



bluecoat
display centre
liverpool

200years: slaverynow

exhibition
curated by stephen dixon



LOTTERY FUNDED

March 25th 2007 marked the bicentenary of the passing of the Parliamentary Bill to abolish the slave trade in the United Kingdom, and this anniversary has been the subject of numerous celebratory events and exhibitions throughout the year.

At the same time, a number of organisations have used the bicentenary to draw attention to the fact that slavery still exists in a number of forms, both within the UK and in the wider international context, from the sex trafficking of young women into western Europe, to the globalisation of economic slavery in the emerging economies.

The exhibition 200 Years: Slavery Now (shown at the Bluecoat Display Centre, Liverpool, from 19th October to 17th November) shared this intention, and brought together ten artists whose work reflects these concerns.

These artists have demonstrated a commitment to highlighting the existence of slavery today, here and now, through the creation of artefacts and the development of personal narratives, exploring a number of issues around contemporary forms of slavery.

The exhibition was curated by Professor Stephen Dixon, with the support of the Craft and Design Research Centre, MIRIAD, at Manchester Metropolitan University.



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no.

01

paulscott

Paul Scott was born in Derbyshire in 1953, and studied art and design at St Martin's College, Lancaster. He is a practicing ceramic artist, and is currently undertaking a PhD Fellowship at Manchester Metropolitan University.

Paul Scott evokes the tragedy of the Chinese cockle pickers drowned in Morecambe Bay, victims of the trafficking and exploitation of migrant workers by the food industry. Additional reference is made to the history of slavery, through the device of the tea service, which both supports and contextualises Scott's printed and digitally manipulated narratives. As he explains, *'the quintessentially English 'cup of tea'* and the tea service are inextricably linked with Britain's development of the slave trade. Bowls made in Staffordshire held slave produced sugar from the Caribbean, making palatable the exotic bitter infusion of tea from China and India.

The legacies of the slave trade include the immense wealth generated for the British economy; its contemporary manifestation in

the architecture of our towns, stately homes and gardens; in arts and culture throughout Britain, and our humble cup of tea.

In spite of its formal legal abolition, slavery is still with us in the twenty-first century, manifesting itself in a number of ways, but almost always involving illegal immigrants forced to work or live in appalling conditions. On February 5, 2004, twenty-one of these contemporary slaves, Chinese cockle pickers, far from their homes, were drowned in Morecambe Bay in Cumbria. Many of those killed in Morecambe bay originated from the Fujian province of China which is known for its production of Oolong tea. A tea service therefore seemed the appropriate form to create a contemporary comment on the legacy of Britain's abolition of the Slave trade in 1807'.



no.

02

gill curry

Gill Curry was born in Kendal, Cumbria in 1943, and studied art and contemporary dance at London University and printmaking at Chester University. She is a practising artist, and Art and Design Consultant for Wirral Education Department.

'the middle passage'

It is well known that tea, coffee and sugar were among the luxury commodities that fuelled the transatlantic slave trade, and this trading connection is further investigated in Gill Curry's mixed media installation piece, which evoked the notorious 'middle passage' between West Africa and the West Indies.

city was a key partner in the slave trade and at the height of its involvement in the triangular trade between Europe, Africa and the Americas.

The Middle Passage installation displays a series of collagraph prints on both paper and plates, recording the history of the rice trade, and its inter-connection with slavery and with Liverpool. The Joseph heap Rice Mill, situated in Upper Pownell Street, was founded in 1780 when the

The metal channel in a deconstructed warehouse workbench represents the concept of change, the stainless steel rice channel becoming the contemporary restaurant, a boat transporting rice through the 'middle passage', a conveyor belt at the Joseph Heap Mill or a trough for sieving and sorting rice. For Curry, 'the installation 'recognises the past in the present' through the poetics of the everyday, where the familiar is associated with security and the unfamiliar with insecurity and instability'.



no.

03

kateegan

'popcorn'

Kate Egan was born in Manchester in 1963, and studied embroidery at Manchester Metropolitan University. She is a practicing artist and Senior Lecturer in contemporary crafts at Manchester Metropolitan University.

Kate Egan's mixed media installation 'Popcorn' works with the more universal notion of control as a form of contemporary slavery, with particular reference to childbirth, and the women's movement.

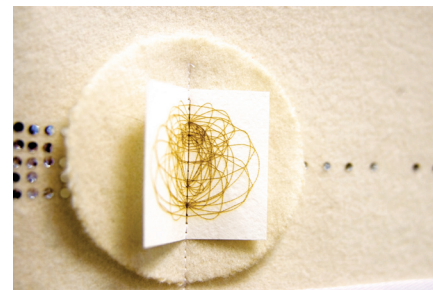
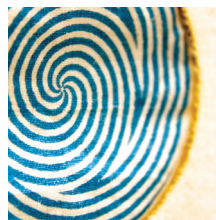
fever which reached epidemic proportions in the 18th and 19th Century. In 1847 Dr. Ignaz Semmelweis advocated the simple task of hand washing in chlorinated lime solutions to prevent the transfer of pathogens from the hands of doctors to their maternity patients (as the doctors could have been working on other patients or conducting autopsies beforehand). Doctors shunned this research claiming they were 'gentlemen...and gentlemen had clean hands'.

'Popcorn' is a world in microcosm, not unlike a snow globe or a Victorian clockwork universe. 'Popcorn' shows an imaginary world depicting 'control' as a form of slavery in the maternity production line, from the mid eighteenth century to the present day'.

In this piece, soap is used as a metaphor, not only to remember Mary Wollstonecraft's unnecessary fate, but also as a reminder of issues currently surrounding the NHS and hygiene.

Mary Shelley's dark novel Frankenstein, the story of a scientist who stitched together body parts to create life, only to have his death brought about by his creation, can be seen as a metaphor for Shelly's own beginnings. Her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft had died days after giving birth to her, succumbing to childbed

'Popcorn is a stark reminder of the existence of this disease today. As slaves of the maternity production line, women are still dying, though through a lack of awareness, not cleanliness'.



no.

04

stephendixon

Stephen Dixon was born in Co. Durham in 1957, and studied fine art at Newcastle University and ceramics at the Royal College of Art. He is a practicing ceramic artist, and Professorial Research Fellow in contemporary crafts at Manchester Metropolitan University.

Stephen Dixon's plates and classicised head-forms allude to a much longer historical association between slavery and western culture, and, like the ceramic collaborations of Alex McErlain and Bethan Lloyd Worthington, draw attention to the contemporary realities of the trafficking of sex 'workers' into the UK.

At the height of ancient Athenian democracy, almost one third of its population were slaves, indeed most early civilisations developed economies which relied on expansion, enslavement and exploitation'.

These heads, and the associated plates, are decorated with printed imagery which references this long history, from the 'classic' colonial manifestations of slavery (sugar, tobacco and cotton plantations) to the more recent tabloid images of sex trafficking and the sex trade.

'Building upon my long involvement with political imagery and printed narratives, this recent body of work draws attention to the historical association between slavery and western culture. The classicised heads make reference to the hidden truths behind our views on the moral superiority of western civilisation.'



no.

05

alex mcerlain & bethan lloyd worthington

'harvest'

Alex McErlain was born in Lancashire in 1950, and studied ceramics at Staffordshire Polytechnic. He is a practicing ceramic artist and Senior Lecturer in 3-D design at Manchester Metropolitan University.

Bethan Lloyd Worthington was born in 1982 in Birmingham, and studied 3-D design at Manchester Metropolitan University. She is a practicing ceramic artist based in Manchester.

'Harvest' is a body of work developed collaboratively by Bethan Lloyd Worthington and Alex McErlain. The development of new ceramic forms in porcelain was their initial starting point, exploiting McErlain's throwing skills. The surface imagery was developed by Lloyd Worthington, and came about as a response to

studying the plight of young women caught up in human trafficking. Their research was based on information and case studies provided by the POPPY project, which has investigated numerous harrowing cases of young women from Eastern Europe trafficked into the UK sex industry.



no.

06

alison welsh

Alison Welsh was born in Dundee in 1957, and studied fashion design at Newcastle Polytechnic. She is a practicing textile artist and Senior Lecturer in fashion design at Manchester Metropolitan University.

Welsh's constructed textile pieces incorporate hand dyed and machine embroidered figurative embroidery, to convey the plight and vulnerability of today's trafficked children. She states 'as the UK commemorates the bicentenary of Britain's abolition of the slave trade, today, thousands of women, men and children are in slavery in the UK as a result of being trafficked into a range of forced labour including forced prostitution, domestic servitude, agricultural work and food processing. *My work asks the question 'Why are some lives more important than others?' and addresses the ways in which the legacy and contemporary manifestations of slavery can discuss social and political issues within textile practice'.*

Welsh's textile pieces are re-workings of found garments, investing them with embroidered narratives illustrative of the contemporary exploitation of child labour in the third world. There is a focus on text and narrative, comparing historical anti-slavery documents with today's campaigning charity websites. These pieces continue her exploration of the use of rejected garments, re-cycling and revisiting the potential for memory encased within a second hand article.



no.

07

jenny walker

Jenny Walker was born in Beverley, Yorkshire in 1972, and studied 3-D design at Manchester Metropolitan University. She is a practicing Jeweller and Lecturer in 3-D design at Manchester Metropolitan University.

Jenny Walker's collection of wearable pins and non-wearable spoons, commemorates the workers of Manchester's cotton mills, specifically the children. Engaged for their small size, they were employed to run beneath the looms, re-tying the threads when they broke and thus keeping productivity at a maximum during the long shifts. *'The basis of Britain's success during the industrial revolution was cheap and plentiful labour to mass produce goods for the capitalist economy. I believe that there are many parallels that may be drawn between the past and our current global situation'.*

'tying the threads'

The pins employ fragments of Victorian smokers pipe found in Castlefield, Manchester and represent the adult responsibilities children had when going out to work in order to contribute to the family's survival. Walker's jewellery makes such specific use of found ceramic fragments, referencing the local and the historical through allusions to the child workers of Manchester's industrial revolution to draw attention to what is happening today in many parts of the world, particularly in the clothing and textile industries. She suggests that society has not moved on as far as we think, and stresses the importance of looking to the past in order to understand the present.



no.

08

alicekettle

'cotton slave I, cotton slave II'

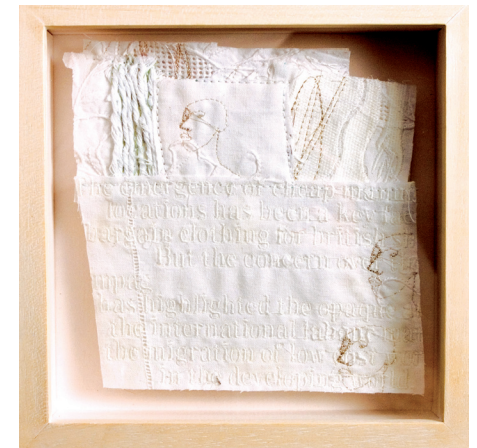
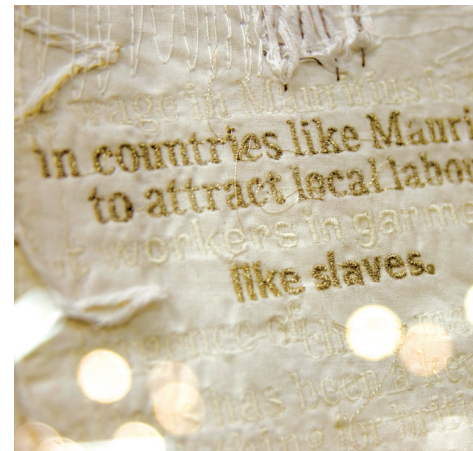
Alice Kettle was born in Winchester in 1961, and studied fine art at Reading University and textiles at Goldsmith's College. She is a practicing textile artist and Research Associate in textiles at Manchester Metropolitan University.

Textile artist Alice Kettle also explores Manchester's connection with the slave trade, through the examination of cotton as a metaphor for today's global trade in 'sweat-shop' merchandise and garments. *'I wanted to make the connection between slavery and the textile industry, since this is my area of practice'.*

the industrial revolution, to the contemporary economy of the UK. The major difference today is that manufacturing is now carried out in other parts of the world. The western appetite for cheap clothing is fuelled by prosperity and the exploitation of cheap labour elsewhere. Our lives are still bound up in the wearing of cotton, using cotton and buying cotton.

The images she found during her research were shocking, particularly the use of plantation slaves for the production of cotton, to establish prosperity in the textile industries of the west. Kettle maintains there is a thread connecting the slaves on the plantations, through the establishment of manufacturing and

'Cotton Slave I' shows the historical reference to the plantation slave, as producer of cotton. 'Cotton Slave II' shows the contemporary worker, manufacturing cotton garments for the western market.



no.

09

cjo'neill

CJ O'Neill was born in Belfast in 1978, and studied 3-D design at Manchester Metropolitan University. She is a practicing artist and designer, and Lecturer in creative business development at Manchester Metropolitan University.

Ceramicist CJ O'Neill adopts the imagery of the worker bee to symbolise slavery and the slave-driver, in the context of contemporary industrialisation and mass production.

thimbles found in old mills and charity shops in Manchester. They are both decorated and disguised with the imagery of the worker bee, a symbol of Manchester and Industry, but an image relevant to many slavery situations.

'My recent experience in India, my working location (an old cotton mill in Manchester) along with concerns of over consumption fed by mass production, lack of individuality and anonymity of both people and objects influence my perspective on slavery'.

Through their previous use, and O'Neill's subsequent re-firing, these pieces have been pushed to their limits, exposing their weaknesses, drawing attention to imperfections and in most cases losing their original function. In these respects they both epitomise and embody the conditions of slavery.

O'Neill's collection is a group of objects symbolic of both 'slave' and 'slave driver'; plates found in flea markets in India, cups, saucers and

