Sarah Desmarais – Artist Statement for *Raw Materials: Textiles*, Bow Arts 2018

A more humane material life?

A number of factors drew me strongly to this project. Historical textiles have been an enduring influence on my work as a textile designer maker, particularly since I am concerned with slow, manual processes – observational and gestural drawing, hand printing, hand dyeing and hand sewing – that have been part of the production of textiles and clothing for hundreds of years.  Recent research into traditional Japanese textile print processes with the Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture intensified my interest in the lively influence of landscape and raw materials themselves on the development of printing technologies and design languages.  Rivers have always played a crucial role in textiles production, as arteries for communication and transport, and as sources of a key material.  My fondness for the River Lea dates to exploration of the canal as a child. I continue to walk there today.  I currently work at Thames-Side Print Studio at Woolwich, just downstream of where the River Lea joins the Thames, and I am intensely aware of the past and continuing lives of these waterways as working rivers with social and material histories.

In designing textiles for this exhibition, I wished to reflect the untidy, enchanting, surprising, half-urban, half-wild environs of the Lea River Valley, where within a 360-degree panorama on a winter’s day one can see a cormorant, a car, reed beds, a pylon, and dead hydrangea heads tumbling over a garden wall onto a towpath. Drawing is central to my practice as a designer. For this project I made drawings of water, birds and vegetation in situ and from memory. I was interested in the way that forms of birds’ and insects’ wings, flower petals, reeds and rippled water came to mirror one another in my gestural drawings, and I tried to capture this in my designs. In mixing patterns, I wanted to reflect the way that patterns in nature are often layered one upon another, seen through one another, and combine a proliferating waywardness with a geometric precision. For me, designing for textiles is a way of producing a drawing on a textured, undulating surface of varying transparency. I like to translate drawings as directly and manually as possible into printmaking apparatus. In this case I drew freely onto stencil paper and cut stencils in a fairly improvised way using the drawing as a guide. For the blue-grey dress (Lea River Valley Dress 1), I used a stencil to print a rice-paste resist onto silk organza. (A resist is a substance like wax or flour paste that sets or dries on fabric, preventing the penetration of dyestuffs in those areas.). Once the resist was dry, the silk was dyed with a modern, widely-used fibre reactive dye, and the resist washed out to leave a pattern. The printing technique is hundreds of years old and widely used in Japan; its equivalents were used all over Europe and North America in the production of indigo-dyed blue-and-white textiles in the eighteenth century.

For the rust-coloured dress (Lea River Valley Dress 2), I used drawing and stencil making in the same way, this time in response to fragile, desiccated hydrangea heads that were part of the towpath scenery. In printing the design, I tried to move somewhat closer to techniques that would have been in use in the Lea River Valley in the early 1700s, a period during which English textile printers were trying to emulate the extraordinary technical achievements of the Indian calico printers using resists, block printing and natural dyes with a variety of mordants. (A mordant is a substance that allows a natural dye to form an insoluble bond with a textile; different colours can be produced from a single dye by using different mordants.) I replaced my Japanese rice-paste resist with a European 1700s equivalent made of gum arabic and slaked lime, and used a natural dye widely used in Europe during that period – cutch – with an iron mordant to dye the fabric. Once the resist was washed out, I overdyed the whole piece with another contemporary dye – madder – this time with an alum mordant. I quickly found that the slaked lime resist damaged the stencils and eroded my fingerprints, a reminder that textiles production has often involved work with health-damaging materials. I also experimented with indigo, another natural dye that I have previously used with success on a small scale, and discovered that it is very difficult to produce a consistent colour over a ten-metre dress length. Able to find only vague information about contemporary practices, I felt some kinship with the eighteenth-century Lea River Valley dyers, who would also have been experimenting in the absence of detailed instructions as they attempted to reproduce the vivid, lightfast Indian textiles so much in demand for fashion and furnishing. I am fairly sure they would also have found the dyes at their disposal capricious (the behaviour of an indigo vat changes from day to day, for instance) and this highlights the appeal that more predictable synthetic dyes would have had when they became available in the nineteenth century. My experiments also underline the fact that all making and design takes place in a ‘transnational space of things’ (Crang and Ashmore, 2009), borrowing from other places and other times through multiple processes of appropriation, translation and transformation.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In producing work for the Nunnery Gallery in this labour-intensive way, I also wished to respond to ironies and responsibilities that are unavoidable when thinking about textile histories, both local and global. Over a few hundred years, the stretch of the River Lea between Hertfordshire and the Thames has metamorphosed from a wild waterway into a polluted outlet for industrial effluvia and part-way back again into a green ribbon of sanctuary for insects, waterfowl, wild vegetation, walkers and boaters, albeit marked everywhere by the signs of its former desecration. Textile making is full of ethical conflicts and contradictions. For hundreds of years, textile design has celebrated flora and fauna through patterning based on natural forms. At the same time, textile production has reshaped and damaged natural environments. Its waste products have polluted rivers, including the River Lea, and there is a growing mountain of textile waste as a result of mass consumption. The clothing industry ranks alongside oil as one of the globe’s biggest industrial polluters. Whilst clothing is a source of physical comfort, textile production has resulted in immeasurable physical suffering and exploitation, and this continues. Textiles have been at the root of far-reaching political conflicts, as symbolised directly in this exhibition by Gandhi’s spinning wheel. Less directly, the Robert Jones textile exhibited here, produced in proximity to a period when the import of Indian calicos had been banned because of its effects on home textile industries, is part of a colonial history of trade conflicts with catastrophic impacts upon lives.

One response to these unpalatable facts is to reinstate slow making as something of value for all in a context in which fashion and textiles are both fast and disposable. I printed these fabrics using readily available materials and simple equipment; the construction of the dresses was done entirely by hand with a needle, thread, pins and some patience. I hope that the simplicity of means with which the dresses were produced is apparent in the finished items. Whilst such slow work might seem pointless if it can be avoided, I’m interested in its distinctive characteristics, and in the psychological, aesthetic and social consequences of making by hand. My intention is not to romanticise manual labour; many of the workaday and fine hand-sewn and decorated textile items produced over centuries in the Lea River Valley were no doubt produced in abject conditions, and the availability of mass-produced clothing makes unnecessary various kinds of domestic servitude. There is something to be said, nonetheless, for being able to make some of one’s own stuff with limited technical resources. The distinctive relationship we have with an artefact when we have made it by hand potentially has consequences for our patterns of consumption. Something made in this way embodies both narrative and experience; hours of sensation, imagination, patience and care. It is emotionally durable. I concur with Richard Sennett when he suggests that ‘we can create a more humane material life, if only we better understand the making of things’.[[2]](#footnote-2)

1. Crang, P. and Ashmore, S., 2009. The transnational spaces of things: South Asian textiles in Britain and The Grammar of Ornament. *European Review of History,* 16(5), pp.655-678. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Sennett, R., 2008. *The Craftsman.* London: Allen Lane/Penguin, p.8. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)