

Darning a yarn

DARNING, KNITTING AND EMBROIDERY ARE CENTRAL TO THE PRACTICE OF CELIA PYM. IN HER HANDS MENDING, ONCE A HIDDEN ACT, BECOMES A PORTABLE AND VISCERAL FORM OF PUBLIC ART

CELIA PYM IS PASSIONATE about darning and especially the evidence of darning, which not only gives her a sense of 'seeing the making', but also bestows a weightiness and heft on a garment.

She manifests this passion in many different arenas – on the internet, in public spaces, in practical handiwork groups, even in the Dissecting Room of King's College London, and is currently one of five artists in 'What Need I Do to Make it OK', a touring exhibition curated by Liz Cooper', which commenced in 2015 and continues until early 2018.

Almost immediately after leaving university Pym received a grant to support a year of creative work in a country that she had never visited. Her appreciation of Ikat weaving and also the novels of Haruki Murakami and Banana Yoshimoto persuaded her to choose Japan. Each day Pym was committed to adding to the enormous scarf, which she was knitting while travelling around the country, staying in one place until the wool acquired there had been used, then moving on. In fact, many of Pym's projects have a nomadic quality feel to them, for her practice is

often taken out of the studio and into the public domain, and she does point out how eminently portable sewing and knitting needles are.

'The Catalogue of Holes' is a truly socially directed project in which Pym restores the clothes of strangers. In such transactions, trust between the owners and Pym is paramount, for these are people who are handing over garments rich in memories and many emotions.

There is the poignant tale of a mother's jumper inherited, but disliked, by her daughter. Moths damaged it and, racked by guilt, she looked to Pym for help. 'The Catalogue' had its provenance in a sweater belonging to her great uncle, where the profuse darning completely concealed the original garment; all these covered holes set Pym to contemplating the 'real', unrepaired hole.

It was in a temporarily vacant premises, the walls lined with empty, expectant coat-rails that Pym ran a mending activity and she found that visitors eagerly brought her damaged garments. There was a certain sense of formality when Pym noted details of the garment on slips of paper, but also

Celia Pym, *first one's the best*, 2015.
60 sports socks, wool
and acrylic yarn.
182 x 220cm

PHOTOGRAPH: MICHELE PANZERI

an intense intimacy when she has to put her hands into the stockings of unknown wearers. Some owners become devoted to certain battered articles and treasure the patched version above any replacements, which might well cost comparatively little.²

As the hangers started filling up, Pym observed the visitors' intense interest in the holes in others' clothes. She feels that people find it oddly compelling to watch an everyday activity such as mending being carried out with conscious care and consideration and, happily, Pym 'loves' wielding her darning needles in the public domain.

The intriguingly varied training that Pym, a qualified nurse, has undertaken includes studying sculpture as an undergraduate, reading Visual and Environmental Studies at Harvard and constructed textiles at the Royal College of Art. This diversity seems to grant her a variety of approaches to expressing the relationships between herself, her work and her experience and interpretation of the universe around us. In another mending project she had, at her short-term disposal, a disused shop prior to its demolition for the Olympic Games building development. She thought how interesting it would be to have, a team, not of sports players, but of darners to be at hand for repairs to athletes' clothes, and this workshop was an example of what that might be. She bought many sports socks – with their unthreatening allusions to the utilitarian and to athleticism – and against their machine-made perfection the dams looked 'lumpy'. She cut into the footwear so participants could practise darning, and as the socks were elasticised – which disturbs the tension of the fabric – it meant that repairing them was much more difficult.

Socks also feature in 'DR', a project in which Pym set up her mending table in the Dissecting Room of King's College London, where staff and anatomy students brought their clothes for her to work on. Here, too, she installed *first one's the best* – which consisted of 60 much-darned sports socks, which injected contrastive splashes of colour into the room, and, wholly unexpectedly, also a humorous element. However, it was important that the students witness the devotion and

'respect' with which Pym fulfilled her task – qualities so relevant to these future medical practitioners. Colours that do not match are what excite Pym. 'It's a mistake to think that you can find a perfect colour to match whatever you are repairing.' She is an ardent proponent of visible mending, which brings its own contribution to enriching the textile's appearance, as in the yellow stitching on the pocket of a pair of blue jeans.

The Nouveau Musée National de Monaco allowed Pym to work with their collection of ballet and opera costumes, which bore full evidence of quite rough repair, perhaps done hurriedly in the wings in the course of a performance. She was attracted to 'the most broken' of these 59 costumes, whose exit papers were yellow tags marked 'S' for 'sortie', but were too loved by staff to be discarded. Because of the fragility of the fabric, Pym had to use a tiny needle and a running stitch, which travelled in different directions but, even so, these were major interventions, which might well irk traditionalists. Pym and companions drove around Monaco and the south of France, wearing these costumes and dancing in venues such as homes for the elderly whilst a Golden Cape from the collection was used by Pym in a workshop in Iceland. It is not only the useful lives of socks and sweaters and NHS sheets that Celia Pym is extending. Her creative darning betters the fabric of our lives, alerts our thoughts to the importance of mending and caring, and to the erosion wrought by time – as in the favourite jumper with elbows worn thin. ©

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REFERENCES

1. *Embroidery*, July/August 2016, pp48-51. Interview with Liz Cooper.

2. While writing this essay I encountered the following anecdote and Pym was intrigued by the rejoinder made by an 18th century actor who, when admonished by a friend for wearing stockings with many holes and advised to get them mended, airily replied: 'I am above it; better have 20 holes than one darn ... a hole is the accident of the day, but a darn is premeditated poverty.'

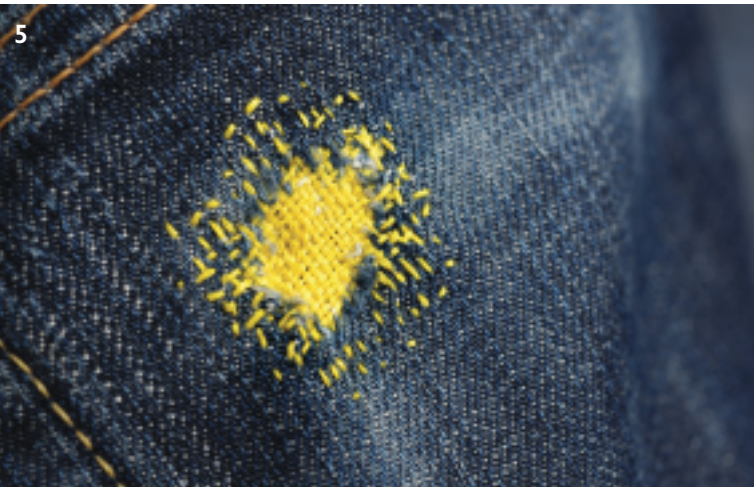
Derek Parker, 'Caught in the Act', *Slightly Foxed*, Autumn 2016, no 51. London: Slightly Foxed Ltd, p92



IMAGES 2-4 PHOTOGRAPHY: MICHELE PANZERI. IMAGE 5 PHOTOGRAPHY: DOUGLAS AITFIELD



- 1-2: Portraits from 'Mending and Anatomy: Parallel Practices', Dr Richard Wingate and Celia Pym. Owner's own damaged item and hand darning with various yarns. Dissecting Room, Kings College London, 2014. Sponsored by Crafts Council, UK and Kings Cultural Institute
- 3: Celia Pym at Darning Desk, 'Mending and Anatomy: Parallel Practices'. Dissecting Room, Kings College London, 2014
- 4: Hope's Sweater, 1951 (and detail above), 2011. Moth-eaten sweater and wool darning. 30 x 40 x 3cm
- 5: Hole from carrying wallet in pocket, number 1. Cotton darning on jeans, 2008



What do I Need to Do to Make it OK? is on show at The National Centre for Craft & Design, Sleaford, Lincolnshire from 8 March-14 May 2017.

www.nationalcraftanddesign.org.uk