

Alice Kettle



Threads & More Threads

Alice Kettle

Threads & More Threads

Alice Kettle
Threads

The Gallery, Winchester Discovery Centre
Jewry St, Winchester SO23 8SB
01962 873603

Alice Kettle
More Threads

12 Northgate, Chichester PO19 1BA
info@candidastevens.com
01243 528401

Foreword

Alice Kettle's textile art is fundamentally and unequivocally ambitious. She elicits moral and narrative density from her artworks. These are often immense in scale: as if the arc of their stories is eternal, their plights universal, and their hopes longing and soulful. The span of time expressed in the work locates us in the deep past and the urgent present.

Stitch – by hand or by machine – is a method of repetition, coverage and endlessness. It can lead to a line that is potentially infinite. Place this means in the hands of an artist whose sources are literary, poetic, political, metaphorical, otherworldly and grounded on soil, then it is not surprising that the physical outcome is, more often than not, magisterial. The complexity of her insight and her facility for allusion allows us to skate over the remarkable technical dexterity of these cloths, to take their scale as both proper and fit, and not in any way grandiose or self-seeking. The epic scale is due to epic cause.

Alice Kettle can see in the grave turmoil of a present, social crisis – especially in the drama and pain of austere Greece – a direct line, a golden thread as it were, to Greek tragedy and myths. These stories, the *Odyssey* above all, bear endless re telling. They can never be over told. Backed up with such a foundation, Alice creates works of emotional intensity. She often pauses on points of narrative or actual drama. Her reflectiveness on the ancient and contemporary issues raised at these symbolic moments is then swept along by visually lyrical and colour-suffused means; these are cloth paintings and poems at the same time. We are their viewers and listeners.

Over the course of ten years, Alice's work has neither mellowed nor slackened its majesty of scope. If there has been what she calls 'a shift in my voice,' it has been to think more deeply around the intention and purpose of textile art. She has started to question where she 'sits' within each piece. Some of her works are autobiographical and bear personal materials, the fragments of family textiles. More recent work, and in particular *Sea* (2017), made specifically for this exhibition, indicates a sort of tremor of authorship: the theme of refugee flight being so deeply important to the too often nameless individuals that her position as the maker might seem somehow contentious. What rights does an artist have to commentate?

One major change to her practice over this ten year period has been the quickening pace of her collaborative work: she has been one of the major leaders in the field of crafts in exploring the creative dynamics and possibilities of working with a companion artist on a single project. Many of these collaborations are with her colleagues at Manchester Metropolitan University, and her long creative partnership with the potter Alex McErlain has produced harvest jugs of a sort that have not been seen in two hundred years of English slipware. She has also

explored a collaboration with place. *Looking Forwards to the Past* commissioned for Winchester Discovery Centre in 2007 was the second signature piece for her home city. The first was the Altar Cloth in Sepulchre Chapel, Winchester Cathedral and the third *Wisdom and Lar* was commissioned by the University of Winchester and gave a powerful visual statement of the academic and social values of the institution. Later works have responded in innovative ways to historic sites, such as the three new works for Inigo Jones's Queen's House, Royal Museums Greenwich. An enriching education programme accompanied this temporary installation, and Alice Kettle has increasingly demanded that her work for these special and resonant sites do not sit in silence. She will lead making workshops and seminars with equal poise to place the works in context or to pass on her skills to a new generation.

Alice Kettle remarks that when she completed the immense labour of *Looking Forwards to the Past* she felt 'loss' and the need to reconfigure her practice. I think this was due in part to her embeddedness in the city, which goes to the heart of who she is. The work was a summation of place, the storied past of Winchester, so how could she bear to let it go? But departing from the piece gave her the chance to reset her means of making, to give a new impetus to use digital techniques, and to think aloud about different sites for practice, unlocking her constant need to develop and experiment. The change has enabled her to think that her work is in some fundamental way 'all about portraiture', not of herself but of 'the other me' – the rigorous thinker, the outsider, the myth-reader, the maker of symbolic figures with their endless stories of the same bewildering situations.

Everything is then set in the swoop of her colour wash, the plaintive elegance of her stitching line and the discursive humanity and emotional intensity borne by the figures that live in the work. Glenn Adamson says that he sees Alice Kettle's practice 'using needle and thread as an interruptive process'. That captures her powerful intentions, her political enquiry, and her restlessness.

This body of work reveals her as a great, as well as internationally renowned artist, courageous enough to look full through the extraordinary every day and the extraordinary deep past.

Professor Simon Olding
Director, Crafts Study Centre
University for the Creative Arts



Odyssey

Alice Kettle's contemporary take on Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey* provides a stitched response to the story of the journey made by Odysseus, King of Ithaca, home from the Trojan War. The narrative has a particular pertinence to Alice Kettle's work as Odysseus's faithful wife Penelope famously employs weaving as a means of protecting herself from re-marrying and thus proving her fidelity to Odysseus. The people of Ithaca urge Penelope to remarry, with crowds of suitors invading her house, and in response Penelope promises that she will decide between the suitors once she was finished weaving a burial shroud for Odysseus's father. While Penelope sits all day weaving the shroud, she spends the nights unweaving it, outwitting her suitors and escaping a fate that has been decided for her. In 2014, this stitched wall-hanging was shown in the 18th century stairwell of Pallant House, recalling the tradition of huge figurative tapestries in historic houses. Yet Alice uses stitch in a contemporary manner as a gesture to create painterly effects with rich surface textures.

Simon Martin
Director
Pallant House Gallery



Odyssey, 2003
180 x 395 cm
Thread on canvas

Hermes and the Lotos Eaters

Hermes and the Lotos Eaters is the companion piece to *Odyssey*. This work draws from Homer's story to show figures sleeping in the foreground having eaten the soporific Lotos fruit. Behind them are Scylla and Carybdis (rock and whirlpool), the metaphorical rock and hard place. On the right is Hermes the messenger. All the stories are stitched together as in Homer's original story, one of self-revelation, decision making and discovery.

Alice Kettle



Hermes and the Lotos Eaters, 2003
180 x 285 cm
Thread on canvas



Stitch Head

The figures are both particular and universal. They are portraits not as representations but as a remembering of a feeling or encounter. That is, I think, why they never really occupy a distinct place, since they are about the sensations and emotions of many moments drawn together.

There are recurrent themes, where the same figures or the format repeats. The single blue figures are on-going, each made at a different time and the closest to self-portraiture.

The Heads similarly are a constantly revisited form. They were originally made from the left over pieces of *Looking Forwards to the Past*. Stitching the fragments together was a way to reconstruct myself as a new being.

Alice Kettle



Stitch Head, 2008
80 x 60 cm
Thread on canvas

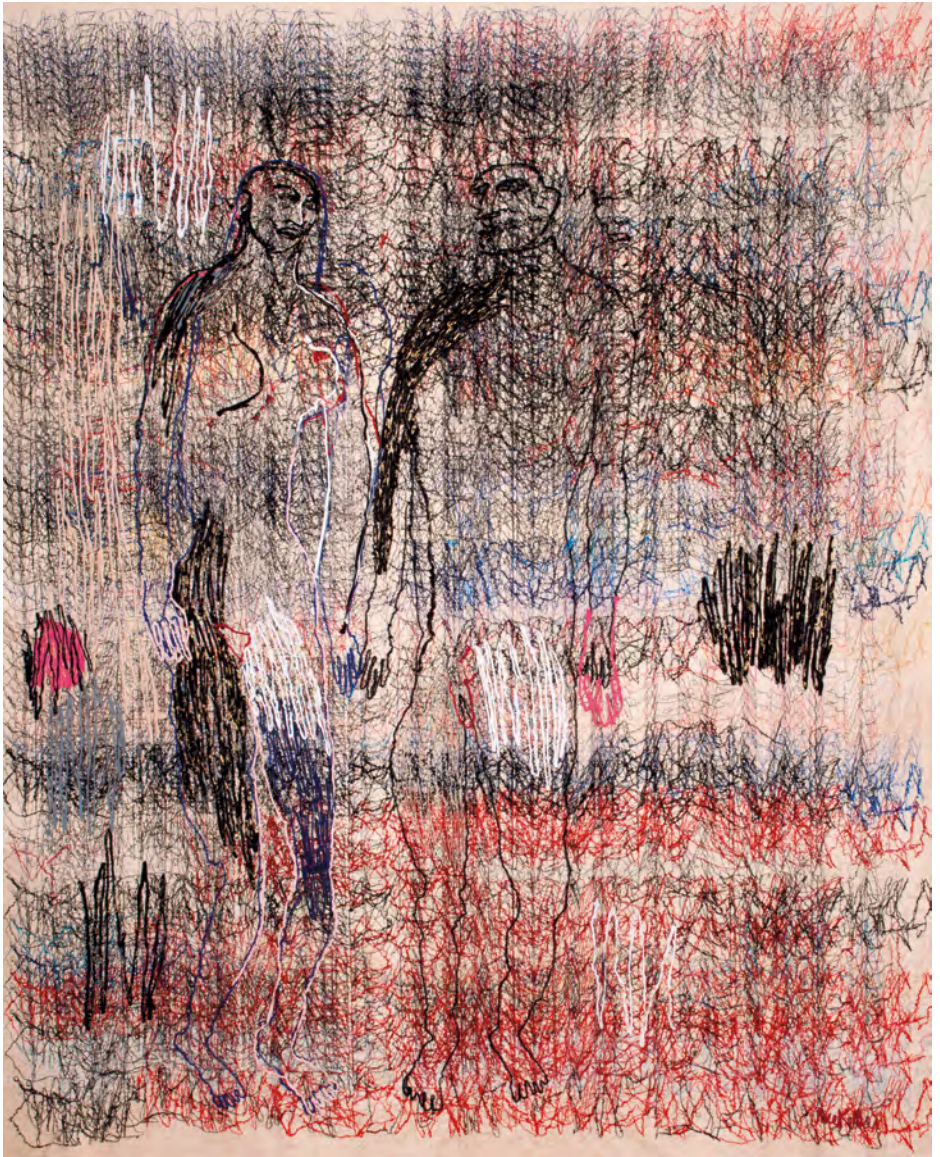
Schiffli Series

As well as completing *Looking Forwards to the Past* in 2007, Alice Kettle also created a series of three huge works utilising the multi-needle schiffli embroidery machine at Manchester School of Art for the touring exhibition *Mechanical Drawing – The Schiffli Project*. The aim of this project was to show how a machine created for the commercial mass-production of embroidery for fashion and interiors could also be exploited to create one-off artworks.

A key feature of the schiffli machine is the mechanistic repeat, produced by having 86 needles stitching simultaneously. Alice subverted this uniformity by repeatedly changing thread colours and thicknesses, to create swathes of scribbled background colour that she then overlaid with monumental figures, dancing between the lines stitched by the schiffli machine.

These three works marked a significant turning point for Alice's working methodology, she realised: 'I do not have to cover the fabric with stitch; I can let each mark breathe. For the first time in 21 years I have liberated the fabric. Does that mean I am liberated too?'

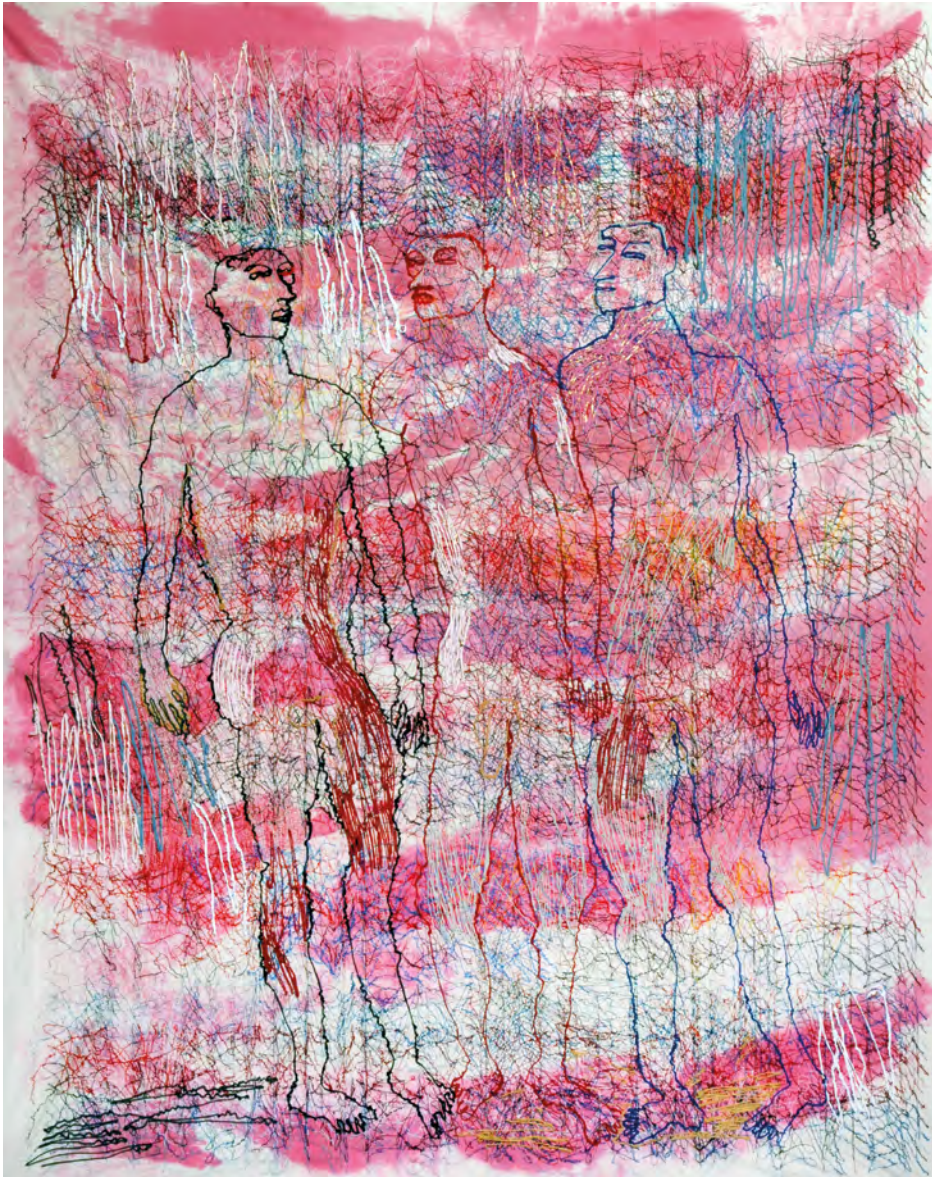
Melanie Miller
Curator of Mechanical Drawing
The Schiffli Project



Schiffli series, Orphrey, 2006
245 x 200 cm
Thread on canvas



Schiffli series, Nepenthe, 2006
240 x 190 cm
Thread on canvas



Schiffli series, Ormo, 2006
249 x 200 cm
Thread on canvas



Ceramics

Over the past decade Alice Kettle and I have worked together to produce many intriguing works in both clay and stitch. When planning new work for this current exhibition it occurred to us that we might reference some of those past endeavours.

The British Museum holds a collection of late medieval slipware tiles known as the *Tring Tiles*, decorated with narrative imagery using the sgraffito technique. The format of the tiles is distinctive and we decided to emulate it, developing our own collaborative sgraffito, making reference to the works we have previously created.

We made ten large slipware tiles, illustrating works in both clay and stitch. Subjects referenced include the *harvest jug* series, the *Alice Kyteler* works, and the *stitched drawings* together with some entirely new creations.

We are both aware of the impact of our collaborations on other artists through the *Pairings* research project, but working together remains for us a special activity that brings challenge and reward in equal measure.

Alex McErlain



Ceramics, collection of works, 2009-2017
Alice Kettle and Alex McErlain

Coeus, Looking Forwards to The Past

At 16m long, *Looking Forwards to the Past* was a huge undertaking, the making process was all consuming and exhausting for Alice. *Coeus*, one of a series of heads, was made by re-cycling the offcuts from *Looking Forwards to The Past*. Stitching together the offcuts in this way could be seen to represent a process of repair and recovery. To me these reconstituted heads symbolise the necessity and ability to forge ahead, no matter what life throws at you. In essence they are symbols of strength and optimism, at the same time conveying the vulnerability, and injured aspects of our lives.

Joe Low

Coeus, 2004
80 x 60 cm
Thread, felt and fabric



Paradise Lost

On 11th March 2011 Japan was hit by a tsunami and earthquake of biblical proportion - boats and buses were deposited on top of buildings, whole communities disappeared leaving no trace. It seemed as if nothing could be worse than this destruction, and then came the accompanying nuclear catastrophe at Fukushima Power station. The combination of the overwhelming power of nature and the folly of mankind shouted its terrible message across the world. Alice Kettle has looked into the heart of this dark time of tragedy and hubris. Taking Milton's notion of *felix culpa* - that good may come from catastrophe, she has built, stitch on stitch, an allegory for our time. Turning from Death and Sin, she shows us no promise of redemption, only a pointing of the way. All are stripped bare; the woman is both the grounded source of life and the abused; the children face us as witness, victims and the future; the angel is moving forward while looking back - to see if we are following? Is it possible to rise from the ashes? The Japanese have an answer: for the past millennium, every 20 years, the Ise Jingu Shrine is torn down and rebuilt. Nothing is certain, everything may be re-made.

Lesley Millar MBE
Director of the International Textile Research Centre
Professor of Textile Culture
UCA Farnham

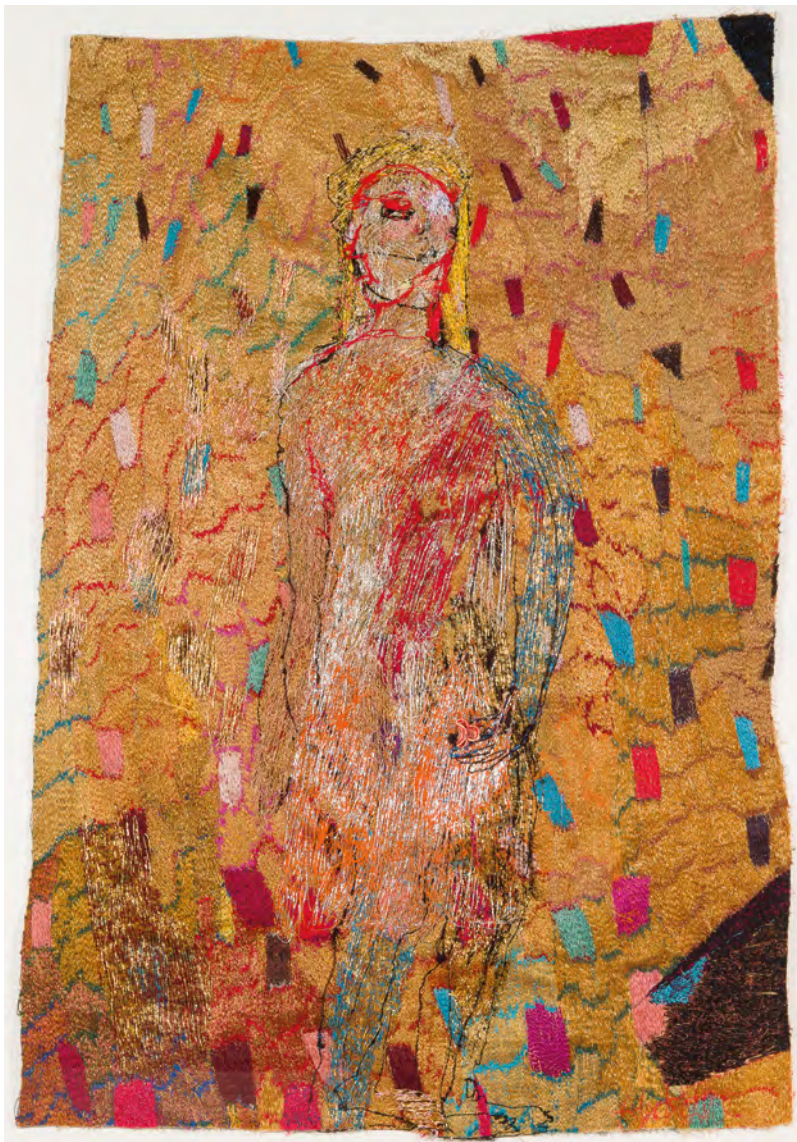


Paradise Lost, 2010
230 x 260cm
Thread on blanket

Lady

There is an optimism to this self-portrait. The dense waves of gold thread are typical of Alice's work pre 2010. The gold is symbolic of hope. The sparks of colour like shots of optimism. Alice; hard working, doggedly determined, a devoted mother, a giver, a survivor, could not in my opinion be better represented.

Candida Stevens



Lady, 2016
90 x 70 cm
Thread on canvas

Riku

Riku is the name of a Japanese flower. This work is about rebirth and regeneration, the blossoming of new life.

Alice Kettle



Riku, 2011
225 x 134 cm
Thread on linen



Suko

Suko is the flowering of life and the blossoming of womanhood.

Alice Kettle



Suko, 2011
224 x 131 cm
Thread on linen

***Queen Henrietta Maria, The Garden of England,*
The Queen's House, Royal Museums Greenwich, 2013.**

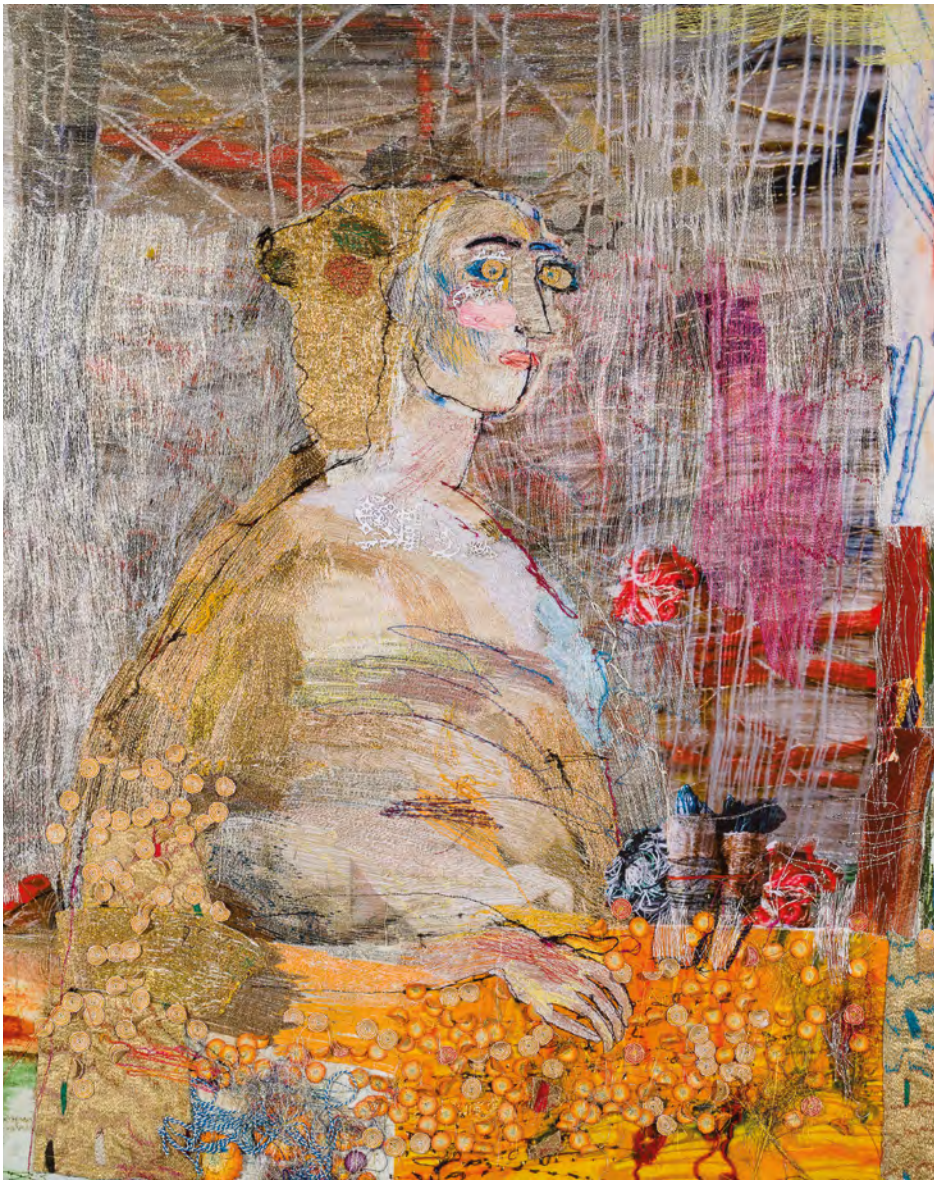
The Garden of England was the inaugural project of the Royal Museums Greenwich contemporary art programme at the Queen's House. Responding to the museum's portrait collection, Alice created three new works that celebrated the queens and courtiers who inhabited the seventeenth-century Queen's House. Her work spoke to the original setting of the house as a garden retreat, capturing the richness and flamboyance of the Stuart court.

Anne of Denmark (1574-1619) and Henrietta Maria (1609-1669) were central figures. The first, the wife of James I who began work on the Queen's House and her successor, the French Princess who married Charles I in 1625 and who, with architect Inigo Jones, completed the House in 1633.

The iconic Tulip Stairs – the motif was really a stylised fleur-de-lys the emblem of France and Henrietta Maria – provided a second setting for the dramatic *Flower Helix*. Composed of handmade flowers reminiscent of Queen Anne's lace, and created by makers across the UK contacted through social media, the piece tumbled through the central space of the stairs.

Alice created a new portrait of Henrietta Maria that was installed to overlook a second piece, a luxuriously patterned and textured garden using the floral emblems on Stuart clothing. The garden was surrounded by individual flower heads that visitors could take as a memento. In this setting, the presence of these two influential Queens was reinstated in their iconic house at Greenwich.

Amy Miller
Curator, Decorative Arts and Material Culture
Royal Museums Greenwich



Queen Henrietta Maria, 2013
129 x 104 cm
Thread and print on canvas



Golden Dawn

In this work, Alice Kettle stitches together two narratives; the Greek myth of Theseus and the Minotaur and the story of Golden Dawn, a far-right party that has risen to prominence in Greece during a period of economic instability.

Kettle brings these two separate stories together through the use of golden thread. In the myth, golden thread was given by Ariadne to Theseus to mark his route, enabling him to emerge victorious from the Labyrinth. Today, threads of Greek history are being woven together by *Golden Dawn* to create a specific, nationalistic rhetoric.

Kettle's works are like tapestries in scale, taking months of slow stitching to produce texture, light, shadows and glistening form.

Purchased by the Northern Rock Foundation Craft Acquisition Fund.
Kindly lent by Shipley Museum and Art Gallery, Gateshead



Golden Dawn, 2014
160 x 360cm
Thread and print on canvas



The Dog Loukanikos and the Cat's Cradle

This piece depicts three girls playing cat's cradle with a golden thread. They stand behind the dog Loukanikos (an actual dog who became a symbol of the Greek anti-austerity protests in 2010), and who barks at a group of riot police who are constrained by another golden thread. Amanda Ravetz, Research Professor Manchester School of Art, writes, 'Like the dog of Hades, Loukanikos mediates politics and magic, reproduction and territorialisation, dream and disillusionment'. This work suggests a continual tension between cynicism and change and between power and powerlessness.

Alice Kettle



The Dog Loukanikos and the Cat's Cradle, 2015
217 x 520 cm
Thread and print on canvas

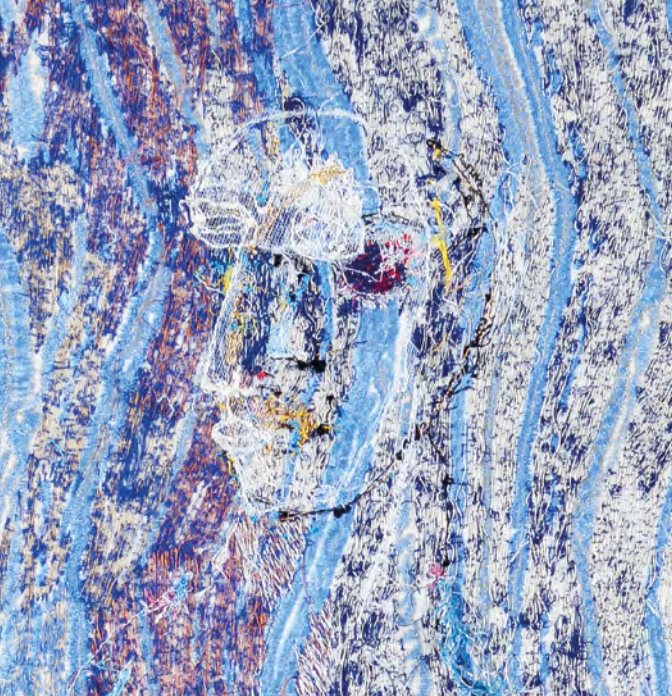
Sea Figure – Island

The work was made for the exhibition *The Scalloped Edge* in Galeria dos Prazeres in 2016. In this piece the sea doesn't appear to be quiet but the female figure seems to be floating in a very peaceful and relaxed way. Her body looks as though it is part of the water that surrounds her. In a way the water and the female figure are made of the same material, not the thread, but the atoms. She looks like she is following the current of the sea and the waves, as in the traditional medieval story of the lovers Ana d'Arfet and Robert Machin, whose boat was marooned on Madeira island, when they ran away from England, to live out their forbidden love. The body of this female figure can also be an island, a floating island, a limb slowly separating from the main European continent, as part of the recent political currents in Britain. Apart from these real and fiction connections, there is the other obvious link between this piece and the two islands of Madeira and Great Britain, through embroidery itself. It is with thread that Kettle connects the physical and the imaginary points of both to draw a new bridge between the two places and their embroidery art traditions.

Hugo Olim
Curator
Galeria dos Prazeres, Madeira



Sea Figure - Island, 2016
201 x 127 cm
Thread on linen



Sea Figure

The waves are repeated curves. They are the scalloped edge typical of Madeiran embroidery drawn to become the sea. I spent time in Madeira working with women using traditional Madeira stitchwork. The characteristic colours are blue and white, with flowing lines and recurrent motifs. A figure is in the waves, swimming, submerged and floating. Madeira and Britain are islands where the sea currents pass between them. This piece reflects on the undercurrents, the movement and passage ways connected by water. It can hang either way vertical or horizontal since like the sea, the currents change.

Alice Kettle



Sea Figure, 2016
223 x 128 cm
Thread on linen

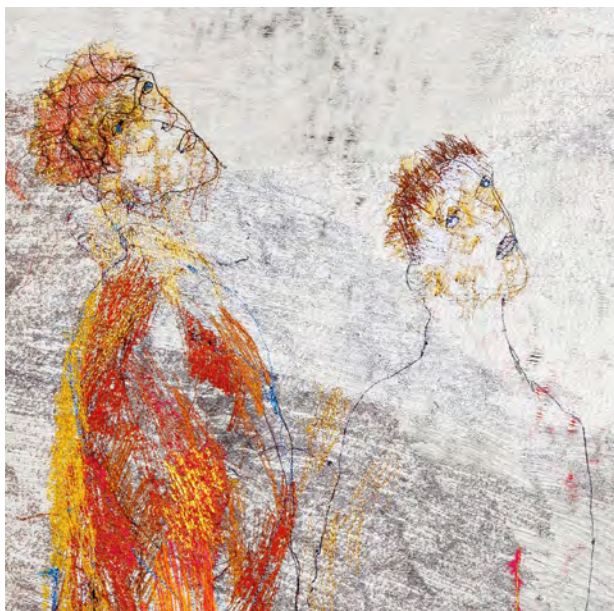
Incubus

The incubus is a mythological figure who seduces women in their sleep. My name sake, the medieval Alice Kyteler (gaelic for Kettle) from Kilkenny, was accused of sorcery, heresy and sleeping with an incubus. She was condemned in one of the first recorded witch trials in the 14th century. Here is my own incubus.

Alice Kettle



Incubus, 2011
90 x 96 cm
Thread on canvas and felt



*Rest at Night
The Sun from shining,
Nature – and some Men –
Rest at Noon – some Men –
While Nature
And the Sun – go on*

Sunbathers

Made for Candida Stevens Gallery, 2017 exhibition *Good Nature*. I had been working through the winter in the dark and realised I was dreaming of the sun. Good nature implies optimism, much like the change of the seasons which move from bleak, sharp greyness into warmth and light. I watched the light as it lifted the dark. This piece mapped this emergence and became about watching as the sun entered and brightened the white empty space, that I had made through the winter, to encourage the grey light to be brighter. Stitching is rhythmic much like the cyclical rising and awakening of the day. The sunbathers watch as I have watched the sun. Its' singularity is like nature, shared and felt together. I thought of the sun that goes on and on in *Rest at Night* by Emily Dickinson, knowing that the goodness of nature is that it goes on despite us.

Alice Kettle



Sunbathers, 2017
147 x 205 cm
Thread on linen



Spring

These two figures are about hope, newness and new beginnings. They are waiting and watching.

Alice Kettle

Spring Light, 2017
115 x 63 cm
Thread and print on canvas



Spring Flowers, 2017
115 x 63 cm
Thread and print on canvas



Collage

This technique is often used by Alice as a means for visualising larger ideas. Using paper and paint she can 'sketch' out a scene. They become artworks in their own right.

Small works in textile often emerge as spontaneous creations using what is in the studio. The *objets trouvés* of Alice Kettle's oeuvre.

Candida Stevens

Collage, 2009
Mixed media collage
70 x 88 cm



Two Blue Trees, 2016
Thread on cotton
23 x 30 cm



Blue Tree, 2016
Thread on cotton
23 x 30 cm



Spring Walk, 2017
Thread on cotton and felt
28 x 33 cm



Space Man, 2017
Thread on cotton and felt
46 x 54 cm

Sea

Sea is the first of several planned new works which Alice is making for *Thread Bearing Witness* her major project which begins at the Winchester Discovery Centre, in the Gallery (with *Alice Kettle: Threads*) and concludes with an exhibition at the Whitworth, University of Manchester in autumn 2018. *Sea* represents Alice's earliest experience, mediated by the UK media, of the migrant crisis, followed by conversations with her daughter, Tamsin (which informed the development of *Thread Bearing Witness*) and then the first of her meetings with refugees in the south of England. This first work illustrates this development of Alice's perception, from a broad concern for groups of anonymous people as viewed through the distorting lens of the media, to a greater understanding of the impact on individuals and a search for a way to show support and represent them, through the shared mediums of textiles and stitch. Alice's sensibilities shine through as she talks about the making of this work, her concerns about appropriation, getting it wrong, misrepresenting strong people who have been through so much, reflecting a helplessness we all somewhat feel. *Thread Bearing Witness* is a form of portraiture, of which *Sea* is the first to give voice to its subjects.

Mark Segal
the artists agency



Sea, (Detail) 2017
284 x 792 cm
Thread on printed canvas

Alice Kettle is currently Professor of Textile Arts, MIRIAD, Manchester School of Art, Manchester Metropolitan University

Education:

- 2014 Manchester School of Art, MMU Pd.D student
- 1985–86 Goldsmiths' College Postgraduate Diploma in Textile Art with special commendation
- 1979–84 University of Reading BA Hons Fine Art

Selected Solo Exhibitions:

- 2016 Alice Kettle, Prazeres Gallery, Madeira Island
- 2015 Here and Now, Circus performance Alice Kettle, Circus and CAA Gallery, London
- 2014 Alice Kettle Odyssey, Pallant House Gallery, Chichester
- 2013 The Garden of England, The Queens House, The National Maritime Museum Greenwich London
- 2012 Alice Kettle, ANU School of Art, Australia
- 2012 The Shape of Touch, Merston Gallery
- 2010 Telling Fortunes, Platt Hall, Museum of Costume, Manchester
- 2009/11 Allegory Craft Study Centre, Farnham and tour; Dorchester Museum; The Gallery in the Bay Cardiff; Farfield Mill Sedburgh; The Willis Museum Basingstoke
- 2009 A Pause in the Rhythm of Time, Belger Arts Centre, Kansas City, Surface Design Association, USA
- 2006 Salisbury Arts Centre
- 2003–5 Mythscapes : Bankfield Museum, Halifax; Touring to Birmingham; The Gallery, Ruthin Craft Centre; Southampton City Art Gallery; Hove Museum and Art Gallery; Brewery Arts, Kendal; South Hill Park, Bracknell; Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museum; Grace Barrand Design Centre, Surrey, Myles Meehan Gallery, Darlington; Harley Gallery, Worksop
- 2003 Featured Artist, The Knitting and Stitching Show, London, Dublin and Harrogate
- 2002 Newbury Spring Festival
- 1992 Salisbury Playhouse
- 1991 Galerie Filambule, Lausanne, Switzerland
- 1990 My Eyes, Your Hands, Brewery Arts Centre, Kendal
- 1990 Alice Kettle – Showcase, ICA, London
- 1988 Oxford Gallery
- 1988 Quay Art Centre, Newport, Isle of Wight
- 1987 University College Chichester
- 1987 Painting and Textiles, Oxford Gallery
- 1986 Oxford Gallery

Public Collections:

Liverpool International Slavery Museum
Museum of Decorative Art and Design, Riga, Latvia
Ararat Art Gallery, Victoria, Australia
Belger Collection, Kansas City USA
Hove Museum & Art Gallery
Portsmouth City Art Gallery
The Otter Art Gallery, University College Chichester
The Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester
Crafts Council of Great Britain
The Embroiderers' Guild
St Mary's College, Baltimore, USA
The Prudential Collection
The Broadgate Club, London.
Hampshire Museums Service
Calderdale MBC: Museums and Arts
The Embroiderers' Guild, NSW, Australia
Museo Internazionale delle Arti Applicate Oggi, Turin, Italy
Manchester City Art Gallery, (ceramic collaboration with Alex McErlain)
Special Collections Gallery, Manchester Metropolitan University
(ceramic collaboration with Alex McErlain)
Platt Hall Gallery of Costume. Manchester
York Castle Museum Gallery (ceramic collaboration with Alex McErlain)

With many thanks to all the contributors.

Published by Candida Stevens Gallery on the occasion of Alice Kettle: *Threads* at The Gallery, Winchester Discovery Centre and Alice Kettle: *More Threads* at Candida Stevens Gallery

Photography by Joe Low and Dan Stevens

CANDIDA
STEVENS
GALLERY



MANCHESTER
SCHOOL OF ART



Alice Kettle: *Threads* is the first part of Alice Kettle's major project, *Thread Bearing Witness*, which concludes with a major exhibition at The Whitworth, The University of Manchester in 2018. Alice Kettle: *More Threads* is an independent complementary exhibition run in tandem by Alice Kettle's representing gallery, Candida Stevens Gallery, and is not financially supported by the *Thread Bearing Witness* project or its funders.

Thread Bearing Witness is financially supported by the Whitworth, The University of Manchester, Manchester Metropolitan University, Design Manchester, and public funding from the National Lottery through Arts Council England. The Travelling Heritage Bureau of Displaced Women Artists is funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund.

the **Whitworth** [DWAN]





CANDIDA
STEVENS
GALLERY



HAMPSHIRE
CULTURAL
TRUST

ISBN 978-0-9931651-1-5