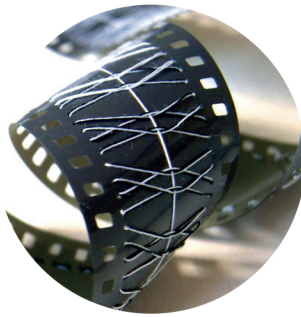
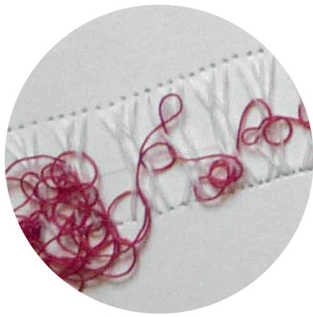


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INTERVENTION AND SYNTHESIS: NEW PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN TEXTILES AND PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE VISUAL ARTS

TEXTILES | PHOTOGRAPHY | MATERIALITY | INTERVENTION | SYNTHESIS
MULTI-DISCIPLINARY | ZEITGEIST



ABSTRACT

WITH THE EXPONENTIAL GROWTH IN THE ACCESSIBILITY OF DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHIC CAPTURE AND ITS MULTI-PURPOSE APPLICATIONS, THERE HAS BEEN A CORRESPONDING INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF VISUAL IMAGES CREATED AND SHARED BY THE GENERAL PUBLIC.

With this comes a corresponding shift in the way many images are experienced – with immediate accessibility and the bright luminosity that comes with viewing through the backlit screens of a mobile phone, laptop, or home computer. This increasingly mainstream experience could be described as ‘democratic’ with the accessibility it offers, but one could argue that it can also result in a homogenised ubiquity and expectation, a downgrading of the sensuous appreciation of materiality. Paradoxically, a new synthesis of artistic practice is emerging that celebrates the importance and diversity of material interventions in relation to the visual image, with particular sensitivity to nuance and visual tactility evident within the work. This paper focuses on this growing area of practice, this new intervention and synthesis between photography and textiles, textiles and photography within the visual arts. The conference, with its thematic strands of strengthening new partnerships and attitudes, and breaking barriers – cross-disciplinary and collaborative teaching, learning and research – provides a forum for an exploration of the relevance of this aspect of visual arts practice, and of the contribution textiles makes within these interventions.

A consideration of the exhibitions 'Depth of Field – conversations between Photography and Textiles' 2006, (Midlands Arts Centre) a MAC touring exhibition, 'The Photographic Object' 2009 at the Photographers Gallery, London, and an exhibition in the development stage in the UK will provide a general contextual background to the emergence of this trend. The contributions of specific artistic practices are considered through a case study approach based on curatorial selection principles. Engagement with the conjunction of – the synthesis – or the intervention between photography and textiles provides an initial starting point for selection. Though intentions, intellectual directions and outcomes differ, the artistic practice of Maurizio Anzeri, Julie Cockburn and Jess Edwards all evidence

- the use of a print based 'substrate'
- evidence/traces of a material interaction with this medium
- an investment in time and craft skills
- nuanced practice
- a commitment to the creation of unique objects

This paper moves the conversations initiated in the 2006 exhibition 'Depth of Field – conversations between photography and textiles' forward to 2012 and considers them within the context of material significance. What is the relevance of the 'textiles' contribution within this thematic expression of artistic practice?

INTRODUCTION: A PIONEERING 'PARTNERSHIP'

As distinct subjects, both photography and textiles are ubiquitous in contemporary culture. On the surface, these disciplines have little in common. Making rather sweeping generalisations, photography places emphasis on image generation and communication whilst textiles could be considered as primarily concerned with tactility, with structured and nuanced materiality. But there has been a relationship between these subjects dating from the earliest scientific experiments that led to the technological invention of the photographic process. With early experiments using a wide range of subject references, including botany, architecture, landscape, portraiture and still life (Schaaf 2000), what was the attraction of textiles – what distinctive qualities did textiles provide?

'Textiles' is a tactile medium, with sensitive nuances and subtle but distinctive permutations of materiality inherent in each fabric/object. The quest for creating images that represented and communicated the tactile material qualities of these textile pieces provided both a technical and an aesthetic challenge. It is notable that textiles were specifically referred to in Henry Fox Talbot's presentation of his first paper on photography at the meeting of the Royal Society in London on the 31 January 1839.

On "one occasion having made an image of a piece of lace of an elaborate pattern, I showed it to some persons at a distance of a few feet, with the enquiry, whether it was a good representation? When the reply was, 'That they were not so easily deceived, for that it was evidently no picture, but the piece of lace itself.'"

Henry Fox Talbot cited in Schaaf (2000)

In reality, as an object, it was an image on a surface that had been created – a translation, an interpretation of the materiality of the lace, but so successfully achieved that the inherently tactile patterned materiality of the piece was transformed into this fixed, static but convincing image.

DIGITAL TRENDS – VISUAL PROLIFERATION AND THE BACKLIT IMAGE EXPERIENCE

Fast forward to the current decade, and the continuing technological revolution has, and is, transforming the concept of and encounters with photography. Current concerns centre on issues surrounding the exponential volume of photographic images that are now being generated on a global basis (visual overload), the instant delivery and replication of these images (through mobile and social networks), and, of particular significance for this paper, the uniformity of material experience of the image though back-lit screens (computers, mobile phones).

This unmediated proliferation of imagery has led to polarised views. Though embraced by the majority, it has also led to some concerned observations and emotive comments. As early as 2005 Tom Ang conjectured that more images were currently being taken annually than in the previous 160 years. Expressed in this way, it is a very sobering thought. Ang (2005) stated ...'in addition to the other pollutions we have unleashed on ourselves, we may well have to thank digital photography for image pollution.' In the seven years since Ang's article, with the ubiquitous mobile phone capture adding to the analogue and digital cameras he was referring to, this exponential curve of image capture generated and disseminated through digital devices continues unabated. Chris Wiley (2011) also commented on this aspect of zeitgeist, expressing

his concerns in a very forthright manner.

It is indisputable that we now inhabit a world thoroughly mediated by and glutted with the photographic image and its digital doppelgänger ... As a result, the possibility of making a photograph that can stake a claim to originality or affect has been radically called into question.

Chris Wiley cited in Ewing (2012)

Evans (2011) is also concerned about the increase in imagery and what he considers a corresponding dumbing down of content, noting that 'digital technology smoothes and compresses as it glides along.'

Galleries are beginning to question the concepts and relevance of exhibition programmes when bodies of work are now so easily accessible online (and mediated through this backlit computer screen experience). There is an international curatorial trend for exhibitions reflecting aspects of this shift in practice. In reviewing 'We Are All Photographers Now! The Rapid Mutation of Amateur Photography in the Digital Age', Musée de l'Elysee, Lausanne, Switzerland, Ritchin (2007) noted the symposia accompanying the exhibition developing this theme. It was

"...asking visitors to question the changes going on in the milieu of photography, particularly about the impact of the digital camera and of cell phone cameras, and an exploration of the fluid dividing lines between professionals and amateurs, or what the museum called "the rapid mutation of amateur photography in the digital age.."

Ritchin (2007)

In New York, *Click!; A Crowd-Curated Exhibition*, Brooklyn Museum of Art, 2008 also called upon the inherent characteristics of this digital

JUST AS THE DIGITAL REVOLUTION HAD AN INITIAL 'SLOW BUILD', THERE ARE SOME NOTABLE INFLUENCES THAT PREPARED THE GROUND FOR A GROWING RECOGNITION AND APPRECIATION OF THE NUANCES OF MATERIAL AWARENESS IN RELATION TO PHOTOGRAPHIC PRACTICE.

expression, with a focus on digital submission and response. The structuring of the exhibition reinforced the escalating trend for a homogenised material experience. Notable was the exclusively digital submission of work, the digital communication of the imagery for voting purposes and the uniform material experience of viewing images through a back-lit computer screen. Decisions were made about the dimensions of the images presented in the exhibition by the popularity of the computer screen voting outcome (the larger the numbers of votes the bigger the image) rather than the photographer's intended size dimensions. In reviewing this exhibition, Ptak (2009) stated his support for the computer screen

"...as an ideal exhibition medium. I love the internet's participatory culture and its flat, levelling digital aesthetic. The very notion of 'crowd curating'keeps in step with the democratic and participatory culture of the increasingly ubiquitous online content."

Ptak (2009)

PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE MATERIAL OBJECT

As the dominant characteristics of a trend become increasingly evident (in this case the ubiquity, indiscriminate volume and the increasing dominance of a back lit screen based uniformity of digital material experience in relation to the photographic image)

the creative potential of the space that has been 'left behind' reasserts itself. A new sense of enquiry emerges and an alternative territory develops.

Just as the digital revolution had an initial 'slow build', there are some notable influences that prepared the ground for a growing recognition and appreciation of the nuances of material awareness in relation to photographic practice.

Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart's (ed) seminal book *Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images* (2004) was of particular significance in this respect. The book presented an important shift in perception when 'experiencing' and considering photographs. It highlighted the notion of photography that moved from the dominance of the 'image' to the photograph as 'object' – a material being – where image and material context intertwine. The importance of material context was framed in conjunction with issues raised by the noticeable impact of the increase in digital compared to analogue practices. The format of twelve essays from authors approaching issues relevant to their specialist (but diverse) academic disciplines indicated the potential significance and scope of the impact this was having.

The staging of photographic exhibitions with a strong material presence also helped to remind both artists and the public of the potential richness

available through the material interaction with the physical image, and the continuing contemporary relevance of traditional approaches to image making. Of particular note was the Victoria and Albert Museum's distinctive exhibition 'Shadow Catchers' staged in 2011. It featured contemporary work produced without the use of a camera with four of the five photographers in this exhibition using the photogram as their means of image production.

Both 'Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images' and 'Shadow Catchers' were concerned with this change of emphasis in photographic perception and material significance from a photographic perspective, but there had not been specific references to textiles. The relationship between photography and textiles re-emerged in exhibitions staged in 2006 and 2009. A focus on the significance of materiality became increasingly evident with this interdisciplinary approach.

Described by Terry Grimley (2006) as a pioneering exhibition, *Depth of Field, Conversations Between Photography and Textiles*, (Little 2006) was a Midlands Arts Centre (MAC) touring exhibition that showed at MAC Birmingham, Lighthouse Poole, the Harley Gallery Wellbeck and Q Arts in Derby. Exploring the notion of interdisciplinary interaction between photography and textiles in personal practice, it brought together work by fifteen emerging and established visual artists from the UK and Australasia – textile artists referencing photography and photographers referencing textiles to highlight a shared materiality within their contemporary practice. This drawing together of very diverse work meant the exhibition could be read, cross-referenced and interpreted in a number of ways involving conversations around the emerging themes of movement, memory and the relationship between craft and technology.

Underpinning many works was a fundamental understanding of the nature of cloth, its handle, the way it performs, its sensual tactility and responsiveness to movement, creating a distinctive physical presence in the gallery. Staged at a moment in time when the digital revolution was having a profound effect on the restructuring of professional photographic practice with darkroom skills rapidly being undermined by the movement from analogue to digital techniques, the relationship between craft and technology was another strong thematic undercurrent. In textiles, these concerns were evident with work ranging from the capture of hand stitch to the use of laser technology to etch textiles referencing the emergence of a photographic image from a chemical bath. (Little 2006)

In 2009, The Photographers' Gallery in London staged 'The Photographic Object', bringing together works from German, UK, American, Italian and Polish artists.

The internationally renowned artists in this exhibition use stitching, cutting, piercing and punching to explore the ambiguous space between two and three dimensions. Dissatisfied with the conventional function of photography as a surface that reproduces a copy of the external world, these artists test the materiality of their medium'

The Photographic Object exhibition brochure 2009

Initiating an exhibition with this concept at this venue (a gallery for both UK and international photographers) presented this emerging trend to a wide audience contributing to the changing nature of the notion of photography and its position in visual arts practice.

TEXTILE INTERVENTIONS – THE PHOTOGRAPH AS SUBSTRATE

Considered from an essentially photographic perspective, these signposts have indicated the rapid technological development of the photographic medium and its accompanying invasive ubiquity. In turn, this has raised some of the underlying contextual concerns that have been influential in shaping the emergence of these current juxtaposed manifestations of zeitgeist, namely the dominance of the back-lit, screen mediated, homogenised materiality of the digital image (data), and the contrasting resurgence of the interventionist approach and diverse material presence of the hand-crafted unique object that included the re-emergence of a strong relationship between photography and textiles.

To pursue this theme of current collaborations between textiles and photography, the work of four artists will be considered, selected on curatorial principles. Though intentions, intellectual directions and outcomes





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differ, in their multi-disciplinary approach all use the photographic print as a substrate. All are committed to the creation of unique objects (as distinct from reproducible images). There is evidence of piercing and textile based interaction with the substrate. There is an investment in time in the creation of these unique objects and physical engagement with craft skills.

MAURIZIO ANZERI

Significantly contributing to this emerging trend, Maurizio Anzeri's work has rapidly gained an international profile. His work is included in exhibitions and featured in magazines that reach a wide international audience, from photography to the visual arts and to crafts. As one of the artists selected for The Photographic Object exhibition already mentioned, his work was prominently featured in the information brochure. Moving beyond photographic circles, this prominence continued with his work featured in Crafts magazine (Hemmings, 2010) and

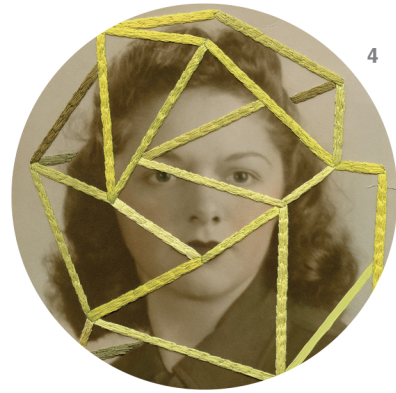
an image selected for the cover of that edition. Selection for Newspeak: British Art Now (Saatchi Gallery, London 2010) placed him at the centre of visual arts contemporary practice. His impressive list of exhibitions can now be accessed through their site (http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/artists/new_britannia/). Further exposure to a wider audience came with commissioned collaborations with Robbie Spencer and Richard Burbridge in Dazed and Confused magazine's 2011 June and November issues. This signaled an alternative approach with a change in emphasis from working with vintage 'found' photographs, to working on a 'live' project with a photographer and stylist.

This is an intriguing image – simultaneously enigmatic and forthright. Ironically, though the material experience of the reader is through a printed approximation of the work, the intensity of the material engagement is powerfully conveyed. Because the artist's practice is to

stitch on found vintage photographs not resized digital reproductions, the intimacy of scale that would be experienced in a gallery can be anticipated. The 'vintage' photographic conventions are present – the sepia toning, the posed grouping and the oval format of the framing device. But the image has been transformed, the overt textile intervention, striking in its execution, encourages subtle readings. There is an implied echoing of the oval photographic format in the organic oval stitched shapes. The decorative immediacy of the stitched thread encourages one to notice the textile detail in the image – the fabrics and style in the garments, the informal detail of the simple, decorative, pierced but regularly spaced stitching on the central yoke, and the elaborately tied fabric detail in the hair. This relationship between the photographic image and the textile intervention is further reinforced by the monochromatic colour selection and



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JULIE COCKBURN'S MULTI-DISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO CREATING HER UNIQUE INTERVENTIONS EXTENDS BEYOND A RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PHOTOGRAPHY AND TEXTILES TO ALSO INCLUDE PAINTING.

placement of the threads hinting at the early hand coloured tinting of images. This is a consummate piece.

Let Them Play is an unexpected series, with its unsettling mix of tradition and intervention, innocence and sophistication. Robbed of their individuality and immobilised by the conventions of the staged pose, these miniature 'people' appear as frozen props incapable of movement – just waiting to be brought to life. The stitched interventions are simultaneously sophisticated and playful, entrapping and liberating. The colour both complements and overwhelms the images. Perhaps it is the trapped frozen innocence implied by these works conflicting with the knowledge that in real time life is now over for these masked individuals that makes for such a haunting series.

JULIE COCKBURN

Julie Cockburn's multi-disciplinary approach to creating her unique interventions extends beyond a relationship between photography and textiles to also include painting. Starting with a found photographic image, the subtle creases and marks from handling over time have become an integral part of her canvas. The works are intimate in scale. Time needs to be invested when looking at their subtle nuances and engagement with the printed photographic image, paint and stitch. In some works the transition is so seamless and achieved with such consummate skill that it takes very close scrutiny to fully appreciate these constructed subtleties.

'Smile' (figure 3) is just such a work. Redolent with ambiguity, from the mark making schemata of distilled symbols for face, neck, eyes and mouth overlaid on the image interpretation of reality, to the distilled essence of the implied painted mark represented

through the medium of stitch. Time has been invested in creating this perfectionist stitched illusion of a spontaneously achieved gestural paint mark. Each thread and stitch must be individually selected to be able to transpose convincing variations in density and tonal qualities. The gentle monochromatic subtlety of the colour palette is arrested by the high key arctic white contrast of the mark. But even the arctic white rewards close scrutiny to reveal the gentle blends of grey and beige that enliven the form.

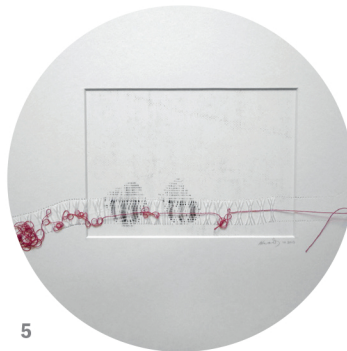
'In Yellow' (figure 4) also rewards close scrutiny. The vintage image, a construct of representational reality, cages 'the figure' in a physically stitched structure. This flat form is tonally graded to create an illusionist impression of a three dimensional form, all the more remarkable as the medium changes from paint to stitch without destroying this illusion. The underpinning of the art of the painter is clearly evident in this stitched piece.

JESS EDWARDS: PHOTOGRAPHY AND TEXTILES – AN ITERATIVE APPROACH

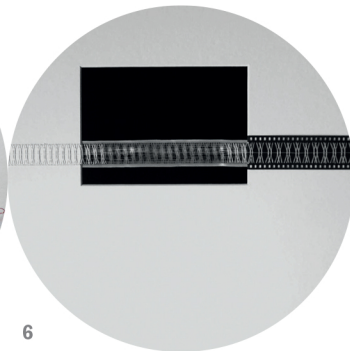
Concerned with the concepts of 'The Sublime in the Mundane' and 'the Slow Movement', Jess Edwards (www.jessedwardstextiles.blogspot.com) has developed a distinctive body of work that is underpinned by knowledge and craft skill, referencing both photographic and textile traditions. The series explores the synthesis of this interplay between concept, aesthetic sensitivity, craft skills and nuanced materiality.

Jess Edwards' creative journey started with the construction of textiles using her awareness of fabric structure and knowledge of traditional drawn thread techniques. Just as Henry Fox Talbot used a piece of lace as subject reference for some of his earliest photographic experiments, Jess Edwards also used textile samples. In this case, her drawn thread constructions were the physical objects that became the subject of a series of photograms. With the fabric transposed into a paper based (photogram) image and mounted for viewing as fine art photography, the photogram and mount now became the substrate, to be pierced and stitched in an iterative process encompassing textiles and photography.

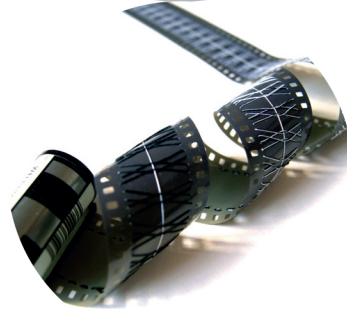
Figure 5 captures this fabric starting point. The photogram shows the three stages of the preparation of the fabric substrate, with the faint trace of the original fabric; defined shapes of more open areas in the fabric produced by the partial removal of individual warp threads followed by the removal of a group of weft threads and finally a traditional drawn thread technique used to re-configure the fabric structure. Using piercing for anchoring and added thread to simulate warp yarns, the work extends beyond the photogram and across the mount. The inclusion of the needle poised in



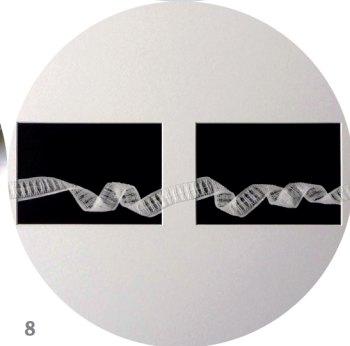
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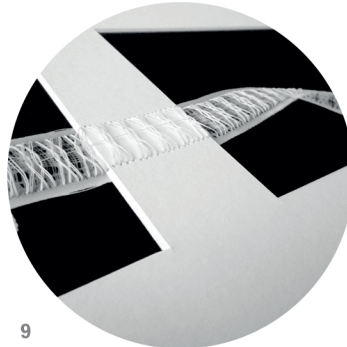
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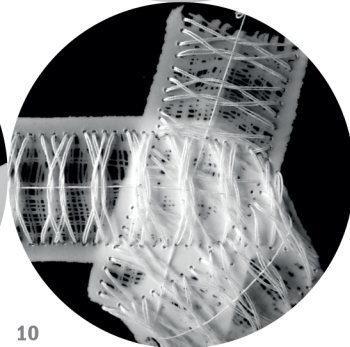
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the act of construction reinforces the extended materiality of the work.

As the series developed, figure 6 captured the conjunction of a textile structure originating from drawn thread techniques with the juxtaposition of the photogram process and analogue film stock, in a complex but distilled narrative. White and black thread is placed in sequence referencing the

ascending grey scale of a black and white analogue print test strip. The film becomes the substrate for the textile manipulation as it unwinds from its canister, as if anticipating the commercial unravelling and downward spiral of this previously popular and profitable medium. In January 2012, with plummeting demand for film stock, Eastman Kodak filed for bankruptcy.

Figure 8 (with details shown in 9 and 10) embodies the lyrical sophistication that developed as the series progressed, with the panoramic sweep of the imagery and the integration of stitched structure flowing across the photogram and the frame.

**PATRICK SNELLING:
AUGMENTED TEXTILES**

Working in Australia, Patrick Snelling is a textile designer and visual artist who engages with the concept of both digital and traditional craft techniques, material processes, and the tools that enable the acquisition of these skills.

Returning to the notion of the photograph or digitally captured image functioning as a photo-realist replication of a material object, (figure 11, 12) Digital Door - Apron features in his Urban Apparel project. This work replicates the structure, detail and materiality of a door with its

peeling paint, house number and door handle. Presented on a gallery wall as a portal to another space all is not what it seems. There are contradictions in the slightly oversized re-proportioning of the door, and its reference to simultaneously functioning as an internal connecting door and an external front door. Printed in slightly oversized sections with each section roughly nailed to the gallery wall, this photo-realist print functions as a photographic substrate. Augmented by a three-dimensional metal hook, it provides the context for displaying the working aprons - the focus of the work. The aprons have been both digitally and hand screen printed followed by undergoing rigorous finishing processes (including burying in the garden) to achieve a well-worn aesthetic. With printing, dying, stitching, distressing and washing processes involved, each object carries its own distinctive material aesthetic and evidence of the hand of the maker. A companion piece with a treated lab coat hanging on the back of a lab door continues the textile/ photography materiality conversations in the workplace.

CONCLUSION

Early photographic experiments created imagery from a wide range of subjects, but a special relationship between photography and textiles was established at the outset when Henry Fox Talbot specifically referred to textiles in the presentation of his first paper on photography at the meeting of the Royal Society in 1839. (Schaaf 2000). The history of photography has been shaped by a continuous technological enquiry and invention, and in the process an extensive archive of images has been created. With the development of digital technology, the number of images produced increased exponentially, to the point that it might now be considered that there is a new phenomenon of image pollution. (Ang 2005).

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These developments led to the current dominant photographic expression of a homogenised material experience of back lit screen delivered data in the form of visual images. In questioning this dominance, an alternative creative space has been revealed. A new iteration of contemporary work that includes personal interventionist approaches with conversations between photography and textiles has emerged. Though intentions, intellectual directions and outcomes differ, there are a number of visual artists who are using the photographic print image as a substrate for textile interventions. In their individual practice they are creating unique, labour intensive, handcrafted objects that simultaneously revel in their physical immediacy but also demand quiet contemplation.

Exhibitions and publications play a contributory role in this unfolding zeitgeist. Continuing in this tradition, a 'Beyond surface and material: The meeting point between photography and textiles' exhibition will be staged at Rugby Art Gallery and Museum in September 2013. Featuring the work of a number of artists referenced in this paper it will provide a physical meeting point for the current, distinctive material concerns that are evident in the new tactile language that is evolving through these iterative and invigorating conversations between photography and textiles.

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FIGURE CAPTIONS AND CREDITS

Figure 1: TWINS, 2011, Courtesy the artist & Private Collections.

Figure 2: Let Them Play, 2010, Courtesy the artist & Private Collections.

Figure 3: Smile © Julie Cockburn.

Figure 4: In Yellow © Julie Cockburn.

Figure 5: © Jess Edwards 2010.

Figure 6: © Jess Edwards 2010.

Figure 7: (detail) © Jess Edwards 2010.

Figure 8: © Jess Edwards 2010.

Figure 9: © Jess Edwards 2010.

Figure 10: (details) © Jess Edwards 2010.

Figure 11: Digital door – Apron © Patrick Snelling 2009.

Figure 12: (detail) Digital door – Apron © Patrick Snelling 2009.