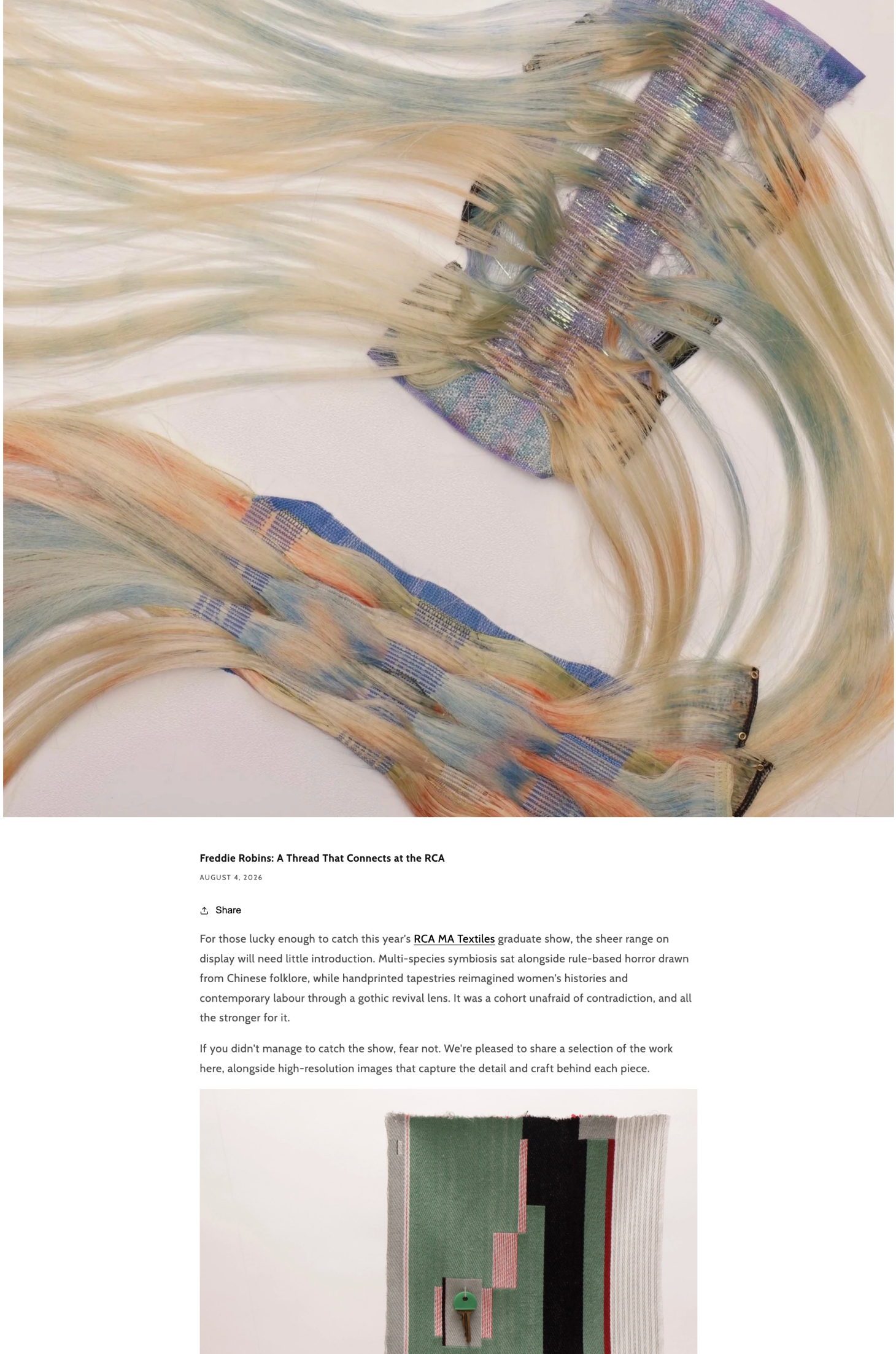


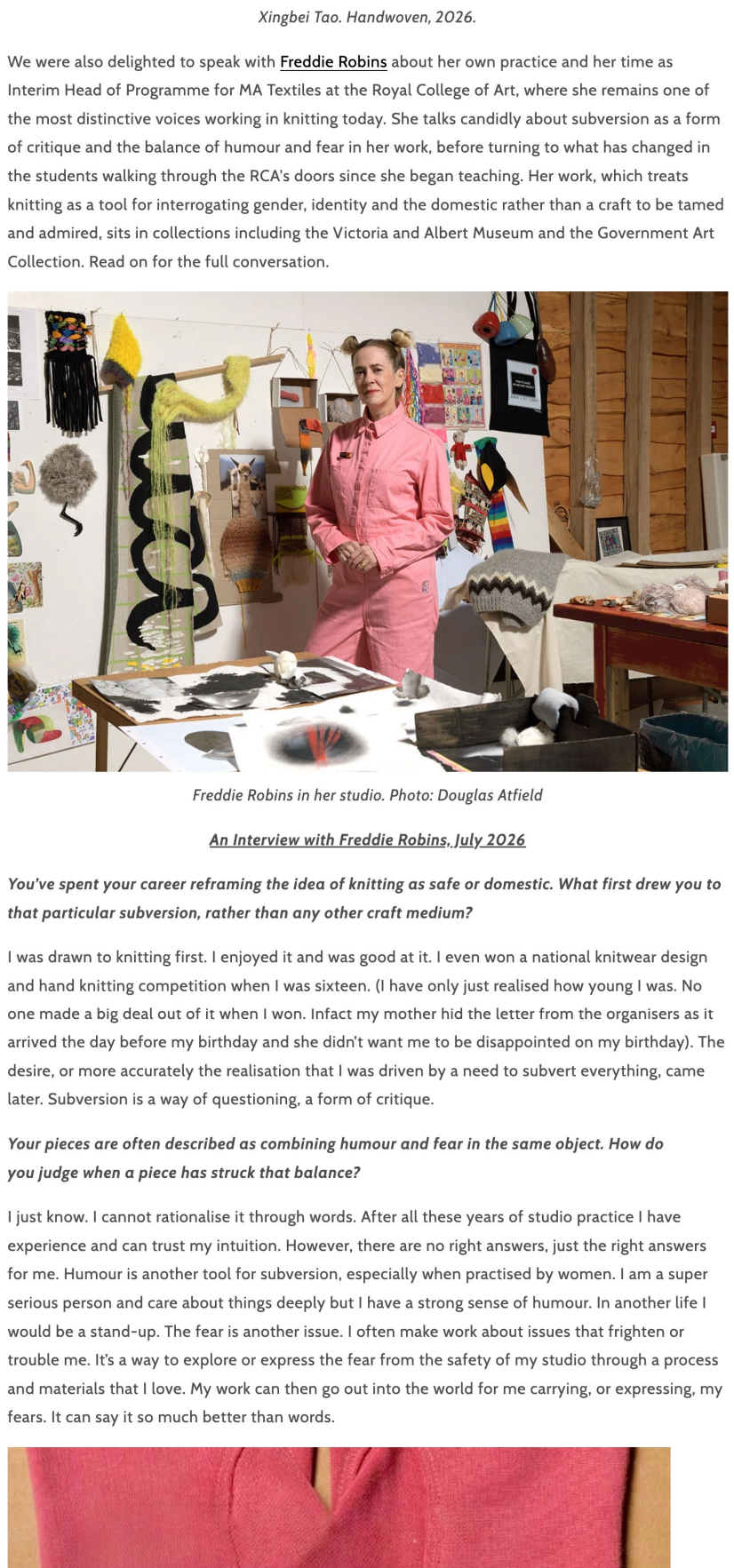


Freddie Robins: A Thread That Connects at the RCA
AUGUST 4, 2024

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For those lucky enough to catch this year's **RCA MA Textiles** graduate show, the sheer range on display will need little introduction. Multi-species symbiosis sat alongside rule-based horror drawn from Chinese folklore, while handprinted tapestries reimagined women's histories and contemporary labour through a gothic revival lens. It was a cohort unafraid of contradiction, and all the stronger for it.

If you didn't manage to catch the show, fear not. We're pleased to share a selection of the work here, alongside high-resolution images that capture the detail and craft behind each piece.



Xingbei Tao, Handwoven, 2026.

We were also delighted to speak with **Freddie Robins** about her own practice and her time as Interim Head of Programme for MA Textiles at the Royal College of Art, where she remains one of the most distinctive voices working in knitting today. She talks candidly about subversion as a form of critique and the balance of humour and fear in her work, before turning to what has changed in the students walking through the RCA's doors since she began teaching. Her work, which treats knitting as a tool for interrogating gender, identity and the domestic rather than a craft to be tamed and admired, sits in collections including the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Government Art Collection. Read on for the full conversation.



Freddie Robins in her studio. Photo: Douglas Atfield

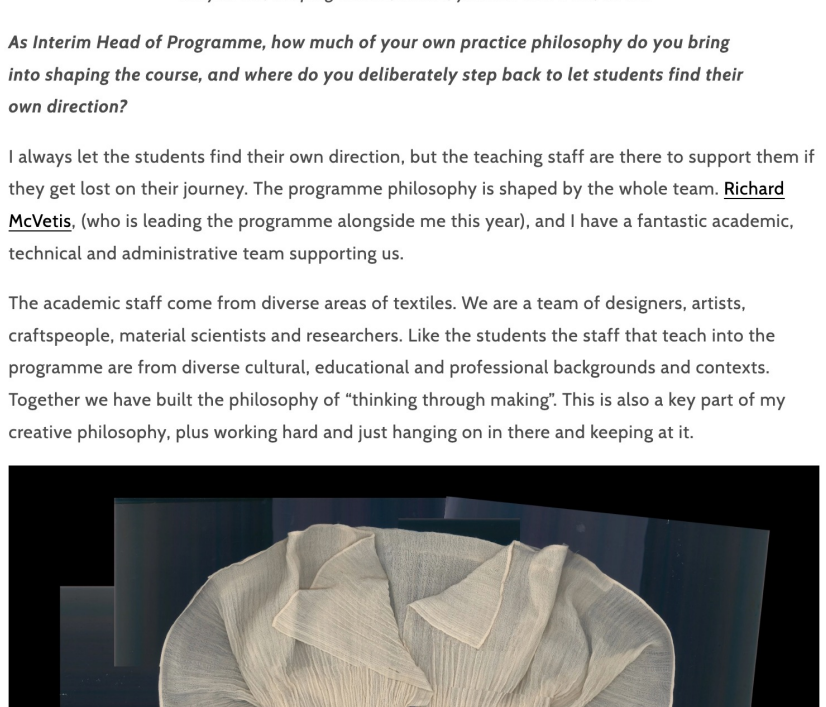
An Interview with Freddie Robins, July 2026

You've spent your career reframing the idea of knitting as safe or domestic. What first drew you to that particular subversion, rather than any other craft medium?

I was drawn to knitting first. I enjoyed it and was good at it. I even won a national knitwear design and hand-knitting competition when I was sixteen. (I have only just realised how young I was. No one made a big deal out of it when I won. In fact my mother hid the letter from the organisers as it arrived the day before my birthday and she didn't want me to be disappointed on my birthday). The desire, or more accurately the realisation that I was driven by a need to subvert everything, came later. Subversion is a way of questioning, a form of critique.

Your pieces are often described as combining humour and fear in the same object. How do you judge when a piece has struck that balance?

I just know. I cannot rationalise it through words. After all these years of studio practice I have experience and can trust my intuition. However, there are no right answers, just the right answers for me. Humour is another tool for subversion, especially when practised by women. I am a super serious person and care about things deeply but I have a strong sense of humour. In another life I would be a stand-up. The fear is another issue. I often make work about issues that frighten or trouble me. It's a way to explore or express the fear from the safety of my studio through a process and materials that I love. My work can then go out into the world for me carrying, or expressing, my fears. It can say it so much better than words.



Above: Freddie Robins, *Plastic (Is Fantastic)*, 2025, Cardboard, reclaimed gloves, plastic knitting needles, dressmaking pins. Below: Angora cuff knitted onto rubber glove, 2025.

The finish on your work is famously exacting. Does that perfectionism serve the concept, or is it a separate discipline you hold yourself to regardless of subject matter?

I have good making skills. These were one of the many wonderful things that I was taught at art school. However, I am not interested in good making skills for the sake of having them. For me knitting is a visual language, and to express myself clearly through it I need to be fluent. This is why good making skills are important in my work. But I am also naturally a perfectionist. This can be limiting and is exhausting but it is just what I am.

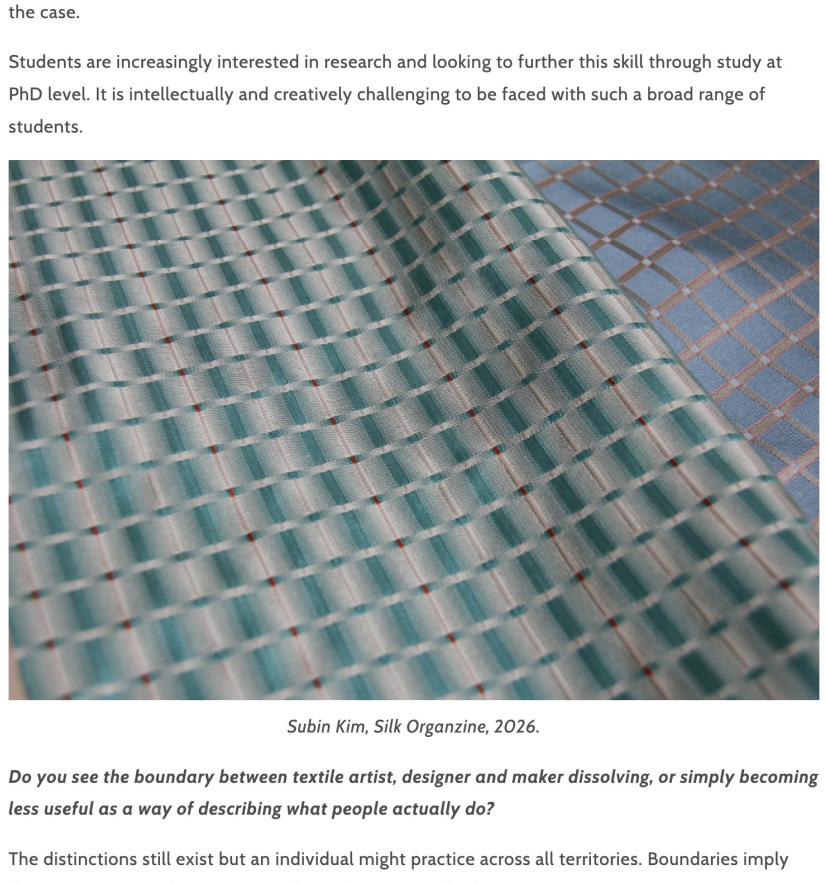


Ruoyan Lai, *Leaping Horses*, weave, yak hair and wool, 2026.

As Interim Head of Programme, how much of your own practice philosophy do you bring into shaping the course, and where do you deliberately step back to let students find their own direction?

I always let the students find their own direction, but the teaching staff are there to support them if they get lost on their journey. The programme philosophy is shaped by the whole team. **Richard McVey**, (who is leading the programme alongside me this year), and I have a fantastic academic, technical and administrative team supporting us.

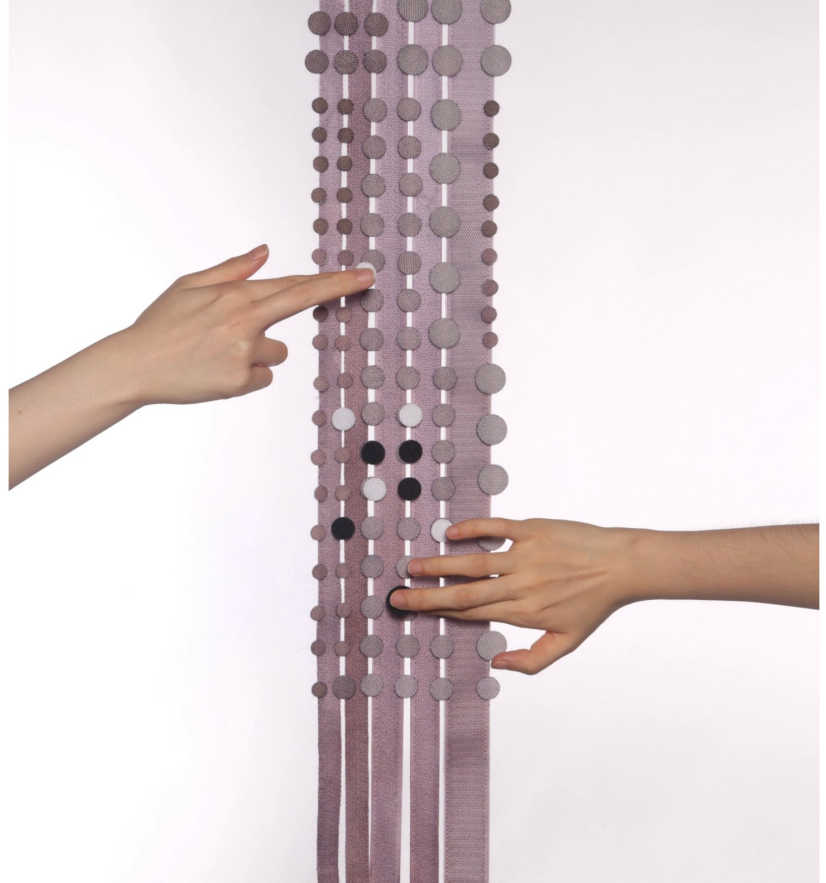
The academic staff come from diverse areas of textiles. We are a team of designers, artists, craftspeople, material scientists and researchers. Like the students the staff that teach into the programme are from diverse cultural, educational and professional backgrounds and contexts. Together we have built the philosophy of "thinking through making". This is also a key part of my creative philosophy, plus working hard and just hanging on in there and keeping at it.



Hannah Brown, *Handwoven 100*, wool, 2026.

The programme talks about "thinking through making" rather than working from fixed concepts. How do you help students trust that process when the outcome isn't clear from the start?

What I hope to do is to instill confidence in the students so that they can "trust to the process" and find their own path. They are studying nearly forty years later than it was. There are many more paths to follow than there were when I was studying. I can't know about everything, but I hope that the confidence that I instill enables students to go out into the world and find, or build, the path that's right for them.



Project by Manwallei Textiles, MA at RCA, 2026, Photo credit: Chris Lee.

What's changed most in the kind of student walking through the door in 2026, compared to when you started teaching?

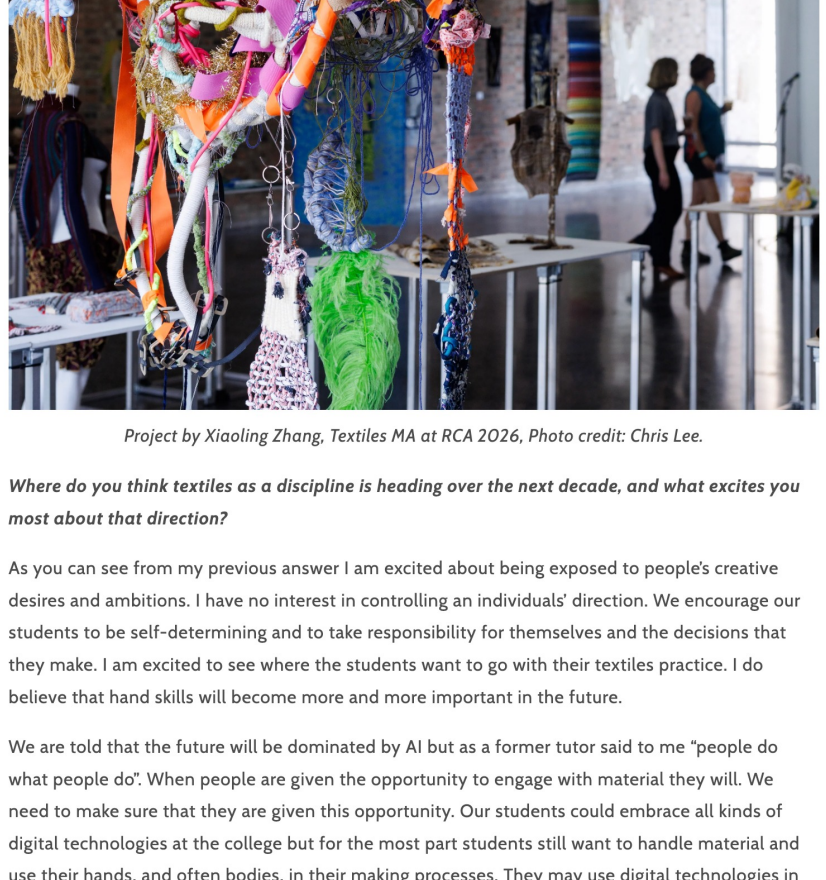
Students now come from much more diverse backgrounds in terms of nationality, professional, educational and cultural background. However, one thing that remains constant is the low number of male, or male identifying students. Textiles is still dominated by women at student level.

Students also have a much greater awareness of the impact that their work may have on the world. Considerations of the climate crisis, sustainability, design for disassembly and the circular economy play a much greater role. Students are embracing nature - natural materials, natural dyeing, colouring and printing processes. There is also an increased interest in well-being and designing for better living and healthcare.

Students are interested in designing new less harmful materials, inspired by designers such as Carmen Hijosa (RCA PhD) who developed an alternative to leather from waste pineapple leaf fibre.

Students are also looking for a greater variety of ways of practising or existing professionally beyond college. They do not all want to enter the textiles industry as designers like they did in the past. The interest in designing for fashion used to dominate the programme but this is no longer the case.

Students are increasingly interested in research and looking to further this skill through study at PhD level. It is intellectually and creatively challenging to be faced with such a broad range of subjects.



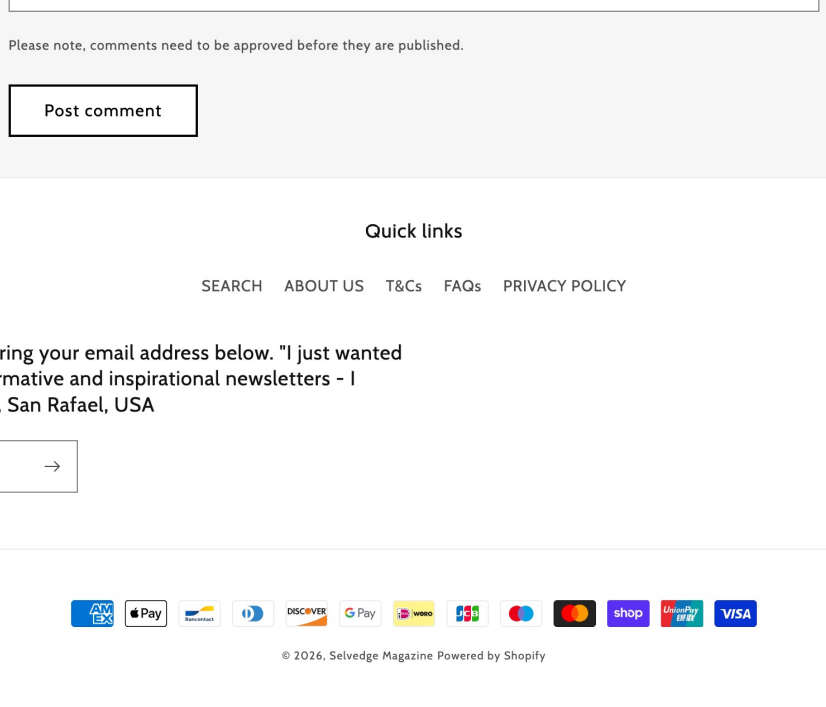
Subin Kim, *Silk Organzine*, 2026.

Do you see the boundary between textile artist, designer and maker dissolving, or simply becoming less useful as a way of describing what people actually do?

The distinctions still exist but an individual might practice across all territories. Boundaries imply that you can't cross but you can and people increasingly do.

This year's projects ranged from multi-species symbiosis to folklore-inspired horror to gothic revival tapestries reimagining women's labour. Is there a thread connecting how differently these students are choosing to work through big ideas?

With 81 students graduating this year it is hard to see a single thread that unites their concepts, which is a strength in the programme. There is no house style. We have 81 individuals pursuing individual paths with individual desires for their professional futures. The thread that does connect them is literally a thread. They are all committed to a material practice producing work that operates beyond the visual. This year we have pieces that involve sight, sound, touch and smell. Material experiences that require close inspection.



Keyi Zhang, *Velcro Fabric*, velcro, 2026.

What tells you a graduate project has genuinely tested the boundaries of the practice, rather than simply looking experimental on the surface?

This is an impossible question to give a general answer to. Each student is starting from a different place. They are testing their own boundaries as well as the boundaries of the discipline. What I find the most exciting and rewarding about working in education is seeing the journey that a student goes on. The distance that they have travelled. This is not always evident from the final work presented.

It is important to remember that what we are delivering is education. Students are learning about themselves, the world and the discipline of textiles. This experience and knowledge will fuel them for life. Education is a difficult career path. It continues to be underfunded, and art education is completely undervalued. At all levels, and in all fields of education, students should be taught and experience practical skills. All students should be taught to think critically and creatively. Despite these difficulties I still love teaching. It is a privilege to work alongside other creative individuals and to nurture creativity in the students. I learn as much from the students as they learn from me. Bring it on!

Project by Shuyao Zhu, *Mutation*, Handwoven, 2026.

All further images as credited in captions.

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