

Joking Apart: the work of Freddie Robins

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Discussing her work with the curator Linda Theophilus for her solo exhibition *Cosy* [2002], Freddie Robins remarked that her knitted pieces present “ a way of dealing with horrific things... I am making them bearable. Like making jokes about things that really upset you”.¹ In addressing her statement to her audience (‘you’), Robins highlights the social character of jokes noted by Sigmund Freud as one of the characteristics of what he termed ‘the joke-work’: the urge to communicate, and the joke-work’s need to ‘commit itself to the condition of intelligibility’.² By utilising the quotidian craft of knitting, Robins is able to address a diverse audience while at the same time subverting the spatial location of knitting as domestic activity usually undertaken in the privacy of the home.

Freud’s attempt to analyse the complexity of joke formation and reception allows us to draw out the multiple associations which Robins’ work invites its audience to participate in. Her work communicates both as image, and through its use of punning/joking titles. As Freud noted: “What we receive from a witty remark is a total impression, in which we are not able to separate the share contributed by the thought-content from the share made by the success of the joke”.³ Thus in *Anyway*, *Forewarned*, and *Forearmed*, text and image are inseparable in registering their meaning, although the “jokinness of joke”⁴ lies in the materials and medium used to express the idea: cosy wool and knitting. Coincidentally, Freud draws on the metaphor of clothing to evoke the joke’s strategies such as the value of the thought ‘clad in a joke’ [p128], or as a ‘costume’ [p129]. However, it is the combination of form and thought-content which, joking apart, drives the serious undertone of *Forewarned* and *Forearmed*, crosses and arms, signalling a host of unnamed but imaginable dangers.

Sign language is based on an economy of means to convey a complex set of ideas. While the art historian Dawn Ades has remarked on Robins' affinity with surrealist word-play "for its capacity to liberate words from their mechanical utilitarian functions to spark unexpected and revealing associations",⁵ Robins' word play exploits the economy of condensation inherent in the joke-work and in visual graphic communication.

One clear and apparent danger is situating knitting in the artist's space. Robins has not subverted the practice itself and all her work is precisely and expertly produced. *Anyway* was the result of a collaboration with the William Lee Innovation Centre at the University of Manchester (formerly UMIST). All her pieces are recognisable as knitted fabric though she employs both hand and machine in the production of the work depending on the demands of the piece. More significant has been her background in fashion with the textile company Tait & Style, following her graduation from the Royal College of Art in Constructed Textiles in 1989, which has endowed her work with a particular alertness to the body and its social environment. So by referencing arms through the use of four sleeves in *Forewarned* and *Forearmed* the pieces are able to convey the socialised character of cultural communication through visual and verbal signs.

Clothes are also inevitably human in their scale. Although Robins has cited the miniature in works such as the *Knitted Homes of Crimes* series (2002), the human scale has been a constant referent and standard. While clothing textiles are inevitably associated with covering the body, it is in terms of the body's scale that these works signal the body's intervention in space. Susan Stewart noted in her exploration of the meanings of scale that the body "has served as our primary mode of understanding and perceiving scale"⁶. This finds expression in English measurements based on bodily scale: spans of hands and feet, a yard as the length from nose to fingers at the end of an outstretched arm.⁷ *Anyway* brilliantly exploits a body's sense of scale and how it can be encompassed through the metonymy of its outstretched sleeves. However, whereas the impact of *Forearmed* and *Forewarned* is visually (and verbally) graphic, the inclusion of the torso in *Anyway* signifies the contingent sense of embodiment in any understanding of space which, despite gravity, is conceptually 'any-way'.

The domestic scale implicit in knitting as 'genre' (rather than simply as a technique) returns us to the joke-work. If, as Stewart observes "the proper amplitude of form depends upon the expectations of the genre"⁸, then there is some humour in encountering knitting in the art space. Acknowledging the ambivalence of this manoeuvre is contained in Robins' joke-work and arises from the cultural contradiction of such a displacement. The works insertion into the gallery space marks the staking out of an embodied claim on the abstracted space of art in which knitting as signifier of unremarkable production is reconfigured as spatial measure and visual sign.

¹ *Cosy:Freddie Robins*, catalogue, firstsite, Colechester, Essex, 2002, [np.]

² S. Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), trans. J. Crick and intro. J. Carey, London: Penguin Books, 2002; pp 140, 175.

³ Ibid p. 91.

⁴ Ibid p.92.

⁵ D. Ades, "Freddie Robins – Body, Nobody, Somebody, Anybody" in *Cosy* op. cit.

⁶ S. Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Durham/London: Duke University Press, 1993, p.101.

⁷ Ibid p. 102.

⁸ Ibid p.95.