

# make it ok.



**19 March – 8 May 2016**

*'When I was growing up, all the women in my house were using needles. I've always had a fascination with the needle, the magic power of the needle. The needle is used to repair damage. It's a claim to forgiveness. It is never aggressive, it's not a pin.'*

Louise Bourgeois.

This exhibition considers notions of damage and repair, disease and medicine and the healing and restoration of objects, individuals and communities. The contributing artists examine these themes in some depth, making connections both physical and what might be termed spiritual – finding relationships between how we think and how we feel about discomfort and vulnerability. Can disjuncture in our minds, bodies and hearts be repaired through 'the power of the needle'?

Since the 2008 global economic downturn, the creative community has produced many variations on the themes of making and mending, often through association with austerity and recycling. These are primarily concerned with physical patching and 'upcycling' of objects, creating what has become for some an aesthetic of mending. Conversely there has also been a marked crossover of contemporary art practice and social enterprise, with artists as diverse and far apart as Hilary Jack in Manchester and Michael Swaine in San Francisco bringing their respect and concerns for individuals and communities to the heart of their own art.

*What do I need to do to make it OK?* charts a path through and around these activities, giving a very particular focus on how the selected artists take metaphorical notions of damage and repair and reconcile these with a needle-led practice. The imagery of damage and repair is central, as is a deeper examination of the feelings and thoughts around these processes.

Questions arise about how damage and repair can both change the nature of a being or object. When something changes, when do we consider this to be damage? Is it about loss of function or alteration? Is damage always a bad thing? In the case of genetic modification it is the process that underpins evolution. Is it of concern that an object is not the same after repair, or is this an inevitable aspect of the changing nature of life? Is there, or should there, be a philosophy of mending?

An interesting branch of research explores how mending is and has been used in textile conservation for both historical and practical reasons, for instance in museum conservation, Japanese Boro and Indian Kantha cloth. The technical aspects of repair can in themselves be fascinating: visible repair and non-

invisible mending can be intriguing, in the way that some people are fascinated by scars.

Artworks in the exhibition, while linked by notions of damage and repair, are also connected to wider themes around the natural versus manmade world with reference to ecology and the human imprint on the planet, medicine & healing, mental health, computer imaging systems and how we connect to others. The five artists all demonstrate sophisticated textile processes which mix digital and hand stitching, contemporary and traditional techniques across sewing, printing dyeing, embroidery, knitting and crochet.

#### SELECTED ARTISTS:

**Dorothy Caldwell** cites her relocation to Canada early in her career as an event that has shaped her work. 'My work is a map of land and memory. I am interested in the landmarks that give a sense of place and how humans mark and visualise the land. The early surveyors of Canada measured and structured the land mathematically but, in the squares of the grid, they made notations on certain rare plant growth, unusual geological formations and other points that they were personally drawn to. Identifying my own personal landmarks, through gathering, touching, and recording is how I create a sense of place. The vocabulary for my work is drawn from studying textile traditions and ordinary stitching practices such as darning, mending and patching. I am drawn to cloth that has been repaired and reconstructed, and in that on-going process which encodes time and the richness of lives lived.'



*Image 1: Quiet Place: Willow and Arctic Moss (detail, Dorothy Caldwell)*

Dorothy's recent work has evolved from residencies in landscapes with, to the casual eye, very little shaping by mankind: the outback of Southern Australia, and the wilds of Baffin Island in the remote Canada Arctic. She searches for faint traces of lines and signs made by existing and earlier civilisations, recording these distant and faint marks not as an exact representation of those often bare and difficult landscapes, but as a reworking, using memory and imagination, of the conversations she has had with local people and their stories. Dorothy has undertaken major commissions across Canada and the USA and also spent time in India studying Kantha cloth stitch techniques and working with local communities around Kolkata as well as similar trips to Japan to investigate Shibori. She speaks of her worried reaction to one commission brief: 'This is awful, oh my god. I approach it as a repair job – what do I need to do to make it ok?'

*Traces* is an entirely new piece of Dorothy's work, shown for the first time at Devon Guild of Craftsmen. Dorothy Caldwell studied at the Tyler School of Art in Rome and Philadelphia and later at The Banff Centre for Fine Arts. She lives and works in a small community in Ontario, Canada.

**Saidhbhín Gibson** is a multi-disciplinary artist who is concerned with humanity's impact on and interaction with the landscape. Her work is intricate and frequently small in scale, requiring careful and intimate observation thereby engendering a sense of wonder rather than any negative emotion. As Irish curator and writer Carissa Farrell writes, 'The burdensome guilt of man's devastating interference with nature is avoided. Instead Gibson moderates thumping criticism with aesthetic grace.' A recurring format is her series of stitch-led subtle interventions into natural objects, such as the series of 'repaired' leaves known as *Make Good, Make Better*. There is deliberate ambiguity in her titles – is it art that makes things better, or nature? *Fall Down Series* and *Comfort and Joy II* are both new works which show the artist's fascination with reworking abandoned, decaying natural materials.



Image2: *Huddle 2D*, Saidhbhin Gibson 2015

Saidhbhín works in drawing, sculpture, print and film as well as stitch, across 2D, 3D and moving image formats. She studied fine art at DIT Mountjoy Square, Dublin and has exhibited widely in group and solo shows in Ireland, Iceland, New Zealand and Canada. She lives and works in the southeast of Ireland.

**Celia Pym** is concerned with process. She has measured time and journeys through knitting, notably a substantial work created while travelling for several months around Japan in 2003. She has told the stories of garments, and those who wore them, through repairs and darns and found intriguing ways to make fleeting contact with strangers and record those connections in stitch. Her interest 'in the spaces the body occupies, the tenderness of touch'<sup>1</sup> is centred around how we, both as sentient beings and biological entities, use resilience, strength and support in our care for each other while making ourselves feel better, both physically and mentally.



Image 3: *First One's the Best*, Celia Pym 2015

Celia has an Anglo-American family background. She studied at Harvard and the Royal College of Art and is now based in London. Her work is in the collection of the Crafts Council and she has exhibited across the UK, France, Norway, Japan and the USA. Celia sometimes combines her artistic practice with experience as a working nurse in hospitals, hospices and homes.

<sup>1</sup> From the artist's statement on Professor Lesley Millar's website [www.transitionandinfluence.com](http://www.transitionandinfluence.com)

**Freddie Robins** is well known for her witty, subversive machine and hand-knitted objects, which in the past have looked at domestic issues, feminism, crime and public notions of craft. She has an obsession with perfection, but recent changes in how she lives and works have led to an embracing of more expedient means and openness to re-use of materials and a less formulated and pre-planned approach to her work.

In early 2013 she said, 'Holding current concepts and themes in mind, ideas about what it is to be human, loss, death, grief and mourning, I am working spontaneously with my materials. Enjoying the release from pre-planned, designed work I am knitting, crocheting, embroidering, sewing and pinning onto



the knitted bodies and body parts (from previous projects).' Following her successful presentation of the first of this new body of work at Collect 2013, Freddie continues to explore her preoccupations around pain, fear and loss.

Freddie studied constructed textiles at Middlesex Polytechnic and the Royal College of Art, where she is currently Senior Tutor in mixed media on the textile programme. She has work in collections across the UK and Europe and has exhibited extensively across the UK, Europe, Australia and the USA. After spending most of her life in London, she relocated with her partner and daughter to a rural setting in Essex in 2009, the context for which informs much of her recent practice.

Image 4: *I'm so bloody sad*, Freddie Robins 2007 – 2015

**Karina Thompson** works in digital imagery, making layered machine-stitched structures and installations. She examines imaging systems and data, such as that used in medical science, but also responds to historic places, objects and people. Previous projects include 'Making Moves', a response to the history and artefacts at Soho House, Birmingham (the former home of Matthew Boulton, 18th century manufacturer and leading light of The Lunar Society), and 'Pattern Within' for the Centre for Clinical Haematology, Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Birmingham. This was a commission based on the imagery of blood data from critically ill patients, combining the codified strings of data that capture the detail of blood science, and the personal experiences of the patients and staff of this specialised unit.



Image 5: *The Leper's Skull*, Karina Thompson 2015

In 2013 Karina created the large scale work '1 Hour's Production = 1 1/2 Miles = 15 Lengths', for the exhibition 'Cloth and Memory {2}' in the former Spinning Room at Salts Mill, building up its sinuous length through multiple stitched scans

of her own heart taken while running, in a very personal response to the immense dimensions of this room. Karina has recently received a grant from Arts Council England to create new work which will explore the skeletons and medical archives in the collection of the University of Bradford, from which she plans to create new intricately layered and digitally stitched imagery from x-rays, CT scans and archaeological site plans. Karina studied textiles in Birmingham and has exhibited widely across the UK, Europe and the USA. As well as residencies and commissions, she has carried out many community art projects in the West Midlands. She is a member of the prestigious Quilt Art group, and lives and works in Birmingham.

*What Do I Need to Do to Make it Ok?* is a touring exhibition curated by Liz Cooper, and is supported by Arts Council England and the International Textile Research Centre of the University for the Creative Arts.

Concept © Liz Cooper

<http://dorothycaldwell.com/>  
<http://sadhbgibson.blogspot.ie/>  
<http://celiapym.com/>  
<http://www.freddierobins.com/>  
<http://karinathompsonstextiles.blogspot.co.uk/>  
<http://www.karinathompson.co.uk/>

*Image credits: Images 1, 3 & 5 by Eoin Carey, image 2 – courtesy of the artist*

Future dates and venues for this exhibition are:

| Venue  | Location                           | Dates                             |
|--|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| R-Space<br><a href="http://www.rspacelisburn.com">www.rspacelisburn.com</a>  | Lisburn<br>N Ireland, BT27 4XE     | 28 May – 24 June 2016             |
| Forty Hall<br><a href="http://www.fortyhallestate.co.uk">www.fortyhallestate.co.uk</a>   | Enfield, North London<br>EN2 9HA   | September-November<br>2016        |
| The National Centre for Craft & Design<br><a href="http://www.nationalcraftanddesign.org.uk">www.nationalcraftanddesign.org.uk</a> | Sleaford, Lincolnshire<br>NG34 7TW | 8 March – 14 May 2017             |
| Rugby Art Gallery & Museum<br><a href="http://www.ragm.org.uk">www.ragm.org.uk</a>   | Rugby, Warwickshire<br>CV21 3BZ    | 9 September 2017 – 13<br>Jan 2018 |