

# Conversations with the Makers

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## Claire Benn, UK

*Claire has been focused on art full-time for the last 17 years; both making and teaching. She works with heavy cotton, linen or hemp, often combining earth pigments (through mono printing, painting or scraping) and stitch to produce reductive, abstract pieces. She also engages with 'slow stitch', enjoying the meditative process and the simplicity of works produced entirely through hand stitch. Her inspirations are simple: empty and desolate landscapes, sitting and absorbing. A limited palette, line, texture, the small details. She wants the viewer to have a slow, meditative experience ... and feel the restfulness that can come with that.*

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### Conversation with the Makers(CWTM) Did you always envision a life as an artist?

**Claire Benn(CB)** *No, whilst I was encouraged to engage with art from a young age (my father painted), I was too keen to become (financially) independent and leave home, which being an artist wasn't going to provide!*



### CWTM: What was your first experience with making art?

**CB:** *I think all kids mess around with art from an early age, but the first time my father got me to focus was through looking at drawings by Van Gogh (his favourite artist), and then working in that style. I still have a couple of them.*

### CWTM: Do you have a dedicated studio?

**CB:** *I have a studio that allows me to engage with wet processes and stitch. It's not huge (12m x 3m) but it's enough and I feel lucky to have this dedicated space.*



**CWTM: Can you describe a typical day?**

**CB:** *I get up anytime between 6 and 8am (earlier in the summer), have a coffee and a cigarette with the cat on my lap and stare out across the fields, watching the day begin. I'm usually in my studio no later than 10am (I like to get rid of any urgent admin before I start studio work) and don't have a phone or a computer with me as these are unwanted items whilst I'm working! I'm essentially in there until 6 or 7pm, with an hour off for some lunch and maybe, a short afternoon nap. I may need to do another hour of admin at the end of the day and of course, some days have time spent doing normal household stuff such as food shopping! My husband and I share the cooking, and chat over a glass of wine and have music playing whilst meals are being prepared. In the evenings I like to either hand stitch, read or watch a bit of T.V. – but only good T.V.! We're usually in bed no later than 10.30pm, sometimes earlier.*

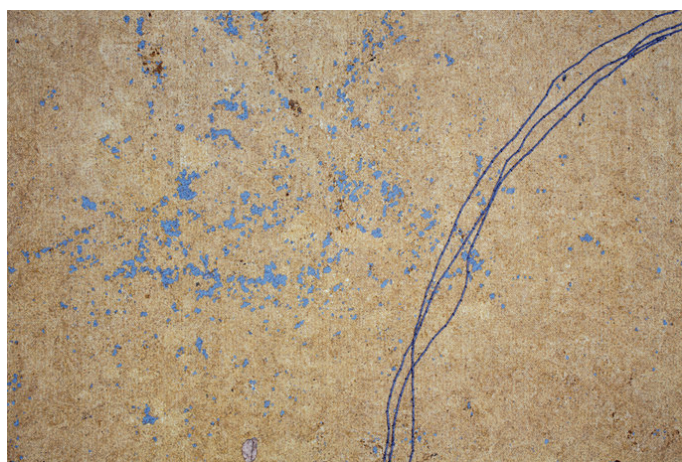


**CWTM: Would you consider your art making to be more about the process than the outcome?**

**CB:** *Yes and no. Process and engaging with process is hugely important to me, as it's through process that you enter the 'zone' and the world falls away. But, I'm always striving for an outcome that matches my idea, internal vision or source and most of the time, I get there, but failure is always an element of making art.*

**CWTM: Do you agree that a small element of uncertainty about the finished look is what makes the process of creating so enticing?**

**CB:** *Yes, taking risks, exploring ways that you hope will get you to what you want are engaging and exciting. I don't believe any plan should be set in stone; start with a vision and move towards it, certainly, but be willing to take time out to really look at the work-in-progress, respond to it and change the plan as necessary.*



**CWTM: Any indispensable tools or equipment?**

**CB:** *Over the last five years I've simplified hugely; both in terms of the work itself and the tools I'm using. For wet media, I'm very focused now on tools that enable direct engagement with my hand, such as scrapers, brushes and items such as needle nose bottles. I couldn't live without good needles and hand stitching thread!*

**CWTM: Do your pieces start with a planned course of action or are they more spontaneous?**

**CB:** *I'm always working with my 'source' in mind. For example with the 'Traces of Time' body of work, it was about translating the stillness and silence of New Mexico and the simple adobe structures. I give consideration to my raw materials (the cloth I need to use, the media, colour schemes etc.) and the best tools to use to achieve what I want. But I don't plan as such, in the sense of keeping sketchbooks, preferring to write about my thoughts and feelings. I'm rigorous in taking time out to consider each piece as it progresses as I feel it's really important*



to respond to the work as it emerges. With my hand stitching, I dig out a piece of naturally-dyed antique hemp, take a good look at it and then just start stitching – the piece of cloth somehow tells me what it wants.



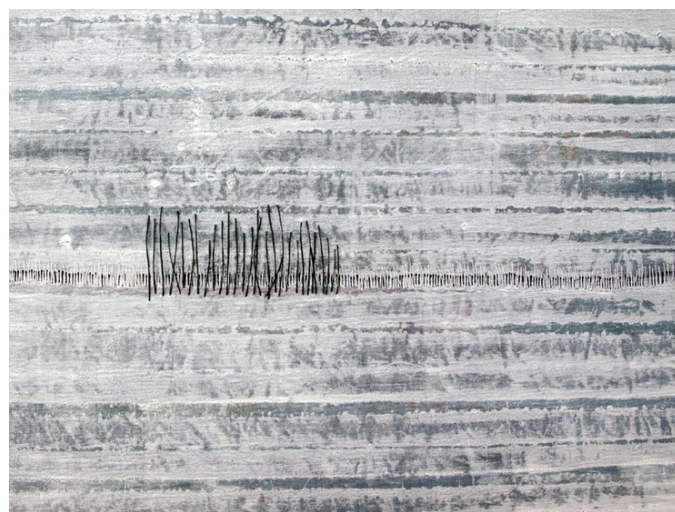
**CWTM: How do you know when to “stop” – when do you consider a piece actually finished?**

**CB:** Knowing when to stop is always a tough call, but it’s about taking the time out to hang the work up regularly, taking the time to really look at it, considering your response to it on an emotional level and being a rigorous critic of what’s actually being presented to you. And when I say ‘critic’, this doesn’t mean self-flagellation. It’s just about being truly honest with yourself in terms of what you’re seeing in compositional terms, and whether or not the piece has achieved what you want it to achieve. A key question to ask yourself is “is this piece ready to be exhibited, and would I be happy to stand by its side as the artist?”. If the answer’s “yes”, then great, stop. If the answer’s “no”, then there’s some serious thought to be given as to why not, and what next.

**CWTM: Your greatest source of inspiration is:**

**CB:** I have two. The first is remote, desolate landscapes such as New Mexico, north Norway in winter, the Atacama Desert or Patagonia. When I visit these places I take a few photographs (mainly close-ups), walk a bit and spend a long time sitting, looking and experiencing my emotional response. I focus on absorbing the sense and feel of it. I have learned that my response to looking at my favourite

art and being in remote places is the same; empty yet whole, rested yet energised, at peace yet inspired. Still. Content. The challenge is to then visually express what I feel in those landscapes – translate those feelings into work of my own. This means restricting my tools, my media, my palette and my process – simplify, simplify, simplify. Out of this came several bodies of work; ‘Potters Farm’ (based on the barn I now live in), ‘As of to Nothing’ (based on the Arctic) and the current ‘Traces of Time’ works (based on New Mexico).



My second focus is engaging with the joy of repetitive, slow hand stitch. Feeling the cloth in my hands, thinking about its history, rubbing my fingers over the texture of the stitch, thinking of nothing other than ‘needle in, needle out’. The act is a meditation and the results – to me – are meditative, simple and complex; beauty in repetition.

So, I now work in two streams. The first aims to communicate the stillness and silence of remote landscapes using cotton canvas, earth pigments, acrylic medium and water. I find pigments satisfying as they have a direct connection to landscape (I’ve just brought a bag of soil home from the Atacama Desert to use in my next body of work), and I bind them to the cloth using as little acrylic medium as possible. These pieces might subsequently have a stitch element added to them, but not always.

*My second stream is intensive hand stitching. I'm currently using French antique hemp (usually dyed with plant pigments), linen and grain sacks as I can literally feel their history under my fingertips; areas are worn in places and this makes me contemplate the years of use the cloth has experienced. My preferred thread includes cotton, linen and hemp and I choose the colour and weight best suited for the cloth. I have now titled this emerging body of work 'In the Fullness of Time', as that's how they happen and each is full of time.*

**CWTM: Favourite quote?**

**CB:** "Your path is at your feet" (Agnes Martin).



**CWTM: When do you do your best creative thinking?**

**CB:** *In stillness and silence, generally when I'm sitting or walking in the remote places I love. Once back in the studio I'll often use music as a backdrop to thinking and pondering, so for example, when making the New Mexico works, I listened to Native American chants to help take me back to place.*

**CWTM: What do you enjoy most about your work?**

**CB:** *Engaging with process, handling the cloth and the thread, the meditative quality of what I'm doing, the world narrowing down to what's happening under my hands.*

**CWTM: Best advice you've ever received?**

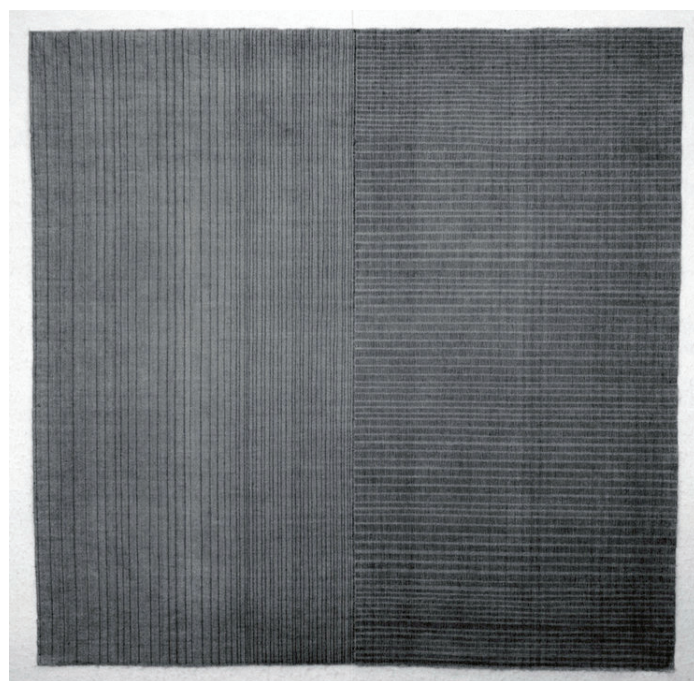
**CB:** *Again, I have Agnes Martin to thank. She wrote: "you must discover the art work that you like and your emotional response to it. You must especially know the response that you make to your own work. It is in this way that you discover your direction and the truth about yourself".*

**CWTM: Worst advice you've ever received?**

**CB:** *Don't teach textile art. What rubbish – although I appreciate it's about balance – taking on too many teaching commitments can distract you from making your own work. But, I firmly believe that to teach is to learn twice.*

**CWTM: Best part of your day?**

**CB:** *There's never a best part – every day is different but all have greatness in them – we just need to look for it and be aware of the opportunities for joy, contentment and inspiration.*



**CWTM: Who would be 6 people that you would invite to dinner?**

**CB:** *I'm trying not to get overly focused on artists here, and try for a shot at stimulating conversation across a range of topics!*

*Agnes Martin (art and philosophy)*

*Keith Richards (music and lust for life)*

*Raymond Blanc (a passion for food and fantastic ingredients)*

*Barbara Kingsolver (a great writer with a passion for the natural world)*

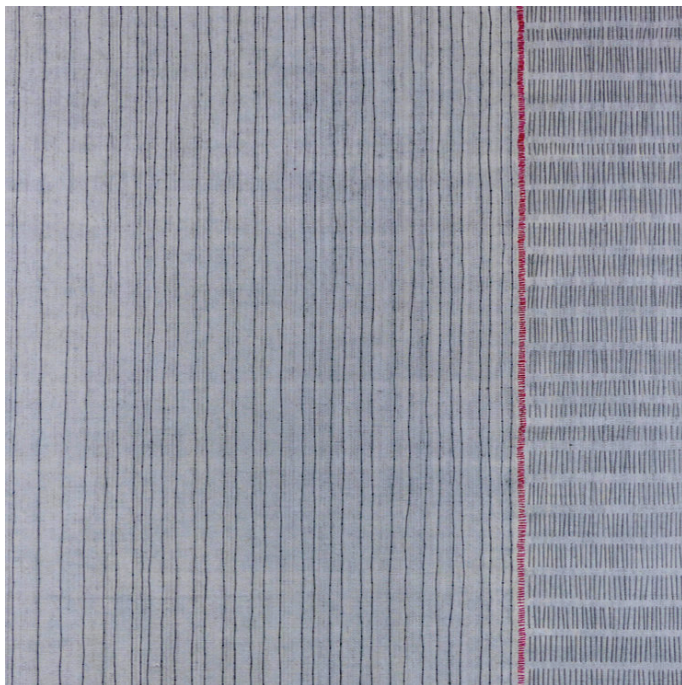
*Nicholas Serota (ex-director of Tate Modern, who'll perhaps give us insight into what makes great art!)*

*Grayson Perry (artist, maker, craftsman with a way of communicating complex things in an accessible and engaging manner)*



**CWTM: What are you excited about right now in the world of textile art?**

**CB:** *Nothing specific but I want to see work that has great visual impact, content, great composition, shows evidence of the hand, shows courage, and evokes an emotional response in me. I DON'T want to see work where technical perfection over-rides content – for me, this is work that lacks soul.*



**CWTM: You'd be lost without...**

**CB:** *my husband, who is my greatest advocate and my greatest treasure.*

**CWTM: What would you do with a few extra hours each day?**

**CB:** *More of what I already do – spend time in my studio. Time isn't something I fret about. Time is simply time and we all choose how we want to spend it. It's about balance, setting boundaries, seeking to make good choices and being happy.*

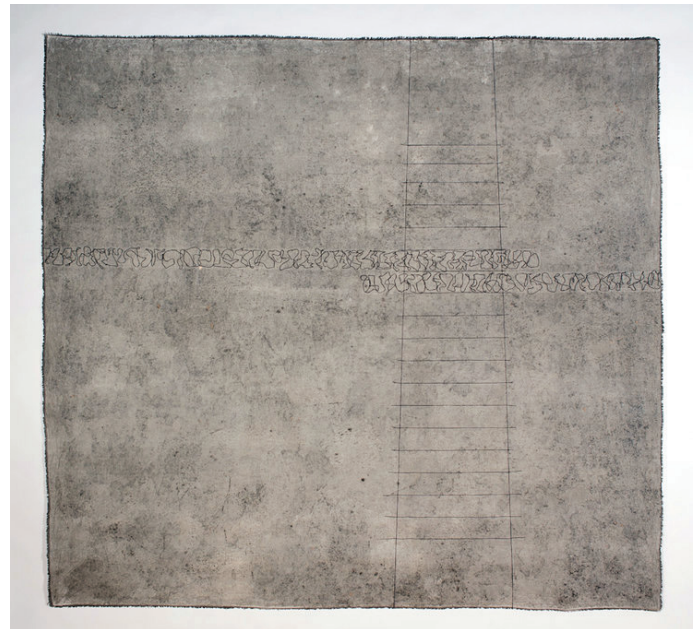
**CWTM: Your favourite luxury in life?**

**CB:** *Original artwork hanging in my home, books and music – assuming my art materials aren't considered a luxury!*

**CWTM: Has the advancement of computers and technology impacted your work?**

**CB:** *Not at all and in truth, I avoid technology and*

*don't engage with social media on any level. Yes, it has its uses but I don't want my life to be ruled by phones or emails as quite simply, they can destroy my focus and steal time from what matters to me – working with my hands. For me, using a computer as part of my process would separate me from the work I'm making.*



**CWTM: Is it important for us to be recognized by the art world and if so, how can we help affect that change?**

**CB:** *By 'us', I'm assuming you mean those that make art with textiles. If so, then of course the answer has to be "yes, art textiles should be recognised by the art world". Cloth in the form of a canvas is often the starting point for a painter, and many artists have used thread or fabric within their work (Robert Rauschenberg, Louise Bourgeois, Tracy Emin, Grayson Perry to name a few). But, I do think that we in the textile world have shot ourselves in the foot by putting the 'textile' before the 'art', which is why I always use the term 'art textiles' as opposed to 'textile art'. Nancy Crow says it best: "I am an artist. My medium is quilts".*

*I also believe that elements within the textile world – such as the 'quilt police' and rules and regulations that encourage a non-existent set of criteria about technical perfection – haven't helped one jot. No established artist worth their salt gives a damn what the back of their work looks like. Go and*



examine work by, say, Agnes Martin, Rothko, Robert Motherwell, Howard Hodgkin - and you'll see plenty of 'imperfection' in the form of drips, or 'corrected' areas. This is evidence of the artist's process and their hand. For me, great art is about human, emotional response, not whether it's perfectly or beautifully finished. Sure, any artwork has to be finished to a professional level and fit for purpose, but who really gives a toss about the back!

How can we affect that change? Quite simply by focusing on what makes great art, which for me is about visual impact, content, composition and emotional response. It's about being rigorous with yourself and what you're trying to create, focusing on the content, the 'art' and not the decorative. I'm not against decorative but it generally doesn't have much of a place in the mainstream art world - the finished piece has to transcend its craft. Having made that great art, it's then about being willing to enter juried shows and competitions - and not just those that are textile focused - or even just rocking up to a gallery with your work and saying "please take a look. I'll understand if it's not what your gallery is about, but I'd welcome your feedback". We can also organise and hire gallery spaces, putting on exhibitions and being willing to take the financial risk involved. Work won't get seen until it's pushed out there, and it doesn't really live until it's out there being seen.

Ultimately? If I never sold another piece of work or got exhibited again, it wouldn't stop me from making.

#### **CWTM: What's next for you?**

**CB:** I want to continue with slow hand stitch and building the 'In the Fullness of Time' body of work. I will also move on to start work based around a trip to the Atacama Desert in northern Chile and I also want to focus on developing a library of 'motherfucker marks'; big shapes that have impact.

