

Exhibitions

PRISM

Whitstable Museum & Gallery, until 6th January 2013

This exhibition started life at the Mall Galleries, London, but part of it has moved to Whitstable Museum and Gallery on Kent's north coast, where it has acquired some extra exhibits of a coastal nature to suit the setting.



The Gallery is small but this didn;t prevent the exhibition working really well, with a more intimate feel and some clever hanging. Careful thought had gone into the groupings of the exhibits, in particular those set in alcoves. Some additional installations presented a flavour of the seaside.

Two particular alcoves stood as examples where the sum of the parts gained cohesion and power through the grouping. In this one, Molly Williams' wet-felted figures were displayed just above floor level with Janet Wain's piece 'Searching' as a backdrop. The title conveyed the longing of the figures, searching out hidden, half remembered places.

This backdrop was sparsely stitched calico cloth, exquisitely painted and the cut-out applied human shapes linked it to the figures below. The figures in 'Mirror, Mirror', and 'Elation', right, seemed animated. In particular the two entwined ones which appeared to move and cleave to each other.



The second themed alcove was dedicated to wildlife and its preservation. Dominated by a large machine embroidered piece of vertical fishes, this monochrome study by Liz Earley first appeared to be a shaded drawing but, on closer inspection, revealed itself as machine embroidery.

This piece showed total mastery of technique and observation and I'd certainly love to give it wall space at home.

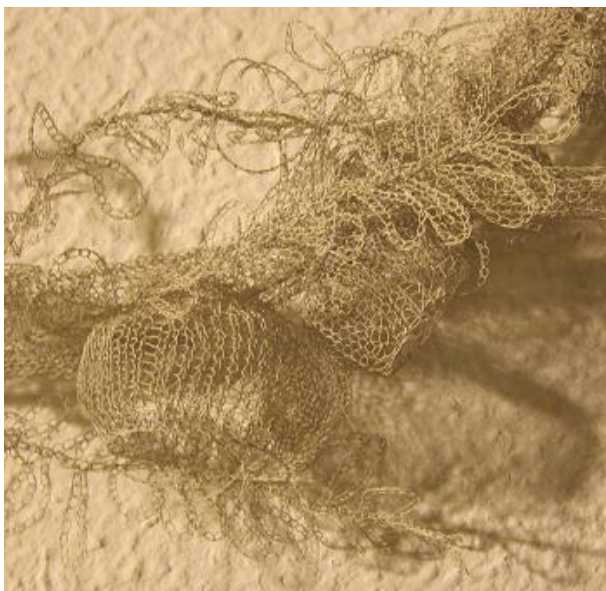


It was juxtaposed with an incredible sculpture, 'Empty Nest' by Jackie Hodgson, which took the form of a huge nest filled with leaves and the names of bird species lost to us forever embroidered on them. This is thought provoking stuff, offered in a way that is pleasing to the eye but also designed to push the message home.

This corner of the museum also housed Anita Bruce's knitted wire pieces – subject of an article in the September 2011 issue. Her 'Coral Wreath', below left, was lovely too but, sadly, the delicate work looked rather lost against the pale woodchip walls of the museum.



There was much hand stitching, which pleased me mightily. Dorothy Tucker's 'Plates and Leaves: Sunlight and Shadows' was a delight of hand embroidery in which a sari strip provided both backcloth and inspiration for hand stitching Kantha-style. This needed the minimum of colour as the rich stitching majored on the textures.



Fiona Rainford is no stranger to WoW fans. Her felt piece 'Oxidisation' worked brilliantly in this setting with the colour contrasts of light and dark, bright and muddy to merge the piece together and allowed the simple embellishment of stitch – both hand and machine to dominate.

It fitted the salty theme as it was based on rust on the Cutty Sark.



Susie Vickery's tiny wooden cupboard (below) was exquisite. Titled 'Organogram', the sentiments behind it suggested that, instead of keeping our feelings closed up in boxes and drawers, we should open them up. Smile and wink at the world, we were told, and the hanging eyes and beautifully hand embroidered lips (straight stitch with strands of fine silk) certainly encouraged this



Eileen Harrison's 'Winter Light', a small piece, was perfect in its capture of a world where the colours are emerging from a snowfall. Simple composition aided this impression with hand stitching adding emphasis.

I loved the Brown and Langfeld collaboration, which was an installation with a stitched hanging background and three-dimensional, paper-pulp figures formed on chicken wire surrounded by birds. What story was being told here? It didn't feel threatening, despite a Hitchcock theme and gave a sense of dialogue between inhabitants of our planet.

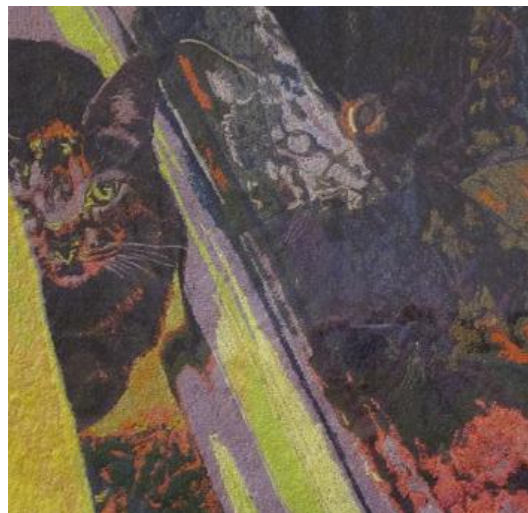
Liz Earley (she of the embroidered fishes) was showing another lovely piece on a more conceptual theme.

'Seen but not Heard' was worked on sheers, and explored the secret lives of children, an intriguing idea which captivated and fascinated in equal measure.

Liz Harding's 'Dandelion Ghost', with its echoes of summer gone, was a haunting work. Worked on sheer fabrics with stitched outlines full of dandelions, it gained another dimension from the shadows the stitching made on the wall behind.



Joan Baillie's cat pieces (detail 'Feline Spirit World', right) were studies in machine embroidery excellence, married to good, strong design skills. Based on printed canvases, these pieces worked tremendously well.



Lois Woodger showed two pieces based on digital prints encased in couched felt strips. While I didn't feel that these worked particularly well, as they needed further integration, I do think that this technique is really interesting. I hope that she pursues the idea and will watch with interest.

Sound played its part in two exhibits. Water gurgling down a drain emanated from one piece of work. I liked the idea but not particularly the work, which was less than subtle.

A better use of 'sound' was provided by Willeke Llaasson, where the use of filled three-dimensional works, filled maracas style with acoustic material, was more successful.

By moving the pieces (sometimes with handles, as shown here) the sound of the sea was evoked and it really did have the desired effect. Gloves were provided for handling the pieces. Lovely subtle sound effects here.

I have reached my page limit without having time to mention Sheila Kahn's 'Moonlight on the Water', Julieanne Long's fabulous work with painted 'sticks' and Prinkie Roberts' patched embroideries, based on Morocco, which brought back the sights, sounds and smells so vividly.

I think you can tell that I was impressed with this exhibition and the imaginative grouping, hanging and installation. Small but perfectly formed and still time to catch it if you move quickly.

