

Education Pack

Michael Brennand-Wood:

Forever Changes



Ruthin Craft Centre

The Centre for the Applied Arts

22 September – 25 November 2012

Introduction to the exhibition and aims of this pack

Forever Changes was originated by Ruthin Craft Centre and curated by June Hill. The exhibition documents over forty years of Michael Brennand-Wood's work, from his student days in Manchester to his current international practice. It features many previously unseen, new and important works and demonstrates the wide range of interests of an artist who is continually challenging the traditional boundaries of arts and crafts.

Forever Changes is a retrospective exhibition, but from the outset, the artist was determined to avoid a biographical approach and to present a history and development of the works rather than the man. He is also keen to acknowledge and encourage variable interpretations of his work. The range and depth of Michael's practice makes this exhibition an ideal environment for students to explore, discuss and perhaps find inspiration for their own creations.

Aims of the exhibition include:

- To examine the work of Michael Brennand-Wood with an emphasis on ideas, processes and techniques
- To trace the development of his unique visual language
- To show new works by the artist within the context of his extensive career
- To explore the relationship between the traditional and the innovative in the artist's extensive range of sculptures, installations, studio and commission works.

This pack is designed to support educators in the planning, execution and classroom follow up to a visit to *Forever Changes* and is also a useful document for anyone who is interested in the art of Michael Brennand -Wood. It is intended as an introduction to the exhibition with a collection of ideas, workshops and points for discussion. The pack looks at four broad themes from the exhibition: **Weaving and Embroidery, Lace, Pattern and Flowers**. The activities are suitable for all ages and can be adapted to your needs.

Visiting the Exhibition and Workshops

Ruthin Craft Centre is open daily from 10am – 5.30pm

Admission is free. Free parking for cars and coaches.

Directions can be found at <http://www.ruthincraftcentre.org.uk/>

Book a non-facilitated group visit - FREE

You are welcome to bring a school group to visit *Forever Changes*. A gallery visit is an opportunity for pupils and teachers to respond to original artworks first hand. Attend the free Teacher Training Workshop listed below or use this free Education Pack to support your visit.

Book a facilitated group visit - FREE

A guided exhibition visit by Education staff with short gallery activities will encourage pupils to look more closely and respond to what they see. *Lasts about 1 hour.*

Training and Resources

Teacher's Day

Friday 28 September, 10am – 3.30pm

£30 includes buffet lunch

Michael Brennand-Wood's work is a fantastic source of inspiration for school projects. It provides the opportunity to investigate a range of ideas, materials and 2D/3D processes whilst developing an understanding of colour, texture, line and pattern.

During this one day workshop you will gather the skills and knowledge needed to lead a visit to the exhibition and to deliver practical follow on activities back in school - supported by a free Education Pack. A practical hands-on workshop with the artist will introduce 2D and 3D technical approaches and provide ideas for developing your own projects. *Adaptable for primary or secondary.*

Education Pack

This Education Pack can be downloaded from www.ruthincraftcentre.org.uk

Image Library

The image library contains images relating to the exhibition. The images can be downloaded for educational use from www.ruthincraftcentre.org.uk Images provided by artist. For educational use only.

Contact us

To book a visit with your school group or for further information contact: Elen Bonner, Education Officer on 01824 704774 or elen.bonner@denbighshire.gov.uk

All educational activity (including non-facilitated group visits) are limited in availability and must be booked in advance.

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Forever Changes: An Introduction to the Artist and His Work

Learning Aims:

- contextual awareness of the historical and artistic background to the artist and his work
- to gain an understanding of some of the processes and materials used by the artist
- to gain an insight into the artist's intentions and approach to making art

'Making' has always been an essential part of Michael's life. An awareness of the unique properties of materials, such as texture, construction, acoustics and scent, can be traced back to his childhood and the home of his grandparents in the North of England. His grandfather was an engineer with a passion for working in metal and wood in his spare time and his grandmother was an industrial weaver at a local mill. She often brought back scraps of fabric for Michael to play with and he also recalls the sounds and smells associated with weaving as he watched her using the family loom or visited her at the mill. From his grandparents, he learnt about traditional materials and techniques and developed an awareness of their role in everyday life, but above all, he was encouraged to experiment with his own creations from an early age. By the time he entered his teens, he could knit and sew and work in wood and metal. He did not consider these skills as gender-specific, but simply a means of making things.

Michael initially intended to study fine art but was inevitably drawn to the textiles department at Manchester Polytechnic which offered more scope for his multi-disciplinary approach to the visual arts. In the late 1960s, the subject of textiles was considered inferior to painting and sculpture in the art world, and still retained its traditional association with women. The only man in a class of thirty students, Michael felt that he could offer a different approach to the subject, such as incorporating new materials and introducing techniques learnt through the 'masculine' pursuits of metalwork and woodwork.

He also made connections between fine art and traditional crafts. He referred to embroidery as 'drawing in thread', thought about 'the geometry of the stitch' and the structural grid that forms the basis of embroidery. He didn't just study other textiles, but also found inspiration in the work of artists such as Robert Rauschenberg, Sol LeWitt, Alberto Burri and Jean Tinguely.

Whilst respecting the history of textiles, he looked to build on techniques of the past and to open new ways of thinking about time-honoured skills such as weaving, knitting, lace-making and embroidery. He sought to move away from the decorative aspect of stitching, for example, to allow it to become more expressive. He also explored its sculptural potential as a mark made in relief on a flat plane. Thinking about the relationship between the two-dimensional and three-dimensional in the embroidered surface, he said, 'I wanted to release the stitch from the background and separate it from the historical.' Rather than creating an illusion of space with design or image, Michael adopted a Modernist approach of drawing attention to the physical characteristics of the thread, particularly its texture and tactile qualities.

Structure

As in embroidery, the underlying geometry of Michael's bases is responsible for giving his works a good structural foundation. The surface may often appear free, expressionistic and even chaotic, but close examination will always reveal a unifying grid beneath the layers. Whether wall-mounted or free-standing, the relationship between the work and its base is a crucial part of Michael's practice.

Touch

The sensory experience of materials is an important aspect of Michael's work and he believes that it is through touch, scent and sound – not just vision - that meaning is conveyed. The memory of feeling, smelling and even hearing the rustle or movement of certain materials interests the artist along with the historical resonance of textiles associated with specific events in life, such as birth, marriage, death.

Materials

The disciplines of Fine Art and Traditional Crafts collide in the work of Michael Brennand-Wood where anything can be used to obtain the desired effect. Although he has been consistently categorised as a textile artist throughout most of his career, his work incorporates such diverse materials as paint, sand, wire, net, aluminium, wood, resins, ceramics, and he uses the techniques and processes associated with other disciplines such as sculpture, embroidery, weaving and carpentry.

Meaning

Michael's chosen media is charged with semiotic potential and each individual responds personally to the textiles, objects, colours and forms according to their own associations, whether sensual, visual or mnemonic. The artist is keen to encourage variable interpretation

but sometimes guides his audience with signifiers, such as text, images or the inclusion of loaded objects and materials. Of course, the most obvious indicator of the artist's intentions is the title – often taken from songs and popular culture and sometimes incorporating puns or play on words.



Michael in his studio, 2012

Technology

As with many artists working in three dimensions, making is an important part of Michael's thinking process. As a painter may make preliminary sketches, sculptors and craftsmen often prefer to work out ideas with models, using their hands and 'physical memory'. This does not mean that he is not prepared to make use of modern technology, however. He is happy to produce computerised embroidery, for example, but will only employ digital technology as an aid not a means for making his works.

Michael's art also reflects changes and development, both in his own life and the world around him. *Forever Changes* is an appropriate title for the retrospective exhibition of an artist who is

continually evolving and developing ideas rather than reworking the same themes. He stated, 'it's really exciting for artists to put themselves in unfamiliar territory, push things ahead and ask questions' which is perhaps why his art continues to surprise, excite and inspire his audience.

Activities

Research artists who have worked with fabrics: such as Robert Rauschenberg, Alberto Burri, Antoni Tàpies, Christo, Lucio Fontana, Jasper Johns or Tracey Emin. Discuss how they have incorporated different materials into their art; the processes used; how the textiles contribute to the meaning of the work; your personal responses to it. Can you see any links between their work and that of Michael Brennan -Wood?

Discuss the importance of textiles in everyday life. Make a list of the different materials that you experience daily. Which ones make you feel warm/cool/are waterproof/stretchy etc. Why do you need different materials for different uses, activities or occasions? Describe your favourite/least favourite clothes- why do you enjoy/dislike wearing these items?

Collect examples of different textiles and discuss their textures. What associations do you have with different fabrics? What do they remind you of? Write down words that come to mind as you touch them. Can textiles have scents or sounds?

Design simple embroidery patterns on squared paper using different coloured pens. You could then transfer this to fabric or another material using pin pricks and add stitches.

Choose one of Michael's works in the exhibition to focus on. Write down words that come to mind when you look at it. What do you think it was made from? How do you think it was made? What does it remind you of? How does it make you feel?

Make a list of all the different materials you can find in the exhibition. How would you describe Michael's work – sculpture? textiles? painting? ...all of these? Invent a name!

Place a partner with his/her back to one of Michael's works. You describe the piece in great detail as he/she attempts to make a drawing without looking. Repeat the exercise with another work for you to draw this time. This will help you to hone your descriptive and listening skills! It will also help you to translate images from your imagination to paper!

The Works

Learning Aims:

- to gain an understanding of some of the processes and materials used by the artist
- to gain an insight into the artist's intentions and approach to making art
- to focus on specific works from the exhibition and to develop skills of visual analysis and confidence in talking about art

This section loosely follows the chronology of the exhibition by starting with earlier works and tracing the development of Michael's work to present day. It takes four broad themes: **Weaving and Embroidery, Lace, Pattern and Flowers**, and each section is supported with suggested activities and points for further research or class discussion.

Weaving and Embroidery

Michael's early works as a textile student at Manchester Polytechnic led him towards freeing the stitch from the traditional confines of fabric in order to make it visible from both sides. He found a solution to this problem by sewing on drilled Perspex so that the thread appeared to be suspended in space. This opened up a whole new area of investigation for the artist as he began to think about using alternative materials to fabrics for backgrounds, such as plywood. As his works moved away from two dimensions and pushed further into relief, so the stitch became a form in space rather than a line on a flat surface.



I wanted to make a chance inspired piece, whereby images could be reconfigured. The boxes are the lace pillows, the thread remains a thread and the wooded cubes are the bobbins. The viewer can twist and change the position of the boxes, some of which had musical sounds to further encourage movement

Box Piece, 1975

Box Piece, 1975 is representative of this experimental period where other forms, besides the thread and its background are introduced into the equation. Here, blocks of wood are sewn

together and attached to the sides of a box. The viewer is invited to interact with this work by moving it, thereby creating random configurations for the blocks. The rearranging of the box and its contents also introduces a percussive element to the work which is in-keeping with Michael's love of music. He has often cited composer John Cage as a great influence on his work along with another avant-garde musician Philip Glass. Their form of minimalist music is characteristically stripped of melody and pared down to rhythm and beat. It can be said that Michael's assemblage works are also reduced to rhythmic strands and pulses of colour and that they could represent a visual equivalent to music.

Michael has stated that the work also makes reference to the wooden bobbins used in lace-making and their rhythmic clattering as they shuttle back and forth during the process..

As with music, Michael's work also begins with a structured base. Besides using flat materials such as plywood or Perspex as a ground or container for threads, he also created backgrounds from woven strips of wood. This imitation of the weft and warp of fabric provided a strong base for assemblage and allowed him to create dense webs by layering and intertwining different combinations of materials.



The title is a quiet allusion to a 1954 Robert Rauschenberg combine called Charlene. I've loved this painting all my life since I first came across it in the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. Early Rauschenberg was for me a visceral introduction to a use of cloth that was decidedly non-decorative (Michael Brennan-Wood)

Charlemagne 1978

Charlemagne 1978 is a good example of an early assemblage using a wooden grid as a starting point. It was made for the 3rd International Exhibition of Miniature Textiles at the old British Crafts Centre on Earlham where the remit was to limit the work's dimensions to 30cm in any direction. This abstract work is richly textured with strands of brightly coloured materials including thread, strips of paper, wood and net. On close examination, the viewer becomes aware of snippets of text – words cut from American comics- 'superhero', 'Han Solo', a picture

of Mickey Mouse etc. The inclusion of words in a collage can be traced back to Picasso and Braque's experiments in this medium in the early 20th century. Rather than being a random selection of cuttings, their collages held semiotic significance and often made reference to current affairs or held personal associations for the artists. Pop artists such as Peter Blake and Richard Hamilton also used clippings from contemporary comics and newspapers in order to reference popular culture and also as part of an attempt to merge the 'elitist' boundaries between 'high art' and 'low art'.

It is tempting to read the cutting in *Charlemagne* and to attempt to make connections between the words from the comics and the work's title. Charlemagne (c742-814) was a powerful French ruler, responsible for expanding the Frankish Empire and initiating a revival in art and culture throughout Europe. So, what connections can we make here? That Charlemagne was a mediaeval superhero? That perhaps his conquering of Europe can be compared to the 'invasion' of American popular culture in the 20th century?

Michael cites Robert Rauschenberg as the inspiration for this work and states that it is his response to a particular favourite from the American artist, *Charlene* 1954. Rauschenberg took collage into three dimensions with his 'combines' or assemblages which merged together paint and materials from everyday life. His multi-disciplinary approach to creating art had a great influence on Michael's own practice.

Activities

Make your own Box Piece by suspending blocks of wood, beads, cotton reels or other materials on threads inside an open box. Paint your box and its contents with bright vibrant colours! Experiment with different configurations to create different sounds and patterns.

Listen to Minimalist Music (eg Steve Reich, John Cage) or watch a video on YouTube. You could attempt to make up your own composition using percussion instruments or improvise with objects that you find around the home or classroom.

Create a base for an assemblage by weaving strips of cardboard, straws, string, wire, twigs or anything else that might be suitable – be inventive! Build up your composition with coloured threads such as embroidery silks, wool, string, strips of fabric etc. Add other materials in layers, eg paint, buttons, beads, paper, tissue, leaves, feathers. Use pva glue, staples or simply tie the materials together.

Find an image of Robert Rauschenberg's *Charlene* and compare and contrast it with *Charlemagne*. How would you describe works of this nature which are not paintings or

sculptures and are made from unusual materials? Rauschenberg called them 'combines'. Invent your own name for Michael's style of art.

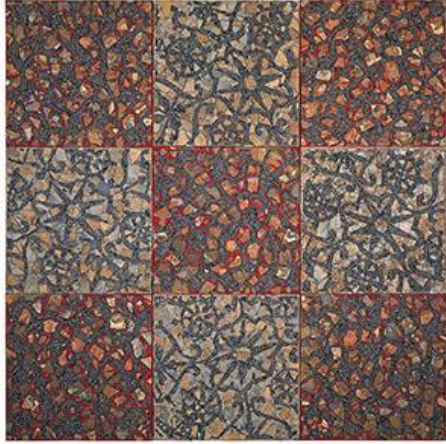
Discuss why artists in the 20th century turned their back on traditional forms of art and began to explore different ways of creating images and objects. Some points to consider might be: the effects and experience of war; finding a new visual language to describe modern life; the availability of new technology such as printing, computers, photography etc; the ability to travel and experience the art of other cultures; the reassessment of the status of 'crafts' and 'fine art' etc

Lace

Michael first made lace in the early 1970s: initially with bobbins and then later using a machine in Nottingham, a traditional centre of the British lace industry. The study of lace formed part of Michael's early investigations into the structure of textiles, and his interest was reignited in the 1990s when he bought a book on 16th century lace designs. In the 20th century, lace had become almost exclusively feminine associations, commonly used for delicate lingerie and decorating wedding gowns. Historically, however, it was not a gendered material but was worn by both men and women as a signifier of wealth and status and Michael decided that it was time to reclaim lace from a male standpoint.

Bobbin lace was made traditionally by winding thread around pins and following a pattern mapped out on paper. Michael's lace works are formed by inlaying fabric into grooves that have been carved on a wooden panel so that it becomes partly buried in the wood.

Michael's lace is also on a larger scale than you would usually associate with this delicate material, so that the viewer is confronted by and immersed in its almost architectural structure.



The work is a meditation on perfection; how like our own skin fabric changes through use and wear (Michael Brennand - wood)

Perfect Skin 1995

Michael's lace works of the early 1990s were based on photographs from books or patterns, but after discovering the display of lace in the Whitworth Gallery, Manchester, he became interested in researching real specimens from their collection and this led to his exhibition, *Material Evidence* at the gallery in 1996. Real lace, he discovered, lacked the perfection of the published images he's previously studied: it had 'experienced a life' and bore evidence of everyday use such as holes, tears and stains.

The four lighter panels of *Perfect Skin* were based on images of 16th century lace whilst the five darker squares were sourced from late 17th century bobbin lace specimens in the Whitworth collection. The surface of the work is clad in split African tile to enhance the 'flayed quality' of the piece and the fabric inlay was created with an off-cut of Armani chenille, purchased in London.

As with all of his works, *Perfect Skin* contains numerous signifiers and associations through its loaded sensual material. The red sand makes reference to the Red Centre of Australia and the desert area that Michael had recently experienced. The title was taken from a 1984 song by Lloyd Cole and the Commotions.

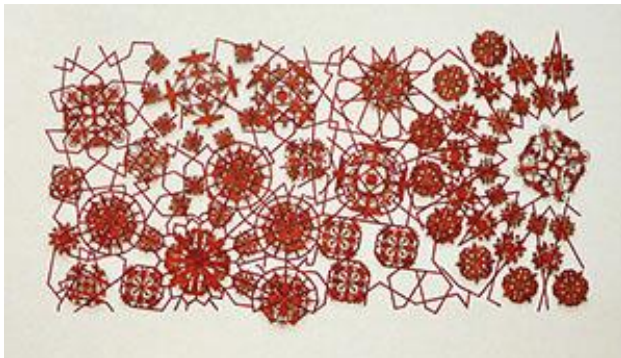


Dreams is a riff on the word culture. I realised that we lived in a culture and could also grow a culture within a Petri dish

Michael Brennand Wood

9 Dreams Within the Here and Now 1998-99

The imagery in this work is drawn from textile, geographical and biological sources. While he was working on the Material Evidence exhibition at the Whitworth Gallery, Michael was commissioned to design an inlaid floor for the Surgical Unit at Conquest Hospital near Hastings. For the purpose of this project, he was given access to the hospital's pathology slides and was surprised by the subtle beauty of these delicate objects. Through examining the slides, he became aware of the 'implied connection between the cellular aspect of both humans and textiles.' They also reignited his interest in micro and macro structures (a favourite painting is Richard Dadd's *The Fairy Feller's Masterstroke* from the Tate Collection which is full of minute details). The nine discs here can be compared to both microscopic and telescopic lenses. They can also be linked with Petri dishes, used in laboratories for growing and studying bacteria: each of the discs contains a fragment taken from another, and within each there is a sense of mutation or cellular invasion. Michael has drawn a comparison between the fear of viral contamination and that of cultural change brought about through interaction with other countries.



I remembered reading that lace might be defined as the encirclement of space

Michael Brennand Wood

Lace: The Final Frontier 2011

Through his academic interest in the history of textiles, Michael was aware that lace evolved as successive generations of lace-makers adapted refined shapes and motifs and added new references to reflect changes in their own lives and contemporary events. In *Lace the Final Frontier*, Michael is continuing this tradition of innovation by creating a lace that retains a historical basis yet is relevant to the 21st century.

Taking its title from the famous introduction to the *Star Trek* television series, this work represents an exploration of different forms of space. Michael recognised that lace is essentially 'a dialogue between borders and enclosed spaces' but that 'frontiers, space and borders' are words that can also be transposed to describe war and conflict.

From a distance, *Lace the Final Frontier* appears to be a lively, vibrant lacy pattern but close inspection reveals repeated motifs of bombs, soldiers, helicopters and tanks woven into its delicate web. Michael stated, 'My intention is to construct a military lace emblematic of conflict and the annexing of resources and territory.' What is first perceived as beautiful, reveals a darker message encoded into its pattern.

The imagery in this work was taken from three sources: lace, war and the Rorschach Test. The latter was an inkblot test used to determine whether a soldier with a suspected psychological disorder was fit to continue in service (see below). The composition fuses Western and Islamic lace designs in order to make reference to contemporary conflict, but the design also echoes the instructional, pricked diagrams that are used in traditional bobbin lace-making.

Colour also plays an important role in the viewer's perception of this work. Lace was traditionally white or black and these colours were often used as signifiers. White suggests virginity or innocence and used in wedding gowns, religious ceremonies such as baptism, confirmations and burial. Black is symbolic of mourning but also has erotic connotations and is often used in lingerie. Red, however, carries a violent message, being the colour of blood and used to signify alarm. In *Lace the Final Frontier*, the red blots have a visceral texture and this adds to the sinister undertones of this highly potent work.

Activities

Find out about the Rorschach Test. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rorschach_test) and make your own 'inkblot designs'. You could incorporate them into collage or assemblage with added materials.

Study the history of lace-making and find examples of different types eg Honiton, Cluny, Chantilly, Mechlin etc. Who would wear lace in the 16th century? How was it made? How is it made now?

Watch a video demonstration of bobbin lace-making (there are many on YouTube eg <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TiTqdr38tTU>)

Find examples of lace in history and paintings – eg Flemish art, Elizabethan and Stuart portraits, Victorian painting etc). Your local museum or art gallery should have examples and specimens for you to sketch or photograph.

Make collage or assemblage that incorporates lace: make rubbings or paint over scraps of lace or doilies onto a sheet of paper. Cut up the resulting patterns to use in your composition.

Roll out a slab of air-drying clay and cut out abstract shapes until you are left with a lace-like design. Push objects and fabrics into the clay to add imprints and texture. Leave for a few days to harden and then paint. Use this as a base for threading materials and small objects to create an assemblage. You could use materials with personal significance, eg childhood toys, threads from clothes, labels, badges, letters, photographs.

Experiment with ‘micro and macro’ structures. Fill a matchbox with small objects and then draw it on a piece of A3 paper, filling the whole sheet. Design giant snowflakes, insects or cell patterns.

Discuss the effect of colour in painting. What do you associate with different colours? How do they make you feel? Try using different paint for things associated with certain colours eg black snowflakes, red doves, blue sun, pink bats etc. How does the new colour affect your perception?

Pattern

Michael became interested in pattern during the late 1980s at a time when it was very unfashionable, but this is further evidence of his willingness to work in contested areas and to continually seek out new directions for his art.

In design, pattern is often a means of communication between artist and viewer: even abstract shapes, colours, forms and lines hold certain associations, whether universal or personal. In Eastern textiles, pattern is a form of visual language and many of the shapes are encoded (see <http://indigorugs.imv.com.au/Downloads/SymbolsMeaning.pdf>)



..from adversity comes a greater strength; the butterflies at the end of the wires are symbolic of that evolution, the transference of positive energy.

Michael Brennan-Wood

Holding Pattern 2007

The design of this circular work is based on the shape of a sports arena with machine embroidered flowers on wire stems and boxed units extending the map of the seating plan into three dimensions.

As with many of Michael's titles, 'Holding Pattern' is a play on meaning: the word 'holding' referring here to the control exerted over the structure by the underlying pattern. It also relates to the capacity of the seating plan of the sports arena, but has a further point of reference, ie the 'hold' of a ship. The coffin-like shapes that make up the structure recalls the 'holding' design of slave ships (see <http://www.retronaut.co/2011/10/stowage-plan-for-the-slave-ship-brookes-1788/>)

Around the perimeter, are strewn figures made from charred wood, whilst boxes confine bound and trussed figures. The plans for these ships describe with ruthless efficiency how many people could be transported across the Atlantic and the coffin shapes reminder that many slaves did not complete the journey.

The white blocks are covered with images of Georgian buildings – a reference, to the wealth and property that was gained from the horrific trading of human beings in the 18th century. Michael described the work as 'an illustration, literally, of how one group of people can reinvent others as non-human – simply commodities to be bought and sold.'

The flowers are commemorative or funereal in this context, but as they reach out of their frame towards the viewer, they also become emblems of hope and indomitable human spirit.



To an extent the circular shapes may be read as counters, the lines as pathways, options to consider. Sometimes emotionally you go up ladders, mostly you slide down snakes.

Michael Brennand-Wood

The Ties that Bind 1996

Compositionally this work makes reference to a board game as a symbol of life's choices. It uses scraps of fabric taken from the garments of two people and as the title (taken from a Bruce Springsteen song) suggests that lives can become entwined when you enter a relationship with someone.

This work also refers to the tradition of American quilts where squares of patchwork and embroidery were skilfully sewn together by different members and successive generations of families using their old textiles. Over the years, a quilt rich in history would evolve, telling the story of the family both visually (through images and symbols embroidered on the squares), and emotionally through association (the history held by the textiles that had been worn and used by family members).

Technically, the binding of individual shapes with silk fabric also relates to the work's title. Michael states, 'The act of wrapping is a powerful emotive gesture, rich in symbolic importance, swaddled at birth, mummified at death.'



Each day I'd choose a collection of music and begin work as I nursed it back to life. I developed a tremendous respect and empathy for the people that had made the piece

Michael Brennabd-Wood

Restored and Remixed 2012

Many of Michael's works have taken their pattern from traditional rugs and patterns. In *Restored and Remixed* he found an old rug and carefully painted over the original design with shapes of his own, derived from modern games such as 'Space Invaders' and 'Transformer' toys. The work is actually, as the title suggests a reclaimed or recycled object: one with a history of its own that has been given a new life by the artist. The symbolism and meaning of the carpet's original design has been obliterated as Michael has re-stained it 'pixel by pixel, stitch by stitch' and added machine embroidered motifs. The resulting object represents the merging of diverse cultures – East meets West; history meets the future, craft meets technology, destruction becomes conversion etc. Michael thought of his restoration work as a form of dialogue with the original creator, 'I'd like to think that as one maker to another I extended its life and in some small way contributed something positive towards a respect for the creativity of others from a region unfairly characterised.'

Activities

Repaint, embroider or stick new shapes onto a piece of patterned fabric eg duvet cover, cushion, t-shirt etc, in order to give it a new life or new meaning. You can buy fabric paints if you wish to introduce your re-cycled textile into your life permanently!

Convert a 2D drawing, board game, plan or map into 3D by building up materials onto its surface. You could use a plan of your school and cover it with references to education eg pencils, erasers, bits of text, badges, flowers with your classmates' faces etc./ a map of your town with advertisements, shop receipts, photographs, tourist memorabilia etc/ a plan of your favourite arena or theatre with tickets, photos, memorabilia from events, flower-faces with footballers or pop stars. Be inventive!

Research the American quilting tradition. Make a patchwork square that represents you or your family made from old garments or household fabrics. You could draw or paint the square and stick fabrics to it if you do not wish to sew it.

List examples of pattern in everyday life. How does pattern dictate the way we live (eg road lay-out, signs, markings, architectural plans, advertising, household textiles, clothes etc). Take photographs or make sketches. Make an abstract painting based on one of these patterns on your list.

Flowers

101

As a textile student all we heard about was William Morris; factor into that equation a directive to draw plants as part of our course and it's not surprising



Stars Underfoot – Flower Power 2001

Michael had an aversion to floral textiles but as he became more immersed in the history of textiles, he found the subject increasingly difficult to avoid. For example, floral imagery was a great influence on design in the embroidered fabrics of the Suzani brides of Central Asia which he found very beautiful. In the late 1990s, he discovered a book called *Flowers Underfoot* which featured Indian carpets of the Mughal era which also interested him. He decided that it was time to confront the subject that he had been so apprehensive of and filled his studio with fresh flowers. Michael chose to use the live blooms as a medium, not a subject, thereby subverting the traditional process. Their ephemeral nature forced him to work at a faster rate than usual and the final result was photographed by James Austin and given the title *Stars Underfoot* in reference to their stellar quality .



I'm interested in pictographic, ideographic floral shapes, which initially appear pretty or decorative when viewed from afar. Closer scrutiny reveals less pleasant associations
Michael Brennand-Wood

Babel 2008

As with *Holding Pattern 2007*, this work is compositionally based on the seating plan of an American arena and projects into relief through the cumulative construction of hundreds of tiny

elements such as toy figures, badges, text and embroidered heads of blooms on the ends of wires.

The circularity of the work gives it the appearance of a giant flower, reflecting Michael's ongoing interest in micro and macro effects. Up close, the dense floral composition reveals macabre skulls, land-mines, weapons. Most of the text is deliberately nonsensical, but the occasional word is legible. Toy soldiers are fused together to create the central projection: the stamen of the giant flower and the tower of the title.

'Babel' comes from the Hebrew word meaning 'jumble'. The Biblical story of the Tower of Babel attempts to explain the origins of language. The tower itself represented an act of defiance against God by its builders, and the sinners' punishment was to be made unable to understand each other.



I realised that the vessel and a floral bouquet could and should exert an influence on each other

Michael Brennand-Wood

Vase Attacks 2009

From vessels comprised from clusters of small objects (eg cobbler's last, dice, toy soldiers), bouquets of machine embroidered blooms project like cartoon explosions from the wall or their free-standing plinths. Close examination reveals faces, insects, emblems, skulls, military insignia, badges and old-fashioned hat-pins. The explosions are exuberant and playful rather than violent and menacing, though as with many of Michael's works, the underlying message is more serious than the surface may suggest at first. Intruding into the viewer's space and demanding physical interaction, this is flower power at its most potent.

Activities

Describe the contents of one of Michael's vases and discuss the impact of its imagery. What associations do you have with these objects? What does the work say to you?

Create floral wheel patterns using buttons, plastic discs, bottle tops, counters etc and sticks, straws, hat-pins etc for stems. Use your imagination for a base – eg a shoe, a drinks can, a lump of clay with objects stuck into it – be inventive!

Research flower symbolism in art eg Mediaeval and Renaissance painting, Victorian art, Persian rugs, 1960s 'Flower Power' etc. (See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Language_of_flowers)

Discuss flowers in art – Chardin still lifes, Art Nouveau, Monet, Matisse, Georgia O'Keefe. Are the flowers in these paintings merely decorative or could they be used symbolically?

Make a communal wall piece – eg a celestial skyscape or a garden background where students all contribute a textile/collaged flower or insect or star or planet...

Other related events

Please visit www.ruthincraftcentre.org.uk for details of talks, events and workshops relating to the exhibition.

Classroom activities

Music – many of Michael's works take their titles from songs. Find some of them and listen to them as you work! Give your own works musical titles taken from your favourite tunes.

- Find examples of other artists with musical interests, eg Wassily Kandinsky, Georges Braque, Pablo Picasso, Jean Tinguely, Peter Blake, Sam Taylor-Wood etc. How do they incorporate music into their art?

Geography – talk about textiles and their uses in other countries eg Japan, Australia, South America etc. Look at clothes, rugs, screens, ceremonial and everyday fabrics.

- Discuss the affinities Michael's work has with landscape ie its 'topography', layers, development over time etc

History – find out about the Industrial Revolution and how it affected the production of textiles. How has modern technology impacted on fashion and the clothing industry?

- Find out how trade and travel affected textiles in 16th century Europe

Art – discuss textiles in art: artists who have depicted textiles (eg Vermeer’s lace, Gainsborough’s satins etc); artists who have designed textiles (eg Henri Matisse, Vanessa Bell, William Morris etc) and artists who have used fabrics in their practice (eg Jasper Johns, Lucio Fontana, Tracey Emin, Yinka Shonibare, Michael Raedecker etc)

- Discuss what is meant by ‘visual language’. Is there an equivalent in art to imagery, rhyme, rhythm, sentences, punctuation etc? Find examples in Michael’s art to support your answers.

Language – write down a list of words that come to mind when looking at one of Michael’s works. Use these words to compose a poem.

- Write a story inspired by one of Michael’s works. Imagine being shrunken and placed inside its structure. Describe your adventures as you move around inside the web of colours and textures.
- Read war poetry eg Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon and compare imagery with Michael’s works.

Further Resources

Forever Changes, (catalogue) Ruthin Craft Centre/Hare Print Press 2012

Cole, Drusilla, *Textiles Now*, Laurence King, 2008

Greenaway, Kate, *The Language of Flowers* 1884

Harris, Jennifer, *Michael Brennand-Wood, Material Evidence: Improvisations on a Historical Theme*, Whitworth Art Gallery, 1996

McBrinn, Joseph, *Pretty Deadly: New Work by Michael Brennand-wood*, 2009

Online Resources

<http://vimeo.com/11024369>

<http://brennand-wood.com/>

http://www.themaking.org.uk/content/makers/2011/02/michael_brennand_wood.html

http://www.clothandculturenow.com/Michael_Brennand-Wood.html

<http://layersofmeaning.org/archives/000217.html>

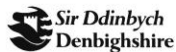
<http://www.transitionandinfluence.com/gallery/statement.html>

<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/t/textiles-in-the-v-and-a-archives/>

http://www.studio-international.co.uk/painting/matisse_textiles.asp

Julie Robson 2012

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