

in the moment

Since 2000, Claire Benn has dedicated her life to textiles, co-founding Committed to Cloth and establishing herself as a tutor whose workshops are always in demand. We talk to her as she enters a new phase – scaling back her teaching to focus on her studio practice at home in Surrey

Known as an engaging and generous teacher, surface design expert Claire Benn combines a deep understanding of process with openness to improvisation, sharing both with her students. She recently embraced slow stitch in her own studio practice. Her circuitous path to surface design, teaching and stitch, no doubt, will resonate with others.

Joking about her college career – she effectively dropped out – she doesn't argue with a first year report that refers to her 'negative attitude towards institutional discipline'. Yet, today a combination of self-discipline and joy in life permeate her work and teaching.

At an early age, Benn's father offered materials and encouragement, and she recalls happy hours drawing and painting. She



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Claire Benn, *Bloodlines*, 2015
(detail on this page).
Linen painted and monogrammed
with alum and titanium mordants,
natural dyes (Madder & Cochineal).
Hand stitched with linen thread.
80 x 80cm



From left: *Traces of Time: Watering Hole* (and detail above), 2015. Monoprint, yellow ochre earth pigment and acrylic medium on cotton canvas. Hand couched with cotton thread. 193 x 181cm
PHOTOGRAPHY: KEVIN FITZSPONS

Colombio Gold (detail), 2014. Antique hemp, natural dyes, hand stitched with cotton thread. Hand stitched antique linen. 100 x 100cm

28 Days (detail), 2012. Commercial grey linen. Hand stitched with hemp thread. 150 x 150cm
PHOTOGRAPHY: LESLIE MORGAN

Benn began stitching a piece of linen and antique hemp, needle out, again and again. The feel of the cloth, the texture of the stitches – this repetitive act became her mediation

worked on small stitch projects with her grandmother's guidance, and she recalls fashioning a nightdress so large it might have fitted an elephant. But, textiles were sidelined as Benn grew up, had her encounter with college, then turned her attention to work and financial self-sufficiency. Eventually she became a successful self-employed training consultant.

After some years, her re-engagement with textiles was sparked whilst visiting Canada when she saw a Mennonite quilt with its muted but rich colours and clean, simple design.

At home, she bought a used sewing

machine and embarked on her first quilt, a self-directed experience sans instruction, rotary cutter or walking foot. Her introduction to hand-dyed cloth and surface design happened a couple of years later when she visited a quilt exhibition in Paducah, Kentucky.

Intense study of dye processes, focusing on the creation of whole cloth, followed. Further experience, plus the inspiration offered by Nancy Crow's workshop studios in Ohio, led to the creation of *Committed to Cloth* with Leslie Morgan.

The movement away from a secure income to a life in textiles happened gradually. She had the flexibility of being self-employed, a supportive spouse and the desire to learn. By her account it took at least ten years to master the craft aspect of surface design via a dedicated exploration of diverse media and processes. The scariest part of this transition was 'letting go of an independent income' in order to commit to textiles full time.

No doubt Benn's self-taught experience, along with the manner in which she apprenticed to others, has shaped how she teaches. Her account

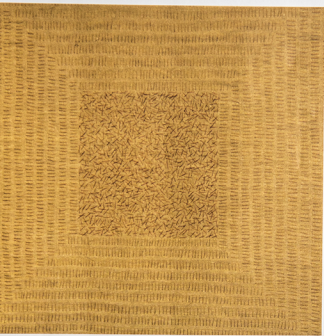
of how she thinks about teaching is revealing. She acknowledges that experience as a training consultant gave her the skills to design successful workshops and that coaching 'underpins a 'pull' style of teaching'. She says: 'At a certain point, my job is to ask questions and pull out the answer from within the student, rather than provide prescriptive responses. I'm aware I have a reputation of being a fairly tough tutor, but hopefully also a generous and energetic one. If I'm going to teach a subject, I'll provide everything I know, then encourage students to engage with the process, observe and consider the results, think and ask themselves questions, take risks, go further, discover more, and most importantly, discover what works for them... There are infinite possibilities.'

In spite of the success of *Committed to Cloth* and the publication of several books on various aspects of surface design, Benn wasn't completely satisfied with the work she was making. Discovering the American artist Agnes Martin and her writings was a turning point. The stillness, emptiness and simplicity of Martin's



Cushion Cover, China, mid-19th century. 137.7 x 51.6cm
The Textile Museum 51.18. Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1940.
Displayed in the 2015 show *Unraveling Identity: Our Textiles, Our Stories*

Opposite: Curator Lee Talbot in the galleries of the
2015-16 exhibition *China: Through the Lens of John
Thomson (1868-1872)*



work struck a core. She describes visiting the Tate Modern retrospective of Martin as, 'the only exhibition I've ever visited where I experienced silence and stillness in the gallery. Those who responded to the work were mesmerised and totally engaged. Those who didn't moved through quickly - but still in silence - as if according respect.'

For Benn, Agnes Martin's writings were also pivotal, offering a 'clarity, breath-taking in its honesty, simplicity, and beauty.' One of Martin's statements galvanised Benn: 'You must discover the artwork 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.'

This led Benn to re-examine other artists to whom she was drawn and her emotional response to their work - Mark Rothko, Gerhard Richter, Rebecca Salter, Howard Hodgkin, Anthony Gormley, Dorothy Caldwell.

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Southwest. Both art and place engendered feelings of being 'rested yet energised, at peace yet inspired... still, content'. These insights became the impetus to simplify her own work, to restrict tools, media, palette and process. *As If to Nothing* and her current series based on New Mexico, *Traces of Time*, grew out of such reflection and simplification.

More recently, Benn spent a month on retreat in India. The intent was to quiet and cleanse the body, mind and spirit. But what to do without TV, books, alcohol, smoking and no external stimulation? Benn began stitching a piece of linen and antique hemp, 'needle in, needle out', again and again. The feel of the cloth, the texture of the stitches - this repetitive act became her meditation.

Benn views a significant aspect of her studio practice today as an extension of *panchakarma*, the word for the deep, meditative detoxification of her retreat. She works on antique linen, often worn in places, and enjoys a sense of touching its history. It is a conscious effort to slow down, focus and engage in repeating a simple

stitch. The emerging body of work, such as *Bloodlines* quietly conveys a sense of freedom, openness and restraint. Just as the making was a slow process, the finished piece slows the viewer down.

Another thread within Benn's current work responds to the landscape. In *Watering Hole II*, she uses mono-printing, directly applying earth pigments to cotton canvas, binding them with the minimal amount of medium required. Stitch may be subsequently added but still working with restraint in a simple and contemplative way.

Benn has also recently simplified her life, retiring from Committed to Cloth and reducing teaching commitments. With this intensified studio focus and time, Benn is an artist to watch - both her work and her practice. She borrows Agnes Martin's words to remind herself, and us, that 'your path is at your feet'. Follow it. ●

SUSAN MOSS

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*Shivers, Deter (Ed), Agnes Martin: Writings, Haze Arts, 1992 (p.54)