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WOMEN



SCULPTORS



SUSAN STOCKWELL



Susan Stockwell was born in Manchester, England and attained her BA in Fine Art from Sheffield Hallam University (1988) and her MA from the Royal College of Art (1993). She now teaches fine art part-time at the University of East London.

Stockwell also develops work through participatory art practice and has worked with a range of groups including Prison inmates, Cuban refugees and Afghanistan and Iraq veteran soldiers in rehabilitation. The project, *Piece Makers* was in collaboration with The National Army Museum London (2012-2016). In 2013, she made *Sail Away*, an interactive installation in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall for the Hyperlink Festival. In 2014-2015 she was Artist-in-Residence at the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford-upon-Avon where she made new work for the exhibition *Sea-Markings* (2015). Also a solo exhibition at Warrington Museum and Art Gallery, UK (2020).

Stockwell has exhibited extensively around the world, including at Tate Modern, and the Victoria & Albert (V&A) Museum, London, The National Museum of China, Beijing, The Katonah Museum of Art and the Children's Museum of Art in New York, the Art League of Houston, USA and Manchester City Art Gallery.

Her work is in public and private collections including: The V&A Museum, The Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam NL, the London Transport Museum, Bedfordshire University, UK, Black Rock Investments and Yale Centre for British Art, USA.

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IN HER OWN WORDS

My work draws from my background, growing up in a Northern English urban culture in what I call a "make do and mend" socialist household where everything was recycled and my mother made our clothes, a skill I inherited and have used in my work. My father was a historian who worked in education and strongly believed in creativity

Left: *Flood* 2010 St. Mary's church, York photo: Shannon Tofts

and doing something worthwhile with your life. He read the *Chronicles of Narnia* to his whole school for an hour each day, with the conviction that the development of a creative imagination was a vital part of education.

I make sculpture, installation, collage, film and drawings. I am best known for my large scale, site-specific installations and sculptures installed in galleries, museums and public spaces. The work arises out of my interest in the political forces that have come to shape our world from colonialism to the social movements of the 19th and 20th century. This has led me to research international trade and cultural mapping and I have made artwork in response. I have also linked this research to the politics of feminism and the body.

An example of this is *Territory Dress*, 2018 [left] a commission for the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam, concerned with claiming female territory and our colonial past and its contemporary significance. Maps of the Dutch colonies are fashioned into the shape of a regal dress with frills and folds made of paper and cloth maps. Small model



Territory Dress 2018 detail Photo: Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam.

money boats and maps of significant territories are concealed inside the neck, womb and train of the dress, which creates a kind of movement, as if passing through time, pulling the weight of a brutal past whilst the hollow of the stomach questions the origins of bodily and national propriety. As a legacy for the work I made a film, *Territory Dress*, 2019, which explores the sculpture and juxtaposes it with archival film of past seafaring imagery.

My carefully sourced materials are often organized into monumental shapes like stacks and cascades or smaller quilts, dresses and maps. The use of large quantities of material invokes notions of mass production, collective history and memory. Three examples of installations where I have sourced pre-used materials that hint at this sense of collective history are *Sail Painting*, *Flood* and *Sail Away*:

Sail Painting at the RSC was a large scale site-specific installation that

Sail Painting 2015, RSC. Photo: Jeff Leyshon

hung in the public atrium in front of the theatre and was made as a result of a year long residency there (2014-2015). It consisted of 32 appropriated and hand-crafted sails (made from old plastic food sacks), which hung at angles in the three-storey atrium. Seen from different vantage points the viewer felt they could be walking inside a three-dimensional abstract painting.

Flood (York 2010) was made from four tons of recycled computer components that cascaded 8 metres down from the ceiling in to the altar area of St Mary's, a de-consecrated 13th century church in York. Addressing questions of climate vulnerability and outmoded systems of ecology management, the computers were dissected and their innards exposed, revealing the underbelly of the machines we depend on yet take for granted – an autopsy of our consumer society. Bob Clark describes this work in *The Guardian*, "Stockwell, while playing with themes of consumer waste, refers to the 'toxic exquisiteness' of her hi-tech raw materials, hinting at the double-edged fascination her best work generates."



For the large-scale installations, the materials I use are often borrowed from industry and returned to the sponsor to be recycled. In the 90s, I made a body of work from industrial scale toilet tissue sponsored by Kimberly-Clark, and another body of work from 2010 onwards made from computer components, where the materials were temporarily borrowed from the recycling chain. I chose these everyday 'commodity' materials because they contain 'stains of existence' and act as ready-made signifiers, which I sculpt in ways that delicately reveal their obscured politics, environmental harm and hidden beauty.

Sail Away consists of many small boats made from old paper currency, tickets and maps that form a large-scale snaking flotilla it was initially exhibited in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall as part of the Hyperlink Festival 2013. It explores the idea of 'connections' in travel, trade, mapping and personal and social histories. The boats are beautiful, delicate and playful: in mythology boats are symbolic of the transition from the material to the spiritual world and are carriers for our dreams as well as vessels for



Sail Away 2013, Turbine Hall, Tate Modern (Hyperlink Festival)

our adventures, escape and journeying. By combining boats and money these dream carriers gain other, deeper meanings. As part of the festival, eight hundred people made and contributed their own boats to the flotilla, transforming it into a huge collaboration. A stop-frame film shows the flotilla as it multiplies and contracts.

The installation *B-side Ecology* (2008) at the Hong's Foundation for Education and Culture in Taipei addresses issues of waste and recycling. A tidal wave of electronic materials was laid out on the gallery floor and formed onto blocks, raising questions about our throw away attitudes to consumer products and our increasing use and unsafe disposal of plastics and rare earth materials. This was my first computer component installation, inspired by living in Taiwan, the home of the electronics industry. I became fascinated by this material's potential, inherent beauty, political content, architectural structure and map like design. The curator and architect Grace Chung describes the work's gently revealing nature "Accumulation, transformation, detritus, debris, everyday materials are all recurrent themes in Stockwell's work. Meticulously handcrafted, the benign sublime beauty in the work belies the devastating effects of our culture and our role in shaping it. Look more closely, and one is confronted by a cultural urgency of global-proportions. Political and cultural colonisation, globalized waste and consumption are reconfigured by Stockwell's work into a new festering eco system of meaning that slowly seeps like the rising ocean level." – exhibition text at the

Hong's Foundation.

These works employ the material culture of everyday domestic and manufacturing products, such as toilet paper, recycled computer components, maps and paper currency and I transform these seemingly banal products into compelling artworks. In seeking to reconnect an object's past, its related history and materiality with contemporary issues, my practice underscores these materials' urgent interconnection to collective memories, desires and ecological shortfalls; aspects that evoke, expose and challenge features of social, racial and gender inequality and injustice.

My influences, inspirations and role models are many, from my parents, partner, artists and life experiences. As I get older, I become more confident and demanding of myself with more rigorous questions about the way we live.

I am currently Artist-in-Residence at Pinsent Mason's law firm in the City of London, which involves exhibiting my work in the public spaces and offices and making a participatory quilt with staff contributions. The quilt contains people's reflections on our current times, referencing subjects like climate change, community and the human impact of the COVID-19 global pandemic.

A solo exhibition, *Hidden Histories, Untold Stories* is also forthcoming at Warrington Museum and Art Gallery, where I will be showing artwork that re-frames and re-imagines their collection.

Taipei Stack and *Freefall* 2008 at the Hong's Foundation, Taipei

