

Exhibition Review

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Smith's Row, Bury St Edmunds, July 12– September 1, 2012

Celebrating its fortieth birthday, Smith's Row, formerly known as Bury St Edmunds' Art Gallery, has played a vital role in offering time and space for early- and mid-career artists to produce new work, exhibit, and take up training opportunities as part of their professional development. Thus the gallery has operated within the scope of a "ladder" gallery, part of a network of such venues across the UK.

Transformations showcases a group of eight such artists, selected for the ways in which their work operates within the field of contemporary visual arts, whilst also subverting its conventions through their choice of media, most particularly referencing craft techniques. Four of the artists, Catherine Bertola, Maxine Bristow, Susan Collis, and Freddie Robins draw on textile, textile language, and textile processes to explore and challenge fine art conventions, confounding and confusing subject-object dualisms through their hand-making and time-consuming processes. The other

four artists, Ben Coode-Adams, Roger Hiorns, Haroon Mirza, and Caroline Wright bring together conflicting and competing ideas and materials, opening up relationships between artist, materials, and processes such that the emergent artworks simultaneously evoke embodied understanding and refute definition.

Susan Collis exquisitely stitches paint splashes and smears onto worker's overalls bringing the hidden work of the artist to consciousness. The worthless marks reveal themselves as the time-consuming activity of hand-stitching. In both *100% Cotton* (2004) and in *Revival* (2011), exhibited alongside, unconscious and conscious become fused and yet remain separated within and across the surface.

In contrast Roger Hiorns' sculptural practice is an alchemical transformation: copper sulfate crystals inhabit and overwhelm objects, creating new and seemingly living colonizations. *Discipline* (2002) (Figure 1), an

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Figure 1

Roger Hiorns, *Discipline* (2002), steel, thistles, copper sulfate, Velcro, 114 × 66 × 51 cm. Courtesy of Smiths Row Gallery.



installation of crystallized thistles metamorphoses weeds into abstract blooms, glittering and entrapped. Hiorns expands and extends, bringing excess to detritus, still life to dead matter. He offers integration and separation in a seemingly continuous event of the work's production, hovering perpetually in the space between material and form.

Ben Coode-Adams' working and thinking processes are opened out through photographs juxtaposed with low-tech felt-tip pen drawings and corrugated cardboard sculptures. In his images the viewer is confronted by a predilection with paths, dykes, and rivers heading off into the far distance, begging questions of purpose and destination (Figure 2). Clues are provided by the

accompanying drawings and sculptures, where the visible and photographable slip and slide into ideas and imaginings. Are these pre-linguistic expressions of inhabitations of the landscapes? The landscape reveals burial chambers, conflating the hope and desire of the open road ahead with the depth and despair of interment. Death pulls the figures onward.

Remaining in archaeological mode Catherine Bertola's work evokes the past by partially recreating a 1766 carpet design (Figure 3). Through fragmentation Bertola draws attention to the activity of production at the same time as its inverse—degradation, fusing past, present, and future within and between the stitches of the hidden and anonymous

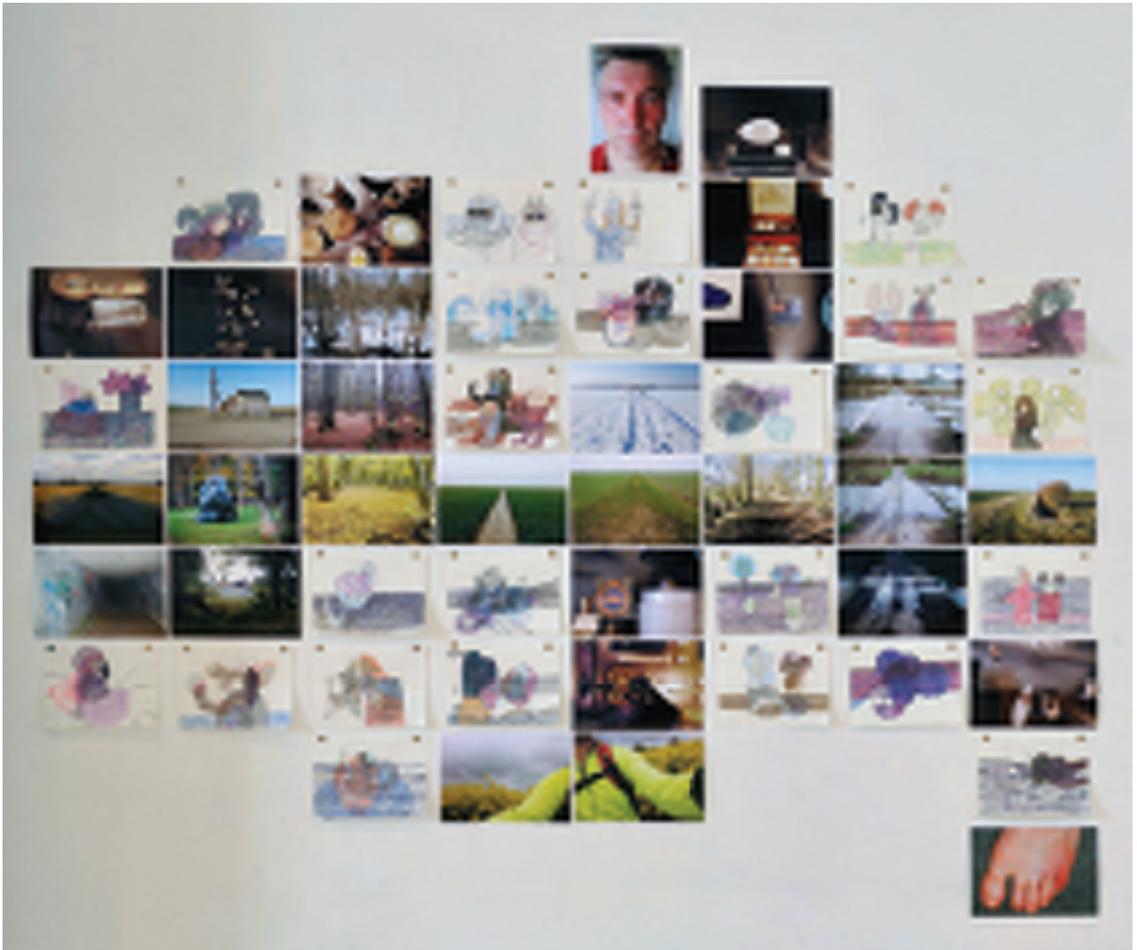


Figure 2

Ben Coode-Adams, *Poles Apart* (2002–10), installation of blog pages: photographs, drawings with felt-tip pen, approx. 300 × 200 cm. Courtesy of Smiths Row Gallery.

workers. This work suspends the ephemeral and foregrounds the ubiquitous.

Where Bertola brings hidden working practices into the daylight, Freddie Robins offers a challenge to the notion of knitting as a passive, benign activity. In *Craft Kills* (2002) (Figure 4), a self-portrait based on St Sebastian's martyrdom, knitting needles pierce a knitted body form. Robins

presents the viewer with an empty, passive jumper-being, referencing the need for an inner body to animate, activate, and support alongside challenging the perceived "safety" of such activities through humor. In this work and the accompanying drawings, Robins brings conformity to subversion, setting knitting not as an activity of safety and comfort-production, but rather as a series

of actions and processes through which identity and subjectivity can be formed and expressed. Robins upsets notions of utilitarianism in favor of artistic expressionism, function, and form in favor of conceptual rigor. In so doing she rejects craft-art arguments as irrelevant and misplaced borderlines.

By way of a strikingly different set of processes and



Figure 3

Catherine Bertola, *The Palace at Hillstreet* (2009), handwoven needlepoint on canvas, approx. 300 × 300 cm. Courtesy of Smiths Row Gallery.

preoccupations, Maxine Bristow explores the intimate and troubled relationship between minimalist sculpture and architectural/physical features (Figure 5). Here Bristow presents a series of forms, part objects, and suggestions of items of furniture that speak in a corporeal language. The elements carry ambiguous connotations of utility whilst defying clear categorization. In this work material culture butts up against and mingles with a minimalist aesthetic that enables and encourages both exchange and subversion to cohabit in an extraordinarily subtle way, but one that is nonetheless powerful for

that subtlety. Bristow achieves this through textile materials and processes, revealing the potency of cloth as simultaneously concept, metaphor, process, and matter. Bristow is not about softening minimalist aesthetics, but rather confounding and confusing traditional dialectics.

Working across disciplines the artists and works brought together in *Transformations* could appear disparate, selected because of their connections with Smith's Row. However what is revealed here is a powerful exhibition of work underpinned by common questioning and challenging of the boundaries that govern the realm

Figure 4

Freddie Robins, *Craft Kills* (2002) and *Untitled* (2011), knitting, knitting needles, ink drawing on paper, approx. 300 × 300 × 200 cm. Courtesy of Smiths Row Gallery.

**Figure 5**

Maxine Bristow, *Untitled* (2012), wood, felt, embroidered cotton, faux leather, dimensions variable. Courtesy of Smiths Row Gallery.

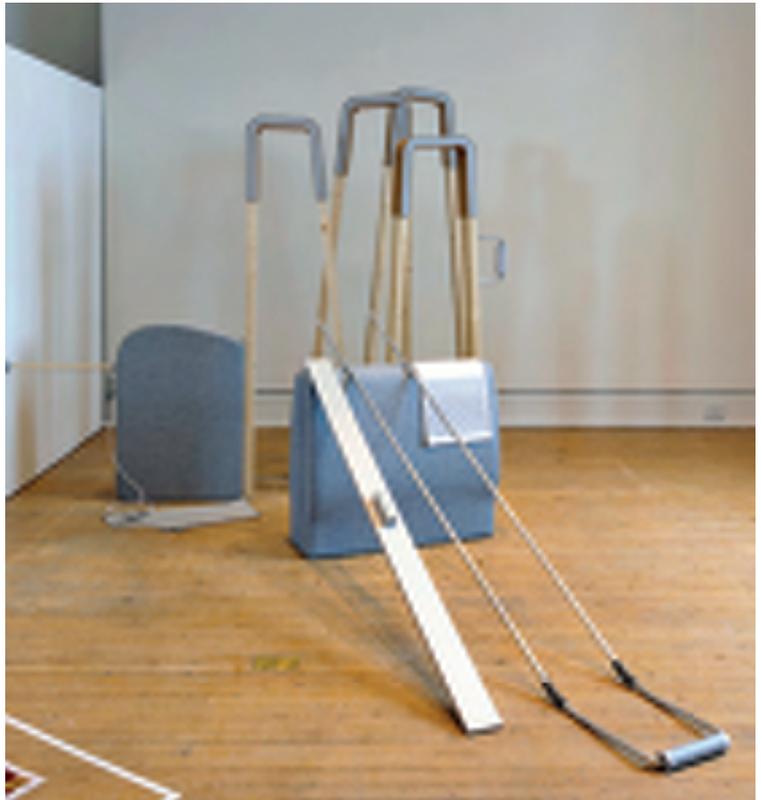




Figure 6
Gallery view. Courtesy of Smiths Row Gallery.

of fine art (Figure 6). Where Collis, Hiorns, and Coode-Adams represent the working processes of art-making, Bertola, Robins, and Bristow question the mutual exclusivity of assimilation and differentiation within fine art discourses, whilst Mirza and Wright alternatively seduce and reject in a refutation of power play at the boundaries of visual art culture. Here, art-making processes are laid bare, highlighting the role that technical and hand-making skills potentially offer within a conceptual framework.

Awards have followed these artists: Hiorns being nominated for the 2009 Turner Prize, Coode-Adams was shortlisted for the 2008 Jerwood Drawing Prize, Robins and Bristow were both shortlisted for the 2002 Jerwood Applied Arts

Prize, Mirza won the Northern Arts Prize 2010, Bertola was announced as the Northern Visual Artist of the Year 2010, and Wright holds an Arts Council Escalator Visual Arts Award. Such accolades testify to these artists' ability to secure and occupy ground both within and beyond conventional boundaries. This is vital and potent ground that opens up space(s) for recontextualization and celebration of craft techniques, processes, and language.

This exhibition marks the invaluable role ladder galleries play in supporting artists. It also serves as a welcome reminder that material culture and conceptual fine art can, and must, remain intimate bedfellows. Further, the space opened up through occupying this is a rich and powerful one.

