

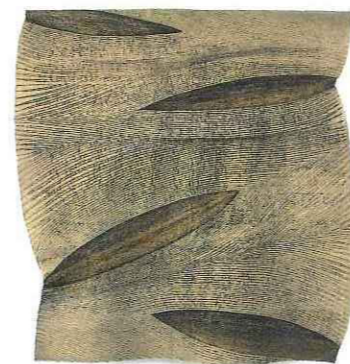
Circle. Hand stitched. 1999. 86 x 91 cms.
Photo: David Westwood.



Sample. 25 x 25 cm. Black striped silk, stitch resist tucks, discharge printed and unstitched.
Photo: David Westwood



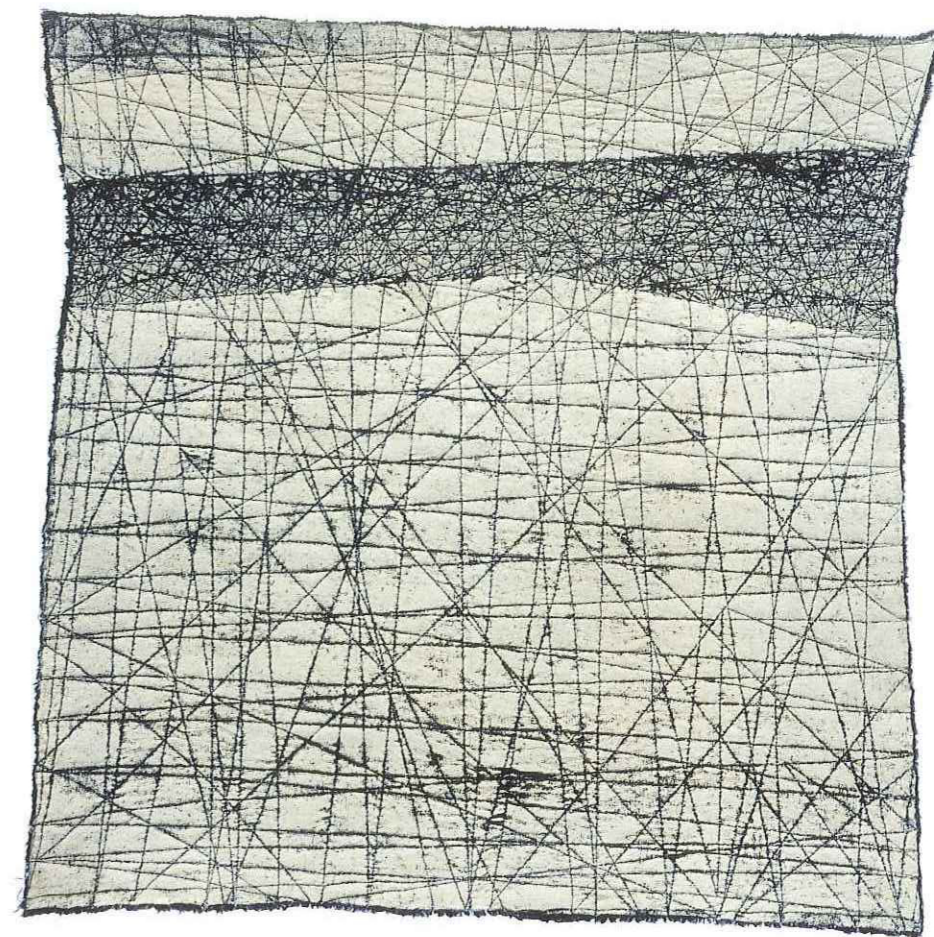
Sample. 23 x 23 cm. Black striped silk, stitch resist tucks, discharge printed and unstitched.
Photo: David Westwood.



Above and cover detail: *Turmoil and Change*. Black-dyed silk, heavily stitched, discharge and overprinted with metallic pigments. 137 x 133 cm. Photo: David Westwood.

Right: *Drawing no. 1* (part of a series of 5). Black-dyed silk, stitched and discharge printed. 61 x 61 cm. Photo: Diana Harrison.

Below, behind headline: Details of *Beginning and Beyond*. Stitched, metallic overprint. 160 x 160 cm. Photo: David Westwood.



Uncovering and travelling

Judith Duffey Harding meets Diana Harrison

Diana Harrison's work does not shout at you. It argues quietly, subtly, in a controlled and elegant voice, urging you to notice the overlooked and valuing a precision of vision and execution. But it is also not safe. Its processes are full of risk and commitment; the results strong and evocative.

The forms of her large stitched pieces emerge from the process of making. The formality of the original rectangle gently alters, as edges begin to curve and distort, responding to the physical tensions of machine stitching. Crisply caught, undulating surfaces record the process. After stitching is complete, each piece, having been pre-dyed in solid black, is then brought back through a journey of repeated screen-printed bleachings to a

range of greys and whites, mapping what remains of the reactive-dyed surface. What we see in the final piece is a record of erasure and excavation, revealing not only the precision of the parallel tapings that establish the original stitching patterns, but also the history of the evolution of the piece. Visual records of the physical tensions between stitch and layered cloth gradually emerge over time through repeated printing and shrinkage. Harrison makes use of the dialogue between natural fabrics in this process. Cotton shrinks, silk doesn't; joining them creates new material stresses. The visual layering of stitched stripes over emerging floating organic forms echoes the repetitions of the process itself.

In more recent textile 'drawings' the parallel equal stripes give way to a criss-crossing of stitched lines, building up solid areas that subtly alter the rectangular regularity of the original shape by gently drawing in the sides symmetrically. This calls attention to the collective force of thread under tension that not only fixes layers in depth but gradually shapes the whole surface contour. In stitched sketches for

future work, some of these shaped movements and sections within the work begin to separate entirely, draping and revealing reverse surfaces, sometimes picked out with bright colour. These suggest a movement toward a more sculptural approach in testing the formal boundaries of the format.

This same sense of seeing the recorded history of the making of an object can be seen in some surprising visual objects in Harrison's studio. Peculiar luminescent metallic fragments turn out to be old torn and distorted cigarette packets, flattened by road traffic. An intriguingly irregular solid patchwork form is explained as the inside of a long-buried football found in the garden. Old sanding discs and crushed rusting lids record the odd beauty of the natural processes of decay and change. In all of these there is a characteristic valuing of the found, and, in the accidental record of a single object, its transformation over time.

In view of the repeated journeys of these processes of making, it is not surprising that she speaks of 'travelling' as one possible source of her emergent imagery. The merging

chevrons in some of the work evoke repeated 'robotic' driving over familiar routes. Repetition and curving of lanes and carriage-ways, of criss-crossing roads punctuated by bridges, the broken lines of stitching echoing dashes on driven roads, repeat her daily experience of travelling familiar territory. She is also interested in crop circles, perhaps connecting with the way repeated bending paths of their formation provide records of regular geometric spaces created over time. Like her work, these are physical records of journeys of making.

Her first encounters with the quilting process resulted from a need to make practical use of her textile training. This experience, first concentrating on embroidery at Goldsmiths and then in print at the Royal College in the 1970s, led to her first collaborations with furniture designer Michael Haynes. Many familiar with her early work will recall the subtle sprayed colour of these initial experiments with quilted surfaces. Another kind of fruitful collaboration resulted from her membership of the unique crafts community at 401 1/2 set up by Haynes, where she worked alongside tapestry weaver

Joanna Buxton and potters Carol McNicol, Jill Crowley and Alison Britton. Here the crop of recent craft graduates were able to continue the inventive explorations they had begun in London's art colleges, linking them to what is sometimes seen as an anti-industrial 'crafts renaissance' of the 1970s, in its renewed valuing of the unique and the handmade. Commissions for textile applications to furniture led to other domestic uses in seating, cushions, bedspreads, developing techniques of working with dye and stitch that are still evident but transformed in more recent work. This vision of craft as a quasi 'art' activity was also evident in Harrison's earliest large stretched printed canvas-like hangings made for large spaces, operating more like paintings than textiles.

Teaching has always been part of her working life. She currently teaches at the University College for the Creative Arts at Farnham (formerly the Surrey Institute of Art and Design) and this experience has given an important reflective opportunity to articulate and test her thinking about the uses of textile and the training of makers. Today's textile students,

although less ready for the commitment of setting up workshops on their own as individual makers, find the textile understanding and confidence gained through the practical nature of this course effectively prepares them for a breadth of careers connected with industry, retail, fashion and marketing. The opportunity of contributing to shaping their experience and understanding of textile processes and language has been key in rethinking Harrison's own work. Current emphasis on research in all university institutions (and a particular emphasis at Farnham, with its own textiles collection and resource, alongside the Crafts Study Centre) has cast a different light on the ways textile practice can be perceived and described. Exhibition is reframed as research, providing a platform for articulating meaning as well as the means of making.

As I leave, I notice that the roads look different. I look for what might have been left as physical traces of passing traffic. As I note the 'stitching' of my journey home, I am reminded of the power of textile thinking to transform vision of the everyday. ■