We Are All Egyptians

The Kunsthalle on the Baerengasse in Zurich is a highly unusual building for a contemporary art gallery. Two seventeenth-century town houses, both of which were transported from nearby on rails, are placed up against each other and adapted to form a single building. That they were once separate entities, and have had patchwork histories of their own, is immediately visible: there is no overall stylistic cohesion, and the interior is a confusing labyrinth of tiny chambers. With the exception of the basement and reception area, the rooms are all domestic in character, with elaborate paneling, decorative stucco and prominent ceramic stoves. By Swiss standards, the building is far from elegant. This is not meant pejoratively; on the contrary, its design chimes perfectly with my long-standing interest in interiors that have evolved in a disjointed way in response to changes of use, and that end up as an unresolved hybrid of the domestic, the civic and the theatrical. It also appeals to my desire to exhibit within settings that lack any presumed neutrality and can be regarded as works of art in their own right.

The theme of Town Gown Conflict is the exploration of textiles by both artists and designers, but with the participants selected only from my own circle of friends. For the purposes of this exhibition, textiles are defined as encompassing fashion – both industrial and produced by hand, and including their display, distribution and documentation – as well as the craft practices of tapestry weaving, embroidery and printed textiles. It also embraces the issue of textiles in relation to fine art, such as their incorporation as a component in an installation or as a direct inspiration for drawing and painting. There are, of course, inherent problems in showing design alongside fine art, especially when the intention is to promote their strengths and differences without setting them against each other in false competition. The quasi-

domestic nature of the Baerengasse space has helped us to overcome this difficulty. While the modern gallery building, typified by the white cube, inflates its contents with the prestige automatically assigned to fine art, the domestic quality of the surroundings here allows our work to be seen as belonging in the rather more humble context of a home, and, by implication, on the body of its presiding mistress.

In orchestrating the presentation of a selection of women artists and designers I do not intend to suggest that they form a cohesive group, nor were any of the contributors expected to think of themselves as being part of one. The intention was to create an opportunity for each to show her work to its best advantage in the company of other works that are in sympathy with it. Through the willing co-operation of these artists and designers it was possible to distribute the artworks throughout the building to create a pattern of juxtapositions rather than a series of solo presentations, and the desire to present our works together evolved naturally as we solved the puzzle of the building. All the participants are remarkable and exceptional women, and their work is idiosyncratic enough to be strengthened by the unusual setting and by the relationships formed between them. And because I believed this strength would be self-evident, I felt I had a license to make our promotional material as outrageously subjective as I wished. Accordingly, I prepared poster illustrations that featured renderings of everyone’s work being argued over by a pair of smoking lady cats and the inside of an oversized doll’s house, all of which was blown up as a digital image and placed on the exterior of the building: Posey Simmonds meets Beatrix Potter at the Baerengasse. I wake up every morning grateful that today it is possible for a woman to present a drawing of a baby otter in a bib without trepidation.

In the modern era the role of textiles in art is perceived predominantly as an accompaniment to a grand narrative, produced, for the most part, by exceptional women: Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Sonia Delaunay, the female practitioners of the Russian avant-garde, the Bauhaus and the Wiener Werkstätte. But these women are still considered to be of lesser importance than their male counterparts. The roots of the problem, however, lay further back. Prior to the twentieth century, the experience of most women in middle- and upper-class households was a matter of long hours passed not in educational or professional activity, but in the production of needlepoint and other 'lap-work', embroidering to fill the time, with minimal creative intention.

> Take one day; share it into sections; to each hour, ten minutes, five minutes, – include all; do each piece of business in its turn with method, with rigid regularity. The day will close almost before you are aware it has begun. Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (1847)

This is why, when I find myself deriving great satisfaction from darning a sock for a loved one, I wonder if I should feel a bit guilty. Feminist artists took up textiles as symbolic material, its marginalisation within art being used as a weapon to challenge the masculine viewpoint as a cultural default setting. Over time, like all outsider positions, these feminist strategies have been absorbed and co-opted by male artists wishing to capitalise on the critical power they naturally contain, adapting them for their own use. I recently encountered several young artists who were using what they considered female art forms such as batik printing and naïve still life for exactly this reason. As men, their ironic distance is assured, and they need not worry about being misconstrued. For the artists in Town Gown Conflict this is not the case.

What unites the artists in the exhibition is a shared lack of interest in the dialogue around textiles that relies on simplistic oppositions: the dualisms of hard and soft,

male and female, academic and radical, fast and slow. In contemporary art, textiles appear to be generally used as a short-hand for gender oppression, institutionalism and time-wasting. It is as if knitting’s only currency in art is as something to be subverted by being given a confessional or sexual twist, and that it cannot contain anything of interest on its own terms. We try instead to present textiles as the rich and flexible medium it is, both in itself and as part of a wider set of artistic and commercial questions.

Domesticity permeates many aspects of the form and reception of textiles. Around 1911, using a traditional Russian patchwork technique, Sonia Delaunay made for her baby son a quilt of simple geometric forms and brilliant colours. She made it, she called it art, and it is now considered a seminal work in the history of the avant-garde. But domesticity is the leitmotif of the exhibition not only because of the enfolding architecture. Consider Verena Dengler's hobby abstract samplers, Carolin Lerch's videos of Viennese women ensconced in their interiors, my painting of the map of Scotland marking the location of the army of ‘chronic’ home knitters employed by Jeanette Murray, and the *trompe l'oeil* tapestries of Elizabeth Radcliffe, which I first encountered as disconcerting silhouettes placed around the converted warehouse she shares as a living space and studio with her daughter Beca Lipscombe in Leith, Edinburgh. There, her student work entitled *Cool Bitch and Hot Dog*, brought into three dimensions by a huge shaggy collar and an outstretched gloved hand, looms out from behind a stand completely overloaded with coats.

PHOTO HERE OF COAT STAND AND TAPESTRY

Edinburgh, where Radcliffe has worked and taught since the 1980s, is a centre for modern tapestry weaving, mainly through the international work of the Dovecot

Studio, where its hand weavers have transformed images by artists into tapestries and rugs since 1912. Her figures echo the dry wit of the British Pop Art sensibility typified by such local artists as Archie Brennan and Eduardo Paolozzi, both of whom often collaborated with the Studio. Her newest work, *Nieves, Bonnie and Teddy*, is a portrait of her granddaughter with her other grandmother, and is placed in the historical setting of a wood-paneled room, turning it into a life-size diorama. Her standing figure *Lucy McKenzie wearing Beca Lipscombe by Elizabeth Radcliffe* (2008), for which I acted as the model, shows the subject smirking at the viewer, dressed in a puffa-jacket and scarf designed by Beca, and is used as a counterpoint to the winsome posing of the characters in Caitlin Keogh's *Scarf Styles*.

These portraits of friends and colleagues, self-consciously modeling scarves in a variety of inventive ways, are inspired by a found object: a handmade manual devised by a door-to-door scarf seller to illustrate the versatility of her products. An image often referenced by Keogh is the iconic photograph by Cecil Beaton of a model in front of a Jackson Pollock painting. 'In my practice', she has written recently, 'I consider my role to be Beaton and Pollock simultaneously'. She envisages her work embodying both the kind of drawing-room surrealism and arch snobbery espoused by Beaton and the splashes of genius implied by Pollock:

> I attempt to be the stage-director and critic of objects and their 'use', as well as an abstract painter. It's not just that art is fashion or fashion is art, but they are both a kind of deep dress-up.

In her painstaking reproductions in acrylic of Bargello, the Florentine needlepoint Flame Stitch, gesture is simplified to an almost digital process, each representation of a stitch like the raster in a jpeg. Their illusionistic virtuosity perhaps derives from her background as a classically trained ballet dancer where the act of perfecting a

movement or line to express meaning is achieved through the discipline of application and relentless repetition.

PHOTO HERE OF CAITLIN SCREEEN

My *trompe l’oeil* still lives are works that I felt would, through their scale and subject matter, complement the Baerengasse space. They depict objects relating to four individuals, and are intended as indirect portraits of those people. Jeanette Murray coordinates women all over Scotland who work from home to produce knitwear that she then distributes internationally. She provides Atelier, the design company run by Beca Lipscombe and myself, with its hand-made jumpers in loose Arran knit. Steven Purvis is the Glasgow tailor with whom Atelier collaborates to produce artists’ work coats, and the tailored lambswool overcoat shown by Beca as part of her display in the exhibition was made by him. It was his experience of running a factory in the 1980s that inspired the piece of silver jewelry from our collection shown with Beca's jumpers – the checker’s wheel tool with which quality control was enforced by companies such as Marks and Spencer, who had the power to close a business if enough garments did not meet their stringent requirements. His pinboard, an orgy of scissors, buttons, business contacts and pattern pieces, illustrates the chaos that lies at the heart of the apparently precise world of tailoring. The third is a commission from two of my private clients, Thea Westreich and Ethan Wagner. My interest in commercial questions extends to being a portraitist for hire, with the price of a painting being determined in the same way that it was in the days of the pioneering Irish-American artist William Harnett (1848-92) – that is, by size, difficulty and number of objects represented. It is a strategy that often requires me to tackle unusual

and, for me, uncharacteristic subject matter. I would not, for example, naturally be inclined to paint Barak Obama, but I did for this work and I enjoyed it very much.

PHOTO HERE OF MCKENZE PAINTING IN MILTON OF CAMPSIE

When Beca Lipscombe hangs her cape in traditional ‘Black Watch’ tartan on a child’s cello, she is neither referencing art history through Man Ray’s *Le Violon d'Ingres (Kiki)* (1924) nor commenting on British militarism. The amusing 1970s window display by Barneys New York, which was her inspiration, may have involved a tongue-in-cheek nod to Surrealism, but her engagement with it has nothing to do with such quasi-academic posturing. As a designer who is deeply involved in the dress business, she regards the commercial display of wares as a matter of primary importance, and this is something she explores in the context of Town Gown Conflict. Lipscombe makes functional day wear for women, finding inspiration not only in the highest standards of design practice but also in the practicalities of how things are actually worn in daily life. Here she uses simple clip art images to invoke one of fashions perennial crazes, ancient Egypt, but does so by way of the twentieth-century sphinx Coco Chanel and the Glaswegian Nefertitis of the 1980s art-school band Strawberry Switchblade. Her poloneck jumper ‘Gabrielle’, on which she has printed 'CHANNEL' in a punning reference to the river Nile, is not analogous to a cheap knock-off: it is hand-printed on silk cashmere of the finest quality. The large fashion houses, whose lead she follows in the use of brand logos, unofficially produce their wares in the same Scottish mills from where cashmere jumpers such as these can be supplied.

The Austrian designer Carolin Lerch, who has been working in Antwerp under the name Pelican Avenue since 2004, specialises in the innovative construction of

digitally printed and woven garments that are shown as seasonal collections in combination with performance, live music and film. Many of her clothes are for an amorphous, unobtrusive, indeterminate gender, where cut and quality take precedence over styling, and this goes some way towards explaining why the fabrics lend themselves so well to static display. As the only artist in the exhibition who is not concerned with the reinterpretation of cultural material or quotation strategies, she is involved exclusively with innovation. She shows work from three collections: ‘Editon Dame’(2004), ‘Intakt’ (2009), from which an outfit is presented as if hung like an exhibit in an ethnographic museum, and ‘Gate Hysteria’ (2010). The inclusion of ‘Editon Dame’ and ‘Gate Hysteria’ creates a contrast: of all her collections she considers the former, which consists of ellipses that connote a futuristic regal or ecclesiastical pageant, the most non-commercial, while the latter is the most accessible. In some instances of Art Nouveau and Jugendstijl practice, architects extended their interior designs to include costumes commissioned for the wives of their clients. Understanding the special relationship between interior and dress, Lerch invited a group of well-heeled Viennese women to model the ellipses of ‘Edition Dame’ in their homes to a soundtrack of their choosing.

In the case of ‘Gate Hysteria’, time constraints meant that she had to focus almost entirely on knitwear, and was not able to include the computer-generated print that usually formed such an important component of her work. To compensate for this limitation on her ability to express her full vision, she chose to collaborate with several other artists, including the Estonian Dancer / performance artist Kroot Jurak. In this manifestation of the work, Jurak inhabits the large, carefully interwoven woollen swatches, first in a narcissistic pretence of examining her own reflection, then in a succession of overpowering gestures of possession. The swatches are transformed into a bouncing, dynamic, oversized folk costume until the performer is

taken over the brink and winds up arranging them into an orderly sequence, as neat and tidy as any clothes hung out by a hausfrau to dry on a washing line.

CAROLIN'S FILM STILL HERE

Verena Dengler studied and resides in her home town of Vienna. Her work responds with a form of high camp to the conservative structures that are still strikingly present in Austrian society today. Pastiche, cliché and formalised psychosis may be part of local taste and history, but they are not sanctioned in the official design discourse of a city synonymous with Modernism. ‘I am not’, she says, ‘relating to a particularly “female” realm. I like to see it more as “camp arts and crafts”.’ Her sculpture installations employ assemblage, combining found materials such as craft objects and counterfeit brand-label clothing with tapestry and printmaking. Her use of stucco echoes the inauthenticity of the Baerengasse building, and it is not design in its pure form that concerns her, but rather the transition of the avant-garde into the everyday application of pattern, and the way it is modified to suit the tastes of mass consumers. Her silkscreen prints were clearly once abstract expressionist before they were countrified into Laura Ashley. They echo the bizarre ‘graffitti’ motifs on the upholstery of public transport in a civic attempt to disguise vandalism. The journey from high art to the mundane is exemplified by the hobby tapestry kits of the Viennese firm Tapex, which feature domesticated versions of Sophie Taeuber-Arp and Sonia Delaunay, and which Dengler presents both dutifully completed and as untouched printed tapestry canvas.

Like Delaunay's baby quilt, the genesis of part of the Belgian artist Lucile Desamory’s practice stems from a creative act undertaken for love. In December 2004 she and I made a pop-up birthday card for our friend Birgit Megerle, and out of

this there grew a long-running fascination for both of us with all that this art-form implies: ephemera, scale, problem solving, set dressing. This was intensified to a delirious level by our visit in 2005 to the Museum of Natural History in New York, where we witnessed the masterful scenery painting of the dioramas. She does not paint or draw, but rather uses the inherent characteristics of found material such as encyclopaedia illustrations, and her broad practice includes film-making, collage and model-making, all interconnected across disciplines by a common thread of narrative and iconography. For Desamory materials are to be used with the utmost precision, and are chosen for their psychic, historic and sexual resonance. Her fabric and embroidery pieces specifically capitalise on the ability of textiles to suggest human and non-human flesh, hair and corporeality. The subjects of her works are often uncanny and supernatural, and, in honour of the specific superstitions of the Paris couture houses, she embroiders a human hair into her fabric banners. In the Baerengasse building, her large paper and fabric banners rest somewhere between stage design, fine art and the interior decoration of a cult.

PHOTO OF LUCILE / LUCY LEUVEN WORK

The coincidence that so many of my peers should choose to work with textiles is satisfying; that they should all do so with such nimbleness and such critical and personal facility is remarkable. The image of a room containing a woman bent over her sewing sails through space and time. She sews not to fill long hours, nor for necessity’s sake, nor even for pleasure, but with the conviction that this, her new work, is going to slay them all.