

THE TEXTILE ART MAGAZINE

embroidery

**Julie
Arkell**
INSIDE HER
WORLD OF
CURIOUS
CHARACTERS

CELIA PYM
*When mending
and meaning
go hand in hand*

Michael
Brennand-Wood
CHOREOGRAPHING
THE NEEDLE

plus
**ANNE
KELLY**
Emily Jo
Gibbs
**WILL
CRUIKSHANK**



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THE THREADS THAT BIND US

Celia Pym has built a practice around mending that bears witness to the personal stories and the worn histories that she repairs

Celia Pym's practice is kind. Exemplifying a habit of thoughtful, quiet care, Pym mends things. And it all began with her Uncle Roly's sweater. 'He was no longer alive,' says Pym, 'so there was no pressing need to mend it. That wasn't the point. I was just incredibly moved by this feeling that the damage represented a trace of his body and that it was evidence of a kind of neglect, something left unnoticed.' That was sixteen years ago and articulating her reasons for the repair is far from straightforward. Having shared a house with her uncle and his sister from the age of ten, Pym inevitably felt grief at his death yet, she has since realised, the emotional pull of his sweater wasn't about her uncle but her aunt, who had died a few years before and who'd habitually darned his clothes. 'The thing about the sweater was that there was tons of evidence of my aunt's care. I hadn't been around when she'd died and, as making is my way of processing and understanding things, possibly there's something about me using this work to take time to grieve.' With hindsight, clearly a form of catharsis, but at the time Pym responded to the mending pragmatically. 'I was at art school and developing my practice and I was just really curious about the problem that had presented itself to me. I'd gone to the library to look up how to mend because I was interested in the stitches my aunt

had made. But I didn't have a fully formed thesis. It was super-instinctive.' Pym never questioned the place the mended sweater played in her arts practice. 'When I started, it was definitely work because it came into the studio.' Immersed at the time in the work of Rachel Whiteread and Doris Salcedo and how they made negative space concrete, Pym began to see the holes in the sweater in terms of the absent body. 'As a child I used to love taking off my clothes and seeing the shape of my body left behind, such as in my tights. So I mended the sweater and I thought, I like this, I like the way it's turned out – let me see if I can mend some more things.' Other than that brief research into darning in order to contextualise her aunt's stitches, Pym was unconcerned by technique or, indeed, about doing it right. 'It's not really a story I come from. I've always watched my family members do things just the way they wanted. I saw it more like drawing.' Though thrilled by the technical embroidery skills of fellow RCA students like Richard McVetis, whom Pym knows, she knew that she didn't want to be that way. 'I'd never studied textiles. I'd done some weaving and I was interested in their materiality but it wasn't until the last couple of years, where there's been such a phenomenal explosion of interest in mending, that people have

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1. *Darned Paper Cardigan*, 2019.
72 x 64cm. Newspaper and wool.
2. *Darned Paper Sweater*, 2020.
72 x 79cm. Newspaper and wool.
3. *Raly's Sweater Mended*, 2007.
Various wools.

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