

L'art feminine

Essay by Claire Doherty.

Published in catalogue for *Cosy: Freddie Robins*, firstsite, Colchester, 2002.

ISBN 0-948252-14-6

"You work hard, Madame," said a man near her.

"Yes," answered Madame Defarge; "I have a good deal to do."

"What do you make, Madame?"

"Many things."

"For instance..."

"For instance," returned Madame Defarge, composedly, "shrouds."

Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*

The dramatic impact of one of Dickens' most effectively vengeful and portentous characters, Madame Defarge, in his novel *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), relies upon the subversion of 'the feminine'. Dickens invokes this culturally formulated category through the metaphor of the knitting woman, only to invert her gentle associations by having her surreptitiously knit a registry of names bound for the gallows. Her character presides over the narrative of his text like a brooding deviant; her methodical vengeance seeming all the more abhorrent due to her employment of the craft for precisely the opposite of its accustomed purpose - namely protection.

Freddie Robins employs a similar device to disrupt the given of 'the feminine'. Her aberrant knitted objects make us distinctly uneasy, precisely because they too invoke, "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (Freud's classification of the Uncanny).¹ Displaced into the clinical environment of the gallery for public examination, their dislocation from a private world, from some other intended use, seems all the more potent. These works do not operate simply to provide the spectacle of the uncanny encounter, however. They are difficult and uncompromising. They refuse to settle inside the frame of display as mere freaks or curiosities, like the stuffed kittens or two-headed lambs of Robins' childhood visits to Potter's Museum of Curiosities. They oscillate between the dream and the nightmare, between comfort and suffocation, protection and harm - even between the indistinct categories of fine art and craft. They leave you with too many absences - the absent maker, the absent use and the absent body. They also

position the viewer precariously between the cultural category of the essential 'feminine' and its undoing. Leaving one to ask whether the work succeeds in speaking from a position that it is simultaneously trying to transform.

The feminine has remained a fiercely contested site of representation and activity since the inception of feminist art practice and criticism in the early 1970s. And nowhere is it more contentious than in the employment of traditionally 'female' crafts. Responses to the exhibition *The Subversive Stitch: Women and Textiles Today* in 1988, for example, confirmed this uneasiness between a valorisation of embroidery, knitting and textiles and the subversion of the essentialist notion of 'woman'. In her retrospective analysis of the show, curator Pennina Barnett asserted that the strategies utilised in the exhibition were deconstructive and destabilising, and did interrogate the role of textiles in shaping social and cultural notions of the feminine, yet that it had become "almost impossible to talk of 'women's activities', 'women' or even of 'woman' as fixed categories?"²

How might Freddie Robins' work have fared within the curatorial and critical context of the late 1980s? Might it have been seen to be complicit in the reassertion of an essential(ist) femaleness? One might at first assume that Robins' practice falls into the category proposed by Judith Barry and Sandy Flitterman in their influential article *Textual strategies: the politics of art making*³, namely a type of art by women which proposes, "a feminist counter tradition...(and) avoids ideological distinction between 'high' and 'low' cultural forms", but which "is an essentialist position in as much as it views women as having an inherent creativity that simply goes unrecognised by mainstream culture...(and) therefore has limited ability to transform the structural definitions of 'art'."⁴

Yet, concurrent with *The Subversive Stitch* exhibition, there emerged another reading of the feminine, which might assist in the analysis of Robins' employment of the feminine as a structural device. In a catalogue text on the work of American artist Nancy Spero, Lisa Tickner proposed the category of *la peinture féminine* (a reworking of the notion of *l'écriture féminine* proposed by French philosopher Julia Kristeva) - this is a discursive category which embraces difference, transgression, unfixity and ambiguity through the subversion of existing visual codes. The activity of *L'écriture* or *la peinture féminine* was not exclusive to women (Julia Kristeva lists Stephan Mallarmé and James Joyce among the radical authors of a 'feminine' tradition), but rather the feminine might be read as a positive, alternative literary or

visual syntax which had the potential to "transform the hierarchies and fixities of an existing social order through the ruin and transformation of its cultural practices".⁵

In 2002, the feminine has been reclaimed and transformed, emerging from the handmade, craft aesthetic of the 1990s to manifest itself in a series of practices which exploit the non-art potential of materials to subvert prevalent social codes. Grayson Perry's radical and provocative ceramics, Yinka Shonibare's incongruous employment of African batik fabrics and Tracey Emin's cathartic and scandalous embroideries all disrupt perceived notions of sexual propriety and gender fixity through so-called 'feminine' materials and skills.

It is this context in which Freddie Robins' work operates as *l'art feminine*. Her *Knitted Homes of Crime*, for example, literally destabilise the cultural formation of 'home' and its alignment with the domestic. The work problematises the 'woman's place' through the visual sign of 'home' and crucially also through a material (knitted wool) previously assigned the values of protection and nurture. In the juxtaposition of this mythic construction and the sites of extreme violence - the work mimics the polarities of 'woman' and 'perpetrator of violent crime' in contemporary society. Unlike Dickens' Madame Defarge, these objects and garments have no narrative framework in which their effect might be contained; rather they operate as distinctly disturbing entities which work quietly on the psyche. They disrupt prevalent values about culturally prescribed dichotomies between fine art and craft, between masculine and feminine.

Robins, then, not only invokes the uncanny through a series of seductive and repelling encounters, but also literally destabilises the categories of home and the feminine through their own visual languages. She exploits the implicit and explicit values ascribed to the material of knitted clothing and the activity of knitting - care, comfort, protection, tranquillity, continuity with the past; quiet, laborious labour - to produce a series of intriguing mutants which act as nightmarish prosthetics for ourselves.

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¹ See Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny", in Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works, vol. XV11, trans. James Strachey, et. Al, The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953

² Pennina Barnett, "Curating the Subversive Stitch", in Katy Deepwell (ed.), *New feminist art criticism*, Manchester University Press, 1995, p. 80

³ Reproduced in Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement 1970 – 1985*, Pandora, 1987, pp. 313-321

⁴ Barry and Flitterman, p. 316

⁵ Lisa Tucker, 'Nancy Spero: Images of women and la peinture féminine', Nancy Spero (exhibition catalogue), ICA, London 1987, p. 8