

Fiona Metcalfe, artist and maker



Fiona brought a little bit of magic into the Pump Room's Orangery with her November talk to the AMA. Speaking variously about inspiration, technique, and her own life story, she had set up a display of textured images and artist's books that began with her early work as a maker, and continued in her trajectory as an artist who, not yet quite confident in her new role, was emerging from a slightly selfrestricting, or perhaps selfdeprecating, chrysalis. We had to imagine a further ghost table since who knows where Fiona's skills and inspiration will lead her next? This was above all a confident, and very engaging, talk.

The seeds of Fiona's life as an artist were sown early, growing up in a household that to a significant extent revolved around art. Her professional life, however, was in social work, a stressful career for which making 'pretty things' proved to be an antidote. After negotiating a little more free time in her professional life, she studied in a part time textile course for a year, and began exhibiting as a 'maker' from c. 2010.

Using print, collage, and paint for a background, Fiona takes a 'thread for a walk' as a means of drawing, producing quirky images that she describes as naïve but which are extremely pleasing, both for her drawing skills and her sense and composition, as well as for the harmony of their colours. Using free embroidery via her trusty Bernina, as well as hand stitching, she draws inspiration from her garden, so that flowers and birds were, and to some extent still are, her dominant motifs. As a maker she has been successful in this comfort zone. Recent retirement, however, has enabled experiment and play, with a move towards abstraction, a wider range of techniques, and much enlarged subject matter, including landscapes drawing on her fascination with nature, and the nature of light, and social commentary that draws on her professional work. An image once begun evolves organically – and presents a variant of the classic artists' dilemma. To stitch or not to stitch? At what point is the work finished? Some black and white work was entirely drawn with stitching.



Most of Fiona's pieces are layered, using collage and stitching to introduce texture and elements of 3D, as well as to refine, alter, and conceal, parts of the image. Fiona spoke of viewpoints: small windows of unique visual and emotional experience, illustrating this with an image that was tessellated with image fragments, 'view finders' into a world beyond. A strong sense of design held the piece together and the paper support, too, was allowed to breathe. Much of Fiona's work is framed, for sound practical reasons, although a tension is created for the viewer and, indeed, for the artist, since framing disallows the tactile qualities of the finished piece, now covered by glass. Her artist's books, however, are cabinet pieces that can be handled; and her sketchbooks,

Fiona Metcalfe, artist and maker continued



Borrowed Landscape 2018

experimental pieces strung together in a scroll, are a visual and tactile delight. Surface naivety is an illusion. Fiona spent much time talking about her various sources of inspiration and motivation: a deeper stream of consciousness underpins her creativity.

This was a generous talk in which Fiona shared some of her techniques and resources. Supports used include calico, lutradur, heavyweight paper, silk, and spiderweb fabric – the last first rescued from a bunch of flowers, in which the wrapping gave even greater pleasure than the flowers themselves. All these take both printing and stitching, and can be collaged.

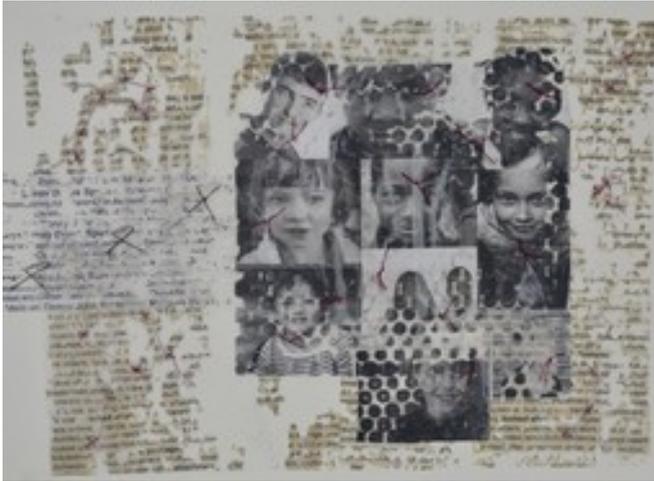
Stitching may be effected from the front or the back of the support. Variations in tension, and choices of thread colour, all affect and modify the finished piece. Found and altered materials, including text and photographs, may be incorporated. A current fascination is 'breakdown printing' which Fiona uses to produce a coloured ground incorporating fragments of imagery. The images can be created directly on the screen she uses for printing, using inks; or, which she finds particularly interesting, using transfer techniques and matt medium to 'break down' a photocopied image which then reproduces as disassociated and fragmented viewpoints of colour sometimes, but not always, retaining hints of the original image. One patterned example shown retained, for example, strong hints of bare branches against a winter sky. Collaged and cut, such prints can be used to introduce pattern, can be worked on as grounds for new images, or may be collaged to produce dream landscapes that can be allowed to break out, in their turn, from the strictly rectangular format of traditional landscape painting. There's a Japanese influence here. 'Borrowed landscapes' allow the world beyond to be glimpsed from within the microcosm of the garden; and there's a serenity in much of Fiona's more recent work that differs from, but sits in harmony with, the joyous play of some of her earlier pieces.



Coastal Path 2018

Humans, too, are a resource. Fiona has started a textile group that offers support and feedback; and recommended the idea of small focus groups to her audience. She runs workshops, in which the learning curve so often runs both ways. And finally, of course, she has won the open commission to decorate Leamington's Art gallery this Christmas. This project is growing in scope beyond the original commission – which was just for the decoration of the tree and

Fiona Metcalfe, artist and maker continued



Lost Children 2018

Tammy has been enlisted to help. What will it look like? Bird forms flying about, definitely, embellished with text that comes across as textured pattern. But for the whole instillation we'll have to wait until December to find out.

There was again an excellent turn out, and it was good to see some of our new members. Like one of Fiona's signature birds, the hour flew very quickly.

See more at www.fionametcalfe.co.uk

Margaret Condon



Borrowed Landscape 2 2018