

# Exhibition Reviews

Compiled by Hilary Miller



Leigh Spinners Mill

Photos: Sarah Byrne

## Coal, Cotton, Canals The Association of Guilds of Weavers, Spinners & Dyers National Exhibition 2022

Leigh Spinners Mill, Leigh, Greater Manchester  
3 – 18 September 2022

In 2020, I had never picked up a crochet hook or a knitting needle. I had never considered the stages that yarn goes through before appearing on the shelves of Hobbycraft. I had never considered the methods of dyeing and blending colours, and how the strands are formed and plied to become someone's favourite colour combination. I thought weaving was something that machines did now.

In 2020, The Association of Guilds of Weavers, Spinners & Dyers were forced to postpone their biennial national exhibition due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Passionate makers across the country from one of over 100 local Guilds, were suddenly allotted two extra years to develop their work and their skills in response to a theme. In the meantime, I had picked up my first hook,

adopted a yarn habit, learnt to spin, opened my mind, and volunteered to steward the Guild's exhibition.

I found myself sitting in the exhibition space, on the 4th floor of the repurposed Leigh Spinners Mill, which has been going through big renovations and changes. Various creatives have appropriated the rooms across the storeys for the sharing and creation of their practices – music lessons, wellbeing classes, artist and maker studio spaces, even a collection of heritage artefacts on the 1st floor. As I sat, I looked out of the open door into the corridor, where I noticed the reason for the sharp breeze I can feel on my legs; there is a missing window pane where I'd assumed the glass was simply clear. I look out and see blue, cold sky and crisp clouds framed by the scaffolding boards

that surround the mill. It would be easy for a building in such a transitional state to seem unwelcoming, but from the moment we opened the exhibition doors at 10am, visitors poured in. So promptly they arrived at opening time that I almost thought they were joining our team of volunteers, but they slipped past us, pulled towards the displayed items and began their slow wander amongst the craft.

Meandering through the exhibition, I'm interested to learn how the makers have found ways to respond to the theme *Coal, Cotton, Canals*. Alison Rainford's (Lancs and Lakes Guild) woven *Canalside Bedspread* is a pattern-rich, colourful example of the type of patchwork textile common at the time canals were built and associated with barges. The inclusion of 'feelie pieces', tactile



Coal, Cotton, Canal Triptych  
Sarah-Jane Johnson



Red And Green Linen 1970s Parker Knoll Chair  
Judy Jones

samples visitors are invited to touch, is ingenious and scratches my itch to stroke the length of the bedspread, imagining it wrapped around me. Work by Sarah-Jane Johnson (Online Guild), *Coal, Cotton Canal Triptych*, forms an abstract imaginary landscape, which among other geographical features represents a canal running past a cotton field, with coal seams beneath the ground. The three pieces travel from one to another, the woven threads dancing across the fabric in a delicate and painterly way.

One of the pieces gaining a lot of attention was Judy Jones' (North Cheshire) fully upholstered 1970s Parker Knoll chair. Covered with an intricate red and green striped weaving inspired by barges and narrowboats, the chair forms the exhibition's



Two Strata Panels  
Fiona Moir



Canalside Bedspread  
Alison Rainsford



Floribunda  
Carole Keepax

only complete furnishing, and is an example of the practical reach of yarn craft. Finished by a professional upholsterer, Jones' piece is an example of the great care and attention this group of makers have dedicated to their work.

Other makers showcase dyeing skills. On entering the exhibition, I am immediately pulled to Fiona Moir's (Dumfries & Galloway Guild) *Two Strata Panels*, each panel demonstrating a combination of dyeing techniques, separated out into organic layers which mimic a section of geology. I'm particularly drawn to Moir's accessible dyeing techniques, using materials commonly found in the home such as ice and flour paste. Carole Keepax (Grampian Guild) is another dyer, whose work, *Floribunda*<sup>1</sup>, examines the reach of natural dyes and articulately displays the diversity and vibrancy that can be achieved from plants and traditional methods.

Along one wall hung a collection of 180 six-inch hoops responding to the prompt *Still Waters*. Each interpretation is a delicate and beautiful insight into the maker's style of work, and highlights skills in weaving, dyeing, and spinning. Some hoops display felted landscapes, shaped by colour, tone and texture. Some mimic the gentle, soft ripples of water's surface through lace stitching. Others show intricately woven motifs, with the hoop used as a frame to connect a mobile piece in the centre. Every time I wandered back up to the wall of hoops, I met with something new to catch my eye – a new tonal

combination or a new detail stitched into the surface of a fabric. Hung together, these small hoops demonstrated not only skill, but the playful and joyful spirit of making and experimentation.

I was joined by Ann, sitting across from me hand-carding fibre into little rolls, which remind me a little of those curly wafers sometimes served with a coffee or stuck into an ice cream at a restaurant. She stores completed rolags in her bag, building her collection throughout the day as we sit and chat. Ann was on the organising committee when they had to make the difficult decision to postpone the 2020 National Exhibition. As a traditional biennial event, the national exhibition means a lot to Guild members across the country; a moment to celebrate their crafts, their talents, and learn from the approach of other makers.

However, the delay of this exhibition has had definite positives. Back in 2020, the only available space to exhibit in was the conference room at the time, now home to the (highly commended) canteen. In the years since, refurbishment has crept through the floors of the building, unlocking new spaces and framing old features, with freshly oiled original wooden floorboards in the purpose-built exhibition space. Walls with a clean lick of white paint host the tapestries, weavings, clothing and objects of the Guilds' makers. With an extra two years to prepare for this exhibition than they originally would have had, Ann notes that the submissions she saw had been particularly ambitious, and the

work itself more refined, with an increase in the number of 'fragile' labels used, which is uncommon for a textile exhibition. The implication is that the work is generally soft and able to be pressed, folded or stacked without damage. More fragile stickers appearing is interesting, in that it implies work that is considered more precious, more valuable; not something to be crushed, but something to care for in the same way the maker has cared for a longer period of time.

As I sat in the exhibition, making notes for this review and overhearing the conversations from visitors as they shared the Guild they're part of and the distance they've travelled to be here, I am struck by the feeling of pride that everyone shared for the exhibition. In my first year of being a member of the Guild, and for my first experience of the National Exhibition, I really feel the anticipation that has been building up to this display, made only more precious by the threat and delay of the pandemic. Visitors are excited to have made it here, to spot the names they know on display, and to share stories with other visitors and volunteers. The momentum to keep making is palpable, and filled me with hope that the joy and inspiration from this exhibition will continue to drive motivation and ambition for the next two years, building to another excellent show in 2024.

Sarah Byrne, Stafford Knot Spinners

<sup>1</sup> Carole Keepax describes the making of *Floribunda* in Readers' Showcase, p.22