

The Magnificent Seven

Stroud Life article 13.04.11

Decades ago the deafening thundering sound of fulling machines, turning water wheels and carding machine rollers filled the Stroud valleys. Known affectionately as the “string of pearls,” the remarkable collection of 150 textile mills made impressive silhouettes against the landscape escarpment and marked an era when Stroud was at the centre of a thriving woollen industry. Scarlet cloth was laid out to dry in fields and weavers worked tirelessly to meet demands. Today although those sounds have gone and many of the mills lie redundant; the town is now held in high esteem by leading textile artists and up and coming talent all over the world thanks to Stroud’s International Textile Festival (SIT). This year it promises to be bigger, better and involves even more high profile artists from different countries as well as providing a showcase for local textile artists. Now in its sixth year, SIT celebrates Stroud’s unique heritage, yet more importantly embraces the wealth of talent which comes under the textile umbrella, from traditional to contemporary.

A group of artists: Liz Lippiatt (textile designer, printer and dyer); Sarah Cant (milliner); Kathryn Clarke (fashion designer and printer); Anne Rogers (felt maker); Sarah Pearson Cooke (textile artist); Jenny Bicât (textile designer and printer) and Corinne Hockley (textile artist); collectively known as Studio Seven will be exploring the theme of weave and woven cloth in this year’s festival. No strangers to this prestigious event, the seven artists are renowned for innovative ideas and for encouraging public participation. This year in particular they are relying on help from people of all ages to take part in what they are calling “the WEAVE experiment.” Through creative inspiration, dance, lighting, textiles and performance, they hope to recreate the atmosphere of a tremendous water wheel at the recently renovated Plunge Pool outside the Museum in the Park. The idea was inspired by one wheel in particular which was stored at the former Stroud Museum for many years. The seven heard about its story when they were performing their impressive “Cut 2 on Fold,” open-air show at Quenington Old Rectory in 2009.

“The water wheel was removed from a property next door to the Old Rectory in 1969 through the roof and was taken to the museum in Stroud, where it stayed in storage. But in 1998 Lucy Abel Smith who was particularly interested in its heritage, took it back to its original village and it now hangs on her bridge at the Old Rectory,” explains Anne.

“The plunge pool was used by rich clothiers who used to cool off in the water after they’d been out hunting,” she adds.

Along with the water wheel imagery, the artists are also hoping to visually represent and celebrate the intricate workings of textile machinery of old. One mechanical machine, known as the Jacquard loom, invented in 1801 was controlled by punched cards with punched holes, each row corresponding to one row of the design. And it’s this idea which will feature in Studio Seven’s experiment. They have printed 5,000 postcards, each made up of 96 squares which will be sent all over the world. The idea is to get individuals to fill in a pattern with a black pen, very similar to the punched cards, which controlled the loom.

“We are hoping as people fill in their cards, their patterns will be interpreted into dance, like a bobbin spinning. Kristin McGuire has worked out a code to correspond with the different rows which she will choreograph.

Just as the punched holes provided the instructions for the loom, our cards will programme our “machine,” and make it come alive,” says Corinne.

“None of us are weavers, we are just playing with the concept and have deliberately not talked to any professional weavers so we aren’t influenced by what they say. We are inspired by weave as a facet of British culture; we aren’t looking at technical weave, rather we are looking at it conceptionally; what it means as a process, what it means to have a water wheel and the power of the water itself,” she explains.

The official launch date of Stroud’s International Textile Festival on Friday, April 30th will also be the start of Studio Seven’s installation, with Kristin translating the pattern codes to create a choreography.

The beauty of their projects is that although the artists have an idea in mind, they never really know how it will end up. Instead it evolves, takes shape with time as members of the public contribute, adding their own twist and turn to the tale. Those familiar with Studio Seven know the high calibre of its work. Past installations have generated excellent reviews including Textiles in Performance; Make Do and Mend; Cut 2 on Fold and Remnants.

“We love working with the public, they end up having a stake in what we perform and they help it develop. As artists it gets us to stand back and loosen up, and because it is a collaboration, we have to let go and let it happen, which is very exciting,” adds Anne.

Studio Seven hopes to get funding in order to develop their WEAVE experiment further and envisage it being their longest project yet, possibly running over the next two years.

“The installation is an abstract visualisation of the process of weave, not a loom, or actual water wheel, but an actual representation of that process and what it leaves behind,” says Sarah Cant.

The first step is for individuals to pick up a weaving card and punch in their own unique code to enable the so-called water wheel to start working. On the back they will also be asked a significant question, “what does WEAVE mean to you?” These answers will be just as important as the codes themselves and add a personal link to Stroud’s rich textile heritage that SIT is celebrating.

Five of the Studio Seven artists along with Sarah Jenner and Francesca Chalk, based in the Textile Studio at Stroud Valley Artspace, will also be involved in the Textile Trail, an Open Studios trail taking place on Saturday, May 7th 10-6pm and Sunday, May 8th 12-5pm.

For more information about workshops and events visit www.stroudinternationaltextiles.org.uk

Tracy Spiers 13.04.11