

**March 2010 - Reflection on the development of the 'bag' and buttonhole pieces in relation to proposed new work: (re) drawn thread/line 0110/1210**

***Development of bag and buttonhole pieces***

This reflection focuses on what have become my signature 'bag' pieces (produced between 1997 and 2007) together with a new piece of work exhibited at NUCA 29th Jan – 4th Feb 2010. The aim of the exercise is to consider the initial stimulus and motivations for the early work in order to identify issues and ideas that were significant in the development of my visual language.

The bag form emerged out of a period of speculative studio enquiry in the early 1990's. A key visual stimulus that had prompted the studio enquiry was a collection of old household linen and plain-sewing samplers that I had acquired from family and antique fairs. What I was attracted to in terms of the linen was the unsung but undeniable quality of the cloth, the quiet dignity of what were well-made ubiquitous items of everyday use, the simplicity, similarity and neutrality of form (essentially seamed square/rectangular pieces of cloth); and in this ubiquity and neutrality, a seeming anonymity. However, it was an anonymity that was countered by subtle individual difference (of weave structure, surface qualities, nature of seams/edgings) and a 'wabi-sabi'- like aesthetic of functional wear and tear. In this tension between ubiquity of form and seeming anonymity countered by individual difference, the linen enacted the essential contradictions between the objective/subjective and the universal/specific dimension textile. In terms of the plain-sewing samples, I was again attracted to the relationship between plain-sewing as an essential universal language that is then countered by the hand of the individual maker, and in the undoubted level of knowledge and skill that in its ubiquity and basic functionality remains anonymous and unnoticed.

My preoccupation then, as now, was with a particular quality of surface; a sensuous tactile surface that avoided the overt emotional expression of the authorial gestural mark or the aesthetic splendour of applied decoration, in favour of a more subtle and quietly modulated surface. I was drawn to all over surfaces which in their repetitive regularity had a certain objective neutrality but through their material presence communicated an instinctive emotional response. By evoking a powerful somatic sensuality, they clearly pointed to the importance of the body in aesthetic experience.

A key breakthrough for my practice was the chance application of a gesso mixture (which I had been using in my drawings) to the surface of a piece of cloth. The gesso was painted on as a solid covering, allowed to dry and then 'cracked off' by slowly working over the surface and rubbing and twisting in a way that released the warp and weft of the cloth. The application of gesso provided a chalky, flaky, quality, creating subtle modulations that activated the surface through the play of light and seemed to emulate some of the qualities of the time worn linen. Initially applied to a shop bought fabric. The gesso still felt like something of superficial 'paint-effect'. However, when applied to a piece of cloth that had been slowly quilted with row upon row of machine stitching, it psychologically seemed to have more integrity and worth, becoming embodied through the time and effort that had been put into its making. The softly quilted surface also physically and visually enhanced the modulation of the surface and importantly there seemed to be much more of an integral

relationship between structure and surface. The effect was particularly effective on striped fabrics where the fractured gesso layer created a kind of amorphous veil that interrupted the regularity of the geometric ground.

What was also important within these early samples was the density of the cloth. It was in an attempt to control the slippery stuff of cloth and give some substance to the fabric that I initially began to use machine stitch. Inspired by examples of Japanese work wear that I had studied in the V&A, I used machine stitch to bond layers of fabric together. The repetitive working of row upon row of stitching created a soft density and a subtly quilted surface which in the same way as the gesso was activated by the play of light. The quilted fabric maintained its pliability, but it was a pliability that had a tailored formality where the repetitive process of stitching regulated the fluidity of the cloth, bringing it under control and keeping it in check. A number of pleating and seaming samples operated in a similar way, controlling the fullness of the cloth and adding substance through the folding and consequent doubling up of the fabric.

In addition to their visual and physical attributes, the processes of quilting and pleating were significant in the way that they operated on a connotive level through their reference to the language of textile making and corresponding histories and traditions. It was in an attempt to negotiate the relationship between a formal material aesthetic and the symbolic connotations of the techniques employed in the work's production that the simple folded pleats became a more referential 'flat felled seam' (the type commonly found on jeans). This prompted me to consider other techniques that would make reference to the plain sewing conventions of textile. A number of samples made from old shirts, together with a small sketchbook drawing of an Inuit slashed hide bag from the Whitworth Art Gallery's library provided the initial stimulus for a series of experiments using the buttonhole as a motif.

The buttonhole operates as a simple mark - a line - yet it is not a mark on the surface but a slit/cut through the surface that functions to join one piece of fabric to another. Strengthened through a stitched or bound edge, the slit becomes both a tailored insertion and repetitive aesthetic device. Repeated end to end, the buttonhole becomes a dashed line echoing the form of a running stitch, or worked at right angles to a seam, sutures to panels of cloth together. Repeated over and over again in a grid formation, it creates a densely striated surface as an additional layer of fabric stitched onto the outside of the cloth is turned through the cut opening of the buttonhole to sit on the inside of the cloth. Through this process, structure and surface become a single entity – similar to the weaving of cloth, surface and structure become indistinguishable. Developing as a signatory motif, the bound buttonhole acted as an incident within the surface (*3x19 Intersecting a Seam*); repetitively mapped and measured the surface (*Square Correlation No.'s 1-5* and *1,326 Grey on Grey*); was obsessively repeated to the point where the ground was almost entirely cut away (*1,452 Not Motif but Ground*); and pushed to the edge, it acted as a framing device delimiting and drawing attention to the surface (*Buttoned Through: 6 rows of 16 and 156 Down 6 Side Seams*).

Whilst I found the densely stitched and gesso encrusted surfaces aesthetically satisfying, they still remained as samples. The initial stimulus for the bag form was prompted by *Untitled (Clothespin Piece) 1968* a small flattened sleeve like structure by Eva Hesse, and was the outcome of a period of enquiry where I was trying to find a suitable vehicle for the gesso encrusted, surfaces that I had been producing. Excited by the sensuality and tactility of these surfaces, what I was looking for was a suitably neutral form that would provide me with a

significant surface area but which in its shape would not detract from the surface interest. What I wanted to avoid were the planar conventions of the textile hanging (where textile materials and processes are used to emulate the expressive language of painting) and instead look to textile's own functional conventions and corresponding position within material culture.

A key reference point for my investigations was my longstanding interest in museum artefacts and the tension between their functional ambiguity, their formal and material aesthetic, and their culturally specific meaning(s). Removed from their original social and historical context(s), it was often the visual/material aesthetic of such objects that engaged my attention, yet it was the fact that they had a function – even though that function might remain unknown – that afforded the objects an integrity and level of ambiguity that excited the imagination.

In trying to find an appropriate vehicle for my quilted and gesso encrusted surfaces I was looking for something that would signify material culture and thereby silently speak of textile traditions and corresponding social contexts and potency of subjective experience. However, I was also very wary of cliché and the propensity within much contemporary textile practice to afford currency to the work through an aesthetic of subjectivity. Whilst I am clearly predisposed to the workings of nostalgia and my work utilises collective memory for maximum expressive potential, I wanted the work to avoid sentimentality and establish a more reciprocal relationship between the subjective and objective dimensions of the work.

What I was looking for was something similar to the household linen which operated as a generic signifier for textile culture but in remaining neutral and refusing any overt narrative, allowed attention to focus on material and formal qualities and opened up the possibility of a multiplicity of meanings. Through the strategic adoption of a reductive language the aim was to defer meaning and deny any emotional engagement; yet with the hope that any attempt at objective neutrality would be continually disrupted by the somatic sensuality of cloth, by the social and historical connotations of the needlework techniques employed in the work's production, and by the ambiguous reference to function. The 'bag form' was something of a hybrid between Eva Hesse's *Untitled (Clothespin Piece)* and a pillow/duvet case and seemed to provide a solution. In its frontality and simplicity of shape it allowed attention to focus on the sensuous quality of surface, but having a back and interior space, it was also very much a three dimensional object with ambiguous reference to function and to textile conventions. Adopting a rectilinear format and hung on the wall, the bag form also established obvious correspondences with painting and in its minimalist aesthetic began to have resonances with what Robert Hughes described as 'the seriality, repetition and exalted emotional silence that was the mark of a certain phase of American modernism.'<sup>1</sup> The correspondence with painting was something that developed quite intuitively rather than as conscious decision, but the adoption of repetitive and reductive strategies emerged from a similar concern to avoid subjective narrative and focus instead on the formal properties of the materials and processes.

Whilst the first pieces were small in size (directly informed by the Eva Hesse piece), it was a conscious decision to move beyond the traditional domestic scale usually associated with textile activity. Inspired by the scale of work within exhibitions such as the Lausanne Biennale, it was important that the work had a sense of

presence and imposed itself on the perception and experience of the viewer. Working on a larger scale allowed for a more generous surface area and thereby a more effective material presence.

The increase in scale and corresponding material presence was crucially important in implicating the body and acknowledging the role of the senses in aesthetic experience. It was through the slow repetitive accumulative processes (the working row upon row of machine quilting, the machine stitching and hand turning of buttonholes, the inch by inch rubbing of the gesso etc.) that the surface of the cloth was repetitively mapped and measured and the body thereby indirectly articulated. The expressive potential of the work is not realised overtly but is deeply embedded/embodied; realised through nuance of gesture, slow repetitive rhythms, and a dense accumulation of subtly modulated surfaces that silently speak of the process of their making. Whilst the repetitive processes of the work's production are retrieved in our imagination, and the importance of the body to aesthetic experience is acknowledged, what we are presented with is a sanitised, controlled body as the 'drama' and reality of the very physical and mental endurance required to create the work is hidden behind its coolly detached façade.

Beginning as singular forms, the bags increased both in size and in number of module units (initially from one to three) with the clear intention of achieving a more pronounced material presence. However, as the size increased a key problem was how to maintain an insistence on the surface over a larger area. A continual challenge was the tenuous relationship between the literal shape or form of the work and the insistence on surface. Concerned that the bags were becoming too monumental and thereby losing their important relationship to the body, and conscious of the difficulties of sustaining the surface over a larger scale, I began in subsequent series, rather than increase the size, to explore the possibilities of much larger multiples. This change of approach prompted a subsequent shift in focus from inner to external relationships as the work moved into the realm of installation and both the space of the gallery and the body of the viewer began to be articulated in a much more pronounced way. In *18 x 51 over 11.44 (2002)* - an installation of 18 modular units - the whole gallery wall was curtained with long thin bag forms hung close together; and in *Double-lined: 198 x 82 (2007)*, 27 draped bag forms lined the entire room.

When the area of the material surface extended to the point where the bags occupied a whole wall and room, this period of enquiry seemed to draw to a natural conclusion. The sheer enormity of the labour involved in the installations also meant that it was not a feasible way of working. Whilst the silencing of the 'drama' of production was certainly an issue within the work, it was felt that this wasn't necessarily retrievable by the viewer and that the process of making (and thereby indirect reference to the body and traditional textile conventions) was somewhat overshadowed by the visual impact and spectacle of the work. I was also conscious of the legacy of textile work being valued through the time involved in its production and wished to avoid an interpretation of the work based merely on the fetishisation of labour.

### **Motivations for new work: (re)drawn thread/line**

Whereas the grid had been implicit within the previous bag pieces (perhaps with the exception of *1, 475 Not Motif but Ground*) and used as a ordering system with which to create a non-hierarchical surface, the intention with the new work is to engage in a more conscious exploration of the grid as both a trope of modernism and

as the essential structuring principle of cloth. Employed for its anti-referential characteristics and resistance to narrative and subsequent efficiency in placing painting in the realm of the purely visual, the aim of the research is to investigate how the grid might operate differently when interpreted through the language of textile. My intention is to establish a direct correspondence with the paintings of Agnes Martin, renowned for her exploration of the grid. Martin's drawn and painted lines are to be interpreted through the process of drawn thread work - a form of counted-thread embroidery based on removing threads from the warp and/or the weft of a piece of even-weave fabric. In this way, rather than mapping and echoing 'the physical qualities of the surface ... onto the aesthetic dimensions of the same surface'<sup>2</sup> as is the case with Martin, the new work will investigate correlations between the visual dimension of the painted grid and the literal dimension of the textile grid. The initial idea is to exploit the potential of the ladder stitch as both a formal motif, which at a distance would read as an equivalent of Martin's drawn line, but similar to the buttonhole, on close inspection would reference its original context as a common edging stitch on domestic linen. What I am interested in is the correspondence between the temporal register of Martin's hand-drawn line and the slow accrual of the ladder stitched line. Other areas of research informing the studio enquiry include: the paradoxical nature of the grid and its centrifugal and centripetal characteristics; the relationship between the visual and tactile (scopic/haptic) and corresponding connotations of distance and proximity and the idea of the optical being countered - but not erased - by the tactile.

*But it is the phenomenology of such works which reveals most closely their meaning. They juxtapose the optical - the visual field experienced as a luminous cloud-like space - with the tactile - the material fact of the object registered through surface texture and geometry. The subjectivity of the optical is thus countered - but not erased - by the objectivity of the painting as object, and in fact the subjectivity of the experience is bracketed between the two moments of objectivity when the painting is encountered through object-unity of the work when seen from a distance and then, close up, as fabric, facture or surface marking. Ultimately such painting aims to intensify an awareness of the body as interface between consciousness [subjectivity] and the world of objects and materials (objectivity).*

## Notes

1. Robert Hughes, *Amish, The Art of the Quilt*, Phaidon, 1994, p.14
2. Krauss, R. (1985a) Grids. *In: The originality of the avant-garde and other modernist myths*. Cambridge (Mass), London: MIT Press, p.10
3. Morley, S. (1996) The Sublime and the Beautiful, *Art Monthly*. June 1996 Vol. 197, p.16

(See also: Bristow, M. (2010) *Materialising the Grid: correspondences, contradictions and conventions*. Unpublished manuscript.)