What Remains

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Lately I've been wondering about what it means to lead a creative life. Clothed as we all are by a 24-hour news cycle, embellished by swatches of ecological, political and social violence, the arts can feel frankly worthless. We speculate under a veil of anxiety on how useful it is to dedicate a life to making. These are questions that textile artist Celia Pym has asked herself many times. Her creative output is bookended by two distinct experiences with the messiness and majesty of life and death: firstly by working part-time in the stroke ward of her local hospital and then by training as a nurse. "I really couldn't make a living, but then I was also asking myself what the purpose was to all of this, to being in the studio. To making work," she says.

In May of this year she published *On Mending*, her reflection on 17 years of making and restoring. She offers 10 personal stories, each told through the rehabilitation of a single, at first unremarkable garment. Central to the book is her long-form collaborative exercise of tending to strangers' clothes. She writes about what it means to put your arm inside the sleeve of someone else's jumper and giving space to what is missing. "I have always been moved by the intimacy of caring for someone and the professional distance you need to let someone know, as you hold them, that you are there for them," she says, drawing on her experience of working within a team of skilled nurses. "Part of the work of mending is about how grief doesn't have to remain the same, you recognise that life keeps moving forward and because I'm handling real things, people's clothes and stories, the impact is more direct for me."

After she stopped nursing, Pym received a grant from the Crafts Council established to reveal the mutual benefits of collaboration between medicine and makers. Pym was paired with Richard Wingate, the Head of Anatomy at King's College London who invited her to set up a mending desk in the corner of the dissecting room. The project was completely open-ended and brought together all of the bits that make up and interest Pym. "It was and is a very special place. There are around 90 bodies each placed on single tables, so it is intense. At the time I kept thinking about all of those questions around intimacy and care, and I was thinking about this difference between a worn-out thing and a new thing. The privilege of caring for someone or something," she says. The loose concept was that Pym would mend things that the medical students brought to her. "I would just sit there and wait for them to come to see me surrounded by colourful balls of wool, sat in the corner of this brightly lit, chemical-scented room." As the students would often be overcome by the intensity of the experience, Pym's workstation became an informal fainting desk where she would sit, listen and stitch.

"Thinking back to this notion of slowness, I ended up being in that dissecting room for six months. I mended a lot of things and that was kind of it, but having that space within the room really changed it — I wondered how that might be applied to other places. What if I sat in my college every day mending clothes and just wait to see what happens? How does this activity change dynamics and offer an opportunity for a conversation that doesn't normally

Fraser's Jacket, mended 2022

WYP PYM test sweater (detail), 2021–23

happen?" she says. "I think the mending work is this: if we don't have to look directly at one another, it's much easier to make a bit of space for emotions that we might not otherwise recognise. When we're talking about a sweater that your late father once wore, we're handling it together, touching it. We are communicating through it."

Pym is loved for her idiosyncratic, probing mending technique. She has captivated a generation who, overwhelmed by the amount of information that bombards them, crave the reality of touch. Her practice is not about making things good or even new. Pym celebrates a garment's history, exhuming its wear and tear. In her hands, a brightly patched hole in a navy jumper announces its presence. "I think mending is a less practical, more essential thing than repair. It's not about something being functional again. Repair is about something being in use whereas mending is about doing something a bit wider. You are looking after it, keeping it okay, keeping it going."

Recently Pym's ideas have been expressed within the more expansive space of the art gallery, but her commitment to mending remains driven by her enthusiasm for encountering people and their stories. In *On Mending* we are introduced to Elizabeth's cardigan, Lara and Lolu's backpacks, Bill's sweater and Freddie's family rugs. "It has been really special for people to trust me with their things, which may otherwise seem ordinary to everyone else, and mend them. I often say that I am responding to a problem, rather than originating something. I hadn't realised the book would bring attention to my work. I thought of it as a chance to make a shift in what I was doing but suddenly everyone wanted to see my older work," she says. "In my head I have all this new stuff bubbling, but there is all this demand and work I'm having to do to represent the old things. It's fantastic, but I'm not really clear or sure about where the new stuff fits."

This new stuff includes a series of embroidered "drawings" on paper and a run of mended paper bags that Pym has been working on for four years. She is also almost two years into an ongoing project with the designer Siri Johansen, co-founder of Waste Yarn Project, an initiative that repurposes surplus yarns to create one-of-a-kind knitwear pieces. "When Siri and I meet, an idea is fluid, and we aren't sure what the end goal is. Are we making a blanket? Or actually is it a wall hanging? Or let's wait and figure it out and it'll come together. Our collaboration is a bit unusual because I've never worked with fashion before. I'm very slow because the nature of hand stitch is slow. So that's why my speed is what it is. I'm very content if things take me a long time."

We often cling to the notion that craftspeople or those working with textile have a very particular and benevolent mode of existing in the world. Pym's process – if seen via Instagram or on the pages of a magazine or even on the cool-white wall of an art gallery — could convey the illusion that her day-to-day life is entirely one of peace, harmony and solitude. Yet in reality, her time is shaped by the emotional and physical toil of the public-facing events she either runs or partakes in. Add to that too the demands of living in a city like London. The dullness of admin. Pym folds in and out of two quite opposite ways of being. "There's this funny thing that people think about artists, that they're these undisciplined people who are just sort of having a great time, at their own pace. I feel like I work really hard. I just did two really long days with Siri in the factory, but it would be hard to quantify exactly what we did. I've always liked working hard and there are all sorts of energies I need to have when I am engaging with other people, looking at their garments that need repair. I also really need time on my own to figure stuff out," Pym says. "I really, really, really need it. I get a lot of energy from being with other people, but a full day alone in the studio is heaven to me. It feels like a kind of freedom, there are a tonne of possibilities."

Many of us have been edged into trying darning – the stitch which Pym uses mostly — as a kind of therapy. Pym says: "A question I often get, and it's funny because it is both annoying and a good question is, is it meditative? I think, well, yes, it is, although I don't meditate, I can get into a zone and when that happens it's a total treat. But I also have many days in-between where I'm working it out and it's amongst all of the administration of life that we all have to do. This idea that the studio is a sacred space when at the moment, honestly, I'm going to get 10 boxes of work back from museums today and I don't know where to put them. The question is always a funny one because it taps into wellness."

"When I started nursing, lots of people were surprised but also really supportive and also not surprised. My dad said: 'Are you sure, because you might miss a creative life?' and I didn't really understand what he meant. It just didn't seem practical to me, I was feeling so frustrated, so why would I miss this? And then I worked for a year as a nurse, and when I was coming to the point where I decided that it wasn't right for me, his comment came back to me. I finally understood it. A creative life is more essential to me than I had realised. It is not precisely a choice — it's what I'm trained in — but also it is kind of *in* me, so I should be doing it." Pym returned to the studio with a different sense of commitment. "I tried really hard for a year to do something else but then I thought, why not just commit to this, even if it is as difficult as it is, just stick to it. When you commit, you don't have to think about it. You're just doing it." §

Elizabeth's Cardigan, mended 2002–2016

Fraser's Jacket (detail), mended 2022

Mended Croissant Bag, 2023

Roly's Sweater, mended 2007

Rolf's Sweater, waiting to be mended

Siri's Sweater (detail), mended 2021

Mended Cheese Bag, 2022

Yuri's Work Apron, waiting to be mended

Mended Bread Bag, 2021

Siri's Sweater, mended 2021