

Linen Futures

Ulster Folk and Transport Museum,
Northern Ireland
4 – 29 May 2016

This exhibition brought 20 textile-oriented artists from Northern Ireland and Wales together to work collaboratively with each other and with those employed in the industry, on new craft and design practice based on the past, current and future landscape of Irish linen.

The exhibition offered an opportunity for practitioners to develop new and more sustainable design solutions from old processes and linens evidenced in some of the textile exhibits on loan from the museum's collections. Fiona McKelvie revived vintage, stained or damaged Irish linen with bright dyes, creating contemporary artefacts, and Sue Cathcart used precious old scraps to cover 3D papier mâché dolls. It makes us consider the reuse of materials we may otherwise disregard so as to bring them back to life in a different form.

Some of the artists collaborated directly with weavers employed in the Ulster mills and there were books of their linen samples to explore. They produced garments, homewares, toys, decorative textiles and artwork and used embroidery, printing, dyeing, felting and appliqué. The curator, Jane McCann, also made a series of linen shirts in response to their collaborative work.

'People have negative ideas of linen being creased as you wear it,' artist Jacki Sleator explained to me. So she decided to take this to the furthest degree and felted linen together with wool. It took Jacki five days to felt the fabric, it being very heavy to work with. The resulting fabric was an exterior of ruched linen with an inner of fine and soft felted wool. It looked like it would be very comfortable to wear. Jacki was paired with Pauline Hearn. Pauline's work used the textures of white embroidery with embossed printing to detail facts and personal stories around the history of linen in Ireland.

Cecilia Stephens and Claire Cawte's work complemented each other well. Cecilia translates her own landscape paintings into weaving. Claire works more directly with the land, using natural dyes to print natural objects, such as leaves, onto woven fabric. Cecilia wove the linen yarn and Claire printed delicate leaf imprints on its surface. Their work was hung in a way that blended from their independent work at either end, to their collaborated work in the centre.

There was a great variety of textures and approaches to working with linen in the exhibition. Mandy Nash and Trish Belford had a small set of samples of printed and felted fabric for visitors to touch and feel. They combined metallic print and appliquéd linen onto wool.

The range of techniques and experimentations was inspiring, and it helped you look at linen differently.

The exhibition will be travelling to England in the autumn.

Heather McNamee, Ulster Guild



Below: Detail of wool and linen fused together with distressed foil technique hand printed on top to create a lace effect: inspired by Carrickmacross lace

*Left: Cushion made from the fabric created Mandy Nash and Trish Belford
Photo: Jane McCann*





Linen shirts
Jane McCann
Photo: Jane McCann

Revived Damask
Fiona McKelvie
Photo courtesy of
McBurney and Black

