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*Christine Borland's Projection Cloth: A Philosophy of Making*

Textile is an ambiguous concept. It is material, it is concept, it is language, it is metaphor. To conceive of a philosophy of textile is to conceive of this ambiguity as a guiding principle for talking and thinking about textile.

- Catherine Dormor, *A Philosophy of Textile: Between Practice and Theory*

The making of textile is rarely an individual effort. It's material production most often relies on many geographically specific and collective processes. To trace the origins of a piece of cloth is to open up a world of interconnected lives and places, from local and small domestic production to mass industrial manufacture. Conceptually, textile is also an active producer of history. It is a socially enacted material that weaves through our everyday lives: the interface between our bodies and the world. Textile is also deeply entwined with language. It speaks through familiar metaphors such as binding together, spinning yarns and stitching up, and, according to Tim Ingold (2007), it is the genesis of text itself – the first human attempt to create a surface from a series of lines, and the first method of recording human process in a linear notation. A philosophy of textile, therefore, is more than a process of making. It is a connection between material threads and immaterial memories.

*Projection Cloth*, Christine Borland's new installation for the 2023 British Textile Biennale, offers a way of thinking that traverses textile's materiality, concept and language. It brings together a number of charged elements housed within a medieval barn in East Lancashire, a geographic area of Northern England whose identity and landscape have been historically shaped by the production of textile during the Industrial Revolution. The installation centres around the production of a fustian cloth – a strong textile woven together with a cotton weft and linen warp. Recognised for its strength and versatility, fustian has traditionally lent itself to the construction of clothing - particularly workwear - as well as domestic furnishings. Its name most likely comes from its geographical origins in Al-Fustāt, now part of Cairo, and was probably first produced around 200AD. In the 13<sup>th</sup> Century, it spread to Spain and Italy where its weavers established their own guilds. Through the cotton trade, it found its way to England where its strict regulation by Parliament was soon challenged through imitation cloths – wool versions of the linen and cotton mix – produced in Norwich in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century. This led to a change in the meaning of fustian to encompass a type of sturdy surface textile, regardless of the composition of its threads. By the 1600's, however, the fibre content of fustian was legally attributed to the traditional linen warp and cotton weft, and, in the UK, it was almost exclusively produced in Lancashire. The transitory years of the Industrial Revolution saw the weaving and cutting of fustian gradually move from domestic production into factories, where it could be stretched and cut, by specialist cutters, in order to create its signature texture, or nap. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, the number of fustian factories declined dramatically due to the importing of cheap and more diverse forms of cloth. Where it was required, new mechanised processes were developed, eradicating the need for fustian weavers and cutters, relegating their specialist skills and labour to distant memory.

With this history in mind, Borland's installation incarnates the complex and almost forgotten histories of the fustian trade in England, tracing it back to its ancient origins, and bringing to life the complex traces of people and place involved in its making. Woven in situ, the fustian in Borland's installation is

created over the duration of the exhibition, using a purpose-built warp-weighted loom. It is composed of the traditional linen warp spun from flax grown in 34 locations across the UK, from flax seeds collected from Borland's own gardens. The cotton used for the weft is produced from a bale imported from Malawi, Africa to the north of Scotland, its transport facilitated through Borland's connection with Malawian cotton growers during a research trip in 2017. The cloth – in its varying states of completion - acts as a screening device for a series of films depicting an avatar whose repetitive movement mimics the practices of spinning, weaving and sewing. Shown intermittently throughout the exhibition, the woven projection screen distorts the film through its own process of making. The image becomes part of the cloth, illuminating its individual threads and drawing attention to the linear movements across its warp and weft.

Borland brings her own artistic process into the space through a spoken dialogue with her daughter, Grace Borland Sinclair, titled the *Distaff Dialogues*. Here, distaff refers to the spindle used by spinners to fix their wool or flax for spinning, but also to the female side of a family, the opposite of the spear, which is attributed to males. Through the dialogue, Borland describes in detail her own experience of the ancient practices of spinning flax into linen. Her daughter responds to Borland's accounts as an embodied alienated voice from a far future, quoting from mythology and folklore, religion and philosophy and from natural history, including bloody conflict, to literary fiction.

It is through these dialogues that Borland weaves conceptual threads from her own identity as an artist and a mother through the distant past to generations of women – mothers and daughters – whose lives were shaped and dictated through the labour of textile production. It is here that the individual elements of Borland's installation collide. The fustian cloth becomes a textile, inscribed with forgotten histories of female labour and animated through the movement of bodies engaged in silent repetitive action.

Returning to the philosophy of textile, Catherine Dormor writes that 'For the practitioner, then, textile could be said to be about knowing cloth through handling it, through making it, through making with it.' (2020: 1) Borland's *Projection Cloth* invites us to do just that: to know cloth through its making and to connect viscerally and imaginatively with its histories and memories, to experience it in the origins of its production and to connect through time with its makers and their labour.

#### References:

- Dormor, C. (2020) *A Philosophy of Textile: Between Practice and Theory*. London: Bloomsbury
- Ingold, T. (2007) *Lines: A Brief History*. Oxon: Routledge