

## text and work

Susan Stockwell's rapport with papers (the plurality is self evident) comes not so much from their being pristine supports for the print or graphic line but rather from their many incarnations as ready made signifiers. She both explores and exploits papers qualities of daily familiarity, weight, texture and ability to dissemble – to appear to be what it is not. Instead of conventional sheets of, say, cartridge or handmade paper, she uses pages from books, old prints, maps, dressmaking pattern papers, tea bags, coffee filter papers, waxed portion cups, toilet tissue, and she uses other materials, such as rubber or wool to make objects we usually think of as fabricated from paper.

During the mid 1990s Stockwell had access to the factory floor at Kimberly Clarke, manufacturers of many kinds of paper but most especially toilet tissue. Taking her cues from both the floating, translucent sheets of uncut rolls and the ponderous weight of compressed off-cuts prepared for re-cycling, Stockwell made work which simultaneously celebrated and belied the qualities of a material which probably did not exist in this particular form a century ago. The paper was compressed into huge stacks, yet while the lower part of these giant columns became almost rock-like through the sheer weight of the paper piled above, the upper reaches retained a fly away quality that a slight breeze might lift. In seamless yet layered works Stockwell suggested both the enduring and mortal qualities of civilisations. With characteristic modesty and in the true spirit of the environmentalist she also constructed these works to be re-cyclable!

A significant extension of this interest in domestic papers - their ephemeral, archaeological and sculptural qualities, as well as that of being taken for granted (what, for example, could be more humble than a sheet of toilet tissue!?) is an interest in maps and dressmaking. Maps are essentially flat paper works, as are pattern-papers - which through the dressmaker's hand provide a wonderfully sculptural project in dress itself. The patterns are a way of mapping the body, and could be read as dictating or at very least, suggesting, the ideal form which we should take.

In some works, using dressmaking pattern-papers as support, ideas conflate around control of self-image and control of territory, populations and resources. Stockwell engages the notion that instructions on dressmaking papers, such as 'shorten or lengthen here' or threading guides in the form of dotted lines and curved arrows, have curious analogies in cartography where the map maker could create an image of the world that was to his (or more usually his sovereign's) advantage and rarely a totally objective truth.

The introduction of dressmaking papers into her work developed out of other map-making pieces. Brought up in Manchester during the 1960s and '70s Stockwell became aware that the granting of independence to so many colonies in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean and other economic, technological and social factors were profoundly affecting Britain's manufacturing and production bases. In the 1990s she was making work that reflected these changes, but which also reflect the country's reliance on both luxury (or at least formerly luxury) and industrial goods, like tea, coffee, paper, cotton

and rubber. Vividly symbolic ‘maps’ of Britain, South America and Africa are literally ‘stitched up’ commodities – constructed as they are from tea bags, coffee filter papers and rubber tyre inner tubes. A further take on this idea is *Mad Cow Country* – a map of the British Isles fashioned like a child’s soft toy out of black and white Friesian -cow-patterned fake fur, an hilarious comment on the mess we have got into through dubious agricultural practices.

Taking the engagement with mapping further, Stockwell became interested in architectural plans and blueprints, themselves species of maps which also, albeit in a slightly different way, control and direct society. Even the ground plan of a single room inevitably exercises an influence, however discreet, on those who inhabit that room. Furthermore, such a ground plan relates to, and is dependent upon, that of surrounding spaces, both internal and external, material and intellectual. In turn such spaces relate to the physical plan of the city, or the landscape in which the building is situated, but also to their layered history of such cities or landscapes.

Until 1837 Bournemouth did not exist but a pretty location on the South Coast was seen by a local entrepreneur as being a perfect site for a seaside resort- a fashionable development in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Once a handful of villas were built, it grew rapidly, attracting in turn post-office, stage-coach stop, church and gradually all the appurtenances of a modern town. Until very recently tourism provided its principal income, but this is gradually being overtaken by service industries, particularly to do with finance, insurance, and housing. Nevertheless the University, despite its youth, is a seat of learning and Dorset itself is famous for its ‘Jurassic Coast’ now a world heritage site for the study and enjoyment of our richly layered geological past.

Implicit in the work seen here is an awareness of this very young, technologically contemporary site, of its new structure, but also its connections with history, rich and many-layered (however fragile or opaque) out of which the local communities have grown.

Definitions of history and territory have also been explored by the artist in other ways. In 2002 she ‘took a line for a walk’ in a London borough, drawing a continuous line in white paint around the parish boundary and in 2003 she made a work at Bryanston where an amphitheatre, built in the 1930s by pupils of the school, is based on that of Pompeii. An electronic device eerily set up the sound of applause when anyone entered the amphitheatre and ghostly street patterns taken from a map of the city were etched by Stockwell into the moss over the stage, thus creating a strikingly atmospheric reminder of classical history and inspiration.

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