



INTERSECTIONS

A CONFERENCE EXPLORING  
COLLABORATION IN TEXTILE  
DESIGN RESEARCH

13 SEPT 2017

Loughborough University  
London

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## **Woven Within the Surface: interconnected explorations of fine art linen canvas production**

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This item was submitted to the proceedings of the Loughborough University Textile Design Research Group INTERSECTIONS Conference 2017 by Geoffrey Diego Litherland.

**Citation:** Litherland, G.D. & McLaren, A. (2017) *Woven Within the Surface: interconnected explorations of fine art linen canvas production*. In Proceedings of Intersections: Collaborations in Textile Design Research Conference, 13 September 2017, Loughborough University London, U.K. Available from [www.lboro.ac.uk/textile-research/intersections](http://www.lboro.ac.uk/textile-research/intersections).

### **Additional Information:**

**Publisher:** Loughborough University (© The Authors)

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*Abstract: For centuries, linen canvas has been the preferred fabric support for painters. While there are historical examples of decoratively woven canvasses, the aesthetic relationship between canvas and painting has rarely been explored. Previously a cottage industry in the UK, production of linen is now mechanised on an industrial scale. Lost skills required to process the fibre are being re-contextualised by designers and craftspeople for the sustainability value of slow, local production methods. Similar principles are evident in the work of contemporary artists exploring ecological themes through use of nature as raw material. This paper describes the early stages of Woven Within the Surface, a collaborative interdisciplinary project to grow and weave patterned linen canvas, exploring interconnected aesthetic, ecological, and material-led concepts in textile design and fine art contexts. Discussion will focus on the benefits of collaborating across disciplines in relation to development of new knowledge and understanding, skills, and creative outcomes.*

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**Keywords:** linen; weave; painting; collaboration; interconnectivity



**Figure 1. Geoff Diego Litherland and Angharad McLaren preparing the land**

Source: Repton, 2017

## Introduction

Within the Surface is an interdisciplinary collaborative research project led by contemporary painter Geoff Diego Litherland, in which the artist aims to, in collaboration with others, make all the materials necessary to create an original body of work (paintings) locally using natural sources from the immediate locality – Wirksworth in Derbyshire (UK). This includes preparing the land for sowing flax seeds (fig.1); growing, nurturing, harvesting, and processing flax fibres to produce hand-spun linen yarn; hand-weaving linen canvas; creating natural primers and paints from local plant, animal and mineral resources; and finally painting on the woven surfaces. The design of the woven canvas and the subject of the final paintings on the surface of it will emerge as part of the collaborative process, influenced by background research into pattern and meaning, and the practical processes involved in producing the materials in a particular location. The aim is to create finished objects that hold meaning beyond their physical presence, imbued by a sense of human collaborative craft, time and place. Currently work-in-progress (due for completion in August 2018), the project objectives include:

- Investigate interdisciplinary opportunities between textiles and fine art, e.g. in what way can a craft led approach to making linen canvas add significance to the fabric? Can concepts of interconnectivity be articulated in a woven contemporary textile within in a fine art context?
- Explore collaboration through participation in a specific location; and
- Develop an on-going iterative, collaborative approach to the design and production of patterned woven linen canvas.

In response to the conference themes, this paper will focus on the collaboration between authors Litherland and weave designer Angharad McLaren to grow and weave patterned linen canvas, which will be used as the fabric support for the resulting paintings.

First we will introduce the collaborators' backgrounds to explain shared motivations as practitioners and academics in exploring interconnected aesthetic, ecological and material-led concepts in textile design and fine art contexts. The material (linen), its background in a fine art painting context, and relevant examples of patterns and their meanings in historical and contemporary textiles will then be described, followed by examples of contemporary craft-based approaches to sustainable material production and ecological notions of materiality in art to contextualise the interdisciplinary conceptual direction. Collaborative research activities, currently at various stages of work-in-progress, will then be described and initial insights discussed to draw conclusions on the benefits of collaborating across disciplines in relation to the development of new knowledge and understanding, skills, and creative outcomes.

## Within The Surface: collaborators

Litherland explores the relationship between culture and nature in his work, through subject, materiality (**the quality of being composed of matter**) and the processes involved in painting. The subject of his work is a collision between pre 20<sup>th</sup> century romantic paintings and 21<sup>st</sup> century images of the universe. The process of painting is instrumental in depicting the collision, as the materials (linen, gesso and oil paint) and technique (under painting, glazes and washes) of traditional oil painting are used to explore ways of perceiving landscape in its historical entirety and thus in a state of flux rather than a fixed temporal view.

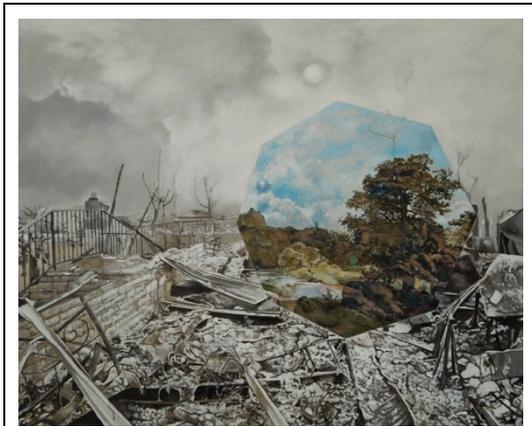
This unique assembly of materials and techniques not only references historical works, but also exploits the process of painting itself (layers, washes, splashes, etc.) in exploring the connection and meaning behind colliding disparate imagery. The landscape is painted as if it is emerging from cosmic and painterly matter or dissolving back into it: hovering between abstraction and figuration, liquid and solid. Each new series seeks to investigate different parameters of how paint can seem to depict elements of the landscape in a traditional way but on close inspection disintegrate to expose the minute matter of painting.

Linen canvas plays an important role in the work, chosen as his preferred support due to its lineage to paintings' history, which tie in with elements of 18<sup>th</sup> century landscape paintings often referenced in his work (fig.2) and its congruous relationship with the materials of oil painting, as linen and linseed oil (the preferred binding agent in oil painting) come from the same plant, flax. His Central and South American heritage and upbringing have also cultivated in him a fascination for symmetrical and geometric patterns in textile traditions.

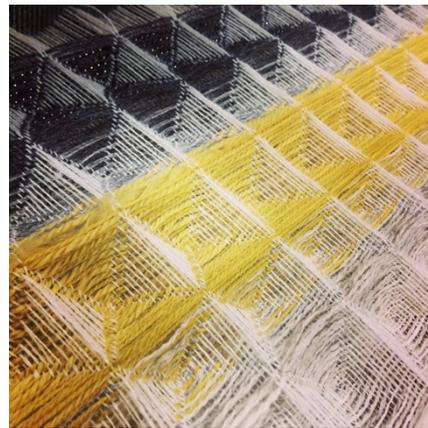
McLaren's research interests centre on sustainability in relation to textile design production, consumption and waste (see for example: McLaren et al 2016; McLaren & Mclauchlan, 2015). On-going enquiries into heritage craft skills, cultural heritage, and community wellbeing are also explored; often through participatory craft approaches such as collaborative weaving activities to facilitate knowledge exchange and shared development of creative outcomes.

Weave Parkhead (2015), for example, was a collaboration between schools, community groups, weavers, textile designers and archaeologists to create a series of four textile panels celebrating the heritage of Parkhead, an area with significant textile, political and industrial heritage in Glasgow's East End. During this a series of community workshops and events, combining weaving, creative craft skills and historical research explored and revealed the spirit of Parkhead – the stories, people and places that make it unique (Weave Parkhead, 2015). The conversations had during these sessions informed and inspired the design of the textiles. Radical Parkhead, a resulting hand-woven panel (fig.3) celebrated the radical, progressive politics of Parkhead's past using colours, materials and weave structures to visually represent the research findings. Other previous praxis has explored traditional weave patterns, practices, culture and meaning, including research into Mayan back-strap weaving, textiles, and culture in Central America.

The project brings together both collaborators' methodological approaches and interests in place, materials, processes, and textile patterns and meanings, in particular those of Amerindian cultures. It offers the chance to explore ideas of craft and collaboration, investigating interconnected ideas of sustainability, heritage, and textile production, and facilitating the development of an interdisciplinary way of working.



**Figure 2. A Field in England**  
oil on canvas, 90cm x 110cm  
Source: Geoff Diego Litherland, 2015



**Figure 3. Panel detail**  
(Weave Parkhead project)  
Source: Angharad McLaren, 2016

## Woven Linen Canvas

Linen fibre comes from a specific variety of flax plant *Linum usitatissimum* (Buchanan, 1995). Seeds are sown in April and the plants mature in August, near the end of this process the plant displays the fleeting and ubiquitous pale blue flowers before the seed heads emerge. For fabric production the plants are pulled up from the field to obtain the maximum amount of fibre. The plants are laid out and left in the field for several weeks to 'ret', a process that allows natural elements to loosen the woody core of the stem so the outer bark can be peeled away. It is then de-seeded by 'rippling', where the top ends of the dried flax are pulled through nails hammered into a board like a big comb (the seeds will be used to make linseed oil). The flax is then taken through a 'breaking' process that breaks the inner woody stalk into smaller pieces thus separating it from the flax fibres. Any 'shives' (small broken woody stalk fragments) still attached to the flax can be 'scutched' out by scraping the fibres with a scutching knife. 'Hackling' then involves pulling the fibres through metal combs to be left with long and smooth fibres ready for finally spinning into a yarn that can be used to weave (Lutton 2007).

Flax was traditionally grown in Ireland, Scotland and N. England, then across to the northern European plain, including N. France, Flanders, Germany, the Baltic countries and Russia. There have been some interesting historic accounts of flax production prior to the industrial revolution in Derbyshire (Bunting, 1996), where this project is located. These accounts detail the cottage industry production processes undertaken by many households to produce personal supplies of yarns sufficient for hand-weaving all the linen needed for clothing and domestic uses. This manufacturing was in essence economically invisible as scales of production were small, yet still required collaboration of skilled craftspeople – farmers, spinners, dyers, and weavers - across communities. The advent of industrialisation and cheap imported cotton by the middle of the 18th century soon made the time consuming process of producing linen for personal use a thing of the past in this country, and hence the skills were lost (ibid). These lost skills are being re-contextualised by designers and crafts people for the sustainability value of slow, local production methods, explored later in more detail (see 'Craft-based approaches).

Production of linen is now largely mechanised on an industrial scale. The most sought after is European linen, which is largely grown and processed in northern France and Belgium (Millot, 2017). Due to its strength, sustainability credentials, and potential myriad of uses it is increasingly being seen as a prestige fibre that can be processed to create high end fabrics for the fashion industry or be combined with other materials to create strong and durable hybrid products, ranging from furniture to tennis rackets (ibid). Since the sixteenth century linen canvas has been the preferred fabric support for oil painters, due to its durability and tightness of weave. Prior to this, painters worked on walls (frescos) or on wooden panels, but during the Venetian Renaissance painters struggled with the damp climate of their city and sought a lighter more stable material and support to work on (Blake, 2006). Properly prepared linen was the solution, revolutionising oil painting by allowing artists to work much larger in scale, and in time even directly outside (ibid). The unique qualities of linen fibres are particularly suited to artists' canvasses – they are round and give the fabric an irregular texture, creating an indiscriminate and natural surface to work on. The fibres retain their natural oils, which help preserve their natural flexibility (Carbonnel, 1980). The fibres are also much longer than cotton or hemp, making it a much more flexible and stable fabric, allowing it to be both tightly stretched and also less susceptible to sag over time. The resulting textile, traditionally woven in a plain weave structure with evenly balanced warp and weft, is tight and strong.

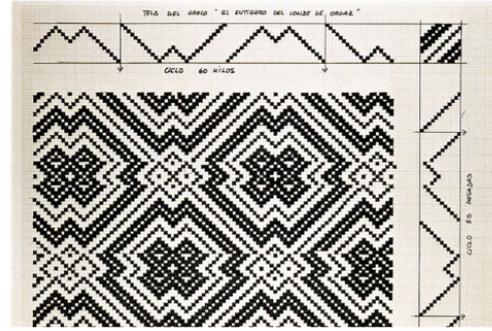
Some historical examples of painters working on patterned linen canvas rather than the customary plain weave have been discovered. Most notably, the early paintings of renowned 17<sup>th</sup> century Spanish artist Diego Velazquez, who sometimes used ornately, patterned linen textiles known as mantelillos as canvas (fig.4) (Zuccari et al, 2005). These consisted of a composite point twill-weave fabric, unbalanced due to having a denser weft than warp. Used for special commissions, these were wider than ordinary plain weave canvasses allowing the artist to have less connecting seams in a larger painting. Other Spanish artists of this time, including El Greco, also used mantelillos to paint on (fig.5) (ibid).



FIGURE 7. *Saint John in the Wilderness*, diagram of the canvas weave.

**Figure 4. Velazquez's *St John in the Wilderness*,  
Diagram of the canvas weave**

Source: Zuccari et al, 2005



**Figure 5. El Greco's *Burial of the Count of Orgaz*,  
Diagram of the canvas weave**

Source: Thais, 2012

However, the visual qualities of these mantelillo canvases didn't play a part in the finished aesthetic of the work due to thick priming and paint coverage (Pacheco, 1649) and were only discovered during conservation and research using x-ray technology (Zuccari et al, 2005).

The possibilities of a figurative or aesthetic relationship between canvas and painting have rarely been explored in a woven fabric. A collaboration that seeks to investigate this, inspired by Zuccari et al, is between weaver Helena Loermans and art historian and painter Marta Pokojowczyk (Loermans et al, 2017). Since 2014 Loermans has been hand weaving exact recreations of patterned mantelillo canvasses (fig.6), on which Pokojowczyk then paints (fig.7). In these works most of the patterned canvas is left bare with thick abstract impasto gestures in the centre of them, deliberately allowing the viewer to see the intricacies of the decorative textiles and celebrate their heritage.



**Figure 6. Helena Loermans recreation of  
Velazquez's mantelillo canvas.**

Source: Loermans et al, 2017



**Figure 7. 'Constellations', 59 x 52 cm, Marta  
Pokojowczyk**

Source: Loermans et al, 2017

### Textiles, pattern & meaning

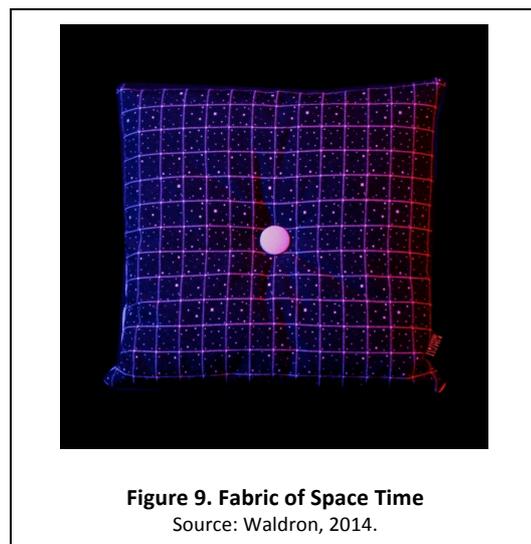
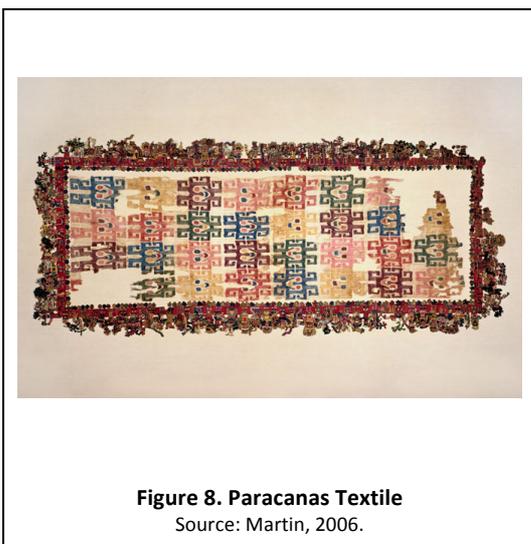
The patterns on the historic mantellilo canvasses are large damask diamond type repeats, patterns that at the time would have been inspired by both eastern and Islamic traditions (Thais, 2012), an example of how cultural meaning can be embedded in textile patterns – a well-established notion in cultural and textile theory. Decoration in textiles can be seen as transformative, their visual and tactile qualities playing an important role in sensory perception, social function, and our understanding of the world (Igoe, 2010):

I begin to see what decoration is for. It completes. It brings buildings, objects and artefacts to completion in and for perception, by making them easier to see, more finished, more easily focussed upon. It completes in and for social use by making them into signs and symbols for our endeavours and beliefs. It completes in and for pleasure by inviting the eye to dwell and the hand to caress. It completes in and for thought by making objects memorable. Decoration, by completing our world, completes those who live in it.... (Brett, 2005:264; quoted in Igoe, 2010)

The woven geometric patterned fabrics of Amerindian cultures, a source of inspiration both authors draw from, often embody fractals and naturally reoccurring patterns and forms derived or abstracted from nature (Williams, 2014) that embody deep cultural meanings. Lois Martin (2006) expands on these concepts in her study of The Paracas Textile (fig.8), for example – a rotationally symmetrical, four-selvedge single back-strap woven web with an ornate border of rhythmic embroidered characters that appears to have played an important role in society:

... its seamless form embodies principles of duality and reflection that echo deeply resonant Andean ways of organizing space and marking time ... [it] could have operated as a solar calendar, a timing mechanism to help ritual specialists schedule activities along the sacred paths (Martin, 2006).

In the cosmology of Andean civilisations time and space are intertwining ideas, where the present moment is permeated by the past and the underworld. Textiles held such an importance in that they were not only a symbolic representation of this but also a tangible one, in essence they functioned as *the structuring structure of structures* (Allen 2002a:236, quoting Bordieu). Beyond narrative content, textiles often express deep-seated, profound glimpses of cultural worldviews and beliefs: *Sometimes in their very layout or conception, textiles also served as actual embodiment of the way makers see the world- as what I think of cosmological maps...* (Gordon, 2013)



Contemporary weaver Hannah Waldron explores these ideas in her Fabric of Space-Time collection (fig.9); which she describes as *...tactile models and tangible representations of the ideas we humans have proposed about the interconnectivity of the forces in the universe* (Waldron, 2014). Within these fabrics a visual interpretation of Einstein's theory of relativity is brought together with the ancient double-cloth Andean weaving tradition, where two layers are inter-woven to create two faces to a cloth. To the Andeans double-cloths were deeply symbolic and represented their ontological beliefs, where fabrics have an inherent symbolic understanding of space, time and interrelationship to nature: *Andean logic is non lineal and based on the interconnection of all elements of the universe* (Crickmay, 1992).

Given the conceptual depth and meaning evident in these textile-led approaches to pattern and material construction, it could be seen as somewhat wasteful that in paintings the canvas is typically completely hidden from view due to being primed, painted and framed, with the intricacies of the woven process lost from view. In analysing the relationship between Bauhaus painting and weaving theories, art historian T'ai Smith describes how painting delineates form on the surface of a canvas – the *forgotten, or neglected, structural ground* – thus creating a *layer of distance between the structural support and the artists' idea* (Smith, 2014:4), compared to integral role that the woven surface plays in creating visual form in tapestry weaving, where *the design and surface are one and the same – they are made from the same material and process* (ibid). This reveals that the visual aesthetic of a woven fabric is not imposed on the surface but formed within the structure itself by the process of its creation, and therefore has the potential to embed both aesthetic and conceptual meaning relating to material and production within the surface.

Initial ideas for the project have evolved from this conceptual starting point; the collaboration allowing both artist and designer to investigate how contemporary woven linen canvas can be imbued with visual and conceptual meaning through integration of woven pattern and surface structure, such as found in Amerindian textiles. These artefacts and ideologies explored and portrayed different understandings of interconnectivity to the natural and spiritual world to contemporary Western society, which are echoed in Litherland's hauntological (Morton, 2011) paintings whereby a particular place is represented at different times in space concurrently. Thus they provide a relevant grounding for visually investigating the aesthetic relationship between canvas and painting from both a textile design and fine art perspective. In addition to this, the origin of the fibre will also have an important narrative and conceptual role to play.

### **Craft-based approaches**

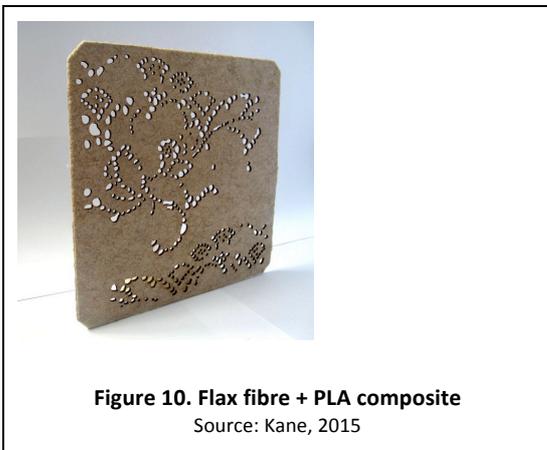
There has recently been a renewed interest in linen fibre and its processes of production mainly through a craft-based approach to sustainable material production. Examples of these are Faith Kane's research into producing local flax fibre composites, and Jennifer Green's Spin Me some Flax project, which both explore themes rooted in practices of sustainability, locality and handcrafted skills.

Faith Kane (2016) has explored flax fibre composites using flax cultivated locally in Leicestershire and polylactic acid (PLA) (fig.10), which is bio-degradable, to develop sustainable nonwoven composite materials and explore their design potential via structural and decorative surface patterning processes. Locality played an important role in Kane's work; Kate Fletcher (2008) outlines that a society that is locally rooted *reflects the ideas, skills, and resource of a local place as well as an aesthetic agenda that grows upwards, imbuing a strong cultural and aesthetic uniqueness and connectedness*, qualities very much present in Kane's composite materials (Fig.10). Fletcher then draws attention to McDonough and Braungart's (2002) claim that the 'best' products are those with a human and material engagement with place. Kane develops this as being intrinsically realised through a 'craft approach', which emphasises: *personal interaction with materials and processes; the recognition of making as a fundamental method within the work; valuing the intimate knowledge of materials, tools and processes gained through practical interaction; and considering end applications* (Kane, 2015).

Canadian born textile designer Jennifer Green also takes this approach in her project. Between 2007 and 2010 she worked with a local community in Lunenburg County, Nova Scotia, Canada to resurrect the traditions of flax cultivation and processing which were so important to the economy and culture two hundred years ago. The end product of this project was a series of locally made hand spun linen threads (fig.11) following historical processes (Green, 2014). She quotes Fletcher in relation to her project:

Materials play a vital role in the local agenda. They tangibly link a product with a region, plant species or animal breed and begin in a small way to counteract the abstract 'flow of goods' that dominates globalized production systems (Fletcher and Grose 2012: 107).

For Green it's about taking ownership and control of the materials and being discerning with the choice of what and how it is produced. Consideration of the social and cultural significance is taken into account, which alongside production embodies an ideology of sustainability led values.



Kane and Green also explore the relationship between craft and locality in their work. Kane references Helen Rees (1997: 120) who suggests that the attractiveness of craft lies in its explicit identification with values of social continuity and personal creativity. This is perhaps facilitated in part, as Rees (1997 122-123) alludes, by the transparency of the craft object's origination. Kane continues to say that Craft objects are also, as Risatti points out, culturally distinctive in terms of place and time of origination. Thus suggesting that a craft approach to materials design may engender a sense of place in the object within which they are applied (Kane et al, 2012). Pertinently Green points out that handcrafted skills employed by the designer as well as being an entry point into the process of making, offer the designer visual and tactile stimulation to explore the full potential of material production through innovative methods (Green, 2014).

These examples articulate concepts of place, production and sustainability that will be embodied and explored by the authors through the research. By learning and engaging with craft-based processes that are purposefully pre-industrial, slow and laborious, we intend to entwine our own personal narratives of process and explore the combination of distinct practice based approaches and expertise. The resulting exchanges, experiences and observations will in turn influence and affect the design and weaving process as the project unfolds.

The authors believe that contextual stimulation in relation to locality is also offered in these processes as the time spent in producing these materials, often outside, through time consuming hand crafted processes, allows for reflection, communication, and understanding. We aim to embed layers of meaning from personal experience, ideas of sustainability, locality, and craft production within the material object.

### Nature as raw material in Contemporary Fine Art

In relation to contemporary fine art objects, artists have also explored the materials that they use in relation to themes of locality, sustainability and engagement with their natural environment. Examples that we'll focus on include the work of John Newling, an artist and collaborator on previous projects with Litherland, and that of Sigrid Holmwood, whose work has clear resonances to this project.

Newling's work is often the time spent fostering and growing natural materials and his experience and observations of this process. This complex exchange of values and meaning is embedded in the object of the artwork itself, whether this is a vineyard of pinot noir grapes, hydroponically grown in a church (fig.12) or a lemon tree planted in soil made from composting the artist's own publications (2010). The works are outcomes of this engagement and Newling has developed for himself a practice and space to explore and renew these notions.

Newling is interested in the idea slowing things down, of experiencing the subtle seasonal shifts of nature's rhythms. The monograph that accompanied Newling's solo exhibition at NC, writes about the effect and importance that the Chatham Vine's project had on Newling:

For the first time, he encountered the natural world on its own terms, as a living entity, a space of chance and uncertainty. It was not something that should be controlled or manipulated, but required respect and attentiveness (Davey, 2013).

For Chatham Vines there was a large team and a lot of technology involved to allow this miracle harvest to happen. In subsequent projects, like the Clearing (2009) and the Lemon Tree, Newling sought a more simple, direct and personal involvement in nurturing plant life as his artistic material of production. Ultimately, Davey writes:

Newling seeks to inspire us to see the natural world as a series of everyday –and yet remarkable - reliquaries that can bring us into the presence of otherness, a clearing leading us to discover eternity within the confines of this physical life (ibid).



**Figure 12. Chatham Vines**  
Source: Newling, 2006



**Figure 13. Three women working wool,**  
**Mushroom pigment made from blood red webcaps (*cortinarius sanguineus*), plant pigment made from yarrow (*achillea millefolium*), chalk, chrome yellow, red lead, woad, red earth and zinc white bound in egg on hand woven linen,**  
**112.3 x 152.5 cm.**  
Source: Holmwood, 2016

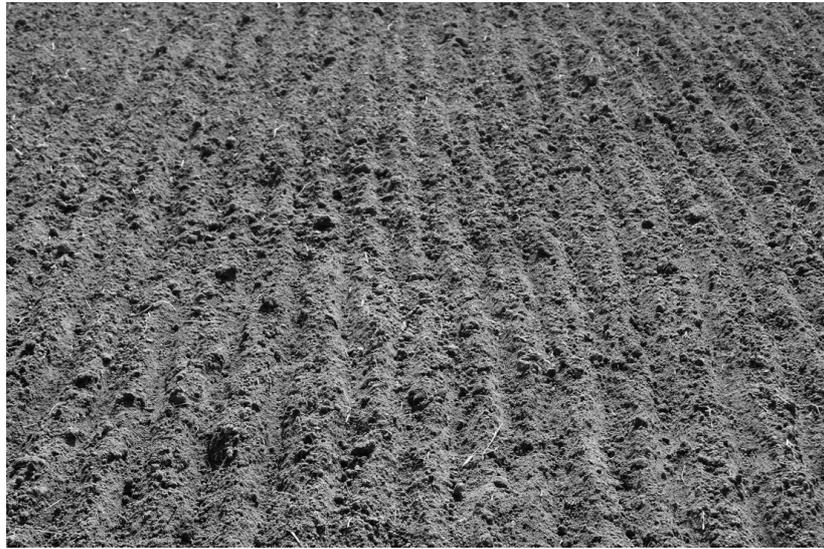
Another approach to natural materials embodying meaning in contemporary fine art can be found in Holmwoods 'Peasant Paintings' (fig.13) (2016). She grows plants to make her own pigments, and embodies the subject of her work 'The Peasant Painter' through performance. The work focuses on how hand made materials and the labour process can counteract the isolation of industrialised society. (Holmwood, 2016) The notion of the peasant is explored politically through highlighting the denigration of the peasant as backward and uncivilised, or as a symbol that can be romanticised to some idealised past. Holmwood also draws from Amerindian ontologies, specifically that nature is not separate from culture and the belief that alongside humans, all substances e.g. plant, mineral, and animal, have perspectives that should also be respected. The peasants in the work and her performance of these, become more than a narrative pictorial symbol as the whole works have been created through this ideology.

These notions of interconnectivity between humans and nature have been the contextual point of reference within Litherland's work for some time. Mostly explored through his subjects; landscape, nature, the sublime, perceptions of space and the cosmos and his painting technique of slowly building images from thinly painted often abstract and loose washes. Drawing on ideas from Newling and Holmwoods' practice, where there is a greater engagement with the materials they use to create an artwork, Litherland seeks to imbue a deeper knowledge and understanding within the process and material values of the art object itself through this collaborative project, an understanding that explores the position of the artist in relation to their environment.

### Methodology

This collaboration between artist and designer is a development of Litherland's involvement and work in the project and exhibition *Closely Held Secrets* (Townsend, 2016), an enquiry that explored the dialogues between methodologies in contemporary craft, fine art and digital embroidery. *CHS* had a particular focus on the often hidden dialogues and relationship between an artist/designer and technician, and how these discourses advanced and challenged digital craft practice; of particular relevance to *Woven Within the Surface* is how original outcomes are produced by the process of collaboration as much as the initial vision of the outcome. Litherland had no prior knowledge of the digital embroidery process and was one of the artists most open to experimentation and new possibilities with the techniques. Likewise, Litherland has no prior knowledge or experience of the weave process thus is very open to McLaren's inputs and ideas.

As such the methodology of *Within the Surface* is not dissimilar to *Closely Held Secrets* in that it will be a reflective, practice-led 'research through Art and Design' approach. The iterative process will be documented through a range of approaches including, photographic and video documentation of every element and process of the project, written reflection, interviews with collaborators and, most importantly, alongside finished artworks, a series of unfinished artefacts that deconstruct the creative and craft processes involved in the project. Although the outcomes are very much pre-defined, linen canvas to paint on, the form of these is very much open to experimentation and each new iteration will be carefully documented and discussed.



**Figure 14 – Prepared field ready for sowing**

Source: Litherland, 2017

### **Research Activities: Growing flax**

A small crop, 25msq is being grown using pre-industrial techniques to sow, harvest and process the fibre (fig.14) on a plot of secluded farmland in Wirksworth Derbyshire. Sown in spring 2017 by the authors, the crop will be harvested after about three months (August 2017).

For initial hands on, practical advice about growing and processing flax, contact was made with Cordwainers Grow: a Hackney based Community Interest Company who undertook the *Flax Project* (2015), a collaboration with London College of Fashion to grow a garment and produce a knitted linen jumper, the first garment manufactured this way in London for over a 100 years. Litherland attended a Cordwainers Grow workshop (March 2017), where they introduced the attendees to the basics of processing dried flax to create twine and gave advice about growing, harvesting and retting stages of flax production.

### **Fibre processing**

In early October 2017 we will attend a workshop with experts at Flaxland (Cotswolds) to learn more advanced techniques for processing the flax fibre. We will then ripple, break, scutch and hackle the flax fibres ready to be hand spun, which will be attempted with a drop spindle. Expertise of an experienced spinner will be sought to create yarns suitable for weaving. We anticipate that we will have our own yarn to weave with by early 2018.

### **Weaving**

Concurrent to sowing the flax crop, the process of collaborating on woven linen canvas design and production began at McLaren's studio in Primary, Nottingham (April 2017). Using commercially available and vintage hand spun linen threads, small samples of woven fabrics have been developed, from elementary plain-woven linens, herringbone, satin, and sateen structures (fig.15) to introduce basic processes and terminology, to more complex patterned and textured fabrics (fig.16). These small samples (150mm x 150mm) have been stretched onto boards where experiments applying primers and initial washes of paint will be carried out to create surfaces / painted objects where the patterned linen fabric

aesthetically and contextually becomes an integral element of the finished painting. We anticipate developing up to thirty of these small samples in an attempt to be as experimental and open to new possibilities as possible.

On-going experiments will explore further complex weave structures and draw from the weaving cultures of Amerindian textiles, with influence from the patterns found in the processes of flax production, e.g. furrows of the field in which the flax seed was sown, flowers and foliage of the flax plants.



**Figure 15. Initial weave experiments - 1**  
Source: McLaren, 2017



**Figure 16. Initial weave experiments - 2**  
Source: McLaren, 2017

### Painting

Litherland will experiment with priming (using traditional rabbit skin glue and gesso), and painting (using earth pigments in oil) on small boards with the hand woven linen samples (fig.17). These initial studies will focus on how the texture and pattern of the textiles can be made visible in the finished work (fig.18). It is anticipated that this will involve applying washes and creating small works of pictorial and figurative elements of the landscape relating to the project. Clear documentation and analysis of each painted linen sample will dictate the next woven iteration until we have a selection of fabrics that could be selected to make into larger finished paintings.



**Figure 17. Woven linen sample**  
– Stretched before priming  
Source: Litherland, 2017



**Figure 18. Woven linen sample – primed with 5 layers of gesso and a thin washes of raw ochre**  
Source: Litherland, 2017

## Initial findings

While the project is currently work-in-progress, some initial findings reveal benefits of working across disciplines in relation to development of new knowledge and understanding, skills, and creative outcomes.

Collaborative contextual exploration has provided knowledge exchange between practitioners, allowing the development of new ideas across disciplines and enhancing knowledge and understanding of the materials, practice and conceptual ideas, with particular focus on interconnected aesthetic, ecological, and material-led concepts from textile design and fine art contexts as described in this paper. From a textile design research perspective, this has specifically provided historical weave knowledge of the construction of mantellilo textiles, further knowledge of Amerindian woven textiles and meanings, and how these relate to our visual understanding of the world. From a fine art perspective, the artist has discovered new ways of communicating meaning through materials and processes of production. By staging a textile as a fine art object, using the mechanisms of a gallery space, the object comes under a different type of scrutiny and can be understood differently by the audience, bringing it's meaning and context to the fore.

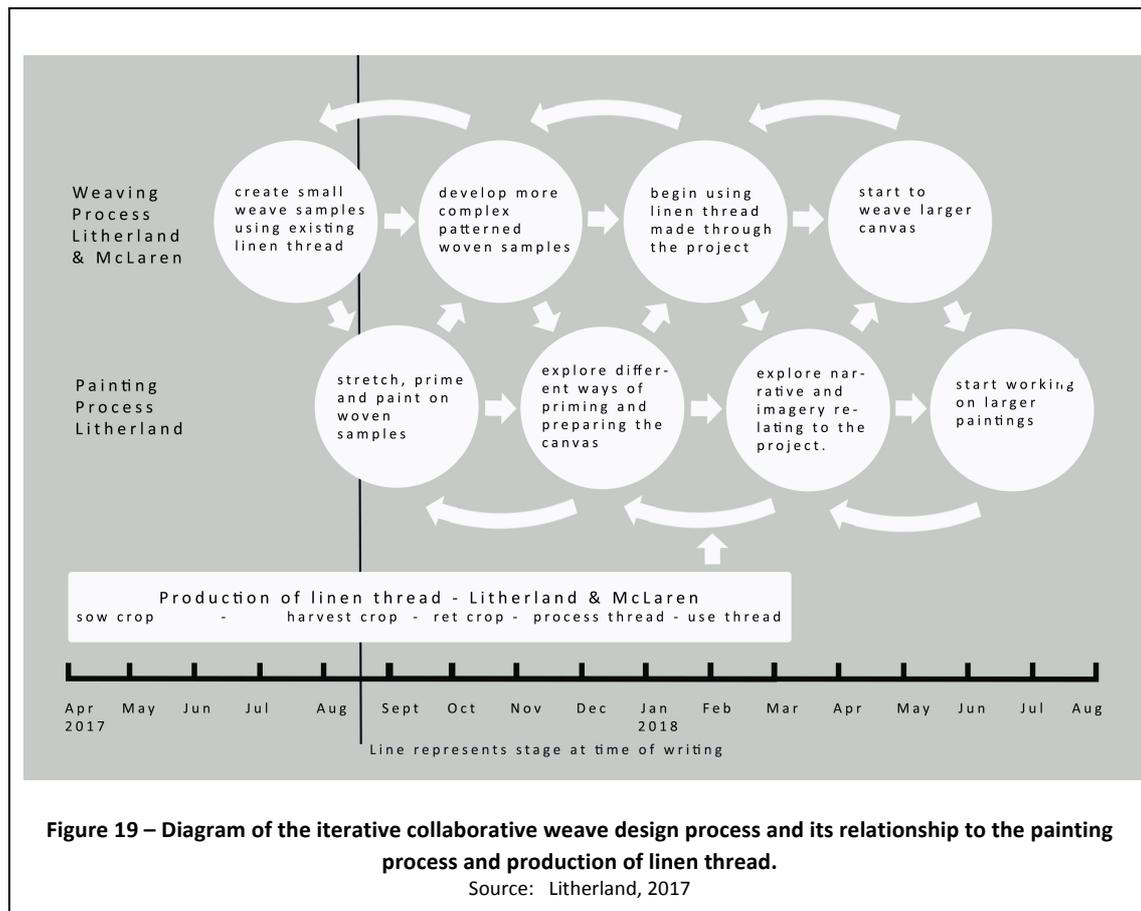
The lack of exploration of the aesthetic and material relationship between canvas and painted surface emerged from the background contextual research, opening up the potential for investigation of how a craft-based approach can add aesthetic and conceptual meaning to linen canvas in a fine art context, in parallel with contemporary art practice. Both have deepened knowledge of current dialogues around sustainability in art and design, and how positive ecological messages can be conveyed through material artefacts, in particular patterned textile surfaces made from local resources through a process of practical application – growing, harvesting, processing, weaving.

The interaction with the land to grow the flax and new handcraft skills encountered during the collaboration in progress are beginning to offer the designer and artist visual and tactile stimulation. For example, noticing visual parallels between the processes and the locality of production such as the similarity of a ploughed field to a warp under tension, the assembly of the dry stone wall around the field in Derbyshire, with structured weave patterns. The opportunity to weave our own linen canvas allows us to move away from traditional plain weave and explore the possibilities of how structure and pattern can influence not only the painting process, but the narrative and subject of the resulting paintings.

Every research activity so far, from digging the field to weaving, priming and painting the canvas has had a strong element of manual labour and focus to it. As all these processes are integral to the project they all seem to be of a similar hierarchical value, digging and painting have equal importance. This has created space for discussion of political aspects of textile and fine art production, an emerging strand of enquiry within the project.

Development of a new iterative collaborative methodology using reflection through practice has been developing through the project, where rounds of sampling build on ideas as they develop and grow but take into account the success in achieving the shared aims of communicating through textile design (fig. 19). For example, the success of samples for the intended purpose depends on the results of priming and painting them. As evidenced in the photos, (fig.17 & 18) the pattern is subtle, structural due to only one colour in both warp and weft, so the discovery that the painting process accentuates the subtleties of structures making them more prominent and noticeable is a revelation that will be developed further.

The project has offered space for new textile design knowledge and understanding to develop. The accentuation of structure through priming the surface offers potential in textile design for application of finishes that could enhance the structural qualities of a woven textile in the same way, for example, and the enhanced performance of the stretched linen canvas primed to give a strong surface under tension also has potential in other applications, such as architectural panels and structural textiles. Further



investigation of the technical properties of the primed canvasses will be explored in later stages of the project.

## Conclusions

Although the project is still work-in-progress, it is evident from initial findings that the process of collaboration has already started to support achieving the objectives of the project. It has provided knowledge exchange, development of contextual understanding and new strands of enquiry for both practitioners by allowing space for dialogue, reflection and critique alongside learning new practical skills. The background research has shown that concepts of interconnectivity can be articulated through a contemporary woven textile in a fine art context, but that the relationship between textile surface and painted image has largely been unexplored. The textiles made from the locally grown linen have yet to be created as the crop is still to be harvested, but the authors believe that by exploring this relationship the interconnected dialogues between textile craft based practice and fine art could be further augmented by combining them both, in a similar way to Litherland's collision of imagery within his painting practice.

The process of undertaking these skilled processes in a particular location is still to be fully realised, but has provided some initial visual research to inspire the subject matter and patterns in the work. The new discovery of technical elements relating to both the application of textiles in this project and with potential in further contexts demonstrates an example of the value of interdisciplinary practice to the development of textile design innovation and will be explored further as the project progresses.

It could therefore be concluded that the process of collaborating across textile design and fine art disciplines has provided both practitioners with new knowledge and deeper contextual understanding to benefit their own on-going practice, teaching and research. There is potential for textile design innovation leading from the research, and communication of important sustainability messages through the final outcomes in a tangible, material format.

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### Acknowledgements

This research has been funded by Nottingham Trent University's Material Seedcorn Research Fund.

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