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Photo Essay

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The Maker and the Made

Photography has always been manipulated for effect, and new technologies have only expanded the possibilities. Effects that would previously have been hand-painted can now be achieved digitally. Colours can be changed, filters overlaid, and elements – even whole figures – added or removed. Artist Susie Vickery uses a combination of both old and new methods of photographic manipulation. Working with her own photographs, she alters them digitally and, after printing them on fabric, enhances them further with stitch.

The body of work shown here illustrates Susie Vickery's interest in depicting individuals working in textile-related jobs (figure 1). Her own background as a theatrical tailor and recent work with handicraft groups in Nepal and China have led to an enduring interest in the life of the artisan. To instil a sense of place and the strong emergence of individual artisans, she photographed and interviewed tailors, textile and garment factory employees, fabric finishers, and fabric salespeople in India, China, and the UK.

The techniques and imagery of Susie Vickery's work are inspired by didactic Eastern religious art, the flat stylization of Western medieval religious icons, and Mughal paintings and the elaborate decoration. After relocating to Nepal and then India, her work was profoundly influenced by old Bollywood posters with their rich saturated colours, kitsch imagery, and garish delight in superimposing pattern on pattern. The posters of the 1970s saw a move away from straight painting to the use of over-painted photographs to create a hyper-real image. Following this tradition of enlivening imagery, Susie Vickery recreates an over-painted hyper-reality using thread. Her two most obvious references in series such as *Icons of the Ordinary* are to Raja Ravi Varma and to the artists Pierre et Gilles (figures 2 and 3). In a kind of subaltern tradition of amateur refinement, Raja Ravi Varma's posters have been embellished with layered fabrics, braids, and beads. The French duo Pierre et Gilles use an over-painted photographic style to create colourful modern icons, beginning with posed photographs of mythical, religious, and contemporary figures and covering them completely with delicate, barely discernible brushstrokes. The difference between photography and painting is only visible up close. Susie Vickery's embroideries elicit a similar response: seen from a distance many viewers have thought them simply photographs, and it is only on closer inspection that the fine stitch work is revealed (figure 4).

For her work based on interviews, Susie Vickery begins with photographs and recorded text. The design is sketched out in a collage of photographs, drawings, and words. She then works directly in cloth, utilizing her skills in tailoring, fabric manipulation, embroidery, and embellishment. Appropriate fabrics are used: khadi and antique saris for Indian artisans, brocade for Tibetan tailors, and Western tailoring canvas for London tailors. Photographic images are transferred on to the substrates

and excerpts from live interviews are stitched on the cloth. Susie Vickery often deletes the image of the person before printing a photograph onto fabric, and then embroiders it back in, reconfiguring it in a textile way by adding colour and depth (figure 5). Facial features are worked and given intensity to achieve a high definition saturated image (figure 6). The background is often left to show through the figure, and the physical nature of textiles is explored by bringing together hand- and machine-embroidery and appliqué to create a visual and tactile tapestry.

As her titles often suggest, Susie Vickery's work deals with the everyday. Trades and craftspeople work intimately with textiles on a daily basis and cloth literally becomes the fabric of their lives. The value of manual work is currently being re-examined as a non-verbal source of satisfaction, in pieces such as Richard Sennett's *The Craftsman*. With great sensitivity, Susie Vickery accesses artisans' knowledge and experience to convey a contemporary message of teamwork, collaboration, and the importance of the maker.

Research into Tibetan costume and documentation of the training and working processes of tailors in India, Tibet, and the UK have led to an embroidered graphic book, *It's Not the Job, It's the Cabbage: The Lives of Tailors* (figures 7 and 8). Tailors' stories are illustrated by a combination of traditional stitches and fabrics with digitally altered photographs, tape measures providing the page numbers. The work raises issues of sustainability, probity, and artifice through the idea of *cabbage*, excess material left over after a tailor has completed a garment. Parsimonious tailoring to maximize *cabbage* is seen worldwide, and is a practice that Susie Vickery sees as linking generations of tailors and diverse cultures. She has created a series of works that tell the stories of tailors and *cabbage*, exploring ideas of ethnicity and story-

telling, brought into the 21st century by techniques such as stop-motion digital animation and the form of a graphic book.

Other works are one-off stills, snapshots of people's lives. *Ironing Wallah* is stitched onto a patchwork of photographs on fabric replicating the patchwork construction of the *istriwala*'s workplace (figure 9). *Master Tailor* uses only metallic threads in a range of tones to recreate the light on a pair of brass-handled scissors. *Silk Gents* is a collage of photographs taken in Mumbai's Khadi Bhandar, transferred onto cloth and then stitched into (figure 10). The salesman's image was deleted before the photograph was printed onto the cloth, and then embroidered back in. A ghostly image of the reflection of his hands can still be seen on the counter.

By working serially, Susie Vickery's embroidered animations, and flick-books made from segments of them, suggest the passing of time and the results appear to come to life before the viewer's eyes (figure 11). They also blend images from East and West, a range of religions, periods, and historical artistic styles, to make a simple statement about the continuity of textile traditions. Font styles are selected for their ability to convey a sense of history, and often hand-stitched text replicates computer simulation of old-fashioned typewriter text: typography as topography.

A recent development has been layered panels in which interviews are illustrated in stitch and animation: works such as *One Son and a Good Government Job* and *Much Better* (figures 12 and 13). These works develop using puppetry and stop-motion animation techniques in which embroidered fabric puppets of the interviewees are made and set against a background of stitched and stiffened textile

panels, spaced to create depth in a reference to theatrical wings and flats framed by a proscenium. The pieces are redolent of the Pollock's toy theatres of the Victorian age, perhaps a throwback to orientalism at its mildest and an effort – like much of her work – to saturate the viewing experience with incident: a sort of meta-kitsch in which the audience marvels at the fine embroidery while watching an animated film and listening to a recorded interview. Stories unfold and fictional and factual characters emerge as their various textile trades are described.

In addition to her solo output, Susie Vickery collaborates with artists from a range of disciplines. She is working with an opera singer and a theatre director to develop a stage performance piece on the lives of tailors in which traditional songs found in historical archives are combined with embroidered animation on multiple screens. Accuracy and attention to detail – in the message delivered and in the technique – combine in a technically professional and visually arresting body of work. Behind it is respect and a wealth of in-depth research that gives due dignity to the product and the producer.

IMAGE CAPTIONS:

1. *The Sweated Trades*, 2008. Embroidery, photo transfer; 30 x 22 cm.
2. *Icons of the Ordinary: Indira Lakshmi Mishra – Mother in Law*, 2005. Embroidery, appliqué; 34 x 28 cm.
3. *Icons of the Ordinary, Mulaha Mandal – Farmer*, 2005. Embroidery, appliqué; 34 x 28 cm.
4. *Carbon Footprint*, 2007. Embroidery, appliqué, photo transfer; 48 x 80 cm.
5. *Street Barber*, 2007. Embroidery, appliqué, photo transfer; 21 x 27 cm.
6. *Yak Butter Tea*, 2007. Embroidery, appliqué; 48 x 80 cm.
7. *It's Not the Job, It's the Cabbage: The Lives of Tailors – pages 3–4*, 2009. Embroidery, appliqué, photo transfer; 48 x 70 cm.
8. *Smart & Hollywood*, 2009. Embroidery, appliqué, photo transfer; 48 x 35 cm.
9. *Ironing Wallah*, 2008. Embroidery, appliqué, photo transfer; 35 x 47 cm.
10. *Silk Gents*, 2009. Embroidery, appliqué, photo transfer; 30 x 30 cm.
11. *One Crow for Poverty*, 2010. Embroidery, appliqué, photo transfer; 30 x 40 cm.
12. *One Son and a Good Government Job*, 2011. Embroidery, appliqué, photo transfer; 46 x 61 cm.
13. *Much Better*, 2010. Embroidery, appliqué, photo transfer; 45 x 65 cm.