Ulster Museum Lecture ‘Troubles textiles’ – Notes for slides

Title slide 1

Today I’m going to examine textile practices and activities that responded to the Troubles in Northern Ireland and place them in the wider contexts of fine art and international war textiles.

Before the Troubles our regional identity was bound up in linen. And our political, cultural and personal identity is still bound up in cloth ... Sashes, banners, flags - the symbolic medium for the expression of the Ulster Protestant identity ... The blanket - a universal symbol of comfort and care - tucked up, mothered ... The protest blanket, the vulnerability of the body, swaddled or shrouded ... The handkerchief, wiping tears, staunching blood ... The flag of Father Daly’s white handkerchief on Bloody Sunday.

Cloth relates to humanity in its mortality and transience – both cloth and our body can be cut, stitched, age, decay. Cloth carries the traces of our bodies through direct contact, in stains, creases, smell. It evokes memory. The child clings to their comfort blanket and in times of crisis, we too, still reach for cloth. But cloth also serves our lack of humanity – think of rope, gags, blindfolds, balaclavas.

Slide 2

The exhibition, Art of the Troubles at the Ulster Museum last spring and summer, featured 60 works by 50 artists. It was the first time work about the Troubles had been brought together on this scale and in a highly visible and accessible public venue.

When I visited this exhibition I could see the symbolism of cloth in many of the artworks and the language of cloth gives us a way to talk about society – to talk about a fragmented society and nation. Think of holes, tears, seams, patches, layers, mending, darning, joining, fraying, ripping, all ways to visualise and articulate the fabric of society.

But as well as their role in symbolism and semiotics, Textiles have also been used as a media in their own right, in protest and testimony, storytelling and memory, from the Bayeux Tapestry to Suffrage Banners; and more recently in projects such as the AIDS Quilt. Cloth has also been used as a media in fine art practices since the late 1960s and the work I am going to show you this morning ranges from individual art responses, to collaborative community quilts, to projects for remembrance and healing and peace.

Slide 3

Going back in time to the late 60s – there were social, cultural and political upheavals across the world and some artists, particularly in the United States, began to challenge authority,
question the Vietnam war, and demand rights for women and non-whites. The Art Workers Coalition, formed in 1969, brought activist artists together, and Lucy Lippard, a writer and critic was one of them. She visited Ireland in 1984 to select work for an exhibition of Contemporary Irish Art to tour the United States and was surprised to find very little activist art in Ireland. She excluded republican and loyalist wall murals and prison arts (as she considered them activist art minus the fine-art component) but she did wonder that there was not more crossover between high art and street art, or more socially-engaged community art – basically more crossover between art and life.

The fine art stance that emerged in Northern Ireland in response to the Troubles was different from North American activist art. It was more complex than a simple dismissal of socially engaged art as ‘bad art’; the groups that came together to spark activist art in North America were all lacking in Northern Ireland and artists in Northern Ireland who did portray the conflict did so in a different way from their counterparts elsewhere. Historically, the political avant-garde have always taken a stance on one side or the other - think of Picasso’s outcry against the Nazi bombing of Guernica. However, artists living in Northern Ireland generally avoided taking sides and avoided making work about specific incidents, perhaps because incident-specific work can (too easily) be read as support or condemnation of one side or the other.

**Slide 4**

There have been 4 exhibitions at the Golden Thread Gallery, Belfast in the last 8 years on the Art of the Troubles. Declan McGonagle curated *A Shout in the Street* in 2008 and took the distinctive approach to include ‘art’ and ‘non-art’. He included bonfires and murals along with fine art on the basis that although they ‘may be formed by different intentions and have different relationships with the art-historical canon, they are connected in the field of experience from which they are drawn’ and this field of experience is also shared by the viewer who is ‘the co-producer of meaning.’

**Slide 5**

He included bonfires and murals in the exhibition so that their cultural value might be examined, because, as he said unless making and doing is classified and archived by society’s cultural mechanisms of the museum or art gallery, as for example ‘fine art’ or ‘folk art’ then the making and doing remain unnamed and unclassified and of no value at all.

**Slide 6**

Textiles, as a contemporary activity of creative expression, tend to fall between different spheres, they don’t really come under the remit of either the Folk Museum or the Ulster Museum. Valerie Wilson, the textile curator at the Folk Museum doesn’t even have a
permanent textile gallery - despite the significance of textiles in our land. The Ulster Museum rebuilt their collection after the bombing by concentrating on fashion and they have an applied art gallery for glass, ceramics, silver and jewellery but that doesn’t include textiles. So the few pieces of textiles that they have don’t quite fit into any of the main collections. You seldom see textiles in art galleries. They are domestic art rather than street art. To see them you have to search them out, most are stored in cupboards, boxes, roofspaces ... or in the case of this quilt – a large suitcase. Many have simply been destroyed or lost. Some of the slides I will show you are dreadful quality, but that is because the record of the piece of work exists only as an old photograph or worse still as a photocopy. I’m not going to claim any particular status for the textile work made in response to the Troubles that I am going to show you now, but I would suggest that whatever its status, it is connected in the field of experience and it can be understood in relation to the broader narrative of the Art of the Troubles.

Slide 7

In the United States in the late 1960s some women artists, whose practices were driven by the concerns of everyday life, began to challenge the modernist art mainstream. These artists operated within a feminist ideology. They were drawn to the use of textiles because of their explicit connections with women’s lives. Their primary intention was to critique the art world, with its patriarchal, hierarchical, elitist structure, and textiles were an effective tool because of their marginal position. These artists explored the various materials, beads, scraps of cloth, photographs, cards etc, that women have traditionally saved and assembled into their own personal art using techniques such as cutting, sticking and sewing.

Slide 8

In Ireland not only was the critical context for socially engaged art lacking but textiles were still linked with industry rather than creative expression, and a feminist awakening did not happen in Ireland until a new generation of women artists, such as Dorothy Cross and Alice Maher, in the mid to late-1980s began addressing issues of identity and the place of women in Irish society. They produced visceral work that was a feminist interpretation of the landscape or the self and they often used materials and forms that were natural or associated with women. Dorothy Cross draped an ambiguous cow-skin over the satin train of her grandmother’s wedding dress to make Virgin Shroud, questioning female identity and the Catholic idea of the perfect woman.

Slide 9

Much of the meaning of cloth is centred on memory and one aspect of memory resides in stains. When Alice Maher was doing an MFA at Belfast she bought second hand bed-sheets in St George’s Market to paint on. She bought them because they were cheap – but then she saw
the stains - the sweat, blood and tears of the human experience and that was the start of her artistic relationship with materials.

She used the stained linen sheets and stained them further using her painted body in a critique of Irish Catholic femininity - making visible that which Irish society in the 1980s sought to conceal. The tented structures of Tryst took her work into 3 dimensions; implicit in the bed-linen were the human experiences of birth, sex and death and the vernacular moral and religious associations – airing your dirty linen in public, born on the wrong side of the sheets.

In 1987, Brian McAvera, writer, critic and curator, searched for Irish women producing artwork on the Troubles for inclusion in an exhibition, entitled ‘Directions Out’. He was unable to find any and concluded that women artists were preoccupied with feminist individuality.

**Slide 10**

However, it could be argued that the lived experience of women trying to find their ‘direction out’ of a society dominated by patriarchal attitudes, as well as the Troubles, is certainly socio-political and has a valid contribution to make to the art of the Troubles debate.

Catherine Harper trained in weave at the Art College in Belfast in the mid-1980s. She used the bog landscape to explore feminist concerns and the place of women in a divided society. For that reason, although Harper was not focusing directly on the Troubles as her subject matter, I am going to consider her work here. We haven’t been able to trace any of her early work to photograph it properly, so if you know where any of these pieces are, let me know.

Landscape has its own questions of gender and identity, it can offer a way to talk about other things and this was the strategy Harper employed. She grew up outside Limavady, in a region where the bog landscape is very symbolic, and she used the County Derry bog land as a metaphor to express other things, about kinship and relationships, about women and what it meant to be a woman in Ireland at that time. This is a detail of a large sculptural piece, *Bog Woman Mouth Stapled Shut*, made in 1988 it pre-dates the Dorothy Cross and Alice Maher work I showed you.
Slide 11

There were infant bodies found under floor-boards and hidden places; and the x-case was around this time - a 14 year old girl, pregnant by rape, who was seeking to travel to Britain for a termination. There were Seamus Heaney’s bog poems and mummified bog bodies turning up in peat cuttings. All these influences were informing Harper’s engagement with the bog landscape as the embodiment of a gendered nation, a feminised landscape, taking in bodies, giving out bodies, the bog woman woven out of the stuff of the land.

Catherine Harper says she has a love hate relationship with Northern Ireland; and the time and place in which these pieces were made, very much underpins them. The bog landscape has become highly politicised as a landscape that conceals and reveals, sucks life down, and gives up bones and fragments of cloth.

A 2013 BBC documentary opened and closed with Seamus Heaney reading his poem ‘Bog Queen’ over footage of the bog lands in the heart of Ireland where the bodies of the Disappeared are believed to lie and Harper’s art, like Heaney’s poem, takes on an additional resonance in this context.

Slide 12

Catherine Harper was the child of a ‘mixed-marriage’ which was not an easy thing in the Northern Ireland of the 1960s. Her father left when she was very young, so she grew up with her mother a divorcee, with a Catholic name, in a Protestant environment and the past became a source of secret shame and anger. Eventually the anger surfaced and she began to make this red thing, with the washing machine going day and night dyeing red material. She made it the weight of an average man and woman, the weight she imagined she and her father would be.

The constructed elements were to do with the abject and the tainted fabric and she described it as a personal catharsis that saved her sanity. When she showed it at an exhibition in Galway she hung the walls with these visceral red cloth strips and covered the floor in natural wool fleece. Visitors to the exhibition at the time said they experienced a purging of emotion. It has faded and hanging where it does now, at the Waterfront Hall in Belfast, it is really just a decorative object.

Slide 13

A few years later she moved to London and while she was researching gender at Goldsmiths College, she developed a drag queen alter-ego, Queenie – a woman who would dress as a man would have dressed as a woman. Queenie was a taking care thing, a healing thing and Harper did performances in Derry where she invited men at the Guild Hall to take off their shirts so she could iron them and scrubbed the walls of Derry to remove the stains of history.
The performances were an offering of small services to repair society and were in keeping with
the participatory tendencies of contemporary art at that time.

**Slide 14**

In 1981 Helen Kerr took a sabbatical from teaching secondary level art in Belfast to do a
Diploma in Embroidery and Textiles at Goldsmiths College London. She made this piece while
she was at Goldsmiths, it is in the format of a child’s cloth book and depicts the experience of
children growing up in 1970s Belfast. She also made some other work that incorporated rubber
bullets while she was in London but she says she felt uneasy about it and couldn’t have done it
at home, because in Belfast it was all too close. This corroborates the distance or ‘outsider’
effect that has often been commented on – and many of the artists who responded to the
troubles did so, with a distance of either space or time.

**Slide 15**

This piece of work, *Shattered Steps*, by Helen McAllister, bears no visible relation to the
Troubles - but it holds a secret. During her foundation year in Belfast, at Rupert Stanley
College, in 1981, a nearby church was bombed and the students were sent round to draw it. The
stained glass windows had been blown out and she collected little shards of stained glass. She
kept them for over 20 years, like ‘treasure’ but never found a use for them until she began to
work on a series of shoe forms. She says this was a profound piece for her, because out of
wanton destruction she was able to make something opulent that linked her roots as a Belfast
girl with her contemporary work. It is a subtle piece – treading a symbolically neutral ground.
The passage of time allowed the glass shards to be used in a way that acknowledged their past
and the relic significance they had acquired in the intervening decades.

The story of how she collected the glass shards also speaks of a different time - of a time when
‘normality’ involved sending foundation students round to a bomb site to draw it.

**Slide 16**

Irene MacWilliam, a patchworker and embroiderer who lives in Belfast, has been making work
as a response to events in Northern Ireland and the wider world since the mid-1980s. She
trained as a social worker and describes her views as ‘humanitarian’ rather than ‘political’. In
1986 she volunteered to help in the textile department of the Ulster Folk and Transport
Museum and looking at the historical textiles she wondered what had been happening in the
world when they were made. She decided to make a quilt every year that featured world events
as a sort of duffers guide to history and all twenty-six *Events of the Year* quilts were shown at
the Tower Museum in Derry a couple of years ago.
Each quilt is made up of 19 picture panels and certain themes reoccur throughout the quilts, disease, natural disasters, environmental issues, tragedies and human achievements and of course the Troubles. Irene MacWilliam believes the ‘Year Quilts are open to being rightly criticised’ by people from other countries and cultures because when you are distant your knowledge is second hand and filtered through the BBC. Even though she is not distant from the Northern Ireland conflict and has taken a non-political, humanitarian viewpoint, she allows that her work may be perceived in a different way by different communities because what she was depicting was the mass disruption to society and therefore the quilts feature more bomb blasts than individual shootings.

Alongside the Year Quilts she has made many individual smaller panels, Peace Dove was an early work. The date embroidered on the ring on the dove’s leg, 1987, was the year of the Poppy Day Bombing, when 11 people were killed by a bomb planted at a Remembrance Day ceremony in Enniskillen. Subsequently 11 bronze doves were added to the cenotaph. This panel is not the symbolic white dove of peace; it is the Northern Ireland reality – ‘peace’ hurtling toward the rocks, olive branch disintegrating.

Irene MacWilliam had been considering the idea of making a peace quilt for some time and people had been sending her bits of red fabric to use, so when there was a ceasefire in 1994 she thought the time was right to do it. Each of the 3161 red pieces represents someone killed in the Troubles between 1969 and 1994 but the absence of names or details means that it is a largely symbolic representation of the death toll. She was very specific that there was a patch for every single person … the exact number according to the statistics.

She wanted it to be predominantly red but not solid red ‘because life is not black and white’ and she wanted to reflect that ambiguity in the colour. It also reflects the rawness of the troubles in its torn, unfinished edges. One of the fabrics, with little pandas, was a dressmaking fabric she had used for her children, so for her that represented the children caught up in the Troubles. Another fabric with little white paintbrush birds suggested hope. She feels it is her most successful quilt because it appeals to everyone, not just those involved in textiles, and she has found people open up and talk when they see it.
**Slide 21**

Some fine artists from outside Ireland responded to the Troubles through the media of textiles. Elaine Reichek, a conceptual artist from New York, had a solo exhibition, *Home Rule* at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in 1993. The exhibition showed a series of eleven samplers, in these the traditional virtuous and biblical messages of the English embroidered sampler are subverted and transposed into nationalist exhortations. Reichek stitches all the work herself, she believes that only the investment of time can defray the cost, or pay for the right, to talk about a history that is not your own. This one uses a quote from Robert Emmet's trial in 1803, when he was sentenced to death for high treason after the United Irishmen rebellion.

**Slide 22**

This sampler skips forward more than a hundred years from the United Irishmen to the Home rule campaign and quotes Countess Markievicz, ‘dress suitably in short skirts and strong boots, leave your jewels in the bank, and buy a revolver.’ Elaine Reichek uses stitch not only to subvert the traditional sampler but also as a critique of the marginalisation of women and women’s work in dominant western culture.

**Slide 23**

She moves forward in time again from home rule to the Troubles in *Easter Lilies*. This takes as its starting point an iconic 1970s Provisional IRA photograph, which would have been readily recognised in Northern Ireland and understood as a constructed publicity photograph. Reichek took the two figures in the photograph and knit them twice, placing them either side of the photograph. In the first knitting she removes the guns, emasculating the crouched figures; in the second knitting she greys the figures out, so they recede into the gallery wall. In the catalogue essay she wrote ‘I’m not sure the people in the picture are the guilty ones’. In 1993, with the Troubles still on-going, the general public would have been as likely to take sides as engage with her open-minded questioning. It would be interesting to see this work exhibited in Northern Ireland now, post-conflict, the figures and the threat receding into history. The construction of the original photograph and the deconstruction of the figures through knitting would now come to the fore and raise questions about identity. Once constructed can it be deconstructed simply by removing weapons? And what exactly has faded?

**Slide 24**

In the same exhibition Reichek questioned documentary truth and drew parallels between how Native North American and Irish identity had been constructed through colonialism. The parallels she made between the North American Indian and the Irish native identity as colonial constructions are not necessarily borne out by closer examination.
The Celtic, nationalist, West of Ireland, vernacular identity, depicted in *Whitewash (Galway Cottage)* was as much self-constructed as colonially imposed. To a Northern Ireland audience, sensitive to the complexities of Irish identity, being on the side of the nationalists is not necessarily the same thing as being on the side of the natives.

**Slide 25**

Lycia Trouton was born in Belfast and emigrated with her parents to Canada in 1970 when she was 3 years old. She grew up in Vancouver with the television and radio coverage of the Troubles being the link to home and remembers the disconnect between listening to the news and then stepping out onto a sunny Vancouver street. She trained in sculpture and visited Northern Ireland in 1999 to take part in a conceptual installation project. The idea for the *Linen Memorial* evolved when she came across the book, *Lost Lives*, which documented all those killed as a direct result of the Troubles. The *Linen Memorial* consists of 400 Irish linen handkerchiefs. The 3,720 names of the dead were embroidered in white chain stitch by volunteers across the world, linking the Irish diaspora with home.

**Slide 26**

Trouton’s training in conceptual sculpture where the materials speak for themselves and the aggregate way of building it speaks for itself, informed the work and the use of linen which is of course iconic to Northern Ireland. The *Linen Memorial* can be shown in different configurations. She had originally thought of it in terms of earth art, something you could roll up, that wasn’t set in stone or steel - that could be laid out in a park like *The AIDS Memorial Quilt*. She had hoped to open up a conversation about shared public mourning and reconciliation.

**Slide 27**

The Linen Memorial was understood by church and peace groups but in the wider community it met resistance. The problem was that the concept of a ‘Memorial’ implies equal remembrance and honouring of all the individuals listed. This raises issues that are still deeply contested and divisive in Northern Irish society. The Linen Memorial is on display until the end of September in various venues in county Down, Lycia Trouton is here today and can give you further details about that.

**Slide 28**

A couple of days ago I was talking to an acquaintance, Heather Castles, who did a PhD a few years ago on Irish Lace, I was telling her about doing this talk and she told me she had done some work in response to the Troubles about 20 years ago. It was the first I knew of it.
This piece, ‘When all is told we cannot beg for pardon’, is made of pieced linen and silk from which 3,600 squares were cut. 3,180 were backed with black cloth, the number of deaths attributed to the Troubles at that time; the others were backed with mauve, the colour of half-mourning, to represent those left remembering the loss. She only exhibited it once, in Dublin Castle, and says she had ambivalent feelings about exhibiting it, because showing it as art somehow felt like making some sort of inappropriate gain from it. Following this, she made some more work in response to the Troubles that she has never exhibited, but she agreed to photograph them and let me show them to you today.

**Slide 29**

This piece, Toroid Wound, was not made to be shown as a work of art. She started it in 1994, using a list of names published after the first cease-fire, at the supposed end of the Troubles. Heather Castles explained that for her the art was in the remembering throughout the hundreds of hours of making. In imagining the differences between the lives of Tracey Munn, Niurati Isliania, Matilda Witherington, and all the rest of the 3,341 people listed, whose individuality was evident in their name.

The 3-layered strip of silk, paper and linen is almost one kilometre long. Paper suggests ephemerality, Silk - preciousness, and linen – Irishness and commodification. The paper is an unbroken computer tape recording information from a galaxy ten million light years away, information that travelled intact through time and space but was corrupted almost immediately it arrived on earth.

**Slide 30**

A couple of years later after peace failed and the conflict resumed, she made this piece, Gash. The surface is torn, held together by rows of stitch, but more attention grabbing than the torn paper - is the raw red wound that slices through it. There are names embroidered into this piece too.

**Slide 31**

But they are only visible when the work is back-lit.

In the next batch of slides now, I am going to move on from individual to group responses. And the first of the group quilts I am going to show you is an historical one.

**Slide 32**

Signature quilts were a popular means of fund raising in the late 19th century and the *Primrose League Quilt* is an unusual early example of a politically motivated signature quilt. The Primrose League opposed Home Rule and defended British interests in Ireland.
Slide 33

The quilt dates from 1888 and was made in Tralee, County Kerry. There was a large Militia Barracks nearby and many of the signatories give this as their address, suggesting they were British soldiers and military wives. The quilt was presented to the Marquis of Salisbury, Robert Gascoyne-Cecil, who was the Conservative Prime Minister and it is in the Hatfield House collection, where the present Lord Salisbury lives.

Slide 34

The Women’s Suffrage movement transposed the Victorian tradition of signature quilts and signature handkerchiefs from social memento to political petition, and Republican women prisoners at Maghaberry, Lisburn, worked a square, embroidered, not with their names, but with demands for women’s rights. Each woman chose an issue that was important to her and stitched it onto a piece of fabric in her own handwriting, this aspect of ‘getting the hand of each woman into the panel’ was important for the group.

Slide 35

The square was one of thirty made into a banner Women’s Rights are Human Rights, organised by the Committee for the Administration of Justice. The banner represented women from all over Ireland, North and South, urban and rural, of all ages and from different social, cultural and political backgrounds. A group of women came together to assemble the panels, bringing their children with them - in the usual way that communal childcare co-exists with women’s activities – and the loose panel attached at the bottom contains the handprints of their children.

Slide 36

The Women Together group was formed in 1970 and Pat Campbell joined it a couple of years later giving up her job to work full time for the group. In 1995 Women Together decided to make a quilt to celebrate 25 years of peace-making; and Pat Campbell, a life-long sewer, organised the making. She had intended to make one quilt but received so many squares that she ended up making 3 quilts.

Almost half the squares use peace symbols, generally a dove, and the words Peace, Hope and Love are frequently depicted as words or patterns.
Slide 37

It is important to note that these quilts were made in 1995, following ‘25 years of peacemaking’ by Women Together and 27 years of the Troubles. At this time there was a gathering momentum toward peace and this is reflected in the imagery and message of the quilts. The squares were made by 52 different religious, activist and cultural women’s groups. Even when the patch was made by one person, the group met to discuss ideas, so the quilts brought hundreds of people together in the making. I just want to point out this square in the top right corner – a cathedral window – made by the Carrickmore Quilters, as I will refer to it again later.

Slide 38

Women Together brought the quilts with them when they were invited to speak, in Ireland, England and Europe; not to decorate the halls but as testimony to peace-making. When invited to Warrington following the bombing there that left 2 children dead, they walked through the streets with local women, carrying the quilts as banners of sympathy and solidarity.

They may look like traditional quilts but no-one goes marching with bed linen held aloft – they were a political statement of peace-making. Their visual similarity to traditional quilts is because they were initiated, designed and made within the amateur patchwork community using the skills, techniques and designs they had at their disposal.

Slide 39

A selection of panels from the AIDS Memorial Quilt were shown at the Ulster Hall and Relatives for Justice, a support and advocacy group, working primarily with Nationalist and Republican communities, were inspired to create their own living memorial. Some deaths during the Troubles were politicised, or surrounded by silence or stigma, so the process of making the panels of the Remembering Quilt allowed these families to talk openly with others who had similar experiences and move toward a more positive remembering of the individual. Each panel consists of 49 squares, the first panel was completed in 2001 and there are now 10 panels, the latest was launched at the City Hall last April.

Slide 40

The squares are completed by the families (with help if required) and the person’s interests, hobbies, beliefs and outlooks are represented by embroidered images, text and photographs. Some of the panels are personalised with the inclusion of fabric from the deceased’s clothing and some of the imagery is symbolic. The square on the right is based on Sir John Lavery’s painting, Kathleen ni Houlihan, the personification of Ireland, calling young men to become martyrs for the Republican cause.
Roberta Bacic, a Chilean academic and human rights campaigner now living in Northern Ireland, curated an exhibition *The Art of Survival: International and Irish Quilts* in Derry in 2008 and included two panels of the Relatives for Justice Remembering Quilt, along with 24 other Irish quilts and 26 international quilts. The panels in the Remembering Quilt represent deaths and suffering in nationalist / republican communities and there are no equivalent quilts from unionist / loyalist communities (that I know of) to provide a counterbalance. The *Remembering Quilt* is not trying to find neutral ground or be conciliatory or take a peace or reconciliation stance. Instead, the squares tell their stories in a direct manner, using strong, emotive images and apportioning blame.

Normally textiles like this are made and exhibited within their community of origin, where they are understood and accepted. *The Art of Survival* exhibition was sited in venues across Derry and Roberta Bacic deliberately placed catholic quilts in protestant areas and vice-versa. After some discussions the work was all accepted and exhibited in venues where it opened up discussion beyond the communities of origin, but this is not always the case.

Wave is a cross-community organisation that supports people of all ages and all backgrounds traumatised by the conflict. As part of their work they run creative arts projects to encourage people to express themselves and tell their personal story, this therapeutic approach places emphasis on the process rather than the finished work. This wall-hanging, *Reflection on Loss – from Darkness to Light* was made almost twenty years ago. It symbolises the journey from the darkness and despair of bereavement to the light of hope for the future. The journey begins at the graveyard and the lighthouse represents the guidance and protection the women received on their journey through the dark and troubled waters of grief.

Instead of each woman telling the particulars of her own loss, they combined their efforts to tell the shared, communal story of grieving. The quilt maintains an all-inclusive and cross community position but in doing so it has to set aside the emotive power of personal testimony that demands attention for the individual. The cross-community position required the use of symbolically neutral imagery and a universal rather than individual focus that does not make explicit the circumstances of the loss - which inevitably implies blame. This quilt may appear anodyne and traditional in comparison to the *Remembering Quilt* but it carries equal pain and healing in each stitch.
Slide 44

WAVE launched a new *Quilt of Remembrance* this year. This quilt is quite different from the previous one – it tells the story of individuals who suffered throughout the Troubles. The intervening passage of time has allowed the images to be direct and representational rather than symbolic and universal. However, it still focuses on common rather than individual experience, so people from both (and neither) sides, can find their experiences of the Troubles represented. The finished quilt is full of details (not only of the conflict) but also of daily life during the 70s, and the strange everyday ‘normality’ of how life adjusted to the Troubles.

Slide 45

There is a growing readiness to explore an account of life during the Troubles that can accommodate multiple and conflicting memories and histories. Participants worked on panels and incidents that they found personally difficult in the recognition that suffering takes place independent of religion or cultural background. The quilt treads a careful line in balancing the conflicting memories, evidence of a high level of awareness and sensitivity to the complexity of the task.

In Northern Ireland throughout the Troubles those who strove to maintain a neutral position were a largely invisible, non-homogenous, unstructured collection of individuals, encompassing the full diversity of society across politics, religion, social class, race and gender. As such a non-group they had no clear identity and no historical symbolism or imagery that they could draw upon to make their position manifest in a visual way.

During the Troubles this neutral position was often a negative identity, a feeling of belonging to ‘neither side’. Now post-conflict (and especially with funded peace and reconciliation projects) there is a pressure to express a neutral but positive, cross-community, shared identity but the visual language to do this is still lacking.

Slide 46

In 2008 4 groups came together from different sides of the divide to make a cross-community quilt, *Shared Visions*. The project was facilitated by the Quakers and the groups were from inner-city Belfast, from inter-face areas - nationalist, unionist, republican and loyalist – areas that had experienced long-term and deeply entrenched sectarian attitudes.

Thirty-two women worked together to make a quilt that demonstrated a tentative coming together to express a vision for a new inclusive society and this required a use of imagery that would be acceptable to all 4 groups.
An analysis of this quilt demonstrates the lack of an existing visual language through which this ‘new inclusive’ society can be expressed. The women have used the symbolism available to them and the result is an interesting juxtaposition of the two dominant cultural and political traditions, in carefully calculated and balanced equilibrium. This is a piece of work clearly made by women who thoroughly, instinctively understand the subtle significances of the nuances of colour and symbols and how they will be interpreted in Northern Ireland.

Symbols of all sorts carry a divided significance in Northern Ireland and are carefully avoided in the quilt, except where they are balanced – a Lambeg drum with Irish dancers, orange lilies with shamrocks, a hurling stick with a football. The suffragettes demanded equality, not androgyny. Perhaps this is what these makers also want – to live side by side in equality and peace but retain their identity. Colours are exchanged, in the way that footballers exchange their strips at the end of a match, but the teams (for now) remain the same. Even the newly hatched chicks have emerged from a shared egg draped in their identifying flags. This quilt recognises that there are separate identities; instead of trying to merge them into a new shared identity it recognises the legitimacy of discrete identities but offers a vision of them co-existing.

Carole Kane’s involvement in creative peace and community work began in 1998 following the Omagh bombing that left twenty-nine people and 2 unborn children dead and a further 220 injured. In a massive outpouring of emotion flowers were sent from all over the world. These became a potent symbol of sympathy, solidarity and hope for the town. They were imbued with a power of healing, both for those who placed them and for those who suffered in the atrocity.

People were reluctant to allow the council to lift the flowers and when Carole Kane heard a radio discussion about what should be done with the flowers she suggested they could be used to make paper, so there would be a continuation. This became the Petals of Hope project - and I think it is an exemplary project in terms of what it brought to the community at a time of collective trauma and also in the quality of the finished artworks.

The flower heads were removed and dried and mixed with dyed paper pulp. Local schoolchildren made three large panels, one for Omagh, and the others for Buncrana and Madrid. Omagh is surrounded by a raised bogland of tuffets and hummocks, and hay stubble fields under leaden skies; and the Omagh panel, shown here on the right, captures this landscape. The title comes from a stanza that Seamus Heaney wrote in the book of condolence, ‘So hope for a great sea-change on the far side of revenge’.
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Pieces of paper, which were later used to construct small individual panels for each of the bereaved families, were made by adults from the local community. The women from Carrickmore Quilters came together to make a piece for Mary Grimes, one of their members who had been killed, along with her daughter, grand-daughter and unborn twins. Log Cabin had been her favourite patchwork pattern so the piece her friends made represented that. Mrs Grimes was one of the Carrickmore Quilters who made a square for the Women Together quilt 3 years before, the square I pointed out earlier.

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Carole Kane believes the value of creativity in the post-conflict process is that it enables people to explore and see things from a different perspective. Although this sort of project is more about the process than the finished product, textiles as a media can play a particular role in facilitating conversation. People are often reluctant to draw, they feel they can’t do it, but with materials they can collage a few things and something starts to emerge. Some people are intimidated by a group where they are expected to speak but with creative activities there is a freedom of speech and a freedom of listening in a safe place that encourages an informal, explorative experience.

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There are of course other countries where textiles have emerged in response to conflict. Most war textiles are woven – such as Afghan rugs, but South American textiles are pieced, appliquéd and embroidered and are therefore particularly resonant in Ireland where the textile traditions are similar.

In 1973, in Chile, General Pinochet overthrew the democratically elected government and there was a dictatorship in Chile for the next 16 years. During this time over 3,000 people died at the hands of the state and over 1,000 people disappeared. In relation to population size, the number of deaths in the Troubles was eight times greater than Chile; but in Chile many of those who disappeared were high profile non-combatants. Women were left to search for their husbands and sons and they had to find a way to survive and support their family.

The arpilleras became not only a source of income but also a means of social, political, personal and artistic expression within the mutual support of a sewing group. The arpilleras found their way into the wider world through the humanitarian organisations that sold them.
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Roberta Bacic, living in Chile during the dictatorship, collected arpilleras in support of the women. After the Pinochet regime she worked for the Truth Commission and became frustrated that the commission was only concerned with facts and legal testimony. The women’s pain over the disappearance of their husbands and sons and the impact this had on their life was deemed irrelevant. So recognising the arpilleras as the women’s personal testimony she now works to bring these neglected stories to the attention of the world.

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Northern Irish textiles made in response to the Troubles differ from arpilleras and other war textiles in that they were not made for commercial sale or for an outside audience to collect in support of a cause. They were made as a personal response. Many of the group quilts have only been seen in public since 2008, through exhibitions curated by Roberta Bacic. A current exhibition *Disobedient Objects* at the Victoria and Albert Museum, in London, includes 4 of Bacic’s collection of socio-political quilts. Bringing women’s grassroots stitching, as a form of protest, to a wider audience. And the cross-disciplinary area of conflict research and textile narrative is one that is just beginning to be explored.

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Roberta Bacic organises textile workshops alongside the exhibitions she curates, to explore people’s memories of the Troubles and encourage dialogue around people’s experiences. These images are details of some of the work made in the public workshops.

Following conflict there are struggles for memory and challenges of how to accommodate conflicting memories. There is no ‘one memory,’ it is ‘memory against memory’ and this is a natural and necessary part of the post-conflict process. After a certain period of time has elapsed rival interpretations of the conflicted past and its memory tend to occupy a central place in political debates. In Northern Ireland, as a society moving out of conflict, the challenge is to find ways as a community to deal with the experiences and the memories of the past.

This requires a collective rather than individual ability to be able to maintain a distance from the past while actively and reflexively engaging in debate about it; and part of the value of the Art of the Troubles exhibition here in the museum is that it extends this debate into a safe, accessible public and cultural space.
When Declan McGonagle curated ‘non-art’ into the exhibition of Troubles Art at the Golden Thread Gallery in Belfast, he justified the inclusion of bonfires and murals as connected in the field of experience – the textiles I have described today are no less connected. Textile responses have not been included in art exhibitions or literature about the Troubles and therefore a unique response, almost exclusively by women, is missing from the broader narrative.

Making and doing with textiles is an inclusive practice, it spans all ages, social classes, religions and traditions. Sewing creates a space, where the hands are busy and there is no need for direct eye contact or conversation. Difficult words and emotions can be ‘laid down’ quietly with the threads where they can be picked up (or left) by the other participants, so communication is facilitated without reconciliation being forced. Cloth has the potential to be used creatively and constructively; especially if it is remembered that the cultural value may be in what happens in the spaces around the making and in the conversations around the work, as much as in the finished artwork.

Questions