance, [and] a kinetic sculpture of dyes dropped into a stream ... Having goaded the museum into a frenzy of acquisitiveness, the artist's new play is to taunt it with the non-acquirable.' The most famous examples of 'non-acquirable' textiles in art are the landscapes and buildings 'wrapped' by Christo and Jean Claude: the first appeared in 1961, and the largest, *Running Fence*, lasted for fourteen days in 1976 [3]. By this time, feminist artists often confronted the subjugation of women by consciously incorporating textile techniques into their

Sherry Tuckle, a professor in social studies of science, has made the argument that tools catalyse changes in how we think. This supports the convictions of several anthropologists and ethnographers who believe that, millennia ago, the very development of the human brain was stimulated by the emergence of basketmaking techniques.³ The cognitive scientist Donald Norman tells us that we blame ourselves when we cannot make a gadget work, when in fact the non-communicative gadget is just badly designed.⁴ We have no such problem with textiles: they are communicative even when the techniques and machinery involved in their manufacture is complex. Textiles long ago became essential models of cognitive processing, providing pathways to robotics (in the human finger replacements provided by the latches in a late 16th-century knitting frame) and computing (via the early 19th-century Jacquard punchcard weaving mechanism). Subconscious understandings allow us to intuit a vast range of concepts from mathematics to psychology, the latter clearest in the notion of comfort blankets. Textiles speak to our ability to grasp these big ideas. In her series of works 'Finding Home' [9], Christine Atkins explores 'the soul-search for a place of meaning and belonging', using her handmade 'nesting box' books to highlight the human need to make emotional connections. Eun-Kyung Suh's tenuously attached *100 Floating Fears* [4] speaks to the same impulse to visualize that which is fervently felt, and we must wonder what lurks in the shadows. To appreciate such works we call upon haptic perception, for which textiles provide the most abundant lessons, training not only the fingers, but also the eyes. And there is ample evidence that, should scientists care to look for it, they would find a gene that identifies those who could be said to think with their fingers and are destined to manipulate materials. Michael Brennand-Wood [14] and Kay Sekimachi [14], for example, are both artists who, long into their careers, discovered ancestors who were also involved with making textiles; it seems that the requisite skills are valuable enough to be passed along genetically.

The visual vocabulary of textiles demonstrates long 'conversations' that reach back thousands of years and connect different civilizations around the globe. The roundel form containing depictions of animals or people is an excellent example of this connection, and we can trace its historical voyage. The ancient Egyptian hieroglyph for 'eternal protection' was a shen ring, a circle on a horizontal line that represented a stylized loop of rope, and expressed the enclosing and encircling nature of textiles and their structures. Occasionally the shape was elongated into a cartouche to 'guard' a royal name, which was expressed through stylized figures and animals. Although the use of hieroglyphs was nearly extinct by the early Christian era, surviving Egyptian textiles demonstrate that the pictorial roundel remained in circulation, typically in the small tapestry-woven woollen insertions in linen garments [12]. Similar roundel patterns characterize the roughly contemporary silks associated with Sassanian Persia (224–642), which are the first known examples of pictorial loom-woven lengths of cloth, created by employing different coloured wefts that almost entirely cover the warp, in a compound twill structure called *samitum* or samite. From Persia and Islamic Soghdia in Central Asia (or Sogdiana, centred on Samarkand), these silks [2] were dispersed as gifts and trade goods along the Silk Road as far north as Scandinavia [10], and were brought to Eastern Asia



1. Eun-Kyung Suh, *100 Floating Fears*, 2008. Chiffon 'pods' suspended at the end of 76 cm (30 in.) music wires move gently, creating intersecting shadows.

2. Mauseen Darby, *If Your Heart Is Not Nailed to Cliffe Hall*, 2010. For this installation, Darby used free machine embroidery over double layers of a water-soluble pliable clear film, sculpted over a Styrofoam base prior to the film's removal, to create what the artist calls a 'hollow drawing'. The site-specific exhibition, at Cliffe Castle Museum, West Yorkshire, was inspired by letters written by Mary Louise Roosevelt Burke Butterfield, the American wife of Henry Isaac Butterfield, a West Yorkshire textile magnate and owner of Cliffe Castle.

3. Rhiannon Williams, *The Time I'm Taking: Proust Pie* (detail), 2008. One of seven patchworks sewn from each of the volumes of Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. Williams expects that it will take fourteen years to complete the series, which is part of a larger body of work – 'Critical Cloth' – that critiques capitalist culture through its 'slow time' approach.

4. Judith Scott, *Twins*, undated. The intuitive manipulation of fibre is epitomized by Scott, an untrained, deaf artist who had Downs Syndrome. From 1981 until her death in 2009, she created amulets of bamboo slats or other discarded materials, wrapping these forms with lengths of knotted cloth or yarn.

5. Jackie Langfield, *Paper Warrior*, 2008. One of five life-size figures made of cardboard, string, paper cording, willow and steel. The ironic title reflects the artist's view of 'the position of man on this planet, his frailty and his vanity, and his inescapable mortality [despite] bigger weapons at his disposal'.

6. Ika White, *Entanglement* (detail), 2008. Projected light, thread, steel pins and space are the artist's materials, used in an installation exploring connections and the 'mutual exchange between the body and the brilliant world'.