

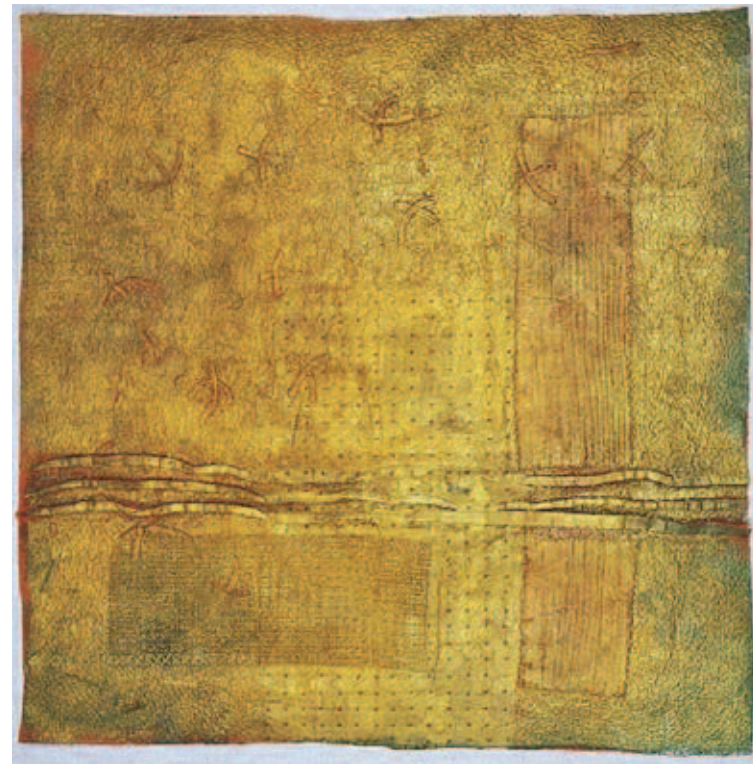
## ABOUT: KAREN FLEMING



“In Northern Ireland local textile artist Karen Fleming, who has taught at the School of Art and Design of the University of Ulster since 1988, has recently been involved in a pioneering project to apply her knowledge of textiles to medical science.”

In recent years although almost no discussion of craft has remained untouched by reference to technology, and new media, few applied artists or craftworkers, in all honesty, have whole-heartedly embraced the possibilities offered by collaborative or cross-disciplinary work. It has increasing become the realm of science-focussed academic research and of all the projects ongoing in British universities and colleges the ‘Past, Present and Future Craft’ project, based at the University of Dundee, is an exemplar of the, sometimes awkward / sometimes forced / sometimes fascinating, marriage between the tacit knowledge central to craft practice and the social applications of technological-lead and industrially manufactured design. In Northern Ireland local textile artist Karen Fleming, who has taught at the School of Art and Design of the University of Ulster since 1988, has

“Her work encompasses traditional techniques such as felting, bonding, embroidering, stitching and quilting as well as traditional materials, making reference to Ulster’s historic textile tradition and especially the prominent role played by women.”



Above / Red Bole, Karen Fleming

recently been involved in a pioneering project to apply her knowledge of textiles to medical science.

Fleming is better known, however, as maker of finely crafted textile artworks, especially in symbolic local fabrics such as linen. She has held the Chair of the 62 Group of Textile Artists

and her work is represented in collections such as the National Museums of Northern Ireland. She is a member of the British Fashion Council, International Felt-Makers Association, the Embroiderer’s Guild, Quilter’s Guild, European Textile Network, the Textile Society and the Society of Dyers and Colourists. Her work encompasses traditional techniques such as felting, bonding, embroidering, stitching and quilting as well as traditional materials, making reference to Ulster’s historic textile tradition and especially the prominent role played by women. In 2004 she was appointed a Reader ▶



Above / Incisions Garment

▶ in Textiles and is the co-ordinator of textile research in Interface Centre for Research in Art, Technologies and Design at the University of Ulster.

Fleming is currently engaged in a project to design a garment to help train medical students. The garment called Incisions is shaped like the surgical gowns patients wear with zips placed over the major sites of surgical incisions. Its purpose is ‘to give medical students both information on where operation incisions are made’ and also a sense of the psychological, as much as physiological, impact of an operation. The silk and rubber material of the gown ‘echoes the texture of human muscles and flesh’ and is a far cry from the culturally conspicuous, pecuniary and fetishistic references such materials evoke. The garment has a hood to suggest the anonymity of the patient (although it recalls in its sculptural form the creations of the New Jewellery movement of the 1980s especially the work of textile artist/jeweller Caroline Broadhead). The garment is a collaborative venture between Fleming and Professor John McLachlan, Associate Dean in Durham University’s School for Health. They

hope that ‘the garment will be worn and studied by medical students in their training to give them a better technical and emotional understanding of what will happen ... on the operating table.’ Fleming and McLachlan believe it could also

‘improve communication between surgeons and patients’ as ‘in current medical training, traditional hard plastic models of the human body are generally used both as teaching aids and in explaining procedures to patients’. Fleming says, ‘the body ▶

“The garment called Incisions is shaped like the surgical gowns patients wear with zips placed over the major sites of surgical incisions. Its purpose is ‘to give medical students both information on where operation incisions are made’ and also a sense of the psychological, as much as physiological, impact of an operation.



Above / Incisions Garment and traditional medical teaching aid

/ Janet Ledsham at work in her studio

/ Poplar and Ash (1996), 70 cm x 168 cm  
in, felt and leaves seeds and tree branches



Left and below / Incisions Garment

Recent discussion of the status of such ventures as 'craft', particularly those by university-lead projects, which are often coached in of the language of outcomes and returns, such as the 'Past, Present and Future Craft' at the University of Dundee or the research of Jane Harris, started at the Royal College of Art, has been challenged and it seems many in the craft world feel such inter-disciplinary may only offer us only an entry point to pushing craft in new directions rather than a panacea to craft's perpetual low self-esteem. It may seem for the time being that the jury is out on the true meaning of 'craft' in such work at Dundee or that of Harris in London and of Fleming in Belfast but these are undeniably intriguing, exciting, and in Fleming's case unquestionably socially beneficial, projects. ●

Joseph McBrinn



For further information on Incisions Karen Fleming can be contacted at Interface Research Centre, University of Ulster at [k.fleming@ulster.ac.uk](mailto:k.fleming@ulster.ac.uk) or on +44(0) 28 9026 7267.

“The body and garments are common objects in art and design but collaboration with medical knowledge brings a new dimension. The challenge for us has been finding material metaphors for living matter in aesthetically inviting, rather than repulsive, forms.”

► and garments are common objects in art and design but collaboration with medical knowledge brings a new dimension. The challenge for us has been finding material metaphors for living matter in aesthetically inviting, rather than repulsive, forms.’ The garment is the start of a wider project funded by Wellcome Trust to explore teaching, learning and thinking about the body through a series of art works and artefacts.

