

Location : Polly Binns and Shirley Chubb

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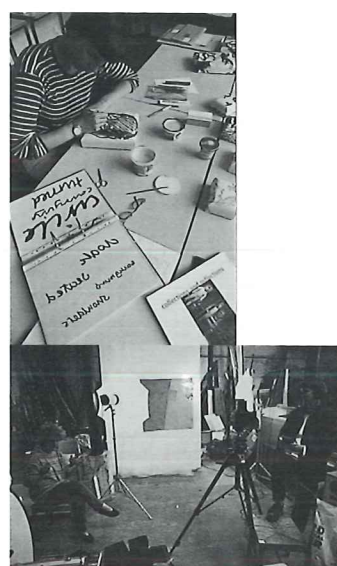
King's Lynn Arts Centre in collaboration with King's Lynn Museums

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Foreword

Liz Falconbridge

There has been some magic in this endeavour which warms the heart and enriches the spirit. *Location* has finally found a place some eighteen months after its inception.

What began as a bringing together of two diverse artists has developed over time and with their creative investment into a true alliance and a remarkably interwoven ideology, as evidenced by this exhibition.

As much as anything, it has evolved into a celebration of collaboration between individuals and organisations whose cumulative passions have ensured its realisation and ultimately its success.

I applaud the vision of Eastern Arts Board, the generosity of the Research Committees of Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College and Chichester Institute of Higher Education, the insight and experience of the writer and curator Linda Theophilus, the advice and enthusiasm of museum curator Ros Palmer and the pragmatic scholarship of Dr Andrew Patrizio, whose essay serves to place *Location* within the current debate from which it essentially arose.

Moreover, I thank the artists, Polly Binns and Shirley Chubb, not only for the exhibition - the revelation of their research - but also for inciting a new appetite for their source material, unearthed via their dogged acuity from our own local geography and heritage.

'A Vast Stereophony': Art and Research on Location

Andrew Patrizio

There would be no dispute that Polly Binns and Shirley Chubb are artists - given the gallery context, the use of accepted art media, and most important of all, their aspirations and intentions which drive and support the work they do. They are also researchers, that is, artists for whom the 'research' process is critical. But, you may ask, why am I both making the connection and drawing the distinction between 'art' and 'research' in the first place? In suggesting an answer, some of the more striking and illuminating fragments of the debate currently being aired in the visual arts will be picked out, before discussing and comparing Binns' and Chubb's individual projects created especially for *Location*.

I
What does the term 'research' conjure up in most people's minds? One response might be a serious activity undertaken by experts necessarily remote from the discourses of the everyday, yet from this territory they pass back findings, provisional or conclusive in nature, that promise to improve some aspect of society. Research seems to speak of future possibilities purposely nurtured into the present. Where is research located? One would think firstly of university or hospital units into which only men with white coats and security swipe-cards have access, or perhaps of those unfortunates hiding inside waterproof jackets, commissioned to frequent city centre roundabouts or housing estates with their clipboards and pens. Whatever the conditions under which research is undertaken, nebulous material is somehow found, collated and then presented.

Despite the caricature and simplification of the scenarios described above, there remains something alluring, rigorous, and even inspiring in the term 'research'. This is precisely why it is such a contested and divisive term when applied broadly to numerous activities in the sciences, humanities and arts.

This allure means that few disciplines would ever present themselves as areas of 'research inactivity', to use a new bureaucratic term. Yet today there certainly

exist subjects which are clearly fields of intense innovation building upon radical research such as genetics, sub-atomic physics or artificial intelligence, in contrast to the more dormant domains of classical science such as thermo-dynamics or optics. That is not to say that any discipline remains static in terms of its relation to innovative research; paradigmatic shifts occur in any area, as has been perceptively analysed by numerous philosophers of science in the last decades.¹

Interestingly, some disciplines resist being seen as research in the first place perhaps due to that term's association with Enlightenment rationalism and its connotations of objectivity, centuries of academic professionalism and guarded career structure. Jacques Lacan, the great theoretician of psycho-analysis wrote, 'I am a bit suspicious of this term research. Personally, I have never regarded myself as a researcher. As Picasso once said, to the shocked surprise of those around him - *I do not seek, I find.*'² At first, Picasso's famous statement is shocking because it seems supremely arrogant, a denial that in seeking he could ever fail to find. Yet Lacan's interpretation of the artist's words allows a more subtle reading, relating to one's

1 Thomas S Kuhn *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* University of Chicago Press 1962, and Paul Feyerabend *Problems of Empiricism* Cambridge University Press 1981

2 Jacques Lacan *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis* London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis 1977 p7

relationship with the object of study. Does your subject resist research procedures or does it open itself up to discovery? A related question, relevant to our later discussion of Polly Binns and Shirley Chubb, might be: Are you consonant or dissonant with the territory in which you are researching? Do you explore in order to expose tensions, erasures and exclusions or, conversely, to reveal patterns, resonances and secrets? Our caricatured research world of white coats and clipboards has quickly turned into a nuanced and almost impossibly complex set of relationships between 'expert', 'field of study' and 'recipient', to which we will have need to return.

II
A published discussion between two heads of British art colleges, Christopher Frayling, Rector of the Royal College of Art, and Colin Painter, the (now retired) Principal of Wimbledon School of Art, encapsulates some of the educational arguments, in Britain anyway, over 'art as art' or 'art as research'. Space permits only one aspect of that encounter to be addressed here. Frayling argued that 'Research has to be readable and deliverable in one way and in one way only, to be communicable. In other words, the concept of *research* is antithetical to the concept of fine art.'³ Colin Painter (notably an artist as well as a senior

3 Christopher Frayling, Paul Greenhalgh, Colin Painter 'An Art Version of the Gaderene Swine' *Point. Art & Design Research Journal* No3 Winter 1996 p6

administrator) indicates a more subtle range of possibilities for art as research: 'In principle, we can never be sure that any account of anything is readable in the same way by every reader and we certainly cannot assume that what is read is precisely what the writer intended...' ⁴ Advanced thought in science takes it for granted that words, equations and tables are *languages of expression*, a translation of a researched subject, and in many ways analogous to the languages of art. To make matters more intriguing, there is also a deep interplay between the 'facts' of science and the notations in which they are expressed - many subjects are *changed* by the very fact of being researched. ⁵ Even more radical are the propositions of writers such as Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend that objectivity in science is a myth, except at the most mundane level, and that theories and languages of expression rarely compete with each other rationally but are based on pragmatics, subjectivities, accidents and untranslatable or unverifiable findings in fields of study where direct comparison is impossible. The resistance within written language to carry communicable meaning was observed over two hundred years ago by Scottish Enlightenment philosopher Thomas Reid, who wrote that 'There is no greater impediment to the

⁴ Ibid. p7

⁵ NR Hanson *Patterns of Discovery: An Enquiry into the Conceptual Foundations of Science* Cambridge University Press 1961 particularly Chapter 1 'Observation'.

advancement of knowledge than the ambiguity of words. To this chiefly is owing that we find sects and parties in most branches of science; and disputes which are carried on from age to age, without being brought to issue.' ⁶

This indicates a still pressing need not only to revise our post-Romantic idea of art as purely subjective expression locked in a unique language, but also to realise in parallel that scientific discourse has only a loose hold on objectivity and communicability as we understand those terms. No doubt, for artists working in Britain today the term 'research' has clear attractions as a defining description of what they do, with its associations of advanced discovery, rigour, and social responsibility. Equally certainly, the artefacts created by Polly Binns and Shirley Chubb are proof that creativity, intuition and the imaginative leap can work in close alliance with sophisticated notions of research within visual arts.

III

Location in the singular form could not be more apt in relation to Polly Binns' project to explore, absorb and interpret through her art the marshland flats of Blakeney Point, a few miles east along the Norfolk

⁶ Thomas Reid 'Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man' (1785) in Alexander Broadie (ed) *The Scottish Enlightenment. An Anthology* Edinburgh: Canongate 1997 p74

Blakeney Point Blakeney Norfolk

coast from King's Lynn. Since 1992, Blakeney Point has become, so to speak, both her occupation and her pre-occupation. She has found a territory that exists between land and sea, a parenthesis whose length defies stable meaning. The mud, vegetation and shore life exist in a landscape punctuated by modest, non-natural features - sluices, bridges, slipways and moorings. It is a place resonant with poetic associations but is also laid out and open, a site where structures and patterns can be researched and revealed. Her most recent textile pieces, complete only weeks before exhibition, respond to an outlying stretch of very flat marsh which is only revealed at the lowest tides. Binns has focused on the semi-random, semi-systematic way in which vegetation is deposited around the upstanding short spikes of samphire at each tide's ebb and flow. Her work will be a non-literal evocation of such patterns in nature revealed through light, as is all of her related work over the last five or six years, such as *Overstrand to Sidestrans* (1992) or *Serial Shimmers and Shades* (1996), the latter piece moving increasingly towards minimalist distillation. The patterns Binns recreates though are never stable in nature, sometimes resisting, at other times yielding to, the effects of water and light. The artist writes of her enquiry into the landscape as an 'observation of its laws and underlying forces, its immensity and its minutiae.' ⁷ Her research activity in this area might be characterised as rhythmical and pulsating; the twice-



daily tide, the four seasonal turns, the animal and human cycles which operate around and across the flats, her regular trips to the region from her Hertfordshire home and the return day after day to the linen cloth during the process of making. Binns shares with many artists, particularly those of the modern era, the inner compulsion to explore and re-explore a site in order to reveal something of gravity, something that might have been withheld from a never-repeated glance. Yet Binns is not interested in optical or perceptual variation, like the Impressionists, but in how patterns of discovery can be given concrete form through complete immersion - psychological, perceptual and emotional - in a shifting subject traversed on foot and alone.

⁷ Polly Binns 'A Personal Narrative of Place and of Process' conference paper, *Ideas in the Making: Practice in Theory* University of East Anglia / Crafts Council 25 April 1998 (awaiting publication)

Perhaps surprisingly, no sketches are ever made on the marshlands, only the sporadic photograph, and even then Binns speaks of occasionally looking through



her lens just to focus the mind, without releasing the shutter. Immediate perceptions of the marshlands get dragged out of view by the deep undertow of memory. This fluid interplay between perception and memory is at the root of modernism, both philosophically and formally, as illustrated in the following beautiful passage by Henri Bergson: '...there is no perception which is not full of memories. With the immediate and present data of our senses we mingle a thousand details out of our past experience. In most cases these memories supplant our actual perceptions, of which we then retain only a few hints, thus using them merely as 'signs' that recall to us former images. The convenience and rapidity of perception are bought at this price; but hence also springs every kind of illusion.'⁸

Those artists who, to Binns' mind, share something of her aesthetic - Agnes Martin, Mark Rothko, Avis Newman, Richard Long and Felim Egan - are not, like her, textile artists (whatever that term now means), but they do adhere to carefully constructed systems or practices in order to express themselves. Textiles, more than any of the other crafts or applied arts, has attempted both through practice and through its critical appraisal in text, to challenge its orthodox perception as a vehicle only for function and decoration, but also for metaphor and meaning. Hence Binns' citing of the above artists is as much a political act within the arts as an aesthetic one. Critics such as Pamela Johnson have spoken of 'textiles as a point of articulation',⁹ and the textile object as suggesting 'a site where past, present, future, the self and the other, difference and belonging may be explored.'¹⁰ Such ambitions for textiles also raise the ontological route of 'text' in the Latin 'textum' meaning something woven or a web, with its allusion to memory as a web and the mind being visualised as intricate fabric.

8 Henri Bergson *Matter and Memory* (1912) cited in Bruce Brown 'Graphic Memory' *Point. Art & Design Research Journal* No 2 Summer 1996 p2

9 Pamela Johnson plenary session discussion *Jerwood Prize for the Applied Arts - Textiles* 4 October 1997

10 Pamela Johnson 'Material Culture' *Blueprint* No 147 February 1998 p26

Similarly, with Binns having recently completed a PhD offered as both text and artistic practice, it is perhaps not surprising to find her citing Roland Barthes' brilliant and inspiring essay 'From Word to Text' (1971). One could write a whole article on the links between textiles including Binns' work, memory and meaning using Barthes' definition of a 'Text', but I will restrict myself to one passage in which he writes that a person perceiving the 'Text' is like someone on a stroll: 'What he [sic] perceives is multiple, irreducible, coming from disconnected, heterogeneous variety of substances and perspectives: lights, colours, vegetation, heat, air, slender explosions of noises, scant cries of birds, children's voices from over on the other side, passages, gestures, clothes of inhabitants near or far away. All these *incidents* are half-identifiable: they come from codes which are known but their combination is unique, founds the stroll in a difference repeatable only as difference. So the Text...(is) a vast stereophony.'¹¹

The method by which Binns creates her work is also analogous to textual syntax, in that her large cloth panels, in the course of being painted, cut and stitched, are often rearranged and edited until a final form is decided. This involves a process of combination, recombination, accumulation then

11 Roland Barthes 'From Word to Text' (1971) in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood *Art in Theory 1900-1990. An Anthology of Changing Ideas* Oxford: Blackwell 1992 p943

fragmentation of the whole. Over July this year she worked on five independent pieces, again based on the marsh but not conceived of in an order or in strict syntactical relation to each other. This particular group of work was triggered by close observation of a deeply embedded length of wood that became submerged at high tide. Binns' methodology, so described, is far closer to the processes of enquiry a researcher in the sciences might undertake, where an edifice approximating to an idea is slowly built up over many, many months. Certainly a conceptual depth of meaning has been attained in Binns' extended project in and around Blakeney Point.



IV

Shirley Chubb's interests are as expansive as those of Polly Binns and are also manifested as deposits, though of a very different kind. Chubb's research activities take place within museum collections, and she has found a rich subject in the Lynn Museum which provides a continuity with the main body of her art work, as well as offering a new area for discovery.

Thomas Baines was an explorer born in 1820 in King's Lynn, whose practical interest in art led him to make a number of paintings and drawings based on his travels in South Africa and Australia. After leaving initially for Africa, aged twenty-two, he returned to his hometown sporadically and then only to raise funds for further travel. He is not well known in Britain but has some standing as an artist in South Africa, many of his landscape canvases being on long term loan to the city of Durban.

As an artist, Chubb feels no affinity on a stylistic level with Baines, and as an archetypal Victorian, he manifests all the traits of imperialism, racism and ignorance that one associates with Western explorers' forays last century to distant countries. However, Baines is certainly fascinating in being, one might say, a museum in miniature himself, collecting visual and written data on 'new' territories and filtering them through his own subjectivity. As the biographers

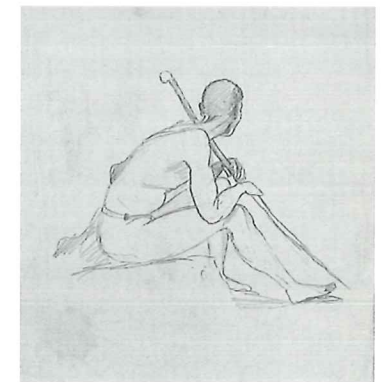
Carruthers and Arnold have observed, 'It is not Africa that Baines describes but his own British response to it.'¹² In contrast to Polly Binns' project, Thomas Baines represents for Chubb an already observable layer of cultural interpretation awaiting re-interpretation and transformation. Indeed, all of Chubb's work comments on the ideological truth that museums *participate* in the creation of meaning, whether consciously or otherwise, rather than merely passively displaying their holdings.

After being introduced to Lynn's collection by the museum curator, Chubb became drawn to Baines' more spontaneous and 'honest' pencil sketches which, as far as is known, had not been publicly exhibited before. They lacked the more forced imperialist message of his finished paintings. These drawings also signalled a quality of research on the part of Baines himself based on direct observation, that is to say through the unguarded eye rather than the prejudiced mind. Chubb's preoccupation with the relationship between looking and seeing (which she shares very much with Binns) then led her to concentrate on heads of human figures, in around 36 of the drawings. The theme became those things that are the object of another's gaze. For example, tribes people and colonials in combat; or quieter, domestic scenes where

¹² J Curruthers & M Arnold *The Life and Work of Thomas Baines* Fernwood Press p76

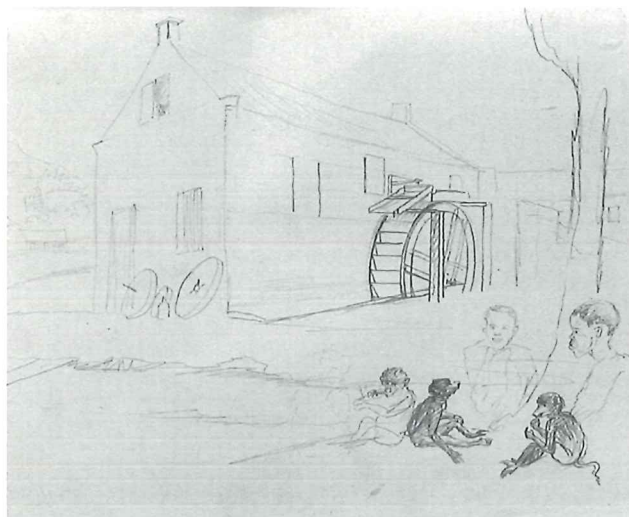
Africans are depicted under the dignified social gaze of each other; Baines himself as artist-observer. Equally in the wider context, the gaze dominates in the process of curatorial perusal of the drawings as they were accessioned into the Lynn collection; or with these works' 'rediscovery' under the eyes of a contemporary artist, Chubb; and ultimately, of course, their scrutiny as they are exhibited for us today.

projects. In this case, her measurements for the final canvases replicate the dimensions of the source drawings. Also she extracts one word from the catalogue details on the reverse of each work, such as 'loved', 'wrapped', 'weapon' and 'butt', and overwrites it across the facial detail of the final work. These details from the original sketched lines are picked out using a mix of poly vinyl acetate and



Chubb photographed each of the drawings and then used a computer scanner to isolate heads only. In their now digitally translated and concentrated form they become discernibly unhinged from their origins and open themselves up to new readings. Vital, indexical links with her source material however are often maintained as Chubb progresses in each of her

Thomas Baines drawings pencil on paper 11 x 15cm 18 x 22cm 19 x 22cm



Thomas Baines drawing pencil on paper 22 x 19cm

graphite (the latter material referring to Baines' use of pencil), and the resulting economical lines and text are covered with a thin layer of African beeswax. This substance, suspended as it is between solid and liquid, 'acts', in the artist's words, 'as a metaphor for trapped time or experience and the possibility of change or shift.'¹³ The beeswax also might signal the theme of travel and cross-pollination, fitting for an artist whose subject is the material and philosophical exchange between colonised and colonial cultures.

Faced with a series of delicately drawn heads and solitary words, Chubb's work suggestively asks us to draw conclusions between the chosen subjects of Thomas Baines, the taxonomic activity of the cataloguer, and our own subjectivity. The connecting

¹³ Notes to the author 1998.

eye is used as a political and analytical tool. The complex relationship between the real life experience of a nineteenth-century explorer, its manifestation through museum artifacts, and its re-evaluation through *Location*, is made explicit by Chubb in the decision to display, adjacent to her final series of panels, the original drawings. The translation of these historical artifacts into a digital medium - the same means by which we are bombarded by media images from Africa and elsewhere - indicates, for the artist, the continued contemporary relevance and yet difficulty of global exchange.

There clearly is a radical purpose behind Chubb's research, which visually crystallises newer and increasingly accepted ways of rethinking the impoverished taxonomy of colonialism. However, of course, Chubb is an artist, so there is also an open-ended fluidity suggested in her use of Baines' images - she is engaged, one might say, in a purposely evolving research in which each exhibition marks another firm conjecture.

v

It is self-evident that both artists work in relation to very particular and clearly identifiable 'research fields': the museum collection and the marshland, or what might termed more broadly, the territories of culture and of nature. Returning to one of the opening

remarks, it is also apparent that Polly Binns works in consonance with her subject in trying to create an artistically valid equivalence to her experience of walking around Blakeney Point. On the other hand, Shirley Chubb works dissonantly with museum collections which, despite being the source of fascination for her, are also entities demanding critique and critical analysis. Chubb closely links the results of her research to the institutional context of which her work speaks - ie the museum - although she exhibits in both museum and gallery sites. Binns is involved in a physical and mental transposition of nature represented ultimately in the gallery.

Certainly it is the gallery which offers a terminus for the work, a stopping point for a consideration by us, the 'recipients' of what the artists wish to present. There exists here a striking comparison to be made between the research scientist and the research-minded artist: the former may, if successful, have his or her findings published in specialist journals, perhaps after months of waiting, and the passage between original research and public effect may be very unclearly discerned. What could be more immediate than the work in *Location*, artefacts that have crystallised in some instances only weeks before their public presentation? We are the beneficiaries of truly fresh and exciting discoveries at the highest level, of artistic revelations born in private yet with no meaning

unless communicated to a receptive public.

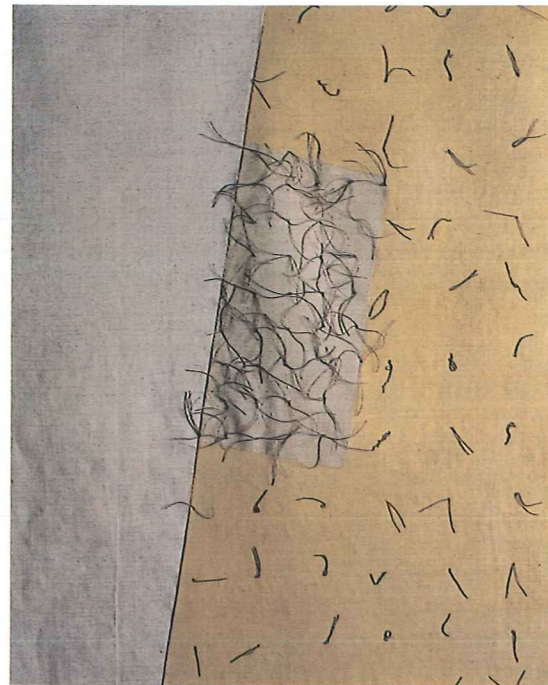
I began with a caricatured version of research, of professionals locked into their own fields working on problems whose resolution need not have any lasting effect on us. Returning to Roland Barthes' essay, cited above, in which he paves the way for thinking about a less hierarchical relationship between artist/author, artwork and viewer/reader in favour of a model reliant on transaction and exchange, we might begin a repositioning of research. For Barthes, 'This means that the Text requires that one try to abolish (or at the very least diminish) the distance between writing and reading... by joining them in a single unifying practice.'¹⁴ He knew this to be 'an important change', for then 'who executes the work?'¹⁵ In visual art the location of research - the revelation of new knowledge - is not only in the artist's studio, out in nature or in the stores of a museum but exists in the fluctuating interface between the materials of art - the fashioned artwork - and the sensibility of the onlooker. Polly Binns and Shirley Chubb help to reveal, with undeniable emotional impact, that however remote the origins of artistic research may be in relation to the public domain, in the end it becomes *our* responsibility to give research its meaning.

¹⁴ Op. cit. p945

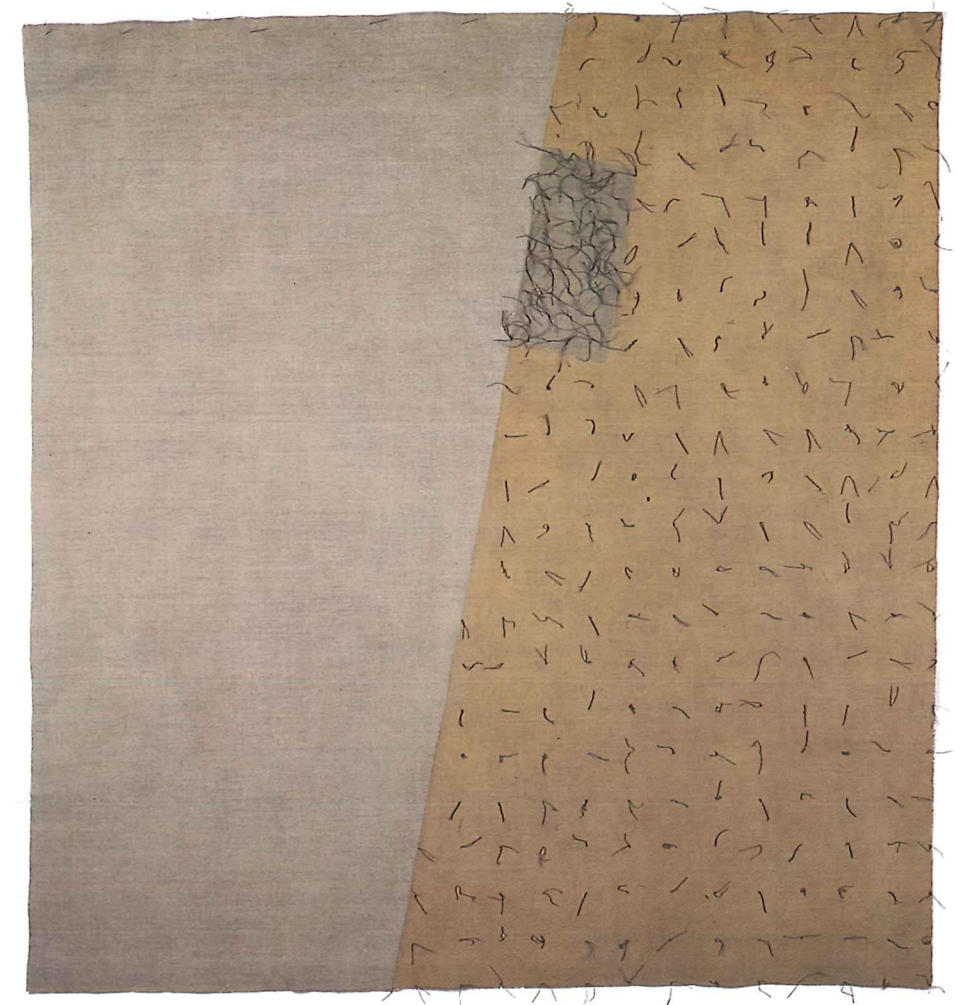
¹⁵ Ibid

New work: materials: acrylic paint and thread on linen (sizes in centimetres)

Tidal Retreat detail



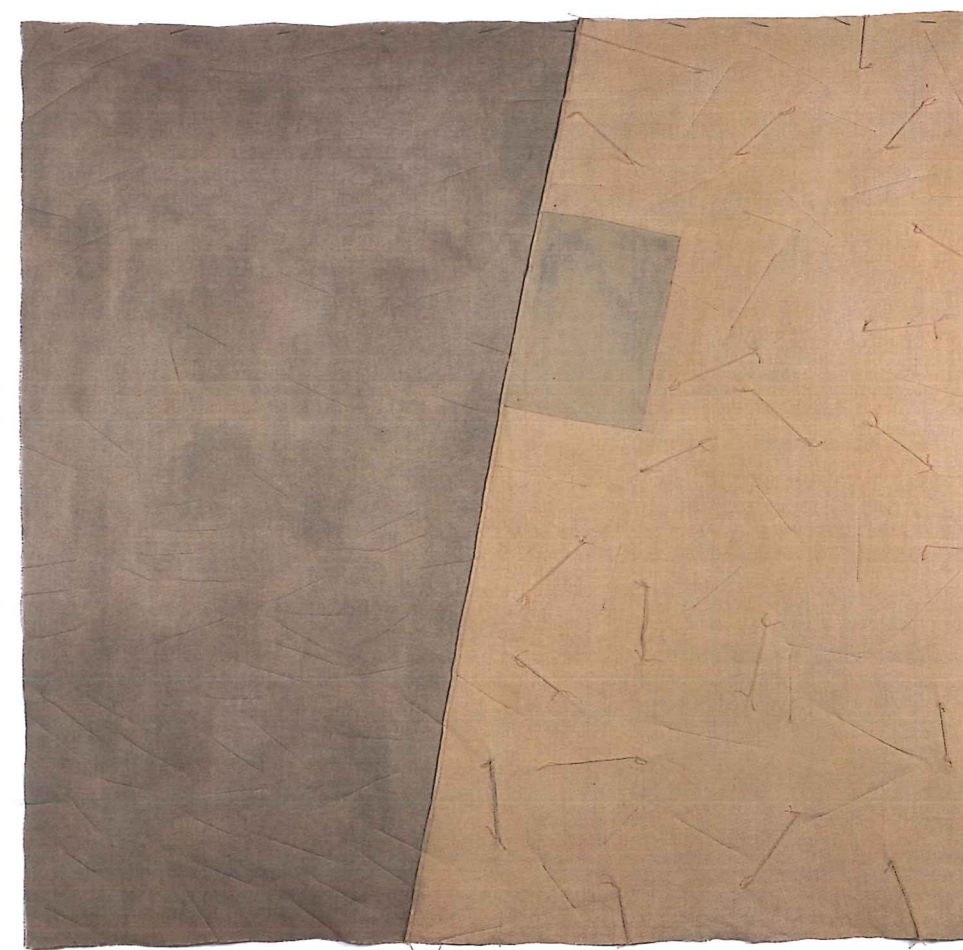
Tidal Retreat 1998 (work in progress) approximately 100 x 100



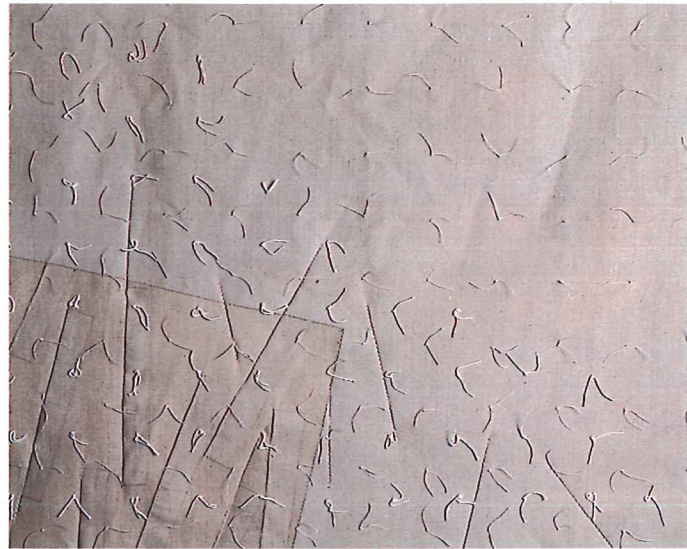
Tidal Margin detail



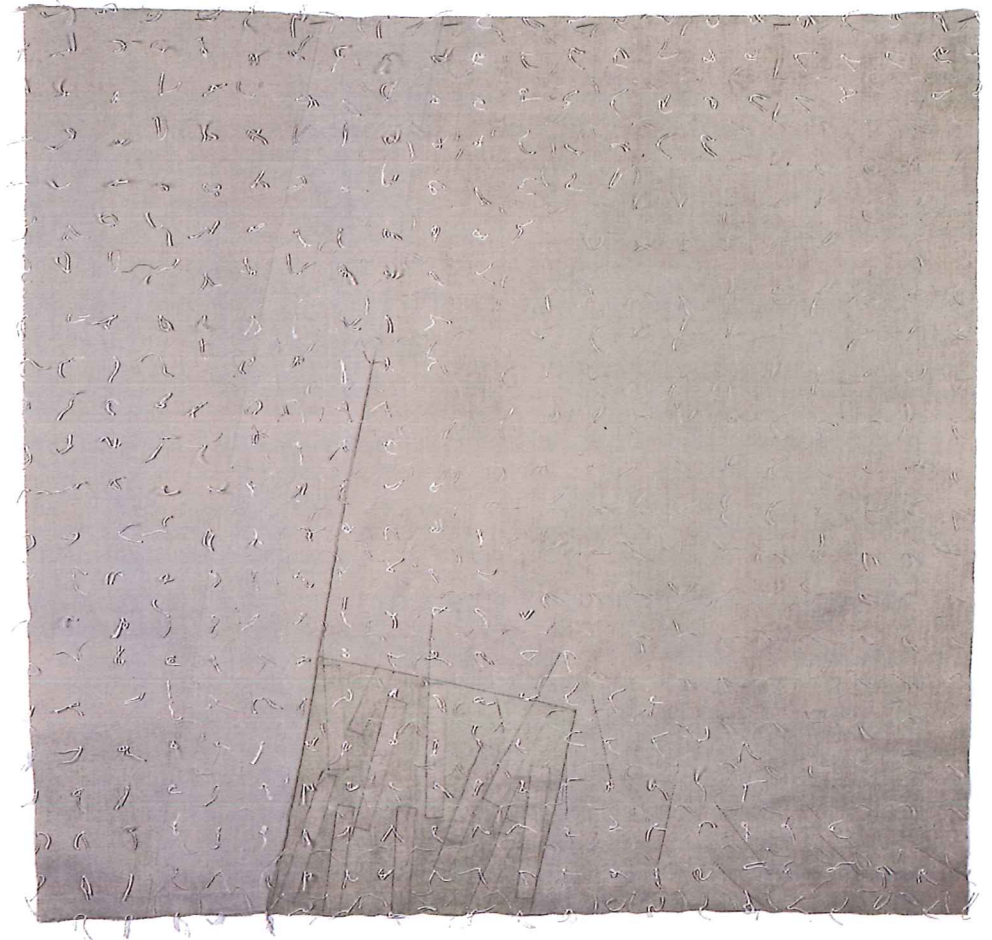
Tidal Margin 1998 approximately 100 x 100



Sea Drift detail



Sea Drift 1998 approximately 100 x 100



New work: materials graphite powder poly vinyl acetate photocopy transfer African beeswax on canvas on board (sizes in centimetres)

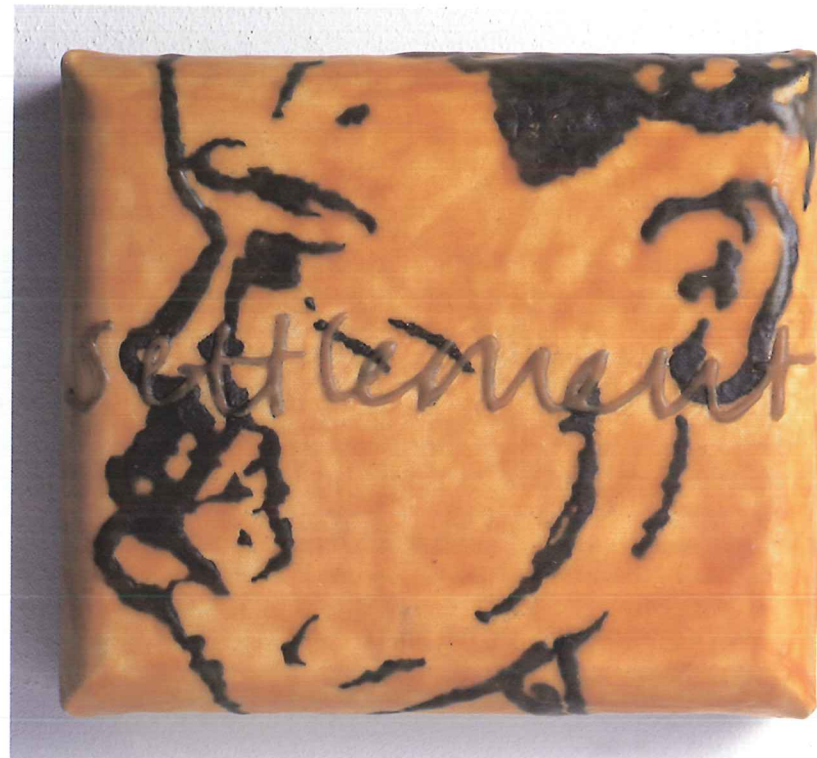
Clothing 18 x 22 x 5



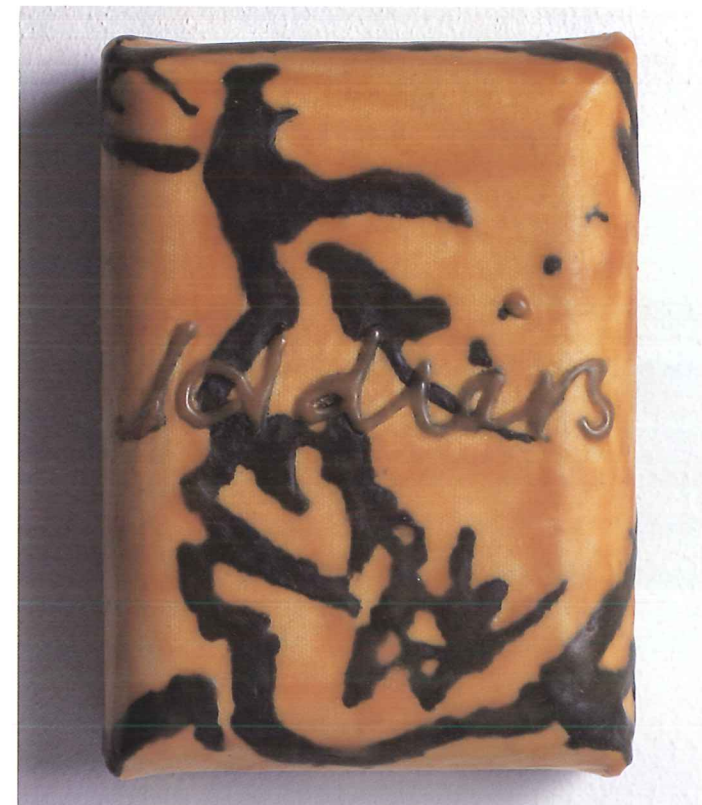
Clothing detail



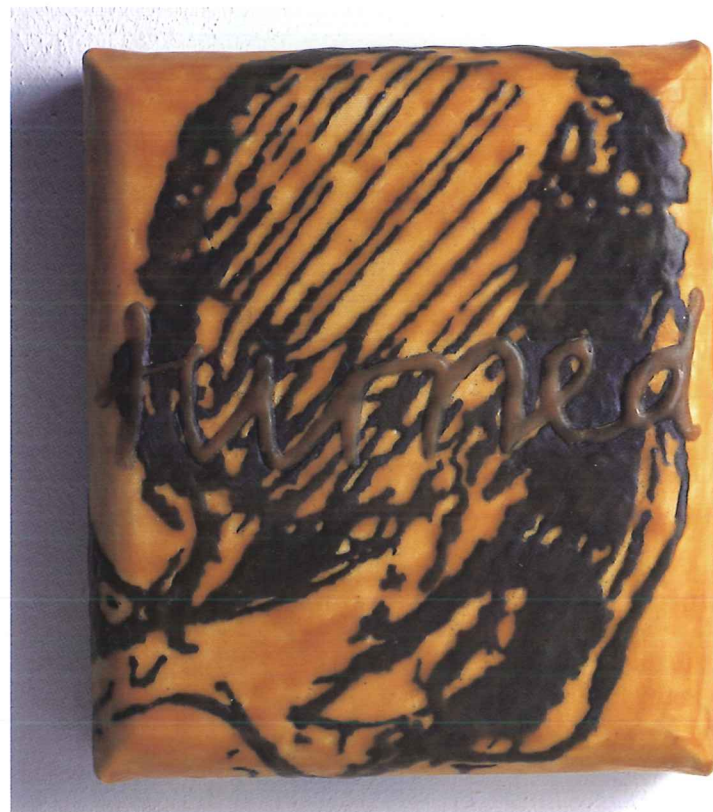
Settlement 22 x 19 x 5



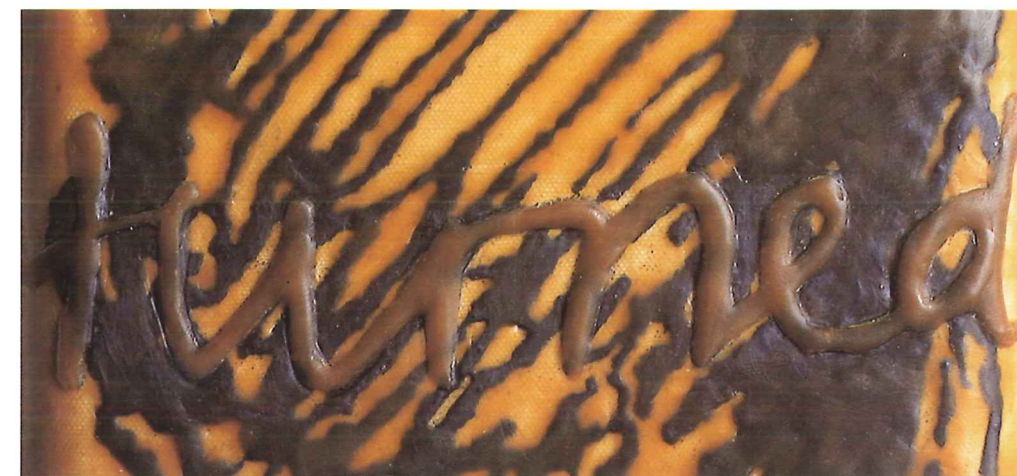
Soldiers 11 x 15 x 5



Turned 22 x 19 x 5



Turned detail



Conversations on Location

Linda Theophilus

These conversations with Polly Binns and Shirley Chubb were carried out on consecutive days in July 1998 when the artists were making work for *Location*.

Both artists spoke of the difficulties of expressing in words some aspects of their work and of the fragile nature of their thoughts which might disappear and become unachievable if translated into language. I would like to thank them both for their patience and frankness during these conversations and for giving such valuable insights into their individual visual research and translation.

I have known Polly and her work since 1991, when I first visited her studio to see the early stages of her new phase of work, a new way of using her command of textile and stitch to respond to landscape, the very particular landscape of saltmarshes and tidal inlets of North Norfolk.

We talked as we walked on the marshes at Blakeney, the location of all of her visual research for her work since 1991.

It was like a coming home... I had been coming up here since 1975, so it has taken a long time to see it. But where I'd walked, how I'd looked, it was suddenly as if the work was ready there, it literally presented itself to me.

This year I came in May, for the first time ever and the marsh was a completely different colour - it was covered in pink; the thrift was out and where the new reeds had come out of the water, they were a really sharp emerald green. The tides were incredibly high and there was an on-shore wind; it brought up lots of vegetation which sat at the edge.

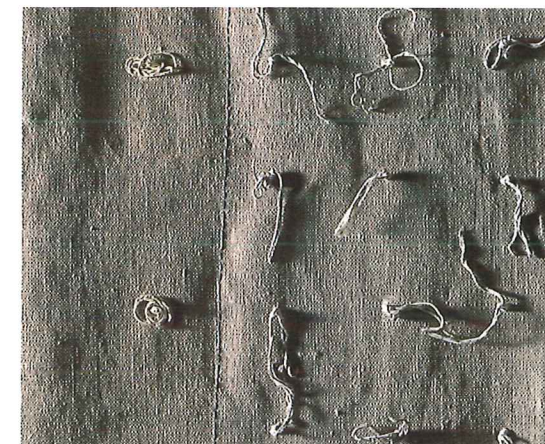
I became very excited by all the detritus which was left between the samphire spikes. The spikes were sticking up like the teeth of a comb and had caught all these short lengths of seaweed, laid down in what ever different direction the last little current of water had left them... in some areas the samphire seemed not to

grow, in strange elliptical, squashed circle shapes... there were bare areas, and then a lot of activity.

What impresses me is your ability to give a very detailed description of a walk you did back in May. Your powers of observation and recall seemed really honed. Is that something you have grown up with?

Yes, so much of family conversation was to do with the world around us, and looking and seeing - the much-repeated phrase in our family is 'Are you looking children? Ah! but are you seeing?' That's what I grew up with.

Serial Shimmers and Shade 1996 detail



In my mind now, I am seeing the samphire spikes but also looking down at the surface, I get to the point where I don't actually see what's here; I see a kind of mirage of the work... and that's almost the point at which you are your most vulnerable, as an artist, but I'm constantly beware of seeing in terms of a formula, and it's what I'm always most scared about. The samphire delighted me - I couldn't have anticipated it. I came prepared to look at other things and with ideas, all of which were blown away... I am always very receptive to having something appear which is so much more interesting than what I had originally wanted to see.

Verbally detailing things is something I've been brought up with, and which I encourage when I teach. But it's something that I find most difficult to articulate about in my work - I don't want to admit to what I'm seeing, because I have this strange sensation that if I even begin to communicate, something will be lost.

I am also aware how ever much in my mind I 'see' a piece of work here on the marshes, when I am actually working, it reciprocally changes because of what it offers back to me. I always try to stay very open to that... It's like the Ellsworth Kelly quote of 'putting your mind to rest'. Both when I walk and I see here, and look and see in my studio, in a sense the answer comes to me if I allow it to.

The grid is something you have used in your work for many years, although I know it is not in evidence so much now. I wondered where that delight in the grid started?

I suppose it comes from my father, a designer very much in the modernist tradition. I can see his hands now putting things down in rows and playing with the relationships, in grid forms. I've grown up with modernist traditions, scales, proportions around me... it is very much within me. In the work now I am very conscious that I want the grid to become much more subdued; I'm beginning to subvert and distort it. But I do draw on the back of the work as a support.

Yet I know that you don't have intermediate stages of drawing, trials or paper collage. When you place a stitch, although one can unpick stitch, you are expecting that to be its permanent home. There's no moving round of elements; that seems to me to be a very confident, developed way of making work. Although you let the work 'come back at you', to make the next mark, you don't give yourself a stage where you are hesitant and can move things about...

Oh no, I can't!...The pieces of work which I feel are the most important to me, are those when there's been huge lengths of time in the 'mediative' thinking process stage, and the moment of actually putting on the canvas the paint or the stitch happens very rapidly, almost angrily - especially the stitch - it goes straight down and it doesn't shift. The next stage that develops isn't to change or resolve the previous stage... Each



stage has got to be complete in itself. A piece could almost be finished after the first stage - say, after a dividing line, and the first area of paint and stitch have gone on; it is a complete piece. These are pieces over time, - not because of what other people say, but purely how I see the work - which I would stand up and be counted by. *Serial Shimmers and Shades* is very important to me. That piece was what I call 'hardly touched'; what went on the canvas is what absolutely happened ...

And it seems to have links with the new piece *Sea Drift* 1998

Yes it does, but I am too close to that, I can't see the work yet, it will take time... If a piece of work as it were 'illuminates' for me, I then find that illumination represents itself constantly in the landscape. That does happen, that is a joy.

I very rarely have my photographs around when I'm working; I like to keep them in books. I take photographs for my own interest and for the sake of the photograph, but much later a piece of work will illuminate something for me in the landscape. I look back and find that I have actually photographed it perhaps many times... but it has not gone directly into the work, there being no conscious thought...

With some earlier work, I think you talk about horizon...

This is traditional big-sky country. It is here but it's not consciously what I'm seeking; I don't need to distinguish between sea and sky, I don't need an horizon to explore my feeling of immensity.

But yes, in a previous work *Tidemarks* 1995 I do refer to the top edge of the work as the horizon... it was my sense of looking from my feet to the horizon... I suppose it was the beginning of being aware of my own body in the landscape, I've become very conscious of that recently. There is evidence in the sense of scale in the work, and points at which I might make a change in the composition. As a simplification, it is how the actual vision - the seeing and the being here - and the material, the process and the making inter-relate. When I'm in my studio, I always pin the work on the wall very carefully at a certain height - it is the height at which I work, and at which I like to see it in the gallery.

And that relates to your eyeline here?

Yes in different ways and also proportionally. It's memories of myself in the landscape that relate to where the piece is on the wall, how I want to explore that on the piece of canvas, and how I actually make the decision to make a stitch or painted mark to start me off.

This prompts me to ask how landscape here effects mood - there is the observation, there is also the emotional reaction isn't there?

I'm very aware that part of the sense in my work is to do with this feeling of space and having this other part of my mind: I am free and most vulnerable here.

And those pieces which for you and for others have an extra dimension - they connect in a very direct way...

They do, they offer more than a literal relationship of seeing the surface of the sand or smelling the mud - it's beyond that.

It seems to me that they can evoke in someone who hasn't made the work, and doesn't know the landscape an essential, eternal quality that is beyond a time or place.

It is what gives me the most satisfaction and pleasure in other artists' work - I feel very emotional in front of work. Being in the landscape can do that too - if I'm out here for a long time and by myself, I do have that emotional sense in the landscape, it is an opening out, a lightening.

For me it's getting to a point where I have physically pushed myself... I forget my body, it's just a vehicle for my mind to get on being as it wants to be... There is within everything else a pre-occupation with our bodies and the physical realities - I wonder if it's a very female thing. But here I can loose that pre-occupation... it is part of the meditative.

You don't usually talk about this in relationship to your work, do you?

No, but it's necessary, it's part of when and how the work is most successful for me. And I know that there are pieces of work that are the most calm, most meditative, most full of that quality that I seek to achieve, which I made when my life was at its most frenetic, my brain being asked to work in a way I don't want it to. It is as though the narrative of my life has no relationship to the work.

When my life is very busy, I hang on to the work, I am always fighting to get back to it, and very resentful of how much of my life is spent in having to use my brain in other ways. Because it does need space and time for this work to happen and develop further.

There is complete compunction to make the work...

Oh yes, I couldn't stop, that is what is most important; it is most essential; it is me.



This was the first time I have had an opportunity to talk to Shirley about her work, or to visit her studio - until now I had only known the work through her gallery exhibitions and the associated catalogue writings.

We talked in her temporary studio at the Town House Museum in King's Lynn, during her week's residency there, the culmination of her research of the drawings of Thomas Baines to which the work in the exhibition is a response:-

Can I ask about the process, as you work - the layers that you use to build up the work...

The layering is something that I've done for a long time - in the practical sense to make a relief, so that

images are tangible - almost as if they are about to come off the surface. And conceptually I am trying to make something very real, that is more than image - I think of it as re-instating the people that the work is about - whether they are identifiable individuals or anonymous masses.

And the time it takes is important?

It's a very important part of it too. It's respect; a bit like carving the wording on a grave stone - you want to do it properly; it doesn't matter how long it takes.

When you first see the primary material - do you need time with that, too?

Yes, although decisions about what to do can be almost instant - quite often I'll have ideas, and then go away and think 'perhaps it should be more complicated than that' but mostly I'll return to the earliest ideas. This first viewing is very productive - it's a personal view or encounter with part of a very big subject - it prompts perhaps the most instinctive and immediate response.

Do you read around the subject at the beginning?

Yes, and I will read a little at this later stage, although it can confuse things if I continue soaking up information. There's a point where I just have to stop because the work needs resolving visually rather than 'academically'.

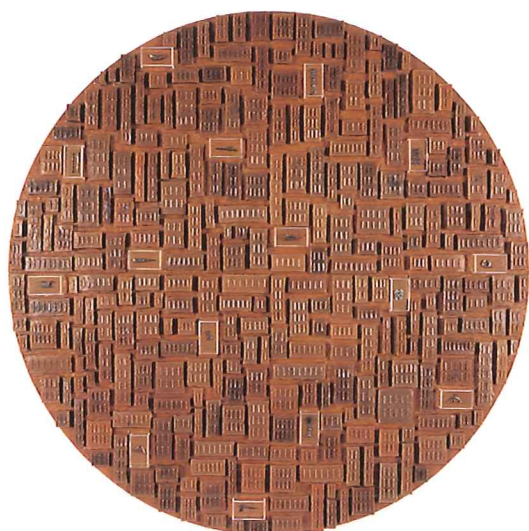
On this occasion, you also seemed to know very quickly how many canvases you wanted; how big they would be... I've become more involved in using the physical facts of the material I'm dealing with as a starting point ... quite often the size, and to some extent the materials as well, relate to the original source material. So on first seeing the sketches, I decided to make the canvases the same size as the drawings, and I wanted to use graphite powder to replicate the pencil used by Baines. These sort of decisions give me an immediate basis for the work... the finer points and details are added to that.

The linking of the materials to the subject is very interesting... Is the wrapped round form something you use often?

It's something I've used for a while; it's very much to do with wanting the finished piece to be only just a painting as an archetypal Western art object, and how this can be used to study another culture. The fact that the canvases aren't framed makes them object-like, so they are just clinging to the 'role' of a painting but are trying to move away from it and as I said before, become more tangible.

When did you discover the African beeswax - it seems such an appropriate thing to use?

With the *Hold* exhibition, the gold weights I incorporated in one work were made by the lost wax



Ghana I 1995 165 cm diameter
Asante brass weights perspex acrylic African beeswax on board

process - that triggered the decision to use wax. It was quite difficult to get hold of; it hasn't been refined and I like the fact that it's in its original state.

There seem to be a number of parallels in your and Polly's work - you both work with the characteristics of the materials. I know you have used stitched canvas work on occasions and you have both spoken of the evidence of yourself in the work...

Yes the integrity of the materials is something that you can encompass and enjoy, rather than completely dominate all the time, although in both our work I think there is a huge amount of control, which I think is interesting in the art/craft thing. What I take to be craft is being able to manipulate and accumulate materials to do a certain thing.- in many ways this is

exactly what I do. Each time you find a way to use materials you are building upon and adding to your practical experience. The way I often use new materials makes the work a challenge. I think that it's interesting to have to grapple with these things, ultimately to make it work. The materials themselves are intrinsic to the work. Both physically and conceptually they are part of it, rather than just being used as a support for an idea or an image. The progression of ideas goes hand in hand with the use of materials; a phrase I like is 'material as metaphor'. Sometimes I worry that there is too much of a formula in my work but the problem-solving, the evidence of my own 'hand' and artistic judgements make a piece individual and personal.

Usually you're doing this, - making the work, applying the wax - in your own private space, your studio, and that must add to the almost meditative activity...

Yes very much so, and also it gives me time to think. I love the slow development and accumulation. It's just you, you're just doing it for you, you're not doing it for anybody else. The desire is strong enough, to get out the brush and the materials, and apply them to a surface, which you don't have to do.

But how does that relate to using computers?

The first sighting of the work is recorded through photographs - taken quickly and as a visual record.

This provides a sort of concrete memory of what I've seen. This time the computer is used to manipulate the images, isolate the areas I'm interested in... it allows me to see how I might place and frame images with text. It's also another stage of looking or seeing - it symbolises a distance from the original time of the encounter between Baines and what he was looking at. He used a pencil to record what he saw; now I and millions of others use this new tool to look and see.

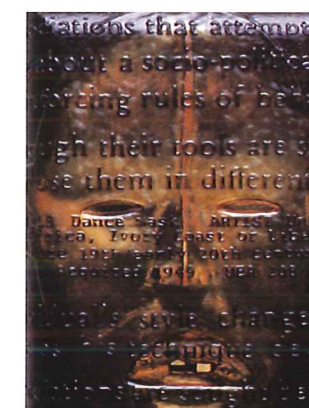
Did you already know that you wanted to feature the face, and the eyes? Its seems almost a natural progression from the masks that you used in the *Collections & Reflections* exhibition. I didn't know what I would find in the museum collection. Most of what I had seen of Baines' work was in the books that I had read... It quickly became apparent that I was interested in reality and real people which is very much what this work is about. In his paintings, the figures were part of a bigger scene; I thought I would have to work with those... so it was wonderful to have the drawings to work with.

Earlier you were talking about your interest in Africa, and the issue of being a white English woman, who hasn't been there, feeling that there is some problem with the 'permission' one is or isn't given to make comment. Do you think that has any correlation to the final image?
This is the part of the work I find the most difficult to talk about... I hope the time element shows my

commitment and sincerity in trying to come to terms with such a huge and complicated subject.

The work is not only about the past; it's also very much about now. A lot of the 'now' is to do with the media, and the images and facts that we are given about Africa. Often these images are so distressing that your race or cultural background becomes irrelevant, they are beyond this.

Trying to describe my feelings and reactions in words is a problem for me. All my work tries to capture a huge breadth of references and associations. There are sparks of recognition all over the place - about the work as a whole and the materials used to make it, about history, about culture and about me - within each work. The written text can prescribe what somebody should think, and I don't want to do that. I can tell people what's in the work, and what it's about, but I don't want to say what they should think. When people are looking, I want *them* to react.



Dan 1996 25 x 16 x 4.5cms
Acrylic colour photocopy poly vinyl acetate photocopy transfer on canvas

Biography: Polly Binns

Education

- 1997-98 PhD by Completed Works University of Teesside
1976-77 Croydon College of Art Research Scholarship
1973-76 Kingston Polytechnic BA Hons Fine Art

Exhibitions

- 1997 **The Language of Touch - 62 Group** Collins Gallery Glasgow / catalogue
Art of the Stitch Barbican Arts Centre, London / catalogue
- 1996 **Take It From Here** *Visual Arts UK Contemporary Art Society* Sunderland City Art Gallery
Under Construction: Exploring Process in Contemporary Textiles Crafts Council, London touring to James Hockey Gallery, Farnham, The Gardner Arts Centre Brighton 1996, The City Gallery, Leicester 1997
Visual Relationships *2 person show with Maggie Henton* Economist Building, London
- 1995 **Contemporary Crafts** *from the Crafts Council Collection* Banque de Luxembourg
Out of this World: The Influence of Nature in Craft and Design 1880-1995 - Crafts Council, Crafts Council Gallery, London, Manchester City Art Gallery 1995, Oriel, Cardiff 1996 / catalogue
- 1994 **Inscape** Midland Arts Centre, Birmingham Bury St Edmunds Art Gallery, Bury St Edmunds / catalogue
- 1992 **Out of the Frame: Contemporary and Historical Embroidery and Stitch** - Crafts Council, Crafts Council Gallery, London, Northern Centre for Contemporary Art, Sunderland 1992, Wakefield Art Gallery, West Yorkshire, The Mercer Gallery, Harrogate Herbert Art
- 1991 **Ripping Yarns** Bluecoat Display Centre, Liverpool
Natural Perspectives Milton Keynes Civic Art Gallery, Milton Keynes
- 1990 **Flaxworks** Contemporary Textile Gallery, London
62 Group Strathclyde University, Glasgow
- Collections & Commissions
- 1996 Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester *Tidemark 1995* gifted by the Contemporary Art Society
- 1994 Crafts Council, London
- 1993 San Francisco, Seaport NY and Michigan 22 works commissioned by Liz Claiborne, Inc USA
- 1989 Trafalgar House plc, London
- 1984 - Kyoto Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto, Japan
- Professional Experience
- 1997 Selector *Art of the Stitch* an International survey of Contemporary Stitch, Barbican, London
- 1992-97 Member of Council Crafts Council
- 1995-96 Selector *Art textiles* a national survey of contemporary Textile Art, Bury St Edmunds Art Gallery
- 1993 - Senior Lecturer Buckinghamshire College Faculty of Design

Biography: Shirley Chubb

Education

- 1983-85 Brighton Polytechnic Postgraduate Printmaking Diploma
1980-83 Brighton Polytechnic BA Hons Fine Art

Exhibitions

- 1997 **History: Image-based Art in Britain in the late 20th Century** from the Mag Collection touring to Hull, Edinburgh, Eastbourne / catalogue
Cartographers Museum of Contemporary Art Zagreb touring to Warsaw, Budapest, Maribor, Middleburg catalogue
Collections & Reflections: the Assimilative & Transformative Uses of Art Objects The Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, University of East Anglia / catalogue
- 1996 **Eighth Mostyn Open** Oriel Mostyn, Llandudno
- 1995 **Hold: Acquisition, Representation & Perception** Brighton Museum & Art Gallery touring to Colchester, Hull / catalogue
- 1994 **Art Unlimited: Multiples of the 1960s & 1990s** Arts Council National Touring Exhibition Glasgow, Leeds, Manchester, London, Ipswich, Southampton, Brighton Hull, Penzance / catalogue
Recent Work International Boundaries Research Unit 3rd International Conference, Durham University
Livre à Vivre / Books of Life Henri Cartayrand Gallery Montpellier, Drew Gallery, Canterbury
- 1992 **777 Distance Communication** Britain, Germany, Iceland Slovakia, Russia, Netherlands, and Denmark Simultaneous exhibition network across seven European countries / catalogue
- The Sussex Scene: *Artists in Sussex in the Twentieth Century* Townner Art Gallery & Museum, Eastbourne / catalogue
Remains Gardner Centre Gallery, Sussex University
- 1992 **Royal Overseas League Annual Open Exhibition** London
East & South The Norwich Gallery, Norwich School of Art & Design / catalogue
Recent Paintings by Shirley Chubb Aspex Gallery, Portsmouth
Changing Places Ikon Touring Exhibition
Hand to Hand Red Herring Gallery Brighton touring to Portsmouth, Czechoslovakia, Minneapolis USA
- 1991 **Shirley Chubb** Galerija ESCE, Zagreb
- Collections & Commissions
- 1997 The Ferens Collection, Hull
- 1995 & 97 The Mag Collection Ferens Art Gallery, Hull
- 1994 & 91 Arts Council of England Collection
- 1994 International Boundaries Research Unit Durham University
- 1993 Brighton Museum Non-Western Art & Ethnography Collection
- 1992 South East Arts Collection
- Professional Experience
- 1994 - Associate Lecturer Chichester Institute of HE
- 1994 - Trustee of Aspex Visual Arts Trust, Portsmouth
- 1993 & 96 Advisor to SE Arts Visual Arts & Craft Department
- 1988 - Visiting Lecturer University of Brighton, St Martins School of Art London, Portsmouth University

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Additional photographs

p2 & 3 Guy Rogers

p7 Derek A Edwards (Norfolk Museum Services)

p8 & 9 Polly Binns

p27 & 28 Simon Sandys

p32 Nicholas Sinclair

p33 Bruce Williams

