

Interview with Aran Illingworth for the Textile Art Magazine

Where did you grow up and where do you live now?

I was born in Malaysia, came to England to do nursing and to do some travelling. I stayed on to do more training, working, studying and later I made England my home.

How did you first become interested in textile art?

My interest in art and textiles goes back to my childhood in Malaysia. A key influence was my mother, who was highly proficient at working with textiles, and who also experimented with painting and drawing.

Do you have an artistic education?

I worked originally not as an artist but as a trained nurse, mainly in psychiatry. After a career break, I completed a Diploma in Art and Design, a City and Guilds Life drawing course and a degree in Applied Arts from the University of Hertfordshire

Which textile techniques and which materials do you prefer?

My preferred textile techniques include hand stitching because it allows for tactile depth and structural control. My preferred textile types are cotton and linen fabric. My works are created methodically, step by step, using photographic images to provide a framework as a basis for the artwork itself. In stitching over the underlying applique fabrics, I follow an unwritten method which I have developed over several years to achieve the desired effect.

What attracts you to textiles as a medium for storytelling?

Textiles act as a powerful medium for storytelling because cloth is intimately connected to human life from birth to death. People have been producing textiles for thousands of years, shaping, reworking and adapting them to provide clothing, tents and a myriad of other artefacts. They occupy a position of central importance in many aspects of life, for instance, as ritual garments or coverings such as altar cloths in a religious context. They serve to express symbolism at critical moments of human life; thus, swaddling clothes, wedding dresses and shrouds all serve to mark transitions in the journey through life from start to end. They express, by turns, a person's unique individuality and collective identity with equal power and effectiveness. Formal and informal attire are only possible due to the infinite flexibility, expressiveness and adaptability of textiles, and their ability to be adapted to a seemingly infinite variety of purposes and contexts. What better medium to communicate an individual's story than through portraiture in textiles?

What attracts me to textiles is the possibilities that they open up in the realm of artistic expression. Textiles offer an entrancing medium that combines colours and textures. Textile art allows artists to create captivating pieces that speak volumes through fabric and thread. Textile art offers an extensive palette of colours that artists can harness to tell compelling stories. From delicate hand embroidery to bold

machine stitching, artists can create captivating visuals and communicate profound messages

How has the undervaluation of textile art influenced your work?

The historical undervaluation of textile art as mere "craft" drives artists to use ambitious scale, conceptual depth, and defiant materiality to claim space normally devoted to fine art. Fibre artists active now are bringing long-overdue appreciation to the medium. Thankfully, attitudes are finally changing, and textile art's potential to showcase creativity and skill is coming into its own. Textile art is finally gaining acceptance as art in its own right.

When I first started doing textile art about 16 years ago, people in artistic circles were clearly prejudiced against it. I found it disheartening that textile art was considered a poor relation to fine art. Although I think that things are changing, there is still some way to go.

How do you respond to the distinction between fine art and craft?

One definition of art proposed by the Cambridge Dictionary is 'the making of objects, images, music, etc. that are beautiful or that express feelings.' The same dictionary, conversely, characterises craft as 'something produced using skill and experience'. According to these definitions, art is focussed on beauty and its evocative qualities, whereas craft objects require skill to produce without their necessarily being attractive or evocative. It is notable that the definition of art, unlike that for craft, makes no reference to the skill or lack of skill needed for its production.

Looking at textile art, it is immediately clear that both definitions are relevant. Textile art can be visually arresting, appealing or thought-provoking; without these qualities, it can hardly be art. Without the skill associated with craft objects, it can hardly be produced at all. Therefore, I would argue that textile art is both art and craft at the same time. As such, it occupies a central and intriguing place in the world of art and craft, what might be described as the art-craft spectrum. An example to consider on this spectrum would be painting-by-numbers. Where a degree of skill is required however it does not allow an individual any expressive creativity. Therefore, it illustrates that a classically fine art medium, paint, does itself not make a work art rather than craft.

A two-tiered hierarchy of art and craft and textile's subsequent craft classification is perhaps related to strong gender identities associated with crafts. Although some craft activities have been historically associated with men, textile work has, over many centuries, been strongly identified as women's work. As time is progressing this distinction is being blurred with more men using textiles and needlework, particularly as an artistic medium.

Even if it has been a long time coming, the reality of textile work being recognised as art is a quite recent development, even a current one. Nevertheless, this change has deep historical roots, dating back to use of tapestries as wall coverings, and

developing further with stitched portraits in the 18th century and, subsequently, the Arts and Crafts movement.

On a personal level, my work is rooted simultaneously in both fine art and craft work. Actually, making a textile portrait takes planning, manual skill and a great deal of patience. You could say that this is the craft aspect. Conversely, the process of building up a portrait of a face, capturing the expression in the subject's eyes and other subtleties, is frequently described as 'painting in thread', an expression referring directly to fine art. My response to the distinction between fine art and craft is therefore to embrace both with open arms, secure in the knowledge that my work encompasses both in equal measure.

Why do you choose subtle humour rather than direct political statements?

Political statements are notoriously divisive, and very often have the effect of preaching to the converted while repelling everyone outside their political echo chamber. Humour, conversely, is a tool for engagement with an audience, seeking to draw them in and include them in the conversation. The message which I am seeking to send through my art frequently has a hard edge, confronting the viewer with painful truths that they might prefer to avoid. Faced with such a challenging task, I use humour to be inclusive in my approach.

What stories do you want to tell about women living in poverty?

Working with textiles, I continue in Käthe Kollwitz's tradition of bearing witness to all those who have been pushed to society's margins. My main goal throughout my artistic journey has been to tell the stories of individuals, whose voices would otherwise go unheard; poverty-stricken women, refugees displaced by deprivation and war, and homeless people struggling for survival on the streets. Through these stories, I explore the issues which affect these individuals and through my art I advocate on their behalf. As an artist, a key part of my role is to bring social issues to the attention of a wider public by depicting them in my work.

A piece which exemplifies my approach is 'Madonna and Children'. It shows a young woman begging with her children in the streets of Delhi. She is looking at her babies with compassion. The sorrow in her eyes shares with us a glimpse of her suffering in silence. And the child is reaching out – for what – food or love? So, this is a very emotional piece of art which tells the story of a woman carrying agony, pain, and hardship. This is typical of my approach; the central idea running through my figurative work is to convey a narrative and through this narrative I hope to draw the viewer into the story of the subject, so that they may consider the social issues surrounding that individual.

How do you create empathy for the women portrayed in your work?

To create empathy for the women in my pieces, I have to communicate their situation, thoughts and emotions effectively to the viewer. I have to find ways in textile and thread to get their situation across. Whether it is the look in their eye, their posture, their gesture or the context and environment set out in the piece, these details have to lead the viewer into the story of the subject and to feel the emotion of

their predicament. This may sound simple, but these effects are difficult to achieve, taking years of practice.

The impact of storytelling on a viewer is unpredictable, and I am sometimes surprised at viewers' reactions on seeing a work for the first time. At a recent exhibition some of the viewers were speechless with emotion, others in tears. This is how empathy with the women in my pieces is intended to work.