

Subversive improvisation

“There’s no improvisation without structure. I feel I’m always searching for that structure – a kind of language which encompasses the possibility of fluidity, the shifting nature of meaning and experience, but related to some kind of precursor, a history.”
Rosa Lee

Convention has it that, in the first drawing, the Maid of Corinth was recording the coming disappearance of her lover and her impending loss. In drawing round his shadow, cast on the wall behind him, she created a linear record, one that re-enacted her desire and loss. Working with the schiffli, and its inherent linearity, many of the artists share the resonances of the young girl drawing round the shadow, as they re-enact, through the manipulation of the pantograph, their original act of drawing. Except that, of course, the schiffli will reproduce the drawing ad infinitum. Ad infinitum but with the virtue of prescribed limits, for the schiffli is a machine, with the concomitant challenge to the artist to subvert the imposed structures demanded by the mechanics of that machine.

The act of drawing represents an act of mediation between idea and outcome, a precise gesture at a moment in time. Drawing with the schiffli is a further act of mediation, characterised by a repetition of mark making and by the serial relationship of these marks, which are energised by the mechanics of reproduction. It is interesting to conjecture whether the repetition suggests an increasing remoteness from the original idea, as the Maid’s drawing round the shadow becomes remote from her disappearing lover and his shadow, or is there a convergence between the original idea, the shadow, and its containment, in the way in which the mark is made? In other words, the slight differences in the pressure of the hand, and texture of the surface enable a mark to have another type of variation. For example, the artist Agnes Martin’s delicately drawn lines across paper demonstrate that:

“in modulating the surface, the diverse gradations of the pencil imply the presence of the artist, whose hand, when hesitant, creates irregularities. The strokes following the course of the hand are not controlled, they occur as natural data, certifying the vital association of artefact and artifice.”
(Celant, 1993)

As noted time and again by those taking part in *The schiffli project*, the needles of the machine, responding to the movement of the pantograph, measure that same slight involuntary variation of the operator.

There is a sense that defenders of the schiffli are in a rearguard position, under attack by the ‘inevitable’ forces for change. This would seem to be a case of forcing the work done with the schiffli, a machine considered to be obsolete, to be seen as ‘textiles of the past’. The work in this exhibition demonstrates that this is manifestly not the case. The confusion arises between identifying process and identifying innovation. One of the most striking things about the marks that the schiffli makes is how modern they look. If a neutrality of statement had been expected from these artists as a result of a sense of subservience to this machine, this is certainly not so, each artist has approached the machine through their own personal visual language.

Contemporary textile practice has much to offer in creating a context for the dissemination of traditional practice, however, the artists working with the schiffli are not custodians of the past. These artists exhibit all the characteristics of innovation and radicalism, using mechanical limitations as a means of questioning the boundaries between the new and the old, the personal and the political, the intention and the outcome. The schiffli machine was developed for industrial use; what is interesting in terms of this project is that all those who have taken part have used the particular

characteristics of the machine as an expressive tool rather than employing its repetitive capacity towards a design outcome. There is no doubt of the expressive pushing of boundaries which can be seen in the exhibition, but these are reflective of personal visual vocabularies rather than a seeking to maintain the industrial continuum. Occasionally, as with the work of Alice Kettle, taking forms of expression to extremes not previously considered.

The Maid of Corinth caught the most potent attributes of drawing, those of desire and loss. The schiffli draws for us, and we can trace the mechanistic systems which allow that to take place; we can actually see it all happening, it does not have a ‘hidden memory’ which, when called upon, will produce a drawing. The schiffli has presence, its ‘drawing’ has texture. The desire for the tangible presence of schiffli drawings is also suffused with potential loss. The schiffli is an anachronism; things that can be ‘seen’ to work are of another era. A young girl today would take a photograph of her lover on her mobile phone to send to her friends; an act lacking the permanence of the mark on the wall, or the many lovers that the schiffli, with all its noisy grace, could provide.

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