
RESEARCH PROPOSAL

The Perfect

Knitted sculpture for public exhibition

At the Jerwood Applied Arts Prize for Textiles Seminar (Crafts Council, London, October 2002) Dr. Jennifer Harris (Deputy Director and Curator of Textiles at the Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester) made the following statement.

“Textile artists should be less ‘polite’ in their practice and more ambitious over process”.

I couldn’t agree more. The fundamental objectives of this research centre on ambition, ambition over process, ambition over scale, and ambition for knitting and textiles.

The creative possibilities of the recent technological advances in knitting machinery have been little explored by artists. As an individual it is difficult to access the machinery and expertise, it is also very expensive. This research project will provide me with the funds necessary to gain access to the facilities and expertise at the William Lee Innovation Centre (WLIC) at The University of Manchester.ⁱ The use of fully automated knitting machinery will free me from the restraints on scale, which are inevitable when working with hand-controlled machines.

The work produced will explore the potential for knitting as a serious form of self-expression. It will raise the profile of both knitting and textiles, demonstrating the importance and possibilities offered by the medium and the new technologies being developed around it. The knitted pieces will question conformity and notions of normality and standardization. They will subvert the preconceptions of knitting and disrupt the notion of the medium being passive and benign. The research will build on a significant body of existing studio-based work to be exhibited to the public.

The main objectives of the research are as follows:

- > To get access to "seamless" knitting technology, machinery and expertise.
- > To explore the capabilities of "seamless" knitting technology and machinery to produce large-scale, repeatable and changeable, knitted sculptural forms.
- > To produce artefacts/installations for public exhibition.
- > To demonstrate the possibilities offered by knitting and the new technologies being developed around it.
- > To explore the potential of knitting as a serious medium for self-expression.
- > To challenge the preconceptions that surround knitting.
- > To have received national and international press coverage.
- > To raise the profile, and in particular the research profile, of knitting and textiles in general.

This practice based research builds on a previous large scale project, Anyway, and a body of medium and small scale knitted works which have been produced on domestic knitting machinery in the studio. Anyway, a two-year project completed in 2002, saw the production of a large, knitted, sculptural form measuring 3 x 3 x 1.65 metres. Anyway takes the form of a three-dimensional knitted grid. Constructed from interlinked four-sleeved, lime green, knitted sweaters it has 27 torsos and 108 arms. It was produced on a Stoll-knit and wear® Knitting System (a computerised, automated, industrial V-bed flat knitting machine which is capable of knitting a three dimensional seamless garment) at the William Lee Innovation Centre (WLIC). However Anyway incorporated a lot of handwork, the machine knitted components had to be assembled and joined together by hand. I now want to see if it is possible to produce three-dimensional, knitted, forms in one piece, with no necessity for handwork.

Access to "seamless" knitting technology, machinery and expertise would enable me to explore the capabilities of the technology to produce repeatable and changeable, knitted forms that I can use as multiples to create large-scale sculptures or installations that would then be shown through public exhibitions.

The issue of scale is central. With knitted textiles the interest is usually in the small scale, in the detail. This detail is held in each individual stitch, be it the patterning, texture or shaping. The approach here will be to address the question of the bigger picture but without losing the fine detail. I aim to produce large scale, knitted sculptural works where size is not achieved at the expense of the fine crafted detail.

Through the research I would explore the relationship between craft and manufacture, in particular with computer-aided manufacture leading to mass-produced objects that look crafted. The research combines creativity with technology. The knowledge gleaned from the research process and outcomes is transferable to all artists working with artisanal skills in combination with new technologies.

The knitted forms that I produce would demonstrate the possibilities offered by "seamless" knitting technology. "Seamless" knitting is a relatively new technology. The first automatic seamless outerwear knitting was introduced in 1995, at ITMA (International Exhibition of Textile Machinery) by the Japanese company Shima Seikiⁱⁱ, who are still the market leader in this field along with the German company, Stollⁱⁱⁱ. The research would push and develop the creative use of the new "seamless" technologies being developed for the production of knitted fabrics and garments. The potential applications and benefits would be to the areas of knitting, knitwear, textiles, craft, applied and fine arts, architecture, design and technology. The potential applications include knitted garment design and construction, furniture and furnishings and concepts for interiors and architecture.

Through the exhibiting of the works, I will widen awareness of knitting as a serious medium for self-expression. I will challenge the preconceptions that surround the medium by demonstrating the conceptual and structural possibilities that knitting offers beyond the expected outcomes of fashion and textiles.

i The William Lee Innovation Centre (WLIC) closed on 31 December 2007 due to lack of funding.

ii For more information see www.shimaseiki.co.jp

iii For more information see www.stoll.com