

THOUGHTS ON TEXTILE ART AND ITS PARTICULARITIES WITHIN CONTEMPORARY ART

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I understand life, and significant moments in it through fabric. Cloth sees us through from birth to death. We are swaddled in it when we are born, and as we grow up (whether by concerted effort or not) we signify something of our gender/politics/cultural affiliations and class via the wearing of different colours, fibre contents, detailing and shapes.

Hannah Gartside with her work *Bunnies in Love, Lust and Longing*, 2015–2019, found leather, suede and synthetic gloves, millinery wire, thread, weighted curtain cord, fabric, dimensions variable shown as part of the ATW exhibition *Leftover Love*, 2021. Photo: ATW.



As a sculpture and installation artist who uses worn clothing as a medium, I believe wholeheartedly in the particular potency of textiles in art and craft. Within the broader field of contemporary art, textiles (by which I mean both work with whole cloth and fibre or yarn) have a powerful ability to convey stories, to evoke emotions, and to engage with and move a viewer.

Cloth gives and takes. Cloth protects us and also receives/absorbs us: our smells, our sweat, and memories of our bodies' movement are caught in a fabric's wrinkles. The term 'memory' has multiple meanings. In relation to fabric and clothing, 'memory' is a technical term that refers to the *material's* physical memory (as if the fabric itself is conscious or sentient). The creases formed and held in the elbow of a jacket after it has been worn is the sleeve's memory, for example. Due to their implicit proximity to our bodies, textiles have a particularly powerful association with a person's lived experiences.

As the American academic Peter Stallybrass puts it in *Worn Worlds: Clothes, Mourning, and the Life of Things*, 'The particular power of cloth... is closely associated with two almost contradictory aspects of its materiality: its ability to be permeated and transformed by the maker and wearer, and its ability to endure over time. Cloth thus tends to be powerfully associated with memory. Or, to put it more strongly, cloth is a kind of memory.'¹ He wrote the piece in response to wearing the jacket of a close friend, who had recently died. As a side note, I see within his writing, and from my own experience of making a quilt from the floral dresses of my Grandmother after she had died, the possibility for textiles to support processing grief and engender feelings of comfort and warmth (as much as I hold the blanket, the blanket holds me).

Textiles are a process driven, labour-intensive medium requiring time-honed skills. Working with textile-related processes such as quilting, weaving, and felting ask of the maker an investment of time, not only in the production of a particular piece, but in accruing the requisite tacit knowledge and handling skills in the first place.

When you view a textile work, more explicitly for me than other mediums, what you are experiencing is the maker's commitment, focus, patience and care. The production hours are embedded within the very process. Who amongst us has had the experience of adroitly hand-sewing only to think a frustrating thought and have the thread immediately tangle? Thread seems particularly responsive to my supposition that the way you feel as you make an artwork is stored within the work itself.

When I am with a textile work that has been made with precision and diligence, I experience a deep feeling of calm and relief. I understand that this particular skerrick of the world has been appropriately cared for and therefore in this moment, right here, everything is okay. That is the generosity and possibility of textile-based artworks.

¹ Peter Stallybrass, 'Worn Worlds: Clothes, Mourning and the Life of Things', Yale Review, 1993, vol.81, p.35-50

Hannah Gartside works across sculpture, installation and video. Characteristically sensual and poetic, her works transform found fabrics and clothing to articulate experiences and sensations of longing, tenderness, care and desire.