

Exhibitions

Julia Caprara Retrospective

The Knitting & Stitching Show – all venues

This exhibition was the most wonderful explosion of colour and texture, as you would expect from the master of colour herself. The photograph below doesn't do it justice – you just had to be there.

When Julia died in 2008, it was a tragic loss to the world of textiles. Michael Wicks and I were working with her just before her death, producing her book, 'Exploring Colour', and the sight of her wonderful sketch books – see right – brought back memories of that time.

This exhibition included work from every period of Julia's life and, as such, was a commentary on the evolution of the textile art we see today. Julia was a brave and forthright campaigner who did much to ensure that stitching was regarded as art, rather than a cosy occupation for the fireside.



The following quotation from Julia is taken from an interview we did together for Workshop on the Web. You can read the full interview on www.d4daisy.com (just click the pic of Julia's 'Exploring Colour' book). It was in response to a question of mine on influence and inspiration.

"I am a self confessed, committed hand embroiderer and, although I was trained in stained glass and printmaking (my specialist area was wood engraving), I find it is stitch that is the creative centre of my work. I stitch because I have to. I know this sounds odd, but there is an aspect of hand stitch that opens up the creative unconscious and enables one to explore one's deeper concepts.

I use colour in very deliberate ways, using strong bold marks of colour to create visually vibrating surfaces. I enjoy working with unusual colour relationships, working very large, and I do like to challenge myself to work with ideas that have no obvious solutions and which I don't know how to handle.

I enjoy complex compositions and have to work experimentally, and my ideas usually evolve through the making rather than by pre-planning or designing. I think that I can do this just because I have spent so many years in looking and drawing and working with such strict disciplines as stained glass and wood engraving. I guess I draw and paint with stitch."

The pics on this page show Julia's piece, 'Burning Bush' 1975. Collection of Dorothy and Stuart Natrass



I talked to some of the people who had loaned work for the exhibition. Jan (Beaney) and Steve Udall bought 'The Frost Garden' – see right, with detail – many years ago. Jan said, “I loved the feel of the piece and used a picture of it in my 'Textures and Surface Patterns' book.”

Julia's 'Peace Mandala', below, also owned by Jan and Steve, was based on the Hyde Park bombings and showed the various elements – stitches going in all directions to suggest chaos – static canvas work stitches suggesting rigid thinking on all sides and no movement from each belief. The explosion was depicted in mainly machine embroidery just off centre. Other areas suggest the beginnings of hope!

Jan said, “I think the circle is a strong symbol in so many faiths and really symbolises peace. I know that she had to change the title and statement before the 62 Group show at the Northern Ireland Offices in case of a bomb threat.

It is a two sided piece but she did not tell me much about the other side – the glitzy one. I loved the piece because of the thoughts behind it, but also because Julia never minded if people just loved the colour and texture. She also did not mind me turning the work around at Christmas so we could enjoy the glitzy side! She was quite special.”



'Highcliff: Summer' (1987) was loaned by Val and Tom Wicks, long-time friends of Julia and Alex. Val went to art school with Julia and they were never out of touch. All four shared a love of Cornwall and this piece was inspired by a holiday bungalow they shared.

Val said: "Julia gave me this piece as a Christmas present, to remember a time that we all shared at Highcliff – the highest point in Cornwall. I love it and she has caught the look of the heather and the long grasses – it's just so typical of Highcliff. (You can see this in the detail, right.)

The piece means so much to me because it is so Julia and so Cornwall. In time, Tom and I bought a home in Cornwall and Julia and Alex were frequent visitors."

In fact, many of the sketches shown in the book 'Exploring Colour' were made in Val's garden and she has a wonderful photo of Julia sketching there.

'Highcliff: Summer' is based on a background piece with the feel of a general view and a central area of expressive stitching to capture the detail.

To anyone who knew Julia, this exhibition was really emotive and the feelings were mixed: joy at seeing all the work together (many thanks to Andrew Salmon for making this happen) and renewed sadness at all that talent lost.

Maggie Grey

Photographs on this page by Michael Wicks



EDGE Exhibition: Starting Points

Gallery 2, art's complex, Edinburgh

9 – 23 October 2010

The latest exhibition by EDGE – textile artists Scotland is a wonderfully exciting show and it is in a very interesting venue. Starting Points is full of very individual work and this adds hugely to the success of the exhibition. The venue is a former office block which is now a multi-purpose arts space with three galleries, community arts projects and multiple floors full of artists' studios.

Rather than produce work on a given theme, this exhibition is all about the design process and showcases the variety of responses to inspiration. Several EDGE members have included exploratory work as well as finished pieces and work in progress.

A lovely, very simple and beautifully spare illustration of the origins of a design and its final outcome is the work by Wilma Graham called 'Wilderness' (see right).

A collage of the maker's inspirational photographs, developmental drawing and colour ideas are exhibited along with the almost completed piece.

Grasses, rosebay willow herb and knapweed on the edge of a wood are interpreted in silk dyes and massed straight stitch.

The stitch, which is needlework at its most elemental, varies in length and visual interest is sustained through the clever use of colour and in the variety of yarns chosen: some are matt, some shiny, some lustrous, while others are twisted.

All the work uses a single strand of thread so that unifies the piece.

Further visual interest and perspective is added to 'Wilderness' through taking the foreground stitches behind the marks left on the silk by the resist. Resists take up colour in a different way from the reaction of untreated fabric to dyes and the maker skilfully exploits this feature in her work.



Several works provide a commentary on contemporary life. Betty Fraser Myerscough's 'Long Legs' and 'Mobile Mania' are lovely colourful reflections of the current fashion for girls and young women, whose figures have not yet seen the ravages of life, to wear shorts or exceptionally short skirts and on the ubiquity of constant chatter on mobile phones. These two works are hung at opposite ends of the gallery so, in a sense, they frame the space.



Sheila Paterson exhibits the results of her experiments with prepared canvas and threads during various aeroplane flights. 'No Needles Allowed' is a small series of works which occupied her time in a confined space and abiding by the current regulations on hand baggage where the usual stitchery equipment, such as needles and scissors, are prohibited.

Sheila imposed her own set of parameters within which she would work and the results are delightful. She wrapped a variety of yarns round little squares of coloured aida creating a range of geometric designs. Each series, representing one flight, is beautifully mounted and framed and displayed with an explanation of the process.

A commentary on events in the Middle East in recent years is the focus of Liza Green's work. 'Desert Storm' and 'Spent Forces' (right, with detail below) are exhibited along with two handmade books with extracts from Liza's sketchbooks and development work.

These works are clearly informed by the maker's direct experience of Middle Eastern life. The colours, techniques and composition of 'Desert Storm' speak volumes. The major area of visual interest in this work is a cocoon-shaped oval, stimulating thoughts of swaddling and protection but also of corpses laid out in body bags. The threads holding this area in tension echo the guy ropes of sheltering tents.



Another perspective on contemporary life, this time highlighting people trafficking and "sexploitation" in the face of the former Soviet Union's fight for survival in the modern world, provides an interesting companion exhibition for visitors to Starting Points. Russian artist Berglind's show 'Who is Afraid of a Russian Doll?' is in art's complex gallery 1 over the same period as the EDGE exhibition. Textiles feature too in this exhibition; here they are in the very distinctive Russian red of women's clothing, both outwear and undergarments.

Throughout the EDGE exhibition, there is a sense that this work represents increased confidence and a maturity built on previous successes. The show at art's complex feels like a step up from the previous Edinburgh exhibition, 'Out of the Blue', and reviewed in Quiltwow in October 2008.

Sue Rankine