



As if to Nothing; Arctic Boundary, acrylic on canvas, hand stitch, 138w x 61h, 2013

Absence of Evidence

THE WORK OF CLAIRE BENN

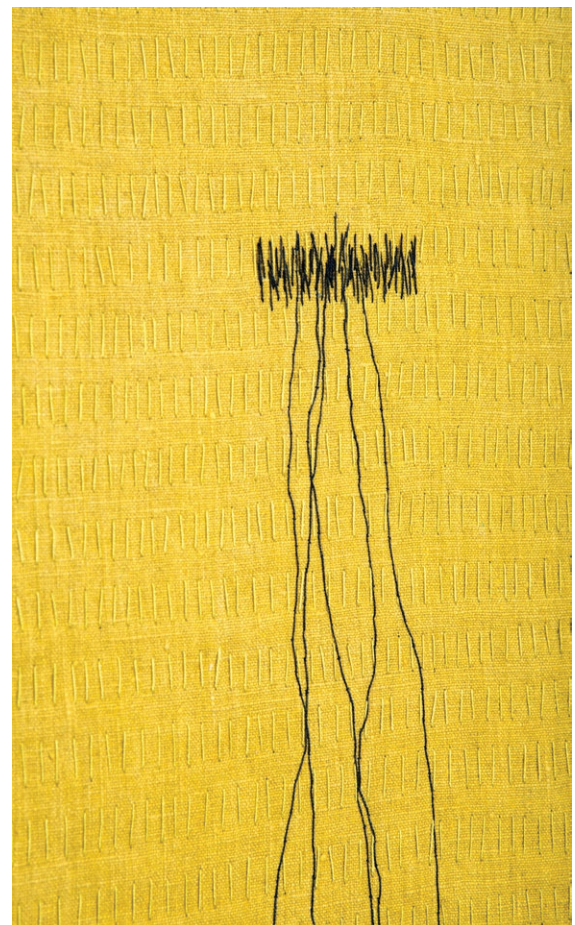
— *by Simon Tait*

“You have to look, that’s the first thing,” said David Hockney. “It doesn’t matter how long for, a few moments or for hours, but if you don’t do it properly you’ll miss what you need”. And what you need is sometimes very subtly hidden.

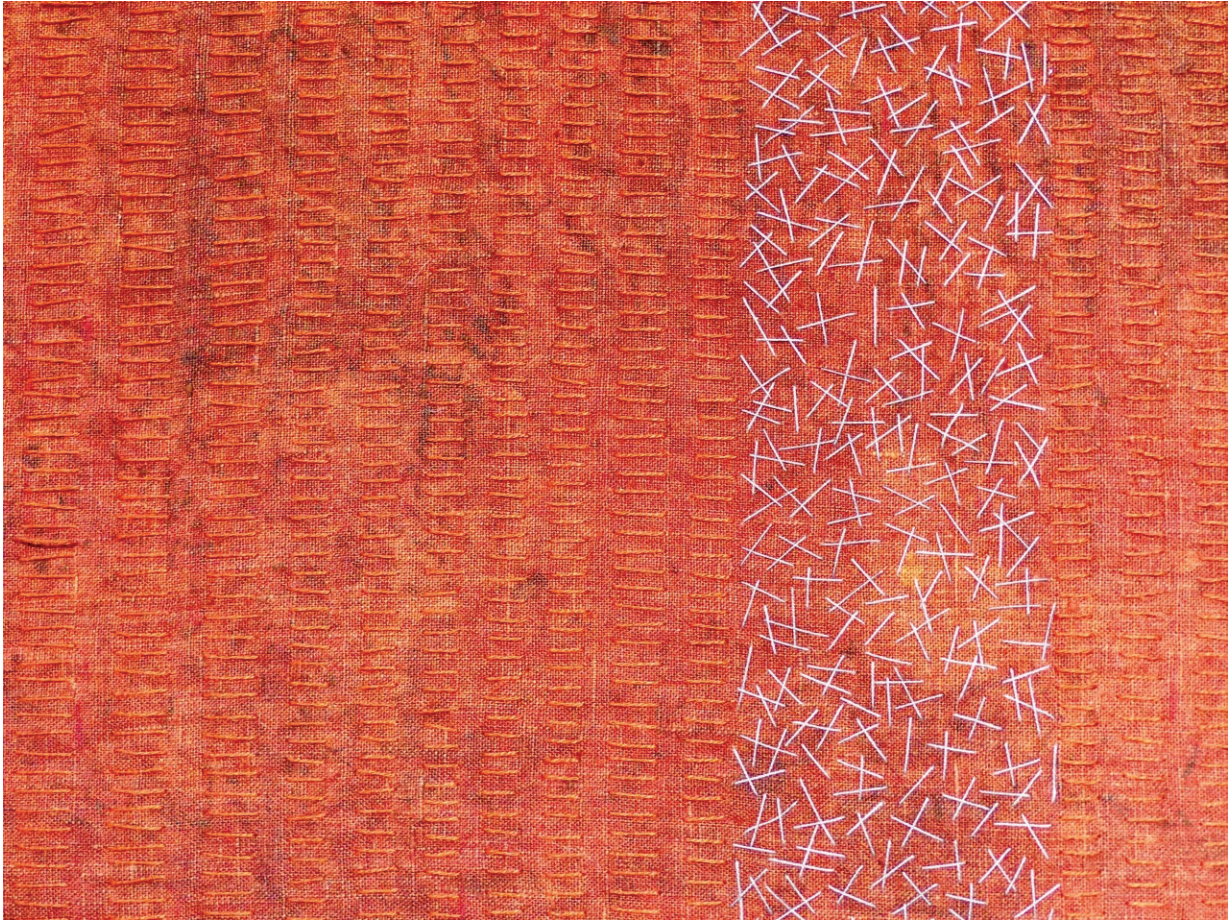
He was talking recently to a group of art critics who had just presented him with the 2018 Critics’ Circle Award for a lifetime’s achievement, but it could have been Claire Benn talking to her students. She can look for days at a subject before she has what she needs.

Hockney is especially noted for his use of modern technology to help him see what he needs – his next exhibition will be based on his experiments with 3D imaging – but technology, he says, is just the tool you need for a particular job. “A paint brush is technology,” he said. Or sometimes, in Claire’s case, a needle.

Claire Benn’s art defies classification, something Hockney would heartily approve of. At its most basic it is sewing, but it also painting; it is using the character of different cloth and thread, and the marks that stitch makes. She seldom if ever knows what will be the end result of a piece of work, but her art has a mystical sense, often of a kind of tranquil desolation that is always absorbing. She looks to wilderness for her inspiration, the white wastes of the Arctic and the infinite bleakness of New Mexico or the Atacama Desert.



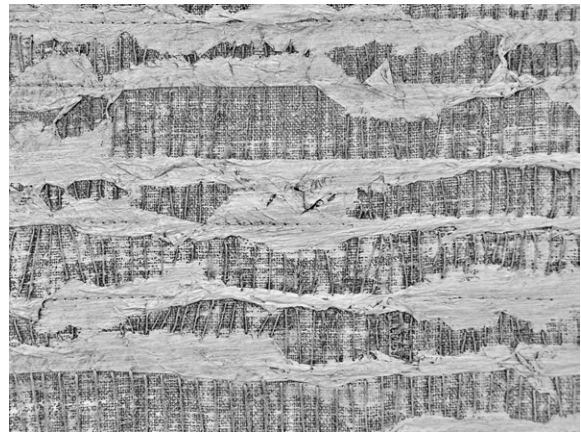
Spring, detail



Her chosen media are mostly textiles (the cloth and the thread), natural dyes, raw earth pigments, and acrylic mediums. She loves to work with antique hempen sheets, some of them a century old, especially those with worn areas or patches because of the personality they can bring to the piece (she has sources in Gloucestershire and Wiltshire). The work therefore is abstract but complex in ideas and practice; reductive and begging touch as well as gaze. There are echoes of the ethereal print works of Rebecca Salter, perhaps, or the devastation of Anselm Kieffer, but these pieces – one cannot even label them “canvases” though some hang as if they are – are uniquely invented, arriving via deep contemplation.

Claire has had no formal training for what she does – there is no training for what she does because no-one else does it. She grew up in Southampton and initially learned hand-stitching with her grandmother – “Her stitching was nothing spectacular, but she did it all the time” – and it was a skill that never left her. She also drew and painted as a child, but at 20, having ducked out of further education – her report declared that she “has a negative attitude towards institutional discipline” – began an extremely successful career in sales and then corporate training and coaching.

After ten years rising through the ranks of Thomson, publishers of Yellow Pages, she diversified into making



(Top) Red Rock, River & Rain, detail
(Bottom) fenced in, detail

training videos. "What became very apparent to me was that people would buy a four hour training video but had no idea what to do with it" she recalls. "I had the skill to know that from a four hour video you could get a five day training programme".

After marriage to James Benn, she went professionally freelance setting up her own consultancy while James pursued a career in independent publishing. The children grown and away, they now live in a 1630s converted timber-framed barn in Surrey and the old cow byre is her studio.

Claire rediscovered her love of textiles in the mid nineties in Canada, when she saw a collection of antique Mennonite quilts. "I was struck by the combination of form and function, something made to keep you warm but which you could just as easily hang on the wall it was so beautiful". She bought a second-hand sewing machine, made her first quilt, did some classes, but didn't take to traditional technique.

James treated her to a trip to a patchwork mecca in Paducah, Kentucky, where she saw hand-dyed fabric for the first time. She signed up at a dyeing school run by Leslie Morgan near to where she now lives and works, and learned how to turn dyes into paint by combing them with a paste thickened with sodium alginate, a seaweed product, and a new creative world opened up before her. Quilting was left behind, and with Leslie she started Committed to Cloth in 2001 as a dedicated textile teaching studio that encourages students to develop their creative ideas. Claire stood down in 2015, but still teaches for Leslie.

In 2012 she rediscovered her love of hand-stitching, through the holistic healing system of Ayurveda, "a kind of science of life", which Claire and her husband have found beneficial. James had been advised to spend a month of quiet introspection at a retreat near Mumbai, and Claire went with him. "We knew that once there we were on a controlled diet – no alcohol, no caffeine, no tobacco – and even reading was discouraged, so I asked if I could hand-stitch. No problem". She tacked together two pieces of grey linen a metre and a half square and with a roll of neutral-coloured hemp thread spent five to six hours a day for 28 days stitching. "I just fell back in love with the process, the slowness, the meditative quality, the cloth on the table or on my lap and I don't know what I think about – or if I think at all. I'm just in a floating mind kind of place". The resulting piece (called '28 Days') became the first in a body of work she calls 'In the Fullness of Time', "because they take a long time to make".



What Goes Around Comes Around,
antique french grain sack and
antique French hemp,
hand stitched, 87x197cm

She had also discovered the work of Agnes Martin, the American painter known for her reductive process that pares down her images to find a kind of transcendental state, with an emphasis, if there is any emphasis, on line and subtle colour. “I watched videos of her working, read her writings, and became really committed to trying to make my work simpler – I was quite frightened by what I was trying to do in terms of how far I could push reduction”. She will sometimes reverse a process on a piece, undoing the labour of weeks, so that some of her works can take months to complete.

She thinks of the aphorism “Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence” in reference to her work, how colour seems to insinuate itself through the underpainting, contriving her pieces through stitch, pigment, cloth, to bring the viewer’s imagination to full bore as they contemplate the ensemble and see what may or may not be there. She looks at a large mostly white and black piece with tiny red stitching barely visible on which she has been working: “Definitely an absence of evidence there” she murmurs with satisfaction.

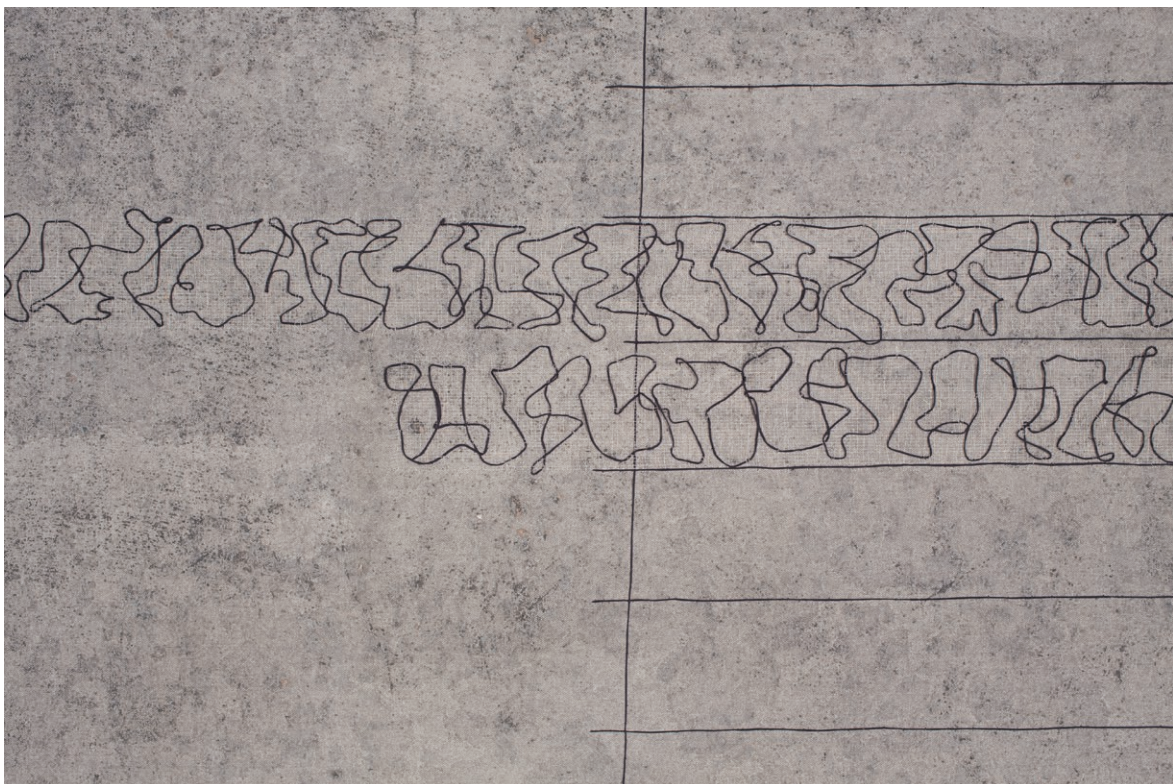
To find her subject matter she seeks out wasteland, in Scotland at first and then in Morocco. She loves the Otago Grasslands of South Island, New Zealand, along with the huge spaces of the Canadian forest, the Atacama Desert in Chile and the high Mesas of New Mexico. She and James try for a “desolation trip” every two to three years, and one was to the Arctic Circle on Norway’s Russian border where the grandeur of

the Northern Lights was, for Claire, dwarfed by the splendour of the tundra landscape under a full moon, “the most astonishing thing”.

If she could choose her favourite place, though, it would be the Atacama Desert. “It is magical, and I’m working with dirt - white dirt, red dirt, brown dirt – as my pigments and bind them to the cloth with acrylic mediums – I like acrylic because it gives a literal, physical feel to the surface”.

Claire teaches in the UK, the United States, Germany and Italy, though not in formal education because she has no formal qualification and has no desire to deal with the beurocracy of the system. Almost all students are female and middle-aged+, and whilst her initial focus is on technique and process, her aim is to foster independence in students so they can move on to make ‘intentional’ work. At this stage, Claire can switch from being a tutor to a mentor and focus on developing compositional skills.

“The joy and beauty of what I do is that there is always something new to find if you look the right way,” she says, “and nothing is ruled out”.



Adobe, Lintel & Ladder, detail