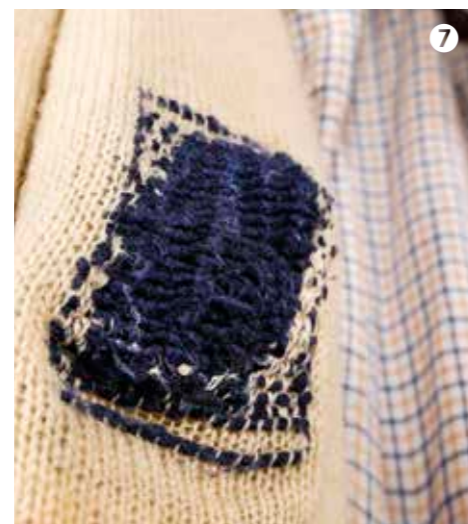




1 Treasures from the rag pile: traditional knits discovered at Annemor Sundbø's shoddy factory 2 Celia at her darning desk 3 'First one's the best' was an exhibition of darned sports socks 4 Celia collaborated with textile artist Lasmin Salmon



Darning is central to Celia's work



5 Celia's darning was inspired by her aunt 6 + 7 Examples of visible darning 8 Celia worked with students in Kings College's dissecting room



'Love Mountain' at the Royal Festival Hall encouraged people to knit from a huge yarn pile

MEET THE ARTISTS

Celia Pym

Taking time with people and with broken things marks out Celia Pym as a darning detective, as Katy Bevan investigates



I MET Celia Pym when she took part in *Knit 2 Together*, an exhibition I co-curated in 2005. She had been knitting her way around Japan, using blue yarns that she acquired on her travels, her time measured in rows of stitches.

Starting her career as a teacher, Celia went on to study textiles at The Royal College of Art, then to train as a nurse – an unlikely trajectory for an artist, although she doesn't see it like that. "The work is always important, the teaching and nursing is life, it's people. And I love people's stories," she says.

For Celia, it all started when she inherited a sweater from her Uncle Roly that had been knitted for him by his sister Elizabeth. He was an artist, and the arms were shredded where his sleeves had rubbed against his drawing board. Elizabeth mended his sweater each time a new hole appeared, until the arms were held together entirely by darning. The care taken made an impression on Celia. "I value tenderness – it is important to me as an approach to working. There is a tenderness in noticing holes, worn out things, damage, and also in handling objects, garments, materials."

In 2005 Celia visited Annemor Sundbø in Norway, a knitter and weaver who ran the last remaining shoddy factory in Norway, Torridal Tweed, where old knitted garments are recycled to create new yarns. Among the rag pile of discarded knitwear, Annemor discovered a treasure of Norwegian cultural and textile history – hand-knitted stockings, mittens and jumpers, many using original folk patterns.

Annemor rescued some of the finer examples of historic knitting, documenting the patterns for future knitters and researching the recurrence of particular patterns, while Celia took on the unenviable task of trying to mend one of these jumpers. You might think that darning a jumper in such an extreme state of disrepair is not worth the time, but for Celia it is about care – the time taken to stitch these repairs gives occasion to reflect on damage and the process of mending.

As part of the project *Parallel Practices* in 2014, Pym worked with Dr Richard Wingate in the Dissecting Room at Kings College London, taking her sewing into a clinical setting. At her desk Celia mended the medical students' broken things, while the students were cutting up bodies – the parallels between sewing up worn-out garments and broken bodies are evident.

'First one's the best', is a collection of 60 cut-up and darned athletic socks, part of the 2015 show curated by Liz Cooper

called *What do I need to do to make it OK?* "I was trying to get that feeling of when you do something the first time and it comes out just right," recalls Celia. "Your first attempt at a new skill can be really good – like beginner's luck. Then you practise and practise to get to a good place; of course you can't get that initial naivety again, but instead in this piece you get a lot of good attempts at it."

Last year I met Celia at the Royal Festival Hall where she was working with textile artist Lasmin Salmon on the 'Love the Yarn' project for ActionSpace, the development agency for artists with learning disabilities. Lasmin and Celia developed a process of shared knitting, working side-by-side, to gradually add pieces to a larger work that is both exuberant and joyful. '59 Sorties' was a project involving the choreographer of Les Ballets de Monte-Carlo, reviving worn-out operatic costumes for a last hurrah and "dancing them to pieces" in workshops that enabled groups to dress up and imagine themselves as ballet dancers.

It's all about mending things, people and minds: "I am a darning detective – honing my skills of observation, thinking in pattern, working out ways to make it okay." ☺

www.celiapym.com www.thecrafter.me

What do I need to do to make it OK? tour dates include The National Centre for Craft & Design, Sleaford, 8 March to 14 May 2017 (www.nationalcraftanddesign.org.uk) and Rugby Art Gallery & Museum, 9 September 2017 to 13 January 2018 (www.ragm.org.uk)

