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Material matters: a quiet philosophy

by Tim Parry-Williams

Matthew Harris' work is immediately striking for its unique language of gentle yet beautifully chaotic assembling of patched, joined, printed and stitched surfaces. The intense visual vocabulary draws on a catalogue of sources; in Harris' own words, it is a "bringing together and condensing of multiple visual references, scraps of things seen and noted, maybe in passing, maybe studied over time."

Matthew Harris is a British tactile artist whose work in cloth and paper has graced the walls of numerous international galleries and is treasured by collectors in places as far flung as Japan and the United States.

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Trained at London's Goldsmiths University, in the mid-1980s, Harris was exposed to an array of ideas and thinking in art and design and he might have taken any number of career routes. He found he didn't quite fit the typical mould of artists at that time and was frustrated by the constant pressure to 'justify' and imbue everything with meaning. He resented the need to delve into one's inner-self and was conscious of a strong sense that meaning and matter are very personal things.

Interestingly, he didn't do much work in textiles and focused on a complex semi-figurative style of drawing. But he was at one point encouraged by Audrey Walker to consider embroidery as an expressive medium. He reveals having made 'various mad things' and recalls works using fragments and scraps of cloth stitched quite crudely onto one another, which of course much later and in a much resolved form, has become a signature practice.

Harris briefly considered and experimented with commercial textile design, producing a collection of paper designs that he showed at *Indigo* in Paris. While initially dismissed as a disaster on a number of levels (he received limited interest, but did sell a number of designs), the show was ultimately an interesting experience, firming his understanding of his place both within and outside this very

¹ Harris, Matthew. 2013. *Material Matters*. Exhibition.

particular domain, and liberating him to recognise the importance of making work that mattered to him.

Inspiration

Perhaps somewhat typically of a textile artist, Harris draws inspiration from diverse elements of the world around him. These might be specific objects held in places such as the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, or the Pergamon Museum in Berlin, but it is very much more the small details and the 'incidental' of the everyday, and the physical nature of scraps of things found or discovered. Indeed, his starting points are often very tiny things and he even enjoys a certain restriction in his sources. He refers to friend and recent collaborator on the *Field Notes* project, composer Howard Skempton, who talks of 'deliberately working from a palette that is quite limited'. "There is a value in this with the opportunity to stretch and exploit the content of it."

The language of music (acoustic and visual) provides an important source of inspiration for Harris, in particular, 20th century or contemporary composed music. The genre is distinct for its improvised or ambient qualities, and loose controlling of structure and the tension between control and lack of control that remains. Harris is especially fascinated by the creative energy and character of Stravinsky, whose work articulated the opposing forces of imagination and versatility, an 'Apollo and Dionysus' balance of head and hand, structure and integrity.

Harris' fascination with this parallel world is such that he would love to be able to read music and indeed learn to play the piano. "There are things that are within reach and things that aren't. We can't do everything. But I think about that a lot. Music is so important in thinking about what I do. I find the idea of music composition so exciting and interesting and tantalising. It has a mystery about it. It would be a way in."

Process

To a degree, Harris' work is somewhat 'composed', where the apparently ordered rows or fields of cloth or paper (of beautifully approximated size and shape) - deliberately coded and then un-coded by marks or pattern sometimes expected, sometimes surprising- play to the eye. This visual characteristic is very much born of an almost visible thinking, and the making and 'remaking'² exercised. Harris describes how the process itself is inspiring and how it moves the work forward just

² Harper, P. 2008. '*Trace Elements*'. Trace Elements Catalogue.

as much as the 'external' visual information that might have been the starting point. Discoveries or challenges throw up chance and opportunity and he avoids making definite marks or decisions and instead uses change to deliver results. The process is about ways of presenting himself with something unexpected that might lead to otherwise inconceivable images. Drawings and textiles are constructed by working backwards, upside down, turning, and folding in a constant attempt to find something unplanned, thereby ensuring a balance of intent and chance, and of the two working together.

In describing this methodology as "Cagean games of chance"ⁱⁱ Harris raises a useful analogy with a very particular form of avant-garde musical philosophy, one influenced by Zen Buddhism (a major theme of which is anti-rationalism or truth beyond intellectual conception), and a broad rhetoric of randomisation, through which he attempts to rid his work of intentionality, of deciding-not-to-decide, and provides it with a certain creative liberation. Appropriately Cage held particular interest in 'Counterpoint', or the combination of two or more independent melodies in a single harmonic texture, and this thought is echoed in Harris' eloquent command of his carefully selected cloth and paper, stitched threads, and printed and painted mark-making. And while the creation may be derived of a kind of visually poetic randomisation, the driving inspirations and the sense and love of the evolving object is of definite intent to him.

Materials

While Harris' works result from a careful blend of approaches, they are very deliberately manifested in only one or two types of cloth and paper. This perhaps is partially a strategy of not wanting to add too many things to a mix, which is already working. However, and not unsurprisingly, the specifics of Harris' canvas are very particular and are all about materiality. The especially smooth, almost opaque hand-made papers are carefully sourced and collected. Their 'once' or 'almost' colour brings a vital base palette to the work, giving a gentle ground, but taking nothing from the marks and stitches that will be added. The textile meanwhile, is a very unpretentious woollen 'dust cloth', discovered by chance at a local builders merchant's. He recalls very distinctly the moment while at home when he first recognised its qualities. Simple in its twill construction and visual character it delivers the stuff of what he needs; its primacy as a vehicle for the images he creates. "It has enough in itself to remain interesting, but very open to being changed. I can do whatever I want on it, and I don't need to extend it."

Equally, what might be unwelcome inconsistency in supply brings intriguing opportunity for Harris's creativity. "I enjoy the slight unknown with each batch in some respects a place for new discovery". He recalls one experience where his dyestuff did something entirely unexpected, spreading wildly over the surface of the fabric. Much like the dyestuffs in hand, what might have been a disaster was quietly absorbed because in seeking to be always presenting himself with unpredictable scenarios, he just thought, "Here's one right in front of you. It's about the tension between those things; I want some mistake but not too much. A certain amount of constraint and control and shaping and a certain number of procedures that bring that about."

Tradition

The textile works speak almost immediately of the 'stitched' element of their make-up, but interestingly the 'tradition' of stitch is something both deeply embedded and quietly rejected. While a broad appreciation of vernacular textile traditions and aesthetics perhaps quite naturally informs something of the language of Harris' work, 'specialist' familiarity brings a questioning eye and an apparent need to align the work with particular practices of 'embroidery', something Harris is uncomfortable with. He does however acknowledge these roots and describes an appreciation of specific genres in stitched textiles including *Kantha*, the Bengalese embroidery typified by running stiches in layered cloth, and Japanese *Sashiko*, with its characteristic stitching through layers to both create a cloth body and a defined pattern. "In earlier pieces I used to add on machine stitch. It was embellishment and embroidery. But I realised I didn't want it to feel embellished. I want a very ordinary stitch. In a way, I quite like it to feel crude. There is a technique, but I don't necessarily want the technique to lead (the work). The feel is almost anti-technique."

Musing on the act of essentially 'learned' stitching he acknowledges its rhythmic nature. "I try to make it as rough as is natural, but invariably the (natural) rhythm means it always starts to become uniform. In a sense it's like handwriting - like a size that one uses. You can't unlearn something. That thing is in you."

Unpacking this 'act' of the work further reveals a quiet philosophy, which both facilitates and drives the pieces. "I'm interested in the stitch to be utilitarian, a function. It's not about making an image with the stitch. I do make a 'mark' but the mark has a function. It's a mark that comes about through the act of joining the cloth together. I want an integrity that goes right through the body of the cloth. My stitch work is about making (multiple) thinner layers of cloth become something whole, a using

of stitch to create 'heft'³ giving it weight and substance. I feel quite strongly that while it's about a way of holding it together, it's also about building the kind of substantial material that contains all this information within the body of the cloth."

In working on these constructed cloths, Harris has recently immersed himself in the allure of the 'backs' of the work, recognising the unselfconscious marks of thread made there through working on the face. "I enjoy the way it jumps from one point to the other, producing ideas of chance in the work; it's that thing about surprise or the unexpected - to see a white or yellow line suddenly crossing an area that may have had nothing otherwise. I like the integrity of working on the back and the front, giving them equal status even though eventually there is a 'front'". With this focus he has recently started constructing in such a way that although the stitching on the back acts to hold the face down, this same stitching might come through to the front almost as a response to the image created on the back.

Combined with his rich printing, painting and dyeing, Harris also seeks to build an impression of the image sitting within the cloth, with the surface perhaps becoming an echo of that within.

"Accordingly, I dye two lots of cloth so that the sense of compressed image is visible in the body of the cloth. That is also what the stitching is doing - holding the image together". This approach is very important to Harris, being something that differentiates his work from more 'conventional' painted image creation, where essentially the image sits very much on the surface.

A variation of this approach, working in paper, has been using the idea of 'binding' the image with thread resulting in something that has been folded and manipulated in the same way the cloth has, the assembled papers almost sprung-loaded with an invisible energy contained by huge stitches making for a dynamic vulnerability. "I like the idea that if the thread were removed it would come away. Cut the stitches and the whole thing unravels. It has a quality of it being temporary."

Colour

In terms of colour, Harris' work is distinct in both its palette and its tone. He is very interested in what this element means to him and his methodology. "In general I don't like clean, flat or hard-edged colour. I think that's why I make textiles and don't paint, although most of the time I'd rather look at a painting than at textiles."

³ Wilson, J. August, 2006. Working the Surface". *Surface Design*. p 26-29

His paper and textile works make use of colours in a very specific way⁴. Many appear washed into the surfaces, almost transparent, while others are heavy and thick in tone. What is common is their tender neutrality, and whether hot or cold, they hold beautifully balanced values. He describes how he wants colour to have a particular fugitivity, something of the transient and momentary - this is perhaps also suggestive of the time laid down in the work, and indeed, of the sources that inspire.

He also sees colour as an integral part of the surface, something particular to textile. "What excites me about it is a kind of three-dimensional quality. Cloth is holding a colour almost in suspension. It's gone into a structure on a three-dimensional level rather than on a primed canvas surface. Colour on cloth is also affected by changes in light in a very special way and there is a unique variation to colour such that it isn't static even if it's not moving."

"The colour in my work always comes from a starting point-groups of drawings based on something that I've seen." Harris refers to his Lantern series, inspired by a large paper lantern he found in Japan, layered in patched and faded papers and covered with inked characters and marks. "I was focused on the translucency of the material, the tonalities of the patching, the black and red, and the colour of the paper itself."

Much like his stitching, Harris sometimes feels defined by his colour. (Of the Field Notes series) "Lots of people have commented on the yellow, implying it's not 'me'. But it's not about the colour itself: but rather the 'quality' of the colour that is so very important. Those works were made specifically in response to an ancient book of maps, and the colour was somewhat integral. It was quite a big jump for me and I did find it freaky to come into the studio each day and experience this yellow. But it was also exciting."

There appears then to be a consistent confidence to the palette of his work but he also exercises cautious control over it. As he notes, "I actually find colour quite a frightening thing to use. I'm very conscious of a kind of physicality and I have a physical sensation in response to colour when I'm working with it. I might describe it as a kind of (musical) pitch."

Conclusion

And so we return to music and the poetry of Harris' view on the world. The works he creates are doubtless of both the crafts person and the artist, but this work is craft and materiality beyond

⁴ Brannand-Wood, Michael. 2008. 'A Quiet Sense of the Invasive'. Trace Elements Catalogue.

tradition, and colour and draftsmanship beyond spectrum and composition. It is instead a complex and engaging language of seeing and revealing, of bringing things together. And the innate capacity to translate the outwardly mundane or invisible into a distinct visual and textural vocabulary, tuning the components of inspiration into a contemplative whole, surely reveals the great intellect that is behind such art.

ⁱ Harris refers to the work of American composer John Milton Cage (1912-1992), whose anti-traditionalist work challenged the very idea of music, using randomness as a basis for composition.