

Glitches in Time

Directions in Textiles

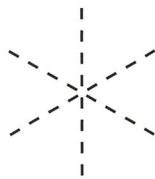
A number of textile-based exhibitions in mid-2006 prompted **Grace Cochrane** to look at some of the ways textile artists and designers are crossing old and new technologies in order to realise their ideas.



Zoë MacDonell's printed textiles, with drawings and computer-generated images, in the photographer's studio, 2006.

Photo: Keith Saunders

... A PIXEL OF COURSE IS REALLY A STITCH

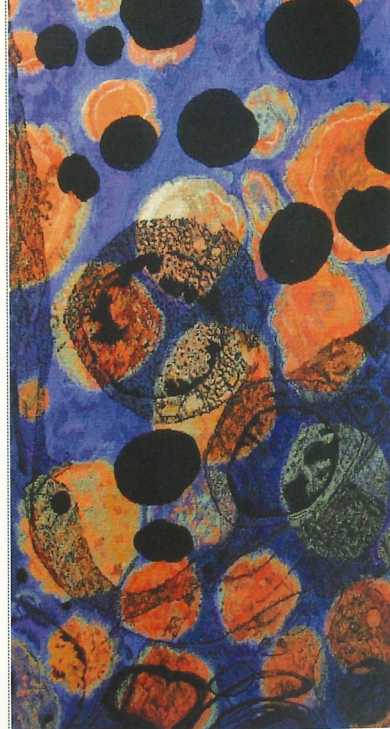
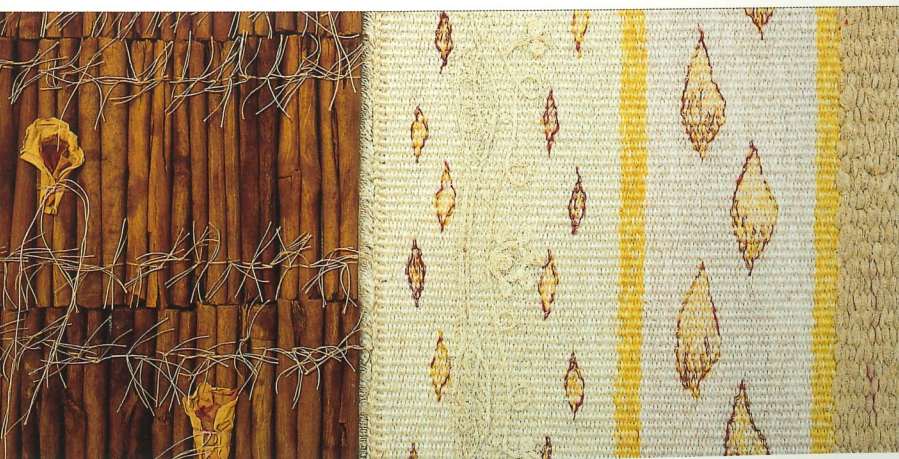


In a recent exhibition catalogue, *Crossing Boundaries: Maintaining traditions*, Susan Brandeis discusses the work of teaching textile artists working in North Carolina, United States – a place well known for both its textile industries and handcrafts, as well as its specialist crafts centres. She observes that while textiles meant survival for ancient peoples, in the form of fishing nets, ropes, baskets, shelters and clothing:

... if we stop to look more carefully ... we can be moved deeply by their ability to embody meaning and to evoke associations with our own lives. For thousands of years textiles were made slowly, and entirely by hand with skill, patience and artistry. Today most of the textiles we use in our everyday lives are mass-produced at astonishing speeds and are easily available in cheap abundance.¹

The 'textile art' in the exhibition took a range of forms and, in many cases, embraced new technologies alongside the old. Some artists – like Catharine Ellis, working with woven *shibori* processes, now often using heated metal rather than dyed fabric – have plans to develop personal work into production through links with local industry, itself under threat from cheaper overseas competition.

These artists are not alone in their interests or in the scope of what they are doing. In Australia and New Zealand the same patterns are clear. Computer-aided programs linked to the machines of manufacture open up many new possibilities, where artists can interface with industry. Contemporary designers can involve themselves in providing textiles for anything from car upholstery and contemporary furniture, to fabrics for fashion or bullet-proof vests. In both materials and processes, their interests and concerns cross both ecology and economy.



However, new technologies also open up different ways of making one-off, expressive artworks. As textile designer and consultant Bruce Carnie says, 'a pixel, of course, is really a stitch'.² The punch-card system used in jacquard looms to control the woven design had been, in fact, adopted in the 1830s by Charles Babbage when he developed plans for his Analytical Engine, the forerunner of the modern digital computer. Direct digital computer links with machines for weaving, printing and knitting now allow infinite customisation: what is intended for rapid prototyping or short runs in industry also offers possibilities for single pieces or limited series by individuals. Printed fabrics no longer need multiple screens and labour-intensive colour changes. Computers can assess the shape of a body and translate it to a profile for a knitting-machine. Like printing, weaving no longer relies on repeat patterns to manufacture in quantity or scale: jacquard and even carpet looms can make large, one-off designs from digital instructions. The carpet being commissioned for the drawing rooms at the New South Wales Government House will be made by Tascot Carpets in Devonport, Tasmania, and those who submitted ideas knew they could design the entire floor area as a one-off concept. Anyone arriving at Darwin Airport will see how this works when they walk across a large carpet sea with local fish and turtles in the airport lobby.

But audiences still like to make associations with the handmade, and many artists and designers see the slow process of hand production as central to the meaning of their work. In contemporary design, it was perhaps the fashion industry that first identified a wider audience interest in the processes and values of the handmade. Designers like Easton Pearson started to use printed, beaded and embroidered fabrics. Akira Isogawa

sourced old fabrics and commissioned others, including textiles from the hand screen-printer, Signature Prints, in Sydney, suppliers of 1970s designs by Florence Broadhurst. SIX exposed seams, frayed edges and tacking stitches; Collette Dinnigan used vintage fabrics, as well as those with commissioned embellishment. Many moved to Asia to find craftspeople who could supply the skills they needed and, in doing so, developed working relationships that benefited local village economies in places like India, Pakistan and South-East Asia. Cath Braid and Kirsten Ainsworth, of Caravana, moved from New South Wales to live in north-west Pakistan, where they work with women's groups in remote villages, providing both a social centre and an opportunity for independent income through embroidering and embellishing fabrics for fashion.

Meanwhile, designers like Georgia Chapman from Vixen, in Melbourne, and Rebecca Patterson from Breathless, in Perth, design for print production in their own workshops. In New Zealand, Miranda Brown left her work in the film industry where she made fabrics for *Xena: Warrior Princess* and *Lord of the Rings*, to set up her own label specialising in *shibori*-dyed New Zealand wool. Doris Dupont collaborates regularly with New Zealand artists like John Pule for her printed fabrics for fashion. In Western Australia, Aurelio Costarella gleans vintage fabrics from op-shops and specialist collectors around the world and constructs new outfits by hand, working only with local sewers, models and shoemakers.

These possibilities are now also explored in various ways in art and design schools where, alongside understanding their materials and processes through experiencing hand skills, graduates use new technologies that anticipate what they might find in industry. In Melbourne, RMIT's school of textiles in Brunswick encourages links with local industries, and the manufacturer, Warwick Fabrics, supports an annual Dreamweaver Design Award that sends the recipient to Belgium for experience. The local Moreland City Council, in fact, encourages the development of small businesses in re-used local buildings through a 'business incubator' program, now providing homes for a number of innovative fashion and design businesses. One of these is Print Ink, set up by Lisa Carroll and others to offer small-run screen-printing to artists and designers as well as handprinting their own wallpaper. Lola Phillips provides a similar service in Sydney, in association with her design studio, Longina Phillips, which specialises in digital printing on textiles. A number of small, design-based industries successfully make small batch production. In Melbourne, for example, Nicola Cerini reflects her interest in environmental issues in her screen-printed textiles for furnishing fabrics and homewares, including a distinctive handbag collection. At cloth, in Sydney, Julie Paterson and her small team similarly make screen-printed accessories and textiles for the home, printing 20-metre lengths in a workshop in the Blue Mountains.

At the University of Technology (UTS), Sydney, the annual Australian Business Limited Award gives final year students the chance to gain mentoring and business advice from industry experts. Here, lecturer Cecilia Heffer worked with lace specialist Rosemary Shepherd in the Lace Study Centre at the neighbouring Powerhouse Museum to research historical pieces, and make new forms of lace that include hand and laser-cut digital print elements and stitches left after dissolving the material around them.

Art schools like the ANU School of Art, in Canberra, and the College of Fine Arts (COFA) at the University of New South Wales, also work to combine hand and digital technologies as artworks, and carry out research projects in a range of areas. At ANU, in collaboration with Jill Pettifer, Annie Trevillian has researched chemical treatments of fabrics, published as a manual, *Bleach Buckle and Burn*, 1997, while Julie Ryder combines digital prints with patterns made by moulds and bacteria. Zoë MacDonell, in Sydney, makes one-off textile lengths with layered drawn and computer-generated printed images, drawing on elements from her everyday environment to make her complex graphic textures. And fashion schools report that with the closure of specialist fabric shops, students are motivated to prepare their own fabrics.

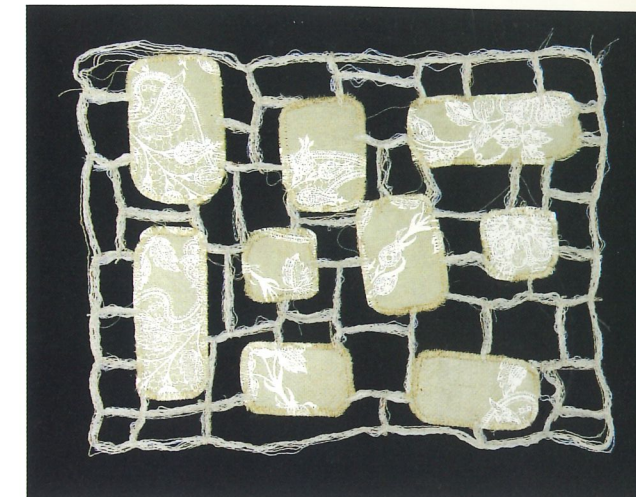
Valerie Kirk, *The Nobel Prize Tapestry* (reflecting the work of Peter C. Doherty and Rolf M. Zinkernagel), 2005, woven tapestry wool weft cotton wrap. Photo: courtesy the artist



Sara Lindsay, *Cinnamon and Roses* (detail), 2004, tapestry, rose petals, linen, muslin. Photo: courtesy the artist



Cecilia Heffer, *Reticella Lace* series, 2006, shantung lace, handcut, with digital print and gold foil, hand and machine stitching, on soluble substrate. Photo: Marta Sengers



Most industries and design schools are not able to make their new-tech facilities available for others who might want access to the equipment. So the facilities and services offered by places like the Montreal Centre for Contemporary Textiles, in Canada, with its fully computerised jacquard handlooms that allow large one-off pieces to be woven, have attracted textile artists interested in extending their work in this way. Liz Williamson, Jennifer Robertson and Kelly Thompson are among those who have travelled there to work, knowing it is also possible to communicate their design ideas later on-line. Equally, Williamson and Robertson, and Sara Thorn from Melbourne, are among those who have sought experience on the ancient jacquard looms at the Lisio Foundation in Florence, Italy.

Important opportunities for textile artists are also offered through commissions for public buildings. Jennifer Robertson is making upholstery fabric for a set of nineteenth-century chairs for Government House, New South Wales, on the looms on which silk velvet is hand-woven at Lisio, and more commissions for other textile artists are planned. The Victorian Tapestry Workshop celebrates 30 years of interpreting artworks into tapestries for installation around the world. Individual weavers also take on commissions. Valerie Kirk, in Canberra, whose own work investigates ideas



of migration and identity, has recently completed a series of tapestries celebrating Australian Nobel prize-winners associated with the Australian National University. In Central Australia, Ernabella artist Pantjiti McKenzie's designs were selected for the production of three rugs in China, to be installed in the State Library in South Australia, while artists from Amata are having their designs made into rugs in Kashmir.

At the same time, many textile artists remain focused on expressing what textiles might mean on individual and personal levels. They are interested in how textiles carry with them personal associations and memories of earlier social functions and ceremonies. Ideas are drawn from the familiarity of colours and motifs, the marks of wear, the evidence of repairs, the value of skills. Meanings are linked to the feel, or even the sound and smell, of fabrics and fibres. We remember the smell of indigo, the rustle of silk, the coarse serge of school uniforms, the softness of mohair. 'Design and emotion' is more than a current marketing term for anticipating and influencing what people might buy; these associations make real links across time and culture.

A number of recent exhibitions and events have explored personal expression through textiles. Object Gallery's touring exhibition *Woven Forms* surveyed the work of 65 contemporary basket makers in Australia, drawn from traditional practices across the globe, but in materials as diverse as natural fibres, communication wiring,



Beth Hatton, *As for man, his days are as grass* (Kangaroo Rifle and 1910 Shotgun), tussock grass, cordyline, linen thread, wood, emu feathers, 2003 (Kangaroo Rifle) and 2006 (1910 Shotgun). Photo: courtesy the artist



Rachael Rose, *Unravelling Eden* (from *Transport*, Tasmania), 2006, collograph printed on muslin. Photo: Garry Conroy-Cooper

packaging tape, plastics and metal. And in late 2005, Craft Queensland's *The Woven Purpose* showed the contemporary work of 15 Indigenous fibre artists from Aurukun, Lockhart River and Jumbun in far north Queensland, demonstrating new interpretations of traditions and meanings.

Many of the exhibitions at the Arts Festival associated with the Melbourne 2006 Commonwealth Games included textiles. In *Threading the Commonwealth: Textile tradition, culture, trade and politics*, 'power cloths' like ceremonial cloaks and robes were juxtaposed with textiles that celebrated rites of passage 'from birth, circumcision, marriage to death and all that comes between'. *Common Goods: Cultures meet through craft* was a complex project organised by Craft Victoria, involving residencies of makers from eight Commonwealth countries, which led to an exhibition of collaborative artworks.

In *The Presence of Things: Sense, veneer and guise*, at the Faculty Gallery, Monash University in Melbourne, 14 artists and craftspeople working in different media responded to pieces in the Embroiderers' Guild of Victoria's extraordinary collection of 3,000 pieces of lace and embroidery from around the world. Nicola Cerini's *Sampler*, 2005-06, for example, brings together in printed form, images of a number of pieces from the collection. At the Freeland Gallery, Sydney, Beth Hatton's reversible rag rugs, combining wool with offcuts of kangaroo pelts, comment on the interface between the Indigenous and the introduced and the impact of settlement on the Australian environment. She links these elsewhere with the threatening interface of full-scale reproductions of nineteenth-century firearms, made from meticulously bound and stitched combinations of local and introduced grass fibres. In Tasmania, Douglas McManus, an authority on hand and digitally-printed textiles, drew on recognised Tasmanian strengths to bring together new print technologies in photography, paper and textiles in the exhibition, *Transport*, at the Salamanca Arts Centre in May 2006, evoking literal, historical, cultural and imaginative journeying – or 'transporting'. And in the United Kingdom, Australians, including Patrick Snelling, were invited to participate in *Depth of Field*, an exhibition from the Midlands Arts Centre, Birmingham, which explores links between photography and textiles.

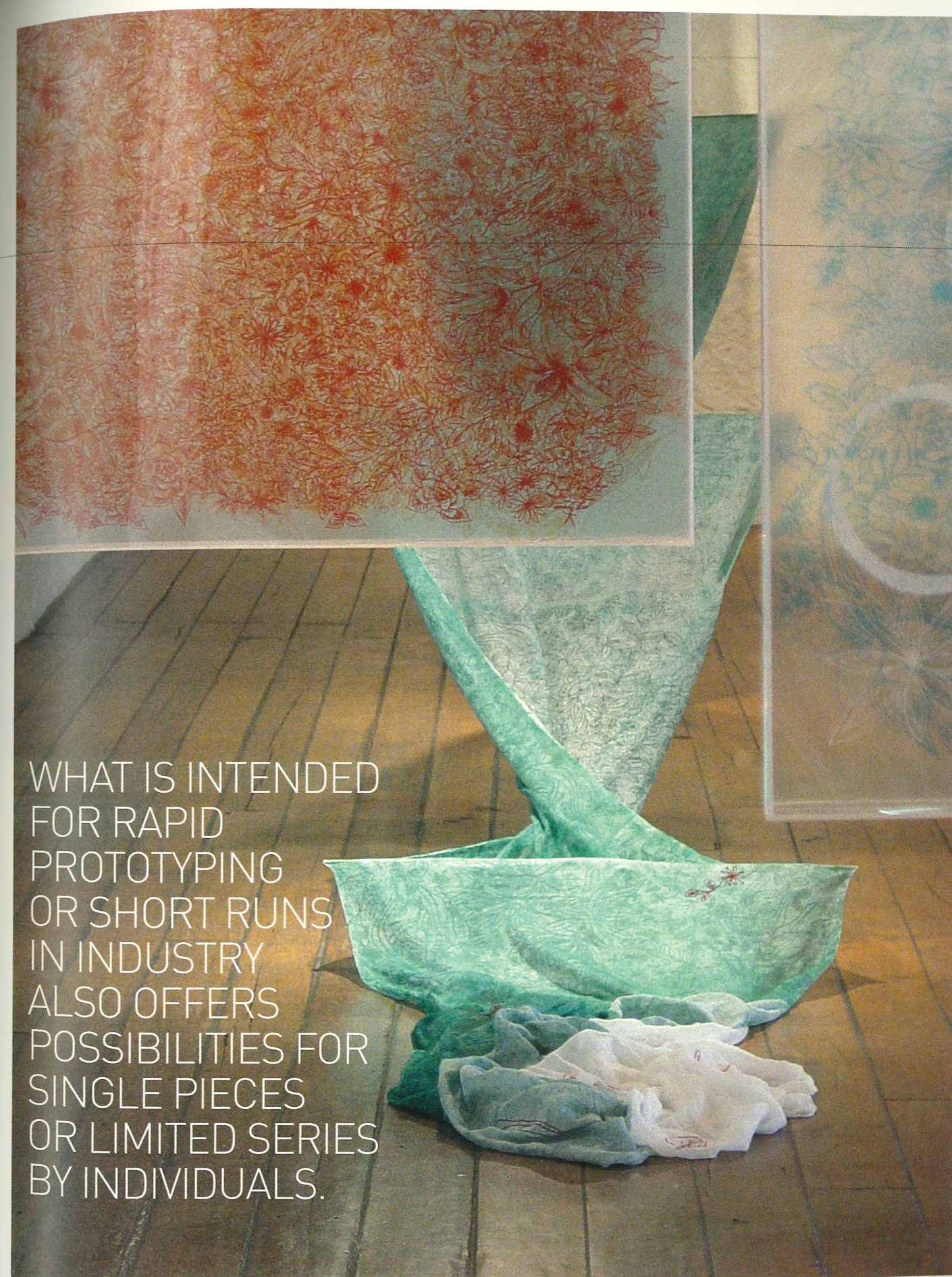
Finally, in the touring exhibition, *a matter of time*, the 16th Tamworth fibre textile biennial, curator Suzie Attiwill talks about how the works from the 26 artists reflect 'the experience of time'.³ The materials and the process of working with them, and sometimes the pieces themselves, represent previous histories and meanings that continue to transform as we encounter them. Sara Lindsay's tapestry *Cinnamon and Roses*, 2004, for example, continues her theme of migration. In a 'reweaving of the family history' in both England and Sri Lanka, she incorporates fragments from her grandmother's wedding dress, which had been re-made into her own christening dress, beside nostalgic and emblematic cinnamon sticks and rose petals. Paul McKee is interested in how men's culture is represented through textiles. He has researched the famous 'wagga' quilts – bush utility rugs believed to have been originally made by men sewing grain sacks together and lining them with cotton bags from the Wagga Wagga Lily Flour Mill, to keep them warm on the road. His own work, as in *Bequeathed*, 2004, combines pieces of old blankets and clothing, their worn histories transformed into new stories.

In the broad scope of what textile artists and designers are doing, the past is clearly always present, but at the same time, so too is the future. It is an extraordinary time for textiles. ■■■■

Grace Cochrane

1. Susan Brandeis, *Crossing Boundaries: Maintaining traditions. Teaching artists of the Southeast*, Center for Craft, Creativity and Design, Hendersonville, North Carolina, 2005, p.2.
2. Bruce Carnie, in conversation with the author, May 2006. Carnie is researching a design management model for the digital textile print industry.
3. Suzi Attiwill, *a matter of time*, Tamworth Regional Gallery, 2004, p.2.

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