



text + work

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Rosemary Miles + Susan Stockwell

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Susan Stockwell is a London based artist. She exhibits in galleries and museums both nationally and internationally. Recent exhibition venues include: the Victoria and Albert Museum, London; Shenghua Art Centre, Nanjing; Ambrosino Gallery, Miami and 20/21 Visual Art Centre, Scunthorpe.

Her work takes the form of drawings, collage, sculpture and installation. It is primarily concerned with transformation. The materials used are the everyday, domestic and industrial disposable products that pervade our everyday lives. These materials are manipulated and transformed into art objects.

Vividly symbolic 'maps' of Britain, South America and Africa are literally 'stitched up' commodities – constructed from tea bags, coffee filter papers and rubber tyre inner tubes they questions the historic and present day trading of luxury commodities and address the post and neo-colonial implications of Global commerce. Paper is the material most often chosen, maps, dress making patterns, tea bags, coffee filters, waxed paper portion cups and toilet tissue are used to make objects that act as ready-made signifiers. The processes of working with materials - accumulating, stacking, sewing and quilting manipulate and transform, sometimes minimally affecting the material in sensitive and subtle ways

or highlighting characteristics, such as paper's ethereal and fragile qualities. For example, Stockwell made a body of work from toilet tissue (1990's) -sponsored by Kleenex who enabled access to huge industrial size rolls and sheets of fragile paper. The translucent floating sheets became light tunnels and huge ponderous stacks, alluding to monumentality and ancient civilisations, yet they were temporal and fragile, not easily recognisable as toilet tissue.

The work of Susan Stockwell can be seen in The Gallery at the Arts Institute at Bournemouth

Text and Work — Susan Stockwell

Susan Stockwell's rapport with papers (the plurality is self-evident) comes not so much from their being pristine supports for print or graphic line but rather from their many incarnations as ready-made signifiers. She both explores and exploits paper's qualities of daily familiarity, weight, texture and ability to dissemble – to appear to be what it is not. Instead of conventional sheets of, say, cartridge or handmade paper, she uses pages from books, old prints, maps, dressmaking pattern papers, tea bags, coffee filter papers, waxed portion cups, toilet tissue, and she uses other materials such as rubber or wool to make objects we usually think of as fabricated from paper.

During the mid 1990s Stockwell had access to the factory floor at Kimberly Clarke, manufacturers of many kinds of paper but most especially toilet tissue. Taking her cues from both the floating, translucent sheets of uncut rolls and the ponderous weight of compressed off-cuts prepared for re-cycling, Stockwell made work which simultaneously celebrated and belied the qualities of a material which probably did not exist in this particular form a century ago. The paper was compressed into huge stacks, yet while the lower part of these giant columns became almost rock-like through the sheer weight of the paper piled above, the upper reaches retained a fly away

quality that a slight breeze might lift. In seamless yet layered works Stockwell suggested both the enduring and mortal qualities of civilisations. With characteristic modesty and in the true spirit of the environmentalist she also constructed these works to be recyclable!

A significant extension of this interest in domestic papers - their ephemeral, archaeological and sculptural qualities, as well as that of being taken for granted (what, for example, could be more humble than a sheet of toilet tissue!?) - is an interest in maps and dressmaking. Maps are essentially flat paper works, as are pattern-papers - which through the dressmaker's hand provide a wonderfully sculptural project in dress itself. The patterns are a way of mapping the body, and could be read as dictating, or at very least suggesting, the ideal form which we should take.

In some works, using dressmaking pattern-papers as support, ideas conflate around control of self-image and control of territory, populations and resources. Stockwell engages the notion that instructions on dressmaking papers, such as 'shorten or lengthen here' or threading guides in the form of dotted lines and curved arrows, have curious analogies in cartography where the map maker could create an image of the world that was to his (or more usually his sovereign's) advantage and rarely a totally objective truth.

The introduction of dressmaking papers into her work developed out of other map-making pieces. Brought up in Manchester during the 1960s and '70s Stockwell became aware that the granting of independence to so many colonies in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean and other economic, technological and social factors were profoundly affecting Britain's manufacturing and production bases. In the 1990s she was making work that reflected these changes, but which also reflect the country's reliance on both luxury (or at least formerly luxury) and industrial goods, like tea, coffee, paper, cotton and rubber. Vividly symbolic 'maps' of Britain, South America and Africa are literally 'stitched up' commodities – constructed as they are from tea bags, coffee filter papers and rubber tyre inner tubes. A further take on this idea is Mad Cow Country – a map of the British Isles fashioned like a child's soft toy out of black and white Friesian cow-patterned fake fur, a hilarious comment on the mess we have got into through dubious agricultural practices.

Taking the engagement with mapping further, Stockwell became interested in architectural plans and blueprints, themselves species of maps which also, albeit in a slightly different way, control and direct society. Even the ground plan of a single room inevitably exercises an influence, however discreet, on those who inhabit that room. Furthermore, such a ground plan relates to, and is dependent upon, that of

surrounding spaces, both internal and external, material and intellectual. In turn such spaces relate to the physical plan of the city, or the landscape, in which the building is situated, but also to the layered history of such cities or landscapes.

Until 1837 Bournemouth did not exist but a pretty location on the South Coast was seen by a local entrepreneur as being a perfect site for a seaside resort - a fashionable development in the early 19th century. Once a handful of villas were built, it grew rapidly, attracting in turn post-office, stage-coach stop, church and gradually all the appurtenances of a modern town. Until very recently tourism provided its principal income, but this is gradually being overtaken by service industries, particularly to do with finance, insurance, and housing. Nevertheless the University, despite its youth, is a seat of learning and Dorset itself is famous for its 'Jurassic Coast', now a world heritage site for the study and enjoyment of our geological past.

Implicit in the work seen here is an awareness of this very young, technologically contemporary site, of its new structure, but also its connections with history, rich and many-layered (however fragile or opaque), out of which the local communities have grown.

Definitions of history and territory have also been explored by the artist in other ways. In 2002 she 'took a line for a walk' in a London borough, drawing a continuous line in white paint around the parish boundary and in 2003 she made a work at Bryanston where an amphitheatre, built in the 1930s by pupils of the school, is based on that of Pompeii. An electronic device eerily set up the sound of applause when anyone entered the amphitheatre and ghostly street patterns taken from a map of the city were etched by Stockwell into the moss over the stage, thus creating a strikingly atmospheric reminder of classical history and inspiration.

Rosemary Miles
Curator, Contemporary Team
Word & Image Department
Victoria & Albert Museum, London

Taking a line for a walk

Experimental Film - 12 minutes

Susan Stockwell, London

July 2002

Collaboration – Susan Stockwell and Polly Nash

This film is a documentation of a part of the project TAKING A LINE FOR A WALK: Mapping Stockwell, which took place in July 2002 during the Stockwell Festival. The aim of the film was to draw a line around the boundary of Stockwell in London, thus defining, marking and mapping the area.

The idea was to make a line drawing on the pavements and roads which literally was a line being taken for a walk. The drawing like many artists drawings was done with a process of mark making. A series of marks and lines drawn on a surface but instead of that surface being paper or canvas it was the streets of Stockwell. The line formed a loop around Stockwell ending where it had begun. It was 1.7 miles long, drawn with temporary water soluble paint and existed for about 1 week.

The project TAKING A LINE FOR A WALK: Mapping Stockwell, also included working with children in Stockwell Park School. The children made drawings and sculptures from the subject of mapping.

Line Drawing

Experimental Film - 3 minutes

Susan Stockwell, London

July 2002

Collaboration – Susan Stockwell and Polly Nash

Line Drawing, examines the line which is being drawn in Taking a line for a Walk. Concentrating on the essence of the line, the variety of mark, speed, character, rhythm and surface in the drawing. Creating a mesmeric journey this work is 'in progress'.

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For Further information contact:

Violet McClean, Gallery Officer

text + work

The Gallery

The Arts Institute at Bournemouth

Wallisdown, Poole , Dorset, BH12 5HH

t 01202 363351

f 01202 537729

e vmcclean@aib.ac.uk

w www.textandwork.org.uk