



MINING TEXTILES

Extracting multi-narrative responses from textiles to rethink a mining past

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ABSTRACT

This article is evidence of a practice-based investigation into the imaginative worlds of mining and textiles as a starting point for transforming ways of thinking and creating in the locality. Featuring artist-in-residence and archival processes of research, and performative and site-responsive interventions, a number of recurring themes of enquiry will be developed that combine elements of clothing design, historical studies, nature studies, photography, inflatable construction and social anthropology. The article will draw from the authors artistic practice in the extraction of multi-narrative responses from textiles as an inventive method for engaging site-specifically with former mining locations in UK and Australia.

1. Introduction

The investigation of the breadth of cultural traditions and vocabularies for contemporary textiles has been a fundamental component of the artworks presented in this article, which are: *A Folly* (1998), *Common Wear* (2012), *Ventilation Dress* (2012/2015) and the proposal *Permeated White (with red and blue stripes)* (2018). Together these artworks show textiles as a way of thinking or imagining within former mining locations as well as being a material involving skill in the process of its production. This introduction presents the constituent aspects of the artworks and their significance within the field of contemporary visual culture involving textile practices. The subsequent sections of the article are structured around the artworks.

The first artwork is called *A Folly* and was started in 1998 as part of a three-month Visual Arts Fellowship awarded jointly by the Sir Robert Menzies Centre for Australian Studies and the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts at Edith Cowan University, Perth. During the fellowship I travelled like an early settler from Perth to Kalgoorlie, and further into the interior landscape to the goldmining ghost towns of Kanowna, Cue and Day Dawn. The development of performance-based installations was inspired by physical remnants of human activity discovered in the landscape, a reminder of people urged inland by the promise of gold. At the beginning of the fellowship my relationship with textiles was complex and full of tensions. As work developed I discovered how the narrative and aesthetic dimension of textiles involving dress-related performance could carry significance and meaning in the goldmining ghost towns in which they were created.

My second artwork began as a collaborative commission with Steve Swindells called *Mining Couture* delivered through Leicestershire County Council's Snibston Discovery Museum and the Transform programme supported by Arts Council England and Leicestershire County Council. Snibston Colliery was closed in 1985 leading to the creation of Snibston Discovery Museum on the former industrial location. This transformation process, involving a museum rethinking its industrial past, was considered within a growing consciousness in the UK in the contribution that visual culture could bring to 'place-making' and a regeneration process within heritage locations (HM Government 2016). The commission was presented in this context and a range of outcomes were developed between June 2011 and March 2012 including the creation of *Common Wear* created from the patterns of pitt brow lass dresses (overalls worn by women working at the coal face) dyed with

natural sources collected at Snibston Discovery Museum grounds and *Ventilation Dress* an inflatable full-scale replica of an auxiliary ventilation unit used to boost the air supply to new coal seams. Three years later, *Ventilation Dress* was reconfigured independently from the artwork's original museum and post-industrial location. Firstly, the international exhibition curated by Lara Goodband called *Da Vinci Engineered: From Renaissance mechanics to contemporary art* featured *Ventilation Dress II* (2015). Three years later, the work was exhibited at *Contextile 2018* textile art biennale presented at Guimaraes, Portugal (2018).

Ideas, materials and practices employed in this work continued into a subsidiary proposal for an inflatable sculpture at Barnsley in West Yorkshire called *Permeated White (with red and blue stripes)*. This involved archival research alongside improvisations of creative experiment in response to Barnsley's industrial heritage of open-air linen bleaching and underground coalmining. Putting two things together, a surveyor's notebook of Royston Drift Mine in Barnsley and an advertising postcard for sun-bleached Barnsley Linen, was a matter of disorientation and reorientation and thinking through ideas relating to coalmining and textile production anew.

Through digging deep and extracting multi-narrative responses from textiles on location at former mining locations and post-industrial heritage sites has brought to the surface a new kind of vision for textiles in facing contemporary social and environmental concerns through a range of poetic interventions and site-specific responses as I explained below.

2. A Folly

In his book *Art as Therapy*, the philosopher Alain de Botton suggests that when we get used to things we encounter habitually we are susceptible to pay them scant attention: "We suffer because we lose sight of the value of what is before us and yearn, often unfairly, for the imagined attractions of elsewhere." (Botton 2015, p.59)

And so - textiles. Is it a material that sits uneasily in my practice as it just feels all too familiar? This was the question I posed to myself as I was standing, in the summer of 1998, in a haberdashery in Perth, Australia considering a range of gold, red summer chintz and black cotton poplin fabrics. I was beginning a journey to the outback and was wondering if to take lengths of fabric with me. Focusing on my purchase, I recalled a poem called *The Red Gown* that I heard sung by Jimmy Murray. I first came across the poem however, in the book *The honey-ant men's love song and other Aboriginal song poems* where I discovered, on reading the editors notes, that the poem was written in the very early days of contact when Aborigines saw a white

girl wearing a red dress with white spots (Dixon and Duwell, 1994, p.6-7). For me, the poem was valuable because it was written in response to the first time that industrially made fabric may have been seen before, which resulted in a clear vision of textiles as resonant with life.

The red gown we see is like a butterfly

A red gown that catches the eye
The red gown we see is like a butterfly

Red gown dancing in joy
A red gown that catches the eye
The red gown we see is like a butterfly

Red gown dancing in joy
A red gown that catches the eye
The red gown we see is like a butterfly
The red gown is dancing in joy

(Anonymous, circa 1788)

I tried to grab hold of the words, like passwords, jumping out at me to teach me a lesson; to look, perhaps, with more alert and playful eyes upon cloth? Subsequently I got out my *Lonely Planet* guide book, which alighted on the wrong page: "Western Australia" it stated "used to be known as the Cinderella State". The two words Cinderella State were read over and over. Ideas were embryonic in my head. Could, Cinderella, by analogy, offer a conceptual device to recalibrate what I may have admired about textiles but had come to neglect? Rolls of faux gold fabric glittered in the haberdashery. The fog lifted. No, I wanted to bring an awareness of textiles into my practice, newly charged as a legitimate place for constructing thoughts through the likeness to a Cinderella state, not so much a municipal, rather a particular condition of the mind. In that coming-to-the-surface realisation I started to reflect on the film *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, in which Elliott (1994) portrays a lone figure standing on top of a bus travelling through the desert in a dazzling leotard with free-flowing yards of silver fabric. I recalled it as a mesmerising and emotive spectacle of textiles vibrant and seductive qualities, heightened by their contrast to the Australian desert landscape. Dizzy with associations I decided, as an experiment, to purchase a couple of meters of gold fabric to see what may happen. Stuffed into my rucksack the textile was taken on a 600km Greyhound bus ride inland, as a kind of limbering up with fabric began.

At the remote Kanowna goldmining ghost town, I pulled out my gold coloured cloth and placed it onto the dry red soil. It lay flimsily on the ground occasionally being lifted by the prevailing breeze. A few weeks later I travelled back to Kanowna with a long dress I had created from the gold fabric. The

sheer effort of wearing a long gold dress at a small broken-down mine in the Australian outback was an attempt to create a textile-based choreography to express how precariously site-specific lives may have once been. Multiple small squares of gold fabric were cut from the dress and then carefully pinned, in a grid formation, onto the ground. The piece may remind some of the performance *Cut Piece* (1964) by the Japanese artist Yoko Ono. Ono sits in deep concentration on a stage with a pair of scissors at her side. Her audience is invited to come up and cut some cloth from Ono's clothing, which they are permitted to keep. As Ono gifts fragments of dress to her audience, gold cloth cut from my dress were assumed directly to the land. Overtime, a rectangular patch of ground became covered with the gold fabric squares. That may invite considerations of a gentle repair within the landscape (Figure 1).

Figure 1: *A Folly*



Source: Author 1998.

2. Common Wear

In the year 2012, *Common Wear* was developed after recognizing that the standard uniform worn by Snibston Discovery Museum staff had no apparent provenance in relation to its location and that it may present a potential site for art. Rather than an item of clothing irreverent to its surroundings, *Common Wear* aimed to create a notional uniform for museum staff that was site-specific. In this process experiments in garment construction through the appropriation of the design of an original 1960's pitt brow lass overall were developed. Alongside being inspired by coal mining

clothes early 20th century Russian constructivist and Italian futurist experimental proposals for anti-fashion designs were explored, with the *TuTa* (1919) or 'Universal overall' created by Ernesto Michahelles (Thayaht) of special interest as it embodied the grids of modernity, an innovation interdependent with modern industrialization, in which coal mining played a major part (Figure 2). In this respect coal mining and subsequently coal miner's clothes could present an attempt to keep pace with the utopian ideals of the modern world, and ultimately, signpost a positive image of a miner within modernity to inspire a couture for our times.

Figure 2: Thayaht in *Tuta*



Source: Thayaht 1920. Photograph by P Salvini, Florence Prato Textile Museum, Inv.n. 05.05.F06

In the spirit of creating a bespoke production for Snibston Discovery Museum staff, a further progression was provided by the vegetation establishing itself amongst the historic colliery railway, industrial archaeology and former spoil heap for the Snibston colliery, as a source of natural dye colour. Crouching down to scoop out acorns from beneath an oak tree, reaching to pluck hawthorn and sloe berries from the banks of a colliery railway or harvesting blackberries, elderberries, nettle and buddleia growing in between the cracks of rusting industrial machinery provided a direct relationship with the rhythms of natural life within the Snibston Discovery Museum grounds. Textiles immersed in a liquor of crushed and mulched natural dye matter produced light putty, rose, yellow and grey tones onto fabric,

subsequently used in the creation of *Common Wear*. The aim of *Common Wear* was to join a contemporary museum uniform to dormant traditions of stitch and garment construction in a colour range specific to ecological disturbances presented at its post-industrial location (Figure 3). In this process it was suggested that *Common Wear* may generate an imaginative spark between the museum space and the visitor to what maybe valuable at a local level.

Figure 3: *Common Wear*



Source: Author 2012.

The experience of working site-specifically on the location of a disused coalmine led me to examine other mining sites that have presented evidence of the interrelationship between textiles and art. *Darning the land: Seam* (2011) was a site-specific installation by the British artist Philippa Lawrence located on Maurice Lea Memorial Park in Swadlincote, Derbyshire. Lawrence worked with a section of the park planting fifty-nine flower beds, spanning an area of 80m x 2m across a section of the park in an enlarged running stitch formation. Seven hundred individual native grasses were then planted into the flowerbeds, intentionally seeking to regenerate the environment while directly referencing the seams of coal buried below the ground. Created on a large scale and within the parameters of garden design Lawrence developed analogous references to textiles and has said that:

“The piece references a seam: a seam of fabric and a seam of coal. It uses the language of textiles to mend, creating a form that the individual can weave himself or herself through” (2014, p.93). While Lawrence is introducing specific grasses into the environment, *Common Wear* seeks to use the plants that have migrated to the grounds of Snibston Discovery Museum, many of which are not native to Britain, but thrive on the post-industrial spoil (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Regenerated spoil from which natural dyes were collected.



Source: Author 2012.

In the year 2012, it was announced that the contemporary art biennale *Manifesta 9* would be presented at the disused coal mine of Waterschei in Genk, Belgian. The post-industrial context of the location provided the starting point for the biennale, with the curatorial team Dawn Ades, Katerina Gregos and Cuauhtémoc Medina stating that the selected works would “interact as directly as possible with the current state of ruin of the building and its immediate surroundings” (2012). The Chinese artist Ni Haifeng was invited to present *Para-Production* (2008) a large-scale installation occupying the former ballroom of Waterschei involving a huge mountain-like form of small pieces of cut textiles filling the spatial location. Comparing the two projects, *Para-Production* is using a mass of textiles piled into a conical shape reminiscent of a spoil tip. This is a form of socially engaged practice, involving the audience in cutting up fragments of textiles, but, once placed back into the pile, their use-function is uncertain. By contrast, *Common Wear* is created from vegetation sourced from the spoil itself, with an end point clearly defined.

3. Ventilation Dress

The sculpture *Ventilation Dress*, was inspired by the 1970's as a period that recalled strength and celebration for the coal industry and subsequently the community. The sculpture was inspired by two artefacts, a blue floral dress held within the National Coal Mining Museum archives in Wakefield and an

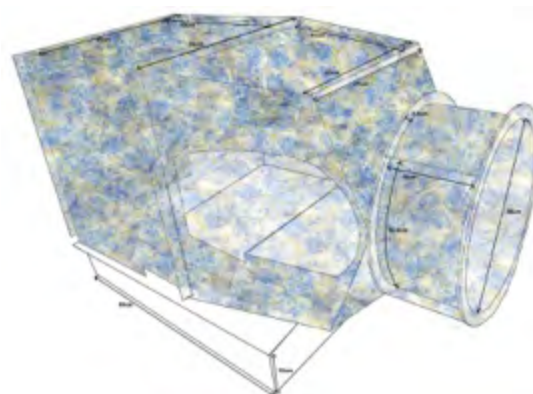
auxiliary ventilation unit, one of many large items of industrial archaeology on display on the Snibston Discovery Museum grounds (Figure 5 and 6).

Figure 5: Auxiliary ventilation unit



Source: Author 2012.

Figure 6: Drawing for Ventilation Dress



Source: Author 2012.

The blue floral dress, originally worn by Margaret Dominiak, the former 1972 coal queen, during the National Coal Queen Reunion of 1976, was carefully laid out on an inspection table at the National Coal Mining Museum for me to observe (Figure 7). The dress corresponds to the flamboyant fashion trends of the mid-1970s featuring a creamy white shiny acetate lining covered in white, cobalt blue and lilac floral printed, diaphanous fabric. The gauze effect of the outer fabric is cut and constructed into a series of V's into the centre of the dress, created to layer to the floor to imbue a romantic feel and soft drape enhanced by the lightweight translucent fabric. A few weeks later, a visit was arranged to see Margaret Dominiak at her home in Wakefield to discuss her experiences of being a miner's daughter and her year as an ambassador for the National Coal Board. Initially she discussed her choices of clothes for the regional and national Coal Queen competitions. It was evident that Dominiak had placed a lot of time and care into achieving a particular look, personally constructed and adapted with accessories and shoes. Conversation then turned to the duties and responsibilities she had had to perform as the

ambassador for the National Coal Board. I came to understand that she was required to be a personable and articulate representative which involved travel, lessons in etiquette and speaking to a wide range of people, bringing to her a new set of skills, beyond previous experience. It was clear that Dominiak relished the opportunities presented to her in her new role, as this extract from a conversation with Dominiak clearly shows:

I was 24 years old, which meant that I was one of the oldest girls in the lineup. I think that my maturity and ability to cope with the work fixed it for me. When I was National Coal Queen I used to try my best to do anything that the Coal Board asked me to do because I enjoyed the work and I enjoyed the people I was dealing with. I went up and down the country. I went to the Ideal Homes Exhibition at Olympia where I met her Majesty the Queen. I never used to know what it was like to go out for dinner, to get dressed up because we couldn't afford it in those days. Then, of course, they wanted you to be nice and wear nice things and they showed you etiquette and they showed you how to meet people and how to speak to people, so all this experience up and down the country and being an ambassador for the Coal Board was great. (Ward 2012, p.6)

Figure 7: The blue floral dress worn by Margaret Dominiak at the National Coal Queen Reunion of 1976.



Source: Author 2012.

Returning to the blue floral dress at the National Coal Mining Museum I came to appreciate how it may present a transient beauty in textiles not to be ashamed of, representing the metaphorical fresh air of life above ground during the 1970s, of a close-knit community bound together by a distinct and shared identity. It also happened that while Margaret Dominiak was wearing her blue floral dress at the National Coal Queen Reunion in 1976, the 1976 noise abatement regulations lead to the replacement auxiliary ventilation unit at Snibston colliery, once crucial to the circulation of air underground. The synergies between these two artefacts revealed how mining technologies and female sensibilities may complement each other, which inspired various fabric compositions to be developed directly onto defunct mining machinery on the Snibston Discovery Museum grounds (Figure 8). Intrepidly putting two different things together, an industrial ventilation unit and a blue floral dress, was a matter to see what would happen and what quandaries maybe catalysed. The concepts of lightness, impermanence and gravity collided; despite feeling off-balanced things began to take shape (Figure 9).

Figure 8: Fabric compositions developed onto disused mining machinery.



Source: Author 2012.

Figure 9: Preliminary model for *Ventilation Dress*.



Source: Author 2012.

The inflatable sculpture *Ventilation Dress* was created from an exact copy of Dominiak's blue floral dress printed onto vinyl and constructed into a full-scale reproduction of the auxiliary ventilation unit used to boost the air supply to coal seams (Figure 10). Using bouncy castle technology *Ventilation Dress* appeared to breath rhythmically as air that was pumped into the sculpture gently seeped from seams in a continuous cycle of inflation and deflation. The writer Jessica Hemmings observes:

Ventilation Dress suggests a domestic shape. It belongs to the home; a place of rest and recovery from the miner's labours underground. The close communities of the collieries have long vanished from the social fabric of modern lives. But amidst the predominantly negative stories we associate with a life of mining, this is a narrative largely overlooked: a sense of place and purpose, solidarity born by a community of shared risk and labour. (Hemmings 2012, pp.12-13)

Figure 10: *Ventilation Dress*



Source: Author 2012.

In 2015 *Ventilation Dress II* was developed using a new understanding of the material properties of inflatables, working with a lighter weight polyvinyl than used in the previous work. The delicacy of the material created a stronger and more defined counterpoint to the darkness of the miners' underground scape. The work is now read independently of its museum context, released of this history it has become an autonomous artwork which has, at its conceptual routes, a specific

fascination with the formative engineering of fresh air into a mine (Figure 11).

Figure 11: *Ventilation Dress II*



Source: Author 2015.

3. Permeated White (with red and blue stripes)

Fresh Air: On an icy spring day in 2018 I visited 'Bleach Croft Way' a small tarmac road in Barnsley in West Yorkshire that stops abruptly before transitioning into open scrub (Figure 12). I walked to the end of the road and then became one of many others who have taken the well-trodden pathways through the undergrowth. I noticed discarded elements of human activity. In-between the coils of wire from a dumped and deteriorating mattress were small fragments of textiles. These textiles presented frayed reminders of a past landscape, when bolts of natural linen would have covered a large part of this area, the ensuing whiteness permeating into the cloth as a visual indicator of fresh air.

Figure 12: Bleach Croft Way



Source: Author 2018.

In an attempt to offer an alternative viewpoint with which to explore the two protagonists within my narrative - textiles and mining - my studio table

became quickly swamped by books and articles providing chronicles of the traditions of the former linen bleaching and coal mining industries in Barnsley. I learnt that as the coal mining industry developed during the 19th century, the scale of the linen bleaching industry quickly diminished, notably as the air became too soot filled to be an effective bleaching agent. An etching of a linen bleacher dated 1827, although not from Barnsley, helps to exhibit the animated processes involved in linen bleaching (Figure 13). The field in the etching is alive to the expanses of long bolts of cloth and the active movement of bleachers washing the fabric many times to remove the dust. It illustrates a series of lengths of white cloth in the landscape, stimulating new associations to textile interventions that alter the physical form and the visual experience of the sites in which they are placed.

Figure 13: Bleaching linen by laying it out in fields to be exposed to sunlight.

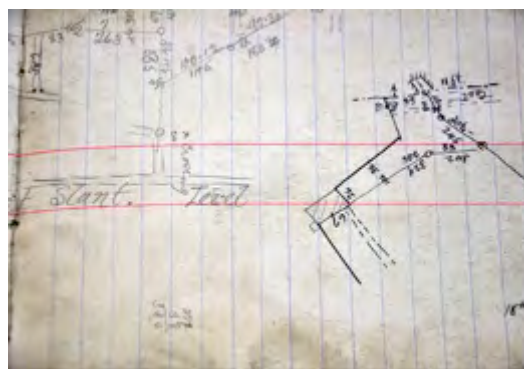


Source: Artist not known 1827. World history archive.

I returned, once more, to the National Coal Mining Museum archives to investigate a small surveyor's notebook of Royston Drift Mine in Barnsley, 1892-1896. The process of linen bleaching, involving the transition from brown to white cloth, appears in direct opposition to the permeation of a black sooty discoloration on the surface of each page of the surveyor's notebook. Presumably worked onsite and underground the paper highlights the mining surveyor's finger prints in the creation of intimate hand drawn plans of coal seams (Figure 14). It conjured up resonances concerned with the gravity of the surveyor's drawings, that seek to prevent an accident, and look for the formation of air flows beneath the ground for those who do not have the luxury of air to spare.

The aspiration to combine the balance of the red and blue lined pages of the miner surveyor's booklet and the red and blue warp and weft threads running through bolts of Barnsley bleached linen led my sampling process. Hand bleached linen was machine embroidered in blue thread using a compressed zigzag stitch to create a series of dense horizontal stitches reminiscent of the lines on the pages of a notebook. Two red vertical lines were then created from the repeated words 'seam' using digital stitch (Figure 15).

Figure 14: Surveyors note book from Royston Drift Mine, Silkston Seam, 1892-1896.



Source: National Coal Mining Museum Collection YKSMM:2004.3015.

Figure 15: Detail of digital and machine stitched linen sample.



Source: Author 2018.

Further observations of layout plans of coal mines in the Barnsley area, many of which are conserved in plastic film, inspired samples with polyurethane plastic as an inflatable material that I could heat weld into lozenge shaped forms (Figure 16). Allowing the

medium itself and the physical process of encasing embroidered linen within the plastic helped to conjoin industrial histories that are in conflict. There is little visual reference material of the linen bleaching industry in Barnsley except for a bright hand painted advertising postcard for “Borespring” sun-bleached Barnsley linen (Figure 17). My installation proposal mimicked the formal, sculptural characteristics of the linen bleaching process on the landscape identified in this postcard, to emphasise the tension when two individual industries collide in their battle for fresh air (Figure 18).

Figure 16: Polyurethane inflatable model.



Source: Author 2018.

Figure 17: Commercial advertising postcard.



Source: Artist not known 1905.

Figure 18: *Permeated white (with red and blue stripes) proposal.*



Source: Author 2018.

4. Conclusion

This conclusion involves a reappraisal of an involvement with textiles as a way of exploring of former mining locations within a site-specific practice.

Undoubtedly, when I initially encountered rolls of fabric in the haberdashery in Perth, I was guilty of feeling uncomfortable with the textile field from which to derive my work. I sought out other visual cultural references that appeared in film and poetry and considered textiles in decorative and conceptual terms. This gave me the incentive to visit goldmining ghost towns in Australia, providing both a solitary place for constructing thoughts and a textual backdrop for activating the aesthetic dimension of textiles on site. Over a decade later, observations of large items of industrial archaeology on display at Snibston Discovery Museum associated with the extraction of coal from below ground and the geometric arrangement of threads in the stitches and folded plies of fabric in items of dress worn by women working above the ground helped to confirm familiar, albeit intuitive, semantics inherent in both mining and textile industries.

My recent focus on coalmining and open-air linen bleaching industries in Barnsley takes these relationships one stage further. In this context fresh air is conceived as a vital source for a miner's well-being, be it literally a flow of air used in coalmining seams underground as much as fresh air captured in the whiteness of linen placed on the ground. The two industries battle for fresh air speaks powerfully about ideas of art, environment and responsibility and their meanings within cultural production.

So, if there's anything I've learned from looking at mining and textiles, it is that it is multi-narrative, and there is no linearity, though both industries share the term seam depth is sought through passages of divergence as much as convergence as drawings, samples, models and finished outcomes reflect a crossover of industrial crafts and cultural practices. The concept of the artists chase, the miners quarry, has been both creative and uncertain; it has been a method of repeatedly creating and unpicking the seam in my textile practice. And, despite the surveyors plans, I have found that there are no reliable maps to the creative process, other than textiles, to provide a comprehensible metaphorical structure within which to navigate my way through my work.

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