

Sharing memories

Christine Chester looks back at her experiences of working on the theme of dementia and identity

I HAVE HAD the most extraordinary year. In November 2014 I was informed that my application for a gallery at the Festival of Quilts 2015 had been successful; and I was already planning to complete my MA at the University of Brighton in September 2015. Bad planning, I know – but circumstances conspired to make both things happen in the same year when I had initially planned them to be in different ones.

For a brief moment at the start, and at other times in the following months, I did wonder how I would manage. Despite sleepless nights, maintaining teaching commitments, and few days off, I got both exhibitions up and, in the last week of September, received the news that I had graduated with distinction. As I say – an extraordinary year.

One of the key elements to achieving this was that both exhibitions were linked in their theme: dementia and identity. While the work was different, the understanding and subsequent inspiration was the same, reducing some of the underpinning research and workload.

I timetabled my year carefully, dividing my time between studio days working on gallery pieces and home days working on my Masters project and written work. Copious lists throughout kept me on track. I was also lucky in that my previous employment in a further education college gave me experience that made much of the planning work easier. I had spent years putting up exhibitions of student work, so could do most gallery tasks alongside the more familiar work of stitching, writing and research.

Planning for exhibition

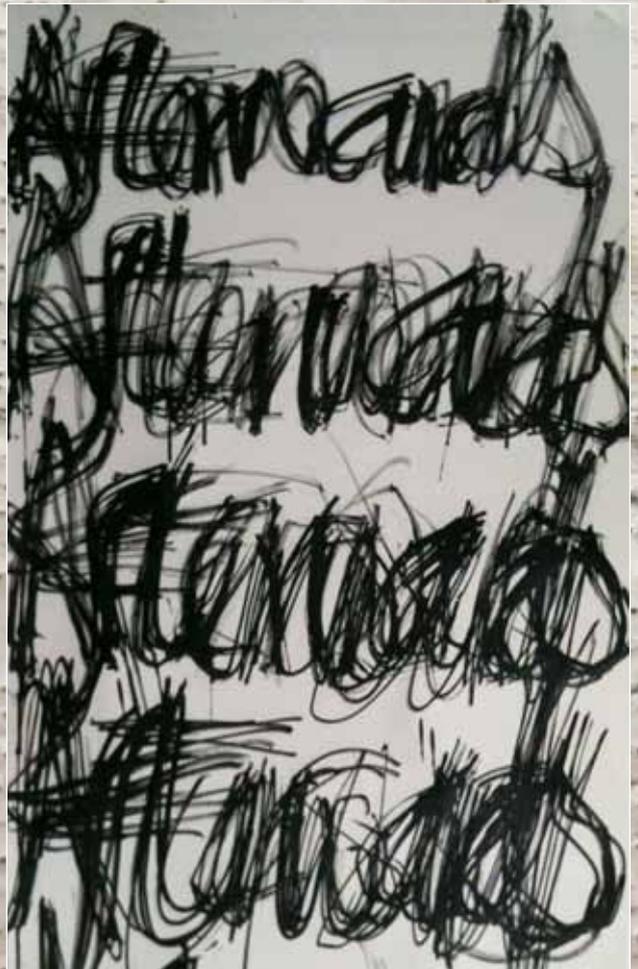
As a Festival of Quilts gallery artist, you are asked in February to plan your space. Did I need extra walls; an 'entrance'; would I need plinths, brackets or shelves? I had to know exactly what I was going to hang: quite a tall order when I had only been getting work together since November.

To calculate how much wall space I needed, I measured existing pieces and those in production. To help me with the fine details, I drew out the space on graph paper to scale and then added all my existing and planned pieces of work so that I could move them around to 'audition' them.

An early disappointment was when I learned that my hanging *Layers of Memory*, part of Quilt National 2013, was to be exhibited at the French Patchwork Championships in September and would not be back with me until December, which left a serious gap to fill.

The final format for the gallery contained textiles, both quilted and simply layered, along with drawings and three-dimensional work. I pondered for a long time about including these additional elements, wondering how an audience of quilters would respond. In the end, the decision to include them was based on the large drawings that were preparatory work for one of the main hangings in the show, and the 3D work was there to make part of my MA possible.

As often happens with large pieces that are worked on over a period of time, ideas develop and change from original intentions.





Background photo:
Forgotten, detail

Previous page, top:
Christine in her gallery at
the Festival of Quilts 2015

Previous page, centre:
Afterwards ii, detail; paper,
stitch and Indian ink

Previous page, bottom:
Forgotten

This page, left:
Layers of Memory

Below left:
MA exhibition display



The largest piece in the gallery, *Forgotten*, had been in production for 18 months and I had intended it to have floating layers over a clean surface. Then I started experimenting with the idea of palimpsest* and developed a rich visually textured surface that was unsuitable for being obscured by printed voiles.

I also had a 'drop cloth' piece of fabric which had been created over a period of time while it acted as a temporary drop cloth under all my printing. I knew I wanted to try to incorporate the idea of 'Afterwards' that I had developed while working with textile artist Matthew Harris (www.matthewharriscloth.co.uk) but had no idea how to translate the out-of-control repetitive drawings into textiles.

Serendipity intervened and I was gifted a longarm quilter and frame. With this piece of kit I realised that quilting a large piece such as *Forgotten* really was possible in the time I had available. I also experimented using it for machine embroidery on dissolvable fabric. Anyone who has worked with textile artist Dorothy Caldwell (winner of the Festival's Fine Art Quilt Masters competition in 2013;

www.dorothycaldwell.com) and tried her 'blind stitching' exercise, will recognise my excitement when I found that the unique quality of the longarm machine enabled me to blind stitch with a sewing machine. For *Afterwards iii* I was finally able to replicate the drawings I had made with a pencil and brush on the end of a 1 metre stick for *Afterwards i* and *Afterwards ii*.

Completing my Masters

At the same time as ideas were changing for the work in the gallery, the outcomes for my MA were also shifting. I had started believing I would produce textiles; after all, that is what I do... But when I began to cast empty pockets with plaster as a metaphor for absence and identity, then I had to change.

Gradually I realised I was missing an important part of the story of dementia – the carers. This led me to taking photographs of hands, both holding the casts and empty. I needed plenty of photographs to represent the sheer numbers of people acting as carers, and what better way than using the opportunity presented by the gallery at the Festival.

So my MA plaster pockets became an integral part of the display in my Festival gallery, not so much as an exhibit in their own right but as a vehicle for conversations with people about dementia while taking very informal photos of people's hands. I was totally overwhelmed by the response to the gallery and to the pockets themselves.

I've been working with the same theme for seven years, exploring the process that would help me express the effects of dementia. The work has gradually evolved from using the personal – photographs of my much missed father – to express generic ideas about dementia and identity, to work that may express wider ideas of loss, as demonstrated in the work done on the concept of 'Afterwards'. When an idea is so familiar, the reaction of the

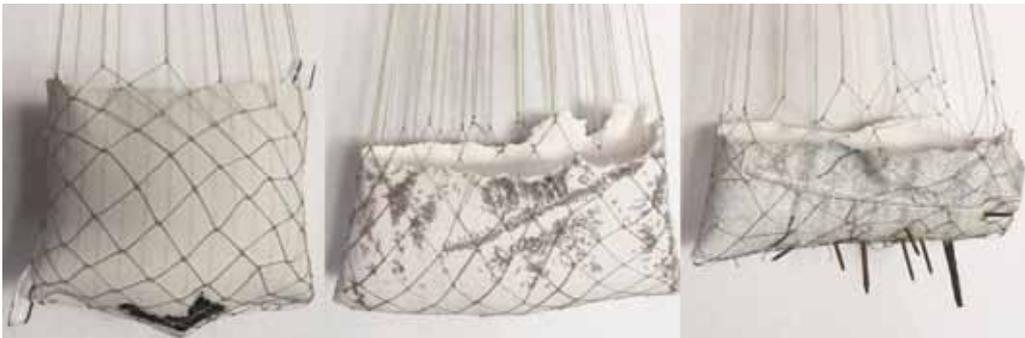
ORIES
had
her FORGOTTEN



Above:
Palimpsest, detail

“I was missing an important part of the story of dementia – the carers”

Below:
Plaster pockets



audience can be a surprise and a reminder of what started you on the journey in the first place.

Neither had I expected the pockets to be so completely understood. I had been uncertain about these plaster casts since I had first started to make them as part of my MA practical research: they were not textile and therefore quite unfamiliar. Whenever I shared them I expected the reaction to be one of polite confusion or quiet dismissal. However, this was not the case. When asked how it felt to hold

one of the pockets, one quilter said that she was holding onto the pocket ‘in order to stop the memories from falling out’. That still brings a lump to my throat. Another gave me the title of my project: ‘Holding an Absence’.

In the Festival gallery there were plenty of volunteers to participate in the project. I would often turn round to see people at the ‘pocket shelf’, writing on a postcard, sharing a memory. These will eventually form another piece of work, as earlier ones contributed to the book I published as part of

Christine would like to thank all those who participated in her MA project by sharing memories and conversations about pockets.

my final MA exhibition.

My MA exhibition had a slightly different focus. We often forget that there is a beloved person trapped in the body of our relative and I wanted, in a very small way, to remind people of the small, joyful, funny, touching moments that happen in the mundane, repetitive, often intensely difficult days, weeks and years spent with someone suffering with dementia. So in the end, the two exhibitions were mutually dependent, and both were richer as a result.

Doing a Masters gave me the confidence to broaden my materials understanding and include work that underpinned the Festival gallery rationale, but was not exclusively textile. And I enjoyed hugely the opportunity to interact with visitors and engaging them with an art project. The textiles I have been making for seven years have given me a greater understanding of the subject matter and its relationship to process and materials. This experience has enabled me to experiment and create work for the MA which I would never have considered possible a couple of years ago.

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* Palimpsest is a 17th-century term relating to medieval manuscripts that had been scraped off and recycled for more writing. Over the centuries, the old words start bleeding back through revealing snippets of previous layers and lifetimes – a powerful metaphor for memory.

Find out more about Christine and her work at: www.christinechester.com

Christine teaches at Studio 11 in Eastbourne. Details about the textiles and other courses are at: www.studio11eb.co.uk

Upcoming exhibition

*un.FOLD at The Birley Centre in Eastbourne, every weekend in January 2016: www.eastbourne-college.co.uk
un.FOLD includes: Christine Chester, Christina Ellcock, Leslie Morgan, Sally Skaife and Sarah Welsby.*