

Susan Cross: Retrospective

Scottish Gallery, Edinburgh

September 7th – October 2nd 2013

Susan Cross' career and exhibition history leads, with admirable directness, from her graduations from Herefordshire College of Art and Design and Middlesex Polytechnic in the early 1980s and her arrival in Scotland in 1989, via shows, solo and as part of a group, in places as far apart as Edinburgh, San Francisco, Kyoto, and Auckland among others, to the award of the Jerwood Prize in 2007, and her Readership at Edinburgh College of Art in 2008. She and her work appear in publications internationally from as early as 1989, and this underpins a continuing history of inspiring teaching, lecturing and professional practice which has been equally busy, and just as international. The work is in a number of public collections, including those of the National Museums of Scotland and the Victoria and Albert Museum; the exhibition and publication history shows a continuing presence among the key indicators of a developing applied art form. And, and this is just as important, it is also out on the clothes and bodies of a large number of appreciative wearers.

Time, therefore, for an overview, and this exhibition at the Scottish Gallery, her fourth solo show here, gives us a fascinating opportunity to see the development of Susan's work as the persistent learning and discovery process it undoubtedly is, right from the domestic learning process which began with knitting and crochet at home as a child. We are given the opportunity to see the work advance from the early wire-textile forms to the balanced suspension pendants to the experiments with enamel currently in hand, and see how they speak to each other and to us. Some of them demonstrate their maker's characteristic association of the consistently assured technique, foregrounded in Susan's Jerwood citation, with courageous experiment, not least in precious metals: the silver and gold sequin and the Ric-Rac neckpieces of 1993 and 2010 show us a sustained expertise and, interestingly, perhaps a hardening aesthetic. The more recent pieces are bolder in form and colour: the Rebel in the Soul and Seacliff neckpieces, combining grey silver embossed oval forms and thread, are sizeable, busy, and noisy in their interaction with the moving wearer. Seacliff began as a necklace made with shells on a beach.

A very evident connecting thread which joins these pieces is the enduring interest in drawing, and specifically in adventures with line, married to an enjoyment of the traditional materials and practices of other cultures, Chinese ink printing on bamboo paper among them. Susan has an active archive of drawings and workbooks which demonstrate a deeply embedded practice: she draws to think and to explore and play as well as to record, and her three-dimensional work carries that forward in her use of wire, thread, and fabric-reminiscent textures, particularly in the more recent work, and even in the enamel pieces, which are clearly going to develop further. The fascination with linear shapes and constructions has a natural connection with the lifelong use of the hand worked thread and textile idioms which appear and reappear in Susan's working patterns, and are refreshed by travel and research abroad, not least in Korea, which provided some of the traditional thread elements in the mixed-medium works. The extraordinary oxidised silver wire panel-constructed gloves of

1988 do lead to the metal and cotton combinations and the crossed thread patterns in the enamel, via the wire-wrapped tubes of the Jerwood period.

With the lines and threads goes a sense of connection, of complex interwoven forms, and of the interaction of shapes and colours: the Concentration brooches coil paper cord and flash loose red cotton threads; the series of Twist, Loop and Tangle brooches in gold and oxidised silver lead the eye around their twisted and coiled or flattened pearl-wire; a transparent square wire cushion includes more of the gold sequins in its entanglements. The Enclosure brooch of 2009 perhaps draws this all together in its use of Ric-Rac wire which encloses a coiled pink thread lining. The sense of containment and security is strong: the garment to which it is pinned, and ultimately its wearer, form the base of the oxidised silver nest – it is both enclosed and transparent, and we might see this as an enduring characteristic of Susan's work: the wearer, a consistent priority from the start, often, and by intention, adds an extra dimension to an object which already has a powerful presence rooted in the quality and innovation of its design and fabrication and the appeal of its colours and texture.

Prof. Elizabeth Moignard 2013