

Making materials meaningful

An interview with Susan Stockwell

Susan Stockwell grew up in the industrial city of Manchester in a politically informed household, her father being a history teacher, her mother being an activist, writing poems and sewing the clothes for the family herself. At 18, Susan Stockwell left Manchester to travel the world and fell in love with the arts. When doing a degree course at Sheffield University, she found sculpture as her expression. Using waste and industrial materials, she developed her own aesthetic language that brings in references to history, politics, gender and ecology. Called a “material whisperer”, the materials she uses guide and inform her work. That’s why in this interview we speak with Susan Stockwell about her art and its process guided by different materials that have been and are important sources of inspiration, exploration and questioning for her.

Rubber – Letting the material speak

In my first project at art school, they left us in the studio with a massive pile of sawdust and we had three weeks to work with it. We were not allowed to use glues, binding or forming materials. We worked as a group and individually. We buried each other in it, we blew it with hoovers and we drew with it. I made a mold of steps and packed the sawdust into it, to form steps and then did a performance, where I tried to walk up the steps. This was a formative work. I was using a material, pushing it to its limits and being as inventive as possible with it. Today, when I work with materials, I explore their possibilities and meanings and push them to their limits.

In the late 1980s, I went to a garage to have my car tires changed and discovered a massive pile of rubber inner-tubes, lying in the corner. The garage was keen for me to take them away as disposal was an expensive problem for them. I now had a continual supply of free material and immediately set to work. This was a formative time, I realized that I could be incredibly experimental and not worry about cost and waste. It gave me permission to fail.

In 1991 had a solo show at the Mappin Art Gallery in Sheffield with work made almost mainly from the rubber inner-tubes. Concurrently with the studio practice I researched into its history and learnt about Chico Mendes. He was the first real eco warrior, who lived and worked in Acre, deep in the Brazilian rainforest near Bolivia. Rubber originally comes from the rainforest, but it's very difficult to harvest wild so it was propagated, enabling plantations for mass production. The mass production of rubber was one of the factors that enabled the industrial revolution.

Chico Mendes realized that logging and clearing, burning of the rainforest was incredibly destructive. He was the president of the Rubber Tappers union, conservationist and activist. He was also articulate and traveled to the meet major governments of the world informing them about what was happening to the Brazilian rainforest and that it is the lungs of the world. He became an iconic international figure leading the movement to preserve the rainforest. He put the issues of the rainforest and deforestation on the map. In 1989 he was assassinated by local ranchers. Paradoxically through his death this message became widely known around the world and was investigated by the international press. He became and remains a hero to the environmental movement. Sadly, the Bolsonaro government has undone the good work set in train by Mendes, re-establishing mining, clearing and mass logging, irrevocably deepening our global climate disaster. Time to make another work about this!

To me this whole story was fascinating and I made a huge installation at the Mappin where the inner-tubes were woven, hung, and stitched, filling the galleries. For two or three years I mainly worked with this material. I started to illustrate some of the points that were concerned with Chico Mendez and the rainforest, but I realized when I worked that way, it wasn't interesting. It was illustrative and one dimensional. When I worked with the material directly, and stretched its possibilities the work became much more interesting and layered in meaning and dynamic. Multi layered readings are important in my work. I don't illustrate, I don't try to make points, I'm not a political activist, I'm an artist.

I work intuitively. I tune into a material. I also do a lot of research, but when I make, I forget that and work with the material and see what comes out. I completely immerse myself in it, intellectually, physically and creatively. I go into what I can only describe as a meditative state. I work with it, have conversations with it, leave and return to it and this process leads to something else, bigger, new and more complex. It's a slow process, it can take years for pieces to reach their potential. I also work in response to spaces, considering their history and functions as well as their physical characteristics. The work takes on its own life, it's a responsive process that takes me to new lands, it's a voyage of discovery.

Toilet Paper – Solid impermanence

I left Sheffield in the early 90s and went to the Royal College of Art in London to do a postgraduate degree (1991-93). When I was at the college, I began to make incredibly fragile organic forms out of papier mâché. I wanted to explore the idea of death and the point of disappearance. This felt like water to me. It exists, but it doesn't exist. It's on the point of disappearing. My father died painfully of cancer when I was 18, we nursed him at home. It was a profound and horrible experience that influenced me and I became obsessed with the impermanence of everything. The very fine line between life and death. I was curious about that feeling of disappearance, which dictates everything.

A pivotal realization happened to me when I sourced a huge quantity of toilet paper from Kimberly Clark. My original intention was to use it to make papier mâché forms, but I soon realized it had its own inherent fragile qualities and I didn't need to transform it that way.

I hung it, jumped through it, painted it, cut it and shot it. Eventually, I started to pile it up and make solid looking block forms. There was no water or glue used, they were made in big molds and I used my body and a stick to bed the paper down and make it into blocks. The resulting forms looked like travertine marble, and yet were impermanent.

From reading I became aware of the destruction of forests and the waste involved in the production of toilet tissue. They say it's sustainable, but it isn't, it destroys huge amounts of forests. It's a luxury commodity that we use in the West, without realizing what we're doing.

After the work is shown the paper goes back to the factory to be recycled. I just borrow it to make art with. So, your toilet paper could once have been art! This principle runs through all the big series of my work. I do that partly for logistical reasons, because I can't store this stuff, nor do I want to. It makes sense, it goes back into the chain, it's a neat circle. I make objects, but I'm not polluting. I'm not adding to the mess and I'm letting it go back to its original purpose or use.

Computer Waste – An architecture of information

In 2007, after doing a residency in Nanjing, China (2005-6) I went to Taiwan and spent time working at Taipei Artist Village, which was fantastic because it was full of writers, curators, artists, dancers and musicians from all over the world. That was an important time not just because of the work I made, but because of all the dialogues that I had with all these creative people and the friendships that were formed. In 2008 I was invited back by the Hong's Foundation and created an installation with three tons of computer components (provided by Panasonic), shown in their exhibition space. This exhibition **B-Side Ecology** looked like the local architecture and cityscapes, when seen from an airplane window. Computer motherboards are maps for information and electricity to pass along; they resemble city maps to me. I have made many exhibitions and commissions with recycled computer components.

Quilts – Sewing our life together

Sewing is an integral part of my practice. I stitch quilts, maps and dresses. Often, I work collaboratively with groups of people. In 2012-2015 I worked with the National Army Museum (London) and with veteran soldiers who had been in Iraq and Afghanistan and we sewed together. Building upon a long tradition of soldiers sewing. The project was called **Piece Makers** and we made a quilt called **Peacemakers** 2014 now in the museum's collection.

I see sewing as not just an activity, but as a therapeutic process as it can create a relaxing, calming and meditative state. I use other repetitive processes like, stacking, layering, binding and quilting for the same reasons. When I sew with people, it seems to be equally therapeutic and I equate it to stitching people's lives together, repairing, healing and mending. It's a process that's much more than just the hand stitching. It's like the hand has its own language and it connects the brain and the mind with the physical body.

Money and Boats – What connects us all

I have always been drawn to boat forms. They act as a symbol for the transition from life to death. For a while I had an old wooden rowing boat in my studio. I used to sit in it and think about things. I invited people to sit in it and have dreams and ideas when they visited. And inspired by that I started making boat pieces, like **Sail Away** and **Trade Winds**, where I was also working with money.

Since 2005 when I was in China, I have collected old money. Originally old Chinese money called Jiao, which isn't worth anything, but is very beautiful and contains images of ethnic Chinese minorities, which now have a different reading. In 2009 I made **A Chinese Dream**, a big quilt piece for the exhibition, **Quits 1700 to the Present Day** at the Victoria and Albert Museum London. It contains a map of the world made from and stitched onto a sea of blue 10 Yuan notes that hold an image of Mao's face. It references the dream that everybody has about bettering life and themselves, which it often based on money. **A Chinese Dream** is now the V&A Museums collection.

I was reading a lot about money. It's an interesting sculptural material and a product that we have a limited perception of. We see it as a means to an end, whereas it's far more complicated than that. The symbols, motifs and designs on notes convey a lot about a country, its history and regime.

As I was playing with it, exploring it and thinking about it, I realized that when folded currency notes make perfect sail and boat shape. That discovery triggered an interesting connection: We invest our

dreams in travel and money. Money passes through thousands of people's hands and collects their residue, therefore it connects us. I named this boat series ***Sail Away***.

Soon after making the first money boats, I was invited by a group called Tate Collectives to participate in the ***Hyperlink Festival*** (2013) at Tate Modern. They gave me the Turbine Hall, which is a huge cavernous space. This was both exciting and daunting. And I asked myself: What am I going to do? Then I thought, Tate's Turbine Hall is an ocean of concrete, and it runs parallel to the River Thames. So, I thought, these tiny little, fragile, poetic, quiet boats could work well in that massive industrial space. I invited school kids and Tate Collective to come to my studio and make boats, and armed with four hundred I made a flotilla of boats that snaked from one end of the Turbine Hall to the other. The boats were made with paper maps, travel tickets and money from all over the world.

During the Festival, we invited people to come and make their own boats. Tate Collective set up six workstations and eight hundred people came and made boats and added them to the flotilla. They interacted with ***Sail Away***, and we allowed them to walk amongst the boats, photograph them and play with them. It was great fun. And because they're very playful, toy like and fragile Tate were worried that they would get damaged but because people made the boats, they were protective of them, and stayed around guarding them.

Maps and Dresses – Claiming territory

For years my studio walls were covered in maps, and I realized that a lot of them contained anatomical shapes. Africa is the shape of a stomach, Brazil the liver, Central America a shoulder strap and the north coast of Africa makes a lovely neckline. Suddenly, my mind went "Ping" and I thought "Our continents and countries reflect our anatomy. I started to make dresses out of maps and realized that if I use maps to make a female dress shape, it claims female territory. Maps have traditionally been used by men to claim physical territory. Now I have transformed the maps and they are claiming female terrain, claiming the female body. Without economic leverage women don't have power and so I made a dress with money, it's another claiming or staking of territory: This is my body!

That's how the dress sculptures began. People bring different things in them, which I learn from and take into the future dresses. The strong visual craft aesthetic used in these dress sculptures (they are sculptures and not made to be worn) act as devices to draw people with the intention that they will then read deeper meanings and ask questions.

Territory Dress 2019 was made as a commission for the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam. It has the hole in the abdomen, with a money boat sailing out of it, and references the colonial histories of Holland and other European nations. But it also has contemporary references, barcodes, computer components, rubber and Batik flowers stitched on and printed into it. The dress train shapes draw from Surinamese Angissa, which are the headdresses that slaves made to communicate with each other. This piece contains many references, yet is a beautiful, tactile objects that people can simply enjoy as well! it all sounds very serious, doesn't it? Well, it is, but I have a sense of humor and that's important.

I'm an artist. I don't see myself as a political activist. I'm comfortable if people see my works as beautiful objects and enjoy them. I'd like to get back to that more because I enjoy the pure process of making. Having done yoga and meditation there is a part of my making process that creates a similar state. I can empty my thoughts, stop the noise and tap into a state of consciousness that I find creative. I read and research and then I try and empty my mind and let the material take the lead. And it's as if the materials history literally does come through. It speaks to me.