

## FIRST DO NO HARM

Vivien Dwyer

### HOSPITAL CEILINGS

Hospital ceilings are not very interesting. I should know because I have spent rather a lot of time staring at them. There are little red lights on circular things and water sprinklers at intervals.

Occasionally there is a damaged panel just to liven things up.

Travelling in a moveable bed, there are doors and lifts and occasionally people talk to you but mostly you appear to be just an object that has to be moved from point A to point B and then parked until they decide to do something to you. Then you get parked again until they move you back to point A.

Point B can be scary. Specially if it is the ante-room to the operating theatre and you are all covered up with a warming blanket and wearing white compression socks with no toes and shorts that dome up at the sides and a gown that opens down the front. So you stare at the ceiling and what walls you can see and read some of the packages stacked high on all sides and try not to think but not fooling yourself for even a second. It looks like you have been abandoned in a storage room and each minute seems as long as an hour. You don't want them to come but you don't want them to stay away too long either. You're just petrified in both directions.

Then they come.

I wrote this after I was hospitalised for a breast cancer operation, and the events that led up to and continued after this operation became the motivating force behind this body of work.

The first iteration of this voyage began somewhat earlier when I began looking at the screen print as a medium in 2015, resulting in a rather unsuccessful series focusing on communication towers. This gave me a taste of how a basic print could be altered and enhanced with the addition of paper, string and paint. I was particularly drawn to the work of Willy Schut, with her use of atmospheric effects in a monochromatic field. Her stark foreground in the work *Wat Zeg Je* stood out very clearly to me as a beacon, a power in the landscape both figuratively and in reality.<sup>1</sup>

I was very much looking for this sort of power in my own work to emphasise the questions I was asking of the institution that gave me my treatments. However, I did not find the photographic transfer process used in screen printing to be conducive to my style of attack, and instead looked at doing a series of free-motion machine-stitching pieces along the lines of my final project, *Journeys*, in 2015, with enhancements using charcoal, pencil and crayons. I was leaning towards a landscape element, as this was something I felt I had not finished with.

I began with a number of sketches using photographs from my medical records, transforming them into landscapes. I stopped at this point and began to look into making a completely new start, as the medium did not fit with my ideas. I had been powerfully drawn to the work being done by Alicia Hall and asked her if she would teach me her method of screen printing, as I felt that this might well be what I was looking for. She spent a very enjoyable day showing me the basics of this process and, finally, I had my foundation for the new work. The book *Breakdown Printing* by Claire Benn and Leslie Morgan was my starting point, especially this passage which I took to heart:

We would exhort you to be willing to have a go, play and practice just for the sake of finding out what can happen. At the same time, you'll be producing cloth that's based on your experiments and samples, your subsequent observations, your modifications, your choices – truly your own, personal cloth. How then you use that cloth is up to you.<sup>2</sup>

The main attraction of this process for me is the immediacy of the result. I like to work in the moment, and with some alacrity, once I have decided what I am trying to achieve and have, over the years, favoured the monoprint over the set pattern of the screen print. In this new process, I was able to combine both, with the dried surface of the printing ink standing in for the photographic element and producing similar, but diminishing, details over the series as the surface gradually broke down.

Throughout this process I was also able to add to the screen again and again, with new dried patterns flooding over and intermingling with the old.



Figure 1. *Untilted, early First do no Harm piece*, 42x47cm, deconstructed screen print on cotton.  
Photograph: April Nunn

I experimented with a number of surface masks using paper, wool and various weights of thread to enhance the prints. These left their own traces on the screen, both before and once removed from the screen during the print process. I found that I could get one or maybe two prints with the surface masks in place and another two or three after the mask was removed. I did not clean up between prints as this would have interfered with the deconstruction of the screen. For this reason, I was careful about what colours were in my backgrounds so as to avoid too much of a muddy result. I found that using heavily thinned colours was preferable to using heavy and more solid colours on the whole, although this depended on the outcome I was after and any further processes that the print was to undergo.

The first large work I made was constructed using two prints from the same series, both cut in a similar way and then applied to a black background over a pin board. At this point, none of the pieces were ironed down, but all had fabric adhesive on their backs to aid in ironing them on later. Once the main parts were in place, I set about cutting and trimming them further; as well as adding more pieces to the mix. I carried this process on for several weeks, making occasional alterations until I was satisfied with the positioning of all the pieces. I then ironed the cloth just enough to allow the removal of the pins before taking it down and ironing the work fully. It then went back on the wall for further appraisal as I wanted to add a label to it, either sewn on or directly embroidered onto the background cloth. To this end, I made a series of machine-embroidered captions including my name and some random numerals from one of my medical scans.

It was at this point that I discovered that the fabric glue I was using on the back of the small pieces was not secure enough to hold the work together. To counteract the lifting in the work, I free-motion stitched all the edges down. This did not affect the look of the work, much to my relief. The free-motion effects were absorbed fully into the overall look, and I felt encouraged to use this method again for enhancement as well as for the stability of the works. I made several of these pieces, as my aim was to create a deconstructed view of a person undergoing treatment – but in such a way as to distort their skeleton into something that resembled a sort of medical remnant rather than a real person. The 'real' has been diminished so that only vestiges remain. The human has been replaced with fragments.



Figure 2. *Diagnostic One*, 105x132cm, deconstructed screen print on cotton. Photograph: April Nunn

In undertaking this project, I was influenced by the experiments in forensic science made at The Body Farm in Texas, where donated cadavers undergo experiments to see what effects insects, weather conditions and such like have on the body. This is done as an aid to the investigation of murder cases. These images have remained in my mind as a sort of gruesome but intriguing sediment that has inserted itself into my own works, even though they were not about corpses as such.

The work of women's health campaigner Sandra Coney has added an additional layer of imagery in my mind, in that the women involved in "the unfortunate experiment" at the National Women's Hospital in Auckland during the mid-twentieth century had no say in what was done to them and, in fact, most did not know that they were a part of an experiment at all.<sup>5</sup> This has always seemed to me to be the absolute worst thing that could ever happen to anybody. It is one thing to lose control of your body knowingly, but it is outrageous that you should be totally uninformed and have no say at all in that process.

I now began to think about how I was going to connect foreground to background. There were suggestions about making the background more clothing-oriented, but my one experiment with this approach on a smaller work had been a dismal failure, and I was reluctant to repeat that. I also considered extending the inner pieces themselves in a sort of shadow play across the ground, but this would, I felt, obscure and clutter up the main part of the work too much – although I considered trying this technique later with works that are less complex.

I had been experimenting with embroidered lines on some of the smaller works, mostly in red, and revisited this idea, too, but decided that the red was not bold enough for the bigger works. However, I did like the idea of a contrast between the very organic main section and the stark grid over the top. This was something I felt would help to bring the work together, so I experimented with positioning masking tape until I felt the balance was right and, using just a plain running stitch in thick, white cotton, made one horizontal and one vertical line over the whole surface. This tied the organic body to the inorganic ground, rather like an insect pinned helplessly inside a display case.

Some of the individual prints I have made are stand-alone works that I have left unembellished. However, there was a second group of prints that I brought into alignment with my ponderings on institutional medical issues using surface embroidery and selective cutting and trimming. The embroidery works really well when kept simple. A few basic stitches are far more effective than more complex stitching. The stitches used in these pieces are chain, running and herringbone, with a few variations; my thread has been the distinguishing factor, in that I have varied the weight of the thread rather than the colour. Some of these works have been reduced almost to fragments before embroidering, while others have mostly retained the overall shape of the original print – all depending on which elements of a given print I felt should be the focus of the final work.



Figure 3. *Mend One*, 20x25cm, deconstructed screen print on cotton with hand embroidery.  
Photograph: Pam McKinlay.



Figure 4. *Mend Four*, 1m x 75cm, deconstructed screen print on cotton with hand embroidery  
Photograph: Pam Mckinlay

One artist who particularly speaks to me is textile artist Vanessa Rolf.<sup>3</sup> I can see in her work shades of the way I work, especially in her use of embroidery and the freedom of her stitching in *East Siberia*. This piece gives the merest idea of trees using single lines of stitching, and yet you can feel the whole landscape rise up in front of you as you view it. Just a few random lines on a white ground, but perfectly executed to evoke the feeling of place.

My aim has always been to enhance the organic feel of the prints I make and to hint at medical procedures. With this project, I was now beginning to explore and feature a more clinical dimension to my original approach, with the addition of lines and angles as well as labels. These elements not only bind the foreground to the background, but also add a much more invasive appearance to these works, almost as if they have been nailed to a screen. I am hinting at body parts under investigation here, and joining with stitches without trying to overwhelm the viewer with nastiness. Adding medical labels to some of the works is intended to enhance this process of institutionalising the organic into the medical and trapping it there.

There is a beauty in the organic nature of the body that I do not wish to hide in a morass of blood and gore. This is not the main thrust of my work, so the hints of overlying technical details that imprison the organic structures beneath give a much better impression of my intentions in a way that enhances the overall aim of *First Do No Harm*, as an exhibition.<sup>4</sup>

Having worked for some time with small prints, for this project I made up a large screen and began the process of setting up some very large prints which I could use as stand-alone pieces. I made up several prints in this way and began the process of cutting them down to enhance their organic nature, and stitched them as I had with the smaller pieces. Rather than placing them on a black ground, I let these works hang free from the wall so as to emphasise their fragility and also to make use of the shadows they cast. I allowed the threads to hang free rather than trimming the ends, so that they suggest a rather imperfect attempt at mending. This is how I see the processes



used by the medical profession – they cannot give a perfect outcome, but simply 'oversee' the problems that they see and hope that this is enough for life to continue.

In the process of cutting, I have tried to give an organic feel to the pieces and form a structure within the rather random print process, so that they can be seen as either complete bodies or parts of some larger body with interconnections of their own. In this way, they hang as an entity and the mends become a binding for parts that need connection to the whole. I have tried to suggest here that all the parts are connected to the whole.

In conclusion, I am very much looking forward to the next phase of my exploration into the world of printmaking. The pieces I have constructed are markers into the world that I entered on being diagnosed with breast cancer; and they have set me on a new path into the art of my existence. They mark a trying part of my life, which is now in the past, and have helped me deal with a variety of outcomes I had not foreseen and would not have expected. I look forward to whatever comes next with enthusiasm tinged with some sadness (over what I have lost) and also some trepidation (over what I might yet face).

**Vivien Dwyer** is a recent graduate with an MVA . She has been a practicing artist for some years and returned to art school after her children grew up and became independent. She works in textile art with a special focus on printmaking and felting.



Figure 5. *Untitled, 2mx2m*, detail from *First Do No Harm Exhibition*, deconstructed screen print on cotton with hand embroidery.  
Photograph: Pam McKinlay.

- 1 "Willy Schut Interview: An Intuitive Process," *TextileArtist.org*, 2 May 2014, <http://www.textileartist.org/willy-schut-interview-intuitive-process> (accessed 26 October 2015).
- 2 Claire Benn and Leslie Morgan, *Breakdown Printing: New Dimensions for Texture & Colour* (Oxted, Surrey: Committed to Cloth, 2005), 1.
- 3 "Vanessa Rolf Interview: Drawing with the Thread," *TextileArtist.org*, <http://www.textileartist.org/vanessa-rolf-drawing-with-the-thread> (accessed 1 May 2017).
- 4 On the connections between the body, medicine and commerce, see Deborah Harris-Moore, *Media and the Rhetoric of Body Perfection: Cosmetic Surgery, Weight Loss and Beauty in Popular Culture* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2014); Elizabeth Ettorre, *Culture, Bodies and the Sociology of Health* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2010); Benjamin Barber, *Consumed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, and Swallow Citizens Whole* (New York: Norton, 2008).
- 5 Sandra Coney and Phillida Bunkle, "An 'Unfortunate Experiment' at National Womens'," *Metro* (June 1987), 47-65. See <https://www.womenshealthcouncil.org.nz/site/aklwhc/files/Metro%20article%201987.pdf>.