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I declare that this **Critical Cultures Research Project** is all my own work and that all sources have been fully acknowledged.

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Women's Work?

Introduction

I hate elitism, and elitism in art through the centuries was handed down by men. We were never seen as makers of art. For thousands of years, weaving, ceramics, sewing were believed to be what untutored women made with their hands. But that was our art. (Schapiro, 2000, p14)

Art made by women in mediums traditionally considered of the domestic realm has struggled for centuries to move beyond its positioning as 'Women's Work'. I would like to be able to say that textile art now sits comfortably within the realms of fine art but even today there is still a whiff of second-class citizen about it. Is this because it is mainly the work of women artists? And yet work with stitch and cloth was not always considered a lesser art form. Medieval English embroidery known as Opus Anglicanum was made by both men and women and was prized in European royal courts for its luxury and valued by the Church for its use in liturgical vestments. Male professional embroiderers even had their own guild, the Worshipful Company of Broderers, chartered during Elizabeth I's reign in 1561 (Watt, 2010). It was during the Renaissance that a hierarchy developed that saw fine art, with its masculine associations with stone sculpting, architecture, and large-scale figurative paintings, take precedence over the craft of stitch and textile. This was compounded when the Royal Academy was founded in 1768 and two years later needlework was banned from exhibition along with other art forms that were accessible to women at the time. The Council of the Royal Academy "Resolved that no needlework, artificial flowers, cut papers, shell-work, or any such Baubles shall be admitted into the Exhibition". In the public advertisement the word 'bauble' was replaced by the less pointed expression 'or anything of that kind', but it nevertheless indicates the contempt

academicians held towards these productions (Baudino, 2013 p181-194). The banning of these forms of art produced by women went hand in hand with the exclusion of women themselves from the full workings of the academy of arts, unless as a nude model of course!

Textile art has developed a footing in the canon of Fine or High art. Can the inclusion of art textiles in the folds of fine art be attributed, in some part, to the influence of textile collectives or is it more likely to have been the result of radical, individual textile artists pushing the boundaries of what is considered art materials? I am interested in this area of art production as I am a member of a textile collective called **element**¹⁵, based in Kildare, Ireland. I found it greatly beneficial to my own art practice which lurked in the background of my life for many years. Joining the collective gave me the encouragement and support to develop my creativity and to have the confidence to put work out for public scrutiny in exhibitions. It also gave me the courage to study in NCAD. The generosity of group members in sharing their acquired knowledge and skills was a key element in my development.

In Chapter 1, I have selected three Collectives as case studies, one each in the USA, the UK and in Ireland. I intend to look at their development and influence within their own countries and whether that influence was significant for the progression of textile art practice in that country. In Chapter 2, I will highlight a selection of radical women artists who have used textiles to create work that challenged the norm and, sometimes through an element of shock, brought textile art to prominence in the art world. I will also look at how social media and the internet has given new impetus to contemporary textile artists through online collectives.

Chapter 1: The Textile Collectives

In using the term textile collective, I am referring to a permanent grouping of artists, not a group or community formed to work on a once off project. Wendy Jacob, in 'With Love from HaHa', describes the HaHa collective as a group of 'critical friends' operating with 'insistent egalitarianism'. (2008 p.7). This descriptor might not fit all collectives, but the elements of positive critique of work in a collegial atmosphere and efforts at inclusion and fairness do appear to be a consistent feature of the textile collectives I have researched.

1.1. Gee's Bend Quilter's Collective, USA

Today, quilts created by the women of a rural black community in Alabama hang in the permanent collections of leading art museums and in private collections. Their abstract designs, created since late 1800s, have been compared to the modernist movement happening in Europe during that period. It is important to remember that these women were not influenced by any movement or artist's work – their creations came from their lived experience. In 2002, the art critic of the New York Times, Michael Kimmelman, hailed the quilts as "some of the most miraculous works of modern art America has produced" (Kimmelman, 2002). Considering the undervaluing of this form of women's artistic expression, and particularly the work of Black women artists, how did this highest of accolades come about?

Gee's Bend is a small rural town in Wilcox County, Alabama. The town is situated on a bend in the Alabama River, enclosed on three sides by water and it takes its name from a plantation owner, Joseph Gee, who developed his cotton growing business there in the early 1800s. Most of today's residents of Gee's Bend are

direct descendants of the eighteen enslaved African Americans who were brought to the plantation by Joseph Gee. After the Civil War, their ancestors remained on the plantation, working as sharecroppers, but in the 1930s the price of cotton fell sharply, and the community was impoverished. The Federal Government stepped in and purchased tracts of the plantation land and provided loans to enable the tenants to remain in situ. Thus, the community remained in existence whilst many other communities died out due to the migration of African Americans from the rural South in search of work and a better life. (Souls Grown Deep, 2010)

One could say that the women of Gee's Bend did not set out to form a collective. There was no initial decision making, meetings or planning. The collective was organically formed as a direct consequence of being an isolated, close-knit, and impoverished community. The women made quilts out of necessity to combat the cold. They used scraps of old clothes and pieces of feed sacks as they could not afford new materials. Their creativity came from their inventive use of sometimes exceedingly small scraps of fabric to create vibrant, colourful quilts that did not conform to the set patchwork patterns and motifs as established by white European settlers.



Fig.1 *Original String-pieced design, 1960.* Loretta Pettway

Precision was not a priority as the irregular sizes of the fabric scraps, as seen in Loretta Pettway's quilt shown in fig.1 above, would not accommodate it. The designs were frequently created as they went along but always with an unerring eye for the look of the final product. In contrast, the patterns and designs used by early European settlers, were regulated, precise and meticulously copied. The Honeycomb motif was very common but not an easy design to sew. Precision was important as any inaccuracy in cutting or piecing is multiplied as the pieces are added and the quilt formed. The quilt in Fig.2 below was made as a wedding gift from Elizabeth Clarkson to her son Henry.



Fig 2: *Honeycomb quilt, c 1830* Elizabeth Van Horne Clarkson (1771-1852)

Whilst all quilts tell a story, these two examples tell very different stories. The quilts made by the African American women in Gees Bend are archives containing the history of the maker and the family who created them, their poverty, their struggle, and their resistance to conforming to a white American narrative. Every scrap of fabric bears the marks of the wearer, the stains of their work and the lives they lived. Many quilts were made to tell the story of family members who were no longer living such as that made in 1942 by Missouri Pettway from her late husband's work clothes. Her daughter remembers her mother's words, "I going to take his work

clothes, shape them into a quilt to remember him, and cover up under it for love". (Souls Grown Deep, 2010). In contrast, the honeycomb quilt in Fig.2 above, whilst also a symbol of love, is a product of a more affluent society. It is unlikely to be made from work clothes or grain sacks but from fabrics imported from England and India. It is a conformist quilt, it fits into the expected norms of white Eurocentric patterns, it follows the rules of quilt making, and was made in comfortable surroundings as a wedding gift, not a necessity.

Up to the 1960s the quilts of Gee's Bend did not venture across the river to the outside world, where the mainly white population in surrounding Counties upheld the racist and discriminatory values of the time. But the Civil Rights movement brought change to this black community when Martin Luther King Jr. visited in 1965 before leading the marches from Selma to Montgomery. He encouraged the population of 900 to register to vote. Their attempts to do so brought about a swift reprisal from the local white sheriff, Lummie Jenkins, who ordered the discontinuation of the small skiff that traversed the river and connected Gee's Bend most directly with the nearest town. J.R. Moehringer, in his Pulitzer Prize winning article, *Crossing Over*, published in the Los Angeles Times in 1999, quoted the sheriff as saying, 'We didn't close the ferry because they were black, we closed it because they forgot they were black' (1999).

In response, the collective nature of the community came to the fore, and they joined with other black women (150 in total) in the 'Freedom Quilting Bee', its name derived from Dr. King's message that through voting would come freedom. The cooperative's aims were to transform their design and sewing skills into an income stream. They won contracts to produce homewares for Sears and Bloomingdales department stores. This was a double-edged sword. The stores wanted conformity

and uniformity and that was not in the DNA of the Gee's Bend quilters. The work of some of the most renowned quiltmakers, such as Mary Lee Bendolph was considered unsuitable as her stitches were too long or she deviated from the prescribed design, and she was not allowed continue in the enterprise.

So, again we ask ourselves how did these humble textiles, used to block out drafts, cover floors and beds, and made from end-of-life clothes, become art? While the collective can take responsibility for maintaining, nurturing, keeping the quilt making tradition alive, it took an outsider, a person of influence and a male, to bring the work to prominence. In 1998 an art historian and curator, William Arnett, saw an image of a Gee's Bend woman, Annie Mae Young, and her quilt in a book on quilts. He travelled to find its maker and purchased the piece for \$2,000 when the average rate at that time was \$15. He went on to buy an estimated 700 quilts from Gee's Bend over the years and organised exhibitions in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, The Whitney, The Museum of Fine Art in Houston, and many other bastions of art. In 2010, Arnett set up the Souls Grown Deep Foundation to continue the advocacy role and to hold the collection of quilts he acquired. Since then, the Foundation has worked to transfer the collection into the permanent care of major art institutions in the USA and Internationally, including, this year, the Tate Modern in London.

What is apparent is that through Arnett's vision and advocacy, the artworld and its market forces decided that these artefacts were indeed 'art' and a valuable part of African American heritage, and they flocked to be part of that story and to value black female history.

...the current group and their lineage of ancestors have shaped an ongoing history of art that continues to define the cultural import of the area, interrupting the 'white male genius' canon in favour of a black, female and collective approach. (R. Morrill, 2019)

When the quilt collection, some produced as far back as the 1920s, was hung on white gallery walls for the first time, it wasn't difficult to see why the work was compared to the abstract modernism of Klee and Matisse. When the art world decides your work is of value, then it is!

1.2. The 62 Group, UK

I first encountered the work of this collective in the Knitting and Stitching show in the RDS in Dublin about twelve years ago. I was a reluctant attendee as the very title of the show evoked for me all the baggage that textile art was trying to shake off. However, after walking through the stalls selling supplies, I came to the most amazing exhibition of contemporary textile art. It was nothing like the work on display in the stands of the Embroiderer's Guild. It was quirky, mixed media and had a narrative that drew the viewer in. The work was based on personal experience or research on a specific topic, usually one that had a relationship back to the maker. I have been an admirer ever since and follow members careers as they progress. The Group's origins date to a time in England when embroidery had an even poorer status in the art world than quilt making, and it struggled to shake off the legacy of Victorian prescribed behaviour when it was considered one of the few genteel pastimes suitable for women. In her 1984 examination of the marginalisation of women's work in the hierarchy of art and craft, Rozsika Parker, feminist art historian, wrote "To know the history of embroidery is to know the history of women" (1984). In the late 1950s, teachers of embroidery in the National Diploma of Design in the UK were despairing of the prospects for their students when they graduated. There were few opportunities to exhibit their work and certainly fewer opportunities to have

it valued alongside other art forms. They decided to call together as many practitioners of the medium, from as many backgrounds as possible, to discuss and form a pressure group to 'upgrade the image'. That initial meeting was hosted by the Embroiderer's Guild and required everyone to become a member of the Guild if the relationship was to continue. (Millar, 2011)

Arising from this initial meeting in 1962, the belief that if they worked co-operatively, it could be more effective than individual efforts, led a group of young embroidery graduates and their tutors to form the 62 Group. The original name was the 62 Group of Embroiderers, but over the next twenty years such was the interest to join from practitioners of other textile disciplines, that they dropped the limiting medium from the name and therefore their ties with the Embroiderer's Guild. This was probably a wise move at the time as the Guild had a staid reputation which, admittedly, it has worked hard to change in the intervening years.



Fig.3. *Backwards/Forwards*, 2011. Caroline Bartlett

Bringing English embroidery practice from prescribed stitches and published pattern books to a contemporary, experimental, and freestyle form has been the work of the 62 Group for 60 years. By making and exhibiting work that challenged the norm,

they opened a space for artists to experiment with cloth and stitch. They allowed the rules of embroidery to be challenged. Knowing and employing a lexicon of different stitches was not necessarily the path to good artwork whilst a minimal range of stitches could be used to create considered but non-conformist work.

The group slowly started to introduce a range of mixed media into their work, harnessing the power of nature to alter a cloth and using non-conventional textile grounds. Their work took on 3D forms and incorporated utilitarian materials in new ways. They encouraged work that evolved out of personal experience or research into areas of interest, so that artworks had a depth of meaning and narrative. The exhibitions that developed were ground-breaking in the journey of textile art in the UK.



Fig 4: *Tarpaulin Cloth* (detail). Debbie Lyddon
Linen, wire, wax, rainwater; 48cm high x 52cm wide

One obvious difference between this collective and the Gee's Bend Collective is the level of organisation and structure that was put in place soon after its formation.

The founding members of this collective were determined to uphold a professional standard for the work being produced and exhibited, a necessity they believed if

there was to be any chance of carving a place for textiles and stitch in the art world. At the beginning any embroiderer could join the collective but that created difficulties when it came to standards for exhibiting work. While there may have been skill evident in the stitch work submitted it might have lacked a design element or a creative narrative. A Constitution was written and selection for membership and inclusion in exhibitions was changed to a juried format, to be performed by the existing members and sometimes invited guests or curators. (Millar, 2011)

This level of professionalism was instrumental in the success of the collective. Within a few years they were sponsored by the Art Exhibitions Bureau, an organisation which toured art exhibitions to venues throughout the UK. This brought their work to a wide and varied audience and resulted in an increase in sales of work. Whilst this was encouraging, the pressure to produce work to replace the sold pieces in time for the next exhibition on the tour, created problems for members and increased the risk that work may not be up to the professional standards they espoused. The Group stopped participating after two years but by that time they had built a reputation for innovative and contemporary work. There followed exhibitions in more prestigious venues at a more manageable pace – The Royal Festival Hall and the Victoria and Albert Museum to name a few (Millar 2011).

One key element of the group's operation is education, or what I prefer to call skill sharing, which can be viewed as a key signifier in the development of textile art in the UK. Members have authored books, taught courses at every educational level, given lectures, and run workshops both in person and on-line. In conjunction with group exhibitions, they have offered workshops and talks which give insight into the works on show and bring the audience through the creative journey. Many members have successful individual art practices which have spun out of, or at least have

been elevated by this group practice. A sizeable cohort of members are involved in the UK education system. Jan Beaney, a founding member, says “it is doubtful that textiles would now be a subject in Art ‘A’ levels without members of the Group being in a position of influence in schools and colleges”. Herein lies the nub of truth, that if you are in a position of influence, you can make change happen. Until adventurous and experimental use of textiles become mainstream in art curricula worldwide, it will always struggle to be more than a second-class citizen in Fine Art.

The 60 Group of Textile Artists celebrated 60 years of influencing in 2022 and the position of textile art in the UK is the better for their advocacy, their stringent selection processes, artist led focus and contemporary practices.

1.3. The Cork Textile Network, Ireland

As with many areas of progressive thinking, Ireland lagged in the development of a contemporary textile art scene, and some might say it still does. Whilst traditional skills in weaving, knitting and lacemaking have been valued, along with the production of fabrics such as tweeds and linen, the contemporary and experimental use of textiles as an art form has been a much slower developer.

Cork Textile Network was initially formed in response to an EU research project in 1998 to create an information network involving industrial textile heritage. Cork has a rich textile heritage with the spinning of flax and the weaving of linen taking place in various factories in Cork from 1889 right up to 1995. The network continued after the pilot scheme ended, with the aim of promoting textile art and offering support to practitioners and enthusiasts across the southern counties of Ireland where many creatives have set up base. It is a collective membership body for artists and

makers who use textiles in their practice, aiming for excellence, originality, and contemporary thinking.



Fig 5: *Pipe Dreaming*, 2013. CTN Group Installation

Like the 62 Group, the CTN has pushed the boundaries in the use of unconventional materials and techniques: wrapping, binding, burning and distorting cloth, weaving it with wire and plastics, digitally manipulating and printing imagery, and incorporating found objects into their work. They have exhibited nationally and internationally and give workshops throughout Ireland. Members have developed their own art practices, worked on commissions, and have developed work collaboratively with other artists. But it would be fair to say that the profile of this collective has not reached the level of, say, the 62 Group in the UK.

Cork has always been a very vibrant creative landscape. It is interesting that whilst this collective was actively promoting experimental and contemporary use of textiles in art, the message was not always heard in its home base. In 2005 Cork was the European Capital of Culture and one of its flagship commissioned projects was called 'The Knitting Map'. This was a vibrant community project, an enormous textile creation and an installation which involved over 2,000 women knitting over the

course of 12 months. The work was an innovative combination of technology and making where data was live streamed to teams of knitters who were gathered in a communal control centre in the crypt of St. Luke's Church. The weather on the day was translated into the colour of the wool, and the day's traffic, volume and movement of people was reflected in the stitches and patterns to be used.



Fig.6: *The Knitting Map* Installation view (detail) Jools Gilson & Richard Povall.

Over the course of the year the project became a symbol of all that was perceived to have gone wrong with the cultural year in Cork. The negative reaction to the project in the press is interesting to analyse now, many years later, but must have been soul destroying for the organisers at the time. What stands out most stridently is the number of critical comments by men published in various newspaper articles. “We want an All-Ireland final in Cork, not a pack of oul’ biddies knitting” (Lynch 2005, cited in Gilson 2019). The artwork was called “a much-resented rug”, “Cork’s most prominent folly”, “underwhelming despite its size”, “an absolute Frankenstein-esque creation” by “an army of knutters” (Mythen 2005, cited in Gilson 2019). Whilst undoubtedly much of the criticism of the project stemmed from the mismanagement

of the expectations of the wider Cork community and questions regarding how funding was distributed, the tone of the discourse was a misogynistic tirade driven by media derision for the work of women's hands. It is unlikely that a similar project involving men interpreting the same data in wood or metal would have received the same level of vitriol. Important elements of the project did not receive much publicity such as performance events: group knitting on buses, in bus shelters, in shopping centres, on the streets in conversation with stalled drivers at traffic lights and on the back of a motorcycle cavalcade with a group of Cork bikers. This was a new way of seeing knitting and, I would guess, a precursor to yarn bombing.

How would The Knitting Map be received if it was proposed in 2023? It might get a more moderated response in the media from a more 'woke' set of journalists with the knowledge that knitting has now become the provenance of trendy young things. But what of the 'unafraid and unashamed group of older women acclaiming, not reclaiming, an art they had lived with all their lives?' (Povall, 2005, cited in Gilson 2019). I am not sure their reception would be any kinder or their work of art more appreciated. This is borne out by the fact that The Knitting Map, a large-scale durational community textile installation, has never found a permanent home in any of our art institutions.

Can we gauge the impact that Cork Textiles Network and artist led community projects such as The Knitting Map have had on contemporary textile art in Cork, or indeed Ireland? CTN celebrated its twentieth anniversary in 2018 with the publication of a book, '20', documenting the diverse range of work produced by members, past and present. There is now an interdisciplinary degree in glass, ceramics and textiles at Cork's Crawford College of Art and Design and in the National College of Art and Design Dublin. Art textiles make a more frequent

appearance in major exhibitions in Ireland and the current president of the RHA, Abigail O'Brien, has used textiles in her practice, notably *Sic Juro 2011*. Nevertheless, textiles are still a rarity in major exhibitions in Ireland.

Chapter 2: Radical Textile Artists

There is a long history of women using stitch on cloth as means of protest and to make a political or feminist statement. The Bayeaux Tapestry was stitched by English needleworkers as a form of Norman propaganda, but it appeared to also contain symbols sympathetic to King Harold, if you knew where to look. When Mary Queen of Scots was under house arrest in 16th century, she spent her time embroidering covert political symbols as her only means of expression.

Since men are not now and seldom have been educated in the complex language of needlework symbology, any message transmitted in a textile medium was almost completely safe from falling into the wrong hands (Maines, 1974).

Since then, political messaging in stitch has become overt and easier for men to interpret!

2.1 Radical Stitch

Judy Chicago (b.1939), one of the pioneers of the feminist art movement showed that embroidery could be used as a tool to fight the patriarchy. Though most of her work was made in hard materials, she incorporated textiles for the first time in *The Dinner Party* (1974-79) as embroidered table runners marking each place setting. Using the iconography of The Last Supper, Chicago seated 39 historical and

mythical women whose contributions throughout history she considered undervalued. The work was dismissed as ‘the ultimate in 1970s kitsch’ by the male critic of The New York Times (Kramer,1980). Chicago continued to use textiles in the following years and worked collaboratively with other women incorporating tapestry, needlepoint, applique, and quilting techniques in her work. Following *The Dinner Party*, she invited people around the world to create two-foot triangular quilt blocks honouring women of their choosing. The result is *The International Honor Quilt* (1980) made with 539 blocks created globally – an international textile collective! She worked with 150 needleworkers over five years to produce her *Birth Project* series which celebrates the wonder and trauma of giving birth. One of the most arresting images from this project is a piece in collaboration with Jane Gaddie Thompson, whose embroidery on silk perfectly and graphically captures the pain and emotion of giving birth. The use of silk which shimmers blood red flesh, makes this piece far more powerful than any paint ever could.



Fig. 7: *Birth Tear*, 1982. Judy Chicago. Embroidery on Silk

2.2. Radical Sculpture

Radical and sometimes controversial work always gets attention. The impact of the element of shock cannot be ignored as a means by which some artists, whether intentionally or not, brought textile art to the notice of the mainstream. The medium of soft sculpture is one where women artists have pushed the boundaries. These are three dimensional artworks that incorporate fabric, plastics, rubber and other cloth-like, flexible materials. The association of 'soft' materials with the feminine has been subverted by female artists and used to challenge the 'hard' male medium of sculpture.

As far back as 1936, Meret Oppenheim (b.1913 Berlin) was pushing the radical possibilities of what has since become known as soft sculpture, with her piece *Objet (Le Dejeuner en fourrure)*, a teacup and saucer she covered in gazelle fur. The feminine association of both these materials – an elegant woman wearing furs and sipping tea – when combined turned them into something disturbing and even shocking. Her work, while humorous explored female sexuality, eroticism and held a menacing darkness.



Fig. 8: *Objet* 1939. Méret Oppenheim.

Magdalen Abakanowicz (b.1930 Poland) made large woven sculptures, organic forms that suggest something more, such as human or animal body parts. Such was the unsettling nature of pieces in her first solo exhibition in 1960 that the gallery was not permitted to open its doors for the show (Tate.org.uk). A collection of her *Abakans* currently hang in the Tate Modern which is a testament to the ongoing relevance of her textiles in a contemporary context.



Fig.9: Magdalen Abakanowicz at the Tate Modern 2022

These soft sculptures inescapably reference female body parts and we can see how they might have disturbed the viewer back in the 1960s:

.. their cloistered interiors, their infoldings and outpouchings, their hushed, sound-dampening weight and organic scent ... we are also arrested by the increasingly overt depictions of the female body, of opened labia, the body's orifices and protuberances. There are breasts and pregnant bellies, puckerings and tunnels... (Searle, 2022).

Yayoi Kusama (b.1929 Japan) was innovative in the use of repetition; be they dots or penises. Her early work didn't have the element of shock but, when she moved to New York in 1958, she began working on soft sculptures. In 1962 she first exhibited

Accumulation No 1, an armchair covered in layers of painted hand-sewn stuffed fabric penises. She covered other furniture, rooms and even a boat in these stuffed phalluses in the years that followed.



Fig.10: *Accumulation No. 1*, 1962 Sewn stuffed fabric, paint and chair fringe

She also created the first immersive installation called *Infinity Mirror Room – Phalli's Field*. The walls were mirrored, and the floor covered in stuffed spotted phalluses, creating a space that felt like the it went on forever. The stuff of nightmares for an artist with a dislike of sex, but one she was willing to confront! Kusama ultimately returned to Japan, frustrated that her innovative work was not given the same recognition as her male counterparts.

Sarah Lucas (b.1962) uses soft sculpture to provoke and to challenge gender positioning. She was part of the Young British Artists but never garnered the same attention for her work as the men in that group. In reaction to this inequality, she began to study feminism and to create sexually charged assemblages using textiles such as below.



Fig.11: *Bunny Gets Snookered* 1997 Sarah Lucas

In her work, *Bunny Gets Snookered* 1997, bunny/female figures made of skin toned stockings are slumped in chairs around a snooker table with their legs parted. Lucas saw the work as a metaphor for how women have been ‘snookered’ in progressing in male dominated spaces. She continued to work in soft sculpture using stockings, creating more amorphous but nonetheless sexualised works, frequently labelled ‘rude’.

2.3 New Wave Radicals

A new wave of contemporary artists continues the task of transforming the image of art textiles, challenging preconceptions, and making progressive, often political work. Younger artists have successfully harnessed social media platforms such as Instagram to get their work to a wide audience, subverting the control of the gallerist and gatekeepers.

Hannah Hill (b.1994) is an embroidery artist whose work stems from a personal exploration of mental health issues, sexuality, mixed ethnicity, and gender. When

still a teen, she created embroidered 'merit badges' with encouraging phrases such as "I took my meds today", "I had a shower" which resonated with a cohort of young people suffering with the stresses of everyday life. A piece of Hannah's embroidery, *Arthur Meme*, 2016, in Fig.12 below, succinctly visualises the thrust of this research project and has given me its name.



Fig. 12: *Arthur Meme*, 2016 Hannah Hill

Hannah has used social media to be part of a community of likeminded people - a virtual collective - which has helped her through periods of invisible illnesses - depression and chronic pain.

The communal side of textiles is important to me. As much as I say I'm sewing in my room and I'm happy just by myself, the communal history of textiles – quilting working around the same thing and completing it for warmth or to sell it – its human history. (Hill, H 2019)

The internet and social media has enabled a textile art movement that did not exist twenty years ago. Artists have used it to form collectives that have made the art form relevant to a diverse group of people for a diverse range of purposes. The 'Tiny Pricks Project' is an aptly named public art project curated by artist Diana Weymar. She was so disturbed by the unpresidential tone of the words coming out of Donald Trump's mouth in 2018 that she stitched them into a piece of her grandmother's abandoned embroidery (Fig.13 below) and posted it on Instagram. The response was positive and overwhelming and started a worldwide project documenting his statements through stitch "... through the use of textiles that embody warmth, craft, permanence, civility, and a shared history. The daintiness and integrity of each piece stand in stark contract to his presidency.." (Weymar, 2019).

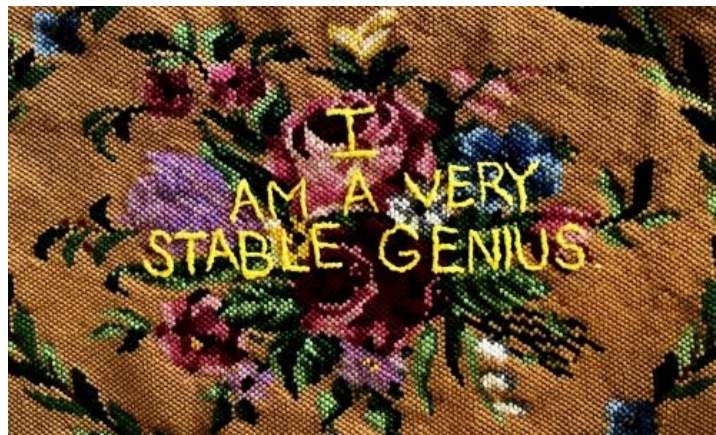


Fig.13: *Tiny Prick 1* 2018, Diane Weymar

Conclusion

Art made using textiles is still a gendered space. Few enough male artists enter that arena and fewer still join textile collectives. There are exceptions of course but it is still safe to generalise. Is it because the gatekeepers, who decide what is worthy of recognition in the art world, still deem work made using soft materials as feminine and by default a lesser art form?

Through this brief research I believe that it has been the work of radical, persistent, and brave artists which has brought textile art thus far into the fold of Fine Art.

Female artists changed perceptions and challenged fixed ideas about what materials could be considered in a fine art context. They pushed technical boundaries in the production of work and invented new ways of hanging and exhibiting 'soft' work. It may be fair to say that many of these artists had already started to build their reputations with work in other mediums and were not, therefore, starting out in their practice with textiles.

While radical female artists have led the charge, it is evident that textile collectives have been the bedrock on which the art form has remained relevant to a wide swathe of grass roots practitioners. I believe that these collaborative forms of art practice are particularly appealing to women as this is where they find mutual support. Women gathered, whether in person or in an online forum, using their creative energies, skill sharing and pushing the boundaries of what they believed they were capable of. But this fact might also be seen as a negative, something holding back art textiles from the public sphere of the masculine arts. The sentiment, expressed during the Cork Capital of Culture, labelling The Knitting Map as a bunch of old biddies sitting around gossiping, would seem to give credence to this

stereotypical view of women gathered in work of their hands. Maybe we should be cognisant of our own unconscious contribution to the stereotyping and drop the 'Knit and Bitch' and 'Stitch and Bitch' names from the groups we form, however tongue in cheek the naming might have been.

In a contemporary context the ability of the internet, social media and online textile collectives to leap beyond these stereotypes cannot be underestimated. In the last ten years initiatives such as TextileArtist.org and Fibre Arts Take Two have made exploratory ideas and experimental techniques in cloth and mixed media available to everyone and many more men have become practitioners.

It is good to see a revival in the use of stitch as a means of protest. In the tradition of the Suffragettes, artists for Repeal the 8th in Ireland used embroidered banners and aprons in their protests in 2018 which were all the more powerful for the use of traditionally domestic materials. The Tiny Pricks Project allowed rage at Donald Trump be expressed in a safe and universal way and the forum continues to be relevant today, allowing protest on social and political issues through stitch on cloth.

In person textile collectives will continue to play an important role in keeping this field of practice active, but the future needs more radical and brave individual artists to push more boundaries.

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