Second Skin

by Ann Coxon

Almost 100 years ago, on Saturday 25th September 1925 Virginia Woolf wrote a diary entry expressing her irritation at being laid up in bed with a 'headache' (likely a migraine) when she had made other plans. 'Never mind', she tells herself, 'Arrange whatever pieces come your way'. In other words, make the best of the situation; work with what you have to hand; use your creativity to foster resilience. At the end of the entry, Woolf confirms that she has 'pitched into bed exhausted' and is writing by the light of 'a single tallow candle'. We might imagine the flickering light, the crumpled bedsheets, perhaps a quilt on top or draped around her shoulders for warmth. There may have been a glass or a cup on the night-stand, certainly a pen and ink: the essentials, the humble, everyday things that soothe our senses, bring us comfort and meet our needs at times when life strips us bare. These are the items that carry us from one day to the next, existing alongside us, our second skin.

Adopting Woolf's phrase, Arrange Whatever Pieces Come Your Way is the perfectly chosen name of the collaborative artistic duo and long-time friends Sheelagh Boyce and Annabelle Harty. Together they have developed a practice of creating hand-stitched, conceptually intriguing and visually arresting quilts. Though they employ the stitching practices of the resourceful and resilient, their quilts are not the care-worn coverlets of Gee's Bend, Alabama, born of necessity, hardship and a threadbare existence. Rather, they have a cool, modernist aesthetic informed by architecture and the pattern pieces of deconstructed clothing: more Hannah Hocke or Sophie Taeuber-Arp than scrappy home-craft (however poignant). Techniques are borrowed from American or Japanese quilting and combined with other ways of working. As with nearly all handmade quilts, old and new, each completed work tells a story. Cloth has memory. Textiles worn next to the skin or employed to furnish a house carry traces of their owner's life, the marks of existence. Fibres soak up the blood, sweat and tears of their wearers and form around each unique body, clinging onto smell and stain long after they've served their purpose as attire.

The AWPCYW quilts shown in *Second Skin* incorporate deconstructed shirts once belonging to the British architect John Miller. On the reverse are aspects of the North and South elevations of Pillwood House in Cornwall, a holiday home constructed from concrete, steel and sloping glass and designed by Colquhoun and Miller in 1972. In this way, textile and architecture are pieced together, the flip side of a pliable sandwich recalling the long and complex relationship between these two primal forms of human shelter and innovation. It is telling that Sir Nicholas Serota referred to 'the elegance of [Miller's] architectural language' as 'like a well cut suit.' Architectural blueprints and sewing patterns both present their own instructive language enabling the user to turn a flat plan into a 3D structure or garment. Design, of course, goes hand in hand with making. Vision requires skill to come to fruition. Tacit knowledge and the coordination of hand, eye and machine are brought to the building of houses and the sewing of shirts. Picking apart the stitches and deciphering the plans may provide clues about the man whose body and mind they touched.

Clothing and textiles are also present in the works of Ann Sutton and Lisa Milroy, though these clothes are not cut and stitched, but represented as images in the mediums of printmaking and painting. Sutton is a renowned weaver whose life-long practice has been dedicated to exploring the possibilities inherent in the crossing of warp and weft threads. For decades she has been a leader in the field of British weaving as art, craft and design, informed by the Bauhaus weavers and through her understanding of constructivist ideas in post-war Britain. Milroy is a painter whose canvases recall the still-life genre, though often depicting everyday objects laid out like the categorised specimens of a museological or anthropological display.

Sutton's series of prints *Discarded Stockings* (1969) marked a departure from her usual practice of producing loom-woven textiles. The prints were made using the original objects: nylon stockings, knitted tubes and doilies arranged on the printing plate and transferred to ink on paper as abstract forms with dense areas where the fabric mesh crosses over. They ask us to consider the textility of the commonplace. What processes of human intelligence, hand and machine went into the making of these items? What properties of strength and pliability do they embody? How has ink replicated the moiré effect of crossed nylon?

In 1967 Sutton purchased an old sock-knitting machine in a Banbury antique shop that enabled her to make her own pliable tubes. These tubes were then stuffed and formed into giant yarns which could be woven together to create innovative 'fabrics' with selvedges on all four sides and from which she fashioned mats, cushions and even chairs. Sutton follows logical rules and systems to explore the possibilities of her chosen materials. Her sock-knitting machine recalls the stocking looms lauded by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Denis Diderot as computational thinking machines during the height of the Enlightenment. Yet these printed tubes of looped threads; stockings reinforced at the foot and thigh; hand-worked fabrics patterned through series' of loops and holes (and themselves resembling hands) all become evidence of less rational, more haphazard forms of existence.

Lisa Milroy's *Quiet* (2024–25) presents an unsettling scenario in which a pile of grey textiles is found below two flanking vivid red cords that appear to have frayed or snapped under the weight. This heap is oddly tidy, monolithic and monotone, more like a smooth rock than a pile of dirty laundry. We can identify shirt cuffs amongst the striped, dotted, sprigged, checked and herringbone-weave fabrics. Perhaps this smooth pile is covering a secret. Its form might suggest an unseen body, the result of a mysterious event. Perhaps this heap is a collection of thoughts and questions unanswered, a state of not knowing at the heart of the painter's enquiry.

Steps Not Taken (also 2024–25) presents a composition of women's shoes in a regimented arrangement more common within Milroy's work. Here each shoe has been separated from its paired partner allowing the viewer to have the satisfaction of playing a matching game. The shoes appear to float over and under an abstract, coloured ground. They may in fact be images of shoes, painted representations of photographs or prints on paper or cloth, repeated and displaced like a printed textile pattern. We see the shoes from above as open vessels awaiting occupation. Their designs, colours and types are strangely familiar. Whose shoes are these? Why has the artist presented them to us in this way? These are shoes not for wearing, but for contemplating.

Familiarity, routine and ritual are concepts considered by Julian Stair, a leading potter, whose work *Quotidian* (2015) takes the form of a full 16 place dinner service. The set of plates, bowls, cups, saucers, teapots etc were laid out and used (or we could also say 'activated') by guests as a living sculpture or performance which was documented by a fixed camera. The subsequent footage was meticulously edited to create the film shown here. Seen from above, the table resembles a canvas, each plate and pot adding to the pattern of shapes and forms appearing on its surface like an abstract composition. A soundtrack of clicking, clanking and chatting accompanies the gradually changing table as the meal is consumed and pure form gives way to social action. Despite its title, this is clearly no everyday dinner time. Stair's mastery in the medium of clay is clear, but so too is his interest in its place within our lives. Form and function combine.

Stair has replicated several of his pots at a larger scale. Domestic vessels certainly become sculptural objects when they can no longer be held in the hand or placed on a table, but instead occupy a place in the gallery, inviting us to circumnavigate them. The point is to see our ordinary items with the eyes of a gallery-goer. The artist has said, 'If people can accept that the small vessel performs its everyday use while also being sculptural, then I will have achieved my aim.' Art and life are not distinct. They both come to meet us where we are, asking us to recognise the value of the domestic, the ordinary, the overlooked and to arrange whatever pieces come our way.