

Fibre and Form

Anna Ray is an artist who chooses fabric and thread as her medium. Her practice explores and expands the methods and materials traditionally associated with textile crafts. Constructed with a playful curiosity, her works invite us to consider the materiality of making using an array of techniques and actions: knotting, coiling, stitching, stuffing, hanging, printing, tufting, etc. Yet here the scale is altered, the intricate, knotted threads and twisted fibres of the textile are blown up to giant proportions, filling our field of vision.

Ray trained in Fine Art Tapestry at Edinburgh College of Art and the rich legacy of tapestry-making is evident throughout her practice. Though she doesn't weave at a loom, her pieces reflect a confidence in the possibilities of cloth as a fine art medium, demonstrating a contemporary take on the traditional wall-hanging. In fact, her works rarely come away from the wall. She explains: 'as a dress needs a body to take its shape, so my work needs the surface of the wall to cling to.' Though supported by the flat, two dimensional surface of the wall, Ray's objects project outwards in a sculptural manner and she considers textiles to be three-dimensional: '...a tapestry or piece of knitting or embroidery has surface depth. The front and back of the textile play a part in a sculptural way...'

Ray's most recent work, *Mesh*, 2020 is a modular structure made up of stitched, stuffed, painted and printed V-shaped fabric units. The flesh-coloured pieces project from the wall like soft louvre shutters that may be opened or closed. Inspired by the bones and stays of corsetry and the semi-permeable membrane of skin, which heals and rebuilds itself after being damaged, Ray sees *Mesh* as a metaphor for our current, constrained situation. For her, the mesh is at once a shelter and a cage: a container into which we retreat yet from which we may potentially emerge. Ray is fascinated by the way in which silkworms create their cocoons as a framework around themselves. Referring back to a drawing she had made in 2004, *Mesh* also demonstrates the potentiality of repetitive, modular systems – a recurring theme in her work.

Mesh brings to mind the cool, geometric modularity of minimalist sculpture, though Ray's meticulously hand-crafted soft forms are a far cry from the hard, industrial, readymade materials of minimalism. Indeed, her work may more readily belong to the amorphous category of 'soft sculpture', echoing, perhaps, Claus Oldenburg's scaled-up domestic objects, or Yayoi Kusama's repetitive presentations of stuffed phallic forms. But I would suggest that Ray's work is more subtle than these iconic artistic statements in stuffed fabric. Her early (and ongoing) practice of embroidery reveals a dedication to subverting the domestic art of stitched thread and a surrealistic imagination. The artist cites Louise Bourgeois, Sophie Calle and Helen Chadwick as influences inspiring her engagement with the feminine, the psychological, the bodily and the haptic. Yet her ability to draw on these sources is combined, unusually perhaps, with an acute awareness of the optical effects of shape, colour and form, bringing artists such as Pierre Bonnard, Bridget Riley and Edouard Vuillard into the list of artistic influences.

Colour and repetition are key elements at play in *Knot* 2007, which is made up of a thousand padded, baton-like fabric 'threads'. Ray has said that the work is inspired by the children's game pick-up-sticks and by the colour-coding she discovered to be at work in the under-wires of women's bras. The stuff of childhood games and the structural supports for woman's undergarments come together in a material expression of the ways in which both distant childhood memories and

everyday adult constraints are at play in the artist's imagination. Ray began her textile experiments as a child playing with scraps. She recalls: 'My mother was always making things: clothes, quilted jackets and bags with wonderful appliqué. I was enthralled by the juxtapositions of colour and pattern in her collections of fabric, lace and ribbons and would always be making things alongside her.' Her studio space is a testament to Ray's continued fascination with the texture, colour, shape, form and structure of materials: whether natural or man-made, found or made. Wall and table-top spaces are given over to her collections and everything from a razor shell to a Clothkits doll find their way in to her vocabulary of making.

While the twisted strands of *Knot* recall structural techniques in textile practice, resembling the pile of a scaled-up, tufted rug; other works such as *Rosette*, 2021 and *Bloom*, 2012 speak to the decorative use of fabric as embellishment. Ray's Huguenot ancestors were silk weavers and fancy trimmings manufacturers in Spitalfields, London. She has referred to *Rosette* as a 'magnified form of Passementerie' (the art of making elaborate trimmings, tassels, braids etc). Unapologetically decorative and making proud reference to what was once a respected and skilled family profession, such works do not shy away from aspects of textile craft which have since become associated with the feminine, domestic, amateur or kitsch. In line with artists such as Miriam Shapiro or Harmony Hammond who were instrumental in the feminist use of craft practices within fine-art contexts in the 1970s and who asserted their position through the Pattern and Decoration movement in the US, Ray reclaims the rosette, the flower or the ribbon as legitimate forms for art. Placing them centre-stage on the gallery wall she forces us to reconsider what is usually seen as marginal, additional or peripheral – the trim becomes the object itself.

At various stages in her career Ray has relished the opportunity to work collaboratively in industrial or community settings. In 2019 she created a series of new works titled *Offcut* for Art in Manufacturing as a resident artist at Forbo Flooring Systems in Bamber Bridge, Lancashire. As the series title suggests, Ray made use of the offcut materials normally discarded in the process of making carpet tiles. *Offcut-ends* refers both to this manufacturing process and to the set up of a weaving hand-loom, where vertical warp threads can be tied on by hand and weighted at the ends if they snap from strain. Ray weighs down her suspended, coloured threads with stainless steel washers, employing weight and gravity to hold the threads straight, like a series of plumb lines in front of the wall. Indeed, the work could be seen to reiterate the historic relationship between thread and wall, between textiles and architecture in which thread (or string) is used as a primitive measure of space and geometry. Whether hanging in space; drawn through cloth as embroidery; or enlarged as soft sculpture, Ray's work reminds us of both the necessity and the enormous potential of a length of thread.

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December, 2020