**Freddie Robins**

**(Dis)identifications: Gender Matters in Practice - But Freddie’s a boys’ name, and boys don’t knit. ICA, London, 27 May 2015**

My name has always been at odds with my gender but I enjoy the way that it catches people off guard:

“Hello, can I speak to Freddie Robins please?”

“Yes you’re speaking to her.”

“Oh (pause) I thought you were going to be a man.”

My name is gendered as male, in stark contrast to my creative practice, which is gendered as female. I knit. When I meet people for the first time the conversation often goes something like this:

“What do you do?”

“I’m an artist”

“What do you do? Paint?”

“No, I knit”

“Oh (silence).”

Both my gender and my creative practice bring about the response of "Oh" and not always a positive oh either.

Knitting has long held associations with women, practicality, comfort and warmth. Women’s busy fingers never resting, justifying sitting down and watching TV, or more recently a fashionable activity to undertake in public, social settings; Stitch ‘n Bitch clubs and Yarn Bombing. I do none of these things. I spend my time in a studio knitting alone, dedicated and designated time to knit, knitting inherently useless things. Knitting is my way of interpreting, communicating and coming to terms with, the world that I inhabit. It sits between me, and my internal world, and the physical world around me, like some form of knitted comfort or rather discomfort blanket. My knitting practice questions conformity and notions of normality. I use knitting to explore pertinent contemporary issues of the domestic, gender and the human condition. My work subverts these preconceptions and disrupts the notion of the medium being passive and benign.

***Knitted Homes of Crime***

**2002 Hand knitted wool, quilted lining fabric**

This work is comprised of seven hand-knitted tea cosies in the form of houses. But these are not the sweet, benign objects that they appear to be. These are the homes of female killers or the houses where they committed their crimes. When someone commits a heinous crime, such as murder, they are damned, when a woman commits it she is doubly damned, once for committing the crime and once for going against her sex. Women are supposed to be nurturing and life giving. The murderers that I refer to are all women that killed alone, women that killed without the participation of a man. Some of the victims are women, some men, some children but not the killer’s children.

When I exhibit these works I also include text, which tells the stories of the murders and the amount of time it took to knit the houses. The inspiration for the forms came from my collection of vintage and contemporary knitting patterns and knitted objects. I have a number of knitted tea cosies representing quaint, stereotypical country cottages. The idyllic country home. My knitted tea cosies are true representations of the houses in question. For some I found photographs of the houses in books, others I had the addresses for and went and photographed them. I then made knitting patterns from the photographs.

As with many of my hand knitted pieces this piece was knitted by someone else, in this case Jean Arkell. I sampled and wrote the patterns and then got Jean, a very skilled and fast knitter to make them. The pieces were then returned to me and I embroidered the detail and made them up into the finished cosies. We made one house per month for 7 months. We worked by post with me also sending the story of the crime along with the pattern and yarn. I am very aware of the undervaluing of anonymous skilled labour and always fully credit and pay anyone whose skill and hands I use in the production of my work. This includes credits on gallery labeling and in printed catalogues.

In the course of my research into the stories behind the murders I was constantly amazed by the derogatory terms that were applied to many of the women. ‘Charlotte’ (14 ½ Hours) (and I quote) “enjoyed a drink and had a reputation as an amateur prostitute in the local pubs. Apparently her toothlessness and lice did not put the men off” (end quote). I was also intrigued by the very domestic nature of most of the killings.

‘EtheI’ (10 hours) the occupier of this semi-detached house put strychnine in her husband’s corned beef sandwiches. A supposedly nurturing act of preparing food and sustaining life becomes an act of extinguishing life.

***Christiana***

**2002 Hand knitted wool, quilted lining fabric**

‘Christiana’ (20 hours) injected chocolate creams with strychnine in an attempt to poison the object of her desire’s wife but sadly ended up poisoning a young boy.

It was here that I discovered the saying “When poison is found, the murder’s gowned.”

***Styllou***

**2002 Hand knitted wool, quilted lining fabric**

‘Styllou’ (22 ½ hours) is a much more violent case but the murder was still committed through the use of a domestic object. Styllou killed her daughter-in-law by hitting her with the ash-plate from the stove, she then strangled her and then set her alight! It also transpired that the last two women to be hanged in Britain, Ruth Ellis and Styllou Christofi committed their crimes in the same road. South Hill Park, Hampstead. It seems that there is a vortex of evil and it's to be found in a residential road in northwest London.

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I find knitting to be a powerful medium for self-expression and communication because of the cultural preconceptions surrounding it. I also often employ humour, which I find to be a very useful weapon. According to Simon Wiesenthal, the Austrian writer and Nazi hunter, "humour is the weapon of unarmed people". This view is reiterated by Pussy Riot, “humour is the most damaging weapon we have”. However when I attended one of Louise Bourgeois’ last salons at her Chelsea brownstone home in New York in 2007 I was told in no uncertain terms by a Brazilian curator, critic and former museum director and Bourgeois’ facilitator that day that I had to decide whether my work was funny or not. It couldn’t be both. I said that I didn’t agree, life was sometimes funny and sometimes not, so was my work. He didn't like my weapon.

As I have already said knitting is a female dominated activity, consequently receiving more interest when practiced by a man; something that my male name sometimes allows me to benefit from. Humour appears to be a male dominated activity. I was interested to read New Zealand comedienne, Michèle A’Court’s, reason why this is the case, “Women are socialised out of being comedians. The comic is the most powerful person in the room…..Women are socialised (and yes, this is a huge generalisation but it has enough truth to be worth saying out loud) to facilitate power, rather than be the one with the power.”

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I also enjoy incorporating text into my work, playing on words to make visual, and again often humorous, suggestions. In the past I have made hand knitted banners containing phrases such as,

***DO I FIT IN***

***WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING AT***

and

***I’M SO ANGRY***

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***Craft Kills*, 2002, machine knitted wool, knitting needles**

‘Craft Kills’ is a self-portrait based on the well-recognised image of Saint Sebastian being martyred. Instead of arrows piercing my skin I have knitting needles. The title immediately brings to mind the old adage of “dying for your art” but what I am much more concerned with is the stereotypical image that craft, and in particular knitting, has, of being a passive, benign activity. How would it be if craft was actually considered dangerous or subversive?   What if we were not allowed to knit? Since conceiving of this piece the world suffered the events of September 11th. In its aftermath you can still no longer fly on many airlines with knitting needles in your hand luggage. Many charity shops have also stopped putting knitting needles on display; they keep them out back. In some situations knitting is now classed as a dangerous activity.

***Weren’t you listening? I told you craft kills***

**2007, wool, plastic cone, knitting needles**

Made five years later these pieces are response works to ‘Craft Kills’*.* Here I wanted to create actual weapons from objects associated with domestic knitting; knitting needles, cones and balls of yarn. Once the crime was executed the weapon could be dismantled and sit with other domestic craft tools and materials allowing the perpetrator to escape detection. My domestic weapons were influenced by a Roald Dahl short story, *Lamb to the Slaughter,* written in 1953where a woman uses a frozen joint of lamb to kill her husband. She cooks the joint and then feeds it to the policemen who come to investigate the murder. During the meal the policemen discuss the murder weapon's possible location. One officer, his mouth full of meat, says it is "probably right under our very noses". I remember seeing an adaptation of this story on Dahl’s TV series *Tales of the Unexpected*.

***Bugbear,* 1999. Commissioned by the Institute of International Visual Arts (inIVA) for X-Space, their experimental web space**

In a review of the latest exhibition at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York, [*Pathmakers: Women in Art, Craft and Design, Mid-century and Today*](http://www.madmuseum.org/exhibition/pathmakers)*,* Alexandra Lange, architecture and design critic, talks about “the continuing gender politics around craft revealing a spikiness that continues to command attention”. When I was typing this paper no matter how many times I tried to type the word spikiness my automatic spell check kept changing it to spiciness. I love serendipity and try to follow its lead whenever possible. Spiciness suggests something that is lively, fun and challenging as opposed to spikiness, which is painful and defensive. So spicy it is.

In the American writer, Leanne Prain's, new book *Strange Material: Storytelling through Textiles.* She says, (and I quote), "Textiles are not always taken seriously - in the history of art, there is little recognition of textiles, and the subject is omitted from most critical texts and gallery collections. Textiles are the invisible sister of the art world, and those who make them have to work hard to be seen." (end quote) However the American artist and academic Anne Wilson takes the opposite stance. In her recent catalogue, *Wind/Rewind/Weave,* when discussing one of her works she firmly states, "Weaving, knitting and lacemaking are now recognised as viable fabrication processes within a broad and more inclusive world of contemporary art". Wilson sees no lack of seriousness or invisibility and makes no reference to the gender of Textiles.

The female dominance in Textiles is often seen as a negative thing. Something to be apologised. In her Review of [*Pathmakers: Women in Art, Craft and Design, Mid-century and Today*](http://www.madmuseum.org/exhibition/pathmakers), Lange goes on to say that “the computer defeminises everything”. Is this desirable? Do we want an art world full of gender-neutral work?

Throughout my career I have attempted to embrace the use of digital technology to further my practice. Firstly in 1999 with *Bugbear,* an experimental website commissioned by inIVA (the Institute of International Visual Arts) and produced by Joanne Moore. Bugbear explored the similarities between knitting and the internet. They are both physically solitary processes. Both are making sense of, translating and communicating information. Computer programs consist of long sequences of instructions that individually are very simple so does knitting. Both can produce extremely complicated results. Computers and knitting patterns use grids, with coloured squares to relay visual information. With both mediums it is easy to “undo” or “unravel” your work. However knitting is seen as an “everyday skill” of the past with social and cultural associations whereas computers and the internet are considered an “everyday skill” of the now which cross social, cultural and geographical boundaries. Together Joanne and I built a site, which enabled the user to move through different stories linking the two processes of knitting and computing.

**Images from *Bugbear,* 1999. Commissioned by the Institute of International Visual Arts (inIVA) for X-Space, their experimental web space**

At the end of each story the user could print out patterns that had been generated on the screen. These patterns could then be cut out ‘old school’ style using scissors and folded to make miniature paper jumpers. The virtual giving you a material return.

***The Perfect,* 2007, machine knitted wool**

In 2007 I received an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Award to enable me to access the digitally controlled, automated knitting machinery in the William Lee Innovation Centre at The University of Manchester. I am going to read the statement that I wrote after reflecting on the project.

“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.”

I found both these project unsatisfactory and deeply frustrating. There was little interaction with material. None of this (rub fingers together). For me the best thing that came out of these projects was the relationships that I built with the people supporting me with the digital skills that I lacked.

***Billy and Eddie,* 2007, machine knitted wool and acrylic yarn**

Since the completion of this project I have spent a vast amount of time trying to make the perfect bodies that the perfect knitting machine knitted perfectly, perfect for me.

I’ve cut them up and stuffed them.

***Collection of Knitted Folk Objects – Pocky*, 2014, machine knitted wool, reclaimed knitting needles**

Beheaded them and suspended the head using crochet.

***Basketcase,* 2015, machine knitted wool, crocheted lurex, wicker basket**

Filled them with builders expanding foam, sawn off the limbs with a bread knife and suspended the amputated parts from a wooden stand

***A Perfectly Good Marriage*, 2013**

**machine knitted wool, expanding foam, hawthorn log with horse shoe embedded in it, flints, sequins, dress pins on oak, cherry and spruce wood stand**

and

Heavily embellished them and strapped them to hunks of oak.

***One Letter Apart*, 2013**

**machine and hand knitted wool, hand crocheted wool, expanding foam, ball of sisal, second-hand hand knitted wool glove, antique glass bead necklace, flints, sequins, glitter, mohair yarn, dress pins on oak base**

The frustration that I have felt through the production of these computer-generated works has been greatly relieved through this intimate and rigorous interaction with material. Marrying the stereotypically male material of wood with the female wool, wielding my bread knife alongside my crochet hook and needle.