

BATTLE JACKETS, CRAFT AND FOLK CULTURE

RESEARCH THROUGH CREATIVE PRACTICE

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Abstract

Battle jackets are a significant means of expression and subcultural identification for metal fans. There is a resurgent interest in folk art and craft amongst contemporary artists, some of whom are influenced by metal subcultures. This analysis refers to art practice and folk culture in order to situate the battle jacket within this tradition. First-hand experience of making jackets is fundamental to understanding their importance within the subculture. Thus the author references his own artworks as well as interviews with jacket makers undertaken in July and August 2014 at Sonisphere and Bloodstock music festivals, UK.

Introduction

This paper refers to fine art practice as a methodology to understand the importance of battle jackets as artifacts that embody the values and practices of contemporary heavy metal music, subculture and fandom. Whilst there is a growing body of academic literature dealing with many aspects of metal subculture, there has not yet been an in-depth examination of battle jackets in particular. Several publications feature metal dress, fashion and costume in the context of street style (Polhemus, 2010, Sims, 2014) but do not deal with the specific making practices of the battle jacket. My research uses interviews conducted with battle jacket makers as well as my own perspective as an artist and jacket-maker. To usefully contextualize the battle jacket, links are made between the literature of subcultural studies (including metal studies) and art history and theory. The conflation and contrasting of diverse cultural traditions and perspectives is apparent in the work of a number of contemporary artists as an attempt to more effectively analyse metal culture. In this vein art practice can offer a unique perspective on the significance of battle jacket making, which is itself a creative visual tradition.

I will describe how my own research uses painting practices to understand the significance of battle jackets, not only within metal subcultures but as a part of wider cultural discourses. I use Richard Sennett's concept of material consciousness (2000) and James Elkins' comparisons between painting and alchemy (1999) to explain the importance of craft processes in jacket making, underlining how my own creative work helps to give insight into these aspects. I then discuss a number of particular processes used by metal fans I have interviewed to customize their jackets. The work of artist Ben Venom (2013) illustrates how these techniques can be used to create artworks that demonstrate links between battle jackets and historic folk art traditions. In the final section I argue that consideration of jacket making as a folk art practice is fundamental to appreciating its true importance.

History and context

Influenced by the 'patch jackets' of motorcycle clubs (Alford & Ferriss, 2008), the practice of creating customized jackets displaying collections of band logos probably began in the late 1970s and is now widespread in metal subcultures. Particularly prominent in the heavy metal and thrash scenes of the 1980s, battle jackets became an external marker of the serious metal fan or band member. Recently these jackets have risen in popularity once more (attested to by the presence of numerous online battle jacket forums), with the renaissance of metal styles and bands from that period.

Alongside long-time fans who have maintained their jackets for thirty years or more, younger generations are embracing the practice, and the production of embroidered band patches is booming to meet the recently increased demand (Bob, personal communication, 7th July 2014).

The styles of customization of battle jackets vary in significant ways, with nuances representing contested value systems (Kahn-Harris, 2006). Personally created by the wearer, the jacket contains a carefully chosen set of affiliations that communicate their identity to others within the subculture as well as their distinction from those outside it. The shift from subculture to post-subculture (Muggleton, 2000) can be observed in the changing attitudes of fans from the 1980s to the present day as to how the battle jacket should be constructed and what it represents. Ideas of integrity, authenticity and resistance to mainstream culture are important to some fans (Hebdige, 1979, Weinstein, 2000), whilst for others the 'look' of the jacket is foremost. In this sense the contemporary incarnation of the battle jacket can be viewed as a sophisticated example of postmodern subcultural expression and consumption (Williams, 2011).

Research through art practice

A growing number of contemporary artists are exploring the themes of metal and its subcultures. In the USA Banks Violette is well known for his drawings, installation and sound works that reference the media controversies around metal (2002, 2009), and Ben Venom creates quilts formed from cut up metal band t-shirts (2013). Australian artist Ricky Swallow has explored the skull motif in metal culture (2006). British artists including David Hancock (2001), Mark Titchner (2011) and S. Mark Gubb (2012) have referenced aspects of metal fandom and iconography. Several significant gallery exhibitions have focused on the themes of extreme metal, notably *Gewaltkunstwerk* at the Kristiansand Kunsthall (Bringaker, Erichsen et al., 2012) and *Altars of Madness* at the Casino Luxembourg (Deroubaix & Lefèvre, 2013).

As an artist myself, I use my creative practice to explore the phenomenon of battle jacket making in several distinct yet related ways. Firstly, I am making a series of watercolour paintings that transcribe particular examples of jackets made by people I have met in the course of my research. The aim of these works is partly to act as a catalogue, documenting typical examples of contemporary battle jackets, and to help me better understand the visual language, composition and construction of the jackets through detailed painting.

Secondly, I am making a series of jackets which feature hand painting, custom embroidered patches and screen-prints as well as mass-produced patches. These works seek to explore the autobiographical nature of jacket making, and to re-contextualize the practice through



Tom Helyar-Cardwell *Aiden's Jacket Front*, watercolour on paper, 38 x 26 cms, 2014



Tom Helyar-Cardwell *Kulturgeist*, denim vest with custom-made patches, 2014

juxtaposing images from different traditions with those of metal subculture.

Finally, another series of textile works use the techniques and approaches of jacket making (appliqué sewing, collaging of images, hand painting, embellishment etc.) to create larger pieces that take the form of banners and flags. These enable me to apply the craft techniques used in battle jackets to different cultural forms.

In what follows, the importance of DIY culture and craft practice in battle jacket making will be considered in relation to cultural hierarchies in order to make comparisons with the history of painting.

Jacket making and craft practice

I made my first battle jacket when I was around eleven years old. As far as I remember this was an old army shirt with the sleeves cut off which I modified by stitching with lengths of leather thong. In place of a back patch I painted my own design, based on Iron Maiden's mascot Eddy the 'Ead. Soon after this I made another jacket, this time a denim vest, which featured a Megadeth back-patch with the artwork for *Peace Sells... But Who's Buying?* This depicted an animated skeleton squeezing the life from a dove clutching a mimosa branch (the band's own mascot, called Vic Rattlehead). I found the image thrillingly grotesque, and whilst I was a very non-threatening middle class child growing up in an idyllic Hampshire village, I thought that by donning my jacket emblazoned with the exoticness of the American band I might look a bit cooler in the eyes of the older, tougher kids on the school bus.

By the time I was fifteen I had acquired my first black leather jacket, onto which I proudly transcribed a copy of Joolz Denby's artwork for New Model Army's album *The Ghost of Cain*. I soon realised the advantages of painting onto leather – the less porous surface did not soak up the paint like fabric did, meaning the paint would flow more easily. The smoothness of leather also allowed much greater refinement of line and detail. These early experiments with jacket making had a profound effect on me. As well as a means for me to display my musical affiliations, they were formative in my development as a painter. The experience of working with denim, leather, studs, patches and paint gave me a keen sense of relating to the world through materials. This was pivotal for me, as it is for many others, as a means of expressing my identity as a metal fan. In this sense it is the very practice of making itself that articulates the metal fan's devotion to the music and its subculture.

Intrinsic to the nature of battle jackets is this idea of DIY construction (in part inherited from the punk movement). These are highly physical garments, and an involvement with their fabrication is key to the fan's relationship with the jacket that is in many ways viewed as symbolic of their participation in the metal scene in general. In *The Craftsman* (2008) Richard Sennett examines the changing role of craft practices in culture, arguing that a personal involvement with skilled making processes is important both for the individual and society. Sennett describes the importance of 'material consciousness', a kind of interaction with the world through things immediate to our situation: "we become particularly interested in the things we can *change*." (2008, p.120, emphasis added). Sennett's material consciousness is a useful way of thinking about both the work of the painter in the studio, and the metal fan constructing their jacket.

The selection of a jacket, modifying it, selecting patches and deciding where to deploy them as well as the central process of hand stitching them on to the denim are all experiences that cannot easily be understood unless they are felt first-hand. Sennett recognises the extensive role of tacit knowledge in craft practice – skills that are not easily taught or explained - but are gained through trial and error. Jacket making, like painting, is not primarily a theoretical discipline; it must be experienced through practice as well as interpreted through theory.

Hands on interaction with the material world is arguably a visceral experience. Trial and error plays a big part in all art and craft practice, and any craftsperson can testify to the importance of experimentation – successful results are rarely achieved first time, and there is much that can only be learnt through doing. Reflecting on the practice of painting, James Elkins (1999) compares the craft of the artist to that of the alchemist. Both, he points out, work essentially with combinations of water and stone, and both tend to work experientially, intimately involved with the materials of their craft. Whilst not all battle jacket makers are painters (and many would not consider themselves artists), Elkins' comparison is apposite. From my own experience and from the conversations I have had with jacket makers, it seems that this too is a sphere where hands on endeavour is often trusted over careful calculation, and in which craft is often self taught or tacitly shared.

A number of significant craft practices are used by fans in the construction of their jackets and are cited by those I have interviewed as being important to them both autobiographically and symbolically.

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In earlier examples of battle jackets from the late 1970s and early 1980s hand embroidery can be found in place of manufactured band patches, which it seems were not yet widely produced (Pete, personal communication, 9th August 2014). I have met a number of fans who still wear their jackets from this period, some displaying a considerable amount of careful hand embroidery (see illustrations below). Pete, a jacket maker since the early 1980s told me:

I could be a bit crafty and, you know, do that (embroider), and it was also cheaper...if you had massive logos on the back I could just sit there, you know...if I had the patience I could just sit there with a needle and I could do it! (Pete, personal communication, 9th August 2014)

It is significant here that Pete mentions both the time involved (patience) and the physical tool (needle) in his account of embroidering. Craftspeople invariably value their tools as conduits for practice, and are keenly aware of time as a measure of labour. Conversely, the products of craft might also be thought of as reifications of time spent, physical agglomerations of intangible hours. Embroidery is particularly time consuming, and was historically used to pass leisure hours in domestic settings, or to occupy the hands and thoughts of convalescing or inactive service personnel (Kenny, McMillan & Myrone, 2014a).

The practice of embroidering on battle jackets represents a deep investment in metal music, with the fan's loyalty displayed publicly but also marked privately through the time expended in customisation. It is also notable as an example of embroidery (often stereotyped as a feminine occupation) practiced by men, in what has been noted as a predominantly white, male, working class subculture (Weinstein, 2007).



Examples of hand embroidered jackets, Bloodstock Festival, UK, August 2014, photos by Tom Helyar-Cardwell and Jon Cardwell

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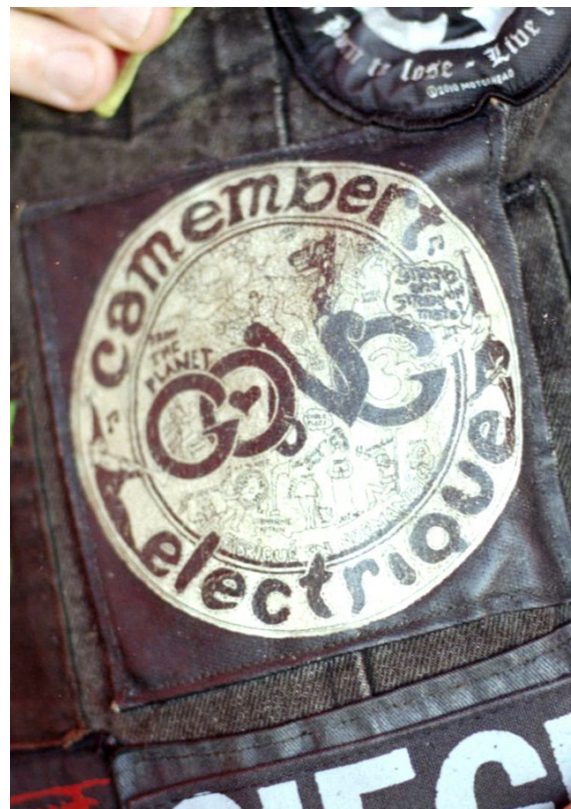
As well as embroidery, hand painting may on occasion be used to render band logos and artwork onto jackets. Whilst painted designs are not as common amongst metal fans as they are in some other subcultures (e.g. punk and goth), they can be found on some jackets, particularly as a way of creating patches for bands that could not be found for sale. I have met fans with designs painted directly onto the jacket itself, as well as some who have painted onto pieces of fabric and then stitched these on like a woven patch. An example of the latter practice can be seen again on Pete's jacket. This is a patch created by hand using acrylic paint representing the band Gong. When interviewed, Pete was very proud of this patch, in part due to the intricacy of the design and how faithfully it represents the band's artwork. He described the process of painting the patch:

I went down to a...what was it?...a 00000 sable brush. And thinned the paint down and I actually managed to get the lines in, that's hand brushed. That took me hours! I'm sitting there with one of those big magnifying lenses that old people use to read the newspaper...That took me about four hours to paint, but it worked. (Pete, personal communication, 9th August 2014)

Again, Pete refers to both the tools used to make the painting and the time it took, as well as describing the consistency of the paint. It is also interesting that Pete did not use his obvious skill at rendering to create an original design from his own imagination, rather his goal was to achieve a faithful reproduction of an existing artwork. This seems to be a common trait of much battle jacket customisation, to faithfully reproduce the artwork or logos of bands, rather than varying or elaborating these designs or inventing one's own. Jeanie Finlay's



Pete, Bloodstock Festival, UK, August 2014, photographed by Tom Helyar-Cardwell and Jon Cardwell



Detail of Pete's hand painted *Gong* patch

documentary *Sound It Out* (2011) portrays an independent record shop in the north of England and profiles some of its regular customers. Part of the film focuses on two metal fans, Sam and Gareth, who talk about making their battle jackets. Gareth has a jacket featuring a hand-made back patch for the band Pisschrist. He comments “This back patch took me three hours to stencil and paint” (Finlay, 2011). Once more the importance to the maker of the time spent in producing the patch is a major part of its significance and value to him. As with Pete’s patch, Gareth’s stencilled work closely represents a pre-existing artwork for his chosen band, rather than his own invention. Amongst many streams of craft and folk art practice it is often the case that the goal of the practitioner is to closely reproduce accepted forms or archetypes, with innovation occurring gradually and collectively rather than individually (Sennett 2008).

Whilst examples of hand painting can still be found on contemporary jackets, a more common method of making patches where manufactured bands are unobtainable is to cut out designs on band t-shirts. Occasionally, some fans might even screenprint their own patches, based on band logos. The use of these custom patches might be due to size requirements, for example if a larger back patch is required than the stock commercial sizes, or if the design in question is not available as a patch. A jacket maker cited several of these motives for making his custom Alice Cooper back patch:

I made the back patch myself...It’s an old shirt that I had from the 2007 tour. I just couldn’t find any back patches at a decent price that I liked. They were all weird shapes. So I just bit the bullet, cut it up and stuck it on. (Chris, personal communication, 9th August 2014)

These ideas of DIY, customisation and craft in metal subcultures are visually and technically expressed in the work of American artist Ben Venom. Using cut up metal band t-shirts as well as old denim jeans and leather, Venom makes large quilts featuring striking and sometimes violent imagery. He has also made a number of custom battle jackets as artworks. Venom cites growing up in the DIY punk subculture of Atlanta, Georgia as an important influence on his way of working which is self-consciously craft-based (Chefas, 2013). The hands-on interaction with the material stuff of metal merchandise is a good example of Sennett’s *material consciousness*. The t-shirts used in Venom’s work represent bands that he is a fan of, and in some case knows personally, sourced from the artist’s personal collection, or donated by friends or the bands themselves (Van Hoy, 2012). In this way the production of the artwork mirrors the trading and sharing of music taste and merchandise that occurs organically within metal culture. In Venom’s work DIY processes and materials are brought into the gallery system yet retain connections to metal subculture. Perhaps Venom’s interest in the traditional folk practices of quilting help underline the continuities between historic craft and contemporary subcultures. As the artist puts it himself, “My work is able to operate in 3 (sic) different worlds...Fine Art, Crafting, and the Heavy Metal scene.” (Chefas, 2013)

Folk art, high culture and taste

In this final section I will discuss battle jackets within the context of wider folk art practice, and look at how critiques of cultural elitism call for a reassessment of canonical ‘high/low’ art distinctions (Smith, 2013).

The customisation of clothing is certainly not new, and many examples can be found in the histories of British folk costume and craft practice (Wilcox, 2011). The suits embellished with buttons of London's Pearly Kings and Queens, the costumes of mummers and morris dancers, or the hand-painted jackets of WW2 bomber crews are ready examples. In each of these cases, as with battle jackets, the customisation is not just decorative, but communicates allegiances, identities and values which are conferred in some wise on the wearer. Many closer relations exist in several of the post-war youth subcultures – the bike jackets of the rockers and 'ton up' boys (Stuart, 1987) and the leather jackets of punks and goths (Baddeley, 2010) are just some of the more obvious iterations.

It is thus that the battle jacket can be read as a material document of difference: a crafted object that inscribes the identity and affiliations of its wearer, communicating membership of the subculture and opposition to a perceived mainstream (Williams, 2011). Through making, the artist interacts with the world, shaping the elements that are to hand. It is a creative practice that facilitates understanding, and continues an enduring dialogue. These features are common to many folk practices, necessitating the consideration of the relative place of folk art within wider culture.

Within contemporary art, particularly in the UK, there is a current interest in the value and relationship of folk art practices within the system of the arts as a whole (Kenny, McMillan & Myrone, 2014a). Jeremy Deller (2005), Mark Wallinger (2007), Alan Kane (2010), and Grayson Perry (2012) have all created works that seek to challenge traditional cultural hierarchies after the manner of Berger (1972). These projects attempt to realign the boundaries of art and culture to encompass the products of folk traditions – traditionally excluded from the high art canon – and to show these as valuable in their own right (Smith, 2013).

The exhibition *British Folk Art* at Tate Britain (Kenny, McMillan & Myrone, 2014b) presented a selection of artefacts from historic folk traditions, from artisan shop signs to embroidered quilts and naval figureheads. Deller and Kane, in a BBC *Culture Show* broadcast (Schellenberg, 2014, June 17) about the exhibition comment that it fails to represent current folk practices, and refers exclusively to historic objects. By contrast, Deller and Kane's exhibition *Folk Archive* (2005) displayed at the Barbican, sought to present a wide range of contemporary folk art objects. This included hand-made signs for fast food vans, customised cars, prison tattoo guns, airbrushed motorcycle helmets and costumes from present-day folk festivals. Though battle jackets did not feature in this selection, they might well have done, as they can be categorised as just such a contemporary folk art practice.

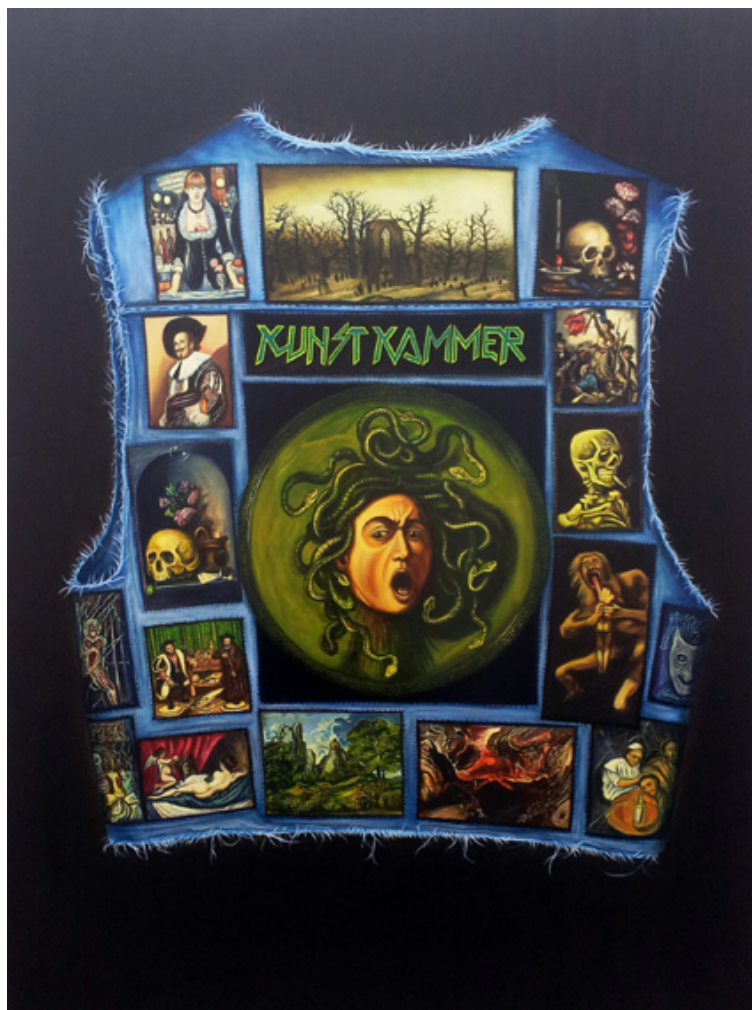
Understanding the practice of making battle jackets as an example of folk art is important in order to realise not only its contemporary value but also its place within a long-running tradition. Deller and Kane's interest in folk art is in large part due to their perception of it as a democratic practice – an art of the people, with many of the traditions connecting to working class culture. At the heart of most of the recent critiques of 'canonicity' – the privileging of upper and middle class tastes in the defining of what is considered serious or superior culture – is a recognition that these histories and hierarchies often marginalise working class culture (Berger, 1972, Smith, 2013). The terms 'folk' and 'craft' have often been used in a perjorative sense in critical debates on art (Kenny, McMillan & Myrone, 2014a). In my own art practice I am interested in conflating apparently disparate or opposing cultural forms, for example in the painting *Kunstkammer* (2012-13). This depicts an imaginary battle jacket with the band

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artwork replaced by images of well known paintings from art history – works by Caravaggio, Goya, Manet, Van Gogh, and Poussin amongst others.

In contriving something that is on one level far-fetched, I am seeking to point out parallels between the imagery of metal artwork and that of ‘old master’ paintings. Similar comparisons are made by the website heavymetalartwork.com, which traces the influence of historic paintings and illustrations on metal album covers. The painting also makes reference to the 17th and 18th century genre of ‘kunstkammer’ (literally ‘art cabinet’) painting that acted as visual catalogues for the collections of wealthy patrons. These paintings can be interpreted as documents of the collector’s status – the wealth of artworks represented are to be seen and possessed by the viewer – in this case the collector. In discussing the flower paintings of Ambrosius Borschaert, Norman Bryson finds a similar attempt to collect and possess disparate objects (exotic sea shells, flowers, curiosities) that symbolise imperialistic dominion and capitalist power (1990). I suggest that the battle jacket is likewise a collection of symbolic images charged with meaning for those in the subculture. Rather than indicating the wearer’s wealth and possessions in a material sense, they might instead be viewed as measures of subcultural capital (Thornton, 1995).



Tom Helyar-Cardwell *Kunstkammer*, oil on canvas, 120 x 90 cms, 2013

It is categorisation and hierarchy of taste that leads some art and culture to be viewed as superior and some as inferior. Issues of taste, class, hierarchy and subculture are prevalent in the work of British artist Grayson Perry. Perry is known for his deliberate use of craft processes not normally found within the spectrum of contemporary art such as pottery and tapestry making. The themes of his work are rooted in first-hand investigation into the peculiarities of contemporary British culture. In a series of television programs (Lord, 2012), Perry set out to identify what constitutes 'good taste' for different social groups, and how this might be linked to class. Perry visited several areas of the UK to meet and interview people in an attempt to understand and characterize contemporary social class definitions. Responding to the different groups of people that he met, Perry produced a series of tapestry artworks titled *The Vanity of Small Differences* (2012). In Perry's comparison of different types of culture, there is recognition that taste judgments are used to reinforce class values. As such, the vilification of working class culture as trashy, crass or kitsch is part of a loaded cultural agenda, in which taste is used to disguise the preservation of a hierarchical social order (Berger, 1972).

Conclusion

Battle jacket making is a resurgent practice that is an important means of expressing identity for many metal fans. Art practice presents a useful methodology to reflect on the value of battle jackets as it allows for a nuanced reading through visual representation. Contextualising these jackets within folk art tradition enables them to be analysed as important artefacts which manifest many of the values of metal culture in visual and material form. The maker's interaction with materials and tools is fundamental to the perceived value of their jacket. Jacket makers themselves attest to the importance of time invested in the making process, and how this contributes to the personal and symbolic significance of the jackets. The battle jacket can also be viewed as a material manifestation of the wearer's individual taste, curated in a personal manner much like the *kunstammer* tradition in historic painting.

There is a need for a reassessment of cultural divisions and hierarchies, and a questioning of how value is ascribed to diverse artworks and artefacts. Along with Deller, Kane and Perry, my own research seeks to question this stratification of culture through comparing the tradition of 'high' art with the practices and images of metal which are often considered as part of popular culture. Like Perry, I am using interviews and other research to inform the production of artworks. The use of painting as a methodology is important because of its ability to articulate visually. Battle jackets are symbolic artifacts that are more fully understood through visual interpretation as well as theoretical examination.

There is much further scope both for the study and analysis of battle jackets and the practices that produce them and for the use of painting practice combined with other methodologies to offer fuller reflection and analysis of various cultural forms and products.

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