

PRESS RELEASE

Category: Contemporary visual art exhibition

Exhibition title: The Difference Loom

Curator: Winnie Sze

Partner institution: Iziko South Africa National Gallery, Annexe

Exhibition dates: 22 August – 27 September; opening evening of 21 August

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This press pack contains:

- Summary about the exhibition
- Curatorial statement
- Short biographies of the artists
- Short biography of the curator
- Caption sheet of images
- 6 image files as jpgs (attached separately)

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About "The Difference Loom":

"The Difference Loom" is a visual contemporary art exhibition exploring textiles and technology. We sense the body in textiles, but not in technology. We discern the analytical in technology, but not in weavings. This exhibition is about those perceptions/disconnections, explored in that area where textiles and technology intersect.

It is an exhibition of works by 8 artists who use textiles as one medium of social critique:

Artists from South Africa:

Quanta Gauld
Keiskamma Art Project
Mbali Khoza
Fabian Saptouw

Artists from the United Kingdom:

Janis Jefferies
David Mabb
Richard Rigg
Nina Wakeford

It is curated by London and Cape Town-based independent curator Winnie Sze.

Textiles invoke our haptic sense, we feel it (visually), and in particular what we sense is the body. This is evident in Keiskamma Art Project's "Keiskamma Guernica", where we feel the suffering of those dying of HIV Aids and their mourners. We also feel the human in Mbali Khoza's work, though in exploring language and narrative, what we are sensing is the ephemerality of human creation.

Quanta Gauld's work brings to the fore the issue of value and exploitation of labour. In the context of the exhibition's theme, we consider this relative to the machine. David Mabb's work reminds us that man versus machine is one of our inheritances from the Industrial Revolution, and his work looks back to 2 significant socialist designers from the early age of the machine who had opposing beliefs about the hand-made versus industrialization. Bringing us back to the contemporary, Fabian Saptouw looks at our fetish for the hand-made in art objects, and Nina Wakeford looks at our captivation with technology.

The historical link between the automated loom and the modern day computer is explored by Janis Jefferies, leading to a work that explores the abstract conceptual possibilities of textiles.

Richard Rigg's work is also about thinking, the artist's, and ours in completing the art work.

"The Difference Loom" on textiles and technology is really about our making and thinking, of textiles, art, technology and cultural values.

Curatorial statement:

"The Difference Loom" is a contemporary visual art exhibition exploring textiles and technology. We sense the body in textiles, but not in technology. We discern the analytical construct in technology, but not in weavings. This exhibition is about those perceptions/disconnections, explored in that area where textiles and technology intersect.

It is an exhibition of works by 8 contemporary artists who use textiles as a medium for social critique, 4 are from SA and 4, from the UK. They are Quanta Gauld, the Keiskamma Art Project, Mbali Khoza, and Fabian Saptouw from South Africa; and Janis Jefferies, David Mabb, Richard Rigg and Nina Wakeford from the UK. It is curated by London and Cape Town-based independent curator Winnie Sze.

Textiles invoke our sense of touch, even when – as art works - we are not allowed to touch them¹. We "feel" their textures, weight and volume with our eyes. Moreover, as their common use is clothing and protective wrapping, what we are sensing is the human body.

This haptic evocation is particularly evident with the Keiskamma Art Project's "Keiskamma Guernica". It is a direct reference to Picasso's work in scale, composition, and subject matter of human suffering, which for the Keiskamma Art Project members is due to the decimation of its community through HIV Aids. It is a tapestry made partially with the blankets of the dying patients, whose presence we sense, as well as those mourning them.

Mbali Khoza's work "Stitches" also calls forth the human presence, though less corporeal and more ephemeral. It is a performance piece, presented in the exhibition as a recording. The inspiration behind Khoza's work is a man she met from central Africa whose tribe has spoken, but not written, language. She invents for them an alphabet, using it to write a text, with needle and cloth, but no thread. There is an ancient metaphor that thought is like a thread, and the narrator, a weaver of tales. Khoza tells us of this man and his language in the sound of her "sewing", and as his thoughts have been woven into hers, she weaves hers into ours.

If we take textiles to stand in for the body, how might we respond to Quanta Gauld's work? It consists of a tunic-like piece Gauld has woven from gold thread, so fragile it barely needs the nail to hold it up against the wall. The work also consists of a machine that slowly and mechanically unravels the textile until it is gone. Gauld's practice is to investigate contemporary issues of human exploitation and abuse through writings on human morality, and try to embody their words with her work. This piece is a response to words by artist Colin Richards: "Violence, poverty, and dispossession all dramatise the body and its ways in a material world".

Gauld's work/Richard's words bring to the fore the value and exploitation of labour. In the context of the exhibition's theme, we consider human labour in relation to that of the machine. The 2 are taken to be in opposition, as much our inheritance from the Industrial Revolution as the advancements of that age, for whilst the first automated loom, the Jacquard Loom, revolutionized the industry, it also put many operators out of work.

David Mabb's work looks to 2 significant socialist-based design movements who had opposing beliefs in that earlier age of the machine, the English Arts and Crafts movement (1840s-90s, England) and the Russian Constructivists (1920s-40s, Russia). In England, protests such as the Luddite Rebellion of displaced textile workers lead designers such as William Morris to eventually

¹ Jennifer Fisher, "Tactile Affects", Tessera volume 32, 2002

question the impact industrialization had on design, skills, and the lives of ordinary people. His solution was to return to a past when men worked and were valued as artisans, a return to nature, and art as the source of wealth and comfort². The Medieval period epitomized this ideal past, and we can see the influence of the designs of that period, with its rich colourings and patternings, on Morris' work. In contrast, the Russian Constructivists, prompted by the utopian climate following the Russian Revolution, rejected the past as a way towards the future. In particular, they advocated moving away from the labour-intensive modes of production to industrialization - their thinking became highly influential on the modernist art and architecture movement to come. The aesthetics of artists such as Luibov Popova were based on the geometric and angular, to reflect the qualities of precision, impersonality and order made possible with machines³. David Mabb juxtaposes both Morris' and Popova's "opposing" iconic patterns, formalistically trying to create an equal balance. For him, the question is not a naively simplistic who is right/wrong, man or the machine, but what can arise – that is new and different - out of a debate about their contending views? We will be exhibiting works from his series "Luibov Popova – Untitled textile design on William Morris wallpaper for Historical Materialism".

Mass production's effect on the value of the hand-made is explored by Fabian Saptouw. He makes by hand items that are commonly mechanized, for instance hand-painting lines on a road with a 00-size paintbrush. Such works end up irregular, and Saptouw uses this irregularity to point out its value in artistic versus industrial goods. His wobbly line would be rejected as a line on a road, but prized as a sign of the maker as an art work. He also challenges the romantic notion that labour-intensive artistic processes are necessarily meditative and personally rewarding for the maker, for he states that he finds the making frustrating and irritating. For the exhibition, Saptouw will be a making a new work, chain mail from fine gauged wire, adding another layer of inquiry the value of the hand in the deliberate non-functionality of art.

If there is an (extra) aura in hand-made art, do we also project something like it onto technology? Nina Wakeford explores this using the theories of seminal child psychologist David Winnicott as a counterpoint in her work "Good Enough Mothers". Winnicott theorises that an infant starts out in an internalized idealized world but must transit to external reality for its proper psychological development. The role of the mother is to be initially the source material of the internal world, and then to help the child with its adaptation to the external; as such, the optimal mother is one who is just "good enough"⁴. Wakeford wonders whether we are not "infants" still living in the internal idealized world with respect to technology? Consider old technology such as dial-up phones which we view with nostalgia and not as obsolete things, and our hubris that new technology will solve all our problems at the same time that we fear being replaced by robots. Wakeford's artwork is made of tie-dyed fabrics, left in their bundled form, set like figures on chairs. It is "low tech" in a work about technology and thus disarming. Are those figures the "good enough mothers" helping us to understand that as a mother is a human, so too is technology human-made, and therefore the achievements and limitations are our own?

That technology is a human creation can also be illustrated by how the Jacquard Loom inspired today's life-changing technology the computer. Twenty years after Jacquard's invention, Charles Babbage was trying to invent an automated machine that could calculate sums. His first

² William Morris, "Art and Socialism", paper presented to the Leicester Secular Society, 1884

³ Christina Kiaer, "Imagine no possessions – The socialist objects of Russian Constructivism", MIT Press 2005

⁴ David Winnicott, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena", paper presented to the British Psycho-Analytical Society, 1953

prototype The Difference Engine failed, but he had his breakthrough when he saw in the Jacquard Loom's technology a solution to his problem. The Jacquard Loom used punched cards to direct/stop thread from going into a weave. Babbage understood that it was also a logical binary system that could also be used to represent and store more abstract ideas such as mathematical data, as well as to process their calculations. Indeed, in homage to Jacquard, Babbage called the 2 key parts of his machine the "Store" and the "Mill", where the former holds the numbers and the latter "weaves" the results⁵. Punch cards are gone in today's computer, but it still has the "Store" in the form of the "Memory Unit" and the "Mill" as the "Central Processing Unit".

This piece of history forms the genesis of Janis Jefferies' work which relates computing and textile technology. In the work "Swarm Techtiles", made in collaboration with Tim Blackwell, she makes sound visible. Sound, such as Bach's Ave Maria, is digitized using software into 2 audio streams that become the warp and weft that threads into a "woven" image. The visual result is a dynamic of changing abstract patterns, varying colour and complexity. Likewise an image could be "heard" by reversing the process. Jefferies further explores the haptic, how we might "feel" that sound and imagery, by physically weaving some of the screenshots into a tapestry using a Jacquard Loom. The work's title, "Source the Code", invites us to consider the abstract concepts, the analytical constructs, and the computing and weaving technologies that the textile embodies.

Thinking is the subject underlying Richard Rigg's work, which looks like a jacket forgotten on the floor. But the title "Cloth Arranged to Look Like a Jacket (Self-Portrait)" tells us that this is an illusion as it is actually an uncut, unsewn piece of cloth the artist has carefully folded to look like a jacket. Thus we are made aware of our sub-conscious perception by our conscious awareness. The work continues deeper, with that phrase added to the end of its title "(Self-Portrait)". It seems there actually is a person the artist wants us to conceptualise – this time, consciously - a "Self". Who is this "Self", the artist who created the work, or we the viewer who complete the work in our minds?

To the degree that it is possible to encapsulate the ideas raised by the works in the exhibition, perhaps it is through this question of "Self". If textiles stand in for the body, as we accept technology is a human product, and we appreciate that we determine the value of labour versus machine, under the same cultural system that values textiles, art, making and thinking - then this querying about textiles and technology is a querying about the achievements and limitations of our "Selves".

"The Difference Loom" opens 21 August evening and continues through 27 September, at Iziko South Africa National Gallery Annexe.

⁵ Luigi Menabrea, "Sketch of the Analytical Engine invented by Charles Babbage, Esq.", translated by Ada Lovelace, 1842/43

Summary bios on the artists (more info available on request)

UK artists

Janis Jefferies is also a curator and professor of arts, department of computing, at Goldsmiths School, University of London. She is widely published. Her most recent and upcoming exhibitions are "Intersensorial Threads", University of Wollongong, Australia, June 3-14 2013 and she is the curator of the Hangzhou Triennial of Textile Art in China (Sept 2013).

David Mabb is also a lecturer at Goldsmiths School, University of London. His art works are in collections around the world, and he currently has a solo exhibition at the William Morris Museum, UK.

Richard Rigg is UK-based and exhibits internationally. His exhibition at the Baltic (Gallery), Gateshead, UK, earned him a short-listing for the prestigious Northern (UK) art prize.

Nina Wakeford is also a practicing sociologist and a reader in the visual sociology department at Goldsmiths School, University of London. Her recent publications include "Inventive methods: the happening of the social: devices, sites and methods", which she co-edited. Her artworks have been exhibited internationally including at the Moscow Biennale.

South African artists

Quanta Gauld is a MFA candidate at Michaelis School of Art, University of Cape Town.

The Keiskamma Art Project based in Hamburg, Eastern Cape, was started in 2000 by medical doctor and artist Carol Hofmeyr. Some of their major works have been shown internationally, and the "Keiskamma Guernica" was shown at the recent Venice Biennale for Architecture.

Mbali Khoza recently completed a BA in Fine Art at the University of Witswatersrand, where she was co-winner of the school's Martienssien Prize. She is a member of the collective the Centre of Historical Re-enactment; the collective recently completed a residency at the New Museum in New York.

Fabian Saptouw is also lecturer at Michaelis School of Art, University of Cape Town. He has shown at the Stevenson Gallery.

About the curator

Winnie Sze is based in London and Cape Town.

She studied fine art at the University of British Columbia, Canada, under Jeff Wall, and at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

In 2004 she started AUGUST art in London, UK, a hybrid contemporary art gallery working with socially-engaged artists and hosting experimental and public art works. Many exhibitions have been ranked in the Top 5 by the Whitechapel Gallery in its monthly First Thursdays listings.

Since June 2012, Winnie/AUGUST art has been focusing on project work in Africa. Her first South African project was part of Infecting the City, 2013. The project "Under Construction" was a collaboration between Scottish, Japan-based international artist Aeneas Wilder, the District 6 Museum and the University of Cape Town architecture school.

More details of Winnie Sze/AUGUST art's work can be seen on <http://www.augustart.co.uk>

CAPTION SHEET

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a visual art exhibition exploring textiles and technology
at IZIKO National Gallery Annexe
22 August – 27 September, 2013

curator: Winnie Sze

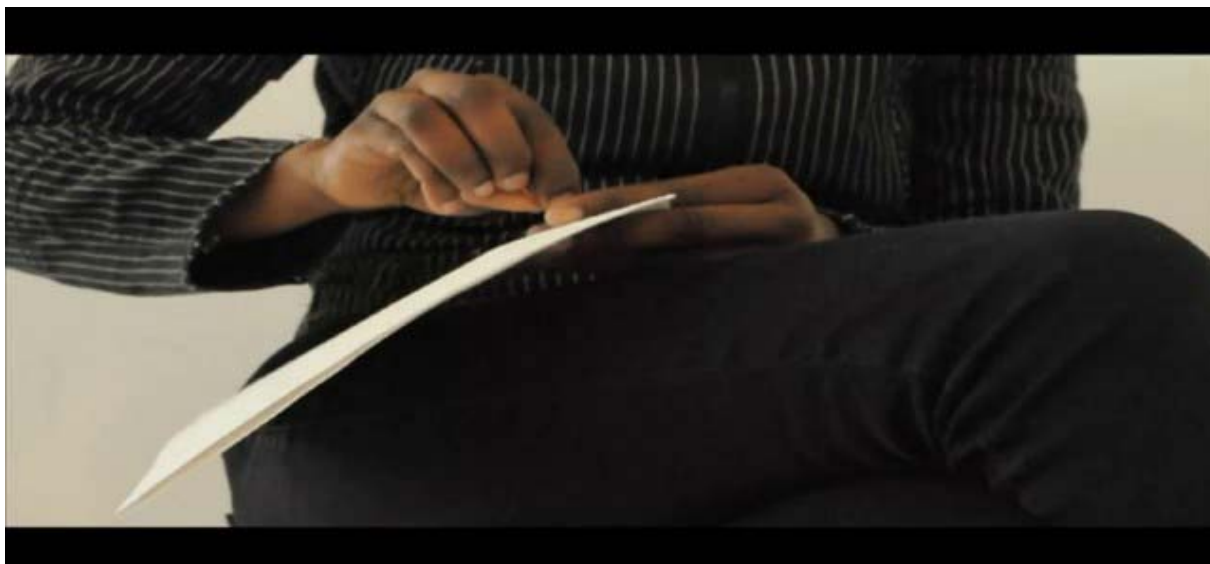
artists: South Africa:
Quanta Gauld (image not currently available)
Keiskamma Art Project
Mbali Khoza
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United Kingdom:
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Keiskamma Art Project
"Keiskamma Guernica", 2010
used hospital blankets, fabric, thread



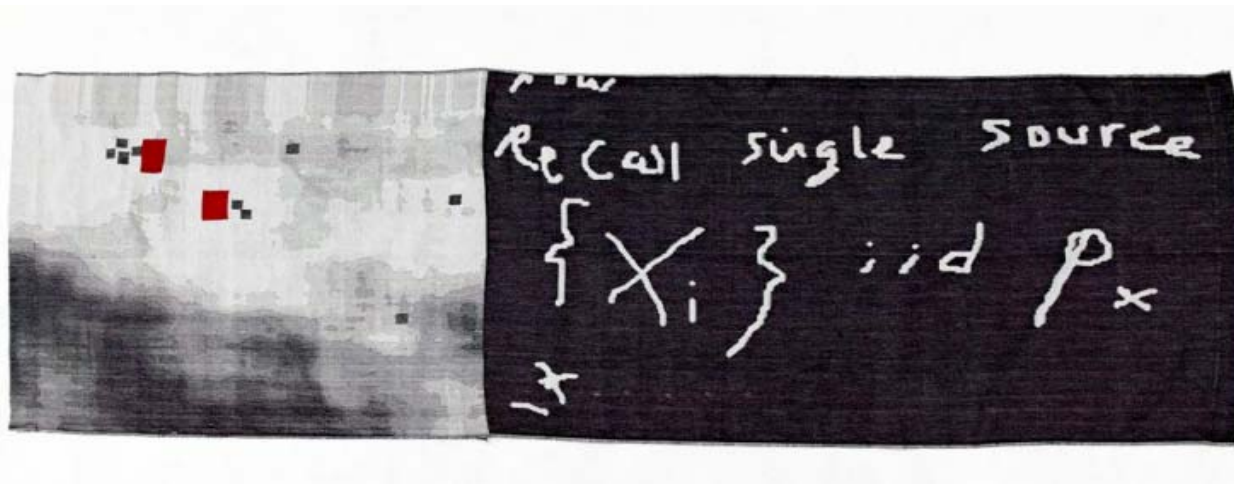
Mbali Khoza
film still from video "Stitches", 2011
performance with fabric & needle



David Mabb
"Luibov Popova – Untitled textile design on
William Morris wallpaper for Historical
Materialism", 2010
Screenprint on William Morris wallpaper



Nina Wakeford
"Good enough mothers", 2012
3 tie-dyed fabric bundles



Janis Jefferies

"Source the Code", 2012

Cotton and brocade twill jacquard, collage of "Swarm Tech-Tiles" images with MIT blackboard source code



Richard Rigg

"Cloth Arranged to Look Like a Jacket (Self-Portrait)", 2011

folded fabric