**Alice Kettle: Foreword**

Alice Kettle’s textile art is fundamentally and unequivocally ambitious. She elicits moral and narrative density from her artworks. These are often immense in scale: as if the arc of their stories is eternal, their plights universal, and their hopes longing and soulful. The span of time expressed in the work locates us in the deep past and the urgent present.

Stitch – by hand or by machine – is a method of repetition, coverage and endlessness. It can lead to a line that is potentially infinite. Place this means in the hands of an artist whose sources are literary, poetic, political, metaphorical, otherworldly and grounded on soil, then it is not surprising that the physical outcome is, more often than not, magisterial. The complexity of her insight and her facility for allusion allows us the skate over the remarkable technical dexterity of these cloths, to take their scale as both proper and fit, and not in any way grandiose or self-seeking. The epic scale is due to epic cause.

Alice Kettle can see in the grave turmoil of a present, social crisis – especially in the drama and pain of austere Greece – a direct line, a golden thread as it were, to Greek tragedy and myths. These stories, the *Odyssey* above all, bear endless re telling. They can never be over told. Backed up with such a foundation, Alice creates works of emotional intensity. She often pauses on points of narrative or actual drama. Her reflectiveness on the ancient and contemporary issues raised at these symbolic moments is then swept along by visually lyrical and colour-suffused means; these are cloth paintings and poems at the same time. We are their viewers and listeners.

Over the course of ten years, Alice’s work has neither mellowed nor slackened its majesty of scope. If there has been what she calls ‘a shift in my voice,’ it has been to think more deeply around the intention and purpose of textile art. She has started to question where she ‘sits’ within each piece. Some of her works are autobiographical and bear personal materials, the fragments of family textiles. More recent work, and in particular *Sea* (2017), made specifically for this exhibition,indicates a sort of tremor of authorship: the theme of refugee flight being so deeply important to the too often nameless individuals that her position as the maker might seem somehow contentious. What rights does an artist have to commentate?

One major change to her practice over this ten year period has been the quickening pace of her collaborative work: she has been one of the major leaders in the field of crafts in exploring the creative dynamics and possibilities of working with a companion artist on a single project. Many of these collaborations are with her colleagues at Manchester Metropolitan University, and her long creative partnership with the potter Alex McErlain has produced harvest jugs of a sort that have not been seen in two hundred years of English slipware. She has also explored a collaboration with place. *Looking Forwards to the Past* was the second signature piece for her home city. The first, *Wisdom and Lar* was commissioned by the University of Winchester and gave a powerful visual statement of the academic and social values of the institution. Later works have responded in innovative ways to historic sites, such as the three new works for Inigo Jones’s Queen’s House, Royal Museums Greenwich. An enriching education programme accompanied this temporary installation, and Alice Kettle has increasingly demanded that her work for these special and resonant sites do not sit in silence. She will lead making workshops and seminars with equal poise to place the works in context or to pass on her skills to a new generation.

Alice Kettle remarks that when she completed the immense labour of *Looking* *Forwards to the Past* she felt ‘loss’ and the need to reconfigure her practice. I think this was due in part to her embeddedness in the city, which goes to the heart of who she is. The work was a summation of place, the storied past of Winchester, so how could she bear to let it go? But departing from the piece gave her the chance to reset her means of making, to give a new impetus to use digital techniques, and to think aloud about different sites for practice, unlocking her constant need to develop and experiment. The change has enabled her to think that her work is in some fundamental way ‘all about portraiture’, not of herself but of ‘the other me’ – the rigorous thinker, the outsider, the myth-reader, the maker of symbolic figures with their endless stories of the same bewildering situations.

Everything is then set in the swoop of her colour wash, the plaintive elegance of her stitching line and the discursive humanity and emotional intensity borne by the figures which live in the work. Glenn Adamson says that he sees Alice Kettle’s practice ‘using needle and thread as an interruptive process’. That captures her powerful intentions, her political enquiry, and her restlessness.

This body of work reveals her as a great, as well as internationally renowned, artist, courageous enough to look full through the extraordinary every day and the extraordinary deep past.

Simon Olding