

Cas Holmes: Sustainable Stitch

A review by Anna Woodhead

Our guest speaker for November's talk was Cas Holmes; she delivered a fascinating insight into sustainability and how this principle guides her practice. Sustainability is at the heart of her art, using found, foraged and donated materials. She emphasises the importance of people sustaining each other, through communication, support and working together. Her talk was interlaced with personal stories, too, and how these feed into her work.



In the first part, Cas spoke of her early work with communities and partnership projects. An important part of her practice is studying the juxtaposition of natural and urban environments. To illustrate how she brings these two together, she described a project with a school in a reserve around a power station. Working together, students gathered materials, arranging them into mathematical patterns, examining colour, form, shape and texture. By showing young people how to observe and discover the world surrounding them, she was teaching them valuable transferable skills. It was particularly interesting to see

how this work is so closely related to her own art. She shared a piece entitled *Rainforest* for which she encouraged the participants to save wrapping paper that they bonded together in layers (a technique for which Cas is well-known), trapping found objects such as leaves and sweet wrappers between the layers, then cutting into them. This piece perfectly encapsulated her message of sustainability: found and recycled materials, used together in a group project.

This led Cas to talk more about her own work, sharing her inspiration and explaining how she comes by her materials. Much of it is given to her, or collected as she travels and teaches. Cas' passion for reusing cloth that has purpose and meaning was tangible. She has not purchased any new fabric for over 20 years, and uses colours from match pots and discarded tubes of acrylic paint, squeezing out the last drop. In her pieces, you will find dustsheets, old dresses, tea towels; she describes her work

as being about mark making and texture, not about neat edges. Using layers bonded with cellulose paste and free motion stitch drawing, *North Kent Marshes* (opposite page) exemplifies Cas' style which is, in her own words, 'painting with cloth'. She described herself as 'a watcher of the world' who always carves out time to draw and stitch, to be present and observe. 'I draw because I want to draw, not with the intention of making a piece'. She prefers to stop and sketch, rather than photograph, and described such a moment that led to *View from a Medway Barge*. While she was sketching, a lady emerged from the barge and gave her a piece of lace. Cas used this in the work, alongside cotton, paper, French silk and a Dutch sack, with her observations of the scene drawn in stitch.



Left: North Kent Marshes; right: Hyacinthoides Scripta; below: Trees

Another poignant piece, *Greed Laid Bare*, is a comment on the shortages of milk, bread and flour at the beginning of the Covid pandemic, and how neighbours subsequently came together to share, to sustain each other. This piece contains scraps of tea towel, lace tablecloth, a jeans label and a hospital robe. Cas spoke of her partner Derek who recently suffered a stroke, and the robe, no longer needed, was given to her by a nurse at the hospital. Cas described how she has lately shifted her focus to the garden because it is what Derek usually does, and is something that sustains her. She spoke of *Hyacinthoides Scripta* (above), how she remembers picking bluebells with her father, a sign writer, whose handwriting she incorporated into the piece. These personal stories all served to illustrate her strong belief that we are all interlocked, we all have stories and what we do impacts on others. She described the beauty of textiles and how it 'bends with the world'. Work such as *Trees* (below) and her folding of cloths, emphasises how we move through the landscape; although we try to contain it, it cannot be contained.



Cas offered us a richly detailed talk, with generous descriptions of her approaches and techniques. The journey through her early work, her inspiration, how her personal experiences inform her art and her strong belief in exploring our impact on the world, was both interesting and conveyed a powerful message. We should all consider what we are leaving behind in this world.

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