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VIEW

What Do I Need to Do to Make it OK?
Pump House Gallery, Battersea, South
London SW11 4NJ 27 August – 1 November
2015 www.pumphousegallery.org.uk Touring
through 2017

"The needle is used to repair damage. It's a claim to forgiveness." Louise Bourgeois. Stitch can be used to decorate, improve and mend. This exhibition is an investigation into damage and repair in landscape, bodies and minds by five artists – Dorothy Caldwell, Saidhbhín Gibson, Karina Thompson, Freddie Robins and Celia Pym.

Traditionally intended to offer an invisible solution Celia Pym uses darning as a form of expression, here held up for all to see. Her work is concerned with care: how we support and help others, illustrated through fixing other people's things. Darning someone else's garment can be an intimate process, repairing the part that is most often in touch with the body; just as emotional support can be intimate. When things go awry it's not always within our power to fix them so it might be better to ask what do I need to do to make it ok? We try to smooth the fissures, although the cracks still remain – even a good repair leaves a scar – while the time taken to stitch these small repairs gives occasion to reflect on the damage and the process of mending.

Pym studied Textiles at The Royal College of Art and is also a qualified nurse so I asked her

what bearing this has on her work. "Nursing is such intimate work and requires great tenderness and care because you are with people when they are feeling vulnerable. And you have to touch and hold and physically support someone as well as being super observant, noticing changes in colour, temperature, temperament, mood."

As part of the project *Parallel Practices*, sponsored by Crafts Council UK and Kings Cultural Institute in 2014, Pym worked with Dr Richard Wingate in the Dissecting Room at Kings College London. Whilst there she was able to demonstrate care and craft-skill through mending the medical students' broken things, while the students were learning the study of anatomy – through the dissection of human tissue. There's an uncomfortable parallel between an ageing garment and the body that has inhabited it. In between the mending and the studying there were conversations about the generosity of donors and their families who give their bodies to science, about respect for the fabric of people's bodies and about healing and reconstruction – how some things that are broken can be repaired while others cannot. The parallels between putting together a fragmented body or mind become apparent in the quiet time and reflection that slow making allows. As the skin thins, a helping stitch is not far away.

First One's the Best comprises 60 sports socks visibly mended with brightly coloured yarn.

These nylon socks weren't in need of darning but were deliberately cut to provide an opportunity to practise, much like the students in the DR. Celia says, "Your first attempt at a new skill can be really good – like beginner's luck. Then you practise and practise to get to that good place, though of course you can't get that initial naivety again but instead in this piece you get a lot of good attempts at it." Oddly the heavy darns rendered the socks rather less athletic than they were.

Pym's *I Think I Will* is cross stitch worked in woollen yarn on a cotton background. To undertake such a large and intricate design takes some gumption; the title refers to committing to the process. This is a piece that had been in the planning for some time based on drawings of darns. "When Liz Cooper, curator, decided [the show's name] I thought the title sounded like an instruction to follow my instincts, I thought it was making it ok for me and my instincts to make this cross stitch – it will be ok and in fact might be good."

At the Pump Gallery *I Think I Will* was in the same room as Freddie Robins' *I'm so Bloody Sad* that captures a knitted torso – head hanging down, spiked with knitting needles, arms lank and useless. By questioning and admitting to weakness or despair and coming out the other side, these five artists make it better than okay. ●●● **Katy Bevan**

Hope's sweater, 1951, 2011, First one's the best, 2015

VIEW



SELVEDGE 93