



THE ART OF MENDING

Daisy Gray meets CELIA PYM, the professional damer who is sewing her way into the art world – one stitch at a time

Photographs – Tara Darby

ON THE WALL OF CELIA PYM'S STUDIO hangs a fieldworker's bonnet, unusual looking, well worn and with a tail of fabric to shield the wearer's neck from the sun's rays. The hat was a gift to her and was used unknowingly by its previous owner as scrap fabric for patchworking. Pointing out its weight and sun-bleached colour, Pym ponders who it might have belonged to and how many hours its owner spent toiling under a scorching sun while sporting the delicately stitched peaked hat.

In her modest home studio, in a quiet north London street, almost all of the weird and wonderful objects on Celia Pym's walls have stories to tell of lives once lived. A trained nurse, Pym's life has long revolved around people, unfailingly trying to repair physical damage, heal wounds and generally patch them up. But, nowadays, she no longer mends bodies, although she continues to be deeply inspired by the worn and the broken. Because this one-time nurse is now an artist and professional damer.

The art of mending began for Pym in 2007, driven by her overriding resourcefulness and a deep-rooted desire to care. "There were holes to be mended in a much-loved jumper that once belonged to my great-uncle," she says, wearing an unusual blue-darned-in-blue cable-knit sweater mended, of course, by herself. Using Thérèse de Dillmont's 1884 *Encyclopédie of Needlework*, Pym taught herself the practical art of darning, learning by example, unfazed by the book's examples of immaculate needlework.

"My great-uncle was a painter," she tells me, while laying out a slightly lopsided jumper onto her desk, pointing out the areas of deepest wear and tear. "He used to lean forwards a lot onto his forearms as he worked," she says, which explains the warped rows of colour-coded repair patiently stitched onto each elbow. Certain movements unconsciously embedded into each sleeve have now been frozen in time by Pym's little, blue darned stitches and, like a talisman, her memories have been wrapped up into a tangible object, captured in every darn.

Imprints of the body have long been part of Pym's darning. "It's like, when you take off a pair of tights, and they keep the shape of your body afterwards," she laughs. "The same goes for the clothes we wear every day. Sculpting and shaping our limbs and body, they become a unique kind of fingerprint – pieces of our personalities." Like echoes of the body, each piece of clothing Pym mends – from tampered sleeves, thumb-holes and the heels of socks – has been moulded to its owner, items sometimes so well-worn and well-loved they are barely still intact.



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Her most recent commission took her to the archive of damaged costumes in the New National Museum of Monaco. Thousands of beautiful but defunct costumes from the State Ballet and Opera House end up there, many in terrible disrepair. 'Almost 60 costumes in the collection had an S label,' says Pym, 'meaning they are being removed from the collection, but not thrown away'.

This grey-area sparked opportunity for Pym, with every piece retaining a concealed value and life. One piece in particular took Pym's attention, a golden cape, a magical object, classical in form and richly embellished. Fit for a theatrical king, it once paraded under spotlights on the grand baroque stage of the Palais Garnier, Paris' opera house. The garment was decaying under layer upon layer of sequins, so Pym laboriously tacked together the layers of silk and cotton, stitch by stitch, and then took the newly restored cape on tour, inviting people to try it on. 'Some 60 people of all ages and sizes paraded, performed and danced in the cape – from farmers in Scotland to schoolchildren in their playground in south London. The more we performed, the more damage there was, and the more mending was needed and so on,' she explains. Documented through a series of photographs by Michele Pansieri, the process tells an honest story, the journey of the cape and its many lives, overlaid with a golden shimmer.

But not all pieces that find their way to her have such a fine pedigree. Friends regularly pass on worn-out family blankets and hand-knitted French sweaters, on which Pym's darts of bright colour are integrated into the fabric's original structures and patterns. Sometimes they are then passed on again. Colour choices are based on what yarn is in her studio, 'and the mending is always visible, you can't fake it'. Pym reuses what she's already got, playing with the contrast, often feeling too self-conscious to pick out a colour herself. 'When a wool runs out, the colour changes'. It's as simple as that.

Having spent the summer in residency at the Penland School of Craft in North Carolina, Pym's next endeavour is tapestry. She shows me her practice sock, a knitted amalgamation of organically created holes, tapestry and darning. Compelled by new ideas and reacting intuitively to damage, the free-form wobbly shapes built on frame-looms form the beginning of her next project, marrying skills together, and constructing without a plan.

Epitomising themes of nostalgia, Celia tells the story behind a pair of mended gardening gloves, a white pair with woollen darts on each finger. 'I bought them in Japan in 2010. They are a prototype for every pair of gloves that I've ever mended,' she says. Like an index system or a catalogue, each coloured stitch maps the mended damage from another pair of gloves, all demonstrated on one item. As if the gloves can talk, they represent all of the people Pym has met, reminding her of the intimacy of human error and damage. Just like the cloth bonnet, the detail and beauty of each darned fingertip leaves us pondering the story that lies hidden in the seams.

Unique and artistic, and pragmatic through and through, Pym's work is embedded with sentiment. As a Loewe Craft Prize finalist in 2017, and teacher of an MA in textiles at London's Royal College of Art, Pym continues to educate others on material relationships, inspiring connections with materiality, mending and observation. *

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