

## EXHIBITION REVIEW

### **Don't Get Comfortable: a Review of 'Knitting Nottingham'**

6-28<sup>th</sup> Nov 2014 at Bonington Gallery, Nottingham Trent University

*Reviewed by Dr Vanessa Brown, Nottingham Trent University, UK.*

Figure 1: Challender, Cathy and Hurley, William, (2014) *Corporeal 1*, machine knitted wool.

*Knitting Nottingham* was conceived by Nottingham Trent University and shown at Bonington Gallery to celebrate the School of Art and Design's 170<sup>th</sup> year. Today Nottingham Trent is renowned for its teaching and research in the field of machine knit, and its history is extensive; indeed a stocking was buried in the foundations of the art college, which was partly funded and campaigned for by local knitting industrialists calling for better education in the field. The dedicated knitwear design course opened in 1973 and its graduates continue to make a strong impression on the industry globally and at Graduate Fashion Week. Recently, Rory Longdon won the prestigious Gold award for best fashion collection (2011), this year Ella Nisbett scooped the overall Menswear Award, and for three years running, NTU students have won the Visionary Knitwear Award.

But in spite of its clear relevance to the creative industries past and present (and some of the more glamorous ones at that) 'knitting' continues to struggle with its image. There is a considerable mismatch between the perception of 'knitting', 'knitted products' and the reality of knitted fabrics and the processes involved in their construction. Knit was crucial to the industrial revolution and remains at the forefront of technical textile experimentation, but objects generally understood by the wider public to be knitted tend to be soft, warm and fuzzy (literally). This is a fascinating semiotic 'problem' well worth deeper investigation. The sexiest, sheerest stockings are knitted. Sleek sports performance wear on the coolest Olympic athletes – also knitted. Yet the stubborn connotations of backward homespun handicraft persist and I am uncertain that this is only true outside of the world of art and design. That textile craft is perceived as feminine, domestic and therefore undervalued and marginalised has been long discussed (e.g. Parker 1984 and 2012), but knitting especially falls foul of the tyrannies of fashionability and coolness. For a few generations, less than fine knitted items may have been the only kind of clothing still made at home, becoming a popular symbol of the difference between old and young, anonymous and branded, uncool and cool.

Ian McInnes and Cathy Challender therefore curated and directed this exhibition with intent to counter these perceptions and show how knit really already goes beyond them, inviting submissions from all kinds of practitioners, from finest art to highest tech, and showed the best emerging talent alongside established practitioners, from Shelley Fox and Francis Geesin to Françoise Dupré and Tilak Dias. The media coverage – and the exhibition's own accompanying text (which I confess to writing, 2014a) focused on the idea of 'changing perceptions' as a hook, using phrases such as 'casting off the cosy image' to ensure the wider audience didn't immediately lose interest.

However, this tactic did somewhat neglect that since the early to mid 2000s knitting has been reconfigured as 'hip' via a significant revival, which academics have been evaluating with some energy (Minahan and Wolfram Cox 2007; Turney, 2009; Fields, 2014), amidst a general resurgence in

the popularity of craft (Peach, 2013). Typically the aesthetics associated with this revival have been aggressive, knowingly kitsch, cute or all three, rebelling against perceived standards of good taste and reclaiming or reworking the feminine (all known subcultural tactics of ‘cool’: Pountain and Robins 2000, Brown 2014b). For example, yarn ‘bombers’ chose knit as the antithesis of cold urban materials, bursting through the urban cultural dictates of harsh masculinity with colourful hand-knitted interventions, offering comforters to railings and fantasy elf shoes to telegraph wires.

To some extent, though, these cultural forms ran the risk of reinforcing that same stereotype by squaring up to it so blatantly, or indeed replicating some of those connotations – whatever the ironic or countercultural intent, the tide of knitted cupcakes and kooky creatures which flooded from contemporary craft market to department store has probably not really changed perceptions of knitting. In contrast, visitors to *Knitting Nottingham* were met with a genuinely surprising and multi-faceted range of work whose diversity stood testament to the need for wider appreciation of the scope, scale and technological, social and cultural impact of knitting, without an ironic knitted foodstuff in sight.

The history of machine knitting was illustrated through an original timeline compiled by Cathy Challender, who drew on primary sources and oral histories from some of the oldest surviving representatives of the local industry, with assistance from Ruddington Framework Knitters’ Museum. This was visualised around the walls of Bonington’s atrium space in artfully pixelated graphics (neatly resembling stitch notations) by Jason Holroyd (fig. 2). The constant (but fairly polite) chugging, zipping and humming of the vast Stoll ADF on loan from the company was a continuous reminder of the trajectory of the knitting machine into the twentyfirst century, as its solid, closed form spewed out a digital design at ‘state-of-the-art’ speed.

This kind of spectacle made a very blunt challenge to the very idea of knitting as craft, but in the next room, a piece by Challender and Hurley made on an industrial machine came back with a counter-attack – a highly complex tree formation of beautifully flat and neat knitted yarn, each ‘branch’ only about one centimetre wide, but the whole piece, several metres long, carefully laid out over a simple plinth, resembling arteries carefully picked out for analysis (fig.1). Standing before it, there was something very visceral and organic about the form that the neat precision of the machine knit could not detract from. The work was inspired by the notebooks of a knit student who died in Ypres in 1915, making a statement about continuity, unrealised potential, and legacy. Challender commented in conversation that she had wanted to display the work coming off the machine, down the corridor and into the gallery; imagine what a powerful statement that would have been.

There’s no room here to rehearse the debate about definitions of craft in a digital age (this took place at another of NTU’s 170<sup>th</sup> events in November, a live public debate chaired by Grant Gibson (editor of *Crafts Magazine*) and featuring an expert panel including Professors Becky Earley and Christopher Breward) but the placing of models and prototypes for the most recent innovations in knitting technology in a gallery alongside conceptual and community-focused works invited viewers not simply to marvel at the range of human endeavour but also to question our perceptions as they change over time and across context, and our understanding of the processes of hand, eye and mind involved in all kinds of making.

Figure 2: Challender, Cathy and Holroyd, Jason (2014) *Knitting Nottingham Timeline*, Nottingham Trent University.

Figure 3: Geesin, Francis (2000) *Tea Set*, electroplated machine knit.

The exhibition was curated and displayed around certain themes and conversations designed to underline the special potentials of knit – ‘future tech’, ‘fit and sculpt’, ‘express and connote’, ‘conceptual’ and ‘sustainable’.

### *Future tech*

Under this heading the exhibition showcased some new applications for knit in the fields of industrial textiles, performance wear medicine and the military, allowing closer and more responsive relationship with human bodies also through electronically functional SMART fibres and fabrics. On display were Hurley and Dias’s early prototype developments for Nike’s ‘Fly Knit’ shoes (2004), their heated glove liners (2006) and information about the Plessey heart-rate monitor embedded in the fabric of a driving seat. Dias’s latest research is exploring the potential for knitted conductive fabrics to be used in communication systems. The beauty of some of these innovations was striking. Coming across the glove liners, I was struck by the unusual detailing dictated by their functionality. As Hurley remarked in conversation, it was an example of form following function, but he added that aesthetics are significant to the design of performance products because many of the technical ‘innovations’ in the field are in fact adapted from techniques and solutions developed first for fashion knitwear, so aesthetic thinking is embedded in the development of the technologies.

The idea of a split between creative and technical ‘progress’ in knit technology was also questioned by work which deliberately mixed up old and new methods and technologies. For example, Laura McPherson and Mark Beecroft showed work which combined conventional knitting with 3D printed elements for creative innovation. Martha Glazzard’s work went looking for auxetic behaviours and found irrational brilliance and beauty in the accident and the error; and Frances Geesin travelled to the outer reaches of possibility and functionality, showing a tea set knitted from conductive fibre and then electroplated, it looked like spoils from a shipwreck, or relics of an ancient and beautiful alien civilisation (fig.3). The exhibition brought these into conversation with historical samples and pattern books; a beautiful mid-Victorian Allen and Solley sampler, a 1930s Smedley Ladies Combinations with unusual breast shaping, an outstanding 1930s Smedley ‘opera vest’ (fig.4), and a late nineteenth century German pattern book on loan from Ruddington Framework Knitters’ museum.

### *Fit and sculpt*

Unlike wovens, knitted fabrics offer the unique potential to fit extremely close to the skin while remaining comfortable. Fully fashioned, cut, or digitally shaped, the body’s contours can be followed, defining a shoulder, heel or fingers, for example, or completely re-imagined through texture, volume and structural stability to go way beyond the norms of the human body in playful, alarming, or politicised ways. Shelley Fox’s bold, minimally constructed round and oval garment shapes (1998) made a definite departure from that, whereas Juliana Sissons’ work (2014) drew on the cut-lines used by plastic surgeons, getting ever-closer to the tension and coverage of human skin on bone.

Figure 4: ‘Opera-top Vest’ by John Smedley, 1930s, frame-knitted silk.

Figure 5: A view of the Bonington Gallery, featuring in foreground, garments from Vibskov, Henrik ‘Judith Balloon’ from A/W 2011 *The Eat* and ‘Acid Tiger Cardigan’ from A/W2009 *The Human Laundry Service*.

### *Express and connote*

Knitting also readily assumes forms which resemble the natural world; waves, geological formations or the contour lines of relief maps, but it also readily connotes the gridlines of urban aesthetics. Fay McCaul's Illuminated knitted structures have a playful and other-worldly intensity of deep sea creatures, or the revelations of microscopy. Combined with extremes of texture, colour and pattern, knit makes an ecstatic statement on the catwalk, demonstrated here by the 'new Nordic' contributions of Henrik Vibskov (fig.5) and Emma Lundgren, both of whose works confound categorisation in a hyperactive, liquid modern profusion of colour and form. Knit looks easy, child-like and playful, but also complex, irregular, digital. Lundgren's futuristic and folkish 'Samilight' pieces combined neons with forms suggestive of classical geometric pattern, luminous lichens, tribal adornment and acid club cultures.

Working with imagery in knit is always potentially compromised – as it only really lends itself to a jagged or broken line. This challenges the perception of knit as an expressive craft, reminding us that 'this wasn't drawn by hand' and making a connection between 'craft' and the digital; it speaks of interference, noise and frustrated intent. Ian McInnes's work explicitly explores the connections between drawing and knit, achieving painterly 'brush' strokes and the subtle interplay of colour and depth more readily achieved in watercolour, really pushing the machine to go beyond its desire to make neat rows and straight lines.

Pattern in knit is integral to the structure of the fabric, giving it a striking level of authenticity which Bomi Han's work played with - the word 'honest' literally emerges from her 'transparent' knitted dress, but that transparency is ambiguous, letting us see 'some' of the truth, obscuring other parts. Telling us it is honest opens up the possibility of the lie, questioning itself and the nature of clothing more generally.

### *Conceptual and Community*

Some of the conceptual work in the exhibition deployed the craft of knitting in a fine art context. Françoise Dupré's work sits within the legacy of the fibre arts movement of the 1970s, using deliberately simple knits to challenge the conventional media of minimalist art. She also uses the simplest, most 'everyday' techniques, (spool or *French* knitting) to engage communities with collaborative projects which can facilitate the construction of new identities and expressions in difficult situations. The apparent simplicity and joyful colour of the works on display (Spirals 2011) belie the seriousness of purpose, and again raise questions about the meaning and value of craft and the role of the maker or artist. Who is the artist? Can these works be considered as art? Do these 'community projects' belong in a gallery? Another practitioner's work, Amy Twigger Holroyd, addresses community and skill-sharing in the push towards more sustainable clothing. Her exhibits displayed the creative potential of re-knitting and 'stitch-hacking' to create familiar yet refreshingly novel garments from existing ones.

Ultimately the exhibition made a firm statement about the social, technical and cultural significance of knit, consolidating it as a field of endeavour worthy of much more critical attention, and inspiring future practice. Many of the exhibits and exhibitors were worthy of more space, and more 'staging'; not something this exhibition could have addressed, but perhaps something for future consideration, and perhaps by other institutions. As a writer about design culture, it left me enriched with new forms and ideas and a new level of respect and awe for knitting.

Marx's theory of the commodity fetish made plain that within capitalism, it was important to obscure the means of production from consumers, so that they would not realise the exploitation of fellow

workers which lay behind that commodity. And as Barthes remarked many years later, for the new object to appear magical and desirable, it must appear to have 'fallen from the sky'. For the sake of more sustainable production, we need to go beyond this, but what this exhibition also reminded us is that making processes visible is also vital to ensuring that our craft practices gain the recognition they deserve.

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Thumbnails to follow, image files attached to email.



Figure 1.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.



Figure 4.

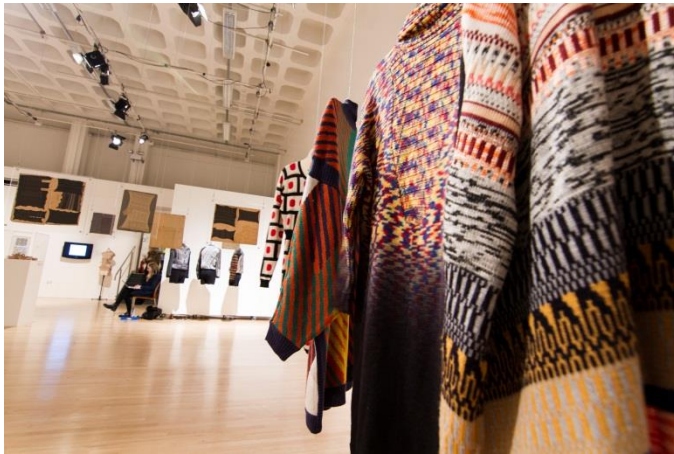


Figure 5.

#### Contributor details

Vanessa Brown is Senior Lecturer in Design, Culture and Context at Nottingham Trent University in the Department of Fashion, Textiles and Knit. She has been responsible for the undergraduate curriculum in contextual studies since 2011. She has wide interests across the fields of design, visual culture and fashion, including taste and the meanings of images, materials and objects. Vanessa is the author of *Cool Shades: The History and Culture of Sunglasses* (2014).

Contact: School of Art and Design, Nottingham Trent University, Burton Street, Nottingham, NG1 4BU, Email: [vanessa.brown@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:vanessa.brown@ntu.ac.uk)