

‘Interview with Julia Bryan-Wilson’ David Homewood & Paris Lettau

In May 2017, art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson visited Australia to promote her new book *Fray: Art and Textile Politics Since 1970* (2017).

David Homewood and Paris Lettau spoke with her about the origins of her interest in textiles, the crossovers between her research on textiles and her earlier work on artistic labour, the relationship between textiles and painting, and more.

David Homewood & Paris Lettau...

You have written on a diverse array of artists, forms, and periods, from the American sculptor Louise Nevelson to the Chilean artist and poet Cecilia Vicuña; to the question of labour in minimalism and conceptualism; to dance and performance art by Yoko Ono, Simone Forti and Robert Morris. Your methodology is equally varied, embracing theories of labour, feminism and queer studies. Is there one thing that ties these topics together?

Julia Bryan-Wilson...

When I narrate the subjects that I write about, they do sound diverse, almost to a breaking point. There is coherence among them, however, because all of my concerns constellate around process. Questions of artistic labour, or examinations about fabrication, or considerations about how objects emerge through social and economic circuits of production—these have always been at the core of my interest in art history. I’m often very curious about seemingly basic questions like ‘How did that get made?’, ‘Who is responsible for its making?’, and ‘What are the materials from which it is made?’

Of course, this doesn’t mean I’m not interested in meaning. But I approach how meaning is created through questions of process and materiality. I think these issues ramify across the methodologies that I am invested in, including feminism, queer theory, and Marxist approaches, and they are generative for understanding a range of work that can include performance, textiles or sculpture. Process was, of course, a frequently used term in the 1960s and 1970s, and it is still one of the crucial keywords for me—that’s one of the reasons I return so often to those decades. Though it is a simple rubric from which to begin, considering who made something, out of which materials, and under what circumstances, leads to other considerations of circulation, distribution and reception.

Your forthcoming book *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* is on textiles since 1970. What sparked your interest in textiles?

There are a few answers to that question. First, I was drawn to the political history of textile

production within capitalism. Textiles are such a signature part of industrialism, but also of organised and individual resistance to industrialism, going back to the Luddites destroying weaving machinery in British mills in the early nineteenth century. The complicated relationship between textiles and industrialism has been at the forefront of several nineteenth- and twentieth-century social movements, including recent protests against outsourcing or the sweatshop conditions prevalent within garment factories.

Another answer is that my first job as an assistant professor was at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD). The textiles department there had some really committed people—professors and students—who were thinking about textiles in new ways. And RISD was founded in part to function as the design arm of the New England textiles industry, since textile mills were the economic powerhouse of that region. I learned how to be a teacher in the context of an art school that was historically closely aligned with the textile industry, and that was quite formative for me.

A third answer is that my mother sewed. When I was a child she handmade clothes for me and my sisters, because she was a single mother and we had to live on very little money. It used to be cheaper to make clothes than to buy clothes. That’s no longer the case, because so-called throwaway fashion can be so low-cost that garments are treated as if they are practically disposable. I grew up surrounded by the stuff of textile making, including the sounds of the sewing machine, and I spent a lot of time going to fabric stores with my mother and picking out patterns and wearing things that were kind of quickly sewn. She taught me how to sew, too, though I wasn’t very good at it; I recall a particularly crooked pair of shorts.

My book includes several autobiographical moments in which I discuss my personal relationship to textiles, because I advocate for what I call an ‘amateur method’ when dealing with textiles—and here I use amateur not to mean unskilled but rather stemming from love and investment.

One of the arguments I make in *Fray* is that everyone is an expert in textiles. We all know what fabrics are warm, what kind of cloth feels soft or rough. Children learn how to rub fabric between their fingers to get an immediate sense of its texture and heft; this is vital tacit intelligence. Humans have sharply honed knowledge about textiles. We sit on upholstered fabrics, we sleep among linens, we wear clothes—we are surrounded by textiles night and day. They structure our social being, they shape how we think about the line between public and private.

Textiles is a topic that soon leads to some very broad themes...

Yes, there is something overwhelming about textiles as a subject. My first book was about work, my second book is about textiles... is my next book

going to be on ‘food’, or ‘shelter’?! These are massive categories, because in some ways they are (and I never say this about anything) trans-historical and trans-cultural. By that I don’t mean to imply that textiles function the same way everywhere—of course not—but rather to point out that they have been an integral part of cultures across the globe for a very long time.

More specifically, my book looks at the relationship between textiles, art and activism in the two decades after second-wave feminism. Reconsidering feminism’s attempt to reclaim textiles as a legitimate artistic practice shows how unstable textiles were during that moment, as they functioned both as a site of resistance towards hierarchies of fine art, but at the same time could be a site of normativity and regulation.

In terms of method, the book is structured as a series of focused case studies. This format has its limitations, but it is also a way to narrow into specifics and elaborate on an argument in concrete terms.

Did these case studies take you far away from the subject of your first book *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (2009)?

Art Workers focused on the subjects of labour in minimalism and conceptualism; to go from those kinds of artworks (like geometric cubes or metal plates on a floor) to textiles might seem like a leap. But textiles are also paradigmatic of work. There is no other industry that has been more persistently affiliated with problems of labour and inequality, or of the gendered, classed, and raced working body. These themes were also central to *Art Workers*. For me, turning to textiles was part of a natural progression, even though the books appear to take up very different objects. The fundamental questions, the theoretical questions, are absolutely related. My chapter on Lucy Lippard did briefly consider the role of textile making within feminist art, so there is that one moment of overlap. And thinking more deeply about Faith Ringgold, who was working with textiles and active in the Art Workers’ Coalition, also led me to the issues discussed in *Fray*.

Picking up on what you said earlier, textiles—both their materiality and the historical means of their production—are rich in metaphor. Could you talk more about the title of the book *Fray: Art and Textile Politics*? It seems like textiles metaphors are really “woven” into the argument—you can’t escape them...

When I was finalising my copyedits I thought to myself, ‘Oh my god, the textile metaphors are out of control—everything is unravelling!’ But it was so irresistible, and hopefully it’s not too overwhelming.

But it proves your point about the pervasiveness of textiles even at the level of language.

Absolutely. I wanted a title that signalled this connection between text and textile but also communicated ambivalence. The word “fray” takes us there, because the book is ultimately about the contingency of textiles. They can never be only progressive or only reactionary; they are always pulled in multiple directions and claimed by divergent ideologies. The title *Fray* alludes to pressure and friction, to being pulled apart at the seams. It also points to how textiles are in the fray of materiality, gender, race, and sexuality.

I continue to have a lot of regret about the title *Art Workers* because in some respects it was very misunderstood. Sometimes I joke that I should have called it *These Artists Are Not Workers*, because that’s actually closer to the argument. I don’t ever proclaim that they were workers in some formulation of easy equivalence. In fact I refuse that at every turn. I tried to complicate the idea of the artist as worker.

I remember your discussion of Robert Morris in that book, for example, was about the artist posing or performing as a worker.

Exactly. The relationship between art and labour in the 1960s and 1970s was fraught, riven with all kinds of complexities and contradictions. In the case of the minimalists and conceptualists I wrote about, the category of the worker never fit perfectly over the category of the artist. *Art Workers* was about the very fracturing of that identification. With my second book, I wanted a title that would strongly indicate the undoing of a singular politics. To be ‘in the fray’ is to be directly in the middle of an argument, to go to the heart of the debate.

The subtitle *Art and Textile Politics* indicates that the book is not exactly about craft. Although many of the objects I discuss are handmade, ‘craft’ is a word I don’t necessarily have a lot of investment in, so it is not in the title. I used ‘textile politics’ to mean the texturing of politics, a way in which politics become textured by textiles.

How did you attempt to complicate the distinction between art and craft?

One crucial aspect of the book is to that I try to give amateur making the same kind of attention as fine art making. For this reason, each chapter is divided in two: one half on textile making by people who don’t consider themselves artists, the other half on the work of someone who does identify as an artist.

To be more precise, this is the structure of the first two chapters. The third chapter is entirely about the AIDS Memorial Quilt, which is a largely amateur, collective textile project. The panels of the AIDS Memorial Quilt were not originally destined for an art museum, and it is not often shown in an art museum context. It’s a textile work

that has had almost no institutional relationship to fine art. In fact, it was frequently lambasted for its connections to the 'low' and to 'kitsch'. As I discuss in my book, that lowness was one reason so many people hated it in the 1980s and 1990s.

Were there any major challenges for you discussing the AIDS Memorial Quilt within an art historical context?

The sheer materiality of the Quilt was one major challenge. There is just so much Quilt to contend with. A crucial task of the art historian is formal analysis, visual description. How do you do that with something that weighs fifty-four tonnes and has tens of thousands of individual components? To begin, I viewed every panel of it online and endeavoured to see as much of it as I could in person; I've seen it in its full display several times since the early 1990s—which was, of course, way before I knew I would write this book. It's difficult to adequately describe this tremendous amount of material in order to do it justice. Ultimately I selected a handful of panels to focus on—this comes back to the structure of the case study as one way to start to grasp an unwieldy archive, but it also raises questions about the status of the example and how much weight it can bear.

The bipartite structure is a novel strategy. Did the professional–amateur split play an important part within your book?

It was central to the whole project. In the last ten years, there's been increased art historical attention paid to textiles—but a lot of that attention has remained focused on its relation to fine art. For example, there have been more themed exhibitions featuring artists who sew on their canvases, or create fibre art. But less attention has been given to the hobby aspect of textiles, even though in my reckoning that hobby interest has significantly contributed to its resurgence. Textiles became valued by institutions not because curators suddenly decided they were interesting, but because Stitch 'n Bitch circles were bubbling up all over and fostering these hungry, eager audiences. It was amateur interest that led to or created the conditions for this increased institutional legitimation.

I am interested in how textiles are pervasive across high-low registers and in some respects obviate those distinctions. It really does a disservice to the rich field of textiles to only focus on those instances we might classify as 'art'. We have to take into account the AIDS Quilt sewing circles, the casual knitters—people who are making textiles not destined for fine art audiences. In *Fray* I discuss how textiles produce a kind of friction around the borders between the high and the low.

Was it necessary to define where the borders of textiles lie? Is the question of the identity of textiles an important one?

I didn't feel any need to justify the limits of my study in terms defining what textiles are. If I had written about the category of 'fibre art', I might have felt differently. For me the capaciousness of textiles is part of its appeal—it can signify garments, domestic objects, art, mass-manufactured goods, handmade things, and so on. There's so much more room for thinking about things vis-à-vis the word 'textiles' than there is with 'fibre'.

How do you distinguish fibre art from textiles?

Fibre art has been understood to be its own category within studio craft; textiles is much broader. There's a great book by Elissa Auther called *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art* (2010) that discusses the contested definition and institutional history of fibre art. Why is it that Eva Hesse could use textile materials like cord or string, or Robert Morris could drape a bunch of felt, and both of them were unproblematically considered to be fine artists, whereas others who were working with similar materials were relegated to showing at craft museums? Thanks to scholars like Auther, these sorts of questions have gained more scholarly attention.

Your book focuses on textiles after 1970. Up to that point, at least, painting was generally privileged as the emblem of art. Textiles, on the other hand, continue to be seen today as craft, domestic, folk, or indigenous traditions. Is this characterisation of the respective status of painting and textiles actually true?

That sounds reasonably accurate to me, if we are referring to a mostly Euro-American context. Despite what I call a resurgence of an institutional interest in textiles in the past decade, it is still so neglected, in part because of its association with those terms you just listed. Since I began writing about textiles, people have constantly showered me with examples. There's always something else, some knit or crochet project, that has been historically overlooked and needs to be included in the history of art. This indicates to me that there is much work still to be done on textiles—my book is only one among many others that have been written and that will be written. If I were discussing painting in the 1970s, I don't think there would be that same reaction, because painting as a category has been well researched. Even with all the talk of the 'death of painting', it's still privileged.

In terms of market value, representation in museums...

All of that. And textiles are not only associated with the low, folk and indigenous—they are also often historically connected to women's work. There is a film of sexism that clings to textiles so that the artists who become really famous for working with rugs or with yarn are those like

Mike Kelley and Fred Sandback—male artists who are ‘surprisingly’ drawn to textiles.

The male being transgressive.

Exactly. Turning to those materials is viewed as part of their transgression, which is then translated as a gesture of daring or originality. Mike Kelley was open about this; he acknowledged that he drew from the example of second-wave feminism when he said that his work was indebted to the reclamation of craft by women in the early 1970s. Yet it was understood as a far more risky formal move for *him* to use braided rugs than it was for, say, Harmony Hammond (whose floorpieces are a case study within my book). In fact, one criticism I received for an early version of *Fray* was: ‘why doesn’t she talk about Mike Kelley and Fred Sandback?’ As if no book on textiles would be complete without these two straight white male exemplars!

As you mentioned, second-wave feminism has a close relationship to the reclamation of textiles in the 1970s. You also mentioned that textiles are an important ‘site of activism’. Radical and emancipatory politics played an important role in many art movements during that period. What other politics were important for your study of textiles? Do you see a connection between those politics and the politics that inform your own research?

A major focus of the book is the moment of gay liberation in the early 1970s and the role that textiles played in queer world-making in the wake of Stonewall—my first chapter brings together the self-made costumes of the Cockettes with Hammond’s rugs. I return to queer textiles in my chapter on the AIDS Quilt. Although *Art Workers* was not overtly marked by my investment in queer theory, *Fray* makes that commitment more legible. In addition, I have a chapter that considers textiles during the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile; politically this was an attempt to practice an art history that is not solely focused on the United States or the global north, while staying attentive to local circumstances.

Have you discovered any inadvertent references to textiles in the discourse of modernism?

I’m thinking of a clarifying moment in Rosalind Krauss’s essay ‘Grids’ (1979). This is an essay in which she argues that the grid performs a double service: it gestures toward the spiritual while it also signals the rational. For her, this dual nature is why the grid is such a resource for modernist artists, and why they come back to it even though it seems so exhausted, again and again and again. At one point she says something about the

materiality of the canvas weave and talks about how the gridded painting refers to its own support. When I re-read this essay during the writing of *Fray*, I thought about how modernism from its very beginnings, including painting, was haunted by textiles. Textiles form the foundation of high modernist painting by virtue of the woven fabric canvas support. It’s an obvious point, but a profound one.

One of Krauss’s predecessors, Clement Greenberg, claimed that late modernist painting addressed itself solely to ‘eyesight alone.’ In your book, do you talk about textiles occasioning a form of experience that cannot be replicated by other means?

Well, many textiles offer a different kind of aesthetic experience than painting does, because touch is often our main interface with cloth and fabric. We have such a bodily and intimate relationship with most kinds of textiles. They solicit the sense of an encounter with the hand, or with the body or skin. At the same time, because we are so familiar with them, they can disappear. The structuring membrane of textiles surrounds us at every moment, yet they disappear because they are ubiquitous.

People often associate textiles with the tactile and painting with the ocular, but the Krauss essay reminds us that this is a false binary. Still, opticality is not usually the primary mode through which we experience textiles in everyday life. As I said, humans possess a tacit knowledge of the materiality of textiles. We have a fine-grained familiarity with their qualities in a way that we don’t have with painting, because we don’t live with painting in the same way, not even remotely.

That’s palpable, perhaps, in the way people interact emotionally with textiles—for example, you scratch or rub fabric when you’re feeling anxious.

Totally. Some textiles have a soothing quality, others are abrasive. Handling textiles is a form of knowing, and we constantly make use of that knowledge. In *Fray* I talk about how important it is to touch the AIDS Memorial Quilt, which is permissible in many of its viewing situations where there are no museological restrictions. Or in the case of the Chilean women’s *arpilleras* (burlap appliqués), some have interactive elements where you hold back a piece of fabric in order to see a scene of torture. This touching is part of what I term the ‘amateur method’ of encountering textiles, and it is an extremely advanced and sophisticated way of understanding materiality.

Do you see a close relationship between textiles and traditional artistic forms in the 1970s? Who are some of the textiles producers during that period who thought of their practice in relation to fine art?

The main figure for me here is the artist Faith Ringgold, who I mentioned already and who is known for her painting and also for her work with quilts (she is also a sculptor). In the early 1970s she was painting on fabric, intermingling cloth and painting quite freely. Her work is an important historical precedent to many of the practices that I explore in the book, including the AIDS Quilt. She thought carefully about what it meant to call a piece a 'quilt' versus calling it a 'painting', in terms of how these words carried differently gendered and raced and classed associations. Some of her formative works were *thangka* paintings (1972), which she intentionally termed 'painting' just as she was moving into the realm of textiles. She's also someone who was deeply politicised in the 1970s, and, as I stated, playing a significant part in the Art Workers' Coalition; her use of textiles has been no less political. Freida High Tesfagiorgis has written about how Ringgold began her *Story Quilts* as a black feminist move, a way to honour African American legacies of working with pieced fabric to tell stories.

Alongside textiles, what do you see as some of the other major oversights of art historical accounts of the 1960's and 1970s?

The 1960s and 1970s might seem to be pretty well trodden territory, but there still hasn't been a lot of work on more vernacular forms of production and dissemination during that period, or the realm of the 'low'. In *Fray* I talk about macramé owls and craft kits, housewives knotting cords into plant hangers—but there is much more to be said there. These kinds of making were happening in the 1960s and 1970s alongside high conceptualism and it would be great to read more about these interactions. In general, the register of amateur and hobby making could use more attention from art history. This is starting to happen, especially with a younger generation of scholars, and I look forward to seeing how such research changes our discipline.

Colophon

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