

Memory and Preservation: Celia Pymâ??s Artful Darning

Description



Celia Pym photo: Anthony Crolla

Self-proclaimed â??damage detectiveâ?• Celia Pym has made darning into a lifelong artistic practice, one that reflects on the close, intimate relationship we form with the clothing in our lives. She has an uncanny ability to transform once tatty, moth-eaten sweaters, careworn socks and even silk costumes through a deliberate and visible act of nurturing repair that celebrates the life the garment has already lived, while simultaneously repairing its longevity for at least another generation or two. She says, â??I like it when things are lumpy and bumpy. Itâ??s nice when you can see the landscape of damage, which although I am mending, I am also distorting.â?•



A detail from one of Celia Pymâ??s darned socks

Celia Pym was born into a family of ingeniously creative people, whose lovingly handmade objects surrounded her day-to-day life with memories. She says, â??I grew up seeing people knitting and making things. There was evidence in my childhood of rugs and blankets, cross-stitch and furniture, and gardens of past generations of women who had a fantastic range of making skills.â• Pym adds, â??a familyâ??s history is often told through artefacts.â•

When she left home, Pym went on to study sculpture at Harvard, and working with materials, substance and form continued to stay with Pym throughout her later work with fabric. After graduation, Pym went on to earn a diploma of teaching at University College London, followed by an MA in Constructed Textiles at the Royal College of Art in London, where she consolidated her deep fascination with fabrics, textiles, knitting and sewing.



Hopeâ??s Sweater, 1951

Pymâ??s interest in darning came through a surprising and unexpected family connection â?? following the death of her great uncle, the artist, illustrator and theatre designer Roland Pym, she inherited one of his old sweaters. Pym noted how the sweater had been carefully darned by her great aunt, Elizabeth Cobb. Pymâ??s aunt and uncle had lived together for most of their adult lives, and the sweater became a testament of their relationship, as much as the passing down of memories from them to her. When she discovered the sweater contained new holes, Pym set about adding her own twist, darning the white sweater in bright blue to make the repairs a distinct feature.

In recent years Pym has translated her artful darning into an act of social repair, extending her ability to gather, mend and transform into peopleâ??s lives. She recently ran a workshop titled Womanâ??s Hour Craft Programme at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, for which, as she explains, â??People would bring their garments with holes in and I would mend them.â?•



Celia Pymâ??s Norwegian Sweater

What Pym noticed was how people would bring in objects that were loaded with memories, of those they had loved and lost, perhaps, or children who had grown up. This fed into Pymâ??s fascination with stories and a desire to examine the deep connection between people and the clothing we have in our lives, whether we wear them, or they hold special personal significance. Pym says, â??As an artist I am looking for interesting people and material. I need to be out in the world looking for stories.â?•



The gold cape Celia Pym darned and mended for the Musee National de Monaco

More recently, Pym received a commission to repair a series of costumes from the collection belonging to the Musee National de Monaco, some of

which would once have been worn by members of the Ballets Russes. Pym was fascinated by these curious, damaged relics, and their state of limbo â?? not quite ready to be binned, yet too damaged to be used. Pym says she asked, â??If they are in this indeterminate state, neither for display or for throwing away but no one knew what to do with them, can I use them?â?• Among the garments she has repaired from this archive are Of all the 59 garments Pym came across, she was most fascinated by a delicate, threadbare silk gold cape. She remembers, â??I mended this gold cape, one of the costumes from the ballet; it was made from this old golden silk and sequins, and over time it had started to rot and was terribly dusty. The whole piece was so fragile, I wanted to tack down what little silk remained.â?• Following her repair, Pym took the cape â??on tourâ??, to BlÃ¶nduÃ³s in Iceland, Monaco, and Old Kent Road in London, asking various club members and individuals to try wearing the cape and having their photograph taken by photographer Michele Panzeri.



The inevitable passage of time is visible in all the clothing Pym works with, and repairing therefore becomes a way of conserving and protecting the

fragile and fleeting history, emotion and memory that is so bound up in our clothes. She thereby encourages us to find new, creative meaning in the things we already have, rather than discarding and replacing in an endlessly wasteful cycle of consumption. Pym notes, â??Over time I have realised that I am mending more than just a garment, Iâ??m into other peopleâ??s problems. People come to me and Iâ??m like, â??Right, what can we do about this?â?? â?¦ I think it is all to do with caring.â?•

CATEGORY

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