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*"CONTEMPORARY KNITWEAR AS A
MEDIUM FOR ARTISTIC EXPRESSION"*

by

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INTRODUCTION

The knitwear designer, though still regarded by some as a craftsperson, has over the past thirty years been gradually accepted as an artist. Knitting has been accepted and appreciated as a medium for artistic expression. I intend to analyse the different ways in which art is expressed through the medium of knitting.

Clothing of the past, from the seventeenth century costumes of the nobility Fig. 1 to the surrealists of the 1920's, has always been an important aesthetic of its time. Art has always been translated into fashion. Jean Cocteau, Pablo Picasso, Salvador Dali and Erte frequently, participated in creating costumes. Sonia Delaunay's theories of simultaneous colour were expressed in garments Fig. 2. Some Russian constructivist artists, including Rodchenko and Stepanova turned their attention to clothing.

Elsa Schiaparelli first came to prominence when she used knitwear to demonstrate the first of her shock effects. Her first design a trompe-l'oeil sweater Fig. 3 was created from a quick sketch. A black wool model, it had a simulation of a white butterfly bow at the neck. Variations on the idea followed. Illusionism, similar to that used by the surrealist artists, was a predominant factor. The idea of a knitted sweater as an art reached its height in the sixties when David Hockney designed a picture sweater that was framed to hang on a wall.

In chapter 1, I began my discussion by pinpointing artists who use knitwear primarily as a medium for



Fig 1. Seventeenth Century Venetian Coat in pale blue silk and silver thread (V+A)

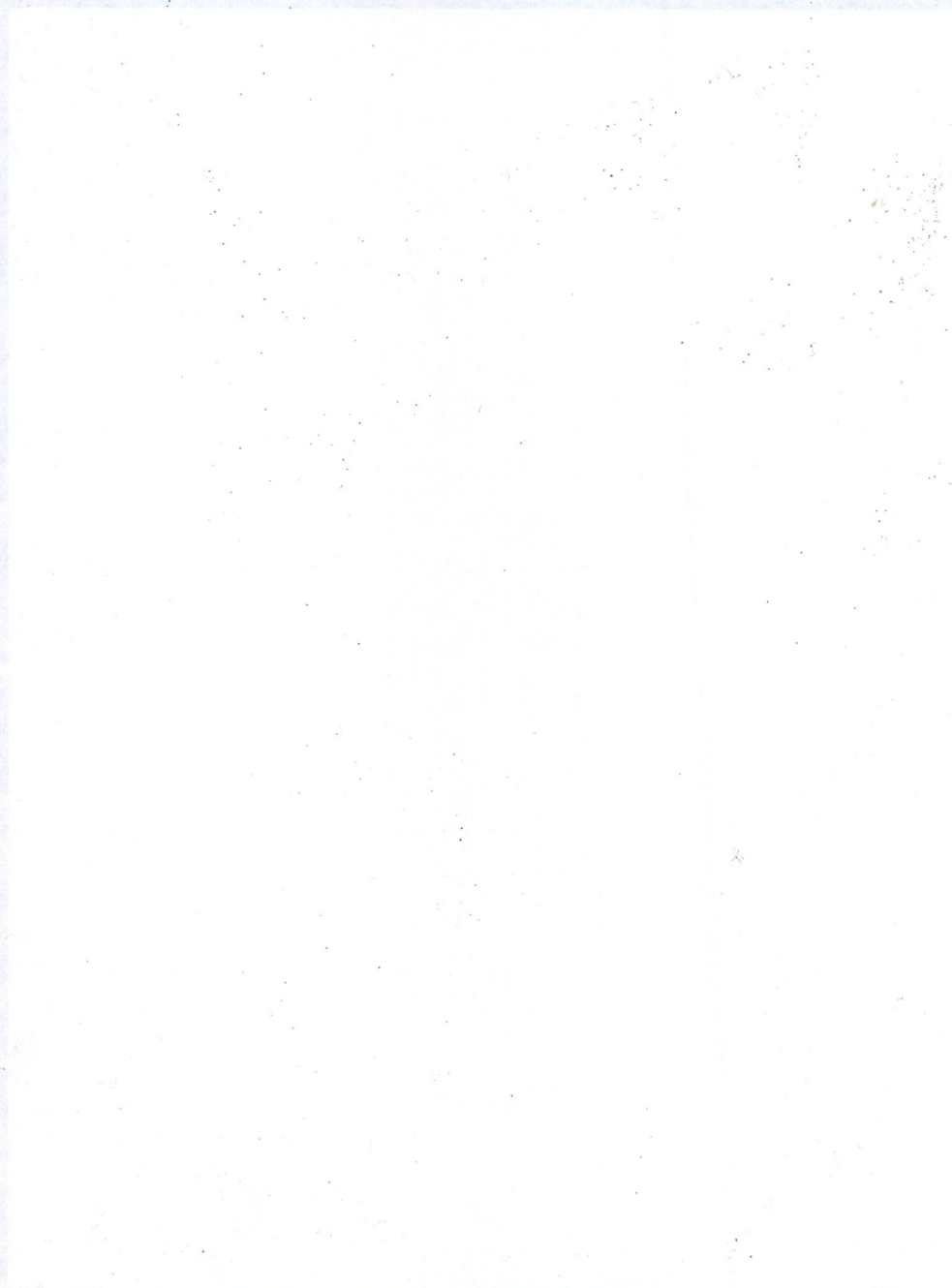




Fig. 2 Fashion illustration by Sonia Delaunay

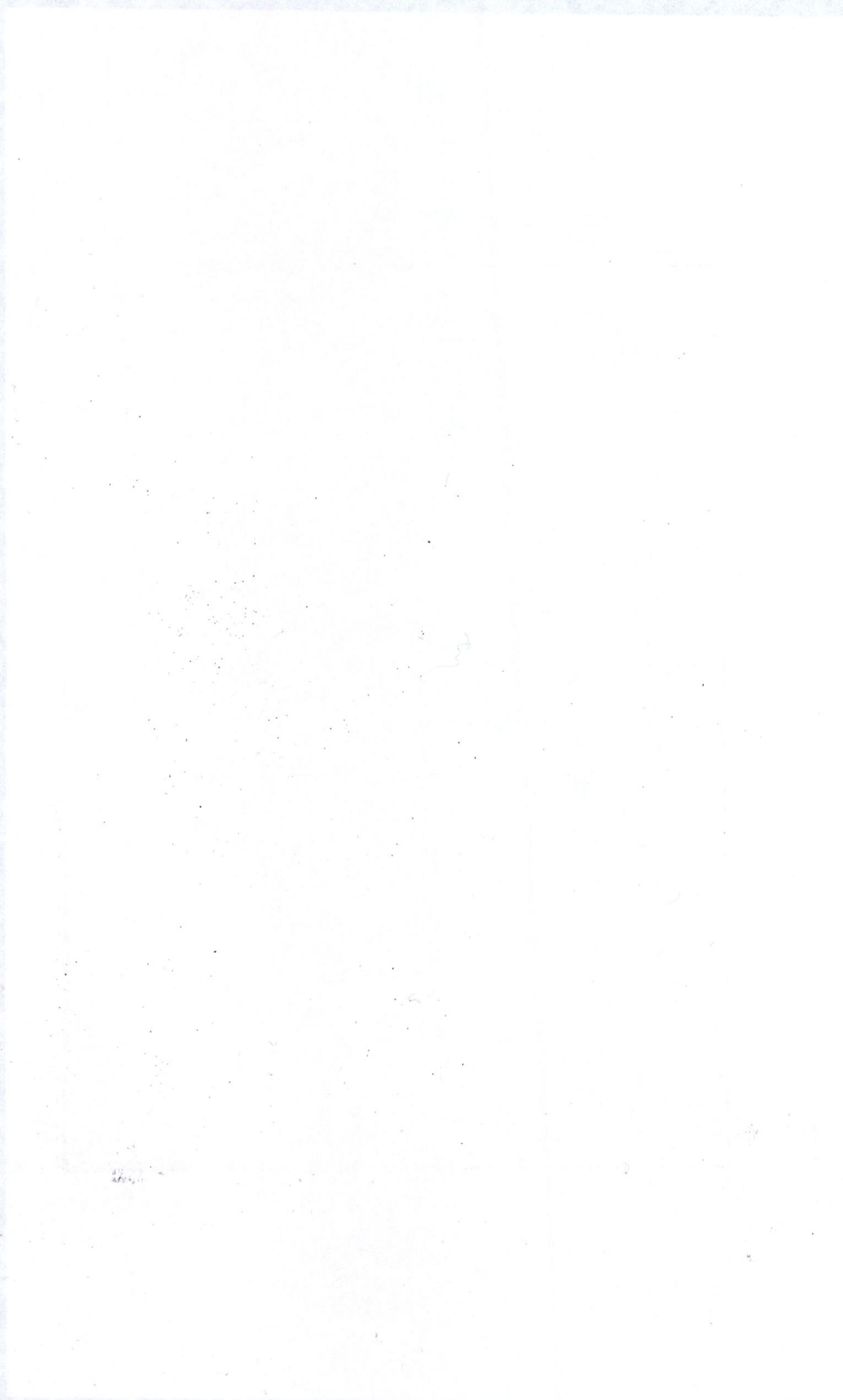
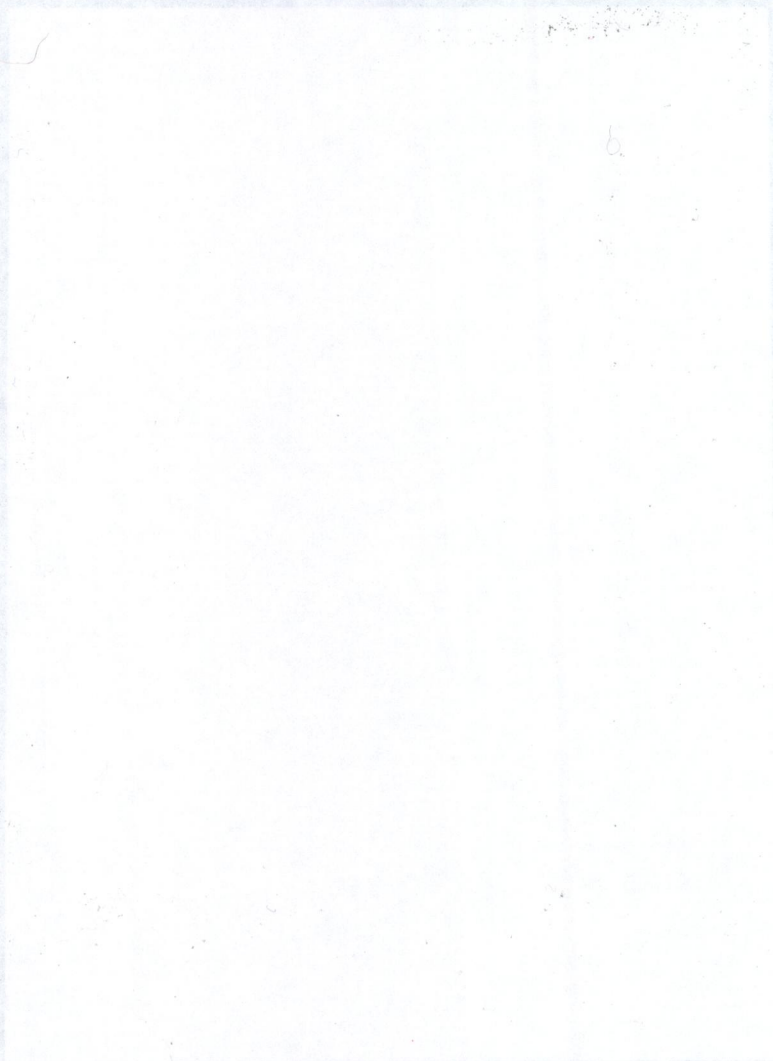




Fig. 3 Elsa Schiaparelli wearing her innovative butterfly bow trompe l'oeil sweater in 1927



creative expression. This chapter introduces the 1970's/80's American 'Art to Wear' movement, discussing the work of two American artists. Janet Lipkin and Susanna Lewis use the techniques of knitting and crochet to create wearable works of art. Their work, though technically wearable, would be more appropriately described as exhibition pieces. The chapter progresses to discuss the work of a Belgian artist based in Ireland. Lily Van Oost is a visual artist who uses knitting as a sculpting media.

Chapter two analyses how art is translated into commercially viable knitwear. I have discussed the work of two Irish knitwear designers, Lainey Keogh and Deirdre Fitzgerald, as an example of how creative knitwear is designed for a commercial market. During interviews, both of these designers expressed to me the importance of a knitwear designers ability to combine artistic elements with styling to create a garment that is both artistic and fashionable.

Kaffe Fassett, the man responsible for introducing knitting as an art to the domestic knitter in Ireland, England, America and parts of Europe, is the subject of my third chapter. He claims that garments should be one size and unisexual and the experimenting with colour and texture is essential to good knitting. His garments are suspended somewhere between wearable art and fashion.

CHAPTER ONE

FIBRE ART

ART IN THE SHAPE OF GARMENTS

"Self expression has always involved choosing what to wear and in the 1970's this choice took on an especially individualized form (3, p.9).

Individuals expressed themselves through their clothing wearing literally anything they considered would best express their feelings and personality. However, the pieces Julie Schafler Dale, author of the book Art To Wear 1986 and founder of Julie: Artisan Gallery, encountered were not just unusual garments put together by untrained individuals, they were wearable works of art of a very high standard. Julie Schafler Dale opened her New York Gallery in 1973 to accommodate and exhibit the work of contemporary American artists creating 'Art to Wear'.

The artist involved in this movement enjoyed freedom equivalent to that of visual and performing artists who worked in more established media for expression. They mixed media and technique, many of the artists moving freely from one medium to another. I intend to concentrate on their use of crochet and knitting. In the 1970's craftsmanship such as crochet was widespread in reaction to an increasingly technological society. The eighties witnessed artists coming to terms with technology and incorporating it into their work. Many artists involved with crochet during the 1970's discovered the knitting machine as a tool for expressing the high tech graphic imagery of

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the Eighties. Some of the earlier (1970's) crochet pieces would be more appropriately described as "body adornments" (2, p.47) as opposed to wearable garments. During the Eighties more attention was paid to the fit of the garments.

The 'Art To Wear' movement (as named by Julie Schafler Dale when she opened her gallery in 1973) rebelled against the elitist view that art should be non-functional, viewed in museums or galleries or cut off from the reality of daily life. Ironically, many of these wearable works of art are only wearable because the artist has stated that they are wearable and added sleeves to what appears more likely to be a wallhanging. A large majority of these garments are not worn in everyday life, have never been worn and in fact are only viewed as non-functional pieces in museums or galleries.

"It was the theme I was so anxious to depict. And because I wanted to be part of Julie : Artisan Gallery, I did it on a cape" (2, p.82).

Susanna Lewis, an American artist using knitting to create wearable art, admits that the wearability of her garment is secondary to the depiction of a theme. By making a piece of art wearable it becomes more innovative, more admirable than a non-functional piece. The appreciation of wearable art is different to that of a non-functional piece. People do not expect to see people wearing art, generally they are impressed by this fact. Unlike Susanna Lewis, some artists insist that the human body is necessary to animate and display their work. In some cases this is true. However, many of the garments displayed in Julie : Artisan Gallery were unwearable exhibition pieces. Nevertheless their

uncompromising freedom of expression and their exploitation of crochet and knitting as an artistic medium demonstrated the endless possibilities of knitwear.

JANET LIPKIN

".....crochet. It consists of wrapping your thread around your hook and pulling it through the knot on your hook. From there we went wild". (2, p.45)

Janet Lipkin is one of the five art students who graduated from the Pratt Institute, New York in 1970 and went on to use crochet as a sculptural art form. She was the first of the group of five students to experiment with wearable pieces. Having studied painting, drawing, sculpture and ceramics Janet soon began to translate her ideas into crochet. Colour, design, dimension and composition remained relevant regardless of the medium she chose to work in. Lipkin used crochet in unusual ways, crocheting around wire and wooden forms and using it in combination with beads, leather, feathers and other media. Janet wanted to make a statement through imagery and crochet was the medium she chose to use. She found that crochet, like painting, has no limitations.

Keeping in mode with 1970's environmental issues, Lipkin spun and vegetable dyed her yarns. She enjoyed taking primitive processes and evolving them into a modern statement. Lipkin preferred to use natural fibre yarns but was prepared to mix them with all sorts of different media to accomplish the desired effect. Artist Dina Knapp explained when describing her preference for crochet, "I love it, I loved using



Fig 4. African Mask, 1970 by Janet Lipkin



something that had to do with colour, something that was useful and beautiful at the same time" (2, p.18). Lipkin also wanted to use crochet to create something both useful and beautiful. In 1970 she first experimented with crochet vests. These early garments didn't really fit the human body, in fact Lipkin herself admits they had little to do with fit. Some of the pieces were so sculptural that that they would appropriately be described as artworks in the shape of garments. Her creations were innovative, but certainly not meant to be daywear. Lipkin describes her early works as "art attached to the body" (2. p.49).

African Mask (1970) Fig. 4 is one of Lipkin's most sculptural pieces. The wearer is literally transformed into a primitive sculpture, totally unrecognisable as a human being. Lipkin has used natural earthy colours, tones of brown being the most predominant. Using wool yarn, leather and wood, Lipkin has hand-spun, hand-dyed, crocheted and painted in order to create this unusual piece. The majority of the garment is crocheted, producing a highly textured surface. The garment is floor length, the hood and mittens completing the transformation of the human body. A line of pockets run down the front of the garment symbolizing the African Shaman's herbal pouch. It is technically possible to wear this garment because the artist has created it with sleeves and stated that it is a garment. However, it is unlikely that this piece has ever been worn for anything other than a photography session. Such a garment would be acceptable if it had been created for a particular reason - such as the theatre but it seems in cases such as this the artist decides his/her work will be wearable to ensure it makes more of an impact.



Fig 5. Strawberry Jacket, 1973 by Janet Lipkin



Strawberry Jacket (1973) Fig. 5 is another sculptural piece, though unlike African Mask this piece doesn't totally transform the wearer. Lipkin planned to do a series of fruit but she only got as far as the strawberry. Lipkin used wool and metallic yarns, wool jersey and sequins to gain the required effects. Again, little attention is given to fit but this strawberry-shaped garment is more wearable than some of Lipkin's other pieces. Throughout this short-sleeved, waist-length garment the artist explores the concept of scale. Every part of the jacket, even close up, looks like part of a strawberry. The strawberry motif is present on the buttons and even the lining is appliqued with images of strawberries.

The year 1974 witnessed a gradual change in Lipkin's work, more emphasis being applied to simplicity and practicality. During this period she travelled to Africa (1976) and returning in 1978, she began working commercially. Lipkin began using knitting to depict graphic images. Commercial knitwear restricted her ideas and so she started to do collage. She channelled all her energy and ideas into collage. However, many of her collages depicted clothing and when she began painting she concentrated on images of coats; soon she began knitting these coats. It wasn't until this time (early 1980's) that Lipkin began to explore, in depth, the knitting machine as she had previously explored crochet.

Flamingo Fig. 6 of 1982 contrasts strongly with Bird Coat Fig. 7 of 1972. Despite the fact that both pieces symbolize birds and both are more sculptured and wearable, it is the treatment of the surface that makes them totally different. The textural crochet of 'Bird Coat' contrasts sharply with the smooth surface graphic



Fig 6. Flamingo, 1982 by Janet Lipkin

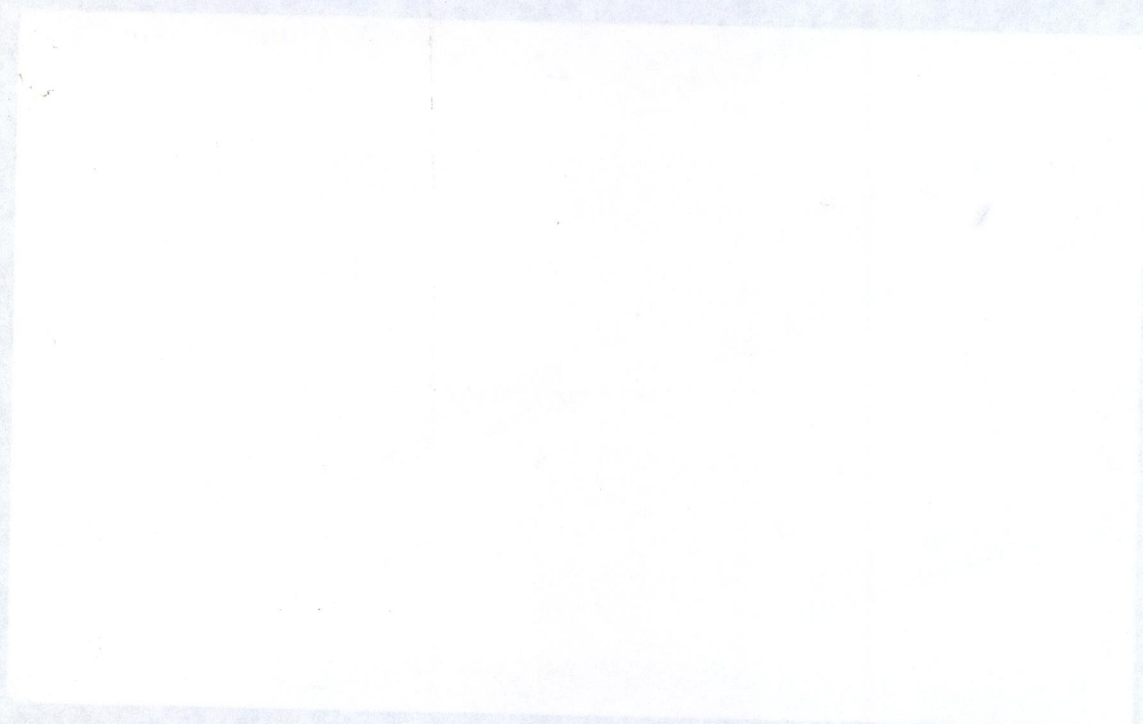




Fig 7. Bird Coat, 1972 by Janet Lipkin



imagery of Flamingo. Although the structure of Flamingo is more sculptured than wearable it is at this stage that Lipkin begins to explore form through drape and her garments become more flattering to the wearer.

Linear Layers (1983) Fig. 8 resulted from experiments of draping the body with fabric. This was the first piece that did not begin with drawing. It consists of four individual pieces that can combine in various ways to become one. The knitted surfaces display graphic designs which work brilliantly when the garments are worn simultaneously. Unlike some of Lipkin's earlier works (e.g. African Mask) it is obvious that 'Linear Layers' would not work without the dimension of a body to provide it with life and form.

Lipkin's work is suspended somewhere between art and fashion. She explains what she believes differentiates these seemingly disparate fields "commercial work is intellectual, rational; art is emotional" (2, p.53). It was not until the 1980's that Lipkin seemed to reach a compromise between art and fashion, at this point her garments became more wearable, sometimes even flattering.

SUSANNA LEWIS

Susanna Lewis is an artist who has used the knitting machine as a tool for creative expression. Lewis studied art, music and biology but it was her link with the Pratt Institute that led to her interest in wearable art. As a student, Janet Lipkin babysat for Lewis's first daughter. Lewis's involvement with the New York Pratt students made her realise the unlimited possibilities of working with yarn in an unconventional



Fig 8. Linear Layers, 1983 by Janet Lipkin



way. In 1971 Lewis bought her first knitting machine. It was three years before she taught herself how to use the knitting machine competently. She produced her first wall hanging in 1974 and now she continues to express herself through fibre art. Lewis was familiar with Julie : Artisan's Gallery and the idea of wearable art in 1974. She was excited with the concept of creating art to fit the body. She decided her work would adopt two identities - it would be a wallhanging when on a wall and a different piece when it was worn, so she began to think of three dimensional pieces.

Lewis's images are identifiable, displayed on simple geometrically shaped garments. She treats the garment as a body tapestry, surface imagery being of predominant importance. She mixes media, using both natural and man-made yarns, often using appliqued fabric, beads, studs and other media. The most important element of Lewis' work is the symbolic message it conveys. Lewis feels that a legitimate art form has to express some kind of personal concept. Wearability is not an important factor in Lewis' work. Some artists consider the concept behind their work to be the more important element, I don't believe that concept should overpower the aesthetic of a piece of art. To create functional art is a concept in itself, a personal message is not always necessary. Lewis seems to have been attracted to the idea of wearable art because it was new and innovative, not because it was particularly relevant to her work.

At Night All Cats are Grey (1976) Fig. 9 is the first of the artists tapestry capes. Keeping in mind her work's double identity, the shape of this piece is a semi-circle which works both as a wall hanging and a garment. This shape also provides sufficient surface

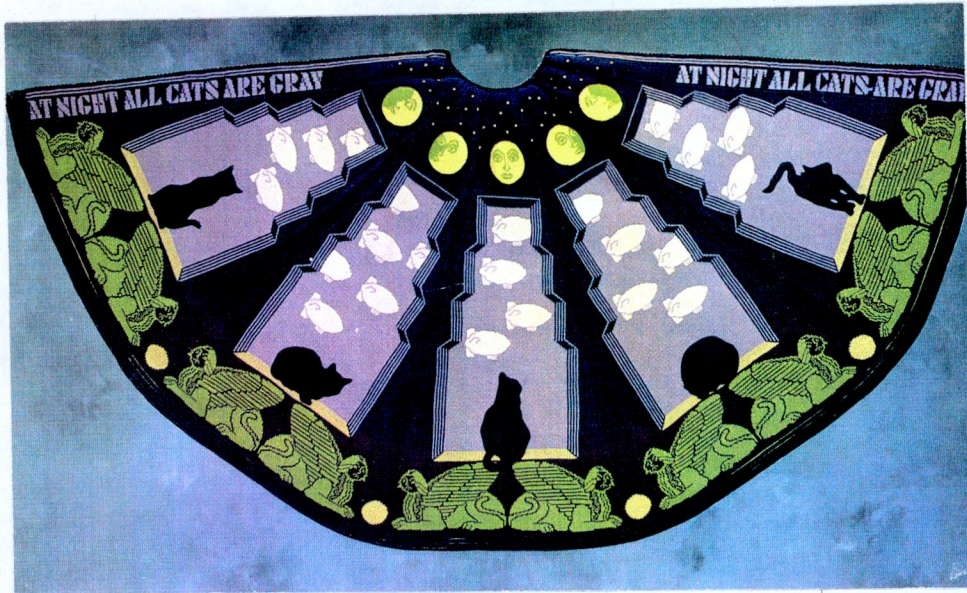


Fig 9. At Night All Cats Are Grey, 1976
by Susanna Lewis



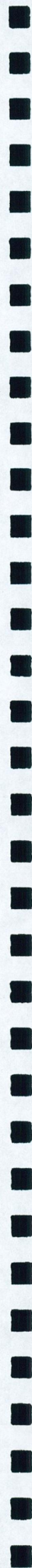
to display her images and convey her message. The title 'At Night All Cats Are Grey' is knitted along the straight edge of the cape proclaiming Lewis' contempt for racial inequality. The capes imagery is dominated by objects and creatures of the night. The cape is divided into sections, in each of which dark cats are silhouetted on window sills, sphinxes sit along the border of the cape. Blimps (airships) float through the sky whilst the five caricatured moons indicate that the end and the beginning of the cape are cyclical.

Lewis did a lot of illustrative pieces similar in concept to At Night All Cats Are Grey. In 1978 she did a piece that was quite different. She was invited by the American Craft Museum to create a piece for "The Great American Foot". She decided to do a pair of thigh length socks which illustrated the entire story of the Wizard of Oz. The left leg of Oz Socks Fig. 10 represents Oz, the right leg represents Kansas. The socks are knitted in one piece from top to bottom. Both legs and feet were knitted flat and a seam was sewn up the back. The majority of the colour work, including the rainbow, Emerald City, cloud forms and Kansas were knitted; applique fabric was later attached. The shoes and socks are one piece. There are two knitted garters, one reading "somewhere over the rainbow" and the other "we're off to see the wizard".

Like Oz Socks, a lot of Lewis' works are mixed media but Picture Postcard Ponchos are limited to the use of wool, yarns and beads. These pieces are large pictorial postcard shaped ponchos. The first was made in response to an invitation to participate in Celebration '84, an exhibition of 'art to wear' organised by the American Crafts Museum and the Ontario



Fig 10. Oz Socks, 1978 by Susanna Lewis



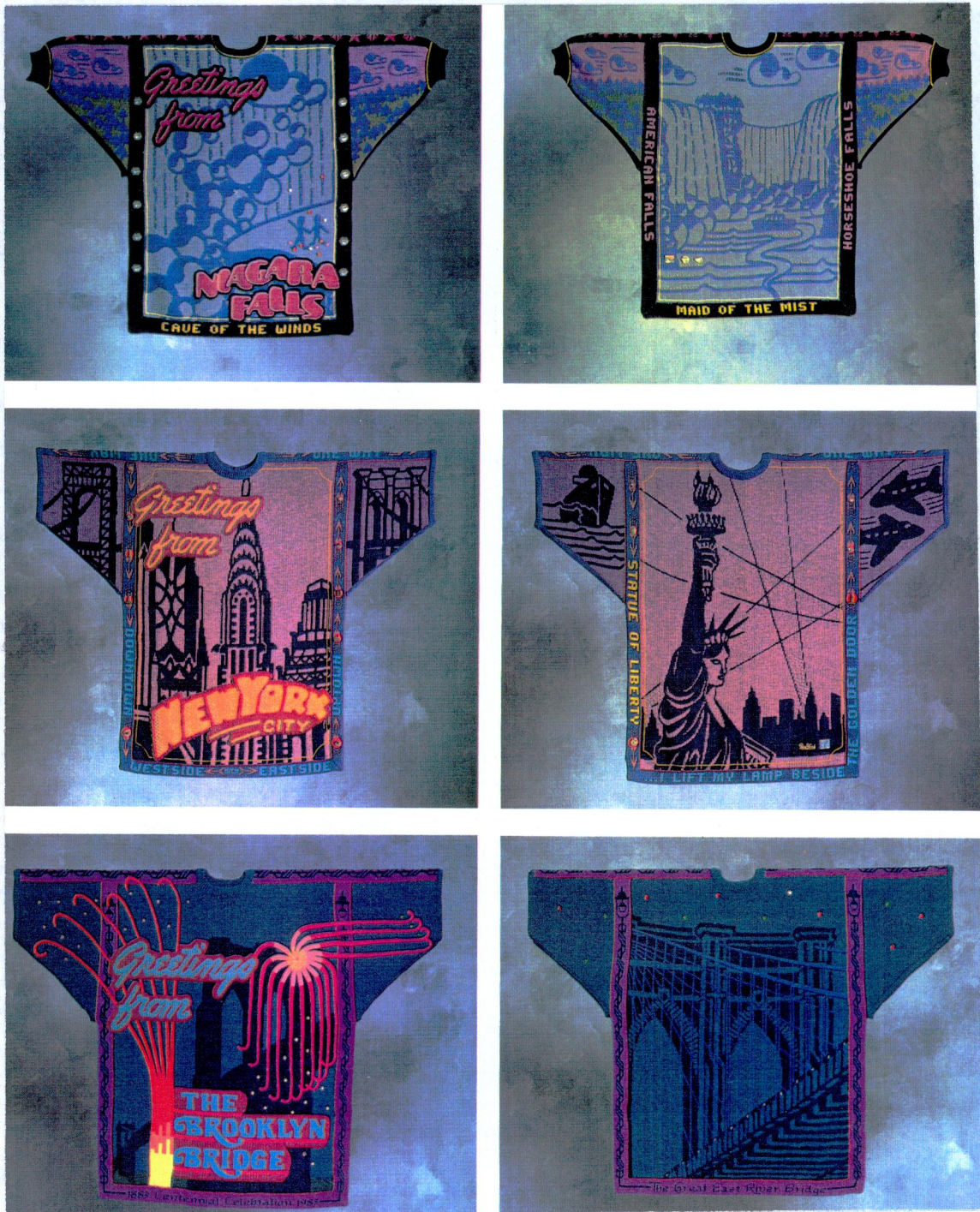


Fig 11. Top:

Picture Postcard Poncho : Niagara Falls,
1984 by Susanna Lewis

Middle:

Picture Postcard Poncho : New York City,
1984 by Susanna Lewis

Bottom:

Picture Postcard Poncho : The Brooklyn Bridge,
1985 by Susanna Lewis



Crafts Council. To celebrate the birthday of Ontario and the friendship between the United States and Canada, Lewis chose a place to depict that has connections with both countries. Niagara Falls (1984) Fig. 11, like a postcard, send greetings and illustrates the American and Canadian Falls (also known as the Horseshoe Falls). "Maid of the Mist" knitted along the hem refers to the local tourist boat that takes visitors under the falls. The next two Picture Postcard Ponchos in this series are called New York Fig. 11 and Brooklyn Bridge Fig. 11.

Lewis uses knitwear as a medium for expression. All of her works express some kind of symbolic message, their function is to illustrate a concept. Unlike Janet Lipkin, Lewis never became interested in draping or styling. Her work always maintained a double identity - as both a wallhanging and a garment.

LILY VAN OOST

Lily Van Oost is a Belgian born artist living in Killarney, Co. Kerry. Van Oost holds a Masters of Fine Art, Arts Degree from the Royal Academy and Institute of Fine Arts in Antwerp. A naturalised Irish citizen since 1968, it was here that she discovered the expressiveness of wool and its possibilities as an art form. Van Oost works as a visual artist through the medium of knit (she also works in other mediums but knitting is her most renowned form of expression).

Van Oost uses knitting as a sculpting media. She has experimented with wearable art - creating spectacular knitted coats and jumpers like shaggy raw wool tapestries with an odour reminiscent of the bog.



Fig 12. Lily Van Oost body coverings in knit and crochet were on tour with the 'Vice Versa' exhibition in 1991.





Fig 13. R.H.K. Arcade, 1990 by Lily Van Oost



In 1991 six works for the International Sculptural Exhibition included a jumper entitled Cocklebus which was knitted for a double decker bus. More of her ideas are translated, through the technique of knitting, into sculptural art forms.

Fiber is a pliable material which makes it very adaptable to various^{ou} shapes. In her work for the Vice Versa Exhibition of 1991 Fig. 12 she totally covers the human with her sculptural garments and masks. Like African Mask Fig. 4 by Janet Lipkin, this piece transforms the human body in a sculptural art form. In 1990 Van Oost knitted and crocheted dyed and twisted Pretty Polly tights to create the wall hanging entitled 'R.H.K. Arcade'^{Fig 13} Van Oost presented the wall hanging to the Royal Hospital Kilmainham in 1990. The work depicts part of the R.H.K. courtyard, complete with clock tower, sundial and a variety of masks. According to Lily these masks include the macho man, the black man, the alcoholic, and other faces which represent the people who visit the R.H.K. (27.)

Van Oost doesn't take into consideration the saleability of the work she produces. Her works are exhibition pieces, she has had fifty one exhibitions worldwide, twelve of them in Ireland. Like all of the artists discussed in this chapter she is a visual artist expressing herself through the medium of knit.

CHAPTER TWO

ART INTO FASHION

LAINY KEOGH

A revolution has struck the Irish knitwear industry over the past few years. With the emergence of new innovative Irish knitwear designers, one of our oldest and most important handicrafts has been catapulted into the competitive world of high fashion. Irish knitwear designers have demonstrated the possibilities of successfully translating creativity into commercially viable garments. Lainey Keogh is one designer who has proven her ability to use her artistic talent to create fashionable knitwear.

Lainey Keogh discovered her talent for knitwear design by accident. In 1984 an oversized sweater she knitted for a boyfriend was a great success. She was inundated with commissions to knit jumpers. She continued knitting, gradually employing out-knitters. Her first collection appeared in the Irish Fashion Design Centre in Powerscourt in September, 1984. After the success of her first collection she gave up her job as a hospital assistant and set up a fashion knitwear business based in Dublin's South Anne Street. She has since won a string of awards including the prestigious International Linen Award in 1989. Keogh's Linen/Cotton Aran style sweaters were chosen by French designer Christian Lacroix in Monte Carlo.

Keogh's knits are expensive, ranging from £150 - £500 but you do get what you pay for in terms of an individual, well crafted garment. She is doing extremely well in the home market. Her main outlet is the Design Centre in Powerscourt but her collections are available at over ten stores throughout Ireland. She also sells twenty five per cent of her total output in Japan, the United States of America and Canada.

"The Harlequinn Jumpers Fig. 14 are works of art" (12.) wrote Tara Buckley when describing Keogh's Winter 1990/91 knitwear collection. Indeed Keogh considers her knitwear to be a form of art. However, she admits that because she is working in the field of commercial knitwear she doesn't have total freedom of expression. Some of her ideas have to be toned down but she balances this by creating one or two really expressive (consequently, really expensive) garments per collection. When her knitwear first appeared on the market in 1984 she was accused of being over indulgent, expecting people to pay from £200 upward for a jumper. Since then she has tried to re-interpret some of her ideas using wool and synthetic mixes and less intricate detail. She has never been a slavish follower of fashion. Her pieces are highly individual but not radical or gimmicky. They are classic pieces that can be worn from one season to the next.

Keogh explains that she gets her inspiration from a variety of sources. She maintains that she is always looking at everything. She is continuously striving to do something new, even if sometimes it involves a source that previously inspired her. She travels a great deal and has spent a lot of time in America this year. In America she came across many ideas she plans to use in the future, though she wasn't willing to

The first part of the report deals with the general situation of the country and the progress of the work. It is followed by a detailed account of the various projects and the results achieved. The report concludes with a summary of the work done and the prospects for the future.

The second part of the report deals with the financial aspects of the work. It gives a detailed account of the income and expenditure of the organization and shows how the funds have been used. It also gives a statement of the assets and liabilities of the organization.

The third part of the report deals with the personnel of the organization. It gives a list of the staff and their duties and shows how the work has been organized. It also gives a statement of the salaries and other benefits of the staff.

The fourth part of the report deals with the results of the work. It gives a detailed account of the various projects and the results achieved. It also gives a statement of the progress made in the various fields of work.

The fifth part of the report deals with the future prospects of the organization. It gives a statement of the plans for the future and shows how the organization intends to carry out these plans. It also gives a statement of the resources available for the future work.

disclose these to me (30.). She considers travel to be a very important influence on her work. The fact that she never knows what she is going to create, for example next year, excites Keogh. She may have a great idea but she is always willing to discover different aspects and improve on this idea.

Keogh loves the imagery in pre-christian Irish art, like the symbols you see at New Grange. They are a major influence in her work, particularly the menswear in her Autumn/Winter 1990/91 collection. (Fig. 15) Swirls, circles and crosses dominate the large chunky jumpers. The colours in natural black or grey are knitted in tweed yarn or mohair mixes. In 1987 she also did a sweater using pre-christian symbols. It is covered with spirals and star shapes and was extremely successful all over the world. She says that when she shows work like that abroad people are very interested in hearing about the symbols, the stories behind the imagery.

Her first commercial designs were big mohair sweaters with multi-coloured ba^oubles Fig. 16. The garments relied heavily on texture and stitch effects and this combination has remained Keogh's trademark in comparison to, for example Kaffe Fassett (see chapter three), Keogh uses colour minimally. She insists that how you use colour is very important, as it makes or breaks a design. Overly colourful garments are not commercially successful (particularly in Ireland's predominantly conservative market). Although her use of colour is quite safe, her colours are always in line with the up-to-date fashion palette. She has explored many Aran-type stitch effects and since 1989 she has used crochet to advantage.



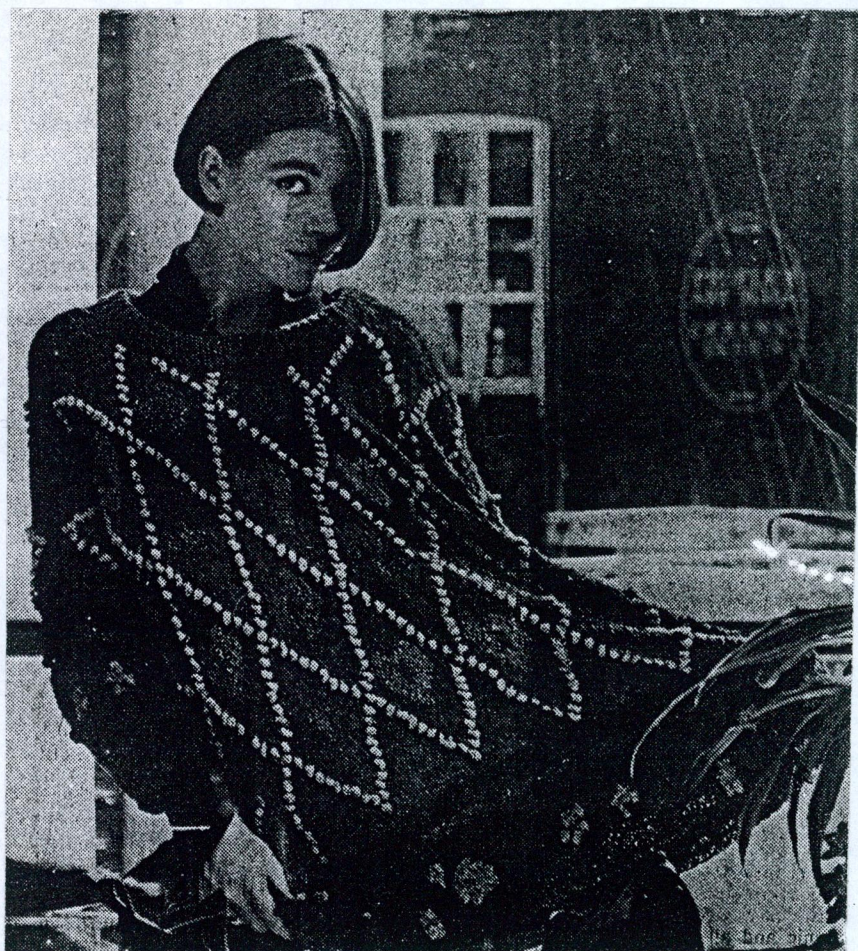


Fig 14. A red viscose jumper with harlequin design in gold and lurex by Lainey Keogh.





Fig 15. Newgrange Sweater, 1990 by Lainey Keogh





Fig 16. Mohair Sweater, 1984 by Lainey Keogh



Unlike Janet Lipkin, Keogh has used crochet in a fairly traditional way. However, hers are not traditional staid white garments reminiscent of christening robes; they are relaxed, loose and sexy. In the 1950's and 1960's designers Irene Gilbert and Sybil Connolly popularised the look of crochet for evening wear. Keogh first got the idea for incorporating crochet into her work when she was looking through tourist shops while holidaying in Killarney. Experimenting with various yarns, she found the best one was viscose for "sheen, lustre, drape and flow" (21.). She cleverly translates crochet into fragile, cobwebby tops with low cut necks that can be worn off the shoulder Fig. 17. Little black bolero tops are fringed with black beading Fig. 18. Her crochet garments also come in unlikely colours such as black, olive, lime, bronze and red rust. She also uses crochet to trim or decorate garments.

Despite Keogh's pre-occupation with stitch effects and texture, she does experiment with pattern. Usually there are not more than three or four colours in each garment. In 1988 she produced South American Indian-inspired sweaters in subtle blends of wool, linen and alpaca. Cactus-inspired motifs in red, green and yellow brighten up black cotton biker-style knitted jackets Fig. 19. In 1989 Turkish-inspired contrast stitches dominated her Autumn/Winter collection Fig. 20. The patterns on her men's jumpers (1990) inspired by New Grange and Celtic Mythology have already been mentioned in this chapter. Keogh uses pattern competently but it is her talent for combining shape, colour, texture and intricate stitch effects that make her hand-knits so unusual. Her knits are totally on stream with overseas knitwear designers like Joseph Tricot. Fig.





Fig 17. Olive viscose crochet sweater in an Irish rose pattern.
1989, by Lainey Keogh.





Fig 18. Crochet bolero with black beading, 1989 by Lainey Keogh.





Fig 19. Cotton biker style knitted jackets by Lainey Keogh.



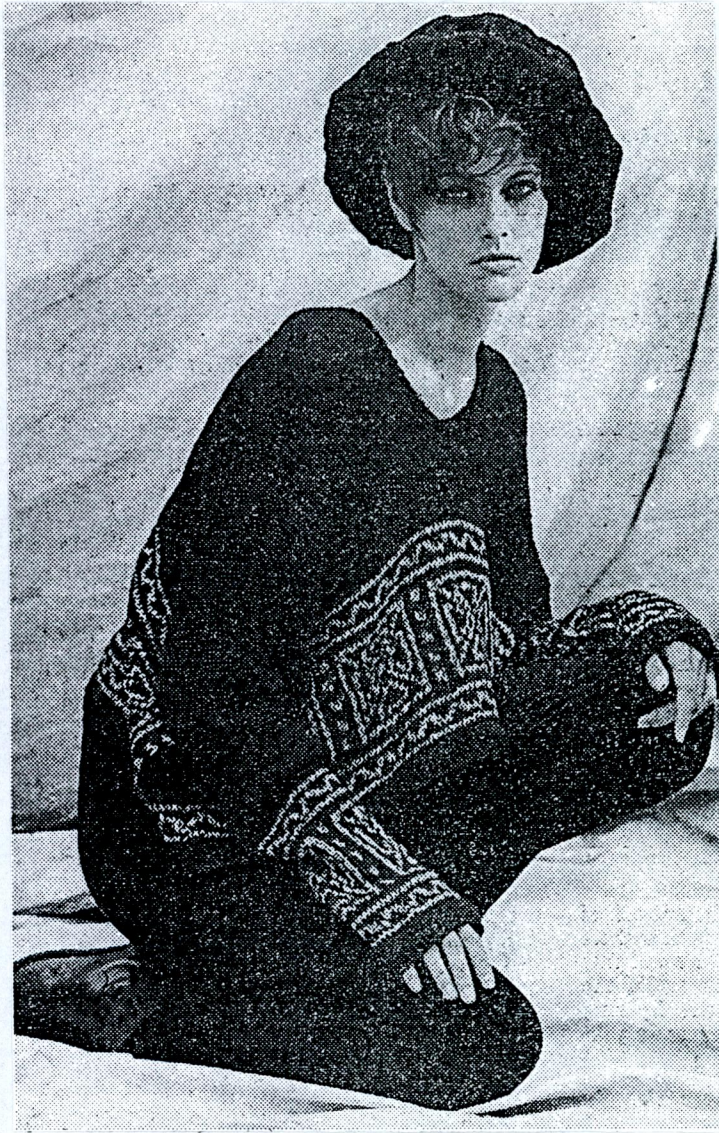


Fig 20. Black drape sweater in black with gold viscose, 1989 by Lainey Keogh.



Keogh explains that for her the artistic process begins with the yarn. She feels that sourcing yarns is extremely important. By using different yarns, knitwear has endless possibilities and that is why going to the Yarn Fairs in France and Italy is so important. Continental yarns are imaginative and they have every colour in the spectrum. "We have to look further in Ireland than the Aran sweater to compete," says Keogh (15.). She has no qualms about using synthetic or acrylic yarns. The most important thing is that the yarn enables the designer to use his/her ability to create a fabric which is of good quality, imaginative and individual. Experimentation, particularly in Italy has resulted in unusual natural fibre yarns becoming equal to innovative man-made yarns. In Italy Keogh discovered a yarn that "looked like stone and felt like feathers" (30.). Other yarns enabled her to knit fake fur. These discoveries provided the inspiration for her 1991/92 Autumn/Winter collection.

Keogh's knits are distinctive, immediately recognizable as 'Lainey Keogh's'. It is a bit like for example, Picasso's painting, always possessing a certain familiar quality even if the source/themes are very different. Keogh's signature is evident in all her work but she says this is not something she does consciously. She also claims that she is not interested in repetition. This doesn't alter the fact that in 1988/89 she depended on South American Indian themes for inspiration three seasons in a row; motifs and patterns were changed slightly and used with different colour schemes. She has used christian art and celtic symbols on numerous occasions. However, she does refer to this fact, stating that obviously she sometimes takes certain aspects of a collection and

develops them further in the next season. According to Keogh, her work is always about something new. However, the new factor is minimal; whether she is interested in repetition or not; she certainly practises it.

Nevertheless, Lainey Keogh was one of the pioneers of the so-called Irish knitwear revolution which began in the early 1980's. Since her garments first appeared in the Design Centre, her style has been religiously copied. The Design Centre now stocks knitwear by Glynis Robins, Lynn Marr and Hot Dot. Unfortunately none of these designers have developed their knits further than their re-interpretation of Lainey Keogh's earlier styles. However, their designs are very popular and have opened the way for more innovative Irish knitwear designers.

DEIRDRE FITZGERALD

An innovative Irish knitwear designer, Deirdre Fitzgedrald fits this description. Deirdre Fitzgerald graduated from the National College of Art and Design in 1989 and teamed up with Lorna Ross under the Francobolli label Fig. 21. The pair have since split and Fitzgerald has concentrated solely on knitwear. Despite the gloom hanging over the Irish Fashion Industry, Fitzgerald is doing extremely well. In some respects e.g. their use of chenille and crochet, her work could be compared with that of Lainey Keogh. They both produce creative knits that are flattering to the wearer. Fitzgerald has not yet progressed to menswear. Her style is very individual and she has found her market.

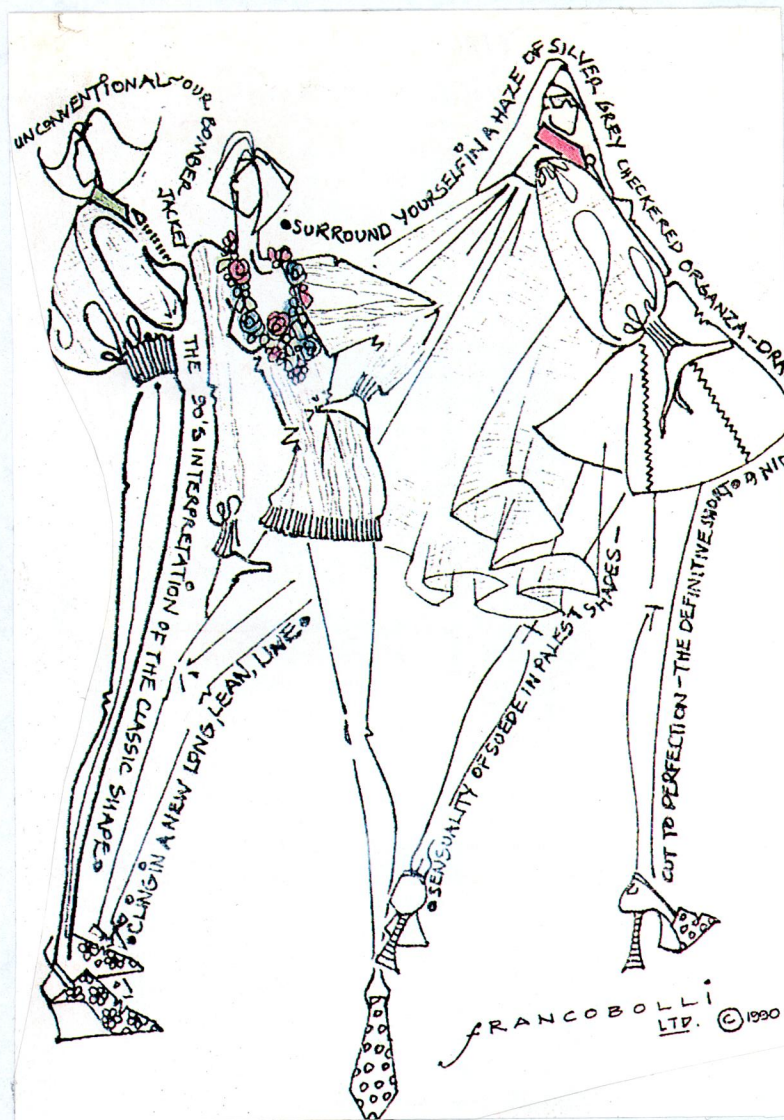


Fig 21. Designs for Francobolli by Deirdre Fitzgerald and Lorna Ross.



Like Lainey Keogh, Fitzgerald is working in the commercial field. Her main outlet is the Design Centre in Powerscourt and Brown Thomas' Wardrobe Department. She is also beginning to build up an export market. Despite concentrating on the commercial end of knitwear she insists that her knitwear is a form of art. Her initial ideas are very artistic involving a lot of three dimensional textural effects. These ideas must be diluted to create a commercially viable garment. She explains that it is imperative that a designer is capable of working the artistic elements and styling together to create a definite look Fig. 21. This is where she differs from artists such as Janet Lipkin, who gives little attention to styling. Lipkin's work is more art than fashion. Fitzgerald's knitwear is up-to-date and fashionable.

Fitzgerald's sources of inspiration vary. She's always experimenting with yarn and she preys on everything for ideas. She tends to approach design in a variety of ways; her 1991 Autumn/Winter collection for Brown Thomas began as a group of colours she wanted to experiment with and from there the collection evolved. In other cases she experiments with stitch techniques and comes across something that sparks a collection. Texture and stitch effects are the most important aspect of her designs. Fitzgerald effectively translates creative ideas into fashionable garments. She designs a couple of very creative garments per range and balances them with less expensive versions. Cost of yarn and labour is balanced e.g. if a very intricate effect is used, resulting in high labour costs, inexpensive yarn must balance the cost of labour. She does not depend on seasonal fashion forecasts but is subconsciously influenced by them.

Naturally you are influenced by what goes on around you. Fashion forecasts are important, they must be acknowledged but not slavishly followed.

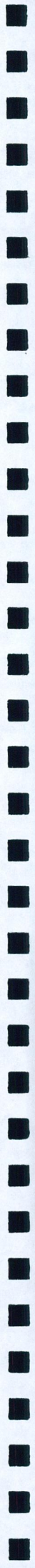
Fitzgerald rarely uses pattern in her knits. She does use a considerable amount of colour but not in a conventional way. For Winter 1991/92 she designed a swing jumper, with a scooped neckline, which was knitted in black and decorated with her signatory crochet garland of flowers. The flowers were crocheted in shades of red, yellow and lilac. In her 1990/91 Autumn/Winter collection a watermelon red cotton knit bustier Fig. 22 was embellished with colourful crochet shapes and crystal bead buttons.

Unlike Lainey Keogh, Fitzgerald feels there is a gap in the market for more colourful, patterned knits. Irish knitwear designers have been unadventurous for a long time and it is only in the last few years that they have become experimental. Most Irish designers have concentrated on Aran-style traditional Irish knits. Unfortunately it is difficult to employ out-knitters who deal with colour successfully. The majority of Irish knitters are only experienced in Aran-type stitches. Traditionally overly patterned garments were regarded as unattractive, reminding people of the sleeveless pullovers worn by Irish men in the past. Now the likes of Kaffe Fassett (see chapter three) have demonstrated the endless possibilities of patterned knitwear. Knitwear designers e.g. Deirdre Fitzgerald are beginning to experiment in this area of knitwear.

Fitzgerald intends to use pattern to create a look totally different from her present style. She did in fact design a Fair Isle cardigan for her 1990/91



Fig 22. Watermelon red cotton knit bustier with crochet garland and crystal bead buttons, 1990 by Deirdre Fitzgerald for Francobolli.



Autumn/Winter collection Fig. 23 but she has not experimented with pattern since. She now intends to design a range of garments for a different company. Her name will not be related to this range because she doesn't want it to effect her present market. The look she produces at the moment is very personal, clothes she would personally like to wear.

Crochet is an important element in Fitzgerald's work. Much of her colour is applied through crochet. For her Autumn/Winter 1991/92 collection, colourful crochet shapes are appliqued onto black chenille jumpers. She also uses crochet independently. This season's crocheted lurex wraps are semi-sculptured^{al}. Swirling crocheted acorn shapes are the predominant feature of these evening wear gold or bronze wraps. In this case Fitzgerald has chosen to use lurex but generally she prefers to use natural fibre yarns. She uses mainly cotton which she buys on the continent - usually from Germany.

Fitzgerald is definitely one of the most, if not the most innovative designer working in the Irish knitwear industry. Her artistic talent is expressed through knitwear. Like Lainey Keogh, she successfully combines the seemingly disparate fields of art and fashion. Their knits are innovative, individual, expressive yet they are also functional, flattering and fashionable.

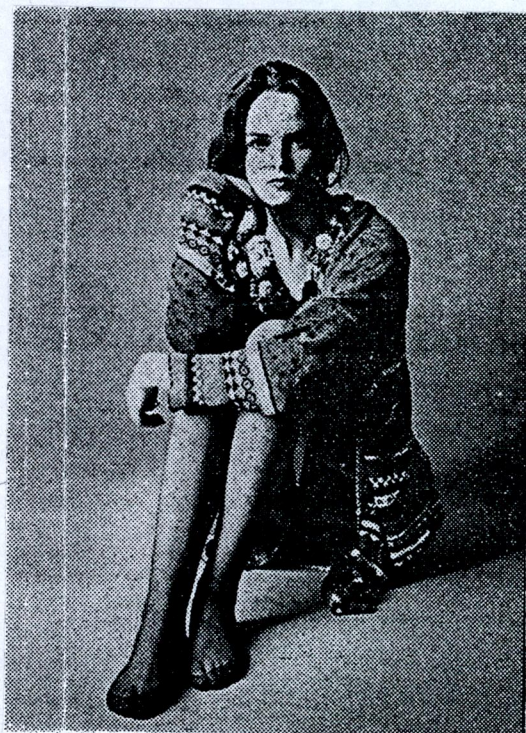


Fig 23. Green/Blue/Cream cotton Fair Isle cardigan, 1990 by Deirdre Fitzgerald for Francobolli.

CHAPTER THREE

KAFFE FASSETT SUSPENDED BETWEEN ART AND FASHION

FROM PAINTING TO KNITTING

"What I would really like to do is invite you to paint with wool" (3, p.8) insists Kaffe Fassett. Kaffe Fasset spent most of his life until the age of twenty eight as a painter of still lifes and portraits. Coming from a family of artists/craftsmen in California, Fassett won a scholarship to study painting at the museum of Fine Arts in Boston and through this had a number of exhibitions in the U.S.A. He moved to England in 1964 where, he explains, "There is something about the quality of light here that has developed my eye for colour" (9, p.39). He continued to paint and it was on a trip to Scotland in 1968 that he came across a range of beautifully coloured Shetland yarns and discovered knitting. Since then his primary form of expression has been knitting. He explains that when he discovered knitting he simply changed from painting to a more enjoyable and satisfying medium. Crafts were not considered a suitable practice for the 'serious' artist at this time. Fassett later explored needle-point as a means of artistic expression Fig. 24.

Fasset completed his first design - a striped cardigan using twenty colours - in 1968. He was commissioned by Judy Brittam (then editor of Vogue Knitting in London) to do a patterned waistcoat for her next issue. He continued knitting, working on a series of one-off garments. He soon set up his own hand and



Fig 24. Cauliflower and Cabbage Cushion by Kaffe Fassett.



machine knitting company with weaver Richard Wormersley. He has designed knitwear for designers such as Bill Gibb, Missoni and Sportswirl NY. Presently his customers include many of the world's rich and famous. Fassett has travelled extensively but has remained a resident of North London where he also has a studio. Fig. 25.

Kaffe Fassett's sources of inspiration vary considerably. Like so many artists working in the field of wearable art, he has found inspiration in the Eastern cultures and so called primitive societies, which do not separate art from craft, artistic expression from daily life. He also draws inspiration from basic motifs which are eternally inspiring to cultures worldwide, including stars, diamonds, strips and flowers. Fassett thinks it is extremely important to be constantly looking. He has been continually inspired by the Victoria and Albert Museum in London with its fascinating historical treasures and collections from the Orient and Near East. In 1988 he was honoured with the first major exhibition by a contemporary textile artist at the V + A. Some of Fassett's works are pastiches - fairly literal interpretations of the original sources - demonstrating the possibilities of working directly from the source. Jug Coat (date not stated) Fig. 26 is an example of a fairly literal interpretation of the original source. However, more often the original source can only be vaguely recognized. Fassett feels that as an artist becomes more confident in his or her work, the connection with the original source becomes less distinct and the work becomes more personal. Kaffe Fassett's work is both personal and highly individual, each piece exhibiting his signatory use of colour and pattern.



Fig 25. Kaffe Fassett pictured in his North London studio.

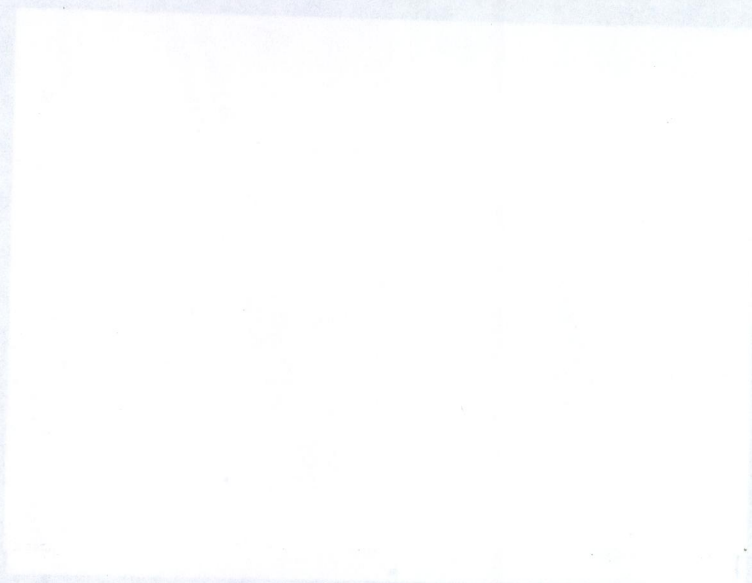




Fig 26 Section of Jug Coat, by Kaffe Fassett.



PATTERN AND COLOUR

Kaffe Fassett's work takes its life from pattern and colour. "I don't do fancy stitches' (9,p.39) he explains. All he ever uses is the simple stocking stitch and ribs, occasionally using crochet or garter stitch to finish edges. It is colour and pattern that is important and his garments are about pattern not pictures. Often he takes complicated pictures and by repeating and formalizing them he makes patterns from them. He has made patterns from flowers, vases and even bowls of fruit. Fassett feels that large pictorial garments are quite unflattering to the wearer though he adds that every rule has its exceptions.

"My world is colour" he says "I will make anything that has to do with amazing colour" (9, p.39). Whether Fassett is designing knitwear, working in needle-point or painting still-lives on canvas, his use of colour is spellbinding. It was the range of colourful yarns he came across in Scotland that first attracted him to knitting. His first knitting piece, the striped cardigan Fig. 27 used twenty different colours. His paintings had always strongly reflected colour and pattern Fig. 28. Fassett believes that it is not change of shape and style that are significant to fashion, he insists it is the colour composition that is of superior importance. As I have mentioned in Chapter one, clothing in the 1970's and early 1980's was a very individualised mode of self expression. People bought clothes that were unusual, the fit and style were of secondary importance, individuality being of primary importance. However, in today's world of high fashion it is imperative that a knitwear designer has the ability to translate his/her fabric into fashionable up to date garments. Nevertheless, Fassett



Fig 27. Kaiie Fassett working on a still life painting wearing his first knitting design.



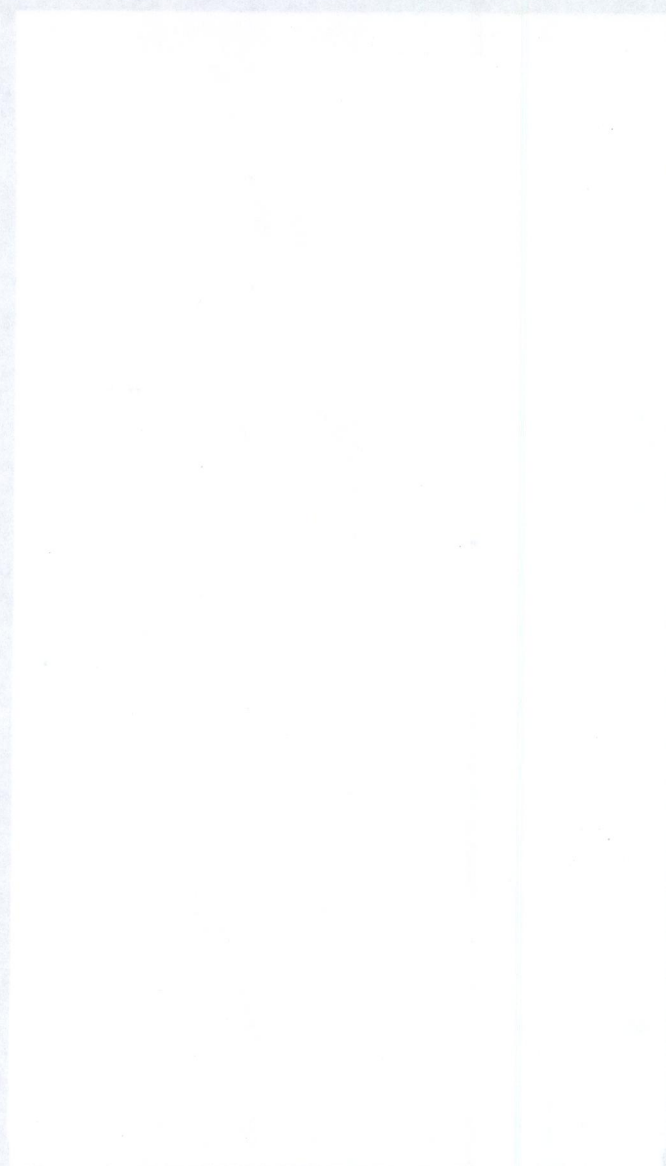
concentrates on colour and pattern. He conducts workshops where he encourages his students to experiment with colour. He insists that colour is not something you automatically know about but you discover by looking and experimenting. He feels that you must continually experiment with sources of inspiration.

Recognizing the importance that knitters should have a good selection of yarns, Fassett produced his own colour range for Rowan Yarns. He then realized that patterns were necessary to exploit these colourful cotton chenilles and wool tweeds; his knitting packs were ^{the} a result. These include knitting instructions, pattern charts and the necessary yarns available for a variety of Fassett's garments. Knitting packs for garments such as Turkish Carnation Jacket 1980 Fig. 28 cost approximately one hundred and sixty two pounds. Fassett doesn't conform to the unwritten 'rules' of knitting which forbid knitters from using different weights of yarn in the one garment, tying knots in the middle of rows and using up to twenty colours in one row. Fassett happily mixes dye lots considering this to be an added bonus which creates subtle variations in colour that are suitable in his work. He spontaneously mixes different yarns in one garment, which can affect the tension of the fabric and hence the fit. Mixing yarns creates variations in tone and colour.

Most of Fassett's patterns are worked from charts. Each square on the chart represents a stitch and each row of squares, a row of knitting. By following these charts the pattern is translated into knit. It is significant that most of the charts involved in the American "Art to Wear" movement used high quality handwork and craftsmanship in reaction to an



Fig 28. Turkish Carnation Jacket, 1980 by Kaffe Fassett



increasingly technological society. Fassett subconsciously follows this mode. The majority of his pieces are handknit with three colours, sometimes more, changing frequently in a single row. It is ironic that now, due to technology, many of his designs could be translated onto electronic knitting machines. The Japanese Shima Seiki electronic knitting machine has the facility to knit four colours per row. Fassett frequently adopts Swiss darning (the covering of a stitch or several stitches in a different colour after the knitting has been completed) to add finishing touches of colour or in some cases to hide a colour that is unsuccessful in the given scheme. He doesn't compromise to make his work less time consuming.

Fassett's use of colour varies; in some of his patterns he uses bold contrasting colours, which emphasize the structure of the pattern. In other schemes he uses colours which harmonize and so the structure of the pattern is very vague. Using very close tones of colour a tweedy effect that all but loses the pattern can be accomplished. Old weather beaten doors and faded leaves of winter inspired the colour story for the Carpet Pullover 1981, Fig. 29. Fassett was enthralled by the variety of shades of grey and pale beige brown in the old doors and faded leaves. The pattern is copied from a Kilim which Fassett bought and has used on numerous occasions as a pattern for knitting. There are at least sixty different tones of beiges and blue greys in this sleeveless pullover. The tones of colour are so close that the structure of the pattern is almost lost.



Fig 29. Carpet Pullover, 1981 by Kaffe Fassett



On the other hand, Turkish Carnation Jacket 1980, Fig. 28 is an example of Fassett's bold use of contrasting colours. The large stylized carnation motif is interpreted directly from a textile at the Victoria and Albert Museum. The powder blue flowers are on a contrasting background of reddish brown, there are shades of lime streaks in the blooms of the carnations and they have deep sky blue bases to them. This design was originally cream on dusty pink. Many of Fassett's patterns lend themselves successfully to a variety of different colourways resulting in the final garments being very different from each other. In some cases he merely changes the colour of the background, totally altering the affect of a particular colour scheme. Turkish Carnation Jacket is more pictorial than Fassett's usual formalized patterns and ironically it proves his point that he doesn't "feel that large pictorial sweaters are really flattering to wear" (3, p.8). This is the type of garment that wears the body rather than vice-versa.

Not only does Fassett experiment with altering and changing colourways, he also exploits his pattern by experimenting with changes in scale. He has always been interested by the changes in scale that can be achieved often accidentally, by using different sized yarns and needles. More often he changes the scale, sometimes drastically, by translating a larger or smaller scale onto a chart. The Crosspatch Pullover (date not stated) Fig. 30 is Fassett's tribute to plaid. The overall equal, solid square, shapes which differ in colour are broken by thin lines of colour. A darker colour scheme can successfully substitute this grey and beige colourway. The Crosspatch Coat (date not stated) Fig. 31 demonstrates how Fassett has applied the idea of changing scale. The irregular



Fig 30. Crosspatch Pullover, by Kaffe Fassett

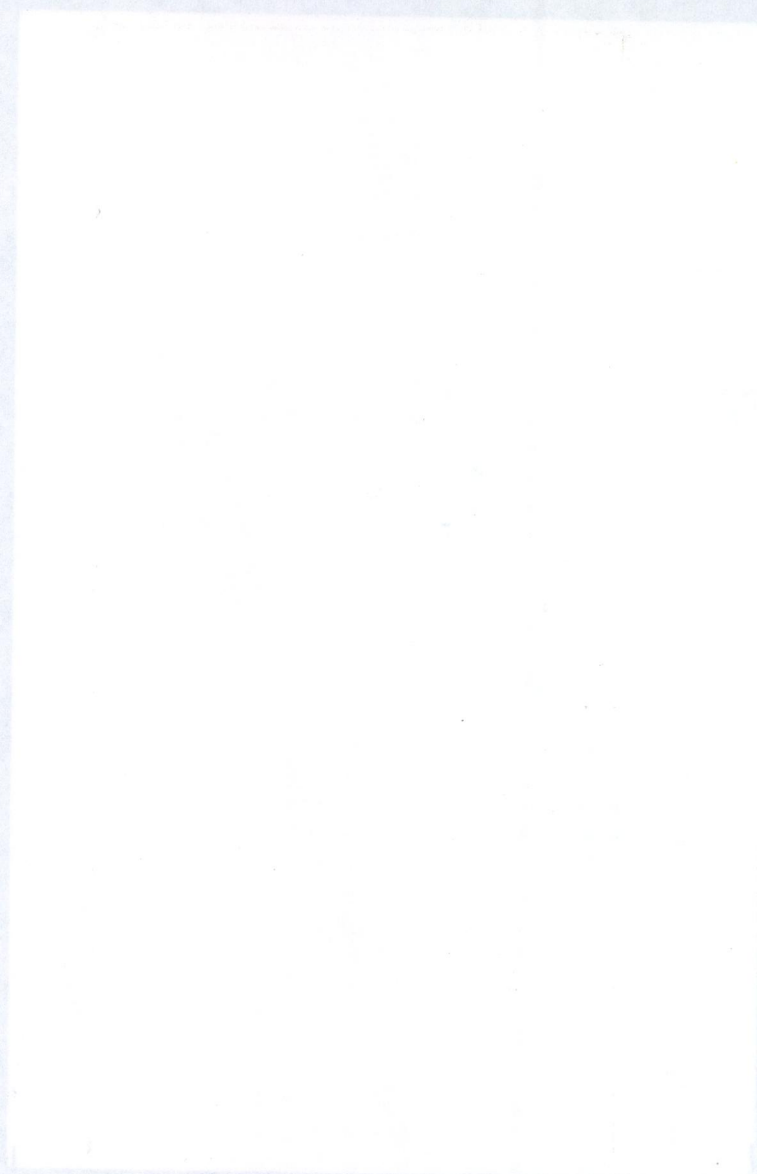




Fig 31. Crosspatch Coat, by Kaffe Fassett



overlapping squares vary in size and each square is divided in four by two colour crosses. The striking leaps in scale effectuate a dramatic effect as opposed to the consistency of the Crosspatch Pullover.

YARN AS MEDIA FOR EXPRESSION

"But this is a professional art school. You cannot call this yarn. Sophisticate the term" (2, p.32) was advice given by her professor to Jean William Cacicedo, an American art student specialising in crocheted 'art to wear' in the 1970's. Yarn became fibre, hence it was more acceptable as a medium for artistic expression. However, Fassett confidently refers to his medium as yarn. He employs his yarn to provide colour and also to create different textures. Like most knitwear designers, Fassett prefers to use natural fibres as opposed to man-made fibres. Natural fibres such as wool, silk and cotton result in superior quality fabrics. Man-made fibres such as viscose (this is man-made but actually originates from a natural source - trees) or lurex, don't wear or maintain their shape as satisfactorily as wool, nor are they as comfortable to wear. However, synthetic and acrylic yarns are often more interesting with unusual texture effects. This is beginning to change, particularly in Italy where a lot of remarkable, experimental, natural fibre yarns are being produced (as mentioned in section on Lainey Keogh in chapter two). As Fassett does not use stitch effects to create texture, it is necessary that the textures in his fabrics come from his yarns. He admits "I'll use all sorts of different materials, anything that will help me get on with the job" (9, p.39).

It is important that he uses some synthetic and acrylic mixtures to gain desired effects but he insists that all his garments are at least eight per cent natural fibres.

Fassett compensates for lack of synthetic and acrylic yarns by mixing his media. He combines different natural yarns to compose unusual textural effects and to enhance colour. He adopts two different procedures for mixing yarns. He uses a variety of differently textured yarns, including wool, silk, cotton, viscose and chenille, in a single garment. He also combines finer yarns and knits them as one, enabling him to get even more variation of tone and texture. Fassett uses cotton and silk in garments that are primarily woollen. Neither of these yarns provides the elasticity you get from wool nor are they as easy to knit but what they do offer is a crisp texture that, when combined with wool, intensifies the effect of a colour design. Silk, despite it's expense is a wonderful medium for colour and it knits into a beautifully smooth surfaced fabric. Silk yarn is available either polished or raw; polished silk emits colour while raw silk gives more of a matt finish. Fassett often uses silk to prevent chunky tweeds and thick cottons from weighing a garment down. Although cotton works well when mixed with wool, it is also an effective medium in it's own right. Cotton dyes and retains it's colour well, it's cool to wear and so it is a suitable alternative to wool for Spring/Summer garments. Fassett compares the filmy lightness of mohair to a glaze used in painting. He uses mohair like a glaze, to soften the effects of crisper yarns like wool and cotton.

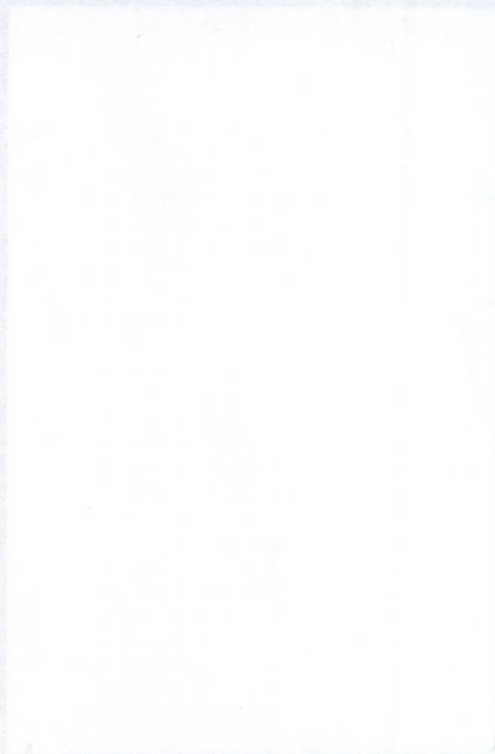
PRESENTING A WORK OF ART

It is important to note that Kaffe Fassett's work is continuously portrayed in an artistic manner. For his books Glorious Knitting 1985, Glorious Needlepoint 1987 and Kaffe Fassett at the V + A 1988, he worked in association with his good friend Chicago-born photographer, Steve Lovi. They travelled extensively in search of suitable locations to photograph Fassett's work. Often the work is photographed in close proximity to it's source of inspiration. Brick Diamond Sweater (no date stated) Fig. 32 is photographed in the book, Kaffe Fassett at the V + A, in front of a wall from which it's colour was inspired. Other backgrounds aim to enhance colour and pattern. In some cases the garment is photographed with objects that relate through colour and pattern. To some extent the photographs appear to be a little contrived. Fassett's work speaks for itself, it is not necessary to be confronted with it's colour or pattern source in order to appreciate it as an artistic expression.

In Cosmopolitan Fassett was described as "an artist, a brilliant colourist" (3, p.front cover). His works are functional creative expressions. His knits are suspended somewhere between 'art to wear' and fashion. His garments are more creative than Lainey Keogh's or Deirdre Fitzgerald's and yet they are more functional and wearable than the likes of Susanna Lewis'. His garments bridge the gap between fibre art and fashion. His knits are acceptable as both art and fashion, not art or fashion.



Fig 32. Brick Diamond Sweater, by Kaffe Fassett



CONCLUSION

Knitwear has become more than a craft. Through the work of artists such as Kaffe Fassett, Susanna Lewis, Janet Lipkin and Lily Van Oost, knitwear has proven to be a valid medium for artistic expression. Knitting has proved to have no limitations while crochet excels itself when used as a sculpting material.

However, as shown by the work of artists including Susanna Lewis and Janet Lipkin, It is not always necessary for fibre art to be made in the shape of a garment. As Lily Van Oost has proven, a wall hanging or sculptural form can be more appropriate.

Art can be successfully translated into fashionable knitted garments but often commerciality limits creativity. Lainey Keogh and Deirdre Fitzgerald have managed to successfully combine Art and Fashion to create garments that are artistic, functional and fashionable. However, their garments could not be appreciated as an art form in the same respect as Kaffe Fassett's.

Knitted garments should be functional and comfortable. Kaffe Fassett successfully translates his patterned colourful fabrics into functionable, wearable sweaters. However, his refusal to experiment with styling and shaping prevent his garments from being fashionable. Despite this fact, he successfully translates art into knitted garments.

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