

Shoddy work

Challenging assumptions about disabled women artists

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Disabled women artists are using textiles to challenge, subvert and inform. Their work brings together issues relating to feminism and disability. This was evident in two recent disability arts exhibitions in Leeds, *Shoddy* (2016), and *The Reality of Small Differences* (2014), curated by Gill Crawshaw.

This essay will focus on work by some of the disabled women artists who were part of those exhibitions and will consider whether textile art and craft has particular resonance for disabled women. It shows how their work is highly relevant to ideas of feminist art, and that disabled women's issues are issues for all women.

*The Reality of Small Differences* was conceived as a protest in response to an exhibition of Grayson Perry's tapestries (*The Vanity of Small Differences*) being on display in a venue in Leeds that wasn't accessible for a lot of disabled people. Organised over a short timescale to reflect the tapestry exhibition (opening on the same day and using similar textile materials) *The Reality of Small Differences* became a significant exhibition in its own right.

Building on this success *Shoddy* was organised with a little more time and resources and pulled together a number of themes: shoddy and shoddy manufacturing (shoddy being new cloth made from fibres reclaimed from used fabric and scraps); local textile history (the process for manufacturing shoddy was invented in West Yorkshire); disabled people's lives and histories; recycling, re-using, re-purposing and finally; shoddy treatment of disabled people by the current government, with public funding cuts including cuts to health and social care and welfare benefits.

The latter point should certainly be something that concerns feminists, with women bearing the brunt of public spending cuts; as carers, as low-paid workers (including the health and care workforce), as disabled and non-disabled women. This should not only be thought of as disabled women's struggle, even though they are clearly at the sharp end of austerity policies.

Within *Shoddy's* range of themes, 'history' was the one that inspired the richest interpretation by disabled women artists – local history of the textile industry, family history and personal history/stories. Throughout feminist art history women have used themes of personal stories, domestic life and the universality of ordinary women's lives, so these disabled artists continue in that tradition.

Katy White's audio visual piece, *Kicking Up A Dust*, drew on her family history over a number of generations and brought together issues of mill work, industrial injury, ill health, women's roles, disability and care.

In describing the work, White (2016) said:

“In the conversation my mum and I follow the thread of chronic ill-health in the women in her family, beginning with my great-grandma Bess, who was born in the 1890s and had mill fever. We draw parallels between Bess’s and my ill-health, uniting them as environmental and connected to work. We discuss the mutual neglect by the state and question how much attitudes to illness and disability have moved forward since Bess’s lifetime. Simultaneously, the piece explores the contrast between the healing I find in textile craft and the working conditions of textile industries as a cause of illness.”

This is an excerpt from the conversation between the two women:

“Only after being ill myself I’m discovering this thread of somewhat ill-health or susceptibility to chronic health issues in this line of women on your side of the family and there’s a great... I find a great sadness in that. But I also find, there’s also this story of closeness between us all... And there’s a sense of solidarity and a sense of always having looked after each other and offered each other comfort and I think there’s a real strength in that” (White, 2016).

The interconnection of the personal and political characterised much of the work of disabled women artists in these exhibitions.

Vickie Orton’s *Maze of Life* used the motif of a maze to reflect the experience of working your way through the benefit system, facing “dead ends or turnings that look promising but lead nowhere” (Orton, 2016). Orton also based her work on family history – literally, in fact, as the blanket that forms the background to the work was made in the local mill where Orton’s great-grandmother, great aunt, great uncle and grandmother all worked.

Both Orton and White’s work has been informed by their direct family connections to the textile industries of the north of England and they have drawn parallels between their own lives and the experiences of women mill workers. While times may have changed, disabled women are still facing hardship and poverty.

Katya Robin took inspiration from the silk scarves that have provided an affordable flash of colour and an expression of positive self-identity and individuality for women of all classes across recent decades. Her *Coin Icon* series of silk scarves subverted the traditions of this accessory, “mimicking the silky appearance because the allure of shimmering fabric is part of the language of luxury.” The discarded old coins that pattern the scarves, no longer legal tender, “unlock memories of daily life”, says Robin (2016).

Robin’s other submission to *Shoddy* was in contrast with the silky scarves, as it concerned functional textiles for use rather than fancy displays of luxury. A participatory piece, *Rag Tales* invited people to sit with unglamorous ordinary fabrics and feel the textures of cleaning cloths, uniforms, interfacing, linings and so on. “It is a space of recollection of stories related to these fabrics of everyday life”, says Robin

(2016). This is not showy, self-important art, but art about “ordinary stuff” (ibid, 2016) – the ordinary stuff of women’s lives.

Memory and ordinary women’s stories also featured in Sandy Holden’s sculptures for *The Reality of Small Differences*, inspired by her own memories and the memories of two other women who spent time in The Hollies in Leeds. Holden (2014) describes that “*While my own experience relates to the Hollies Garden, a place of peace and beauty, the Hollies Mansion and Gardens were often the site of personal tragedies for others.*”

Holden’s paper ‘pods’ hid poems that recorded the difficult and emotional memories and experiences of two women who spent time on the site. One of the women spent some of her childhood there in the 1920s when it was a children’s home. The second woman was a resident in an emergency hostel for young women during the 1980’s.

Disability, impairment and ill health are addressed from personal experience in disabled women’s art and there are examples of this from both exhibitions. In *Tatterdemalion*, Kirsty Hall (2016) swaddled 255 stones in recycled white cotton:

“One stone for each month since January 1995 when I became ill with ME/CFS. The work explores the on-going nature of chronic illness and the way that many impairments are invisible. The work speaks to the inherent contradiction of disability – that we are so often perceived as vulnerable, worn-down or damaged yet we often have a hidden core of inner strength.”

*Reductivism* is Faye Waple’s reaction to a diagnosis of multiple sclerosis, where she used her own body as research material and transformed images from MRI scans of her brain and spine into a series of ethereal embroideries. This has enabled her to gain objective distance from her condition and to broaden her practice. While a diagnosis might be life-changing, it need not be experienced as loss or a negative experience, but could be an opportunity to develop, in life or in artistic practice. As Waple (2014) says:

“Using abstraction as a technique to look at my scientific scan results has made me step back from them – I no longer feel absorbed by my condition.

The effect of my diagnosis, rather than limiting my practice, has expanded my perception, understanding, enthusiasm, and knowledge of the symbiotic relationship between art and science.”

Gemma Nash addressed the reproductive rights of disabled women and the concept of ‘womanhood’ with her documentary sound installation, *A Womb With A View*, presented within a tactile textile casing. This challenged the ongoing practice of forced sterilisation of disabled women. Nash (2015):

“Interviewed a cross section of disabled activists, academics actors and artists about the issues they have faced as women. ‘*A Womb With A View*’ provides audiences

with a unique insight into disability, bioethics and womanhood in a modern world. The documentary is both funny, hopeful and at times heart wrenching”.

It should perhaps be no surprise that exhibitions calling for textile-based artwork would attract mostly women. In these cases, disabled women artists clearly welcomed the opportunity to take part in projects that were political, highlighting issues around inaccessibility and injustice, whilst challenging stereotypes.

At the same time, disabled women artists both subverted and embraced the possibilities of textiles as material suited to communicating a range of ideas and messages. Soft, pliable textiles along with the tools of needlecraft were used to represent hard truths, discrimination, the misuse of power but also the strength and resilience of disabled people.

The extra layer of resonance and meaning of textile art and craft for disabled women was not lost in the *Shoddy* project. It was gratifying to overturn people’s preconceptions that an exhibition bringing together disabled artists and textiles would be safe, unimaginative and would simply reproduce traditional needlework and craft techniques – as perhaps learned at the day centre. Far from demonstrating skills of cross stitch or hand-knitting, the exhibition included large installations, audio and video work, sculpture, conceptual work. The exhibition confronted people’s expectations of disabled artists, with high quality, complex work that was challenging as well as rewarding.

Needlework has been a staple activity in institutions for disabled women, from the workhouse onwards. Whether providing suitable training for girls in the workhouse, keeping women occupied and quiet in the asylums, or delivered as occupational therapy in day centres, needlework has long been part of the background of disabled women’s history. Contemporary interest in textile art and craft is bringing this to the fore, with a growing interest in embroideries and other items produced in the workhouse, for example. These are not just decorative objects, but rich in social history, giving insight into the lives of women who have been forgotten and giving them a voice.

*Shoddy* acknowledged this with a workshop about the embroidered scrolls produced by Lorina Bulwer whilst she was incarcerated at Great Yarmouth workhouse at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (the Thackray Medical Museum in Leeds holds one of the scrolls).

These long, densely and neatly embroidered tapestries are generally read as great outpourings of anger and frustration by Bulwer. That she might be angry at her situation, at family members and people in the institution where she was held is understandable. Her work was clearly made to be seen, although whether it was seen outside the workhouse at the time is unknown.

Bulwer's voice and sheer bloody-mindedness come through loud and clear in her scrolls. While she might have been allowed to make them as a form of therapy or to keep her quiet, she managed to take this permitted, genteel activity and create something powerful and transgressive.

There is a strong link between Bulwer's work, the work produced for *Shoddy*, the work of other disabled women artists and the ongoing practice of textile art in feminist art practice. Common themes of personal histories, narratives of the body, women's lives, resisting institutional power and fighting inequality run throughout the work. While it is therefore no surprise that textiles are proving to be versatile and expressive media for disabled women artists, perhaps what is more surprising is that disabled women are not more visible in this strand of feminist art.

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