

## ABOUT: MICHAEL BRENNAND-WOOD



“Michael Brennand-Wood’s installations are artistic interventions not only in the spatial and sculptural configuration of the private and the public but also within the history of textiles, and their current preoccupation with conflict, diaspora, and compression and tension as well as individual and collective experiences of space find a powerful resonance in Northern Ireland.”

For many artists the issue of displaying their work in galleries or museums presents a paradox. Many rightly feel that the elevation of objects on plinths, or encasement by boxes, bathed in pools of light can reconfigure meaning beyond their control and draw their creation into the ‘spectacle of consumption’. However, does the ‘white cube’ concept really continue to hold sway over how we interact with artworks in the twenty-first century? The placement of works of art on plinths, boxes and walls must in some ways render their own space and the space around them circumspect. The presence of the physical is reduced to the purely visual. This is all very well but what about the artwork that is immersed in the corporeal and the material, where process and production are as relevant as the aesthetics of display. Indeed, this paradox holds a greater complexity for the craft object which needs to be experienced as a thing rather than read as an image.

Outside public spaces such as galleries and museums, it was as a feature of a building’s fabric rather than as adjunct in decorating its interior, that craft was historically understood. But our contemporary built environment has little sympathy was anything not flat-packed or manufactured to specification. Few artists manage to get beyond placing their work in someone else’s context.

One of the most important exceptions, who’s works are more interventions in space rather than this placement of objects, is the English-born textile artist Michael Brennand-Wood, who has recently just finished an almost decade-long tenure as Research Fellow in the Applied Arts at the University of Ulster in Belfast. Since the early 1990s Michael has been at the forefront of the textile art ▶



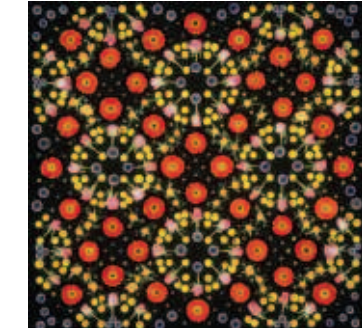
Above / Michael Brennand-Wood at work in his studio



Above / Bankfield Museum (1999)

Below left / Bankfield Museum (1999)

Below right / Ocean Music Venue (1999)



Left / Panel entitled ‘Shakin’ all over’ from Royal Aberdeen Children’s Hospital’s A&E Dept (2003)

Above / ‘Bee Bee’s Blues’ from the Stars Underfoot series (2001)

▶ world and he has worked on a series of major craft+architecture commissions. Although at the centre of his practice is a keen interest in the ‘contested areas of textile practice embroidery, lace, and patterning’ his work also shows how the artist can intervene in the spatial positioning of their work. Most recently, an installation by Michael was unveiled at the Yorkshire Cancer Centre, Leeds (2008). This comprised two wall hung works, ‘World of Echoes’ and ‘Stars Underfoot’, in the atrium. Both

belong to a group of work, which were made of ‘constructed relief panels that reference spatial orientations found in early stitched and woven textiles’.

The idea originated in a project called ‘Stars Underfoot’, which derived its title from a book ‘Flowers Underfoot: Indian Carpets of the Mughal Era’ that accompanied an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1997, which showcased pile-woven rugs from the sixteenth to eighteenth

century imperial courts in Asia. Michael inverted the concept of the pictorial imagery and spatial arrangement of these textiles and used real flowers as his material rather than stitched or woven fabrics. The result was a series of photographs, the exact size of the flower installations. He points to a constant source of visual stimulus in his work emanating from Central Asian textiles as their ‘imagery is accessible, celebratory, and universal in its contemplation of space and love of flowers as a symbol of renewal’. Both the works for the Yorkshire Cancer Centre he suggests ‘are unashamedly positive in their colouration, energy and material choices, my aim is to give visitors an intriguing, vibrant, optimistic visual intervention as they visit the centre.’



Two Above / ‘World of Echoes’, Yorkshire Cancer Centre, Leeds (2008)

Michael is currently working, in conjunction with the London-based architects Levitt Bernstein, on a major installation for Colston Hall, a 140 year old music hall in Bristol, to be completed in 2009. In this work he references ‘musical genres, interactions and influences’ through the use of badges/buttons and metal discs which ‘relate to three iconic discs found in the recording of music, the LP, CD and single’ where ‘[e]ach disc will contain visual and text fragments that relate to specific musical genres’. He envisages the work ‘as a constellation of musical genres, carefully mapped to indicate connections and hybridization’ which also reveal the ‘duality of terms such as Chart (music composition or retail list/astrological map) and Star (musician/heavenly grouping)’. Michael’s work has long been ▶



Left / 'Flower Head – Narcissistic Butterfly' (2005)

Below / 'Holding Pattern' (2007)



► admired for its musical analogies and he freely admits the key influence of several musicians on his ideas and approaches such as Terry Riley, John Gage and Philip Glass. As well as including musical elements in installations such as that for the Royal Aberdeen Children's Hospital's A&E Dept (2003) Michael has designed interiors for a number of musical venues including Ocean Music Venue, Hackney, London (1997). He has often pioneered the exploratory use of unorthodox constructions and materials such as the installation at Bankfield Museum in Halifax (1999).

The fascination with space in Michael's work is evident in the remarkable series of pieces he has produced over the past decade. These are technically and conceptually complex and aim to disrupt the viewer's physical and psychological engagement with the artwork and its

space. For instance, 'Flower Head – Narcissistic Butterfly' (2005) 'references the implied relationship between the floral and human head ... [as each] individual embroidered flower has at its centre a human face, preserved at the end of a flexible wire. A bunch, cast, of political and media characters ... The embroidered flower is a twentieth century snapshot, analogous to a preserved butterfly in a museum case'. This has been developed in a series of works including 'Crystallized Movements' (2004), 'Sweet Jaine' (2007), 'Holding Pattern' (2007), '51 Phial Bodies' (2008) and 'Babel' (2008), and most recently in the monumental 'Stars Underfoot – The Slow Reveal' (2008).

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current preoccupation with conflict, diaspora, and compression and tension as well as individual and collective experiences of space find a powerful resonance in Northern Ireland. After almost a decade as a key figure in textile education at Belfast School of Art and Design, it will surely be unforgivable if the interior of one of our city's many new sterile public buildings is not given over to the devastating beauty of Michael's imagination and his extraordinary genius. ●

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Thanks to Craft Northern Ireland and to Michael Brennand-Wood for talking to me about his work. All quotes and images are courtesy of the artist. For further information on Michael's work see [www.brennand-wood.com](http://www.brennand-wood.com)



Above / 'Stars Underfoot – Slow Reveal' (2008)