

THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE This issue contains, serendipitously, a number of articles covered by the broad heading of textile art. Readers will find it unsurprising that every one of the artists featured is a woman – Louise Kerr, Jan Irvine-Nealie, the felters and weavers, Mo Orkiszewski's Dreamers—the dozens of women who responded to her invitation to 'dream of a world where love is the answer', as well as Karla Dickens and eX de Medici. To most of us who live with the arts, plural, it seems normal that women predominate in the textile/fibre arts. When men, they tend to stand out and they will tell you that they are conscious of being present in a predominantly female environment. Two talented men who have been featured in this magazine are Robert Brain (tapestries in issue 7) and Greg Somerville (textiles in issue 4).

Surprise, surprise, the old art vs craft debate continues to rumble along and in #MeToo times apparently has become a gender issue. Amber Butchart in *Freize* (14 November 2018) lauded *Tate Modern's* recent commitment to showing artists working in textile arts and reported an increase in the display of textiles around the UK. She takes particular note of the 2017 *Turner Contemporary* exhibition 'Entangles: Threads and Making' which 'challenged the classifications of fine art, design and craft' through the work of more than 40 female artists which included embroidery, weaving and wood carving.

Butchart says 'the artificial divide that exists between fine art and textile... is a gendered issue' and she

quotes Hannah Lamb of The 62 Group of Textile Artists (a pressure group which has been promoting textiles as a fine art since 1962): 'Textiles have always suffered as an art media because of their association with domesticity and femininity.' Butchart does point out that in fact it was during the Renaissance that the distinction between art and craft began to emerge and 'a hierarchy developed that saw fine art – with its masculine associations – prized over the craft of stitching'. This was accelerated in the 18th century with the founding of the Royal Academy in 1786 which regulated to ban needlework from exhibition.'

Let's say that women are, by reason of their gender, sociologically and culturally more likely than men to utilise textiles in their art. And it is probably unlikely that there will be, in our lifetime at least, large numbers of men attracted to participate. So the textile arts are unlikely to be 'lifted' by becoming more unisex but will continue to be a predominantly female form of creative expression. By calling out a 'gendered issue' here, some women are demanding not more participation by men but greater recognition by society generally, and by the frequently male dominated art organisations and institutions. They think that defining their work as 'fine art' will influence this change — presumably in the status given to their exhibitions and so the enhanced collectability and monetary value of their work. Times are fast changing, institutions are changing, the equal right of women with men to follow their dreams is mostly accepted. I think some of the arguments have been overtaken by events.

Look at *Karla Dickens's* straitjackets and *eX de Medici's* exquisitely vicious artworks and pow! textiles can certainly pack a punch. Look at the subversive ways in which women have utilised textile art historically and now. The medium IS the message. And it's fascinating to learn that eX de Medici is also a tattooist.

Textile/fibre art will always flourish and it is the feminine traits (and the female gripes) we bring to that art that distinguishes it, not its inclusion as a category of 'fine art'. I hope you enjoy!

Carolynne Skinner

Left: Louise Kerr's *Stray*

