

Cities

Amsterdam
Antwerp
Aries
Aspen
Athens
Auckland
Barcelona
Basel
Bath
Belgium
Bergen
Berlin
Bilbao
Birmingham
Bonn
Boston
Bregenz
Brighton
Brisbane
Bristol
Brussels
Budapest
Cambridge
Canberra
Cardiff
Chicago
Cincinnati
Colorado
Copenhagen
Coventry
Daytona
Dubai
Dublin
Dundee
Düsseldorf
Eastbourne
Edinburgh
Espoo
Essen
Florence
Frankfurt
Gent
Glasgow
Haarlem
Hastings
Helsinki
Hong Kong
Hull
Humboldt
Installation
LA
Leeds
Leicester
Levens
Lisbon
Liverpool
London
Los Angeles
Madrid
Manchester
Mangate
Marseille
Massachusetts
Melbourne
Memphis
Mexico
Mexico City
Miami
Middlebrough
Milan
Milos Keynes
Montreal
Moscow
Mumbai
Munich
Napoli
New Delhi
New York
Newcastle
Newcastle Gateshead
Nice
Nîmes
Norwich
Nottingham
Oakville
Odham
Online
Oslo
Oxford
Paris
Philadelphia
Plymouth
Portland
Prague
Preston
Reggio Emilia
Rennes
Riga
Rome
Rotterdam
Salisbury
San Francisco
San Diego
São Paulo
Sculpture
Seattle
Seoul
Seville
Shanghai
Singapore
Somerset
Southend-on-Sea
Sofia
St. Moritz
Stockholm
Stoke-on-Trent
Sydney
Tel Aviv
Tel Aviv
Tokyo
Toronto
Vancouver
Venice
Vienna
Vilnius
Wakefield
Warsaw
Warrington
Wellington

Medium

Animation
Architecture
Archival
Assemblage
Book
Broadcasting
Ceramics
Choreography
Collage
Custom
Digital
Drawing
Enamel
Film
Group
Installation
Kinetic
Landscape
Light
Mixed Media
New Media
Online
Painting
Performance
Photography
Pottery
Print
Printmaking
Projection
Publication
Sculpture
Sound
Tapestry
Text
Textile
Textiles
Video
Virtual Reality
Watercolour
Weaving

Show

Art Fair
Art Prize
Artist Profile
Biennale
Book
Camden Arts Centre
DAM
Festival
Frieze Festival
Frieze projects
Group
Installation
Jerwood Visual Arts
Print
Solo
Two-person

Archive

Nov 2020
Oct 2020
Sep 2020
Aug 2020
Jul 2020
Jun 2020
May 2020
Apr 2020
Mar 2020
Feb 2020
Jan 2020
Dec 2019

TJ Boulting, 59 Riding House Street, Fitzrovia, London W1W 7EG

Subversive Stitch



Artist : James Merry
Title : Nike + Jöklaseley
Date(s) : 2015
Material : Embroidered sweatshirt
Website : <http://www.tjboulting.com/home>
Credit : Photo by Thomas Whiteside



Subversive Stitch

TJ Boulting

14 February - 23 March 2019

Review by Anna Souter

In 1984, feminist art historian Rozsika Parker published 'The Subversive Stitch – Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine', in which she explored the sociocultural and gendered connotations of sewing and stitching across Western history. Now in 2019, TJ Boulting presents 'Subversive Stitch', a group show examining the legacy of embroidery today – another step in the creation of a contemporary canon of fabric as a serious artistic medium.

In her ground-breaking book, Parker argues that from the early modern period onwards, embroidery was construed as feminine; the dominant male discourse associated it with domesticity and craft, in opposition to the masculine fine art mediums of painting and sculpture. However, Parker also draws attention to examples of women who have stitched subversive messages into their sewing or harnessed its perceived femininity for empowerment, particularly after the cultural reclamation of embroidery by the Arts and Crafts, and suffrage movements. She wrote about "the contradictory forms of embroidery, demonstrating how it has been both a source of pleasurable creativity and oppression. Embroidery has been the means of educating women into the feminine ideal, and of proving that they have attained it – witness the history of samplers, for instance – but it has also proved a weapon of resistance to the painful constraints of femininity."

The potential power of the stitch has been picked up by women artists with increasing confidence over the course of the 20th century. This is particularly true of modernist figures such as Anni Albers and contemporaries of Parker like Louise Bourgeois, whose work prompted a reassessment of what it means for female artists to work with fabric.

The show at TJ Boulting has a snappier title than the book that inspired it – perhaps a hint that the gallery aims to re-frame this "women's work" for the 21st century. The exhibition's primary focus is on the medium of stitched fabric itself, rather than exclusively on women's gendered role in producing it, allowing for nuance, openness and differences of approach. This is a feminist show, but it doesn't restrict itself to only showing work with an explicitly feminine message.

For example, Lillah Fowler's contribution '3609' (2017) explores the connection between weaving and computer programming, highlighting the historic use of machines to produce complex patterns in materials as an early example of automation in manufacturing. Yelena Popova also uses weaving to examine the materiality of the digital in a tapestry that acts as a physical "screen shot" of an earlier algorithm-generated computer work.

Other works on display deal with ecological themes, such as James Merry's embroidered vintage sportswear. Merry (whose inclusion in the show indicates that embroidery is no longer solely a female occupation) stitches delicate flowers and leaves onto the logos of well-known consumer brands, encroaching on the company's cultural identity and suggesting a symbolic resistance by nature. Marianne Thoenner's work similarly deals with organic growth, using thick thread to recall the microbial and the bacterial.

There are also some unabashedly feminist pieces in 'Subversive Stitch', and they are some of the strongest in the show. Charlotte Edey's powerful hand-finished tapestries challenge the gendered politics of space, making a case for a radical feminine space: an imaginary landscape inhabited only by the female. Gal Lesheim likewise contributes a powerful offering with 'And She is a Mummer and Queen', a hanging sculpture made of soft fabric. The work's title is taken from Natan Alterman's 1957 poem 'The Spinner', which highlights the historic role of women in creating the fabrics that clothed everyone from kings to beggars. At the end of the poem, the spinner of the title makes clothes for herself:

"And she put on the robe of her weaving –

no brighter ever was seen.

And now she is thief and beggar,

and she is mummer and queen."

In these verses, spinning becomes a tool for self-determination, allowing the woman to create her own identity through her active role in the production of her clothing.

Rozsika Parker wrote, "Limited to practising art with needle and thread, women have nevertheless sewn a subversive stitch, managing to make meanings of their own in the very medium intended to foster polite self-effacement." "Subversive Stitch" at TJ Boulting suggests that work with fabric has changed in status since Parker was writing in the 1980s. Fully accepted as a legitimate medium for art, there is little politeness or self-effacement here. Instead, men and women are using the stitch to empower, to challenge, and to make meanings with a confidence that is entirely deserved.

Published on 26 February 2019

Related Articles



staring forms: Miranda
Bennerhassett, Aleana Egan,
Andreas Kindler von Knobloch,
Tanad Williams



Maria Farrar: Eaves Deep



The Decorator and the Thief (...)