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MAXINE SUTTON LOOKING BACK TO THE FUTURE



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House proud

The contemporary history of the English domestic interior lies at the heart of Maxine Sutton's journey from paint into stitch, writes Rose Jennings

THERE ARE ARTISTS whose work one admires but whose thought processes, when you get to know them, remain opaque – or even, dare one say it, downright uninteresting.

Then there are other artists, who make equally beautiful and accessible work but have the gift, too, for setting it in a human context. The textile artist Maxine Sutton definitely falls into the second category. Though ambitious, she's never glib about the complexities that are involved in building a career; and that honesty adds a deeper dimension to her work.

Sutton originally studied painting at Ravensbourne. After

graduating in 1985, she worked as a stage hand, in London's Dominion Theatre and Sydney Opera House and, later, after starting her family (she has three children) as a freelance graphics and textile designer and teacher. In 2004 enrolled on the MA course in Constructed Textiles at the RCA.

Since then, her work has appeared in a number of shows and has won several awards – including the 'Made' Art Prize at Brighton Art Fair, a National Grid Transco 'Design for a Responsible Future' prize, and the Clerkenwell Green Association 'Reflect Forward' award. The latter provided support for a period of study at the Geffrye Museum in East

London, with the resulting work being shown at Craft Central in Clerkenwell.

Though actually displaying objects from 1600 on, the Geffrye has to some extent become synonymous with modernism. Room sets include a 1930s flat and a mid century room decorated in the 'contemporary' style. Echoes of these are at first apparent in Sutton's gorgeously muted colour palette – turquoise, ochre, eau-de-nil, a lovely coral pink – but also in the techniques she uses to build up her surfaces. These include hand and machine embroidery, screen print, appliqué and needle-punch.

The slight distortion of scale between objects lends an appearance that is at once both homely and faintly sinister

Below: *Wing Chair*, 2008

Right: *Cuckoo*, 2008



Above: Maxine is inspired by vintage domestic manuals, periodicals and transfer patterns; a selection of which were on show at Craft Central earlier this year, along with her sketchbooks

Below: A detail taken from *Cloth*, by Maxine Sutton, 2008



At Craft Central, my eyes were initially caught by what was described as 'one-off homeware pieces'. In essence, these were tea cosies – but tea cosies constructed according to some surreal, *Alice-Through-The-Looking-Glass* blueprint. While not quite large enough to hold a samovar, they're definitely not scaled to hold a conventional tea pot either. The figures that decorate them – skirted ladies, a rather Hans Arp-ish cow – have a similarly stately demeanour.

The wall panels, which comprised the rest of the collection, though more conventionally worked over stretchers, use much the same collage techniques. The slight distortion of scale between objects lends an appearance that is at once both homely and faintly sinister.

Sutton draws her motifs from an eclectic range of sources.

Dainty figures taken from old embroidery templates rub shoulders with looser, more schematised forms – a zonked-out rat, kitchen utensils, a veined leaf – that recall the great mid-century designers: Robin and Lucienne Day and Jim Flora. Embroiderings 'set' the compositions, and hint at narrative as line does in an abstract painting.

Sense of identity

'The work is constructed as I would have a painting. I start with the idea of assembling groups of objects in different scales, and structuring the space by laying down large areas of colour with screen print. The motifs – fawns, budgies, hollyhocks appear sweet but underneath there is something... not dark, exactly, but maybe murky, or sad.'

The research at the Geffrye was pivotal, says Maxine. 'Decorative patterns on wallpapers and fabrics reminded me how important patterns were to me as a child, providing endless starting points for day dreams and imaginative – sometimes fearful – scenarios. It became apparent how complex the relationship is with the objects we chose to have around us, from helping to form our identities to creating a sense of who we are as adults.'

Forming an identity as an artist is a complex thing. In mid life, especially, it takes a certain amount of courage to look at where you are, what you feel you need to learn, and to go with that. While the culture demands that we adhere to the convention of openness ('it's all good'), decisions have to be made, and followed through.



Maxine's 3D objects:
Tuffy (and right from top)
Ethel, Rita and Cowtree



'I knew from my background of sewing domestically that that's what I wanted to explore, in terms of technique and materials – the domestic interior and the seemingly ordinary, everyday experiences of people. This is home-based work'



Above: Maxine's installation at Craft Central

Below: Tree and Flower pieces



Why I wonder did she chose the RCA's MA, rather than going down a more fine art-based route? 'I knew from my background of sewing domestically, that that's what I wanted to explore, in terms of technique and materials: the domestic interior and the seemingly ordinary, everyday experiences of people. This is home-based work.'

But she is also very clear that she wanted to make a living out of her work. 'I wanted it to have a commerciality. Doing an MA was the start of reshaping my career in order to earn a living using all my skills and experience – rather than just some kind of personal journey. The RCA seemed like the best MA from which to start to realise my intentions.'

Sustainability

Sustainability is right at the core of Sutton's work. This is evident not only in her choice of materials – she uses found textiles, where possible (or responsibly produced materials otherwise) but in the way she thinks about objects and images, and the presentation of said objects and images.

After spending some time researching and creating a collection of sustainable interior products – lampshades and cushions in organic and recycled materials – she is now concentrating more on her wall pieces. Given that both lines find enthusiastic buyers (wall pieces are priced from £250 to £2,000) it is an interesting shift of emphasis – and one that is not entirely explained by the difficulties of her sourcing 'organic duck farmers for organic duck down stuffing'. Maxine explains: 'I thought it was better (for me) to focus on raising consciousness of these issues. What are we valuing in hand work?'

Though she doesn't answer this in as many words, I believe that the act of mounting her work on a wall is critical.

Painting, and particularly still life, has a long tradition of 'raising consciousness of these issues' – so why not use that?

She is keeping the materiality that she loves – these are very much constructed objects that one can imagine changing, perhaps fading over time – but claiming the right to ask a few questions, too. Why are we chasing round, finding ever more obscure 'solutions' to problems that don't exist – when we could be using the resources we already have to solve the ones that do? 🌱

www.maxinesutton.com