

RIPPLES: DEVELOPMENT THROUGH ART

Alicia Hall

Nothing is a mistake. There is no win and no fail. There is only make.

John Cage

Because my work explores patterns of social relationships, my project has involved a collaboration between the Dunedin School of Art and the School of Social Services at Otago Polytechnic. Based on process, my work is about colour and printing multiples on textiles and large installations. The processes I engage with are adapted and extended when used in community workshops. I use fabric, because it has such a close relationship with humans, dating back thousands of years, and it still plays an important role in our daily lives.

In my first year at art school, I started exploring aspects of printing, layering and working with waste.

In my second year, I engaged with Martha Rosler's feminist parody video, *Semiotics of the Kitchen*.¹ Working in many media, Rosler analyses the myths and realities of patriarchal culture. In response to her video, I explored printing and dyeing, using kitchen utensils, kitchen chemicals and food. This resulted in two wall works made of food



Figure 1. Alicia Hall, *Material Deconstruction Print*, 2013, 3 x 1.8 m, white and black printed cotton. First-year BVA exhibition.



Figure 2. Alicia Hall, 2014, food colour; serviettes. Second-year BVA exhibition, Salisbury House, Dunedin.

colouring and serviettes. I was also interested in wool and its felting properties and made another wall work depicting the visualisation of cells.

In my third year of the BVA, I focused on ideas of connection, interdependence and the individual as part of the collective. I began to consider the underlying reasons for my interest in community and social relations, things which are still very much part of my work today.

In my installation *12 000+*, the first felt units I added were made entirely of wool. Subsequent units included unfeltable materials like cotton, acrylics, silk and even plastic, to see how much could be added and how it would compromise the structure of the resulting units. During the making, I was thinking about how we are influenced and shaped by what we see and experience daily, and how we influence and shape people by our behaviour.

In a sister work entitled *Same but Different*, I explored the colour-separation properties of black food colouring mixed with water, on serviettes. I found that the difference between the colours depended on the amount of water added and how it was applied. I reflected that the same principle could be applied to love, as it is how we show (apply) our love that makes the real difference.

In May 2014, I attended a five-day deconstructed screen printing workshop in Whanganui with American textile artist Kerr Grabowski. I decided to use this process in my work for my MVA, which started in January 2016. The requirements for the process are blank screens, thickened dyes and application of texture for imagery. The build up of dye in the textured areas acts as a resist, and large quantities of prints can be produced in a short space of time.

In life, I am attracted to the flawed and the outcast. This comes through in my work, where I use scraps and less-than-perfect materials to give them an opportunity to be meaningful and still be worth something. The texture of materials intrigues me and makes me want to explore their materiality through print. The structure of the material mainly determines the mark it leaves on the fabric. This aligns with how I feel about the mark or effect that we have on each other as we interact on a day-to-day basis.



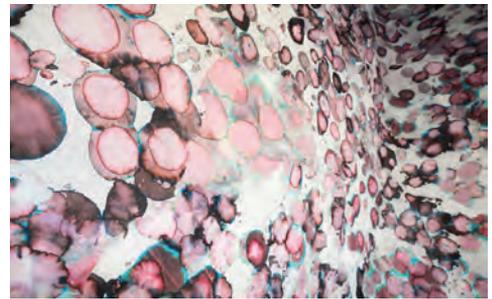
Figure 3. Alicia Hall, *Cell Visualisation*, 2014, felted balls, wool, acrylic, silk, bamboo, cat fur. Second-year BVA exhibition.



Figure 4. Alicia Hall, *12 000+*, 2015, felted wool, cotton, plastic, cat fur; bamboo fibres. Third-year BVA exhibition, SITE 2015. Photo: Pam McKinlay.



Figure 5. Alicia Hall, *12 000+* (detail). Photo: Michael Schouten.



Figures 6 and 7. Alicia Hall, *Same but Different*, 2015, serviettes and food colouring. Third-year BVA exhibition, SITE 2015.

Working with waste or everyday materials in a deliberative way dates back at least to the modernist period and the Dada art movement of the early twentieth century. These in turn influenced artists in the group known as Fluxus that took shape in the 1960s and 70s. They encouraged everyone to make art all the time, and didn't believe that there should be any boundaries between art and life. German artist Joseph Beuys was part of this group. The impact he had as an individual artist, especially with his land artwork, *7000 Oaks*, in the city of Kassel, is a great example of how influential an artist can be in changing an environment. The group was influenced by John Cage's belief that the process of creating was more important than the finished product. Cage also believed that one could start an artwork without necessarily knowing the outcome beforehand.²

As a process-based artist whose work is predominantly about colour, I have researched painters who utilise a variety of physical application processes. I became interested in the work of colour field painter Helen Frankenthaler, who used a 'soak stain' technique, where she would pour diluted oil paints onto unprimed canvas, with the emphasis on spontaneity.³ The diluted paints then became part of the canvas, instead of just paint sitting on top of it.

There are no rules. That is how art is born, how breakthroughs happen. Go against the rules or ignore the rules. That is what invention is about.

Helen Frankenthaler

My community art projects bring together individuals who print fabric and make quilts for people in their community. The quilt references elements of security, warmth, love and care. Quilting and quilts have such a rich history. Quilting had, and still has, great social benefits for isolated women in many parts of the world, especially during colonial times. All fabric scraps were precious, and the quilts evolved without much thought about their design. The no-waste ethic of these old-style quilters aligns with my own values.



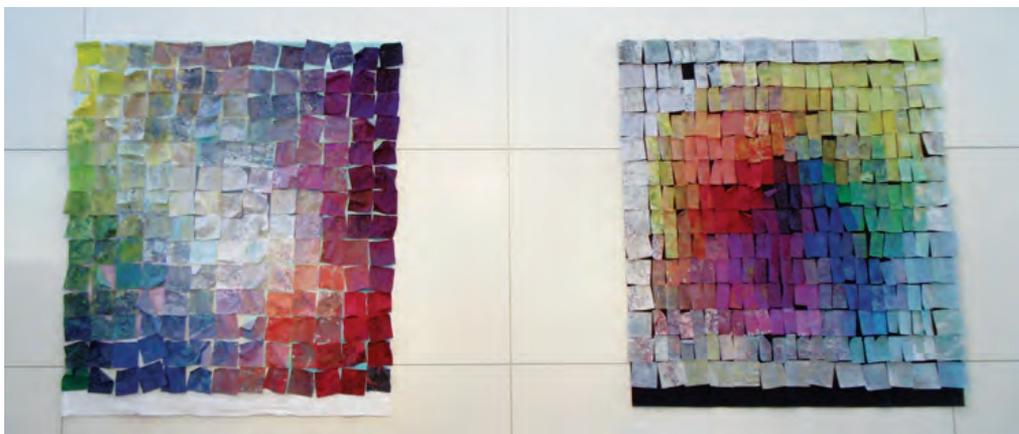
Figure 8. Alicia Hall, *Material Deconstruction*, 2016, strips used for screen-printing. First-year MVA exhibition.



Figure 9. Alicia Hall, *Town Dump Project*, May 2013.

The Gee's Bend Quilters of Alabama, an isolated and poor African-American community, have an interesting history, having made quilts since the 1920s. Their work has been compared to abstract painting due to the simplicity and improvisational nature of their designs. It is the exact opposite of the ordered regularity of mainstream Euro-American quilt design. Their quilts have now become coveted wall hangings.⁴

In the making of my "provisional quilts" I explored ideas about society and social structure. The best prints were used first, and the rejected prints formed the subsequent quilts until only a small, substandard group remained.



Figures 10. Alicia Hall, *Provisional Quilts* and detail.



Figures 11. Alicia Hall, *Provisional Quilts* detail.

For me, each print is a person and, by utilising this procedure, the quilts mimicked the kind of social process that I disagree with.

Textile artist Gunta Stölzl played a fundamental role in the development of the Bauhaus Weaving Workshop. Anni Albers, the first textile artist to have a solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, was also part of the weaving workshop. Colour made up a very important part of the preliminary course at the Bauhaus, which was designed by artist and art theorist Johannes Itten. He believed that the chief characteristic of colour is that it is always relative, and that a colour seen in isolation will never look the same when set alongside another colour or colours.

Josef Albers, also originally from the Bauhaus, taught his students to work with colour before he taught them colour theory. His book *Interaction of Color*, published in 1963, has changed ideas about the perception of colour. His *Homage to the Square* series consists of more than a thousand paintings.

I am drawn to working with bright, clear colours. As a South African, my childhood memories are filled with sunshine, heat, blue swimming pools and beautiful coloured flowers. My colour use is a response to living in Dunedin, where the greyness and the lack of sun is in stark contrast to the quality of the light in Africa and my childhood sensations, which still resonate in me.

Although I prefer working with pure colours, due to the printing process I utilise, where I use dyes from two different sources and use black dye, muddy prints are par for the course. As part of the bigger picture, these prints bring a welcome balance to my work and give the eye places to rest.

Making has transformative power: As a student at the Dunedin School of Art since April 2013, I have engaged with both physical and sensory processes and have been exposed to new ideas in art theory. This has led to a transformation in myself and has given me the impetus to train as a facilitator in community art, using the power of making to affect lives positively. Tiffany Singh, a New Zealand community artist who has influenced me, bases her ideas of art as a tool for healing and wellness on psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's research on creativity and happiness.⁵



Figure 12. Otago Girls' High School project.

As part of my training as a community artist, Social Services organised a placement for me at Otago Girls' High School. For this project prints were made, then cut into units and a quilt was designed as the final stage. As a process-based artist, I feel that predesigning an outcome is too contrived; being playful with the materials makes for a richer experience, with more scope as a result.

The leftover prints and fabric were cut smaller and repurposed for a craft workshop to be held at my church for the children's Christmas party. For this workshop, I had to design projects tailored to various levels of difficulty to accommodate different age groups. The leftover materials from this workshop have been used in a piece for my final exhibition for the MVA.

My exhibition for my MVA exam consisted of a number of wall works. One work consisted of 140 metres of strata-like strips. The Gestalt elements to be used in the installation are size, similarity, proximity and alignment, which provide unity as well as variety.



Figure 13. Alicia Hall, Otago Girls' High School project 2016.



Figure 14. Alicia Hall, *Strata*, 2017, 140 m, printed and dyed cotton.

Alicia Hall's work looks at social structures, and she leads creative workshops in the community to promote connection through making. She has a BVA from the Dunedin School of Art and is completing her MVA in 2017.

- 1 A critique of the commodified versions of traditional roles of women in modern society, *Semiotics of the Kitchen* is a feminist parody film and performance piece released in 1975. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vm5vZaE8Ysc>.
- 2 <http://www.theartstory.org/movement-fluxus.htm>.
- 3 For a brief biography of Helen Frankenthaler; see <http://www.frankenthalerfoundation.org/helen/biography>.
- 4 Neal Conan, *The Quilts of Gee's Bend: A Showcase of Distinctive Work by African-American Artists*, 2003, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=970364>.
- 5 John Hurrell, *Singh in Titirangi*, 2015, <http://eyecontactsite.com/2015/01/singh-in-titirangi>.