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Migrations

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The period between the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries was marked by both a rampant and ruthless European imperialism as well as an astonishing revolution in textile manufacture and consumption. It was a period that saw textiles transformed at an unprecedented speed from an indigenous product of everyday use to a global commodity of rare symbolic power. The spectacle of innovation often masked appropriation or exploitation and it could easily be argued that in the modern age any, and indeed every, textile became inscribed with the entwined histories of colonialism and capitalism.

The dominance of Europeans, and the social darwinism deployed to justify the subjugation of countless cultures and peoples across the globe, was in some ways challenged and resisted by the textile traditions existing in many colonised countries. What Europeans sought to obliterate, they ended up devouring. Indeed, what would many European cultures be today without the historic influence of Indian, Indonesian or Islamic textiles? To say this was always one-way traffic would, however, be an oversimplification and postcolonial theorists have spilt much ink demystifying the complex evolution of the ‘global commodity’ as something of a hybrid process in which the subaltern possessed both agency and affect. In an age of apparent Post-postcolonialism the genealogies of all sorts of woven, printed and stitched textiles continue to attract commentary from many contemporary artists and designers even if postcolonial scholarship, as an academic discipline, continues to place little stock in textiles as a site worthy of serious exploration.

A surprisingly intimate and thoughtfully selected exhibition entitled *Migrations*, curated by Jessica Hemmings, set out to interrogate just how ‘hybrid cultural identities’ generated by histories and legacies of colonialism feature prominently in contemporary textile practice (Hemmings 2015: 12). The exhibition was accompanied by the publication of an edited volume, also by Hemmings, entitled *Cultural Threads: Transnational Textiles Today*, and a symposium featuring artists, designers and writers, held at Central Saint Martins in London. And as if to echo the peripatetic nature of textiles, smaller scaled-down versions of the exhibition also toured to America and Australia.¹

Collectively the exhibition and publication cohesively argued Hemmings’s point that ‘[c]ontemporary textile practice engages with ideas of the postcolonial more frequently than in other disciplines such as ceramics or jewellery perhaps because textiles, one of the most portable material disciplines, move with such relative ease around our world’ (Hemmings 2015: 15). Hemmings further suggested that ‘[m]uch like the cultural references of their

makers, many contemporary textiles exist in an in-between world, not wholly embraced by the establishments of art or design, nor functional objects in the conventional sense of craft' (Hemmings 2015: 13). Indeed, in the small single room of the National College of Art and Design's new gallery a tight selection of work by nine international artists, designers, and one writer, grappled in various ways with this complex proposition of how we can read postcolonial ideas within all sorts of constructions and conceptions of fabric.

Highlighting the breadth the term 'textile' can encompass the exhibits ranged from Ghanaian artist Godfried Donkor's recording of his mother discussing the meaning of fabric, specifically the wax-resist cloth so emblematic of contemporary African culture, and the Scottish-Indian designer Jasleen Kaur's placing of a Sikh turban on the head of the grandson of a once celebrated British colonialist, to the French-born Françoise Dupré and Zimbabwean Dan Halter who have been drawn to new fabrications such as the machine-made polythene carrier bags often associated with migrant and Diasporic communities. Indeed, Dupré argues that 'it is this combination of textiles' cultural specificity and transnationalism, its mixture of history and contemporality, that have been instrumental in my choice of this medium for context and art making' (Hemmings 2015: 169).

Other works in the show drew attention to the often-overlooked role of illusion or artifice in textiles. The Norwegian, Toril Johannessen, whose several folds of digitally printed textiles lay on a table in the centre of the exhibition affording visitors an opportunity to handle the material, was inspired by optical illusions found in wax-resist textile patterns of West Africa. Mr. Somebody and Mr. Nobody, the collaborative practice of two South Africans Heidi Chisholm and Sharon Lombard, gently spoof the complex visual and verbal intricacy of 'khangas' or proverb cloths, originally an east African textile, now made over from the outside – as the designers reside in America. And the Italian design duo Simone Farresin and Andrea Trimarchi, working under the name Studio Formafantasma, embedded a series of three seemingly comfy mohair blankets, made at the famous TextielLab of the Tilburg Textielmuseum in The Netherlands, with imagery detailing the often overlooked history of Italian colonization.

The relation between the post-industrial and the postcolonial was subtly drawn out by many of the exhibits. For example, a series of textiles by the Australian artist Julie Ryder was inspired by Charles Darwin's famous journey across South Pacific to Australia on the HMS Beagle. As a central historical moment spurring the colonial desire to collect and classify, and ultimately commodify and exoticise the unknown, it prompted Ryder to look at Darwin's place in his own family tree. Creating imagery that reflected both the imperialist fascination with the complex genealogy of natural forms, that was to influence textiles so profoundly, and Darwin's own genealogical past she was struck by how Darwin and his wife Emma Wedgwood shared their maternal grandfather, and at how the histories of colonialism and industrialism converged. She commented that:

In a series of digitally printed textiles Regenerate: 1808, 1835 and 1859, I explore the avenues open to textile designers to produce or 'generate' patterns and designs. The dates in each title refer to specific events: the year of Emma's birth; the year Darwin arrived in the Galápagos Islands; and the year that Origin of the Species was published. Images and motifs are re-worked to form the cloth before it. As with our understanding of life, it is a mixture of the past, the present and the future. The blue colourings of the three textiles reference the tones found in the famous Wedgwood jasperware pottery, founded by Emma and Charles's mutual grandfather Josiah Wedgwood I (Ryder quoted in Hemmings 2015: 33).

Many such threads in this exhibition were pulled together by the short audio recording of the writer and critic Pamela Johnson reading her poem '100% Cotton' (this was first published in Hemmings 2010: 286-287). This explored the recent decline of textile manufacturing in Britain, its origins in the colonial import of textiles from countries such as India, and the legacies of poverty, racial tension and societal breakdown.

Although the spread of global capitalism seems to flatten and homogenize all cultures this exhibition, and publication, aptly showed just how textiles, operating beyond the literary abstract of postcolonial theory, have acted as both resistance to and comment upon this process. As Hemmings herself says this 'sense of connection to everywhere and nowhere simultaneously' may be both individual and universal but 'the multiple, often overlooked, histories behind the objects that make up our material world' urgently need much greater investigation (Hemmings 2015: 12).

References:

- Hemmings, Jessica. ed. 2015. *Cultural Threads: Transnational Textiles Today*. London and New York: Bloomsbury.
- Johnson, Pamela. 2011. '100% Cotton.' In: Hemmings, Jessica. ed. 2012. *The Textile Reader*. London and New York: Berg.

Notes:

ⁱ A smaller version of the Dublin exhibition was held at the KANEKO Center in Omaha, Nebraska, USA, in the spring of 2015, and a pop-up version traveled to the University of New South Wales, Galleries, Sydney, Australia, in the autumn of 2015.