

Healing stitches

Claire Benn's creative journey has brought her a long way from the sewing machine in the attic where she made her first quilt. Pretty Patches finds out more. . .

Interview by KAREN HOLLOCKS



Textile artist and tutor Claire Benn has enjoyed significant success in her creative career to date but, as is the case for many in the arts industry, it has taken passion, determination and a great deal of patience to realise her vision.

The co-founder of one of the UK's foremost textile craft teaching practices, Committed to Cloth, Claire has also exhibited her own work nationally and internationally. However, she explains that her first forays into stitching were a little more humble.

'In 1994 I was inspired to learn to quilt, so my mother-in-law bought me a second-hand Viking Husquevana,' she recalls. 'I set that up on a table in the attic and my first quilt was done cutting out every strip with a ruler and scissors. I didn't know rotary cutters existed!'

Quickly realising that her passion lay in whole cloth work, Claire uncovered her real love during a trip to Paducah in Kentucky with her husband. 'That's where I saw hand-dyed cloth for the first time, and I knew I wanted to learn more about it. I came home and researched dyes and techniques, and then saw a sign advertising dye classes with Leslie Morgan. I ended up studying with her for four years to learn the basics.

'From that point I stopped piecing and started concentrating on making a single piece of cloth work for me.'

Inspired to share their love of textile work with others, and at the same time frustrated by a lack of teaching facilities in the UK, Claire and Leslie set out to develop their own practice, and in 2001, Committed to Cloth was born. Today, the company (see right) offers a broad range of creative courses taught by internationally renowned tutors, as well as overseas retreats. Students can take full advantage of Committed to Cloth's purpose-designed studios for textile work and engage in wet processes involving dyes, discharge media (a reverse technique using colour-destroying agents) and paint or dry processes involving construction, design, collage or stitch.

However, whilst state-of-the-art facilities give Committed to Cloth's courses a huge appeal, Claire insists that a lack of studio space at home shouldn't deter anyone from their first



COMMITTED TO CLOTH

Committed to Cloth offers a range of textile courses designed to excite and inspire the creative journey. Students can choose to take part over a period of time, studying on one day a month at the company's dedicated 'textile sanctuary' in Oxted, Surrey, or fully immerse themselves in a five-day retreat at locations across the UK, Europe and the US. To find out more, visit www.committedtocloth.co.uk



Top: 28 Days (detail) - this work will be exhibited at the Festival of Quilts in August.

Above: In the Fullness of Time: Winter (detail).

Opposite: Yellow Barn (detail).

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adventures in textiles. 'If you don't have a studio, don't let that put you off - Leslie and I both started in our kitchens and back gardens. Just go out there and make,' she urges. 'It's one of the most healing things you can do, and one of the biggest gifts you can give yourself.'

A HUMAN INSTINCT

An expert in the art of wet dyeing and surface design - a craft she says took her 10 years to master - Claire is passionate about the therapeutic benefits of working with textiles.

'I think for many of us engaged with textiles, the main reason we love it is because of the tactile quality of the cloth, and the meditative quality. We like handling it, we like working with it, we like holding it close to our hearts - because once we've encountered our mother's and father's skin, the next thing we encounter is textiles.'

'I think part of it is I enjoy solving problems,' she says of her love of dyeing fabric. 'Getting to grips with the product and the tools, and using them to get what you want - it engages you totally.'

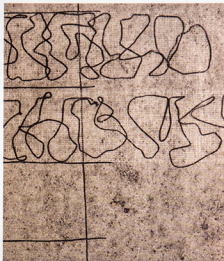
'I've never really liked working with commercial fabric. For me it's about the fact that the cloth that you're using - for whatever purpose it might be - is 100 per cent yours. It is a reflection of you, and who you were and what was going through your mind at the time. You know damn well that nobody is going to be able to replicate that.'

Currently enjoying natural earth pigments such as yellow ochre, Claire has used them successfully in a series of work that reflects the landscapes of New Mexico.

'I start with a 7.5 ounce cotton canvas as my base, and with a combination of water and acrylic, I use a mono mix process to get the pigment into the cloth. At that point it will tell me what to do next - whether that's to hand-stitch it or whether to just leave it be.'

Hand-stitching is a significant element in much of Claire's work, a technique she enjoys as much for its meditative qualities as its effect.

'Four years ago my husband and I undertook a deep detox process in India. We knew we wouldn't be allowed TV, books, ▶▶



Above left: Watering Hole (detail).
Above right: Adobe, Ladder & Linet (detail)

alcohol, no external stimulation – so I took two 1.5m square piece of cloth, tacked together, and I spent the time stitching.

'Stitching a) kept me sane, and b) re-engaged me with the meditative aspect of hand-work. And it also reminded me that I wanted to simplify things. As a result of that, one of my main streams now is to hand-stitch.'

Claire particularly likes to work with linen or hemp. 'I like the texture of it – it has a particular weave that makes it very pleasurable to hand-stitch.'

Influenced significantly by the 'very reductive' work of abstract painter Agnes Martin, Claire has been particularly inspired by her words.

'Agnes said, "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."

'For me,' Claire goes on, 'because I've lived quite a busy life, what I'm looking for in my life and my work is a stillness and simplicity – and the challenge now is to do it!'

See Claire's 'Lines & Rows, Rhythm & Repetition' exhibition at this year's Festival of Quilts, 11-14 August at the NEC, Birmingham. You can also view more of her work on her website www.clairebenn.com

IS THIS ART?

Claire is very clear that there is a distinction between work that is decorative, and work that ultimately becomes a piece of art.

'There's nothing right or wrong, or better, with one or the other,' she says, referring specifically to the two approaches in relation to quilt-making. 'I say to people, you might love that piece but it suits the bed rather than the wall.'

'I don't have anything against being decorative, but I think that in a true work of art, the work itself transcends the craft in the making of it. You just engage with it on a visual and visceral level, certainly initially. For me, that's what's got to happen first to make it work as art.'

'If the first thing you think about is, how did they make this, then for me it's moving into a territory that is more craft based. All art is underpinned by craft, but if I go to quilting exhibitions, I look at quilts and ask myself, does the quilting enhance what already exists in terms of the composition? I occasionally wonder if the quilter is just trying to impress me with their skill in machine work. Ultimately, no amount of quilting in the world can improve poor composition.'

'Sometimes people get very decorative in their quilting, and actually it starts to fight with what they had in the first place. That's where the discipline and rigour comes in – to think, what is the right thing to do to take it to completion? And those are really, really tough questions. You can sit there sometimes for years before you know the answer – or maybe you'll never know the answer, it was just part of your journey.'