

## Contemporary Irish Textile Artists: Exploring Experiences of Gender, Culture, and Artistic Medium

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### **Abstract:**

The purpose of this study was to understand what textile art means in Irish culture and society through the lens of women who create it. The methodology used in this study was founded in part on the phenomenological exploration of meaning within lived experience and was informed by concerns raised within and central to contemporary feminist writing about women's experiences in society and culture. Four interpretive techniques were used to collect data in the field: long interviews, a demographic questionnaire, close observation, and an analysis of each artist's work. Three conceptual areas were used to structure the thematic interpretation: identity, marginality, and agency. The results of this interpretation provide insight into the ways that textiles, as an artistic medium, help to shape and redefine notions of gender and creative expression in a socio-cultural context.

### **Article:**

Irish history reveals that women have been the primary producers of the country's traditional textile goods, including needlework, knitting, lacemaking, and patchwork (Ballard, 1993; Jones, 1981, 1978; Kelly, 1987; LaBat & Nelson, 1996; Shaw-Smith, 1984; Wilson, 1991). Such textiles were made for both economic reasons and as a domestic past-time. With the creation of the Irish Republic in the 1930s came a new constitution and laws established to force women to carry out most of their activities within the home (Clear, 1993).<sup>1</sup> Developed out of a close-knit relationship between the Catholic church and the state, these laws prohibited married women from working outside of the home, providing constitutional grounds for the notion that women were supposed to run the household and to bear and raise the children, while men were considered primary financial providers (Barry, 1988).

Although much has changed for women in Ireland as a result of the country's own modern day women's movement (Mahon, 1995; Ni Chuilleanain, 1985), some women continue to face difficulties in terms of equality. This is particularly true for women artists (Robinson, 1992, 1995) and especially those who work in the textile medium. In the spirit of Ireland's rich history of textile traditions, many contemporary Irish women artists choose to use textiles as a medium

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Article 41.2 of the 1937 constitution of the Irish Republic states, "By her life within the home, woman gives the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved. The state shall, therefore, endeavor to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home" (Clear, 1993, p. 180).

to create and exhibit textile art. Based upon fieldwork conducted in Ireland, this research lays the ground-work for an understanding of this contemporary use of textiles in light of the historic connection between women, textiles, and the home in Irish society.

### *Women and Textiles in Ireland: Historical Framework*

As a new republic, Ireland sought to legally bind cultural ideals of family with gender relations, and to create little competition for employment between men and women. As Smyth (1985) writes, “Irish women are juridicially and socio-economically marked as dependents—a dependency reinforced by the patriarchal authoritarianism of the Roman Catholic church” (p. 261). This link between church and state did little but harm the overall economy and justify the church’s power over women’s lives (Cullen, 1991; Luddy, 1995; O’Connor, 1995). As a consequence, until the early 1970s much of women’s creative expression was relegated to the home and was done to either meet fundamental needs, such as warmth and protection, or as part of an invisible economy within Ireland (Ballard, 1993; Shaw-Smith, 1984).

Times have changed somewhat since the development of the Republic, and this change can be seen in the ways that the textile medium is used in works made expressly for exhibition in public galleries. Within this context textiles are utilized in a way that is not meant to be touched or used, but instead hung on a wall to be viewed. Thus, contemporary forms of textile art disrupt and redefine how and why textiles are used in everyday life (Aptheker, 1989; Barnett, 1995; Lippard, 1995). At the same time, the textile medium is associated with the mundane aspects of daily life, and thus brings with it to the walls of the art gallery specific associations in direct opposition to the function of the gallery in contemporary Ireland. By exhibiting textiles as art, issues of the interplay between gender, artistic medium, and social value are brought to the fore of the discussion about how textiles and women’s creative expression have been socially and culturally devalued (Lippard, 1995).

This marginalized location is a reflection of the fact that most, if not all, textile art in Ireland today is created by women. Due in part to a negative stigma attached to sewing, which is a fundamental aspect of working with textiles, very few male artists in Ireland use this medium. Consequently, women textile artists over the last two decades have had to work hard to have their art exhibited and made visible to the Irish public. The focus of this study involved the experiences that five individual Irish women had with creating “textile art” within a social and cultural context that holds a deeply-rooted misperception of the medium’s value. Even though each artist uses textiles as an artistic medium in unique ways, as members of a “muted group” (Ardener, 1975, 1993), each faces the challenge of making her work visible within a society that continues to view textiles through the lens of dominant definitions of what art is and against a background of women’s uses of the medium in Irish history. As their experiences illustrate, both factors contribute to a lack of respect for and value attributed to textiles as a contemporary art form.

Textile art is often positioned as a hybrid art form, one which combines associations of women’s creativity with domesticity, and thus is seen by some to be a critical non-genre with respect to the monolithic tradition of art (Jefferies, 1995; Maharaj, 1991). For some scholars, textiles function as an art medium, while at the same time challenge the time-honored association between art and medium (Maharaj, 1991). Often considered to be a combination of traditional and nontraditional

forms, contemporary textile art in Ireland reflects a myriad of textile techniques, including patchwork, quilting, and embroidery. Yet textile art is also the product of a combination of influences and innovations brought to the creative process by the artist. This is the case for the five artists here. Each uses the textile medium differently by altering traditional forms and techniques to create her unique brand of textile art.

### *Methodology*

The purpose of this study was to understand what textile art means in Irish culture and society through the lens of women who create it. The methodology used in this study was founded in part on the phenomenological exploration of meaning within lived experience (Jax, 1989; van Manen, 1990) and was informed by concerns raised within and central to feminist research and writing about women's experiences in society and culture (Anderson, 1995; Aptheker, 1989; Collins, 1990; Harding, 1987; Nielsen, 1990). A phenomenological approach to research is interpretive, that is, it suggests that the meaning of that which we experience in life can be revealed through a dialectic or dialogue between researcher and participant whereby "knowledge is an unpredictable emergent rather than a controlled outcome" (Westcott, 1990, p. 62). Phenomenology as a type of interpretive research works from the presupposition that "all human knowledge is based on experience that is lived ... Phenomenology attempts to gain insightful descriptions of the way we experience the world rather than how we explain or control the world" (Hultgren, 1989, pp. 119-120).

Experiences take place within and are shaped by social discourse, therefore the social reality of women is a crucial factor within a methodology that focuses on the exploration of women's lived experiences (Ardener, 1993; Brewer, 1993; Scott, 1991). As Acker, Barry, and Esseveld (1991) suggest,

Although we [feminist researchers] view people as active agents in their own lives and as such constructors of their social worlds, we do not see that activity as isolated and subjective. Rather, we locate individual experience in society and history, embedded within a set of social relations which produce both the possibilities and limitations of that experience. (p. 135)

This highly contextualized positioning has implications for a methodology that begins with women's lived experience, particularly when one factors in the ways that forms of women's creative expression have historically been viewed as outside of the realm of "true art" (Deepwell, 1995; Robinson, 1992, 1995; Smith, 1987, 1990). The phenomenological mode of inquiry was used to understand the experiences of the five artists and to help explain the cultural, artistic, and social location of women working in the textile medium in Ireland. Through thematic interpretation of the data, the meaning of experience can be deciphered, organized, and understood as a way to shed light on the everyday lives of these individuals.<sup>2</sup>

### *Data Collection*

A combination of four techniques was used to gather "texts" of experience of the five artists. First, a two-part demographic questionnaire was used to compile in-depth background information about each woman and the nature of her experiences as a working artist. This

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<sup>2</sup> For examples of various uses of phenomenological interpretation, see Hultgren's (1989) thematic interpretation of the experiences of student teachers, Hegland and Hemmis' (1994) analysis of the creative development of a knitter, and Hardy's (1995) exploration of women embroiderers in India.

background included general information about her, such as family history and living situation, as well as information specific to her artistic expression, including formal and informal education, teaching and exhibition experience, and selling her work.

Second, in-depth conversations or “long interviews” were conducted with each of the five women individually. These interviews were audio-taped with the written consent of each participant.<sup>3</sup> A minimum of one week was spent with each artist, and five to seven hours of audio-taped interviews with each artist were compiled. Topics discussed in the interviews included her personal life history, the inspiration for and from creative work, her self in relation to her work, reconciling family and social expectations with artistic expression, experiences with and opinions about the social value of the work, and reflection on the research process by each artist.<sup>4</sup> In designing the interviews to be conversational in nature rather than rigidly structured, an understanding of the meaning each artist assigns to her experiences and the myriad of forms she may use to express them was sought. By implementing the long interview method within a fieldwork scenario, and being immersed within their culture, a better understanding of the complex meanings operating within the lives of the five women was attained.

Close observation of the creative process of the artist and her relations with family, friends, and other textile artists was the third technique implemented within the fieldwork context. Close observation took place throughout the total time spent with each artist. Van Manen (1990) writes that “close observation” involves observation, participation, and reflection on the part of the researcher. Because approximately one to two weeks was spent with each artist, various kinds of activities were observed, including the space in which the artist lives and works, her interactions with family, and social relations, which included other artists. Observations were recorded as field notes.

The fourth technique involved photographic documentation and written interpretation of the visual aspects of each artist’s work in the textile medium based on conversations with the artist. Art can be a means to investigate lived experience because “Artists are involved in giving shape to their lived experience, the products of art are, in a sense, lived experiences transformed into transcended configurations” (van Manen, 1990, p. 74). Art as an expression of lived experience in and of itself was examined through ongoing photo documentation and dialogue with the artist about the work. Textiles have their own language of expression, and exploring the nature of the five women’s textile art began the process of interpreting each woman’s work as an expression of lived experience.

### *Participant Confirmation*

Personal narratives were developed from the texts of experience gathered with each artist (Personal Narratives Group, 1989). The narratives were then compared and a thematic

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<sup>3</sup> McCracken (1988) writes that in doing qualitative research that involves long interviews, the fewer subjects one has the better. This takes two factors into consideration: the quantity of interview material one must then interpret and the cultural understanding that needs to arise from and through the process of the interview. Five is an appropriate number considering the in-depth nature of phenomenological interpretation.

<sup>4</sup> In order to instigate this reflection, questions were posed about the research process itself, such as: Was this a positive experience for you? If so, what about this experience made it most valuable to you? And, what, if anything, was revealed to you during this experience? Through these questions, an awareness of what the experience meant to the artist and how she felt about being a participant in the research was developed.

interpretation of the factors of experience that relate the artists to one another as members of a group was established. The narratives were explored for what these experiences say about the place of textile art and its makers in contemporary Ireland. To illustrate how the experiences of each individual can be understood as part of a larger whole involved questioning the potential implications of interrelationships between tradition, gender, and value for understanding perceptions and meaning of textile art within the context of contemporary Ireland.

Given that lived experience was the starting point of inquiry in this study, and understanding experience was the fundamental purpose of this study, the participation of the artists within the interpretation process was crucial. Participants were asked to confirm the analysis at various stages of the interpretation process. First, each artist was mailed a copy of the transcription of her interviews and asked to clarify or correct any areas of misunderstanding that may have occurred during the interview process. She was then mailed a copy of the personal narrative developed based on the texts of experience gathered with her and was asked to review and make any changes or suggestions as to the structure and content of the narrative. Upon completion of the personal narratives, each artist was given a copy of an outline of the broader issues with respect to their experiences as a group of textile artists working in Ireland that appeared to be important among all of the narratives. Each was asked to review and respond to the content of this outline and to contribute to a discussion of these issues as part of a group. The conceptual areas and subsequent interpretive themes were then developed out of this correspondence, thereby using the artists' dialogue as the starting point for the interpretation.

### *The Participants*

The five artists were selected on the basis of their own histories with the textile medium, as well as their high degree of activity within textile art organizations in Ireland and abroad. They were all participants within a larger group of twenty-seven women who were chosen to attend group textile artist retreats at the Annaghmakerrig Center for the Arts in County Monaghan, Ireland over the course of five years.<sup>5</sup> All of the women had been working with textiles as an artistic medium for nearly twenty years. All of them had exhibited and sold their work throughout Ireland, Europe, and the United States. They were of similar socio-economic backgrounds, and their ages ranged from 50-68. All were married with children either having left home or else in the process of doing so. Each of the five artists learned to sew as young girls, whether in school or from mothers and grandmothers. Each found herself interested in textile art because of a connection with fabrics encouraged at some point within her past.

Although the five women were selected based on specific criteria in regards to exhibition and work history, there were also general similarities and differences among their experiences as Irish women. The fact that all of the participants were women of the same generation lends itself to similarities among them in terms of education and marriage. That is, each faced similar social expectations and roles on account of her gender, including giving up full-time employment upon marriage, and being educated for work in such areas as teaching and domestic science. Consequently, all of the five artists carried most of the responsibility of raising the children and running the household. All were of the middle-class and their husbands were the primary financial provider.

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<sup>5</sup> The outcome of these retreats included an exhibition, "Contemporary Irish Textile Art: The Women of Annaghmakerrig," shown at the Goldstein Gallery, University of Minnesota in 1996.

Each of the artists had lived her entire life in Ireland. They all lived in urban locations; four out of the five were living in or near the capital city of Dublin, and one lived in the city of Galway. Each had at least a secondary-level education and worked outside of the home before marriage. The majority of the five were brought up in traditional Irish- Catholic families, wherein girls were expected to pursue marriage and motherhood rather than a career outside of the home. Although all the artists learned to sew early in life, each began to work creatively with textiles when her children were older and she found more free time. Finally, each reached a point in her life when she began looking for some kind of creative outlet, and this factor is what ultimately brought them all together as a group.

Each of the artists were members of the organization called the Irish Patchwork Society from its conception in 1980. The five artists selected work in all manner of technique, form, and content with respect to textiles, linked together by their interest in and extensive experiences with the textile medium.<sup>6</sup> Their techniques were wide-ranging and included patchwork piecing and appliqué, embroidery— both hand and machine—as well as the dyeing, painting, and beading of fabrics and surfaces.<sup>7</sup> The form of their work varied widely, but primarily consisted of flat pieces made to be displayed on a wall. Content in the work included inspiration from experiences with the religions, culture, and landscapes of Ireland as well as world events and political concerns. Four of the five women worked and exhibited in other media, including painting, drawing, photography, and paper-making. All five have done commissioned pieces and actively participated in exhibitions of their work in venues both within Ireland and abroad. The diversity in use of the textile medium on the part of these five women was much like the diversity in life course experiences among them. Each came from a different background and point of view, even though they were all “Irish.” Like their work in textiles, their lives reflected a multiplicity of experiences as women artists living and working in contemporary Ireland, and their work provided a broad picture of the nature of textile art being created there.

### *Interpretation*

Similarities in experiences among the artists formed the basis of three conceptual areas which were used to broadly structure the interpretation: identity, marginality, and agency.<sup>8</sup> Identity was defined as components of experience that define who Irish women textile artists are and what they do as a group. Marginality was understood as the underlying collective experience of the artists’ place in relation to the art establishment, and how this location was reflected in and reinforced by the social perceptions of their art and their medium. Agency was defined as the potential of the artists to define their own individual and group identities and to challenge the marginalized location of their work. As is consistent with other phenomenological inquiry (Dahlberg, 1995; Hultgren, 1989), within the following interpretation each conceptual area

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<sup>6</sup> While there were many women in Ireland working in the medium of textiles at the time of this study, five were selected in order both to narrow the focus and to facilitate an in-depth exploration of life course experiences through an interpretive methodology (McCracken, 1988).

<sup>7</sup> In regards to patchwork in particular, “appliqué” is the “application of a cut fabric onto the top” of the patchwork surface, and “piecing” is “the combination of many small fragments of fabric [stitched together] to form a design” (Federico, 1983, p. 22).

<sup>8</sup> The three areas are not understood as static. Rather, each is purposely broad to allow for flexibility and flow back and forth between them. That is, each is a part within the larger whole of the experiences of these five textile artists. Thus, factors discussed within one area relate to those discussed within the other two.

contains themes centered around issues and corresponding perspectives that surfaced across the artists' narratives. These themes speak of the complexity of the artists' daily lives and illustrate the ways that gender, culture, and artistic medium are interrelated components of their lived experience.<sup>9</sup>

### *Identity*

Obviously, the most apparent and fundamental factor of experience that linked the five women together was their interest in working creatively with textiles. Much of what they experienced as women in Ireland contributed to this interest. But even though each learned how to sew as a young girl and continued to sew as an adult, four of the five do not have formal art training. Thus, each artist found her interest in textiles largely fueled by the organization of the Irish Patchwork Society (IPS) in the early 1980s. The IPS was a crucial factor in the independent development of the artists' creative abilities, as it provided educational opportunities that each artist pursued in order to learn to work with textiles as a medium of creative expression. However, it is also important to point out another similarity among the five: though each became involved in the IPS shortly after its inception, each had to reconcile her interest in learning to make textile art with the demands of motherhood and the responsibilities of running a household.

Forming the Irish Patchwork Society. According to the five artists' recollections, the IPS was the key to coalescing the textile art arena within Ireland, in that it led to an awareness of these individual textile artists, however diverse their approaches, as a collective, or "society."

Although there were a few people working here and there with the textile medium it was not until the development of a centralized organization that this disparate few would begin to work together toward a common goal: the widespread recognition of textile art. This coming together led to a cohesive identity out of which exhibitions could be developed. From these exhibitions came opportunities for public recognition of the contemporary uses of the textile medium. On a personal level, membership in the IPS influenced an artist's approach to expression, in that being part of a larger group both validated her identity as a textile artist and allowed her to share her work with others.

As members of the IPS, all of the artists found personal and professional value in working as part of a larger whole. One artist in particular found this to be true, and explained the implications of group interaction for her own work:

JK: I've never really gone forward in process through reading, I think that's through talking to other people who are in the same thing. You swap ideas in textiles. All my processes were got through talking to people and going to workshops, and that sort of thing.<sup>10</sup>

To broaden the potential for increased interest in textile art, the IPS began to provide workshops in textile art, as well as exhibition opportunities on a national scale. Indeed, textile art in Ireland came to be understood through the lens of this organization. By creating a kind of collective identity, the IPS helped its members to explain to themselves and to others what they do in the textile medium.

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<sup>9</sup> The following interpretation is an abbreviated version of the broader examination of these artist's experiences found within Nelson's unpublished doctoral thesis, "Women Textile Artists in Ireland: An Exploration of Experience, Expression, and the Everyday" (University of Minnesota, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> Reference to each of the artists is indicated by the initials of her first and last name.

Comprehending a Gendered Kind of Expression. The artists who initiated the IPS were female, many of whom— like the five artists here—learned to sew as young women, and found themselves attracted to the textile medium by its familiar qualities. The majority of the society’s members are women, and though there have been one or two male members of the IPS, one rarely sees a textile art piece made by a man in Ireland unless it is classified as “mixed media.” The difference between the use of textiles as mixed media and the use of textiles by stitching is gender-related, and another artist suggested it is an issue that has real implications for where the work will be displayed.

AF: If you mixed fabric with painted work and made a collage out of it, people will see it as mixed media, and that can go into an art gallery. But if you make something that’s just textiles, you have to find your space, you won’t be accepted in an art gallery.

Very few men in Ireland do piecework, and one artist saw this as having more to do with the sewing necessitated by the textile medium than with the meanings attached to the medium itself. As she pointed out,

GM: I think that probably one of the reasons that many men don’t become involved in the textile end of it, is really because it’s not so much the fabric end of it, but it’s actually the stitching end, which, here would be looked upon as being a female task as such and almost sort of strictly relegated to the female .... And I think it’s probably because, on their part, of a fear of ridicule, which I think is probably what they get .... And I think it’s more the attitude ... which would prevent many men working in this field ... that stitching is a woman’s job, chore, hobby, whatever, but rarely taken as seriously as many of us would like it to be taken.

Moreover, another artist saw the automatic association made between textiles and a “woman’s hobby” as related to the limited opportunities Irish women had until only recently. As she explained, textiles are understood to be part of the domestic scene for two reasons: they were made and used in the home by women, and women spent much of their lives in the home.

JK: [a]nything, any art or craft to do with textiles has now become synonymous with women. Because it was the only outlet for women, in the home .... And because, particularly in this country, women were so pinned down to being in the home, it was the obvious outlet.

Exhibiting Textile Art Abroad. Because of the small population within Ireland (approximately 3.5 million in 1998), and the even smaller population of people who are textile artists (around 500, according to 1998 IPS membership accounts), each of the five women recognized the need to look outside of Ireland for ideas and encouragement. One artist in particular has always made it her goal to invite teachers to Ireland from abroad in order to broaden the scope of textile artists working in Ireland. Meeting other textile artists from diverse cultural contexts and learning how others view textile art has also had a positive impact on how Irish textile artists regard their work. As one artist pointed out,

BF: [w]hen you meet other quilters, especially Americans, you don’t become shy about your work, you’re able to say, ‘Yes, I did that’ and you know, before that you’d be hiding it behind your back. I think we were like that in Ireland, we weren’t up front, but things have changed and now we want to share everything as well for everybody.

Such experiences contribute to the shaping and defining of one’s own identity as an artist. For each of the women, learning to respect their work and to take themselves seriously as artists



culminated in an increased confidence in their work and, subsequently, in their identity as Irish textile artists.

### *Marginality*

Although the cross-cultural acceptance and recognition of Irish textile art had a profound impact on the way textile artists defined themselves and their work, and had been an on-going source of encouragement for them, they nevertheless found it necessary to prove themselves worthy of respect within their own society and culture. The textile artist's identity is formed within the same social, cultural, and organizational contexts in which her work is understood. Thus, the interaction between the artists and these contexts must be considered when exploring how textiles are a marginalized art form. This marginalization arises from general social perceptions about textiles within Irish society, and the ways that such perceptions impact the value, both social and economic, attributed to textile art. In turn, the degree of value attributed to textile art affects the kinds of space textile art is exhibited within, and thus contributes to its invisibility as an art form.

Recognizing the Social and Economic (non)-Value of the Textile Medium. For each of the artists, exhibitions of textile art provided indication of how and why the textile medium was not fully accepted within Irish society in general and within the art establishment in particular. Textile artists attributed the marginality of their work to the double-meaning evoked by the textile medium: textiles are meant for everyday use and typically associated with the home, and thus of little value in comparison to "true" art. Altering the location in which textiles are used, that is, taking them out of the home and putting them into public spaces, can begin to change this double meaning, but this requires educating the viewer to appreciate textiles as art objects. It also requires posing fundamental questions about the traditional divide between art and craft, as textiles often fall prey to their age-old association with craft. Contemporary textile art in Ireland is no exception and, as a result, has suffered the consequences of this divide.

All of the artists recognized the necessity of exhibiting their work, insofar as it was the key to creating a greater awareness of their work, to altering perceptions about textile art, and in turn, to increasing its value within contemporary Ireland. However, though every attempt was made to present contemporary textile art exhibitions in the best light possible, the five artists all believed that this had little influence on public reaction because of the lack of visibility of such events. In one artist's experience, exhibitions of textile art are not as well attended in Ireland as they might be if the public was made more aware of them. In the following passage, she pointed out how this was the case in the 1997 National Exhibition put on by the IPS:

MT: The viewing public would be comparatively low .... Not that many people go to see the exhibitions. Quite honestly, not that many people. A huge lot of promotion [was done], trying to get them in the papers, and you know you find that the papers aren't really interested in us.

Ultimately, factors such as promotion and attendance have implications for the value placed on textiles. That is, value and social perception are reflexively linked, and thus in order for one to change, the other must as well.

One artist believed that the social value attributed to textiles impacts their economic value, insofar as the perception that textiles (specifically those that are pieced as opposed to examples

of weaving and tapestry) are not worth preserving resulted in the perception that they are not a longterm investment. As she explained,

GM: [t]extiles, in this country, have always been downgraded ... I think that they're not rated highly enough. First and foremost I think because people are afraid to invest money. I'm talking about maybe corporate bodies and that ... they would be reluctant to invest money because first and foremost they would presume that textiles are reasonably fragile or are more fragile in relation to the artwork that they might purchase which they presume will hold its value, whereas textiles may not, and so ... this is a mental view ... that you are up against a lot of the time.

Similarly, the difficulty in convincing people that textiles are a "good" investment has resulted in a lack of specific standards for pricing textile work on the part of both the buyer and the seller. Unlike paintings, the value of textiles is thought to decline rather than increase over time. Thus, because the buyer has low expectations of a return on her or his investment, the artist is forced to sell the piece for much less than it is worth, oftentimes not even regaining the time invested in the piece. The textile artist is therefore caught in a no-win situation, because, as she further explained,

GM: I think there's no standard ground whereby they [the buyer] can analyze the worth of something .... We've no basis either on which to price our work and ... if you really and truly analyze the amount of time and energy and materials and that you put into the work we do ... it just prices it virtually out of existence.

Whether exhibiting alone or as part of a group, convincing the media to support exhibitions of textile art has been one of the biggest difficulties faced by textile artists. The overall lack of awareness about textile art in Ireland is largely due to a gross lack of support for and publicity of textile exhibitions on the part of the media. Although there has always been a degree of public interest in attending exhibitions, the problems with advertising and promotion have hindered the visibility of textiles on a broader scale.

GM: I think there is a natural fascination with them [textiles], but I just feel that it's so difficult [to get] them mounted and well publicized ... the Dublin area is very difficult, it's virtually impossible to get the newspapers, for instance, to come, because again, like that, they don't rate this too highly either. And if you don't get good publicity, you know, then you're in trouble....

Understanding the Value of Gallery Space. Much like the hierarchy among art forms, galleries have their own kind of stratification. With a few exceptions, the situation in Ireland is such that the better the gallery, the less likely it is to exhibit textile art. According to one of the artists, exhibitions of textile art are not overtly "banned" from well-known galleries, but the acceptance of a textile art exhibition often depends on the mission of a particular gallery space:

GM: [t]here's always... reasonably positive feedback ... but then again a lot of these gallery spaces would be sort of booked up maybe two or three years in advance. Many of the well-established and the I suppose 'better' galleries, for want of a better word, in Dublin city would still resist taking textiles in, because in some ways they're still regarded as ... second class art.

In addition, many of these top galleries exhibit by invitation only, and as a result of the lack of visibility of textile artists and their work, she further pointed out that very few textile artists are well-known enough to be invited to show their work in such spaces.

GM: [t]here is a strata ... within the galleries themselves. You know, and you actually have to work your way almost from the bottom up. And to get into the more important, impressive galleries, obviously, you know, you have to do an awful lot of hard work in order to be invited .... But I still think that certainly I don't ever recollect any of the top galleries in Dublin ... inviting textile artists to exhibit.

It should be noted that most of the top galleries in Ireland are run by males, who will often act as gatekeepers, upholding the traditional divide between art and craft. That is, male dominance in the upper echelons of Irish galleries has been an extremely effective means of keeping women's creative expression out of the hallowed halls of "art" proper.

The distinction between galleries also plays a fundamental role in the vicious cycle experienced by textile artists, in that the places where textile art is typically exhibited are not widely respected art spaces per se, and thus attempts at widespread recognition of textile art are further thwarted. As one artist explained, "[I]n general, you know, they [the IPS] would look for larger spaces, and the larger spaces come as halls [which] certainly would be second-rated to art galleries." For many textile artists, the reputation of a space is as crucial as its size, particularly for those who are interested in gaining recognition for their work.

### *Agency*

Value, support, and gallery space are all interrelated factors that have contributed to the marginalization of textile art and its makers within Ireland. For each of the five artists, exhibiting their work was the key to understanding how such factors have implications for the social perceptions of textile art, and thus its marginalized location. However, the artists also found that exhibiting their work could be a tool to educate each other, the art establishment, and the general public in the appreciation of diverse textile forms, and thus viewed exhibitions as critical sites for change. In other words, textile art exhibitions provided the opportunity for artists to negotiate the marginality of their chosen medium, and to challenge normative definitions of "art" within contemporary Ireland.

For the five artists, the potential to effect positive change through creative expression was an important reason to exhibit work. Many textile artists recognize the widespread changes that have occurred in the art world during their lifetimes, particularly with respect to what makes for acceptable art media. Moreover, many have witnessed changes in gender expectations, whether within society in general or within the art establishment in particular. Such changes point to the further possibilities that can be achieved by textile artists, in that while each continued to face challenges on the road to recognition, all thought that there had been positive inroads made in a number of different areas.

Working to Break Boundaries. Because the textile medium is situated within the margin of the art world in Ireland, and because women are the primary users and viewers of the medium, it could be argued that women textile artists are doubly-marginalized. The fact that women are the primary users of the textile medium is crucial to a discussion of contemporary Irish textile art. Within Irish society, like many other countries, gender has been a determining factor in the success of artistic expression. This is primarily due to the financial limitations of creative expression. To establish oneself as a professional artist usually requires one to have other financial resources. In many cases this means financial support from the family, a difficulty

considering that many Irish women were raised to be full-time homemakers and mothers. As one of the artists explained,

JK: [w]omen couldn't afford [to be artists]. To a large extent. Because, if they didn't have private means, they would have been shunned by society .... So, the women who were professional artists, without private means, would have sunk in[to] obscurity.

Yet the artists did not see this scenario as the destiny of the younger generation, in that Irish women are now being brought up to pursue careers outside of the home and can choose to become professional artists. As a result, most of the artists believed gender to be an issue of little importance for young women artists, regardless of their chosen media.

Educating to Broaden Perspectives. The artists were quick to point out that free expression in the textile medium worked to stretch the limits of traditional quilting and patchwork forms. A number of them mentioned that Ireland's lack of its own quilting tradition was a positive factor, as it allowed for free movement between all forms related to the textile medium. For example, in the IPS, embroiderers are not separated from patchworkers, as they are in England and Northern Ireland. Rather, everyone works and exhibits together as part of textile art as it stands in Ireland. One of the benefits of this flexibility has been the on-going interaction between people working in textiles in different ways. As one artist explained,

AF: I think what's going on in Ireland—I know we're small and we know each other—but because we're small enough ... there's always been this cross-over of embroiderers and textile designers in general. And that's been good, because if I were in England, I would be a 'patchworker' and 'quiltmaker' full-stop and you wouldn't go out of your boundaries!

Experimentation with the textile medium has ultimately led to exhibiting work on the part of all five artists. Indeed, the public recognition gained through exhibiting work has been important, as, according to the five artists, both the public and the galleries need to be made aware of the aesthetic value of the medium. Moreover, exhibiting textile art has helped to further contest the notion that sewing is simply a menial task with utilitarian results, and challenged the consequent lack of respect afforded to textiles as an art form. However, fostering public awareness of textile art has been no small task, at least according to one of the artists, who said,

GM: A lot of people I suppose would still look upon it as a hobby, and that's inevitable I think at this stage one has just to accept the fact that no matter what I do and probably continue to do it will still maybe for quite a long time be looked upon in that respect. I try to have it looked upon with greater respect ... and I try to do that through education, through educating people. And, by putting on ... the exhibitions ... and in many ways I think I've succeeded probably with the exhibitions .... It's still happening a lot slower than most of us would like, but it's certainly not through lack of trying. I do not like to have or to hear anybody ask me if it's my hobby, but I can understand maybe where a lot of people are coming from .... And people still I think find it very difficult to look upon textiles as art because it doesn't play a major role in ... the art arena, I suppose, as yet. And you can only come to that through education.

Support for textile art education has come primarily from voluntary organizations like the IPS and the Irish Countrywomen's Association, rather than institutions of higher education. Consequently, an artist explained, many students in art colleges have not been exposed to the textile medium.

AF: They can go into art college, they don't even know how to use a sewing machine .... And that's a problem. To have to go and teach people how to use a sewing machine, that's a problem. But, the exception to that is the Ulster University, in Jordanstown. They have a big textile area ... and so, you know, the textiles and embroideries coming out of there is a high standard. Whereas if you go to the NCAD [National College of Art and Design] in Dublin, there's no quiltmaking at all.

As a result of the lack of available textile art programs in higher education there are fewer numbers of people being formally educated in the medium.

The five artists clearly saw a relationship between the standard of their work and its value as art, in that they all believed that one must first accept one's own work in order to have it accepted by others. Although a marginalized location is a reality faced by textile artists, the potential to effect change with respect to this location nevertheless rests in their hands. Change has already begun to happen, in that textile art has come a long way in terms of its status as an expressive medium. As one artist said,

BF: I think it is popular, it is becoming more popular, and I think it probably will become another bit popular .... I think there will always be room for it. Certain people will always appreciate it and want it and like it .... I'm quite convinced that if people's work is good enough, it will be accepted. If a piece is not accepted it's because it isn't good enough. If your work is good enough, it will be treated with respect.

Likewise, textile artists have come a long way in terms of their visibility as a group. As a result of their own efforts towards educating themselves and others, textile artists in Ireland have created a forum for raising critical questions about perceptions of art and artistic medium in social context. By working together toward this goal, they have established the textile medium as a viable art form, clearing the way for others to choose textile art as a mode of creative expression.

### *Reflection and Implications*

The themes within each concept area help to illuminate the breadth and depth of this illustration of life as a textile artist in contemporary Ireland. Similarly, each theme works in concert with the others to construct an interpretation of the lived experience of the five women and the common ground they share. Paying attention to the themes that surfaced across the five artists' narratives allowed for an exploration of the experiences of textile artists in social and cultural context, and was crucial in order to understand where the textile medium sits in relation to other art media in contemporary Ireland. Although their mode of creative expression may not be fully accepted as a "legitimate" art form, the efforts of textile artists to challenge what makes for a legitimate art form have been on-going. Whether sharing in the excitement of exhibiting one's work for the first time, or working to provide learning opportunities for themselves and the public at large, the experiences of these five women as active, exhibiting textile artists are the necessary parts within the whole of creative expression in the textile medium within contemporary Ireland.

When textile artists exhibit their work in public spaces, they enter into a dialogue with each other and with society at large about the associations made between gender and artistic medium, and the implications of such associations for the general understanding of what constitutes "real" art. Each woman in this study came to realize how little value was placed on her work by others in society when she began to present her work publicly. Further, she soon came to see how this lack of value was a consequence of general misunderstandings about what textiles represent and how

they are meant to be used. With the inception of the Irish Patchwork Society in the early 1980s, opportunities arose for learning more about working in the medium, and for exhibiting textile art at home and abroad. Since then, many textile artists have worked to establish themselves as a creative force within Ireland, and to ensure that those who are interested in doing so can freely pursue their own creativity using textiles as an outlet. As a result of their experiences with exhibiting their work, many now see themselves as agents acting for change by exposing the public to new uses of the textile medium.

A fundamental premise of this research was that an exploration of women's lived experience could be facilitated through the use of personal narratives (Personal Narratives Group, 1989), and in-depth interviews (Cook & Fonow, 1990; Cotterill, 1992; Devault, 1990). The result of this exploration was then used as the starting point for interpreting the meaning of experience. As Jax (1989) explains, in phenomenological inquiry, "The focus is not to generalize or to make universal laws, but to search for meaning within a specific context or situation .... It is through the perspective of the subjects that reality, meaning, and behavior are analyzed and discussed" (p. 66). The use of personal narratives placed the voices of the women at the center in order to present these women as the subjects, rather than the objects of this study. Such intentions shaped an interpretive methodology that was focused on the exploration of experience, and facilitated the use of interpretive research methods in a manner that sought to preserve the subjectivity of the participants.

This interpretive framework helped to illustrate how artistic medium is a crucial component of an artist's experience, and subsequently, to interpret these experiences as fundamental to the meaning of textile art. As a result, this study contributes to the existing dialogue surrounding women, textiles, and society, and further explores how women come to know about themselves and the world through creative expression. Yet this framework also points to the fact that more research is necessary in order to better understand the implications of viewing textile art this way. Further research is needed to fully explore the relationship between form and media in creative expression, the relationship between an object and its worth by linking space and value in social context, and the relationship between gender as an experience and creative expression as a means of translating that experience. Finally, although there has been a significant amount of writing done about the use of textiles in western countries, particularly the United States, Canada, and Scandinavia (Butterfield, 1990; Cerny, Eicher, & DeLong, 1993; Ferrero, Hedges, & Silber, 1987), future researchers might focus on exploring strategies used to effect change in social perceptions of textile art by textile artists within and across different cultural and national boundaries.

The connection between women and creative expression in the textile medium yields several different points of departure for further study, particularly in light of the fact that such expression tends to be undervalued socially and economically in Ireland as well as in other countries. Extensive exploration into the ways that our understanding of art is organized around the concept of gender is needed in order to elucidate the ways that associations made between gender and modes of creative expression influence the degree to which objects of material culture, such as textile art, are valued along a gendered trajectory. Specifically, although outside of the scope of this study, a thorough examination of the reasons why so few men work in the medium both

within Ireland and without is needed, especially considering that one of the most famous and influential North American textile artists, Michael James, is a man.

The voices of five artists have been presented here as parts within the whole of the current dialogue surrounding women's creative expression. As textile artists, they disrupt normative definitions of art by adding multiple dimensions to our understanding of creative expression, and challenge the gendered consciousness that frames our experience of viewing by presenting us with alternative ways to define art. Thus, to understand how five textile artists experience their mode of expression within contemporary Ireland is to recognize that they create textile art both out of a need to make visual their lived experience and out of a desire to light the spark of change within a culture's collective way of seeing.

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