

Exhibitions

A wearable art

**The Oxfordshire Museum,
Woodstock, Oxfordshire, England**

2–31 May 2009

Embroiderer Sue Rangeley has curated this impressive exhibition in an excellent gallery venue. Generally my heart sinks when I note that a textile exhibition is in a local museum because so often even the best quality work can be badly hung, dreadfully lit and lost within drear surroundings. This is so far from the truth in this case.



The temporary exhibitions gallery of the Oxfordshire Museum is a lovely additional space at the back of the main building, set in a splendid garden, which also has that all-important café overlooking it. In the gallery, the presentation of the displays in this exhibition was professional, as befits the professionals exhibited, and the layout gives the unusual and appropriate sensation of being in a glorious combination of artist's studio and designer fashion store. Sue Rangeley (see above and a detail of her work on the right), besides her own breathtaking creations, included an unusually rich array of talented makers, so that there were delights all around in the two rooms of displays.

Bridget Bailey, Emily Jo Gibbs, and Sue Rangeley herself, had exhibition spaces to walk into: the 'studios' which were laid out with examples of inspirations and work in progress as well as finished articles.



Bridget Bailey (detail below) makes spectacular sculptural hats and fascinators, with peas in pods a particular inspiration.



Emily Jo Gibbs, like so many of the artists in this show, is inspired by natural forms. She also included Russian dolls and the seaside bucket (see right) as springboards for her quirky ideas. Her bag and bowl forms mixed textile and metal with a delicacy of touch and an exquisite whimsy (www.emilyjogibbs.co.uk).



Sue Rangeley's own 'studio' space was also a treasure trove as you can see below. Display cabinets were laid out like the most luxurious magazine spreads, with the background papers as desirable and inspiring to onlookers as the carefully crafted items resting on them. Her delicately detailed yet richly sumptuous embroideries are the basis of a wide range of textiles for interiors and for fashion. In the latter category, she was as interested in accessories as in whole garments. She is inspired by nature, historical costume and, it seems, by the very techniques of embroidery itself (www.suerangeley.co.uk/SR.html).

Art to wear is an interesting category: it combines artistry with adornment and fashion with timelessness. What separates it from couture is that the designer is also the maker. An additional value is also conferred to the wearer who then can feel part sculpture by association. On top of this the process of design, the individual techniques involved were of great interest - not only to other makers.



Sometimes it is the garment itself which becomes an art object. For instance, in this exhibition, there were three corsets rendered as sculpture: Emma Fryer's bronze and green leather breastplate or corset with glass and bronze droplets, Rachel Hutchinson's plywood corset on a stained plywood and oak plinth and Claire Fife Jackson's beautiful silver corset brooch. These sculptural forms were complemented by the silver jewellery of Sarah Pulvertaft and Annik Piriou, and the chunky beads, necklaces and brooches of Aileen Hamilton (this last in a final display case with a seemingly unexplained mixed selection of pieces which fitted in with the show as a delightful extra – a kind of fine chocolate accompanying coffee after a deliciously filling meal).

Almost the first work to greet the visitor, with her signature animated sketches of lively figures, Rachel Howard's ties were on display and there was much else to captivate those interested primarily in fashion. For those more drawn essentially to textiles and textile techniques, a range of craft disciplines was represented as well as the embroidery mentioned:

knitting by Alison Dupernex (www.alisondupernex.co.uk/) using luxurious yarn combinations sought out from small scale merchants;

weaving by Tim Parry Williams - hanging here were some of his elegant minimal scarves, showing an affinity with the Japanese principles and designs he encountered on his visits;

felted in the frothy candy-floss-like scarves of Liz Clay (www.lizclay.co.uk/), whose creations have been associated with Givenchy and Stella McCartney;

painting and printing on silk could be seen in the equally dramatic designs of three individually distinctive artists: Carole Waller (www.carolewaller.co.uk/home.htm), Jenny Bicât and Georgina von Etdorf (www.gve.co.uk/).

So much diversity of design as well as of discipline: everything was of such a high standard, and was all set out in such a way that there were no clashes. Rather, each element enhanced the whole, just as the whole provided a rich setting for each individual. For instance, displayed close together, Sarah Cant's millinery (www.sarahcant.co.uk/hats.menu.html) and Victoria Borondo's bags made from vintage fabrics were set off delightfully by Tricia Rafferty's ceramic buttons on illustrated cards.

Ideally the exhibition deserved several visits for selective intensive viewing. My only disappointment was the absence of any kind of catalogue. A show of such quality of breadth, depth, and content deserved the 'afterlife' that a catalogue would provide, also possibly generating further interest for individual artists. This lack made me wonder if there is indeed any survey of the UK's talented art to wear artists. Given that this exhibition concentrated largely on the Cotswold area, what a wealth there must be around the country.

Sue Rangeley's work (right) first came to my attention on the cover of 'Crafts' magazine in the late 1970s, and I was always impressed by her eye for elegance and detail as well as the attractive designs and varied use of textile forms. Now, some thirty years later, it was a delight to catch up with her current work while enjoying the feast for eye and mind she provided with yet another talent – that of curating this extraordinarily impressive collection of artists, showcasing the quality and beauty of their work.



Olga Norris