

**Materialising Ritual: A Visual Investigation of the Evocative Power of Ritual
Objects, Through the Medium of Cloth and Thread.**

By

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Abstract

This research project has investigated ways in which visual qualities enhance the evocative power of ritual objects. Through the medium of cloth and thread the project aimed to find ways in which to visually represent intangible aspects of ritual such as wonder and talismanic protection. A key element of this aim was to explore ways in which to represent ritual action in still objects.

The impetus for this project came from my own experiences of Catholic ritual and its objects, however it also considered a wider range of traditions of ritual practice both religious and secular. The project was not concerned directly with the spiritual, but rather with the very human activity that surrounds it. I was interested to discover what it was about ritual objects that distinguished them from other more 'everyday' objects, that is, what made them special.

In order to carry out this investigation I considered various functions of existing ritual objects. These included their ability to manifest in material form what is essentially immaterial (prayers, intentions, hopes, and sentiments); to condense symbols; to evoke a sense of wonder and awe; to separate what is considered to be sacred from the profane; to be symbolically rather than physically instrumental; and to provide manuals for ritual action.

My work is located primarily with reference to the work of other textile artists such as Anne Brennan, Louiseann Zahra and Elsje King who employ cloth and thread to embody a sense of intangible presence. Reference is also made to some of the works of Annette Messenger and Janine Antoni which deal directly with ritual-like practice.

My contribution to this field lies in the creation of quasi ritual objects which borrow existing aspects of ritual to explore how form, colour, ornament, labour, and material can be used to enhance an objects perceived 'power'. Primary to the development of these objects was the consideration of ways in which to visually suggest ritual action. This was explored through the use of physical form; stitching as a metaphor for the intense focus and repetitive nature of ritual participation; as well as the connotations that thread has of connectedness and its suggestion of paths.

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Introduction

My project is concerned with the 'power' or efficacy of ritual objects. While the perceived power of these kinds of objects—beads, crosses, wrapping cloths, chalices etc.—is inextricably linked to the belief systems in which they operate, their 'power' can also be said to be enhanced by visual qualities. My project investigates the contribution that these qualities can make toward this efficacy, through form, ornament, material and colour. It also considers how power is invested in ritual objects through the process of their making and employment in ritual.

In this investigation into the 'power' of ritual objects I have also been concerned with how ritual objects reiterate or reveal the ideas, sentiments, wishes and values that are involved in ritual practice. That is, how they can manifest in material form what is essentially immaterial. My project is not concerned directly with the spiritual, but rather with the very human activity that surrounds it. Ritual objects can be seen as the transformation of hopes, desires, lamentations and prayers into physical objects. Despite the fact that religious ritual activities are primarily focussed on attaining or communicating with non-physical, that is, spiritual things, it is clear that human beings rely heavily on physical, material things in order to communicate and engage with this 'other' world. Through an investigation of ritual objects, my project seeks to find visual representation for intangible qualities evoked by ritual, such as wonder, value and talismanic protection.

The impetus for this project came from my own experience of Catholic ritual and its objects. As a child my experience of religion was filtered through these objects. Every Sunday sitting with my family in the front row of the church I watched in clear view, the ritual movement of objects—chalices, plates, white linen. The tabernacle, a cupboard-like or safe-like object that's function is to house the consecrated wafers was house-shaped with a domed roof. It had a sliding door in the front, which was always locked with a key and hidden behind a satin curtain. I loved to watch the ritual of the curtain being drawn open, the key turned, and the door slid open in order to retrieve from it the chalice with its domed lid—shut tight.

At home, away from the authority of the church I created my own rituals with my own objects. I wore a brown felt scapular with its machine-embroidered image of the Virgin

Mary appearing on a cloud, under my clothes, close to my skin, out of sight. My rosary beads which had a capsule of Lourdes water¹ embedded in the back of the crucifix promised the act of prayer extra magical possibilities, and my bright blue miraculous medals provided me with an entry into a world of wonder.

My previous body of work titled *Objects of Vertu* 2002-03, consisted of pieces that drew directly from my experience of Catholic devotional objects. The work referred to objects like those mentioned above, for example, the series of small textile objects titled *Scapular for Thérèse* 2003 was based on ideas relating to the scapular.² Much of the *Objects of Vertu* were a reflection on the wonder I felt towards these objects as a child.



Figs. 1 & 2: Rosemary O'Rourke, *Scapular for Thérèse* 2003 (details)

While my research project builds on this previous work, it focuses on the idea of ritual action which is fundamental to the 'power' of ritual practice. The work attempts to imply action through creating objects that suggest ritual-like use. Some of the work takes the form of containers and wrapping cloths to suggest ritual containment while other work is accompanied by photographs which display the objects 'in use'.

Action is also explored in the work through the labour intensive use of stitching. Ritual action has been described as saturated, condensed, repetitive and rhythmic.³ All of

1 Lourdes water comes from a spring in Lourdes, France where the Virgin Mary is believed to have appeared. The water is believed to have healing powers.

2 An object consisting of two small pieces of cloth worn by some Catholics around the neck on a piece of cord under clothes, believed to protect the wearer.

3 Schechner, Richard, 1993, *The Future of Ritual: Writings, on Culture and Performance*, London: Routledge, p 228.

these adjectives could equally be applied to stitching. My work uses cloth and thread to explore the stitch as a metaphor for the intense focus and repetitive action of ritual.

Unlike the *Objects of Vertu* which were confined to references to Catholicism, my research project considers a wider range of traditions of ritual practice. It sits outside the parameters of any particular system of belief though it borrows conventions from existing ritual practices. Through visual means it offers new interpretations of existing rituals and related objects.

Through my research into ritual theory I have identified key features of ritual practice. In Chapter One I examine these features and the functions and nature of ritual objects which have informed my work. Chapter Two places the research project in the context of the work of other artists who use textiles as both material and content. I am particularly interested in the ritual-like qualities that many textile practices appear to have and how they contribute to the work of artists who use or make reference to these practices. Chapter Three reports on the development of the work and how the research was pursued.

Chapter One

Central concerns of the project

In order to investigate the visual representation of ritual, I have researched the phenomenon of ritual itself. This chapter outlines some of the features of ritual that inform my work. It also looks at the function and nature of a variety of existing ritual objects in an attempt to understand how certain visual and/or physical qualities can reinforce the ideas relating to ritual. As my project aimed to find metaphors with which to explore notions of ritual, the identification of the features of ritual provided me with points of reference to explore in my work.

The features of ritual

Ritual⁴ can be seen as an intricate web of actions that links people, places and things in accordance with particular belief systems or social structures. It has the effect of ordering the world, marking off certain things, space and time from others, and in doing so articulating value. Catherine Bell defines ritual as “a way of acting that is designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more quotidian, activities.”⁵

Writers on comparative religions like Mircea Eliade state that one of the crucial functions of ritual in religion is to separate that which is believed to be holy or sacred from the ordinary or profane world. According to Eliade, the sacred is in direct opposition to the profane and the two realms need to be carefully delineated through ritual.⁶ Ritual draws symbolic lines and boundaries around that which is sacred. Religious rituals can be seen to occupy liminal spaces between these two worlds and are often visualised as

4 Several writers point out that ritual should not be confused with 'routine' as the common usage of the word ritual might suggest when we say something is 'just a ritual' to infer a meaningless, pointless 'going through the motions' activity. For example, see Rothenbuhler, Eric W. 1998, *Ritual Communication: From Everyday Conversation to Mediated Ceremony*, Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, p 28.

5 Bell, Catherine, 1992, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p 74.

6 Eliade believes that this separation between the sacred and profane is a fundamental vehicle for the understanding of religion, see Eliade, Mircea, 1959, *The Sacred and the Profane: the Nature of Religion*, New York: Harcourt and Brace. It is also worth noting that while the opposite of the sacred is the profane, the opposite of religious is secular, the sacred and secular are not necessarily in opposition to one another.

doorways, and passageways through which to symbolically move from one space to the next.

It is important to note that while ritual is often associated with religious activity, it can also be secular—the raising of a national flag is an obvious example. It is sometimes difficult to draw a line between the two, as religious rituals have often been borrowed from secular rituals and vice versa. While secular ritual may not be seen to be usually concerned with the 'divine' or 'sacred', it is still concerned with a higher ideal, such as the concept of 'national pride' encouraged at Anzac day parades. Rituals like this allow its participants to feel a part of something larger than themselves, not unlike religious ritual. My project looks at concepts that can apply to rituals of all kinds and is not solely concerned with sacred ritual.

It is also concerned with the idea that ritual is a practice where physical action is not concerned with physical ends but rather with the 'real' power of symbols. Ritual "emphasises symbolic action over technically instrumental action..."⁷ This kind of reality is possible because ritual exists outside the logic of rationality, it is a-rational. It requires an entirely different mode of thought. "The symbols of a ritual are seriously effective. Above and beyond the ordinary ways that language use gets things done, the symbols of ritual are powerful."⁸ The idea of objects having symbolic functions is explored in my work through the creation of pieces such as the *Praying Hand Protectors* 2004-05 which are obviously impractical as physical protectors but allude to protection of a different kind.

Another of the key defining factors of ritual action is that it is to some degree predetermined action, that is, the ritual 'actor' is for the most part not the author of his/her actions, but acts out the ritual according to prescribed 'rules'. There is a 'correct' way for a ritual to be carried out, in order for it to be powerful. The power of the ritual

7 Rothenbuhler, Eric W. 1998, *Ritual Communication: From Everyday Conversation to Mediated Ceremony*, Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, preface p 1.

8 Ibid, p 16. 1981.

comes from the fact that the actor seems to be involved in something beyond him or herself.⁹

This has some correlation to the act of making where process is important. This is explored in my work through the use of stitching, which like ritual requires some rule making and following. It also involves participation in a tradition, of joining others in the practice of working cloth with needle and thread.

The function of ritual objects

Objects are often integral to ritual. They enable participants to play out symbolic actions, move through symbolic spaces and times, and to follow symbolic paths. They carry meaning that condenses the symbolism of the ritual. Eric Rothenbuhler describes the nature of ritual symbolism found in objects:

For the religious - condensed symbols explode with meaning when released in the ritual situation. Ordinary objects like flags, uniforms, crosses and vestments expand to fill their situations with meaning. They flood consciousness, reducing the significance of ego as it is washed over by what is experienced as the inevitable flow of meaning.....From the point of view of the participant, the condensed nature of the symbols of ritual means that they are super-saturated. These are symbols that contain more meaning than is normally possible.¹⁰

The following section outlines some of the ways in which ritual objects function.

Ritual objects as manuals

Ritual objects can act like manuals, tools or vehicles allowing participants to negotiate their way through the layers of ritual. They often visualise or provide 'maps' of imagined

⁹ For some cultures the production of art itself is ritualised and follows strict guidelines. For example the Yolgnu people of north-east Arnhem Land through their painting aim to faithfully reproduce sacred designs that have been passed down from the ancestors, and in doing so access their power. See Layton, Robert, *The Anthropology of Art*, New York: Columbia University Press, pp 90 – 91.

¹⁰ Rothenbuhler, Eric W. p 17.

spaces. A Tibetan Buddhist Mandala for example, in both two and three-dimensional forms, details complex palace-like structures that represent the cosmos.

In visual form, the mandala is a symmetrical and spatial arrangement of forms representing a palace and incorporating aspects of architecture such as walls and gateways, and the dominance of its symmetry communicates a sense of order and permanence.¹¹



Fig. 3: 17th Century Sino-Tibetan gilded mandala

Labyrinths¹² are also good examples of two-dimensional 'maps' of ritual action. They date back to ancient times and include the famous example of the Greek myth of the Minotaur held within a Cretan labyrinth.¹³ Theseus with the aid of Ariadne's golden thread was able to enter the labyrinth, slay the Minotaur and find his way out of the maze

11 Fisher, Robert E. 1997, *The Art of Tibet*, London: Thames and Hudson, p 70.

12 Eliade also links the labyrinth to thread, which he says "is sometimes conceived as a 'knot' which has to be 'untied'". See Eliade, Mircea, 1991, *Images and Symbols*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University press, p 116.

13 Graves, Robert, 1955, *The Greek Myths Vol 1 & 2*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd, Vol 1, p 339.

safely¹⁴. Ariadne acts as a guide through the ritual process and her golden thread literally becomes the path to follow—the path to safety.

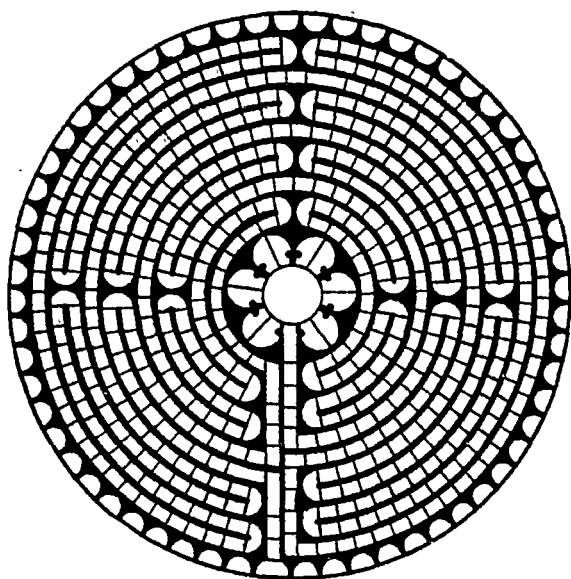


Fig. 4: Labyrinth in Chartres Cathedral

Traditionally, true labyrinths were not maze-like, that is they were not puzzles for the traveller to 'solve', rather they were made from a single meandering path that did not follow a logical or economic route but required an investment of endurance, time and patience from the traveller. Labyrinths have been found to be associated with rituals of several societies and can be seen literally as maps for ritual action. Examples of labyrinths include some found on church floors such as Chartres Cathedral in France. Labyrinths like this one contain no passageways but are simply lines marked on the floor. For centuries pilgrims have made their journey around this labyrinth on knee—pausing to pray at regular intervals. Labyrinths like this one were possibly a substitute for those who could not make the arduous journey of actual pilgrimages to the Holy Land or other relic-housing cathedrals dotted throughout Europe.

Using stitch, my work explores the use of paths in ritual. Paths appear in the work as simple lines of stitched thread that articulate the form of objects; thread stitched in labyrinthine patterns; and continuous ribbon that randomly meanders its course to form a coherent pattern.

14 Ibid.

Making the intangible, tangible

Ritual objects also have the task of making invisible aspects of ritual visible. Ritual is usually concerned with a spiritual world or a secular world of ideals which are essentially non-physical, immaterial things. However, the expression of engagement with these intangible elements through ritual, necessarily requires physical acts and physical objects.¹⁵

My work attempts to suggest intangible aspects of ritual such as prayers and intentions. The use of transparent organza for example, is intended to create objects which have a shadowy presence. Objects made from light diaphanous materials suggest that they are half-present, half-absent. Natural examples such as feathers¹⁶ have traditionally been associated with the spiritual or supernatural. A transparent object sits between two states. It has qualities of a solid object, it has volume. Glass for example is rigid, it can be touched and picked up. It has a constant size and shape. But at the same time, the object can be partially seen through as if it wasn't there. Transparency can act as a metaphor for things that might exist across two worlds - like ghosts or prayers.

Wonder

Visual qualities like transparency can also evoke a sense of wonder in ritual objects. Wonder, according to the philosopher Baruch Spinoza, following Descartes, for example, is a kind of paralysis, as a result of the viewer's inability to automatically comprehend the object of wonder and to incorporate it into any prior understanding of the world. He says,

15 Dominic Janes makes the point that even when ritual participants are consciously trying to remove the reliance on material things to aid ritual, there is always a physical component to it. For instance "*In a modern Quaker meeting room, chairs are placed in circles around a table on which there will be no more than a few Bibles and a small bunch of flowers in a vase. [However] the very act of sitting in silence for an hour in such circumstances is itself a specific material ritual.*" See Janes, Dominic, 1998, *God and Gold in Late Antiquity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p 1.

16 Stevens, Anthony, 1999, *Ariadne's Clue, A Guide to the Symbols of Humankind*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, p 259.

"the mind comes to a stand, because the particular concept in question has no connection with other concepts."¹⁷

This idea of wonder has links to the rational incomprehension that occurs in ritual. Stephen Greenblatt in his book *Marvelous Possessions* writes that:

*The expression of wonder stands for all that cannot be understood, that can scarcely be believed. It calls attention to the problem of credibility and at the same time insists upon the undeniability, the exigency of the experience.*¹⁸

If wonder implies an inability to completely comprehend the object then it also has the effect of veiling the object, making its imagined possibilities even greater than its known ones and giving it an aura of mystery. Like wonder, ritual involves a lack of comprehension. Some theorists argue that ritual actually requires a certain amount of 'unthinkingness' in order for ritual symbols to work. It can involve text or spoken word but ritual primarily communicates in a nonverbal way. It operates on an a-rational level; and requires its participants to suspend rational, logical assessment. Eric Rothenbuhler argues that in ritual "the working of condensation depends on faith, lack of attention or misdirection of attention. And it does not hold up well under cynical examination".¹⁹

The nature of ritual objects:

In my work I am concerned with identifying the qualities that contribute to the wondrous properties of items of ritual and to utilise these in the construction of my objects. The following section of this chapter outlines those features of ritual artefacts which are of particular relevance to my work.

17 Spinoza, Baruch, 1884, *Chief Works*, (trans) Elwes, R.H.M. London: George Bell & Sons, p ii, 174, cited in Greenblatt, Stephen J. 1991, *Marvelous Possessions: the Wonder of the New World*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

18 Greenblatt, Stephen, 1991, *Marvelous Possessions, The Wonder of the New World*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p 20.

19 Rothenbuhler, Eric W. p 17.

Careful Crafting

Many ritual objects are enhanced by qualities that good craftsmanship can bring to an object. A well-crafted object brings to the ritual connotations of attention, care, sincerity and devotion. A hand made object is unique and often displays the process or action of its making. Walter Benjamin suggests that art objects have an 'aura'. He uses the term 'cult value' to describe the 'sacred' quality that some objects are infused with. He says originally art objects were cult objects, that is, made to service ritual. As art has become secularised, Benjamin argues that it has retained its sense of 'aura' through its authenticity, its originality. In his essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'²⁰ Benjamin argues that this 'aura' is diminished when a work of art is reproduced. For him the physical time and place that an art object occupies is integral to its essence. An object has value because it exists in one place at one time and because it has a specific record that cannot be reproduced. He also gives value to work that keeps a 'natural distance from reality', that is, work that is made 'free of all equipment'. Authentic works of art, made with the bare eye and by hand, for Benjamin, have an aura that art made with technology such as photography and film, could never have.

In many rituals, this authenticity of objects is important. In some cultures the actual making of ritual objects is ritualised itself, that is, ritual action brings about the object such as the painting of a Buddha²¹ or the sprinkling of sand in a Navajo sand drawing.²² This kind of making must be carried out by the appropriate person/s following prescribed rules in order to be 'authentic' or correct. Other objects used in ritual which are either found or machine made, also undergo special rituals to change them from their ordinary state into objects fit to be used in ritual.

By carefully crafting my work I hope to create objects that have a strong human quality, that is, that display human activity with its suggestion of a lived life. The hand-crafting of my work is also intended to capture the action of making. My objects openly display the labour with which they were made. I explore the notion of objects embodying action through the use of stitching which has correlations with ritual action.

20 Benjamin, Walter, 1970, *Illuminations*, London: Jonathan Cape Ltd, pp 217 – 251.

21 Freedberg, David, 1989, *The Power of Images*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, p 84.

22 Newcomb, Franc, J. 1975, *Sandpaintings of the Navajo Shooting Chant*, New York: Dover Publications.

Ornamentation

Ornamentation can also play an important role in adding meaning to ritual objects. It could be argued that ornament in general has similarities to ritual itself. Like ritual, ornament is often considered to be superfluous to practical necessity.

Ornament can give an object a visual quality it might otherwise not have or it can accentuate an existing quality. It has the ability to emphasise or modify the 'action' of an object. Robert Nelson gives as an example of this, the ornamentation of Greek marble columns. He says:

*Their purpose is thus symbolic; but it is a symbolism of physical things, a hefting action, a graceful address to a huge burden and a delicate translation of a necessary function into a gesture of poise.*²³

Qualities like these which are so necessary for the expression of the power of the Greek temple, would not be represented by un-ornamented columns to the same degree. Ornament like this articulates the purpose of an object. It is often used to mark out boundaries and to emphasise different parts of an object, like the vertical columns and their bases and metopes, in order to stress their relationships which are crucial to meaning.

Jeffrey Hamburger in writing about the use of ornament in a Medieval church says that "each part of the church—nave, transept and choir is marked by a distinctive vocabulary, creating a hierarchy of spaces that become ever more elaborate as they approach the sanctuary."²⁴ The architectural ornament creates a layering of spaces that progressively move closer to the focal point of the altar which is emphasised by its 'condensation' of ornament.

The latin origins of the words ornament and decoration show them to have had moral as well as physical connotations. Our word 'decorous' comes from the same Latin root as

23 Nelson, Robert, 1993, *Ornament; An Essay Concerning the Meaning of Decorative Design*, Fitzroy, Australia: Craft Victoria, p 2.

24 Hamburger, Jeffrey, 1998, *The Visual and the Visionary*, New York: Zone Books, p 44.

'decoration'.²⁵ 'Decoration' has obvious ritual connotations when we consider the use of the word as a metaphor for dignity and value when a soldier is 'decorated' with a medal.

*...the Greek word for decoration (kosmos) which also means world or universe, hence obviously enough, cosmos.... the Iliad describes things done duly and correctly as 'according to kosmos.'*²⁶

Ritual too requires that things are done duly and correctly. These etymological meanings link ornamentation to ritual in that both can be seen as an ordering of the world and a setting of values.

Symbolic form

Ritual objects employ forms that emphasise ritual action. Domed cupolas act to enclose the space of a church, that is, to separate it from the outside world, yet at the same time it offers the space the possibility of symbolically transcending its physical limitations through its association with the heavens. As Arnheim puts it "as an overarching and surrounding hollow it [the cupola] forever preserves a spontaneous affinity with the natural sky and shares some of its principal expressive connotations."²⁷

A dome's perfectly round shape creates a clearly delineated space, a space held perfectly taut as if a force field is holding its edges equi-distance from its centre. It is all encompassing and has the appearance of strength, confidence, assurance, as well as lightness and infiniteness.

The dome is used extensively in sacred buildings today. The domed roof of a Catholic church—like the outer layer of a Russian doll—echoes the domed apse inside, which holds the domed tabernacle, which houses the domed ciborium, which in turn, contains the consecrated wafers, which are believed to be the body of Christ himself. Like a form

²⁵ Nelson, Robert, p 8.

²⁶ Nelson, Robert, p 9.

²⁷ Arnheim, Rudolf, 1977, *The Dynamics of Architectural Form*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, p 208.

of ritual action, the repetition of the overarching dome serves to extend a sense of separation from the space outside, emphasising and re-emphasising this hallowed space as sacred.



Fig. 5: Domed ceiling, St Peter's Basilica, Rome

Forms of containment and enclosure such as chalices, screens, wrapping cloths, fonts, all with close connection to domestic objects, imply action. During ritual, compartmentalised spaces are moved through, objects and materials are received, contained and dispensed. They allow symbolic acts based on fundamental human activities such as eating and drinking, being sheltered and clothed, washing, protecting oneself from enemies etc. to be played out in a ritual context.

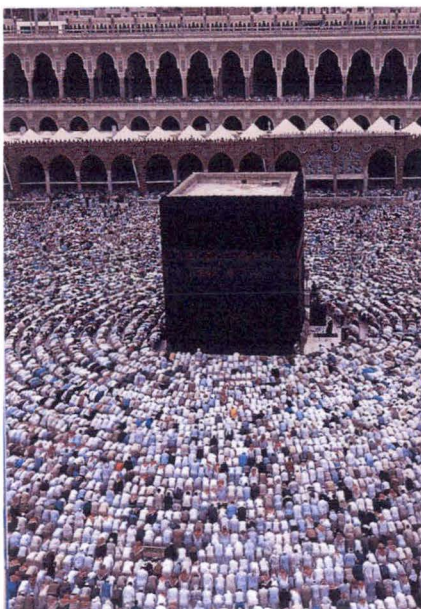


Fig. 6: View of the Kaaba at Mecca surrounded by worshippers

Simple, or sometimes elaborately decorated pieces of cloth used to wrap objects for storing or carrying, appear in all cultures in some form or another. They often play important roles in ritual. Examples include, the veil or 'kiswa'²⁸ that covers the Kaaba²⁹ in Mecca, shrouds for wrapping the dead; Korean Bojagi, Catalan farcell, and Japanese Furoshiki³⁰ for protecting and carrying everyday objects as well as those of value.

Despite its simple form a piece of cloth used to wrap has strong symbolic power, as it encloses, conceals, and protects. It provides a flexible container that can be adjusted according to its contents.

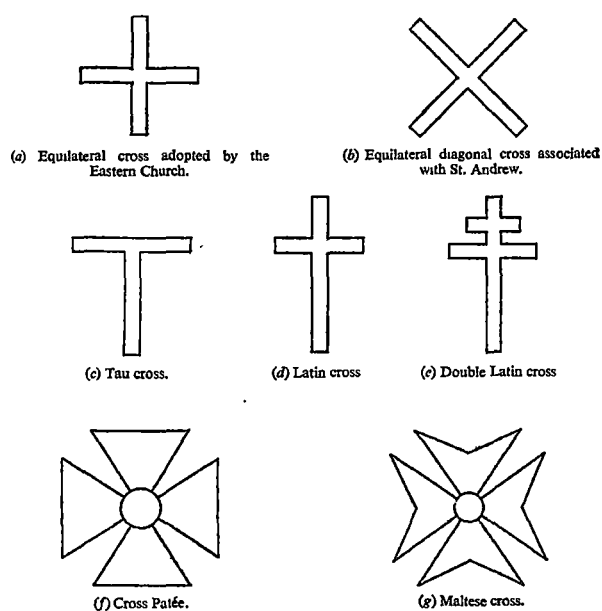


Fig. 7: Forms of the cross

Another form used to imply ritual action is the cross. On the surface, the cross might appear to have limited meaning. Due to its overuse it has come to be read as a code-like sign for the Christian church rather than as a multivalent symbol. However as it is both a visual sign and an action—Christians trace the shape of the cross with their hands as a blessing—it is an important example of form as ritual action. Crosses were and still are used extensively outside the Christian tradition. The Ancient Egyptians used crosses, the Tau cross T appears in the Old Testament and the swastika was used by the ancient

28 Bloom, Jonathan and Blair, Sheila, 1997, *Islamic Arts*, London. Phaidon Press, p 83.

29 The Kaaba is believed by Muslims to be the house that Abraham erected for God, and is the focal point for pilgrims. See *ibid*, p 16.

30 Trias i Valls, A. 2001, <http://lucy.ukc.ac.uk/csacpub/Mono19/index.html>, *Wrapped Gifts, Ritual Prestations and Social Obligations in Contemporary Japan*, CSAC Monographs Online, Canterbury: University of Kent.

Aryans among others³¹. The occurrence of the cross in several different societies might suggest that besides being a reference to the instrument of Jesus Christ's death, the formal qualities of the cross alone lend themselves to ritual. Rudolf Arnheim writes:

*...the cross form as such can symbolise the conjunction of opposites, the action of centrifugal or centripetal forces, the spreading of life or fire, crossroads, the relation of vertical striving to horizontal stability, and so on.*³²

A cross is not an arbitrary mark. Two straight lines that pass through one another mark off a particular point or place, a location. A cross is definite. It implies an action, a crossing, a marking, and a passing from one side to another. These attributes make the cross an important and useful ritual symbol.

Visual dynamics like those of the cross and dome are not exclusive to ritual objects; objects from all areas of life may exhibit strong visual dynamics. However, the dynamics of form take on heightened meaning in the overtly symbolic world of ritual. My work uses the dome, the container, the cross and the wrapping cloth to explore how these forms can suggest action and contribute to ritual.

Materials and Colours

Ritual objects also make use of the symbolic power of materials. In many societies animal parts such as bone and hide bring to the ritual the powerful attributes of the animals themselves such as stealth, strength or speed. Other rituals make use of rare and precious materials like gold and precious gems, silk cloth, oils and incense. Colour is also used to evoke powerful symbolic qualities. White is generally associated with purity and is often used in purification rites. Red with its associations of fire and blood is used to symbolise human life and vitality. The ability of gold and gems to catch the light and reflect movement, has the effect of animating objects. This ability, along with the qualities of preciousness that these rare materials suggest has been well utilised to create objects of significance used in ritual. Blue is also believed to have special powers.

31 Tyack, G. S. 1900, *The Cross in Ritual Architecture and Art*, London: William Andrews and Co, p 1.

32 Arnheim, Rudolf, 1997, p 209.

Until the industrial revolution the most common dye used to obtain blue cloth was indigo. Indigo requires skill and knowledge to achieve good colour. The processes of dyeing indigo have often been of a ritual nature. As Paine points out “The complexity and secrecy of the dyeing process, and the mystical way in which dyed cloth suddenly changes to blue on contact with the air, all conspire to surround indigo with ritual and superstition.”³³

Pure colours suggest a kind of essence of quality. Objects of a certain colour take on the qualities associated with it. My work uses white, red, blue (turquoise), gold and black to allude to ritual symbolism and practice.

Materials are also used in ritual for their associative value. Cloth and thread, for example, dominate a great variety of rituals due to their strong metaphorical inferences. Cloth is malleable and so can take on many forms and transformations. It can also be fragile, evoking the vulnerability of human beings. Thread can evoke ideas of connectedness. It symbolically binds us to each other, we speak of bloodlines, lifelines, storylines, everything that holds our world together is visualised as thread. Mythologies such as the three Fates of ancient Greek legend³⁴—Clotho the spinner, Lachesis the measurer, and Atropos, the cutter of the thread, give to the image of thread the importance of life or death. Thread has also often been associated with the divine creation of the universe, for example, the Scandinavian goddess Frigga spun sunrays and wove the clouds;³⁵ Egyptian Neith is always pictured with her heavenly shuttle;³⁶ and the Indians of Central South America connect the spider and weaving to the creator goddess, the Spider Woman who ‘weaves lightning, clouds, rainbows and sunrays into her fabric.’³⁷

33 Paine, Sheila, 2004, *Amulets; A World of Secret Powers, Charms and Magic*, London: Thames and Hudson, p 103.

34 Graves, Robert, p 48.

35 Ann, Martha and Imel, Dorothy Myers, 1993, *Goddesses in World Mythology; A Biographical Dictionary*, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p 405.

36 Patrick, Richard, 1972, *All Color Book of Egyptian Mythology*, London: Octopus Books Ltd, p 65.

37 Franke, Judith, A. 1999, ‘The Gift of Spider Woman’ in *The Living Museum*, Vol 61, No 2, Illinois: Illinois State Museum, p 7, www.museum.state.il.us/ismdepts/zoology/spiders/pdfs/giftofspiderwoman.pdf.

The metaphors of textiles enter our everyday language. We speak of unpicking, weaving, piecing, networking, and embroidering. Because of these associations cloth and thread are seen to have special amuletic powers. In many parts of the world thread is embroidered onto costume to protect the wearer.

Seams, hems, wrists and neck edges, where spirits are most likely to slip under clothes and cause disease, are stitched in multicoloured thread. The breast area is covered with embroidery, in Siberia with red triangles, while in Baluchistan slits to facilitate breastfeeding are decorated with coloured triangles that protect the mother's milk, the source of life for the baby.³⁸

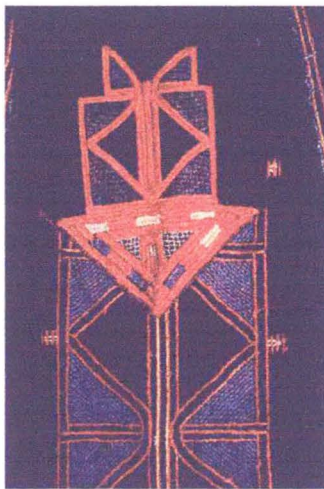


Fig. 8: Embroidery round the pocket of a coat, Aleppo, Syria

Romanian brides are encircled by a red ribbon;³⁹ as a symbol of their union, the bride and groom at an Indian wedding are tied together;⁴⁰ and in Russia red thread is tied onto those in a transitional phase of life—children, brides, or the newly deceased. Cloth and thread can symbolically act as a tie or binding that holds individuals in place at these important but potentially dangerous times in people's lives.

My use of white, red and blue cloth, white, gold, and red thread, and black ribbon makes reference to these kind of ritual practices. By doing so I aim to create objects that also suggest qualities of protection, fragility, purity, value, care and connectedness.

38 Paine, Sheila, p 36.

39 Ibid, p 104.

40 Sumner, Christina (Ed.), 1990, *A Material World*, Haymarket, NSW: Powerhouse Publishing, p 10.

In summary, my project seeks to create objects that reflect the separation from the ordinary that occurs in ritual, by evoking a sense of aura of the object. It does this through making visible the labour intensive nature of its making, the use of diaphanous materials and pure and luminous colours, and the use of forms suggestive of transition points or entrances such as domes. Fundamental to my aim to create objects which evoke the qualities of ritual has been the exploration of ways to suggest ritual action within still objects. In the following chapter, the work of a number of artists who have likewise sought to produce objects as embodiments of action will be discussed in order to contextualise my work within the field of contemporary art practice.

Chapter Two

The work in context

In order to contextualise my work I examined the work of artists who use cloth and/or thread and textile practices as content in their work. As one of the primary aims of the project was to consider ways in which to visually suggest ritual action in the work, I considered ways in which the work of other artists implied or embodied action in some way. Some of the work of the artists chosen also made direct reference to existing ritual practices. In the work of artists like Anne Brennan, Louiseann Zahra and Elsje King process is paramount. The process of making reveals itself within their work which can be read as the materialisation of careful, attentive labour, or as a tangible link to the maker. The work of Annette Messenger makes direct reference to ritual practice and suggests action through the creation of objects that the viewer can imagine using and Janine Antoni's work, like many ritual objects, makes use of the metaphoric value of cloth and thread with their associations of connectedness.

Artist and writer Anne Brennan has developed a practice that deals with memory and its relationship to stories and objects. One of the ways in which she considers this is through the idea that stitching can contain the presence of the maker and be a record of his or her actions. This has particular relevance to my project as I have also used the stitch as a materialisation of action. Brennan writes about her own experiences of learning to stitch on buttons as a child. "Most of all... I loved the stitches themselves: the way they looped through the tiny holes said something, told me a story about work, about the connection between an action and a result."⁴¹

In 1995 Brennan worked on a collaborative piece titled *Secure the Shadow* with Anne Ferran that took as its subject the female occupants of the Hyde Park Barracks in Sydney in the late 1800's. The lack of stories about the individual women led the artists to consider the scraps of clothing and sewing made by the women that had been found under floorboards as the only real tangible evidence from which to gain any sense of the women's lives. She describes these scraps of cloth as mute relics, and she writes:

⁴¹ Rowley, Sue (Ed), 1997, *Craft and Contemporary Theory*, St Leonards, NSW: Allen and Unwin, p 86.

...it was in this evidence of their labour, in our bodily understanding of the process of sewing that we might find some form of communication with them... A single row of stitches closely spaced, can be read as a code for a precise sequence of movements of the arm and hand.⁴²



Figs. 9 & 10: Anne Brennan and Anne Ferran, *Secure the Shadow* 1995

Running stitches follow each other one by one in an orderly way, they can therefore be followed to reveal the path of the thread and the hand of the stitcher. The simplicity of stitching means that the path can be clearly seen. It is, in a sense a record of action. For Brennan the stitches holding together the scraps of cloth that were worked by the women⁴³ over a century ago were “a substitute for their lost words”⁴⁴ and provided them with a ghostly presence and a connection with the women which had otherwise been lost. In my own work I have also explored how action might be recorded and made visible through the stitch, making a link between the material object and the intangible actions that produced it.

Janine Antoni is another artist who uses cloth and linearity as a metaphor for memory. *Moor* 2001 consists of a rope made from materials given to the artist by friends. Many of the materials came from people who had passed away. The choice of these materials

⁴² Rowley, Sue (Ed.), 1997, *Craft and Contemporary Theory*, pp 94 – 95.

⁴³ ‘...the women made their own clothing and did piecework and mending to earn income whilst in the barracks.’ Ibid, p 93.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p 95.

gives the work an emotive quality and links *Moor* to ritual practices that incorporate particular materials. In ritual this is usually done with the intention that the materials might offer a connection between people and/or things—the Victorian practice of wearing a locket holding a lock of hair from a deceased person is one example of this.⁴⁵ The practice of piecing together significant pieces of cloth and other materials is also found in Korean *Bojagi*⁴⁶. The emotions we associate with these pieces of fabric become transferred into the piece. The materials Antoni includes in *Moor*—cloth and other fibrous materials—are detailed in the label information accompanying the work:

'Meg's green pajama top', 'leather from Kevin's tightwire shoes', 'Raffia from the straw bag given to Pat at our wedding', 'Yellow kite string and red electrical wire from Paul's studio', 'Robin's father-in-law's Navy uniform', 'Fur from Jody's cat, Hudson', 'Melissa's polka dot Carmen Miranda dress', 'Plastic rain hats that Jenny found'.



Figs. 11 & 12: Janine Antoni, *Moor* 2001 (detail)

These details tell us that the materials had a previous life and belonged to people who are personally connected to the artist. They also reveal that they represent fragments of stories. They include articles that were used at important events in people's lives, and act as signallers of rites of passage. They are re-woven together to form what the artist calls a 'life line'. She also associates the rope with an umbilical cord.⁴⁷ Lifelines can be a thread reaching out and pulling someone to safety or they can also be a story, the path

45 Heaven, Judith, 1994, 'Mourning: traditions, symbols and meaning', *Artlink*, Vol 14, No 4, p 13.

46 Please see discussion in Chapter One, p 15.

47 Sollins, Susan, 2003, *Art: 21, Art in the Twenty-first Century*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Incorporated, p 82.

that one's life follows. The rope records parts of the artist's life and the people in her life.⁴⁸



Figs. 13 & 14: Janine Antoni, *Moor* 2001 (installation views)

This rope becomes a holder of memories and has a life of its own as Antoni installs it differently in different spaces and constantly adds to it so that it continues to grow over time. The stringing technique Antoni uses to make the rope involves twisting the parallel fibres in different directions so that they twist back on themselves locking onto each other creating a self-supporting structure. The act of twisting these fragments together to form a strong interlocking cord is also symbolic of unity and wholeness. This use of the physiology of textiles for symbolic value also occurs in my work. Like Antoni's use of interlocking strands, I use seamless, continuous thread, and transparency for their symbolic value.

Antoni uses performance to bring the viewer back to the making which is a crucial part of her work, but she also relies on the objects she works with to 'tell the story', that is, the processes she uses are implied in the visible form of the objects. The resulting objects of her work are often the residue of the process she has carried out. She describes her work as part "sculpture, performance, relic".⁴⁹ This has correlations to my project as I also intend my objects to reveal the processes with which they were made. There is also a performative element in my work, particularly with those where the 'ritual' objects are photographed in use.

⁴⁸ Sollins, Susan, 2003, p 82.

⁴⁹ Ibid, p 76.

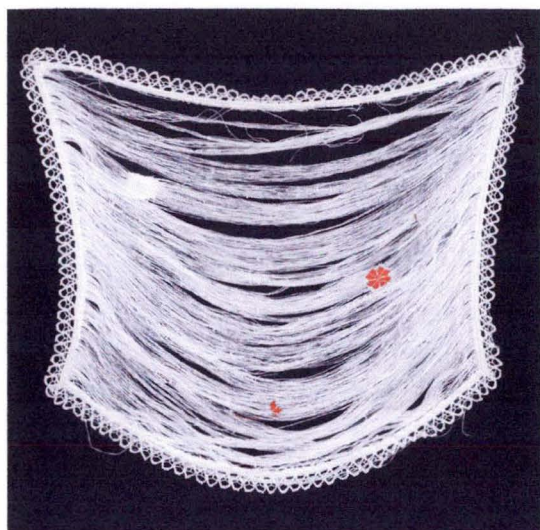


Fig. 15: Louiseann Zahra, *if he so intended* 2002

Louiseann Zahra is another artist whose work explores the presence of the maker within objects. In some of her recent work, she has employed found textiles to explore the processes of making and 'unmaking'. Through a laborious process of unpicking she has removed the weft from second-hand 19th century embroidered domestic textiles, leaving the parallel lines of the warp suspended within the borders of the cloth. The loose threads retain a slight zig-zag—the result of spending years held within the weft, weaving in and out of it—their previous state stamped in the memory of the thread. Also left untouched are the small embroidered sections of the work, so that these small motifs made by an unknown embroiderer remain intact as if caught in the warp. Many of the cloths used had been embroidered with initials giving them a sense of a personal history; they invite us to speculate on the previous life of the textiles.

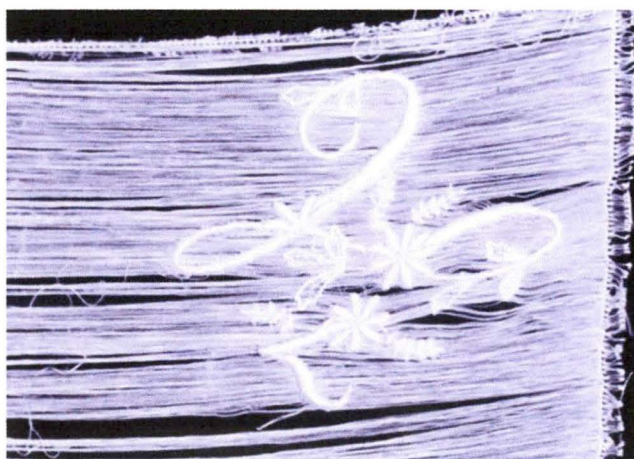


Fig. 16: Louiseann Zahra, *as for her keeping your secret* 2002 (detail)

This act of removing the weft from the cloths, which we understand to have been a careful, rather than hasty and destructive process, draws attention to the original making of the cloth—to the workings of the weave that we would probably otherwise not notice. This process of removal has a ritual element to it. It follows rules and reveals the act of both weaving and un-weaving that has occurred. This is a powerful process, as Zahra brings the cloth and its maker back to life, she uses the term 'reanimate'⁵⁰. Undoing the work, re-exposing it, is a way of remembering it and revealing the materiality of the cloth. In a sense she is retracing the original work of the weaver. She describes the unknown maker as her 'collaborator'⁵¹ and speaks of a shared 'making space'⁵². The cloths are transformed and have an importance restored to them that they would otherwise not have, as they had been relegated to op shops, forgotten and devalued. These works are of interest to my project because they reveal the cloths as holders of memory and memorialise the original making. They reveal the action of their making as well as the action of removal, becoming in a sense objects that exist in between these two acts. These works also relate to my own work as they evoke a rule-governed activity which pre-exists the maker, just as ritual practice transcends the individuals who participate in it.⁵³

Process is also important in the work of Elsje King. While her work is primarily a response to the natural environment—the Western Australian bush—it has strong references to cultural activity such as traditional textile techniques and the work itself strongly acknowledges its own making. Much of her work is made by carefully piecing together individual pieces of dyed cloth. As in a quilt, the pieces of these works act like compartments or steps, meticulously stitched together to create a whole. This process can be seen to have a correlation to ritual as it involves rule-based, ordered placement. King remarks on the similarity between textile practice and ritual: "Spinning, weaving and

50 Zahra, Louiseann, artist's statement in: Tamworth City Gallery, 2004, *A Matter of Time, 16th Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial*, catalogue, Tamworth, NSW: Tamworth City Gallery, p 36.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.

53 Much of Zahra's work deals directly with ritual, particularly those surrounding death.

stitching are meditative activities. They engage the whole person in the same way as many meditation techniques which are based around a simple repetitive act."⁵⁴



Fig. 17: Elsje King, *dust to dust* 1996 (detail)

The title of the work *dust to dust* 1996, makes direct reference to existing rituals associated with death and burial. The work is constructed from pieces of dyed silk arranged in a traditional quilting pattern called 'log cabin'. This also brings with it associations of security, the safety of home, safe refuge.⁵⁵ Quilting techniques have long had associations with ritual. Several cultures practice the superstitious piecing of auspicious fabrics such as the inclusion of a scrap of wedding dress in a quilt or the tying of scraps of significant textiles to a cradle to offer protection to the child. Quilts are also often made to commemorate an important event such as a birth or marriage. The large floating expanse of the two panels of *dust to dust*, also gives it shroud like qualities. And the installation of one in front of the other to create a contained space suggests a kind of wrapping. The repetitive geometric shapes which have become softened by the cloth suggest gentle reassurance.

54 O'Brien, Philippa, 1997, *Elsje King: Fragile Objects*, Perth, Western Australia: Craftwest Centre for Contemporary Craft, p 18.

55 King, Elsje, artist's statement in: Prospect Gallery, 1996, *Second Look, Prospect Textile Biennial*, catalogue, Nailsworth, South Australia: Prospect Gallery.



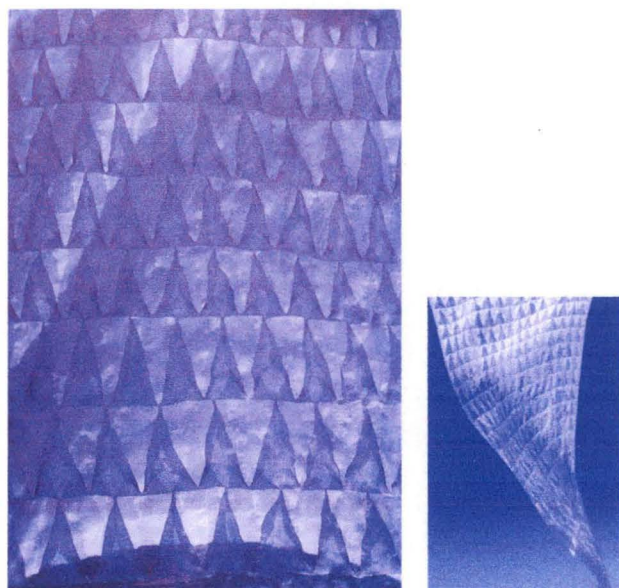
Fig. 18: Elsie King, *dust to dust* 1996

The flat cloths that King pieces together also reveal their previously three-dimensional state. Before entering the dye bath the cloth is wrapped, folded and twisted using shibori techniques. The ways in which the dye penetrates the cloth is determined by the ways in which it has been manipulated. Its folded form is preserved in the marks that the process leaves on the cloth. In this way the work embodies the processes with which it was made. Philippa O'Brien describes King's work:

*Its power comes largely from the aura of real experience that is entrenched in its material body, in the hours of work in its physical making. Its metaphoric life is magnified by the lingering sense of its closeness to the original experience.*⁵⁶

An artist working this way puts faith in the process itself which is not totally controllable. It is almost as if the process has a power of its own, analogous to the experience of participants in ritual. There is a balance between ordered control and faith in the life of the art making process, just as in ritual practices which all involve participants who perceive themselves as engaging with a power that is not generated by themselves whether it be a supernatural power or a social order. King's work is of interest to my project, in particular to my *Wrapping cloths* 2005 in which I attempted to allow the possibility of process to exert its own power in the outcome of the piece.

⁵⁶ O'Brien, Philippa, p 24.

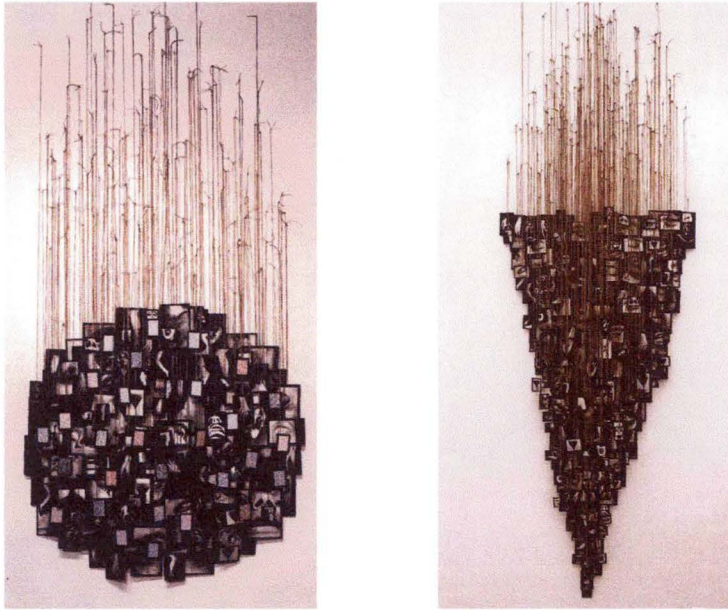


Figs. 19 & 20: Elsje King, *breath* 1996

King's use of different fabrics also extends the qualities suggested by her work. *Breath* 1996, is constructed from alternate triangles of white opaque and transparent silk. The lightness of this material suggests the lightness of breath, something immaterial made material. The purity of the white cloth gives a sense of clean, unpolluted air which is fit for breathing. In other work, King uses heavier cloth of wool which soaks up the dye creating a denser fabric that speaks of comfort, warmth and shelter. These kinds of qualities of material are also used in ritual objects for symbolic and evocative purposes. Like King's *breath*, I have used transparent fabric in my own work to evoke a sense of lightness of the object, and to suggest immateriality and a transcendence of the physicality of the object.

Another artist who uses a variety of media, including knitted and unravelled wool, knotted cord and stuffed fabric is Annette Messenger. Her work often makes reference to ritual practice. *My Vows* is a series based on the idea of 'ex voto' which is a common European ritual practice where small ornaments depicting body parts—hearts, arms, legs—are hung at shrines to strengthen the efficacy of prayers often relating to the particular body part shown. Small black and white photographs of body parts framed in black hang on the wall from long knotted threads. The mass of photographs are hung close together overlapping each other, forming an overall regular shape, such as a circle or a triangle. The shape is in a sense saturated with these images. Messenger says:

*In the end, everything becomes inextricably mixed up: arm, thigh, promise, encounter, argument, arm, leg, mouth, arm, promise return, suspicion, suspicion...Such superposition, accumulation, and overlap of image and word recall the successive strata of memory and time.*⁵⁷



Figs. 21 and 22: Annette Messager, *My Vows* 1988, and *My Vows* 1988-89

The order and repetition of the work reinforces the petitions that the objects make. In some of the works the photographs are interspersed with small framed text written in coloured pencil. The inclusion of handwritten text reiterates the idea of incantations. Both the text and the photographs, like ex-votos, act like material forms of spoken prayers.

In *The pilgrims' staffs* 1992, Messager has created imaginary ritual objects. Suspended from the ends of poles are cushions held horizontally by their four corners. The cushions create little hanging platforms like shrines on which the artist has placed strange fabric and wooden pencil objects which could be read as peculiar relics. The staffs allude to processions where precious objects or people are ceremoniously carried on cushions while at the same time they also suggest swags and the arduous ascetism of the pilgrim. The strong functional connotations of these staffs indicate action. We can imagine them being swung over a shoulder and carried off. The type of action suggested is ordered

⁵⁷ Grenier, Catherine, 2001, *Annette Messager*, Paris: Flammarion, p 114.

and careful, perhaps even requiring great skill on the part of the pilgrims to balance their precious cargo on their little cushions. Catherine Grenier in writing about Messenger's work says that objects like this "have to be handled mentally, they encourage dreaming and spur the imagination."⁵⁸ They invite the viewer to imagine using them, they suggest potential use but do not dictate precisely how they might function. This is an important aim of my work. Like Messenger's *The pilgrims' staffs* my *Praying Hand Protectors* 2004-05, *Petitions* 2006, *Piscinas* 2005 and *Wrapping cloths* 2005-06 are intended to suggest that they might be used in a ritual way. My work could also be seen to have correlations with the work of Messenger through its use of aspects of existing ritual practices and objects to invent new imaginary ones. In the following chapter I outline how I pursued this project of inventing imaginary ritual objects.

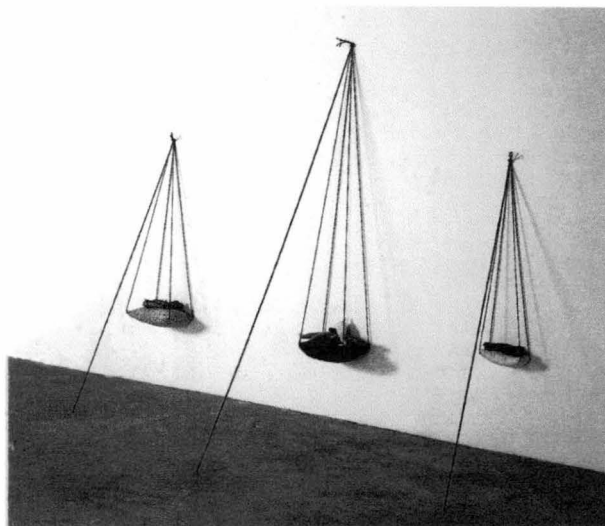


Fig. 23: Annette Messenger, *The pilgrims' staffs* 1992

58 Grenier, Catherine, 2001, p 142.

Chapter Three

How the research was pursued

A crucial aim of the project has been to explore ways in which to represent ritual action. One of the ways I attempted to do this was by creating objects that implied some kind of ritual use. Most ritual practices are based on fundamental human activities such as eating and drinking, being sheltered and clothed, washing, protecting oneself from enemies etc. Ritual elaborates on and/or condenses these basic human acts translating them into symbolic acts. The Jewish Shabbat for example is based on sharing a meal, Muslims, among others, practice ritual washing, and a Catholic nun ritualises the process of dressing in the habit⁵⁹. Much of my work was made as a response to these kinds of ritual acts.

Initially I considered using a wide range of materials to carry out this research into the power of ritual objects. I made preliminary experiments with beads and wax and collected materials such as prayer cards. However, as the idea of ritual as action became more important to the project in order to develop ways in which to explore this, I chose to limit myself to cloth and thread. The use of cloth also allowed me to draw on a particular way of experiencing the world that we share through our daily contact with cloth.

Textiles have a close connection to our everyday lives. We have an intimate tactile knowledge of textiles and their various qualities from our interaction with cloth on a daily basis. Textiles are ubiquitous. From birth to death our bodies come in contact with a series of cloths; cloths that wrap, shelter, screen, mop, wash, wipe, dry, shield, cover, tie, bind, warm, comfort, provide barriers, provide refuge, reveal, restrain, protect, and contain. The qualities of cloth are varied and vast; it can be soft or rough, weightless or heavy, opaque or transparent, extravagant or humble, stiff or flowing, cool or warm, densely or loosely woven, felted, embellished, coloured, stressed and mended. We acquire knowledge and understanding of the world through our experiences with cloth. Some of my strongest memories from childhood are of textiles—the dryness of terry-

⁵⁹ Kuhns, Elizabeth, 2003, *The Habit: A History of the Clothing of Catholic Nuns*, New York: Doubleday, p 17

towelling; poking fingers through loosely crocheted wool; the weight of thick woollen blankets; the roughness of hessian covered pin-boards; the magic of a white tulle veil used to dress up; and the sheen of the blue brocade rayon curtains of my bedroom and the blue glow they gave the entire room. Cloth has a memory; it reveals its wear and tear through its creases, fading and holes. We are able to read textiles in relation to our own experiences of them in everyday life.

A connection between material, process and form became crucial to the work and by limiting my materials I hoped also to develop my knowledge of this particular way of working. I was interested in the ability of thread to shape cloth, that is, in the way that cloth could be manipulated through controlling the direction and tension of the stitching alone. Stitching is used in traditional tailoring to gently mould the fabric into shape. These techniques of pulling thread through cloth with a needle allowed the process of making to remain visible. My investigation was one that considered various qualities of ritual action—condensed, repetitive, ordered, exaggerated, rhythmic and saturated. These are all qualities that I could explore visually through stitching. The stitch therefore became a metaphor for ritual action in the work.

The *Piscina* series

As a starting point for my *Piscina* 2005 series I considered the piscinas containing holy water, fixed to the wall at the entrance to churches for those who enter to bless themselves with. Contained within the liminal space between outside and inside, these piscinas help the believer to make the transition between the two spaces. By dipping a hand into these dishes and taking a small amount of the water⁶⁰ and making the sign of the cross with it, the believer readies him or her-self to enter into a holy place. The containers I have made were designed to suggest this type of action. *Piscina 1* is heavily stitched in fluid watery lines. Like *Piscina 4* it creates a small convex shape in its top to mimic a shallow dish inviting fingers to dip. Rudolf Arnheim believes that the visual dynamics of an object such as a vessel suggest function. He says:

⁶⁰ The water is believed to have purifying properties due to having been blessed.

*Vessels receive, contain and dispense. Roundness is a visual dynamic quality which expresses containing. The convexity of the boundary gathers the contents of the vessel around the center.*⁶¹

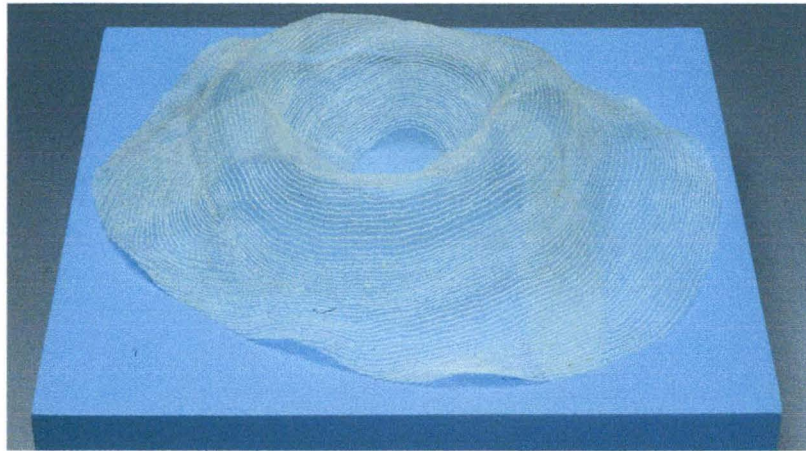
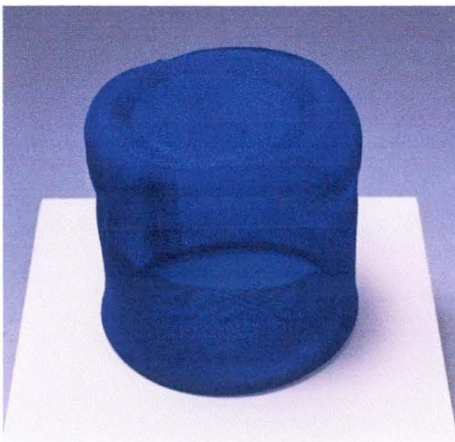


Fig. 24: Augustus W. N. Pugin, St Paul's church, Oatlands, piscina in chancel south wall

Fig. 25: Rosemary O'Rourke, *Piscina 1* 2005

In the *Piscina* 2005 series I was interested in these kind of visual dynamics. *Piscina 2* also creates a small shallow contained area representing the passive holding of water, which might allow its dispensing not through pouring, but through an action like dipping one's hand. However this container is also held inside another taller form which prevents immediate access. This suggests that it is designed to hold something valuable, but something available only through specialised knowledge or to a select, properly initiated few.



Figs. 26 & 27: Rosemary O'Rourke, *Piscina 4* 2005 and *Piscina 2* 2005

⁶¹ Arnheim, Rudolf, 1977, p 260.



Fig. 28: Rosemary O'Rourke, *Piscina 3* 2005

Piscina 3 is also a shallow container that cannot be reached. It is made up of a squat cylinder with a concave space forming a container. This is made from pieces of white cloth stitched together resembling stonework.⁶² Over this concave space curves a convex surface of red organza. The organza allows the viewer to see the 'water' container below but not reach it. It plays with spaces that invite action and prevent it. This was an attempt to create an object that had characteristics found in ritual which place areas and objects off limits, which can only be approached according to strict rules.

My Heart is a House

The domed containers *My Heart is a House 1* and *2*, 2005, provide a different kind of containment. Rather than offer their contents, they shield them. Containers like this are not designed to hold liquid but to provide a cover for other objects. They do not dispense their contents but provide an 'aura' around what they hold. The shape of the dome is understood to be a reference to the heavens. Even in small form viewed from outside, as in these pieces, it still retains some of its mystical qualities—not through sheer physical presence and spectacle as we might experience looking up into a Cathedral dome, but in the condensed form of the miniature. Susan Stewart suggests that the miniature has the capacity to create an 'other' time. She says,

⁶² The concave form was achieved using a small balloon to draw up shapes that when stitched together would form a spherical curve.

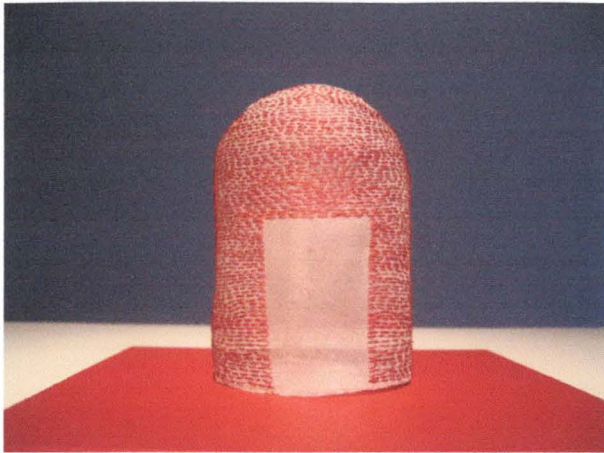


Fig. 29: Rosemary O'Rourke, *My Heart is a House* 1 2005

*The reduction in scale which the miniature presents skews the time and space relations of the everyday life world, and as an object consumed, the miniature finds its "use value" transformed into the infinite time of reverie.*⁶³

Miniaturisation in a sense creates a more condensed version of the world, a world that no longer has bearing to reality and that has its own inward infinity. A world too small to physically enter can only be known visually and is moved through only in our imagination.

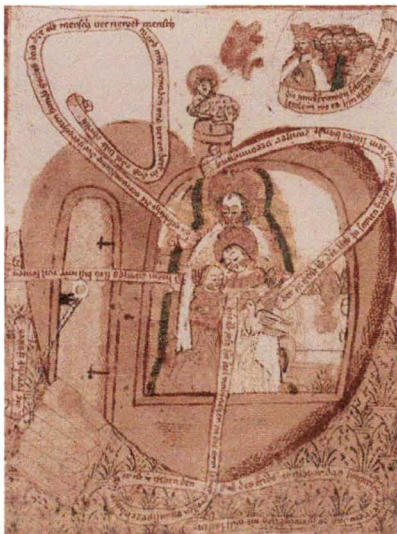
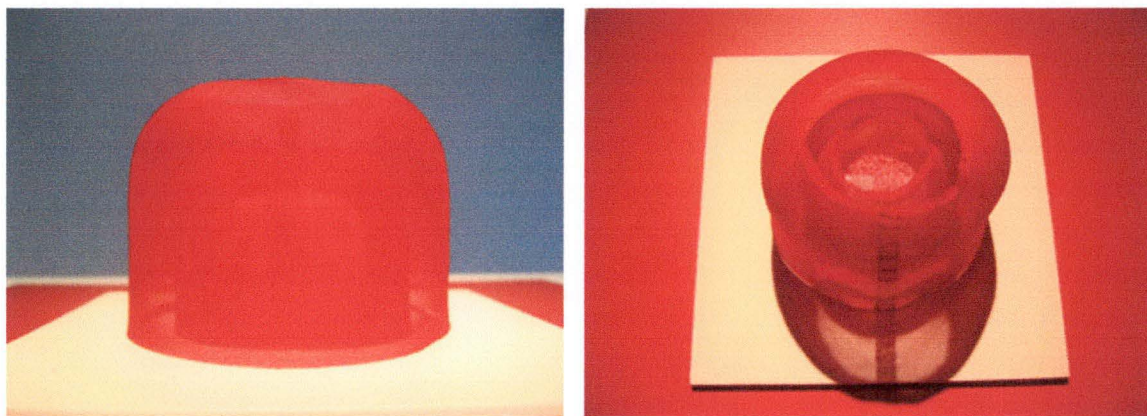


Fig. 30: 19th century German devotional drawing; *The Heart as a House*

⁶³ Stewart, Susan, 1993, *On Longing; Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, London: Duke University Press, p 65.

These pieces were developed at a time when I was reading Jeffrey Hamburger's book *Nuns as Artists*.⁶⁴ I thought that his research into the private artistic life of medieval German nuns who made drawings for their own private devotion might offer some insight into how objects contribute to ritual. While this fascinating book provided good background to the project I did not incorporate many of its ideas in my work as the project became focussed on ritual action in objects, to the exclusion of images used in ritual. I was however struck by the nuns' use of the image of a heart as a house to represent the dwelling of the soul. The house-like objects that appear in their drawings as the containers of their own souls provided me with an image on which to base my own red domed containers.



Figs. 31 & 32: Rosemary O'Rourke, *My Heart is a House 2* 2005 views from front and top

The multiple domes of *My Heart is a House 2* offer in miniature form, layers to be moved through visually. These layers, like a repeated petition, exaggerate the act of containment that they perform, reiterating it, emphasising its intent.

Technical development

The technical development of the work played an important part in the project as much of the research took place with needle and thread at the worktable. The process of making was one of experimentation and then response to technical developments. In

⁶⁴ Hamburger, Jeffrey, 1997, *Nuns as Artists: the Visual Culture of a Medieval Convent*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

this way the process of making determined the direction of the work as much as other conceptual considerations.

The *Piscina* 2005 and *My Heart is a House* 2005 series are made from organza cloth and thread. By cutting the cloth on the bias, that is, so that the warp and weft run diagonally around the form rather than horizontally and vertically, it is possible to manipulate the cylindrical forms. The domed shapes, for example are made by running a line of stitching around the top of a cylinder which is then pulled in carefully to create the form. This creates a dome with an open oculus, which I used in *My Heart is a House* 2. To create the covered dome of *My Heart is a House* 1 after inserting a circle of organza to cover the opening, I covered the whole form in parallel lines of stitching. This was quite an arduous task as the organza needs to be handled very carefully when working as it dents and pulls out of shape very easily.

After making the initial pieces with white organza I was keen to introduce colour into the work to increase the range of symbolic references. In order to do this I dyed the silk organza with procion dyes. By making a paste with the dye and hand-painting the cloth I was able to achieve rich strong colours that would have been impossible to achieve with bath dyeing. The strong colours give the organza forms a luminosity due to the contrast between the weaker colour of the transparent organza as it appears when looking straight through it and the intensity of colour achieved when looking through it at an angle as it goes around the cylindrical forms.

The Praying Hand Protectors

The development of the *Praying Hand Protector* 2004-05 series was significant to the project as it brought together a number of my concerns. Through the invention of these imaginary ritual objects, I was able to explore ways in which to visually imply ritual action, suggest talismanic protection, emphasise ritual gesture and to imply action through the use of the photograph to 'perform' the work.

The repetitive act of stitching, that I had been using in the container series seemed to me a way of suggesting repetitive, prescribed and careful ritual action—like an incantation or a prayer said over and over. The *Praying Hand Protectors* were

constructed simply, using running stitch with sewing thread on organza. I was interested in the idea of each small repetitive stitch acting like a visible unit of time or step in the ritual process. I came to see the unembellished running stitch as a direct visualisation of the process of running a needle and thread through cloth. It reveals an investment of time in the object and suggests a visible wearing, like the effects of time and use on an object. The stitched lines are continuous, the transparency of the organza allows the stitches to be read as lines that trace the form of the object, reiterating it, wrapping and enclosing it. The stitched lines almost 'reassure' the object which is rather insubstantial in itself.

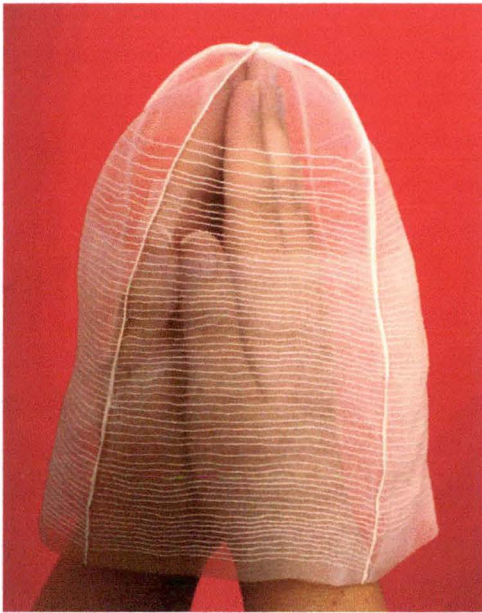


Fig. 33: Rosemary O'Rourke, *Praying Hand Protector 1* 2004

The use of this fragile material also emphasises another aspect of ritual. During making, the thin fabric spends hours in my hands being turned and punctured by the needle—the organza is almost distressed due to this over-handling. The resulting flimsy object offers no physical protection to the hands that it is designed to enclose. The sheer impracticality of the objects suggest that they are not intended to protect literally, but symbolically, just as ritual action is not directed towards physical outcomes but symbolic ones.⁶⁵ The heavily stitched *Praying Hand Protectors* were an attempt to suggest the

⁶⁵ In using the word 'symbolic' I do not intend to imply that these outcomes are not perceived as real for the participant.

presence of a protective power that some ritual objects are believed to have, which is gained not through physical strength but through ritual investment—thoughts, action, words, and intentions.

The use of a photograph to accompany an object gives an artist the opportunity to develop the context in which the object is to be seen. The display of an object held or worn on the body allows for an exploration of the relationship between that object and the body or its parts. It brings the object directly into a relationship with human activity and demonstrates the object 'in the world' to some degree, even if in a rather staged and static way. The use of the photograph in the *Praying Hand Protectors* 2004-05 and the *Petition* 2006 series (to be discussed in more detail later) allowed me to create objects that demonstrate a relationship with the hands, the *Petitions* for example echo the shape of cupped open hands. The photographs meant that I could 'perform' the work, inventing and then demonstrating the objects' 'imaginary' use.



Fig. 34: Rosemary O'Rourke, *Praying Hand Protector 2* 2004

The objects themselves of the *Praying Hand Protectors* as well as the 'performance' of their use also emphasise the importance of ritual gesture, in this case the bringing of one's hands together in the act of prayer. Activities that produce nothing or gain no material ends can be seen to symbolise the rejection of the material world. To place one's hands together is to abandon daily tasks, to disengage from the physical world. The form of the two hands together form a wedge pointing to the heavens like a steeple, temple, or tent. In this position, the hands pressing against each other are immobilised,

still. E.H. Gombrich tells us that the gesture of praying with folded hands was originally a sign of surrender, “delivering oneself more or less ‘bound hand and foot’, or at least ready to be bound without offering resistance”.⁶⁶ The creation of an object that covers these hands isolates and protects them, enclosing them in their own special space. The dome of *Praying Hand Protector 1* for example encloses the hands while its stitching, like ritual action, reaffirms this encircling protection.

In *Praying Hand Protector 2*, I set about following a rule of progression in the stitching. The decorative motif provided a centre, a point with which to begin, and an ordered, considered, designed area. I wanted to set up rules to follow with the stitching, just as in a ritual there are correct procedures to follow. Like ritual, stitching has ‘rules’ too. The rule of progression in this piece was simply to spiral around the central motif, stitching just outside the previous line of the spiral, so as to encase the domed object.

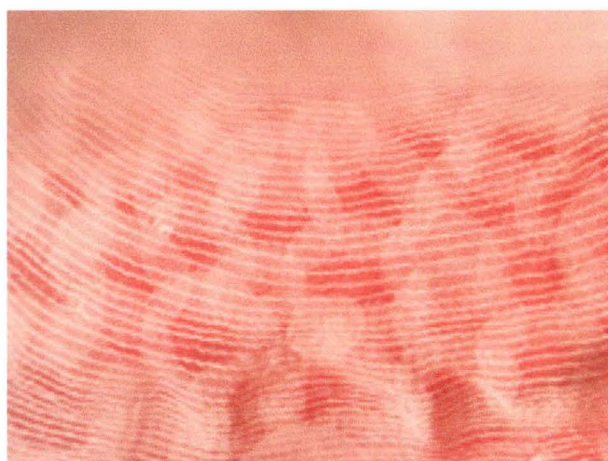


Fig. 35: Rosemary O'Rourke, *Praying Hand Protector 3* 2004 (detail)

Praying Hand Protector 3 introduced another symbol to the work. It is made up of hundreds of small circles of organza that are held together only by the spiralling parallel lines of stitching. Unlike the previous two pieces, there is no base cloth that has been cut to form a dome and stitched together with seams. To think of it in reverse, the stitching lines almost form a kind of impossible cloth, held in place by the circles, so that it is seamless. Traditionally seams of garments have been believed to be a point of weakness or to give the object a lack of wholeness. Superstitions have been attached to

⁶⁶ Gombrich, E. H. 1982, *The Image and the Eye*, Oxford: Phaidon Press Ltd, pp 71 – 73.

this physiology. The seams of Eastern European traditional costume for example were often embroidered to provide extra symbolic protection along these vulnerable lines to ward off devils. Garments made without seams were traditionally highly valued. The Bible uses the seamless shirt of Christ as a symbol of his wholeness. John's Gospel tells us that Christ was wearing a seamless garment when his clothes were removed at the crucifixion. Rather than tear the garment the soldiers who claimed it, tossed coins for it.⁶⁷ Muslims wear a similar white seamless garment when making a pilgrimage to Mecca.

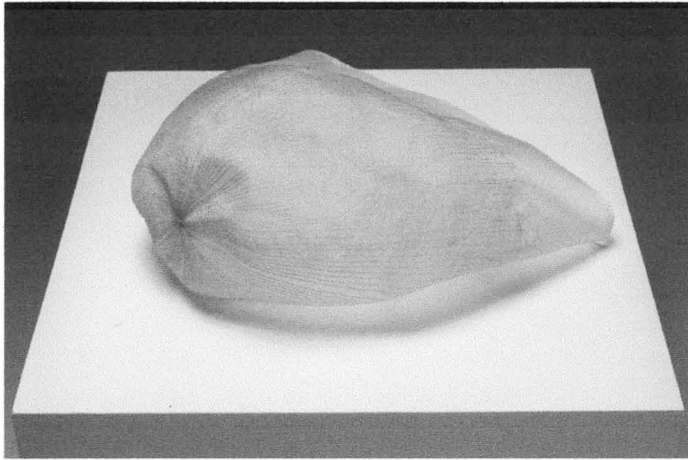


Fig. 36: Rosemary O'Rourke, *Praying Hand Protector 4* 2005

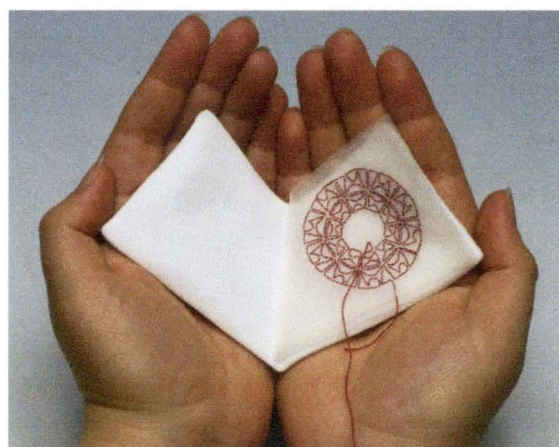
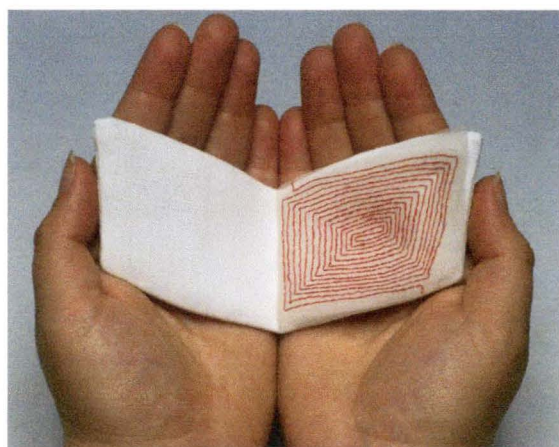
I also used stitching in the work to mark and emphasise different parts of the objects to explore the importance of ritual at the entrances and exits to sacred spaces. The stitching of *Praying Hand Protector 4*, for example, condenses as it overlaps around the top of its dome, which symbolises the furthest point away from the everyday world. I chose coloured thread for this piece, so that this condensation occurs in colour as well as in volume of thread. The stitching also condenses around the bottom of the dome, which like the periphery of sacred spaces is dangerously close to the ordinary outside world. These marginal areas are in need of more careful attention to ensure that the boundary between the sacred and profane is not breached. This extra attention is analogous to special bridging rituals⁶⁸ which are performed at the beginning and end of ritual events.

⁶⁷ John 19:23-24, 2000, *King James Quick Reference Bible*, Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, p 139.

⁶⁸ Rooijakkers, Gerard, in Holsbeke, M. (Ed.), 1996, *The Object as Mediator: on the Transcendental Meaning of Art in Traditional Culture*, Antwerp: Etnografisch Museum, p 23.

The *Petition* series

The book as an object lends itself to ritual. It is made up of compartments, pages that can be moved through step by step. Pages carry text—black marks on a white field, which open up onto the infinite world of the written word. Text can be ornamented—as in the case of illuminated manuscripts—as if the single letters themselves contain special powers that can be strengthened through their embellishment. A book is held in the hands, held and read, it provides a quiet intimacy where the hand turning the page brings the reader back to their situation in the world. It also focuses the reader on their task, as he or she cannot attend to anything else while reading, which is an all-consuming activity.



Figs. 37 & 38: Rosemary O'Rourke, *Petition 1* 2006 and *Petition 2* 2006

The *Petitions* 2006 are prayer-book-like objects and open like butterflies in the hand. I was also thinking about other ritual 'opening' objects like shrines or religious triptychs and opening figurines which can reveal their contents but also hide them away. The small scale of the *Petitions* focuses the viewer or imaginary user on a meditative task. They draw attention to the gesture of the hands. Gesture adds an important layer to ritual. As the participant uses his or her own body he or she is engaged with it physically as well as mentally. Ritual does not just involve thought but physical action as well. To cup one's hands together to hold an object is a gesture of care and protection towards a valued object. The *Petitions* are each embellished with a single line of thread. The thread follows the form of some of the books and resembles traditional labyrinth

designs⁶⁹. They can also be seen as versions of miniature labyrinths that have also been found on the walls of churches to be traced by hand. They offer the user portable, personal versions of these, just as rosary beads held in the hands, mark the number of prayers and the stages of the rosary. These books were intended to suggest a miniature world opening up in the palm of one's hand.

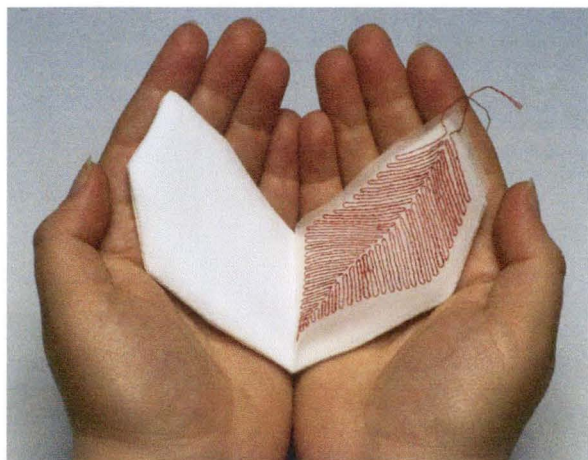


Fig. 39: Rosemary O'Rourke, *Petition 3* 2006

White cloths embroidered with red thread have a basis in Eastern European ritual traditions and are typical of special domestic cloths. My choice of red thread on white linen in the *Petitions* series also makes reference to these kinds of traditions. The vibrant colour of the red thread contrasts with the crisp whiteness of the cloth suggesting both the vitality of blood with its life-giving (or destroying) qualities as well as the purity of white and its formal ordered qualities. For an object to remain white it must be kept separate from contaminants and is therefore symbolic of the kind of separation of the sacred from the profane that occurs in ritual.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Please see discussion in Chapter One, pp 7 – 8.

⁷⁰ The use of white and red together in Japanese traditions is also of symbolic significance. See Trias i Valls, A. 2001.



Fig. 40: Embroidered white linen marriage shirt marked with the word 'friendship' in red thread, Portugal

Fig. 41: Ritual towel, Russia

The *Wrapping cloths*

My experiments with how to make various forms in cloth led me to think about the relationship between the flat two-dimensional shape and the three-dimensional form. I also began to see this gap between the two and three-dimensional as offering a visual device to suggest the potential that a 'flat' object has, to become a three-dimensional form with the ability to enclose, wrap, cover or hold. In this way, I felt a flat shape might be able to suggest potential action.



Fig. 42: Rosemary O'Rourke, *Wrapping cloth 1, 2 and 3* 2005-06

For the *Wrapping cloth* 2005-06 series I considered various ways in which to visually represent this act of wrapping. I looked at a variety of three-dimensional forms represented in two-dimensions such as designs for flat-pack boxes, dressmaking patterns, church plans that articulate vaulted ceilings, as well as the Japanese tradition of shibori dyeing—a technique that involves the folding and stitching of cloth and subsequent dyeing, resulting in dazzling patterns that reflect their previously folded and gathered state.

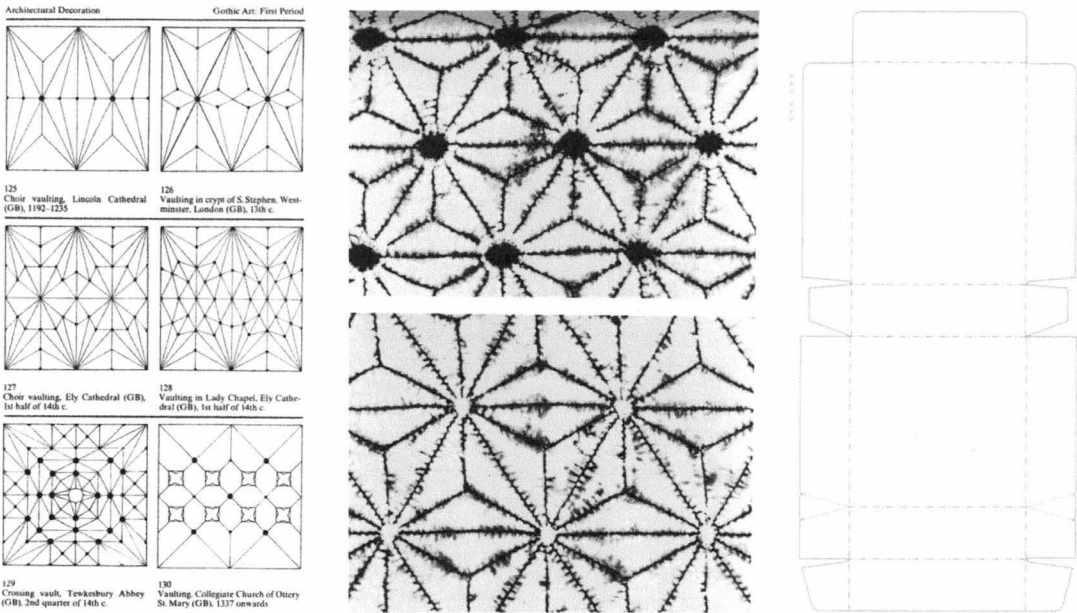


Fig. 43: Examples of Gothic church vaulting: 1100–1500 A.D. Great Britain

Fig. 44: White shadow (shirokage shibori), two types of hemp leaf pattern (asa-no-ha)

Fig. 45: Denison, E and Cawthray, R, Design for flip top carton with tear-away entry

At this stage I was also exploring the idea of ritual gesture and how I might elaborate on this within the work using the stitched mark. A stitch reveals the action or gesture of its own making. I had used running stitch in the previous work to suggest ritualised gesture through repetition and directional lines that encircled the organza objects, but I was also looking at more specific ritual actions like bowing (Japanese), genuflecting (Catholic), prostrating (Muslim) and making the sign of the cross (Christian). Because the sign of the cross is made by moving the hands across the body or in some cases tracing a small cross with the thumb, it appealed to me in relation to the scale of the work and the stitching. Initially I had not wished the work to be read exclusively as referencing

Christian ritual however as I researched the historical use of the cross I found that it had much wider implications.⁷¹

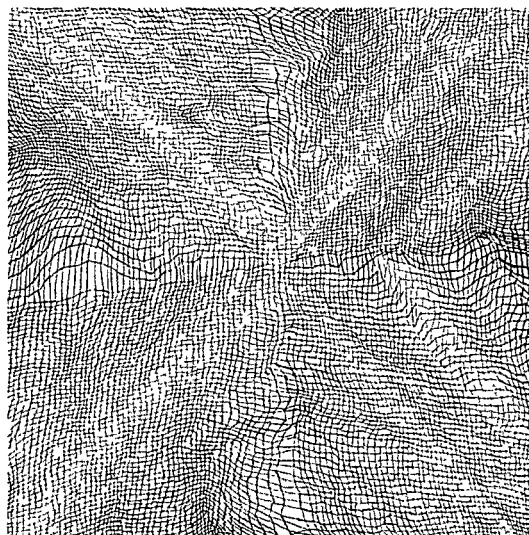


Fig. 46: Rosemary O'Rourke, *Preliminary drawing for wrapping cloths* 2005

My experiments with crosses resulted in the three *Wrapping cloths*. I made drawings in preparation for the stitched pieces, made up of hundreds of crosses, quickly executed in rows mimicking the repetitive and prescribed nature of ritual action. As I worked around the square page, filling the whole area with adjoining rows of crosses, the hand-drawn marks gradually moved off course some clumping together while others spread out. In an attempt to allow the possibility of the process to exert its own power rather than having total control over the piece, I set myself a rule of progression. I worked around the paper marking it with crosses each one joining up with the previous one, I worked quickly without measuring or using any technique to gauge size or angle of lines. The resulting pattern that occurs undulates and gives the impression of cloth that has been folded and crumpled as it might if it had been used to wrap another object. In this way the drawings began to do what I had envisioned the *Wrapping cloths* to do, not through the deliberate representation of folded cloth, but through the process itself.

A visual condensation of action occurs within the *Wrapping cloths* as the thousands of small marks indicating movements or gestures are incorporated into the larger overall ability of the cloth to wrap. The repeated stitches were intended to suggest an object

71 Please see discussion in Chapter One, pp 15 – 16.

which had repeatedly been worked, folded, wrapped. The area of crosses also form a delicate netting that shares qualities with the transparency of the organza pieces, and brings to the work connotations of safety-nets which are good metaphors for ritual with their reassurance and structure.

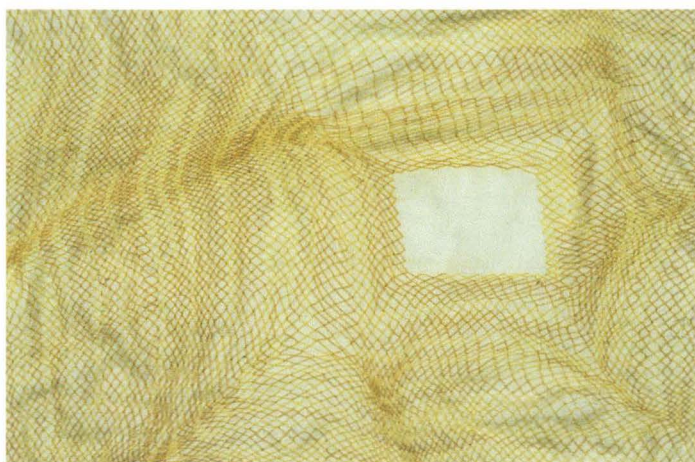


Fig. 47: Rosemary O'Rourke, *Wrapping cloth 1* 2005 (detail)

Ribbon wrapping cloth

The last piece completed for the project consists entirely of a continuous strand of black ribbon. This piece was an extension of the *Wrapping cloths* where the cloth becomes reduced to the thread itself, in this case thick ribbon. Like a path or thread to be followed the ribbon meanders its way across the table seemingly randomly but in its dense layering reveals a coherent pattern. "Black, with its associations of night, absence of light and life"⁷² and its suggestions of humility has traditionally been an important colour for rituals of mourning. Victorian widows wore black, and used mourning handkerchiefs and stationery of plain white designs bordered in black. It is common today to see sportsmen wearing black armbands on the field to commemorate a death. *Ribbon wrapping cloth* 2006 makes reference to these kinds of ritual practices. Its black ribbon forms a dense lacy cloth, it is both single thread and whole cloth, and its scale offers a refuge for the human body. The ribbon folds back on itself many times, like ritual its path is made up of many small steps. I sourced the pattern—and then manipulated it—from a design of a church ceiling. Its two dimensional lines are also the lines of the three dimensional

⁷² Heaven, Judith, 1994, 'Mourning: traditions, symbols and meaning', *Artlink*, Vol 14, No 4, p 13.

vaulted space of a church ceiling. My intention for this piece was to suggest that the overlapping thread could become a cloth which in turn has the potential to become a container, wrapping and reassuring what it contains. I intended the visual lines the ribbon makes to appear quite animated as if it was being wound around its invisible object, tracing out imaginary ritual movement.

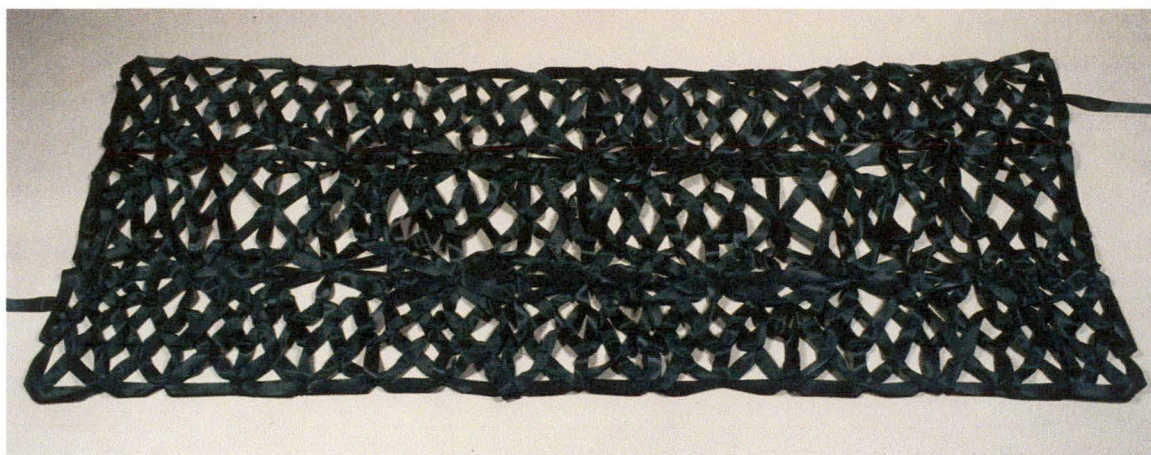


Fig. 48: Rosemary O'Rourke, *Ribbon wrapping cloth* 2006

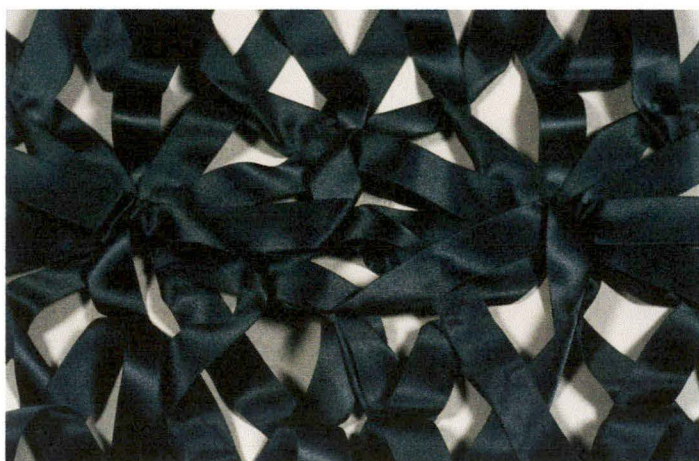


Fig. 49: Rosemary O'Rourke, *Ribbon wrapping cloth* 2006 (detail)

Conclusion

The project developed from my own experiences of ritual practice and my responses to ritual objects. Much of the work was made quite intuitively, as I attempted to make objects that have qualities that, like many ritual objects give them an 'aura' that cannot easily be described. At the same time my research into ritual theory gave my project a theoretical basis, as many of the ideas expressed by theorists, reinforced my own more intuitive responses to ritual.

By limiting the processes I used, to stitching and manipulating cloth and thread I was able to develop a way of working that I hoped would suggest a careful, attentive engagement with materials, which is analogous to participation in ritual practices. Through the act of stitching, I aimed to create work that suggested a careful balance between elements in the work such as heaviness and lightness—similar to the kind of balance often reported by participants in meditation. I hoped that the use of repetition would suggest an investment of time in the work, a labour intensiveness, yet not in a burdensome, dull or mechanical way, and that it would suggest fragility and lightness yet at the same time, assurance.

The work of artists Elsje King, Anne Brennan, Louiseann Zahra, Janine Antoni and Annette Messenger, who all use thread and cloth, provided me with a context in which to locate my work. My interest in these artists lay in the ways in which their work embodied or represented action and/or referenced ritual-like practices. My contribution to this field lies in the creation of quasi ritual objects, which are intended to distil various elements of ritual. Primary to this was the consideration of ways in which to visually suggest ritual action. This representation developed in my work in two ways. Firstly, the individual objects created were intended to imply action, that is, to suggest ritual-like function through their physical form. Secondly, the use of stitching was developed as a metaphor for the intense focus and repetitive nature of ritual participation. This also resulted in a further suggestion of action as the work embodied the action of its own making. The stitched mark also developed links to ritual by incorporating the metaphoric value of thread with its suggestion of paths. The performative dimension of ritual objects was made possible within the work through the use of photography, which allows an exploration of these still objects 'in use'.

Significant technical developments included the introduction of colour to the organza works. This meant a switch from synthetic to silk organza and the development of dyeing techniques to colour the fabric. This gave the work new possibilities in terms of the range of its symbolic references and new visual qualities such as a luminosity that the work had not previously had.

The project saw many other new technical developments such as the 'cross' stitching technique I developed for the *Wrapping cloths* and the use of drawing as preparation for the stitching. I see this as having potential for future work. Due to the time consuming nature of the process and the time restraints of the project, I managed to complete three *Wrapping cloths*, however I intend to extend this series in the future as I feel that there is still much to be explored through these with scale, colour and form.

While limiting myself to thread and cloth as material for this project, I aimed to create a diverse range of works using different approaches. The *Praying Hand Protectors*, for example invent new imaginary ritual objects, and focus on the symbolic power of ritual objects rather than physical power; in the *Piscina* and *My Heart is a House* series the objects were designed to suggest encasement and protection in an attempt to allude to ritual action; the *Petition* series explored the use of gesture in ritual and the use of thread to suggest a path; in the *Wrapping cloth* series I explored the stitched mark as ritual gesture, and the power of process, and in the *Ribbon wrapping cloth* existing ritual traditions that use the connotations of the connectedness of thread. These concerns overlap throughout the work which are all concerned with the materialisation of ritual action and the power of ritual objects.

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(photograph — John Farrow).

Figure 43:

Examples of Gothic church vaulting: 1100–1500 A.D. Great Britain.

Scanned from: Christe, Yves; Velmans, Tania; Losowska, Hanna and Recht, Rland, 1982 *Art of the Christian World A.D. 200-1500, A Handbook of Styles and Forms*, New York: Rizzoli, p 425.

Figure 44:

White shadow (shirokage shibori), two types of hemp leaf pattern (asa-no-ha).

Scanned from: Wada, Yoshiko Iwamoto; Kellogg Rice, Mary; Barton, Jane. 1983, *Shibori* Tokyo, New York, London: Kodansha International, p 163.

Figure 45:

Denison, E and Cawthray, R, Design for flip top carton with tear-away entry.

Scanned from: Denison, E and Cawthray, R, 1999, *Packaging Prototypes*, Switzerland: Rotovision SA, Crans-Près-Cèligny, p 127.

Figure 46:

Rosemary O'Rourke, *Preliminary drawing for Wrapping cloths*, 2005

Pencil on paper, 21 x 21 cm .

Figure 47:

Rosemary O'Rourke, *Wrapping cloth 1*, 2005 (detail)

Linen cloth, polyester thread, 56 x 55 cm

(photograph — John Farrow).

Figure 48:

Rosemary O'Rourke, *Ribbon wrapping cloth*, 2006

Polyester ribbon and thread, 79 x 180 cm

(photograph — John Farrow).

Figure 49:

Rosemary O'Rourke, *Ribbon wrapping cloth*, 2006 (detail)

Polyester ribbon and thread, 79 x 180 cm

(photograph — John Farrow).

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