



Alice's Adventures

Internationally recognised textile artist Alice Kettle shares her story and asks you to get involved in her latest project!

Multi award-winning textile artist Alice Kettle is being celebrated in a stunning exhibition of new and existing work. Marking the 10-year anniversary of her commission to create the spectacular *Looking Forwards to the Past* artwork, *Alice Kettle: Threads* brings together a wide selection of the artist's work made over the past decade including a number of works from public and private collections, specially sourced for this unique retrospective in Winchester.

'We are literally taking over the building with embroidery – I love it!' she laughs. Celebrating her career-changing piece for the Winchester Discovery Centre, the exhibition celebrates her journey in hand, machine and digital stitch, and launches the first of a major new series of ambitious works planned for exhibition in Manchester, 2018.

There is also workshop space devoted to her new public engagement project *Stitch A Tree* – more of which later – plus Winchester and Young

Embroiderers' Guild exhibitions, work from local artists, and more.

'There is the most wonderful atmosphere there, and it's all about stitching!' she says. 'We are trying to show how stitch is a common language and how we can all come together no matter who we are, where we come from, through stitching because it is something we can share. And it was something so apparent on the opening day. We had everyone sitting down in the workshop stitching but also this beautiful work all round on the walls, then there is my work, in the upstairs gallery, plus my big piece, *Looking Forwards to the Past*, so it's like the whole building is being devoted to stitch.'

Devoting one of its main cultural centres to her work, Winchester is clearly proud of Alice. Born and brought up in the city, she came from a home where stitch was always present.

'My mother always had a sewing machine out and a lot of stitching and making with fabric was always going on so I think the culture of

making was very much there from the beginning. I think the younger generation are reclaiming that, making and doing craft activities but I think it's not quite as familiar as it was in my childhood where everyone made everything.'

She received a sewing machine for her 18th birthday, then went away to university to train as a painter. 'It was very abstract impressionist, but I think in terms of understanding how to physically cover a big canvas – mine tends to be quite large scale work – understanding about composition, scale, the impact of a mark, a gesture, I think it was really helpful. It's informed everything I've done to date.'

Her love of sewing resurfaced after her degree, taking her to study at Goldsmiths in London. 'They had a "textile art" course, which was something I'd never heard of before, but it was about approaching textiles in a non-functional way, making something you would put on the wall rather than about making a bag: much more conceptual than practical. →

'Because I was very used to using a sewing machine at home I just picked up from there, translating my painting into threads, using stitch as a medium.'

'I realised that stitching can be very specific, very planned, very careful, but also you can be very speculative and very intuitive. And you can reinvent all the rules, so it has this broad scope for you to be very individual with it. And I realised that whilst I had to acquire lots of technical skills, it opened up a whole new world of texture and approaches and I could just start to think about colour, think about light, think about surface, in a whole different kind of three dimensional way.'

'I simply started stitching really, thinking about composition and acquiring technique as a consequence of what I wanted to do.'

And she never forgets her initial training in painting. 'When I come to stitch I think all the time about the

dynamic of a line, resonance, rather than the mechanicals. When you use a machine it tends to have a mechanical, predictable look but I'm always thinking about how to make it more like painting, how to give it movement, dynamism, and the relationship between one mark and another. But over and above that you've got all the other implications of the threads and what you are using.'

It is this 'mechanical' work, using a sewing machine, for which she is best known. 'I do free machine embroidery, that's how I fill my huge canvases! But I like to work in my own way. So I swap from the front and back all the time so that I can vary the thickness of the threads and put the thick thread in the bobbin. Some of the pieces are mainly made upside down, where I'm playing with the tensions of the threads all the time.'

'I also use a ribbon and braid pleating machine so I use that to

create a really thick cord, and I use a lot of digital embroidery. That's really different, it means you can design an image on the computer and you can reproduce it. But you might reproduce it in multiple different ways: you might change the size, change the threads, just reproduce some of it. You can't do that with free machine embroidery, there every mark is a new mark, a different mark. Digital work is another tool for my vocabulary. But I always try to make it look like it's not come out of the machine predictably, that my artist's hand is very much in charge.'

It is her vast, inspiring works in this area that has perhaps seen her reach international significance as an artist, and be honoured with a prestigious professorship in art textiles at Manchester Metropolitan University. But she is still interested in the small scale, and has definitely not forgotten handstitching.

'Some pieces I've done completely in handstitching, because sometimes you don't have a machine around or there are various reasons why you can't do it. And the good thing about hand stitching is it's very portable so you can take it anywhere and do anything with it so I do use it. I love the qualities of it as well.'

It is this medium which is being used for the Stitch a Tree project, in which she is giving out kits to complete a small, embroidered tree. She will then bring all the entries together to form a 'forest'.

'We launched it in the City Space Gallery of the Discovery Centre in Winchester the other day and we've had so many absolutely beautiful contributions already. People have taken so much trouble. The whole point of that project was having the very individual contributions that come together as a community of stitching and it really shows that because they all are of equal value but they are so different.'

'I don't know the ages of all the people involved but we've got a school group where the whole class have each done one, so we've got about 20 from them, and they are just beautiful and most of them had never done stitching before, and then there are some where you can tell they have got a lifetime of stitching and they are just absolutely remarkable.'

'It's just so lovely to see the range of handstitching there. I felt quite weepy actually when I looked at all of them.'



"Textiles offer a powerful medium through which to explore themes of cultural heritage, journeys and displacement"



This emotional connection is of huge importance in her artwork. She is now working in partnership with refugees, including displaced women artists, for her emerging Thread Bearing Witness project to create monumental textile works which tell their individual stories.

'I think all of us have watched the media and seen this being played out over the last few years and we can't help but be really aware of the challenges and the human disaster. But not only that, one of my daughters has been working very directly with refugees for some years and that brings it very close to home and so supporting her through the trauma of that and hearing very immediately individual stories I felt how can I pretend I can't see this? On a human level these are people like me. So from that it made me feel I had an obligation and responsibility to just connect and say "I care". That's it, to simply say "I care".'

With migration becoming one of the defining issues of our time, this ambitious new project seeks to connect concerned communities and individuals across the UK by inviting them to get stitching, show solidarity and raise funds for displaced people around the world. Thread Bearing Witness will conclude at the Whitworth Gallery in Manchester in 2018. Artwork sales for this project will be donated to charities supporting displaced people.

Simultaneously, Alice is working on a local level to connect personally with individual refugees and asylum seekers, asking them to work with her to contribute to and inform new monumental stitched artworks.

'Textiles offer a powerful medium through which to explore themes of cultural heritage, journeys and displacement,' she says. 'They are all about a global narrative. If we delve into our history in textiles when you think about a lot of the patterns, the clothes, the carpets that surround us, we are all immersed in global textiles. We don't often recognise it but it's steeped in our cultural psyche. We live with textiles, we all make them and we share these common methods of making them.'

'Stitching has a ubiquitous quality. You don't need to talk, you can just sit and stitch, and it's about coming

together. So wherever you are across the world you find it's something that people have these extraordinary skills and abilities in and you find it's part of their domestic environment.'

'For me, this project is about saying "we are all women, we all stitch, we are all connected by textiles, so let's celebrate that!"'

Alice will be drawing all these threads of her work together at the Winchester Discovery Centre until January 14, 2018 before the final exhibition in Manchester next year. You can even contribute to her new work, Forest, by stitching a tree at home now! ♥

For further information about the exhibitions and the Thread Bearing Witness project please visit:

www.hampshireculturaltrust.org.uk
www.threadbearingwitness.com
<https://candidastevens.com>

TAKE PART AND STITCH A TREE!

Alice Kettle's public participation project is open for entries and she would love you to get involved! You are invited to stitch a tree, which will later be arranged into a large embroidery and will be displayed at the Whitworth, Manchester, in September 2018.

Packs containing fabric, thread and a printed booklet can be posted to you and are available by emailing threadbearingwitness@gmail.com. Alternatively, download our Stitch a Tree booklet and Further Information PDFs and start designing and stitching your tree on a piece of your own fabric (cotton only please) measuring 12 x 12 cm. When you have finished stitching, post your tree back to the organisers in the envelope provided and don't forget to include your name, email address and brief information about your tree.

Each contribution to Forest will be acknowledged and documented on a map. Visit threadbearingwitness.com/stitch-a-tree-project/ to find out more.