

False teeth, Tai Chi & Two Tattoos; Concept and Empathy in the Work of Michelle Edwards



The best part of my role as the Chair of The Textile Society has been attending New Designers as one of the team of judges for the New Designers / Textile Society Award. I can also say that it was the hardest task that I had to do! New Designers is an annual event held in Islington, London that features the best of design graduates from across the country. Most universities, Colleges of Higher Education, Schools of Art, etc send the cream of their graduating students. The range of work is incredible and the standard is always very high. How to make a choice for a final winner amongst these glorious displays is always a challenge, the society has written criteria to be followed but what I have noticed is the way that eventually one work (and the person who made it) will stand out from the crowd. In June 2005 it was Michelle Edwards and her distinctive work that caught my eye and went on to win that year's prize.

Michelle Edwards studied 'Textile Crafts' at Huddersfield University, where she was awarded a first class honours degree. Her specialism is embroidery with a highly narrative content and it was her interest in stories, the obvious empathy with her chosen subject matter and ability to express these issues through clever use of concept that impressed me as much as the skill, by which she produced items.

The award winning work displayed at New Designers had the incredible title of '*False teeth, Tai chi and two Tattoos*' and consisted of a display board that contained 70 small gold hooks, hanging from 65 of them were small completely handmade objects. The geometric display was quite stunning in itself but what I found to be really amazing was only revealed upon closer inspection. Among the items hanging on the hooks were tiny shopping trolleys, embroidered bus passes, sequinned glasses, a 'Granddad' with sparkly earrings, a gauze bag full of marbles – embroidered with the text 'I've lost my marbles' and even a small jam jar with a real pair of false teeth in them! I found myself smiling as I looked at the different objects and when I came to the jar with the false teeth I actually laughed out loud. I was so surprised by experiencing this emotion while at an exhibition that I had to find out more. What was the meaning behind these items? Why were there 65 objects but 70 hooks?



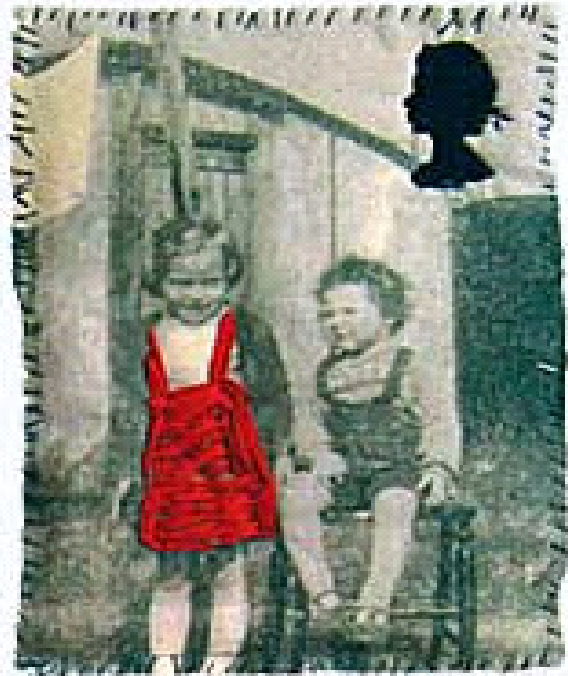


Michelle explained that the work was an idea for a campaign for Age Concern and it was a response to the possible Government proposal to raise the age of retirement from 65 to 70 (hence the number of objects and hooks respectively). She stated that “Whether you are for or against this political move, I wanted to make the audience think about the whole subject matter – how do they feel about growing old? how do they feel about possibly working into their seventies?” The work was therefore both personal and political at the same time.



The work could so easily have slipped into either a rose-tinted version of old age or have been patronizingly pitying, but instead it was celebratory and poignant. It was the feelings that Michelle exactly wanted to convey to her audience. She wanted her ‘work to touch people with a sadness, satire, humour and hurt...[to make] people to think about their own grandparents or elderly neighbours’. As judges both Eileen Ellis and myself felt that the student was addressing a challenging issue with an original concept that was fresh and fun. We were very impressed (and a little stunned) that such a young woman should chose to look at an issue which for many people might seem to be highly unpromising as subject matter. However, this work was for Michelle an extension of an earlier projection and part of her profound interest in people and stories.

At Huddersfield University, her love of drawing manifested itself through a very illustrative style of work. It was because of this approach that she decided to enter the ‘Graphics Question’ of the prestigious RSA national awards – the Royal Society of encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce *Design Directions Awards 2005*. The brief was very open, simply ‘to design a range of postage stamps with a particular campaign or concern in mind’. Michelle decided to tackle this in her own inimitable manner by taking inspiration from a very personal story, this time her Grandmother’s experience as a child during World War II, being evacuated and thus separated from her parents. The aim of the stamp designs was to make the purchasers think about their own past and family. Much to her surprise, but not the judges who heaped acclaim upon her designs Michelle won the £2,500 travel prize.



The warmth of Michelle's feelings towards her subject matter is evident in her work and by the way that she speaks about her inspirations. At one of her talks the audience was highly entertained as she showed them the textile shopping trolleys she had made and moved to hear her speak so lovingly of the elderly neighbour who had inspired their creation. This lady had 'adopted' her student household and regularly gave them meat and potato pies!

The textiles used for these creations often come from charity shops, as this is the type of place where she can find the plastic caps and old check clothes that are so reminiscent of her subject matter – indeed often the actual types of clothing that they wear. Michelle commented that while the textiles were 'not necessarily pleasing from an aesthetic perspective, [because they] reminded you of the person behind the textiles – they were beautiful'. I think that this is a particularly revealing statement of Michelle's and demonstrates for her the importance of textiles in relation to people. It is a sentiment in which she is far from alone; during the nineteenth century such women authors as Mrs Oliphant and Mrs Gaskell would describe the types of textiles and the manner in which they were used as narrative devices for their stories. Mrs Gaskell in particular emphasized the strong bond between people, often mother and daughter through their knowledge and love of textiles. Textile people (and both Mrs Oliphant and Mrs Gaskell were very keen on fashion and textiles!) are invariably interested in the people connected with the fabric – who made it, who owned it, how was it used, etc. For me, Michelle Edwards with her narrative inspired textile based work is part of this tradition.



I am sure that future is bright for such a talented and dynamic designer maker as Michelle Edwards. After New Designers, Michelle was inundated with interest from a number of different companies, including DKNY, The Crafts Council and was even invited to exhibit her work at Top Shop in Oxford Street London. It will be exciting to see how her travel plans (following the travel award from the R.S.A) will influence her future work and what new concepts she will address. Such an empathic person will surely be inspired whether she travels to Mumbai or Manchester. I look forward to finding out.