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Collected - used and abused

When I was a child I read a library book about two children who ran away to live in a museum. I have only recently tried to track it down and have found a children's novel entitled, *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*, by E.L. Konigsburg published in 1967, which seems to fit the subject and the time frame. Ever since I read this book I have wanted to live in a museum. The one I have had in mind for the past thirty years is arguably the greatest museum on earth, the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford.

Taking up residence there has not yet become a reality for me but ramming a Victorian terraced flat full and producing a classic tourist style postcard has

As has converting a 16th century timber-framed Essex barn into a live/work space. Inside the barn I have created my own museum, using glass cases to divide up the cavernous space and turning a small grain silo into a dedicated space for smaller cases.

My collections are wide ranging but mostly of little value, let alone monetary value, to others – they include ethnographic objects, religious paraphernalia, dolls, stones with holes in them (or with faces on them, or that look like fingers), rabbits, things from Japan, badly stuffed animals and knitted toys. These objects have always inspired my work but more recently they have become not only part of the work but also part of the process of creating work.

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When I was a teenager I discovered the hand knitting pattern books of designer Patricia Roberts. (I obviously now have a collection of these). I saved up for yarn from my weekend job. I couldn't afford her innovatively branded *Woollybear* yarn, which used a severed teddy bears head wrapped in yarn as it's logo, so I had to use a cheaper synthetic mix but I did manage to knit two of her patterns, including a complex picture knit called *Tarzan*. The jumper featured a parrot and a monkey eating a banana with a 3-dimensional banana skin. Having held onto this jumper for nearly twenty years, in a moment of uncharacteristic rashness, I threw it out. I have been trying to track it down ever since.

It was when I started to use ebay to hunt down my Patricia Roberts jumper that I became aware of the number of picture knits out there. I have ended up with a collection of Patricia Roberts knitwear that I wear, but not *Tarzan*, and a collection of other picture knits, that I don't.

There are several terms that you can put in front of the words 'hand knitted jumper' to search for these picture knits on ebay - "geek", "quirky", "festival", "grunge", "hipster", "blogger" and even "granny". When I was searching I became fascinated by the number of what I called "countryside jumpers", hand knitted jumpers that portrayed idyllic rural landscapes; farmhouses with animals, villages complete with churches, pretty streams, rolling hills, blue skies and fluffy white clouds. I would often find the patterns for the self same jumpers for sale too.

Here are a couple of my ebay purchases and the patterns that were used to make them. I enjoy seeing how different to the pattern a finished knitted jumper might be. I didn't realise that I had the pattern for the first one until I put this paper together, the actual jumper is so big, it is more like a dress.

The difference between the photo of the jumper on the pattern and the actual item is usually through the use of a different yarn to the one given in the pattern resulting in a different tension and the picture on the jumper becoming distorted. The jumpers are usually under £30.00 but they are becoming increasingly hard to find on ebay.

In the December 2017 issue of *Vogue* I also saw a new landscape picture knit by *Joseph*. It looked very familiar, bearing a more than a passing resemblance to the original 1980's Sirdar pattern and jumper that I own.

This one was even described as "ugly and amazing"

It is knitted from a pattern that came free with *Woman's Weekly* magazine where it is described in much more favourable terms, "our delightful picture sweater" and a "charming pastoral scene".

So much time has been invested in the knitting of these items. I would also add skill but sometimes they are knitted so badly I can't understand how someone got to the end of the jumper, their technique is so poor. What makes me saddest of all about these no longer desired jumpers is the yarn they are often knitted in. Maybe that is why they became undesirable. Mostly they are in cheap, synthetic yarn. So much time invested in such poor materials giving a disappointing outcome. Time is cheap but materials aren't.

The notion of wearing a hand knitted, an often-idealized activity, jumper, with an idealized rural scene emblazoned across it struck me as ironic. Particularly when it was badly knitted in acrylic. Here was a genre of knitting ripe for subversion.

Picture knits have now become the object of much ridicule. However I always was, and still remain, a big fan of these garments. I even won a national knitwear design and knitting competition when I was eighteen with a mohair trompe l'oeil jumper

representing a man's tailcoat complete with 3-D knitted bow tie and buttonhole, the only thing that I have ever actually won.

Picture, or novelty knits grew to great popularity through their association with the TV stars of the 1980's as is evidenced by this knitting pattern book, *KnitWits*, co-authored by the designer George Hostler and celebrity Gyles Brandreth, This book has designs modeled by eleven celebrities including Joanna Lumley and Christopher Biggins. But the most famous wearer of this type of knitwear must be Diana, Princess of Wales.

Diana and Charles were given hand knitted novelty jumpers in 1981 as wedding presents from the daughter of the New South Wales Premier, Neville Wran, who presented the couple with a pair of koala and kangaroo motif jumpers designed by Australian designer, Jenny Kee. Diana started wearing hers when she was pregnant a year later.

Diana wore her, *One black sheep-in-a-flock*, jumper in 1983. Diana as the ultimate subversive or novelty knitwear as a prophetic object?

The original machine-knitted wool jumper was designed by Sally Muir & Joanna Osborne in 1979, a pattern for the jumper was published in *Woman* magazine in 1984 and a sheep jumper is now in the collection of the Victoria & Albert Museum. Muir & Osborne told me that David Bowie bought a version of this jumper in another colourway. Whether he bought it for himself or as a gift is unknown but my fantasy is that he bought it for himself and one day a photograph of him wearing it will emerge.

As with all these things, wearable knitted pictures eventually fell from fashion's dizzy heights but unlike other genres they have never regained serious appreciation. However I do feel that if an image of David Bowie in his sheep jumper became available it may have a hope.

During my research I found the following terms used in reference to novelty knitwear "nasty knitwear",

"nightmare knitwear",

"knitted monstrosity",

"having one's stomach turned by this season's wacko woollens ",

and

"it is time to be afraid: very afraid."

This is the kind of language and turn of phrase usually associated with exceptionally sadistic crime. All this bile in just one article, and just about a knitted picture in the form of a jumper!

In Joanne Turney's, *The Culture of Knitting*, she talks about the ultimately damaging effect that the strong association between the celebrity and novelty knitwear has had on knitting:

“...the relationship between the novelty sweater and its ‘as seen on TV’ persona quickly became associated with the anodyne and boring, removed from the realms of good taste and fashion, and as such symbolized an out-of-step and out-of-time mediocrity”.

In the conclusion to her book Turney goes on to state:

“Scarred by a history of novelty jumpers, innovation in knit has seemingly been overlooked, and knitting has become the butt of jokes. Knitting, the (knitwear) designers believed, had been seen as fun, frivolous and something to be laughed at, when actually it was big business, and as well as being a wardrobe staple it was highly innovative, experimental and fashion-led.”

Wow those novelty knits sure were powerful. The novelty sweater is now back big-time and accepted but firmly placed outside of fashion, knowingly placed within an ironic, bad taste category and only at Christmas. As *The Sun* newspaper says, “NOTHING screams Christmas like a wacky festive jumper”.

The novelty Christmas jumper is available everywhere during the festive season and has become associated with charitable activities. Last Christmas *Save the Children* asked us to “Make it Better with a Sweater”. Friday 14 December was nominated Christmas Jumper Day with people donating £2.00 to *Save the Children* to wear their Christmas knits to work or school. The campaign raised over 4 million pounds. Whilst I am pleased to see so much money being raised for charity, I am frustrated that knitting continues to be the butt of the joke and that increasingly knitting is validated through its ability to make things better. Whilst the charity, and the Christmas jumper retailers, benefit big time from these campaigns, the environment and our resources, both human and material, suffer big time. Who is actually producing these garments and what happens to them after the festive season is never mentioned. All I will say is that you don't see second-hand Christmas jumpers listed on ebay. They are so cheap new, no one would bother. Again back to *The Sun* for a pertinent comment, “Primark's batch this year are sure to get any Scrooge in the mood and are priced from just £12.00”.

My series of works using my collection of picture knits is called *Someone Else's Dream* and like my previous series *Knitted Homes of Crime* it subverts a popular, or rather a once popular, genre of knitting. *Knitted Homes of Crime* subverted the knitted tea cosy that often comes in the form of a country cottage. In my work the knitted tea cosy houses are true representations of homes of female killers or the houses where they committed their crimes.

Someone Else's Dream refers to the idealised view many people have of living in the countryside. When I was living in London I meet so many people who wanted to leave. The great white flight for cheaper housing, a garden, to have a dog or more children, supposedly better schooling, less crime and greater personal safety. A move to the countryside was their dream, a dream that, although I do live in the countryside, I did not share. In *Someone Else's Dream* I have swiss darned, an embroidery stitch that mimics the knitted stitch, on top of the countryside scenes on these jumpers, changing the idyllic picturesque scenes to the scenes of misery that can, and do, happen in the countryside.

Some of the scenes that I have embroidered are from personal experience, some from news stories, all have happened in the countryside. I have embroidered a car crash, a figure hanged from a tree, a house fire, a body drowned in a river, fly-tipping and a crime investigation scene complete with white tent, police DO NOT CROSS tape, police van, car and helicopter.

I have two more scenes that I would like to create when I can find the appropriate picture knits to work on top of; a stolen car, joy ridden and dumped in a field, (like ours was), and a ram raided village shop cashpoint machine (our JCB was stolen to pull the local cashpoint machine out of the wall, you can see a film of it on YouTube).

The use of distressing or violent imagery when presented through a domestic, seemingly passive and benign object such as a hand knitted jumper subverts our expectations of both the object and the medium employed in it's production. Making the imagery initially less painful to see but ultimately much more disturbing.

[Before we move on, and as a little aside, if anyone has *Tarzan* and no longer wants it I am very happy to relieve you of it. In fact I am happy to take ownership of anyone's surplus-to-requirement picture knits.]

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In 2016 an invitation to take part in a live printmaking project saw me break into one of my oldest and largest collections. My collection of hand knitted toys. Like a number of my collections this one started from a dislike, a mild repulsion, of the object that I then go on to repeatedly buy. I am not alone in this. The photographer Martin Parr talks about his feelings of hatred motivating him to collect Margaret Thatcher memorabilia in an interview for the catalogue of the 2015 exhibition, *Magnificent Obsessions – The Artist as Collector*.

Unlike many collectors I am not motivated through ownership of the rare, the beautiful or the valuable. I am interested in the everyday, the overlooked and the undervalued. I also like the things that I collect to be relatively easy to find. Knitted toys fit all my collecting requirements. People seem to like knitting toys, or so the quantity of patterns that exist would indicate, but do children actually like them. I

think they are yet another thing that people like to knit as opposed to a thing that people like to receive. To my mind they are fairly perverse and abject objects.

I share this feeling towards them with the influential American artist Mike Kelley, a pioneer of 'abject art', who 'highlighted the irrational and the repulsive'. In his seminal work, *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid*, he questioned the ideals of minimalism producing a work that conveys an aura of emotional and spiritual disillusionment. The work's title also suggests wasted effort; the long hours of stitching that were required to create the toys and blankets that were then discarded.

Kelley was an incisive commentator on American class and popular culture, rebelling against minimalism, the dominant aesthetic of the time, where less is supposedly more. Kelley took his own life in 2012. A spontaneous memorial in the form of a shrine was set up in an abandoned carport near to his LA studio referencing *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid*, with friends, colleagues, former students, and fans leaving toys and crochet afghan rugs in his memory.

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I was invited to take part in *Big Steam Print*, at Ditchling Museum of Art + Craft in East Sussex alongside renowned printmakers Angie Lewin, Anthony Burrill and Rob Ryan. The project was to use a vintage steamroller as a printing press to publicly produce enormous prints - performance printmaking. This was going to be a difficult project for me. Firstly, I hate performing. I am naturally a solitary maker. I like to work alone, and unobserved, in my studio. Producing flat, two-dimensional work has also always been a problem for me, especially when confronted with a 2 metre-long piece of paper. I naturally want to 'conduct' my materials. Have them pass through my hands. However, I have always enjoyed process led creative activities such as printmaking, producing prints through the use of a press. The motions that you make with your body are rhythmic and repetitive, not unlike working with a knitting machine, but printing through the use of a steamroller was not going to offer me this. I didn't want to create an image to print and I didn't have the time, or desire, to carve a large piece of lino. I wanted to produce something that related strongly to my on-going use, and investigation of, knitting. Luckily my large collection of knitted toys, squashed inside their glass case, leaning against the wall in my studio, came to the rescue. I had rescued them from an uncertain future and now they were repaying the favour. And I had more than enough to spare.

I printed directly from the toys, firstly squashing them down flat onto an inked-up sheet of glass, then laying them onto the paper, ink side down, and lastly applying pressure to transfer the ink onto the paper. When I did my performance printing using the steamroller it was a real crowd pleaser, in both the process and the outcome.

The public watched me lay each inky toy down, watched the steamroller roll over the toys, whilst crying out "no, don't do it", and then saw me peel each flattened toy off

the paper. When the finished print was held up there was a round of applause. It was so popular; I had to do it again. When this work was later exhibited I entitled it *More More Love Hours* as a tribute to Mike Kelley.

There was so much interest in my printed knitted toys that I have since produced a series of prints, but lacking my own steam roller have returned to the more conventional method of printing with an 1851 Albion Press.

I didn't know how to end this paper so I thought that I would share two more images of knitted jumpers from ebay with you.

These photographs were put up as part of a series of images in an attempt to sell \$100.00 mohair jumpers. I don't know why I bother trying to be subversive when this ebay seller is achieving it without even trying!