

Exhibition Review & Notes

*lightweight?**

Editors' Notes: This project entailed a collaborative exhibition – held at Salisbury House Gallery in Dunedin and in the Foyer Gallery of the School of Art, Australian National University in Canberra. This collaborative project involved almost fifty students and staff of the textiles departments of the School of Art in Canberra and the Otago Polytechnic School Art in Dunedin. *lightweight?* provided a snapshot of the work of both departments and allowed an opportunity for exhibitors to experience new perspectives on contemporary textiles as a medium. Both the show and some participants travelled to both sides of the Tasman, which proved to be an invaluable experience and the continuation of the dialogue between the schools. The texts that follow include a review of the exhibition by Ralph Body and four brief sets of notes on the exhibition by the organisers and travelling lecturer-artists.



Above: Visiting New Zealand group singing a waiata or traditional Māori song at the opening of *lightweight?*, Australian National University, Foyer Gallery, Canberra, October 2007.

* A CD catalogue with images of all the work is available from Christine Keller at christinekeller@tekotago.ac.nz

REVIEW by Ralph Body

The Salisbury House Gallery in Smith Street, Dunedin, offers a domestication of the traditional white cube display space. Divested of furnishings and whitewashed throughout, it nonetheless evokes memories of its former identity as an inner city townhouse, its appropriation suggesting a domestic realm charged with creative potential. It is thus the ideal venue for *lightweight?* an exhibition showcasing the variety and artistic possibilities of contemporary textile art. The exhibition features works by students and lecturers from both Dunedin and Canberra, its title referring to the limitations placed upon the weight of works which were to travel between the two cities. It also refers to the position of textiles as a marginalised art form, dismissed as a nice, genteel hobby. Much of this prejudice stems from its position – in post-Medieval Western society – as a predominantly female practice, separated from the 'high' arts by its relegation to the domestic sphere. The location of the Dunedin exhibition, in a home-turned-gallery, provides the perfect setting in which to challenge these prejudices without endorsing the assumptions that underlie them.

Perhaps one of the benefits of textiles' exclusion from traditional histories of art is the absence of any central canon. This is not to suggest that textiles are without a heritage. Indeed, the histories of textiles descend from numerous traditions encompassing a multiplicity of cultural backgrounds. As such, contemporary practitioners can engage with a variety of different media, processes and purposes. This richness and diversity of practice is amply represented in *lightweight?* Works included utilise such varied processes as dyeing, stitching, tapestry, weaving, printing, felting, beading, and embroidery, as well as a number of conceptually driven pieces which use unconventional materials and challenge the boundaries between traditional categories of art. This sheer variety makes it difficult to generalise about the exhibition. Nonetheless, some interesting parallels emerge between the works. This review will discuss specific works which appear to address recurring themes; however, it neither attempts nor claims to be representative of the exhibition as a whole.

Textile work has traditionally brought together the artistic and the functional, a union which has frequently

seen it dismissed as 'craft' or 'applied art'. It has been viewed as too closely connected to everyday lived experience, lacking the necessary separation to facilitate aesthetic appreciation. While few of the works in the exhibition could be described as functional, neither are they concerned with achieving an autonomous status. Instead, many refer to an external context through the use of borrowed imagery or recycled materials, the memories associated with these thus informing the finished art work. This is evident in Bianca Wall's *Face Towel* where pieces of old towels have been used to create a pixelated image of a human face. The work evokes the daily ritual of washing, emphasising the intimate connection of its materials with bodily experience. Its loosely suggested patchwork portrait suggests a Saint Veronica's veil-like imprint.

It is precisely because of their close relationship with the human body and lived experience that textile objects can become such potent bearers of memory. In *Reflections*, Anna-Lee McLeod has embroidered images taken from old family photographs. This transference between mediums has resulted in a greater degree of stylisation and distortion – a smiling bride and groom almost seem to grimace – but this idiosyncratic quality helps bring them to life. The application of this imagery to fabric suggests the residue of personal histories, invisibly inscribed upon numerous pre-loved textiles folded away in top cupboards. The issue of memory is addressed somewhat more obliquely in the three woven panels of Lucy Eliason's *Journey*. I usually dismiss the notion of life as a journey as a trite cliché, the sort of thing spoken about by contestants on reality TV shows. Fortunately, this work addresses its theme with a greater reticence. The daily cycle of waking and sleeping is evoked by a series of bands, much like the rings on a tree. Throughout, this repeated pattern is subtly nuanced, suggesting variations of experience.

A number of works have made use of natural materials, such as plant dyes, in a manner which relates to the themes they explore. Roka Hurihia Cameron used materials entirely sourced from Blueskin Bay for her work *Ngā Karu o Tangaroa – He Who Watches*, such as shellfish buttons to represent Pupu, as the eyes of the spirit energy that lives in the water. Sally Blake's *Animated Pods* was inspired by the form and function

of eucalyptus seed pods (gum nuts). These protective pods have been created from a woollen blanket, suggesting that the potential for future life has been tucked up warm and safe. Plant dyes have then been used to render them in a variety of cheerful colours. In addition to these organic origins, the work gains a playful humour from its subtle anthropomorphism. Variations in size and posture suggest the forms are engaging with one another, like swishing flounced skirts or a band of genuflecting Christmas trees. They recall beloved soft toys, suggesting plants can be just as endearing as soft, fluffy animals.

Julie Ryder makes use of not only natural materials, but also natural processes in the production of her work. Her panels of silk are patterned through the innovative use of fermenting fruit. Over a period of several months, the bacteria and moulds produced by the rotting fruits have stained the cloth with natural dyes. In works like *Chiaroscuro* the striations of the lemons used have left an ethereal trace of their former presence. The repeated patterns produced resemble cells or molecules.

Scientific and biological imagery has been utilised by a number of the exhibitors. While not subject matter traditionally associated with textiles, the two work together strangely well. The repeated molecular forms of the microscopical rendered large recalls patterned fabric, while the delicate qualities of many textiles create a membrane-like surface. In her work *Viralart*, Jeanette Pearce has placed a series of machine-embroidered pathogens in petri dishes. As these works are sold and disseminated the artist's 'virus' will spread. It is intended that the new owner will email the artist with photos of the works in their new environment, thus allowing her to track the progress of the epidemic. The viruses all possess an identical form, recalling the branding of corporate logos.

Textile work is often presented as a delicate and decorous pastime, in turn reinforcing notions about feminine delicacy and vulnerability. Many of the *lightweight?* exhibitors, however, have committed acts of violence against their materials, exploring the artistic possibilities of destruction. Fabric has been stained, cut, torn and in the case of Brenna Mary McCann, subjected to chemical burning. In some works, patches of sumptuous silks have been

roughly stitched together and loose threads left hanging. In painting, evidence of the artist's hand in the form of visible brush marks is often credited with imbuing the finished work with a sense of its creation, a permanent sense of its coming into being. Conversely, in these textile works, the scars, threads and delicate materials produce a sense of ephemerality and decay. In the case of Rebecca Thomson's *Viridis Eliptica* the bunched and warped surface of her chiffon ground instils the felted wool leaves that decorate it with a decidedly autumnal character.

The elaborately worked surface of Bev Bruen's *Pelt Sampler* suggests violence through different means. Using machine and hand stitching on a felted shape, she has created a simulation of wounded flesh with all the sensuality of a Baroque martyrdom. Coloured with a mix of chemical and eucalypt dyes, her various folds and stitching suggest the veins, innards and tissue of mutilated flesh. As her point of departure, she has taken the ambivalent environmental position of the fox in Australia. An introduced feral carnivore, it poses a threat to native species. At the same time the hunter is itself hunted, its pelt sought after as a trophy or material for fashion items. Issues of fashion and appearance are addressed by a number of other exhibitors who, through the use of textiles, have been able to use the very materials of their subject matter to question the values and conventions it espouses. Like so many others in this diverse and varied exhibition, they have demonstrated the rich potential that exists in textiles as an art form.

NOTES by Jennifer Robertson

The idea for *lightweight?* stemmed from a series of miniature international textile exhibitions that began in the 1980s – easy to transport, limited by weight and sometimes also size, allowing freedom of expression whilst also establishing a theme for textile artists to work to.

Facilitating cultural exchange between two great institutions, this exhibition was all the more interesting as it exposed some common and diverse contemporary themes and approaches, made clearer by the large number of participating artists.

Following the movement of fibre art textiles from the USA, some works from Dunedin explore 3D



Images: Installation details of *lightweight* at Salisbury House Gallery, Dunedin (photographs courtesy of Max Oettli).

soft sculpture, narrative and humour. An interest in deconstruction is also apparent in the work from both institutions, with some works referencing cloth and clothing. Other textiles explore the inherent characteristics or properties of materials, such as wool and felting.

Some artists use traditional skills such as crocheting, weaving, embroidering, and tapestry weaving. However, these skills are often interpreted in new forms, analogue and digital, exploring ideas about current cultural and social issues. There is also a resurgence of interest in natural dyes, with textile works from both places echoing the beauty of natural colour, resist and incidental mark marking.

Now back in Canberra, I am delighted that the exhibition was widely received in Dunedin and that during the reciprocal visit to Canberra the exhibition and cultural exchange achieved further development.

NOTES by Julie Ryder:

Don't Forget the Question Mark

Flying over the Pacific towards Dunedin I was bombarded with advertisements for the latest mobile phone, iPod and Blackberry in my in-flight magazine. These essential tools equip us for survival in the ever-increasing pace of today's society, and they all have something in common. They are all faster, lighter or smaller than the previous model. For aspects of communication, it seems, *lightweight* is a highly desirable quality.

I pondered on the meaning of this word whilst helping to install the textile exhibition *lightweight?* Developed through necessity to subvert economic and international freight restrictions between the two relevant institutions, the concept of 'lightweight' is also reflected in the materials used for fabrication, and the way in which the pieces engage with space, either on an internal platform, or on a physical one.

But that is where I believe 'lightweight' ends and *lightweight?* begins. Consisting predominantly of undergraduate student work, these textiles navigate a path through weighty issues regarding identity (cultural, personal and sexual); social and environmental relationships; and sustainability. By juxtaposing traditional materials and techniques with contemporary

ones, these works act as communicators – crossing geographical and cultural boundaries, to inform, enlighten and engage us. The miniature scale of many of the works compels closer inspection, promoting a feeling of familiarity and intimacy that only textiles seem to evoke.

The works exhibited by the lecturers are assured articulations in concept and execution. They act as signposts for the direction of contemporary textile practice, and illuminate the pathways towards a career in fibre for younger practitioners.

Cultural exchanges such as *lightweight?* continue to keep the lines of communication open, encouraging discourse and enriching our visual language.

NOTES by Christine Keller

When Jennifer Robertson asked me about a year ago if I would be interested in doing a staff and student exchange show between our two art schools, I said yes without much hesitation. Jennifer and I have met a few times over the years; at conferences and during residencies. I knew who I was talking to and I trusted our mutual professionalism. Our art school here at Otago Polytechnic has a textile department which is not very large – fourteen students in years three and four and a couple of staff members. This includes enough people to make a show like this work. So, I happily forgot about it for six months and did not worry. About five months before the show we needed, however, to become more specific and it turned out that we wished to include the Master of Fine Arts candidates. What a great opportunity for students to be part of an international exhibition! I got a bit concerned when our final count rose to fifty contributors in total from the two institutions. While many things can be planned beforehand (like the gallery, hospitality and the catalogue) others cannot be anticipated. 'How do the works match? How much space do we need exactly?'

It was important to have one coordinator in each city. In the beginning I tried to be very democratic and sent copies to everyone about everything. However, in the end the emails were only sent with great frequency between Jennifer and me. I allowed for more group discussion than the students enjoyed at

times but I consider this a valuable way to provide transparency and to allow the students to learn from seeing all the different production steps that happen behind the scenes of the staging of a project like *lightweight?*

Reflecting on this experience we are generally satisfied with the result and the inevitable tensions that occurred during the process are overridden by pride in a successful project.

NOTES by Victoria Bell: The Semantics of Cloth

"What you see is what you see." (Frank Stella)

Textiles arrive in the 21st century burdened or abundant with the (*well made?*) luggage of several lineages and histories. In a contemporary visual arts environment, fine art, fibre art, applied art, craft art, fashion as art and 'the domestic arts' converge to subvert the dominance of any single ideology within textile practice and education. The works developed

for *lightweight?* employ these multiple positions as departure points in their creation.

Past divides between art and craft have been much discussed. Each new generation of art graduates subvert, redeploy and challenge these hierarchies in their making. Some choose not to prefix the term artist with the word 'textile', as post-media and interdisciplinary practices signal one way forward, while others locate their emerging practices squarely within Textiles with a capital 'T'.

In referencing textile methodologies, artworks may move outside the expected frame, as seen by the increasing number of painting graduates who use knitting and crocheting as brush and palette. However, they are still places for technique and careful labour. Many works in *lightweight?* showcased exemplary dye, weave and stitch processes, affirming a continued position for the discipline in the wider field of visual arts.

Ralph Body is currently completing a Master of Arts in Art History and Theory at the University of Otago. The subject of his dissertation is the Dunedin artist and teacher Alfred Henry O'Keeffe (1858-1941). He has previously worked as a tutor; visual resources curator; and arts editor for the student magazine *Critic*.

Jennifer Robertson was born in Somerset, England and studied at the Surrey Institute of Art and Design University College and the Royal College of Art, London. She migrated to Australia in 1986 and established a weave studio in Fremantle, Western Australia. In 1997 Robertson moved to Canberra to lecture in Textiles at the ANU School of Art.

Initially trained in science, **Julie Ryder** graduated from the Melbourne College of Textiles in 1990, and completed a Master of Arts (Visual Arts) degree at the Australian National University, School of Art in 2004. She has been the recipient of many awards and grants, and in 2005 was awarded the inaugural ANAT Synapse New Media Artist in Residence at the Australian National Botanic Gardens in Canberra. She has exhibited in ten solo, and over ninety group exhibitions, both nationally and internationally.

The work of German-born New Zealand-based artist **Christine Keller** is positioned between traditional textile design and weaving, new media art and innovation. She is interested in the clash of tradition and new technologies and its social and political implications. Her work has been exhibited internationally and was featured in the publications, *Techno Textiles 1* and *2* (1998 and 2005). She is an award winning designer for her woven and felted design work for the "Handweberei im Rosenwinkel" (1998-2001) in Germany. Christine Keller has taught textile design, weaving and textile arts in Germany, Mongolia, Australia and Canada and is currently head of the Textile Section at the School of Art at Otago Polytechnic in New Zealand.

Victoria Bell is a practicing artist and Master of Fine Arts candidate. Currently a Lecturer in Textiles at the Otago Polytechnic School of Art, she relocated to Ōtepoti Dunedin from Ōtautahi Christchurch, after receiving the Olivia Spencer Bower Award in 2005.