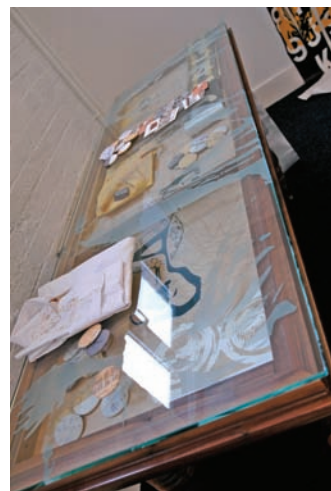


## ABOUT: JILL PHILLIPS



In the late autumn and early winter of 2009 Craft Northern Ireland in Waring Street, at the heart of Belfast's Cathedral Quarter, played host to 'Different Buses: An exhibition of textiles by Jill Phillips' (10 September to 10 November 2009). As a designer Phillips is best known as a creator of bespoke, exquisite furniture and textiles which are always conceptually as much as technically interesting. In the 'Different Buses' show Phillips takes the conceptual one step further by showing how designed objects, especially those we take for granted as part of our everyday material culture, can hold meaning and mediate identity. The inspiration for the show comes from Phillips' own schooldays in Northern Ireland where the region's unique social, political and religious divisions became physically, as much as psychologically



**Above** / School table from 'Different Buses' exhibition, CraftNI, 2009

"Phillips' work embodies a playful juxtaposition of the 'old and new, past and present, experience and innocence, antique and modern' and is often both subtle and deviant. Her approach has a freshness and energy in its capturing of the 'uncanny' quality of everyday design that lifts it out of the current trend for Design Art and one-off bespoke pieces by designers."



**Above** / Bus seat with laser-cut linen from 'Different Buses' exhibition, CraftNI, 2009

manifest, in its material culture. Phillips is not the first to consider this perspective, historians and critics from David Brett and Neil Jarman to John A. Walker and Louise Purbrick have all highlighted the cultural ramifications of politics in the design of Northern Ireland. But Phillips is very much the first to consider this idea not in the mainstay of contentious design areas, as promoted by political and sectarian organisations or the State, but in the more ubiquitous aspects of everyday experience, i.e. the bus journey to and from school.

The pieces in the 'Different Buses' exhibition focus on Phillips' reminiscences of a particular year - 1986 - memories of which she recreates materially through 'a medley of letters, exams papers, sporting paraphernalia, uniforms and school colours to convey the underlying sameness and universality of the human condition.' Phillips interprets her memories through an installation made up of laser-cut, printed and engraved textiles. A group of bus seats have been 'reupholstered with printed and laser-etched natural linen' in which 'school badges and colours which once had so much significance' as



**Above** / Bus seats with laser-cut linen from 'Different Buses' exhibition, CraftNI, 2009

the material signs of difference 'have been de-familiarised and re-merged to form a new, unbranded image.' The 'School Table', tables are something of a leitmotif in Phillips' work, 'invites viewers to look through (and past) the teenage girls sandblasted [onto toughened glass] across the top to examine the imagery below.' The same ideas, and signs, are explored in other works such as a school changing-room bench, a wall-hanging and a floor puzzle, in the form of a giant wooden jigsaw, 'with printed and laser-engraved imagery' which enables visitors to the show to step back from the completed puzzle and 'see a unified image, symbolising our common origins and shared experiences (love, happiness, pain, death).' As in the table, here Phillips points to the material dualities of division and commonality. ▶

**Right** / Linen wall-hanging from 'Different Buses' exhibition, CraftNI, 2009

**Below** / School changing-room bench from 'Different Buses' exhibition, CraftNI, 2009



▶ She says 'looking back now, it is easy to see the absurdity of the situation. Our uniforms were almost identical, except for the badge and the colour of our shirts. Biologically we were the same; we lived in the same place. Yet every day we each caught different buses home from school - one for the Protestant school and one for the Catholic school ... No one told us to take different buses - it was an unspoken rule - and none of us ever questioned it.' She feels that 'the invisibility of the boundaries which separated 'us' from 'them' is the concept which lies behind this project. Twenty-three years ago, our 'differences' created tension and posed a threat. Yet what I see now - with hindsight and maturity - is what we had in common: we all came from a womb; we were all girls; most of us would become women some day; some of



**Above** / Detail of 'Contemporary Souvenir' display in the 'Making Changes: Contemporary Craft in Northern Ireland' exhibition, Ormeau Baths Gallery, 2007

**Right** / 'Letitia' table, 'Contemporary Souvenir' display in the 'Making Changes: Contemporary Craft in Northern Ireland' exhibition, Ormeau Baths Gallery, 2007



us would give birth to little girls of our own.' The laser-cut and printed imagery references the biological as much as social and the installation aims to challenge observers 'to reflect

on the unresolved tensions from their past, to question their own boundaries, and to consider what they have in common with those they perceive as different.' ▶



**Below** / 'Lilian' table, 2000 x 600 x 780 mm, reclaimed Indian Rosewood, hand-blown crystal legs, embroidered leather, 2007



► Like a great deal of Phillips' work the 'Different Buses' project is made up of a combination of laser etching and printing on wood, paper and fabric. Her work often exposes how we invest meaning (individually or collectively) into things which may seem totally quizzical if we analyse it. Phillips studied design, and textiles, at the University of Ulster in Belfast, the Scottish College of Textiles, Galashiels and Central St. Martin's in London. She has had a remarkably varied career in professional practice and education, she has been a senior designer, as well as acting manager, at companies such as Ulster Weavers: she has been a design consultant for organisations such as Invest NI; and she has lectured at the University of Ulster in printed textiles. In 2007 Phillips established her eponymously-titled company which specialises in 'furniture and textile design, luxury hand crafted pieces, and limited editions' which also promotes 'sustainable interior design combining quality and a high level of design which is environmentally friendly.'



**Above** / 'Skyline' table, 2000 x 1000 x 780 mm, solid walnut, natural oiled finish, glass top

**Below** / Detail of 'Sylvia' table, solid walnut, natural oiled finish, mirror, toughened glass; joints include - mitred dovetail, mitred, mortise and tenon

In the summer of 2007 Phillips represented Northern Ireland in the 'Making Changes: Contemporary Craft in Northern Ireland' exhibition at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington D.C. and the Ormeau Baths Gallery in Belfast. As part of this exhibition as well as contributing to Craft Northern Ireland and Interface of the University of Ulster's 'Contemporary Souvenir' project she also designed furniture (a series of three tables) to display some of the work. Her tables are based upon a reinterpretation of local craft traditions through new technologies and work such as the tables 'Lilian',



'Skyline', 'Sylvia' as well as 'Letitia' (created for the 'Making Changes' show) all reference sources from textiles to architecture. Phillips work has been seen at shows for the Crafts Council of Ireland the Crafts Council of the UK as well as design fairs such as Designers Block in Milan and London Design Week. Phillips' work embodies a playful juxtaposition of the 'old and new, past and present, experience and innocence, antique and modern' and is often both subtle and deviant. Her approach has a freshness and energy in its capturing of the 'uncanny' quality of everyday design that lifts it out of the current trend for Design Art and one-off bespoke pieces by designers. Her ideology is committed to 'making sure her work is crafted in Ireland by skilled cabinet makers' so 'in each one, the sophistication of traditional design and craftsmanship combine with contemporary innovation to truly make these "New Antiques" elegantly deviant.' Phillips' work can also be seen in 'Designers & Makers 2009: An exhibition of fine craft and design' at the F.E. McWilliam Gallery & Studio in Banbridge, Co. Down (3 October to 17 January 2010). ●



**Above** / 'Sylvia' table, 1100 x 550 x 760 mm, solid walnut, natural oiled finish, mirror, toughened glass,

Joseph McBrinn



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Phillips and to Emma Duggan of Craft Northern Ireland. Jill Phillips can be contacted through Craft Northern Ireland or through [www.jill-phillips.com](http://www.jill-phillips.com)