

making it OK by Ian Wilson

"Art is restoration: the idea is to repair the damages that are inflicted in life."

Louise Bourgeois



FREDDIE ROBINS *Basketcase* 2015
machine-knitted wool, crocheted lurex,
found wicker basket, 40.4" x 10.2".
Photo: Douglas Atfield.

Mending and repairing possess a myriad of potent possibilities and interpretations, ranging from the economic to the therapeutic. Liz

Cooper, curator of *What Do I Need to Do to Make It OK?*, is fascinated by the many implications that these activities embody. She developed this touring group exhibition in partnership with the International Textile Research Centre of the University of the Creative Arts in Farnham and Arts Council, England. Cooper's intention is "to explore damage and repair, disease and medicine, healing and restoration of bodies, minds, and landscapes." Her earlier curatorial undertaking entitled *Making and Mending*, which coincided with the global economic crisis of 2009, "made the territory topical, with a general embracing of thrift and recycling." Within the larger history of textiles, participating artist Dorothy Caldwell sees mending as the provenance and artistic forerunner of "more formal textile art forms, such as North American quilt making, Japanese *sashiko*, and *kantha* embroidery from India ..."

The title *What Do I Need to Do to Make It OK?* seems to hold an implicit awareness that change is necessary. But also, perhaps, it includes a sub-text suggesting that perfection is not always possible, and that all too often, in so many of the situations that we encounter as human beings, "OK" will have to suffice. The exhibition

takes both practical and conceptual mending, carried out in various media, into the sphere of the art gallery, showcasing five artists who will make new work for the exhibition as it tours to different venues in the UK through 2018.

In quite different ways, **Freddie Robins'** knitted pieces address her interest in using textiles to "repair" distressing emotional experiences and to accept that sometimes life can be punitive. *I'm So Bloody Sad* deals with how we frequently do not communicate feelings of sadness; the slumping head—impaled with knitting needles—conveys a sense of helpless wretchedness. *Basket Case* exemplifies Robins' use of what she has on hand instead of sourcing new materials. The head is from a project entitled *Perfect* where Robins attempted to knit a body with industrial knitting machines. She struggled with this enterprise—

BELOW: FREDDIE ROBINS *Someone Else's Dream - Crashed* (2013-2016), found handknitted jersey reworked by artist, mixed fibers, 22.8" x 20.47". Installed at Forty Hall, Enfield, UK.



ABOVE: FREDDIE ROBINS *Someone Else's Dream* series (2013-2016), found handknitted jerseys reworked by artist, wool, angora, cotton and mixed fibers, dimensions variable as installed Forty Hall, Enfield, UK.



DOROTHY CALDWELL *Traces*
2016, plant-dyed cotton
with stitching and applique,
107.4" x 102.7".
Installed at Devon Guild of
Craftsmen, Bovey Tracey, UK.
Detail ABOVE.
Photos: Simon Williams.

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often cutting off the limbs and also this crocheted head, which now occupies a former flower basket.

Robins has always been intrigued by how “novelty knitwear” jerseys, bearing such images as idyllic countryside scenes, reference an idealized view of rural life. In *Someone Else's Dream*, she corrupts the cozy power of these garments with Swiss darning (an embroidery stitch that simulates knitting). By transforming a canvas of charmingly rustic visuals into hand-knitted scenarios of horror, she shocks us into reassessing the misleading nature of our misperceptions.

Illuminating ideas concerning creative practice and artistic ethos are expressed on the website of Ontario-based **Dorothy Caldwell**. “The vocabulary for my work is drawn from studying textile traditions and ordinary stitching practices, such as darning, mending, and patching. I am drawn to cloth that has been repaired and reconstructed, and in that ongoing process encodes time and the richness of lives lived.”

Hand-dyed with plant dyes, stitched, and appliquéd, the specially commissioned wall work *Traces* is part of a larger project on which Caldwell worked in remote places in the Australian outback and Canadian arctic, demonstrating her fascination with the slightness of evidence left by human beings on such landscapes. This is essentially a “quiet piece reflecting the hushed quality of these isolated places.” For this artist, all these experiences relate back to textiles, for she feels that marks on the landscape are like those of repair on textiles—when textiles are restored there is invariably evidence of the human mark.

Caldwell has a fascination with maps and was thrilled to discover that many of the Aborigine bark paintings which she admires were actually maps. There is a suggestion of the cartographical in *Traces* in the black grids which play a role in “framing” elements, such as the appliqué shapes. Best discovered by close unhurried contemplation, these have minimal stitched additions which seem to signal information, as on a map.

An inherited sweater which once belonged to her great-uncle—so heavily repaired by her great-aunt that the original had almost disappeared—inspired **Celia Pym**. She finds darning to be a small act of care and tenderness. When people bring her clothes to repair, it is invariably the ones they love the most, clothes they are reluctant to let go of, often symbolizing a sense of loss in that the garment was made or worn by a person now deceased. The socially directed focus of *The Catalogue of Holes*, in which Pym mends strangers' clothes, is an ongoing exercise started in 2007. Pym studied Visual and Environmental Studies at Harvard, Textiles at the Royal College of Art, and she is a qualified nurse. Her preoccupation with health and mending came together in a project where she set up her work table in the Dissecting Room of King's College, London.

First One's the Best consists of 60 sports socks cut up and heavily darned. It brought splashes of color and unexpected humour into the Dissecting Room, as the effect of darning was visually dramatic. In the exhibition, there is a photograph of Pym's mending desk with many colorful



ABOVE LEFT: CELIA PYM (second from right) with medical students in the Dissecting Lab at King's College, London, during her *Parallel Practices* residency in 2014, supported by Crafts Council and Kings College Institute. Photo courtesy the artist and Crafts Council.

ABOVE RIGHT: CELIA PYM *First One's the Best* (detail) 2014, 60 sports socks cut up and heavily hand-darned, dimensions variable. Created during the artist's *Parallel Practices* 2014 residency in the Dissecting Lab at King's College, London. Photo courtesy the artist.

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ABOVE: SAIDHBHÍN GIBSON *Comfort & Joy II* 2016
found songbird's nest, cotton, linen, needlelace, 6.2" x 5.9" x 3.1".
RIGHT: SAIDHBHÍN GIBSON *Make Good, Make Better - Netting* 2012
found leaf, cotton netting, dimensions unknown. Photos courtesy the artist.

yarns on the table. There is an A4-sized sheet of paper on which Pym has written follow-up comments to the "DR" project, as well as how nurses clean and care for the cadaver, ministering to the damaging toll of death.

Saidhbhín Gibson, an Irish artist for whom mending and repair can be experienced on a global level, stresses that the small scale of her work exemplifies the universal. By this she means that we need to mend our thinking and how we approach the non-human. The actual handling of materials is of utmost importance to her.

Comfort and Joy II relates a bird's nest-building skills to those of Gibson, the human maker. She has created a delicate needlepoint lining, highlighting the capabilities of the bird and its beak in creating such an intricate and robust object, and aligning these talents with those of the skilled crafts-person. *Arranger* consists of a packet of tights bought in New York and quaking grass collected from the banks of the River Barrow in southeast Ireland. This is another coming together of the manmade and the natural and underlines the "arrangements we make within nature." In fact, it was a sweet chestnut leaf that Gibson "restored" with immaculate cotton netting which inspired Liz Cooper to originate and develop this curatorial project.

It is the strand of "disease and medicine" which **Karina Thompson's** quilt *The Leper's Skull* references. Medical imaging fascinates Thompson, who feels that studying and familiarizing oneself with such visuals, made possible by advanced technology, inevitably involves thoughts of damage and repair. Thompson received a grant to make a creative





KARINA THOMPSON *The Leper's Hands* 2016, wool, digital embroidery, 70.8" x 51.1". With detail.

response to the collection at the Biological and Anthropological Research Centre at the University of Bradford where she was working with paleopathologists. An X-ray taken of a skull excavated from a lepers' cemetery outside Chichester in the 1980s was digitally printed on cotton drill. On this white background, Thompson shadow quilted details of the archaeological dig plan, done freehand and using long-arm, free-motion quilting. The image is simultaneously bold and ghostly, with the powerful ancient symbolism of the human skull achieved by technological advances in both medical imaging and sewing machines.

60 Beats per Minute has six images of an echocardiogram of a single beat of Thompson's heart. It shows the valves and chambers of the organ filling and emptying. Another quilt that Thompson is creating for traveling venues of the show is *The Leper's Hands*, which consists of eight X-rays that each appear three times. Recorded in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, these "heart-breaking" images are slightly larger-than-life and hand-stitched to make the quilt feel "more private and intimate" than *Skull*.

Curator Liz Cooper has successfully avoided the pitfall to which André Gali alludes in his introduction to the book *Crafting Exhibitions*, namely: "Objects are displayed as singular phenomena with little or no relation to other

objects."¹ Although perhaps not immediately apparent, there are allusive thematic interrelationships between the artifacts, as well as between these objects and the world we inhabit. Cooper has enabled this group of artists to exploit and explore mending as an expression of moral responsibility and concern—an ethical stand against a culture of wasteful neglect—thus revealing the immense diversity of this practice and its importance within the structures of our existence.

¹ André Gali, ed., *Crafting Exhibitions*, Oslo: Norwegian Craft and Stuttgart: Arnoldsche Art Publishers, 2015. pp 15–16.

Liz Cooper: lizcooper.org/what-do-i-need-to-do-to-make-it-ok
 Freddie Robins: freddierobins.com
 Dorothy Caldwell: dorothycaldwell.com
 Celia Pym: celiapym.com
 Saidhbhín Gibson: s-gibson.com
 Karina Thompson: www.karinathompson.co.uk

What Do I Need to Do to Make It OK? will be on tour through 2018 and on display next at the National Centre for Craft & Design, Sleaford, UK (March 8–May 14, 2017). www.nationalcraftanddesign.org.uk

—lan Wilson is a writer with a special interest in the fine and applied arts and design. Based in Bath, England, his work has been translated into many languages.