

The Perfectly Imperfect

By Freddie Robins, Royal College of Art, UK



Images 3 & 2 - Caption: The Perfect – Billy & Eddie, 2007 Machine knitted wool and acrylic yarn, 450 x 240 mm
In the collection of Spring Studios, London Photo credit: Douglas Atfield

The Guardian Guide to Craft (published 3 February 2007) states, “It’s not perfect, but who cares?” Well I do. I enjoy imperfection in you and yours but not in me and mine. I am very attracted to the imperfections, failings, and roughness of the material world. I enjoy the evidence of human hands, the inevitable wear and repair of objects. I love the obviously hand-made. But I suffer from being a perfectionist.

This body of work deals with the constant drive for perfection. It is made using technology that was developed to achieve perfection. Technology developed for mass production to make garment multiples that are exactly the same as each other: garments that do not require any hand finishing, garments whose manufacture does not produce any waste, garments whose production does not require the human touch. Garments that are, in fact, perfect.

I have produced my knitted multiples through the use of a Shima Seiki WholeGarment® machine (a computerised, automated, industrial V-bed flat machine, which is capable of knitting a three-dimensional seamless garment). These multiples take the form of life size, three-dimensional human bodies. I have combined them in a variety of different ways to create large-scale knitted sculptures and installations.

Perfectionism is associated with good craftsmanship, something to aspire to. I aim for perfection in all aspects of my life, my work and myself. It can be very debilitating and exhausting and it is of course, unachievable.



Image 5 - Caption: The Perfect, 2007
 machine knitted wool Dimensions variable Installed at
 KODE – kunstmuseene i Bergen, Norway
 Photo credit: Ben

The background to this work is that for many years I had been “hand crafting” knitted skins on a domestic knitting machine in my studio. This is a time consuming and technically difficult process. It requires taking the knitting on and off the machine many times and moving stitches between the two knitting beds by hand. I built up to the complete skins by working through the body in parts, like some kind of serial killer taking the body to pieces to dispose of privately but in reverse, putting the various different elements together to build a body to put on public display. I mastered gloves – hands, jumpers - torsos, then bodies minus heads, heads minus bodies and then finally the whole body, only to then attempt to deconstruct this to knit a flayed skin giving Dr. Hannibal Lecterⁱⁱ a run for his money.



Image 6 - Caption: The Perfect Skins, 2007
 machine knitted wool, metal rail 1800 x 800 x 100 mm
 Photo credit: Ben Coode-Adams

For some years I had also wanted access to a Shima Seiki WholeGarment® machine (a computerized, automated, industrial V-bed flat machine, which is capable of knitting a three-dimensional seamless garment). I wanted to see if I could get this machine to knit a whole body. Give birth to a knitted skin. I was interested in subverting the technology and somehow thought it might be less painful than giving birth to them myself on my own domestic machinery. Through a technician, a computer programme was written that enabled the machine to knit bodies that simply dropped off the machine, finished and technically perfect.

This sounds painless but it wasn't. It was very time consuming, and very expensive. It was deeply unsatisfactory on other levels too, physically unsatisfactory as there was no interaction with materials or process, no touching, and aesthetically unsatisfactory as there was too much fine, flat knitting, no stitch definition, no texture. I found both the process, and the finished works, disappointing. I much preferred the initial samples and test pieces; these were imperfect – distorted, deformed and peppered with dropped stitches.



Image 4 - Caption: The Perfect – Tilak, 2007
 machine knitted wool and acrylic yarn 1400 × 1050 mm
 Photo credit: Douglas Atfield

The whole project brings to mind the thoughts and actions of another fictional doctor, Mary Shelley's Frankenstein: 'My imagination was vivid, yet my powers of analysis and application were intense; by the union of these qualities I conceived the idea and executed the creation of a man.' (Shelley 1818)

Like Frankenstein I also felt a sense of responsibility to the work that I had created, the material that I had used, the time and money that I had spent. 'I felt what the duties of a creator towards his creature were.' (ibid)

However I struggled to take ownership of the supposedly perfect works. I felt the need to physically interact with them, to handle them, to re-work them, to own them. This has resulted in the knitted skins being used in another two series of work, Out on a Limb (2013) and Collection of Knitted Folk Objects (2014). In these works I have taken the knitted skins as my raw material; embroidering onto them, stuffing them and filling them with expanding builder's foam, only to then saw them up with a bread knife and use the individual parts in separate sculptures.



Image 8 - Caption: Out on a Limb – One Letter Apart (on left) A Perfectly Good Marriage (on right), 2013
 machine knitted wool and mixed media
 approx 1700 × 550 × 430 mm Photo credit: Ben Coode-Adams



Image 9 - Caption: Collection of Knitted Folk Objects – Pocky, 2014 machine knitted wool, reclaimed knitting needles 700 × 400 × 120 mm Photo credit: Douglas Atfield

In another work, *The Imperfect* (2009), I employed the hands of another artist to interact with the knitted skins. I gave one of my former students, Celia Pym, two of the technically imperfect skins, skins with holes in them. Celia darned the holes, repairing them beautifully and obviously, using different coloured wool. The tension between the machine knitted wool and the hand-darned areas is very pleasing. It brings the hand and machine together, making the bodies more tactile, more human. Ironically the imperfect works are the perfect works for me, and the perfect works for others too. A photograph of one of *The Imperfect* bodies was used on the cover of the Black Dog Publication *In the Loop: Knitting Now*, edited by Jessica Hemmings (2010).



Image 7 - Caption: The Imperfect, 2009 machine knitted and darned wool darned by artist, Celia Pym 1920 x 1640 mm Photo credit = Celia Pym

I think that my main problem with digital technology is that I get too excited by the possibilities that it appears to offer, and the problems that it promises to solve, when in truth it sets up as many problems as it solves and offers no more possibilities than hand work, just different ones. The perfection that I have strived for is, as I have already stated, unachievable. Its association with digital technology is an illusion, and unhelpful when I am having ideas about how I might employ it in my practice. The damaging effects of striving for perfection are confirmed by the author and journalist, Oliver Burkeman (2012), in his book, *The Antidote: Happiness For People Who Can't Stand Positive Thinking*.

Perfectionism is one of those traits that many people seem secretly, or not-so-secretly, proud to possess, since it hardly seems like a character flaw – yet perfectionism, at bottom, is a fear-driven striving to avoid the experience of failure at all costs. At its extremes, it is an exhausting and permanently stressful way to live. (There is a greater correlation between perfectionism and suicide, research suggests, than between feelings of hopelessness and suicide.) To fully embrace the experience of failure, not merely to tolerate it as a stepping-stone to success, is to abandon this constant straining never to put a foot wrong. It is to relax. (Burkeman 2012)

So the biggest physical successes for me were the physical failures, those early samples and test pieces. But the real success of the project, also the big surprise of the project, was the human interactions that it brought me. The reality of engaging with highly advanced digital technologies is that you need to work with an equally highly skilled technician. Through an attempt to engage with digital technology I had a deep engagement with people.



Image 1 - Caption: The Perfect – Alex, 2007
machine knitted wool and acrylic yarn 580 × 920 mm
Photo credit: Damian Chapman

References

Burkeman, O. (2012) *The Antidote: Happiness for People Who Can't Stand Positive Thinking*, Edinburgh: Canongate Books Ltd.

Hemmings, J. (2010) *In the Loop: Knitting Now*, London: Black Dog Publishing Ltd.

Robins, F. (2007) 'The Perfect', *Contemporary Applied Arts*, London. 14 June – 17 July 2007

Robins, F. and Pym, C. (2009) 'The Imperfect', *Making and Mending*, Bury St Edmunds Art Gallery, UK, 11 September – 31 October 2009

Robins, F. (2013) 'Out on a Limb', *COLLECT 2013 – Project Space*, Saatchi Gallery, London, 10-13 May 2013

Robins, F. (2014) 'Collection of Knitted Folk Objects', *Yan Tan Tethera*, Cecil Sharp House, London, 15 May – 25 September 2014

Shelley, M. (2003) (1818) *Frankenstein: Or, the Modern Prometheus*, London: Penguin Books Ltd.

i The Perfect – Knitted Sculpture for Public Exhibition was a research project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and the Royal College of Art (RCA), Research Development Fund. <http://www.freddierobins.com/blog/post.php?s=the-perfect-ahrc-rca-funded-research-project>

ii Dr. Hannibal Lecter is a forensic psychiatrist and cannibalistic serial killer in a series of suspense novels by Thomas Harris published between 1981 and 2006.