

## The Hidden Histories of Women: Researching, reflecting, and responding to our Grandmothers histories

Words are not my thing. I don't find it easy to express the ideas in my head through words. Expression comes much easier via my hands, through creating visual work. I have always made things – I made dolls clothes and accessories like teeny weeny belts from the age of about ten. In my teens I was instinctively drawn to becoming a jeweller, and that is what I specialised in at Art College and have had a career in since the 1980's. My own hands have those marks of making - black spots appear when you have inadvertently embedded silver under your skin – cutting yourself when working at a jewellers bench.

I remember my Uncle talking about memories of his Grandfather. He remembered sitting on his lap and counting the number of black spots on his hands. My male relatives were silversmiths - my great grandfather and his father. This knowledge made me realise that my attraction to jewellery could be through my inherited genes.

But I have also always loved working with fabric and thread and this connection was nurtured by my Grandmother, Dorothy Alice Phillips, nee Bond. I was lucky enough to live just down the road from her between the ages of six and thirteen. During these years she taught me how to knit, embroider, crochet and cook.

She also continued to learn new skills herself, including bobbin lace making and tatting. I inherited some of her pieces when she died, including a crochet edged table cloth, which I never saw her use, that she made on the train to and from work before she was married. My memories of her in her last few years were of her sitting on her sofa unable to use her hands to make anything anymore because of crippling arthritis. She would look at old photographs, jot down memories on odd bits of paper and remember.

What do you remember of your own grandmother, or another important older female relative or friend? What did you learn from them? What about their younger life before you knew them?

These are the questions answered by people who have so far taken part in my Grandmother project – *The Hidden Histories of Women*. I respond to the whispers of these lives and the fragments of information given to me, and interpret them visually by creating miniature vessels that reference both the female form and reflect the scale of significance that history has given these women's lives. My own family history is one determiner for this project. I now I want to talk about how my own practice of working with textiles in the miniature, has developed over the last few years to arrive at this current work.

Women's stories make up just 0.5 percent of recorded history. From great medieval queens, to writers, scientists and artists, the role of women throughout history has often been overlooked. Until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a woman's role was seen as primarily as a home maker and mother, and to support their husband's public lives. Their lives are often hidden despite the reality of their roles being a vital part of a functioning society. This questioning of the hidden role of women in the history of family and places was the starting point for my project in 2016 that featured miniature textile vessels '*Whispers and Fragments – exploring the traces of history left by place and person*'. The focus was Evelyn James, the mother of surrealist art patron and poet, Edward James who bequeathed his house and inheritance to establish West Dean College. My interest was piqued by a visit to the empty unused room which had been her bedroom, showing remnants of its glory days, and by a painting of her as a young Edwardian woman.

My research was multi-lineal and multi-layered. I researched the history of the room and the life of Evelyn using the Edward James Archives and The British Newspaper Archive, exploring the traces she has left behind, the hidden corners and the different layers to her life. I found diaries, day books, photographs and envelopes containing snippets of Evelyn's children's hair. She was a woman of many layers, a beautiful woman who did charitable work. She was involved in amateur dramatics and choirs and was a society host of great repute. She had four daughter and one son all looked after by nannies. She suffered from post-natal depression for which she had electric shock treatment.

At the same time I was researching and building my knowledge and skills in a variety of textile techniques, referencing the clothing of that era. I specifically experimented with how to use bobbin lace to create three dimensional forms alongside embroidery and fabric manipulation.

I explored how to evoke the female form in abstraction and focused on the vessel as a form that juxtaposed the ideas of containment and support with openness and expansion. A vessel has the quality of being open, empty and waiting to be filled, but also able to contain or hold something, be it a physical material or conceptual idea. I was interested in investigating the sensuality that fabric could convey to create a metaphor for the surface of the body and traces of Evelyn James.

So why make miniature vessels? Clearly I have worked in that scale making jewellery but how does that translate into textile? Susan Stewart in her book *On Longing- Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* suggests:

*"The miniature presents a diminutive, and thereby manipulatable, version of experience, a version which is domesticated and protected from contamination."* (1993:xii)

In the book *The Poetics of Space* Gaston Bachelard recommends that we rediscover the immense in the most intimate of things, and says:

*"values become condensed and enriched in miniature."* (Bachelard, 1958:169)

You can capture the monumental in the miniature. With small scale work there is a concentration of form, process and concept. Each mark, decision and thread matters because it is looked at as if under a magnifying glass. The process of making – the time and concentration required to produce work of this scale, is an important part in the development of my ideas and gives the work an aesthetic embedded in this process. As well as the time consuming making process initiating a moment of stillness from the viewer, the physicality of engaging with smaller scale work also requires the viewer to lean in, stop and look.

So through this project I established a methodology for my textile practice that combined historic and practical research.

In 2020 I had the opportunity to develop a body of work inspired by South Hill Park (now an Arts Centre) and its inhabitants. *Who Owned South Hill Park from 1455?*, the book by Diane Collin's, was the starting point of HIDDEN HISTORIES. Reading through the book it was again apparent that the lives of the women who lived there were hardly acknowledged. Those that were, either had no children or had little regard for family life.

LADY HENRIETTA HAYTER did not have any children and what she achieved in live appears to be largely related to her husband's political and humanitarian interests. She also had strong views on a women's place in society - that they were not equal to men mentally or physically. FRANCES BEGUM

JOHNSON grew up in India and was married four times. She lived at South Hill Park during her third marriage but when her husband died and her children had grown up, she returned to India never seeing her children again. Her memorial in India states 'The oldest British resident in Bengal, universally beloved, respected and revered'.

Because there was not much information on the women who lived at South Hill Park, I broadened my research to encompass, firstly the hidden histories of women with the same name; THE VIOLETS, DAISIES, ROSES AND IRISES. As well as fabric, I made the vessels out of metal and Jesmonite, a water based resin. I used these different materials to evoke the different roles women played at this time in history. Jesmonite depicting the solid foundations women have given to their husbands and children. Delicately stitched fabric to depict the fragility of their lives, and the decorative nature of their roles. Metal cage like forms depicting the restrictions that women had in their lives.

This research led me to consider women of history who found success late in life, creating a group called THE GREYS. A couple of examples in this category; ANNA MARY ROBERTSON MOSES was an American folk artist who only began painting in earnest at the age of 78 when arthritis made embroidery too painful to do. Actress JUDI DENCH, was over 60 when she started to receive international success with seven Oscar nominations. Artist ROSE WYLIE found critical and commercial success late in life, winning the 2014 John Moores Painting Prize at 80 and her first major exhibition taking place when she was 77.

And then I became a Grandmother and this made me reflect on that role and how important my grandmother was in my life. My grandmother didn't just teach me the practical skills that I mentioned before. She was a kind and patient woman who always had time to sit and listen to other people's problems – very different to my mother. But then a grandmothers role is very different than a mothers role. I didn't get to know my other grandmother Ada Baxter as she died when I was about six.

So I started to talk to other people I knew about their grandmothers and heard some fascinating stories. EILEEN LANKSTONE was a formidable working class northern woman who was offered a scholarship to Cambridge but turned it down. GERTRUDE LIVINGSTONE fed her granddaughter clotted cream sandwiches. LILLIAN MONA made matching outfits for her granddaughters and their dolls. The concept of a Grandmothers influence then grew to include other important older women in people's lives. FREIDA FORD was my husband's landlady when he was at University in London. She was a tall woman and had a parrot called Polly that lived in the sitting room. She had no children of her own but adopted the son of a friend who died during childbirth whilst visiting Frieda.

These conversations began to have as much significance as the focus on researching, reflecting and responding to information to use to create my vessels. When I asked Paul Wilson about his memories of his grandmother, the first thing he said was;

*'I suppose she was quite an important person in my life – I hadn't really thought about her in that way before'.*

I also realised the importance of allowing people more time to think about their relationship with their grandmothers and their significance within broader family relationships. These conversations became a means of making connections, of finding childhood experiences that still resonated in adulthood and in other relationships.

Ann Tomlin makes intricate floral hats and headpieces, dyeing and constructing each individual petal and stamen, lots of the techniques that I use in my miniature vessels. She uses the same dyes on her flowers as I do on my vessels. Ann and I started having a conversation about her grandmother, who

taught her all of her sewing skills. What was interesting was how this conversation developed into a discussion about our relationships with our mothers – neither she or I are close to them.

We all think we are unique in our experiences but others are often experiencing the same problems, disfunctions, joys and worries. Having conversations, talking to each other about our Grandmothers or other important women in our lives is just a starting point. It's fundamentally about making connections with other human beings. Finding connections, no matter what difference we may perceive there are between us.

At the beginning of this year author Kate Mosse launched #WomanInHistory, a global campaign to nominate incredible women from any period of history, anywhere in the world, so that collectively we may celebrate and honour their legacies. Her book *Warrior Queens and Quiet Revolutionaries* is published in October.

My Hidden Histories of Women project is also about acknowledging and celebrating women, those who may not have left a visible legacy in the wider world, but have definitely influenced our lives and guided us from childhood to adulthood.

I hope that sharing this project and exhibition with all of you, opens up the opportunity to honour these women and to make wider connections. Not just conversations that I have with someone, but facilitating the sharing of stories and making connections with people who you don't know, or finding out the hidden histories of your friends and acquaintances. This project started with two vessels depicting my grandmothers. By the end of this conference, with your input, sharing your memories, I hope it will have grown. Not only in quantity but in the impression it leaves on you and your interaction with family, friends and strangers – people who you don't know yet.