

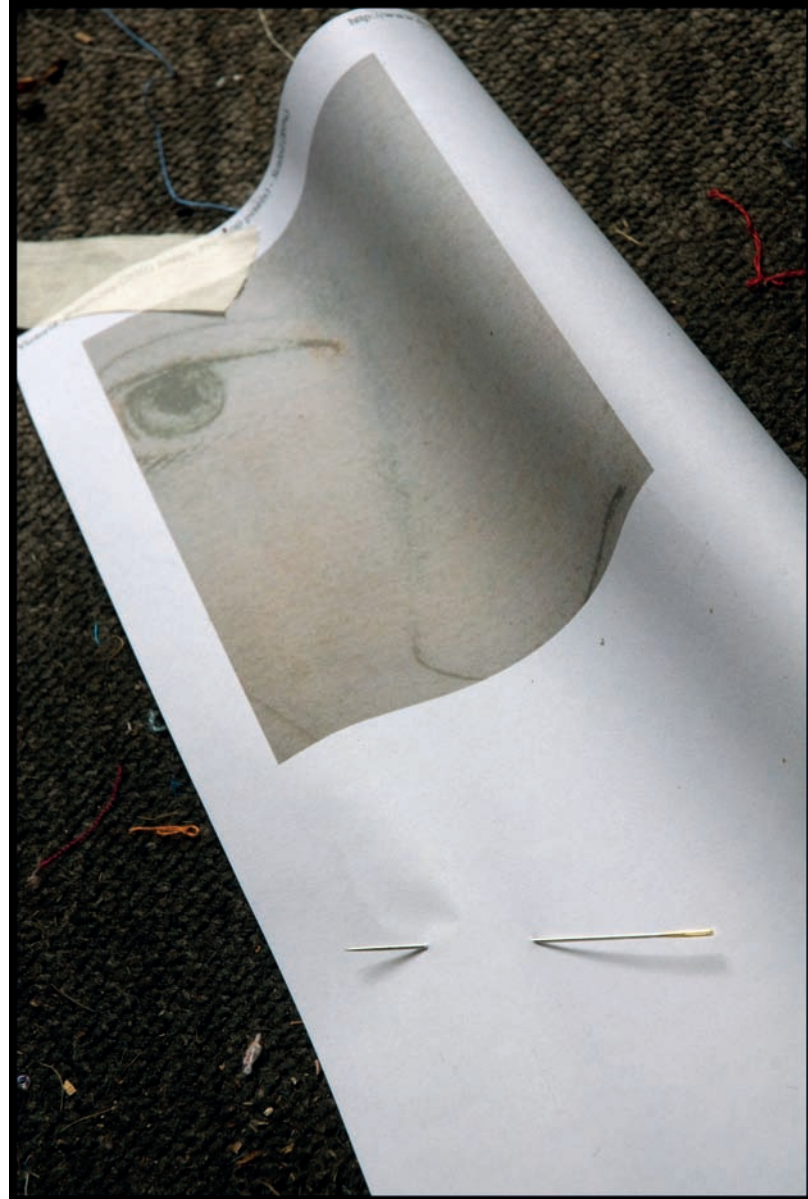
The Narrative Line

Alice Kettle & Bernie Leahy

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30th October 2010 - 12 January 2011
National Craft Gallery, Kilkenny



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Disparate Connections

1.

Fragmentary; allusive; exuberant; introspective

2.

The works in the exhibition *The Narrative Line* are both contradictory and meshed together. They are distanced and collaborative, independent and familial. A common dialogue has been forged by conversation, e mail traffic and a gathering sense of shared values (as well as a powerful passion for textile art). Two highly-experienced and strong-willed makers have found a common cause. It has pressed them to reconsider their own practice and value what has happened as a result of this discourse, research, communication and independent reflection. This has led to the making of new work that is characteristic of their individual styles as well as respectful of each other's world view. This is work in conversation as well as monologue.

3.

Bernie Leahy's internationally-celebrated stitched drawings isolate the power that can be found in the smallest mark. This is a body of work that demands the closest of physical readings, because the mark of a single stitch has such an intense value. The thread is important in itself - it leads to a line and the line leads to a subtle shadow - these are independent drawings made of textile. Leahy's themes are expressive as well as emotionally-charged. The intensity of her drawing, the sometimes nearly-aggressive vulnerability of her portraits (and self-portraits) imbue her images with a theatrical strength, a yearning for life in its profundity and sometimes its rawness. These are works where strength and despair may be seen in the same dark and forbidding glance. Leahy works on the large scale with as much facility as the small. The physicality of her work is always present. Like many contemporary textile artists, she responds not only to the creation of the image on the cloth, but also to its symbolic resonances, and the sense that in depicting, say, a relic or referring to an ancient textile practice, her contemporary piece carries a charge or a memory of what has passed

before. Her work is in a continuum with the past, its rituals, hopes and misbeliefs. Her relic pieces, tiny fragments, are echoed images of her grand parents and especially her children are symbolic as well as personal. Leahy's work looks at aspects of humanity. They are open, unyielding, bare. The gestural line of the thread can take on a remarkable poise, in the intense earlier study of a child (*Empower*, for example). In the stitched drawing *Swirl* her interests in balance of the human form as well as the female musculature create a tense, jagged force. A partial view of a face may, by the very nature of cropping and isolating, intensify the mood and overwhelming emotion. The stakes are set high in this art.

4.

Alice Kettle's remarkable machine-embroidery uses rich and dynamic colour, a compelling narrative often drawn from particular myths and symbols, and lyrical, gestural drawing in thread to create a sometimes hypnotic effect. But like Bernie Leahy, she has found a shared interest in the idea of fragmentation and connectivity. Her long standing reliance on the idea of the myth and the place of self as a means of commenting on contemporary life and places has reached a crescendo in this exhibition. The central wall hanging alludes to the Kilkenny story of Dame Alice Kyteler (Kettle) the so-called 'Kilkenny Sorceress' whose servant was burnt as an alleged witch in the town in 1324. Alice Kettle has depicted her namesake as an authoritative and even glamorous figure: she is standing in a pose and dress that is reminiscent of a Nicholas Hilliard portrait of Queen Elizabeth. Dame Alice is confident in the face of her trials, unabashed by the flurry and plotting around her, commanding this great wall hanging, her four husbands depicted with heads that may be swirling with love as much as in the turmoil of the poisons that 'the witch' was alleged to have administered to them. This is a tableau of selfless pride in the face of political and religious power play. Dame Alice is above this fray and rumour: she is noble, ardent and magnetic. The dynamic colour of the piece, its richness and glow, offer a reimagining and even a conversion of the medieval myth. There is no overt religious iconography here; but the narrative that is proposed upturns the innuendo of the religious and political classes who would have Kettle herself disgraced and burnt. And perhaps in this reading, we find an autobiography, too. Alice Kettle herself, facing tribulation with dignity and grace.

5.

The Narrative Line is an exhibition that extols the enriching benefits of partnership: a partnership borne out of mutual respect. The introduction of new material partners to thread and cloth is also a linking process for both makers: Leahy has combined stitching with metal, plaster and gold leaf; Kettle has drawn on ceramics and placed wood veneers into Dame Alice's skirts. Textile may be the foundation of their practice; but drawing is also explicit bedrock of the work, and it is this openness to expression that allows them both to experiment boldly with process and materials. In their thoughtful and sometimes passionate hands, Kettle and Leahy have looked introspectively and imagined new histories. They have brought a feminism to bear on mythology and medieval iconographies and histories. They have interpreted these contradictions, meaningful symbolisms and the grace-notes as well as the bizarre emblems of religion and found a narrative of the present. The artists have commented that in working together they have 'discovered cohesion out of difference'. The connections that link their work are as strong as the things that are different. Leahy's expanses of unbleached cloth focus attention on the spare lines of her drawn thread and the intensity of their single colours. Kettle's wall hangings are alive with colour and texture and the thread dances its way across this abundant field. But both makers have looked into their souls and both have revealed a focus on icon and ritual and the sometimes terrible dramas of personal narratives and intractable histories.

Simon Olding

15 September 2010

Professor Simon Olding is Director of the Crafts Study Centre, a museum of modern craft and research centre at the University for the Creative Arts, England. He is a writer and curator, President of Walford Mill Crafts and a Trustee of the Leach Pottery.



The WORK | Alice Kettle

The Golden Thread

Ariadne, daughter of King Minos of Crete, helped Theseus to slay the Minotaur. She gave Theseus a ball of golden thread to unwind so that he could find his way into the heart of the Labyrinth where the Minotaur lived. Theseus killed Ariadne's monstrous half-brother and followed the thread to emerge triumphant from the Labyrinth. He claimed Ariadne as his own, on his return, only to abandon her on the island of Naxos. The god Dionysus fell in love with her, married her and she became immortal.

I have always been captivated by the pattern of myth and of storytelling. Every birthday and Christmas my god father gave me an edition of the Andrew Lang Fairy stories.

These stories were often grotesque and violent, but also magical in their roots in folklore. They are a rich tableaux of archetypal love, endeavour, honour and valour, played out in an indeterminate place that is touched by the fantastic and unreal. These timeless legends often concern morality and transformation, a belief in eternal justice and order out of chaos. The stories are richly laden with wonder and the sense of the bizarre. There are curious goblins who materialise from the air and the metamorphosis of objects into beings of mystical presence.

I cannot help thinking that these tales are being played out whilst I stitch. During this time of creating my head is filled with dreams, of escapism, of transcending the everydayness of life, and is often a manner of confronting the roughness of daily challenges.

My storytelling with thread concerns longing, searching, questioning, and discovery. With the alchemy of stitch I can reconfigure, redraw and create a narrative line made up of the twisted threads running over and through and around each other. The passage of the line can take me anywhere real or imagined, each thread a metaphor for a word in a sentence, or for a relationship. When one thread joins with another it enters a dialogue with its partner and continues its journey in tandem.

With thread I can make and reform my own world. I can reveal and define my identity or try to discover it.

In these works are episodes and characters all of whom contribute to the ultimate plot, the over arching theme of life, love, conflict and the eventual resolution. Amongst them is Alice Kyteler, (Alice Kettle) an intriguing coincidence of name. I am somewhat wary of being in allegiance with a perceived witch, I keep a respectful distance, whilst knowing that in thread there is the magic to conjure up or lead to another universe with its power to transform.

An East European traditional tale tells of an old woman who lived in a cave, seeing the world through a small hole. She sends out white doves to collect good deeds in the form of golden threads, which the doves bring back and pass through the hole to the old woman. She embroiders the threads into a cloth which one day will cover the world with universal joy.

Alice Kettle

Winchester, September 2010



Alice Kyteler
Cotton, rayon, wool thread, fabric scraps, wood and found objects
182 x 172 cm



Agape
Cotton, rayon, wool thread on canvas
74 x 58 cm



Mandrake
Cotton, rayon, wool thread on canvas
74 x 58 cm



Incubus
Cotton, rayon, wool thread on canvas
83 x 93 cm



Chant
Watercolour, gouache, thread and paper
81 x 114 cm



Alchemy
Thread, test tubes
2 x 80 x 15 cm



Tygg, Witches bottles and Moneybox - collaborative work with Alex McErlain
Ceramic slipware
Max height 40 cm



The WORK | Bernie Leahy

Parts

Fragments and parts are an important part of my work. I prefer to use elements of the whole and retain areas of space, to create the balance or tension, rather than include an entire image or concept. Literally - through the compositions, which are frequently fragments of human forms, glimpses of expression & movement etc; and also technically - through removing stitches which can be implied by their absence.

The composition is always to draw in the viewer. By handing over this element of interpretation, by drawing in physically to each piece, the viewer may see a kaleidoscope of thoughts behind the pieces. In portraits, for example, removing parts of the face, while still retaining both a likeness and the essence of the sitter, leads to a fragmented image that is still familiar; the eye fills in any gaps of perception, there is no need to supply the whole image.

The human figure is central to all of the work, and many of these drawings use people who are close to me as subjects. When working on a drawing, I usually leave it part-made, hanging for weeks or months as I develop other work. Eventually, a solution of how to finish it presents itself. sometimes it is to stitch more, often it is to remove stitching, for example in the face of *'The Mirrory Eye'*. While developing the large panel *'Tempting'* (2m x 2m) I tried to create new marks with the thread, so I developed different techniques, which forced the stitches - which are naturally tiny, just one or two millimeters - into sweeping lines to create gestural marks. I broke so many needles as I tried to force the machine to behave in an un-rhythmic way...

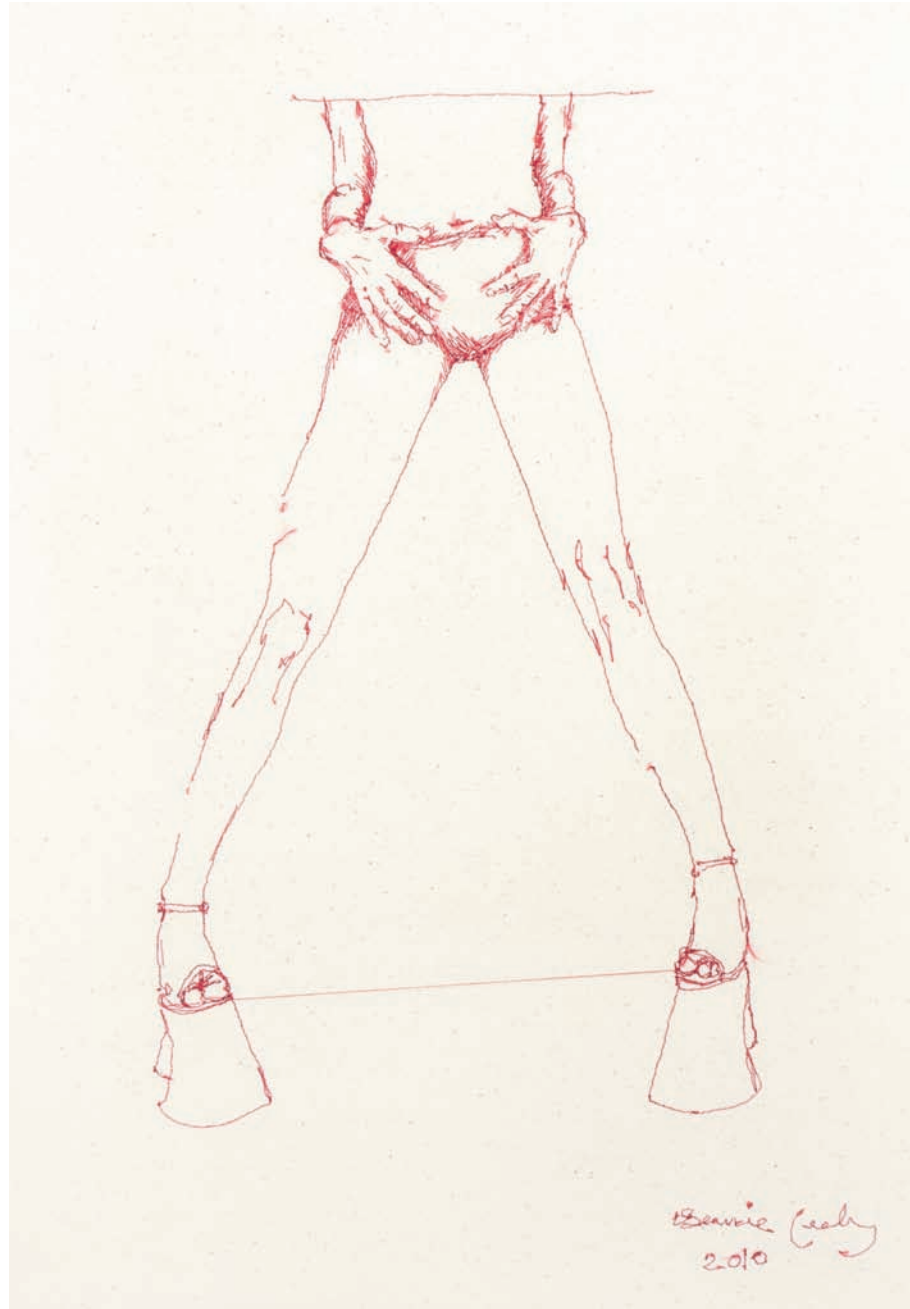
Some of the work in this exhibition started out in notebooks six or seven years ago. Drawings, ideas, materials were explored. All the artworks here have been made over the last nine months. The pieces have grown out of varying but connected sources; reading about mythology & past histories, connecting the dots with the rituals from the past and now - rituals which we hold precious as part of our daily lives. Communications between people are central to all of the artworks.

There were other influences: the old masters, Carravagio, Giorgione, Matisse, Schiele; the ancient relics of the catholic church housed in their macabre & gilded shrines, into which they seemed to place their souls. In the Wearable Drawings, housed in Victorian locket and watchcases, the act of holding the object in one's hand is literally protecting it with the self, the hand (these small objects hold a previous history - whose photograph previously lived in the locket, in whose pocket did the watchcase live...?). The element of protection, given or received, seems to pervade most of the work.

Hope is perhaps the most fundamental element for survival. We find it in many reasons for our actions. Much of the artwork here is about hope, in all its guises, how it can be snarled up in love.

Bernie Leahy

Lusk, October 2010



Bang Bang
Stitching on Unbleached Canvas
59 x 44 cm

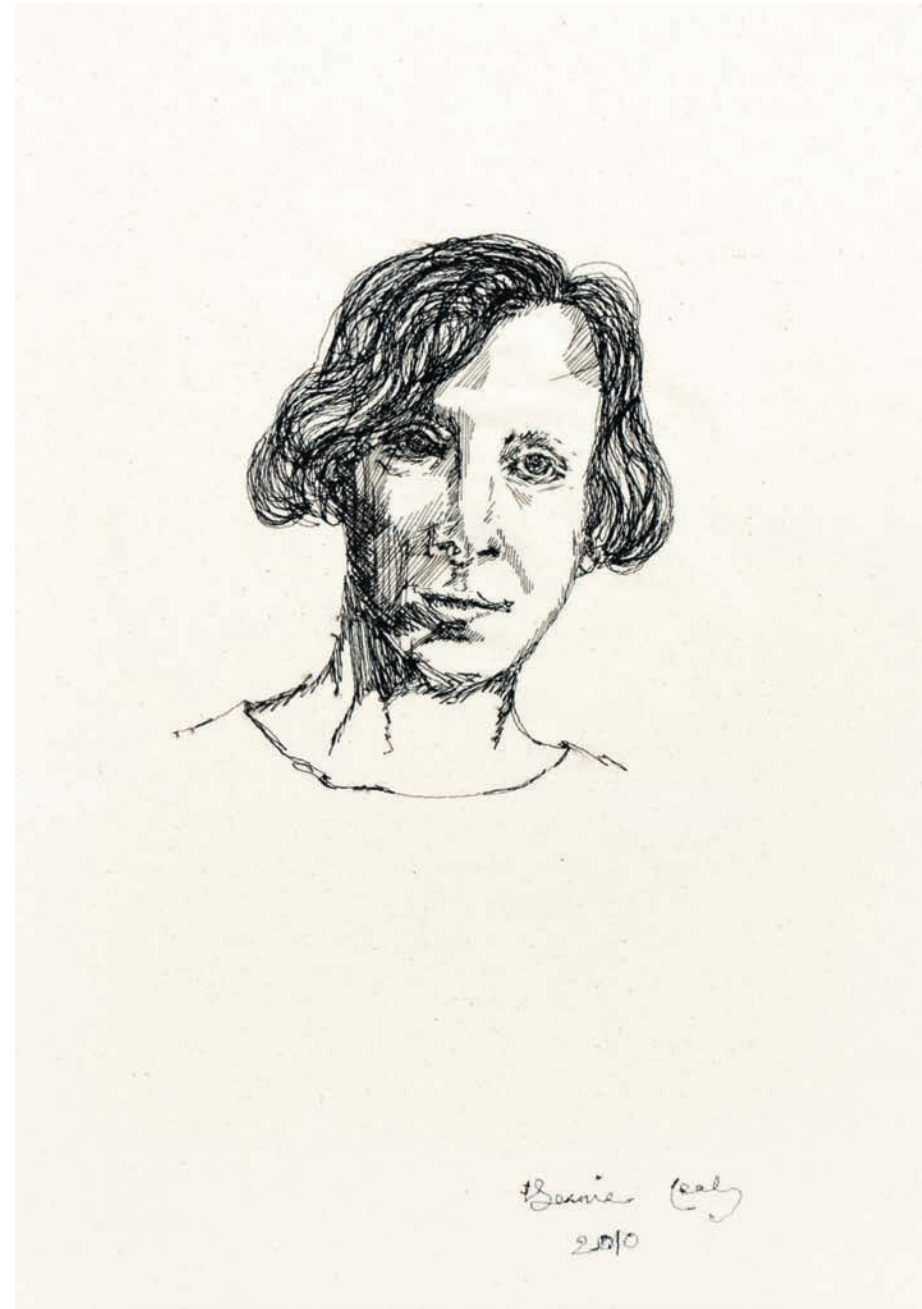


Balancing
Stitching on Unbleached Canvas
59 x 44 cm



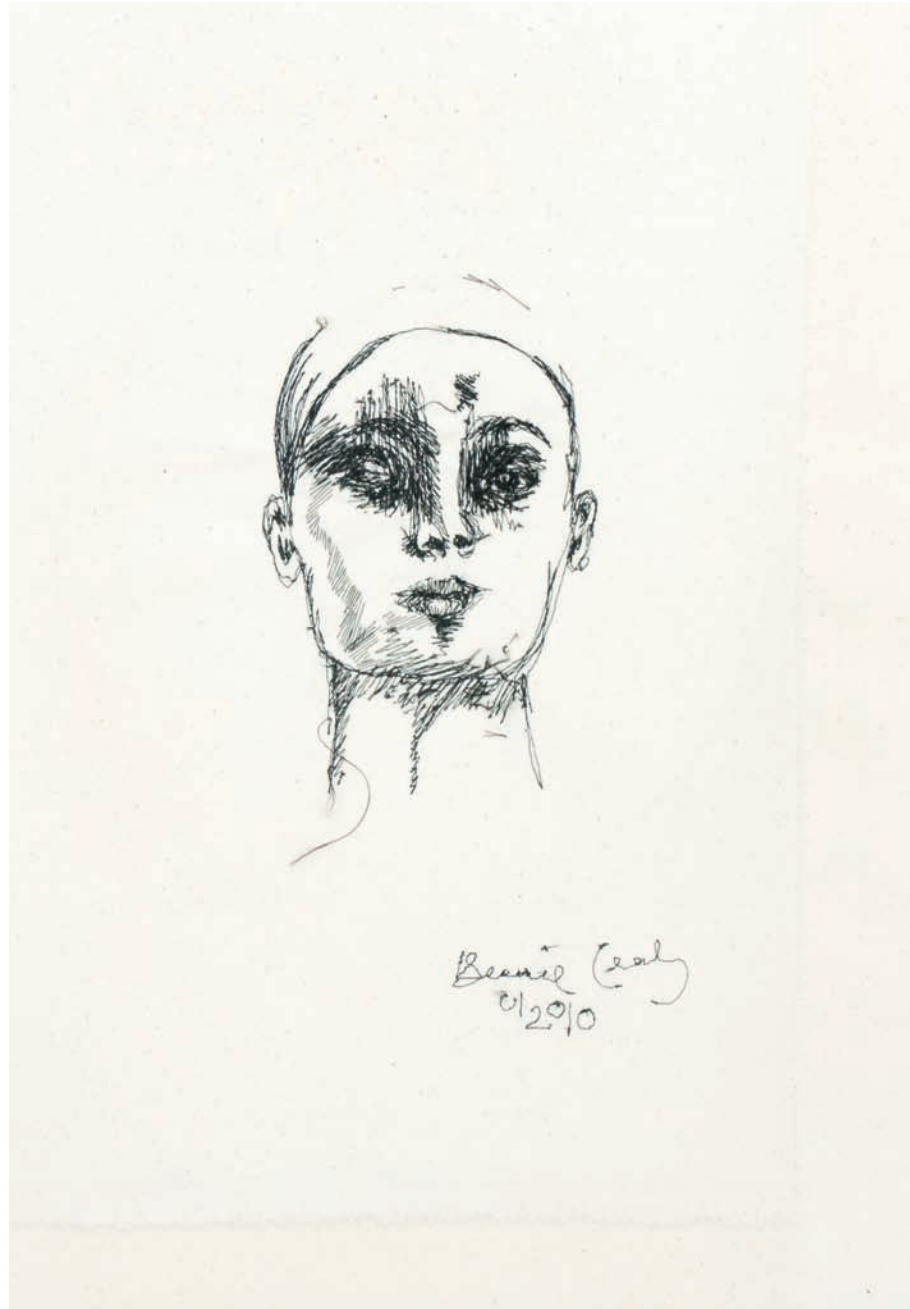
Beanie Galy
2010

The Mirrory Eye
Stitching on Unbleached Canvas
59 x 44 cm



Beanie Galy
2010

Ma'a Ma: Mathilda Ripton
Stitching on Unbleached Canvas
59 x 44 cm



I don't know if you can see me
Stitching on Unbleached Canvas
59 x 44 cm



Into a wilderness
Stitching on Unbleached Canvas
59 x 44 cm



BIOGRAPHIES

Hope Artifact 1
Plaster, gold leaf, pigment, stitching on unbleached canvas
20 x 15 x 9 cm



Alice Kettle

Alice Kettle was born in Winchester in 1961. She studied at the University of Reading and Goldsmiths' College, London.

She exhibits extensively in the UK and internationally - some recent solo exhibitions include *Telling Fortunes*, Platt Hall, Museum of Costume, Manchester, 2010, *Allegory*, Craft Study Centre, Farnham and UK tour (2009-11), *A Pause in the Rhythm of Time*, Belger Arts Centre, Kansas (2009). Some recent group exhibitions include *Global Intrigue*, 4th Riga International Textile and Fibre Art Triennial, Museum of Decorative Art and Design, Latvia (2010), *Bending More Lines*, 62group Rijswijk Museum, The Netherlands (2010), *European Prize for Applied Arts*, World Crafts Council, Brussels (2009-10) and the *Florence Biennale*, Firenze, Italy (2009). She is currently working on a two-person show with Claire Curneen in CAA, London in 2011.

She has received numerous awards for her work, including *Arts Council of England Major Development Award* (2009 and 2002), *Arts Council of England South East Award* (2007), *Textile Artist of the Year Award*, Creative Exhibitions (2006) and 1st Prize, *Pfaff International Art Embroidery Challenge*, (2005)

She has consistently worked to commission in architectural spaces, including the National Library of Australia, the Scottish High Court in Edinburgh, Gloucester and Winchester Cathedrals and the School of Music & Drama at Manchester University. She has completed a vast piece measuring 3 x 16.5 m for the Winchester Discovery Centre, for which the building received a RIBA award in 2008.

Her work is represented in various public collections in the UK and internationally, such as the Crafts Council London, the Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester, the Museo Internazionale delle Arti Applicate Oggi, Turin, Italy and the Belger Collection, Kansas, USA.



Bernie Leahy

Bernie Leahy lives and works in Lusk, Co. Dublin. She studied at the Dun Laoghaire School of Art and Design and the National College of Art and Design, Dublin.

She exhibits widely, with recent exhibitions including *International Fiberart Biennial*, Snyderman Works Gallery, Philadelphia (2010), *SOFA International Exposition of Fine Craft*, New York (2010) and Chicago (2008), *You'll Never Walk Alone*, National Craft Gallery, Kilkenny and Bluecoat Display Centre, Liverpool (2008) and *International Textile Biennial*, Museo de la Ciudad, Venezuela (2004), plus solo exhibitions in Tad Concept Gallery, Rome (2004) and *Line*, Fabrications Gallery, London (2004).

She has received numerous public commissions for her work, including *Eachother*, Waterford Healing Arts Trust (2007), *The Wish Path*, Department of Education and Science/Fingal County Council (2006 – Best Practice for Percent for Art), *Conversations*, Northern Irish Arts Council/Belfast HSS (2006) and *100 Images of Care*, Kildare County Council (2005).

Awards include *High Profile Award*, Irish Arts Review, Dublin (2007), *Crafts Council of Ireland Bursary Merit Award* (2008), *1st Prize Contemporary Embroidery*, RDS (2004) and the *William Smith O'Brien Cup for Excellence*, RDS (2004). She is represented internationally by Snyderman Works, Philadelphia, USA.

The National Craft Gallery

Set up by the Crafts Council of Ireland in December 2000, the National Craft Gallery exhibits a programme of groundbreaking national and international contemporary craft.

Activities include profiling the work of Irish makers in Ireland and abroad, developing relationships with Irish and international galleries and collectors, and inspiring appreciation, creativity and innovation through the gallery education and outreach programmes.

The Crafts Council of Ireland is the champion of the craft industry in Ireland, representing all craft disciplines. It strives to foster the commercial strength and unique identity of the craft sector, and to stimulate quality, design and competitiveness. It is funded by the Department of Enterprise, Trade & Employment through Enterprise Ireland.

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