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## THE PORTRAIT SECTION

**ALICE KETTLE**

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# Tying the knots

### Keywords

stitch  
textile art  
narrative  
socially engaged practice  
chronicle  
materiality  
migration

### Abstract

*Alice Kettle's stitched works can be viewed in the canon of English figurative embroidery. She uses stitch and thread as a narrative device and as a connecting line, which ties together individual and collective stories as multiple strands across time. The article gives an overview of Kettle's works which integrate autobiography with mythology and contemporary event, tracing the lineage practices of women and offering a feminine viewpoint to chronicle experience. The works document the recent histories of sociopolitical disruption in Europe, which heralded the fragmentation of unity and Brexit. The recent project Thread Bearing Witness concerns people displacement, migration and global conflict. Stitch is used as a means to represent the marginalized and multiple voices of refugees and those seeking asylum. Stitch is viewed as an expressive and empowering means to change perceptions, promote change and as a common language of making.*

My work concerns thread, thread that is sewn, that stitches together stories and describes the accounts of lives. It is a thread that connects with others and stitches up the different parts, sides and

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edges of being human. I see the world as a thread world made up of interconnecting lines which knot the past to the present, intertwined within each other and narrating the feminine voice. Ingold tells us that, 'threads and traces appear [...] as transforms of one another. Threads have a way of turning into traces, and vice versa [...] whenever threads turn into traces, surfaces are formed, and whenever traces turn into threads they are dissolved' (2007: 62).

Thread acts as a connecting line that ties together individual and collective stories as multiple strands across time. Through my work, I explore the transformative agency of stitch in the context of the pre-eminent historical canon of British figurative biographical embroidery, from the Bayeux Tapestry to more contemporary explorations, extending investigations of stitch as an agential medium. The 70-metre-long Bayeux Tapestry is a rich and subtle depiction of war. Embroidered by nuns to portray the invasion of England by William the Conqueror, and the subsequent battle in 1066, it is a stitched document of a seminal battle in British history and an unsettling depiction of a war atrocity. The practice of couched gold and silver work of Opus Anglicanum was unequalled within Europe through the Anglo-Saxon period to the Gothic era with pre-eminence in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Characterized by its dense expressive stitch and modelling of figures, this work was a distinctly English style (Wikipedia n.d.).

The continuum of thread practice can be traced through the English Arts and Crafts movement of the late nineteenth century, which looked back to medieval craft practices as liberalizing forms based on excellence of design. In her writing, *Decorative Needlework* (1893), the key figure May Morris recommends using simple stitches. Design, she wrote, above all was 'the very essence and soul of beautiful embroidery' (Davison 2017: n.pag.). My husband's great aunt was Ann Macbeth, a tutor at the Glasgow School of Art in the early twentieth century, when embroidery was viewed as equal to other artistic media. Her progressive teaching laid the foundations for the art textiles we practise today, using stitching as a means to develop creative thinking, principles of design and furthering the cause of suffragism.

My work is determinedly contemporary in its fabrication and subject matter but can be viewed within this canon of practice and within the histories of women artists. Much of my work, which is generally large in scale, integrates autobiography with mythology and contemporary event to explore my own wonder and puzzlement with the world. These tracks and traces described by Ingold are where thoughts become tangible and trace an entry point to explore the imaginary. With much of the stitching done from the back, I envision what is on the other side. In this process of making and in drawing in thread an alternative version of events can be portrayed where a new track is forged.

## Lineage

I start with work that references family history, locating myself within the lineage practice of my ancestry with seamstresses and tailors on both sides.

*Pause* uses stitch within a generational cycle that repeats and evolves. The series of works, as discussed in my Ph.D. thesis, which formed part of the *Allegory* exhibition (2011) at to:

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Figure 1: Alice Kettle, *Pause*, 2011. Photograph by Joe Low.

portray past and present experiences as mutually entangled and co-dependent. Time is unremittingly advancing, but these works portray a holding point, a moment of pause. Two almost identical artworks, *Pause* and *Pause II* (2011), take as their source the allegorical 17<sup>th</sup> century painting 'Dance to the Music of Time' by the French artist Nicholas Poussin. The complex iconography in Poussin's allegory is expressed through classical codes

with symbolic iconography and a moral subtext concerning virtue (Kettle 2016: 65). In the centre are the figural four seasons, cyclical, regenerative and in perpetual motion. The Janus head looks simultaneously to the past and future, as conjoined and interwoven in time as relentless and progressive. As one of three sisters and with three daughters, the symmetry and continuity of mother/daughter/mother within *Pause* is personified within a recurring temporal revolution. The stillness of movement in the work as the suspension of time is 'time's balancing act; as past and future hang in the balance' (Chrostowska 2012: 43). That pause or suspension is in the substance and stillness in the work. This is underscored by stitch which, as a repeated motif, is a constant metronomic pulse marking time and lineage practice. *Pause* and *Pause II* explore the 'inter-penetrability of generations by incorporating thread and patches of fabric from dresses stitched by my mother, worn and handed on. It is not clear which work represents which generation, they are interchangeable' (Kettle 2016: 70), within the generative cycle of revolving and of moving backwards and forwards.

## The chronicle

A sequence of three interrelated works, tell the story of my connections with Greece and the enduring connectivity of time and of searching for home. I have family in Greece and it is a place that was once home. These works intertwine personal lived experiences with the universal truths contained in tales and mythology and include the contemporary events that surround me. They use embroidery as a means to explore ideas of searching for home, both 'as a place we can go to and the concept of finding a home within' oneself (Kettle 2016: 49, original emphasis), a place that is already there.

*Odyssey* draws upon the classical Greek epic poem by Homer which comprises stories within stories concerning passage, faithfulness and endurance, as codes for way finding and self-renewal. In Greek mythology weaving is linked to fate and the making of cloth to 'creat[ing] a personal destiny' (Sullivan Kruger cited in Harrison and Young 2008: 28). In the 'faithful and fateful weaving' of Odysseus's wife, Penelope, 'we see a powerful action of self-protection' (Kettle 2016: 47). My work, like Homer's poem, explores the relationship between husband and wife as separate yet entwined and as concomitant worlds. These unsteady and fixed worlds reflect the experiences of those within them (Kettle 2016: 47). 'The feeling of home is recreated as a place of self-discovery and solidness in the *Odyssey*, in these works are a place to be at home' (Kettle 2016: 48). The 'concept of home as a place we can go to and the concept of finding a home through making become synthesized'

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*Figure 2: Alice Kettle, Odyssey, 2004. Photograph by James Newell.*

(Kettle 2016: 49, original emphasis). The *Odyssey* was made in a time of personal turmoil and created for me a sense of home. Making the works was like Odyssean wandering but through the perspective of his wife Penelope, as I made and unmade, in order to find stability.

*Golden Dawn* was made some years later, having left Greece, thus seeing it from a distance. It is more overtly political, utilizing the agency of thread to encounter brutality. The work reimagines the moment of expulsion of the neo-fascist Golden Dawn party from the Greek government in 2013 whose activities challenged authority and included acts of terror. The depiction draws upon the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur (from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*), using Ariadne to layer autobiographical meaning alongside the political, with the indexical element of gold thread. The political events in Greece in 2014–15 were at the beginning of the recent European challenge of austerity, political unrest and people movement. Michaloliakos, leader of the Golden Dawn party is depicted as the Minotaur, pacified through golden thread. Ariadne cannot be seen in figural form; but is embodied in the stitching signifying her power to rescue and to change the narrative. Thread is used to bind the personal to the archetypal encountering ways to apprehend and understand the present. *Golden Dawn* is reclaimed as a moment of new beginnings.

*Loukanikos the Dog and the Cat's Cradle* is the third work in the triptych and responds to the Greek austerity protests in 2015. The mass rallying of people represented a key political moment in Europe with consequent events occurring in relation to the fragmentation of Europe. The work specifically depicts a real moment of adversity and tension but has a wider universal currency where power resides and is instrumental in repressive acts. It similarly draws upon the myth of Ariadne, where her golden thread is used to constrain and enable new beginnings. The thread is in the making, Ariadne personified as protagonist in material form and thread as the main subject itself shows three girls playing cat's cradle. The cat's cradle is a universal string game where twisting lines between each other creates pattern and structure. It represents human entanglements, which in this case are in the girls' hands; they have the power to disentangle and reconstruct hierarchies and relationships (Haraway 1994). A stray dog, the actual Loukanikos, appears in the work at the forefront of the protests and acts as a symbol of mediation. Clothed in brocade, he too is realized through embroidery and 'mediates politics and magic, reproduction and territorialisation, dream and disillusionment' (Ravetz 2015: 43).

These later two works recognize the potency of Ariadne's thread and tie experience and story together as echoes of each other. Thread is an imaginative means to secure a place in the world, to fix oneself to a place and its bonds. Thread also reconfigures relationships and signposts the potential to make new worlds.

## Collective stories

*Thread Bearing Witness* is a project of a common thread, using stitch to offer a one-world-view formed through the contributions from those seeking asylum and refugees. People migration is one

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*Figure 3: Alice Kettle, Golden Dawn, 2004. Photograph by Joe Low.*





Figure 4: Alice Kettle, *Loukanikos the Dog and the Cat's Cradle*, 2015. Photograph by Joe Low.





Figure 5: Alice Kettle, *Thread Bearing Witness*, 2018. Photograph by David Oates.





Figure 6: Alice Kettle, Thread Bearing Witness – SKY, 2018. Photograph by Michael Pollard.

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defining issue of our time. Through textiles we can explore the challenge of maintaining cultural heritage at a time of displacement. The material itself acts as a metaphor for the knotty social bonds that simultaneously hold us together and separate us.

Stitch in this project is used to empower the marginalized, connect individuals and communities, and influence issues of social justice. Corbett argues for 'the process of making to engage deeply with the issues' we care about, to influence and effect change (2017: 1). The project uses stitch as testimony and collective story-telling where embroidery can again represent home-making and home-finding. In the textile cloths we co-create are patterns that are culturally binding and carriers of the stories of all who participate.

The *Thread Bearing Witness* project acknowledges the world as individualistic and culturally specific, but with networks of influences and histories as integrated and shared. Thread operates a materially tangible human connectivity, remembering these integrated pasts, confluences of knowledge and transactions. It sews back and binds the fractured and disrupted as an act of reparation.

The project invited individuals and groups of refugees and those seeking asylum, to contribute to and inform new monumental, stitched artworks called *Sea*, *Ground* and *Sky*, alongside other multiple and varied activities. Working with groups and individuals in Greece, France, the United Kingdom, and in refugee camps, I invited them to contribute drawings which I embroidered into these huge works to make a pluralistic world unified through embroidery. These huge works affirm the value of human dignity as rich, colourful, multi-dimensional complex fabrics. The images are surprisingly untroubling. Drawing upon the heritage of textile iconography are flowers, hearts, leaves, kites and birds from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and African countries. The embroidered panels form asymmetrical and disrupted patterns that reorder the geometry of an interconnected social world of flux. The concept of disruption and of seeking home as grounded can be seen in the solidness of the fabric itself as in *Odyssey*. A parallel art-based project *La Lande* describes the grounding of human experience which bears witness to the 'undocumented present, to create a space for new dialogues' (Hicks and Mallett 2019: vi). Using a concept of 'contemporary archaeology' they similarly reassemble fragments of images, to realize the stories which would otherwise not be told.

Stitching facilitates the narratives of marginalized peoples as 'a heuristic through which we deepen and make more complex our understanding of some aspect of the world' (Barone and Eisner 2011: 3). Sonja Arellano, through her own quilt-making migrant project, speaks of the value in the 'the rhetorical possibilities of non-alphabetic composing, and the importance of narratives that quilts convey' (2022: 20). As a cultural intermediary of her project, she sought to 'ethically craft an understanding of migration' (Arellano 2022: 20). The *Thread Bearing Witness* project challenged assumptions about authorship, ownership, hierarchies of power and opposing forces. Unsettling stories of heart-breaking tragedy were ever present and constant. This bleak witnessing of the impact of conflict posed profoundly difficult questions about my own motivations and privilege and of individual and collective social responsibility and citizenship.

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Stitching has been a way to trace the past and shape the track forward. Through making self-reflective themes can be explored and relationships deepened. Bratich and Brush describe, '[m]aking [as] an action which can be seen to break down boundaries and binaries [...] to a new fabric of relations' (2011: 233). The materialization within the fabric secures testimony and commentary whilst simultaneously opening new dimensions that are future orientated, possibilities that occur through the process of making.

Ingold says, 'the thread being spun now and the thread picked up from the past are both of the same yarn. There is no point at which the story ends and life begins' (2007: 90). Thread, stitch and embroidery draw together relationships as part of a politically and socially engaged medium and process, not one that is quiet and overlooked. Thread operates as a line of human connectivity which in my case secures me within a canon of practice and gives me a place to belong to, as a kind of homecoming.

## Funding

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## Contributor details

Alice Kettle is a contemporary textile/fibre artist in the United Kingdom. She is professor in textile arts at Manchester School of Art, Manchester Metropolitan University. Her work is represented in various international public collections. Her major exhibition *Thread Bearing Witness*, 2018–19 at the Whitworth Art Gallery, used stitch to address issues of migration and people displacement. She has co-edited various publications including *Collaboration through Craft* (Bloomsbury, 2014) and *The Erotic Cloth* (Bloomsbury, 2018) with Prof. Lesley Millar.

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