

Press Release - April 2018

## ALICE KETTLE: THREAD BEARING WITNESS



**Major new Whitworth exhibition, 1 September 2018 - March 2019 (Date TBC)**

From the Barberini Tapestries to the Bayeux Tapestry, monumental textiles in the form of large-scale narrative embroideries, weaving and tapestries have been used to illustrate contemporary events to become enduring material chronicles. *Thread Bearing Witness* is a major new series of large textiles, and other works, to be shown at the Whitworth, that considers cultural heritage, refugee displacement and movement, while engaging with individual migrants and their creativity within the wider context of the global refugee crisis.

Alice Kettle is a highly regarded contemporary artist focused upon stitched textiles, a powerful medium through which to explore these themes. *Thread Bearing Witness* represents displacement through the migration of stitches, using the three strands of artistic representation, participation and creative resilience, testing ways of belonging within a cultural space, and using textile as a medium of integration, collective expression and resilience to displacement.

Alice Kettle, *Ground* (detail), thread on printed canvas, 3m x 8m, 2018, courtesy the artist and Candida Stevens Gallery Photo: Joe Lowe

Core to *Thread Bearing Witness* are SEA, GROUND and SKY, three monumental works which form an immersive installation in the gallery. Kettle's textiles act as temporary walls and campsites, requiring the viewer to negotiate them, challenging simply 'decorative' readings. The works embrace both the personal testimonies of the refugees Kettle has met and textiles' role, from the domestic to the spectacular, to encourage understanding in this chronicle of shared making. SEA reflects on the mediated experience through the media lens, symbolising the perilous and fatal sea journeys taken by the migrants. GROUND is patterned, informed by refugee's contributions of imagery and textile cultural heritage for a collective common ground of making where Kettle has created sites for other voices to occupy. SKY is similarly made through image contribution as a shared one world view.

Kettle has developed the project *Thread Bearing Witness* with her daughter Tamsin Koumis who has a background of working with migrants and refugees and set up the Dunkirk Legal Support Team, enabling access to rights. Public and refugee inclusion and engagement in the project is critical. They recently went to help in the PIKPA camp in Greece with the organisation Lesvos Solidarity. Kettle has also worked closely and regularly with refugees in the UK through various organisations in the UK and abroad. Selected imagery from this work are translated into stitched images for GROUND and SKY while original artworks are also being developed. Kettle sees her role as a pattern maker, raising awareness of the issue of migration and raising money for refugee causes through ultimately selling the textile works. Kettle has also worked directly with talented asylum seekers from Afghanistan, Uganda and Syria to make works for the exhibition including a tapestry and a large beaded artwork – these showcase the talents of asylum seeker and refugee communities.

Alice Kettle said: "*Textiles make connections with home and community. In its substance it maps our cultural identities. I cannot be an observer; textiles are a way to engage, to show I care in a meaningful way, in a medium where I have a voice. I want to help and make a difference, maybe like all mothers do for their children.*"

Further strands of *Thread Bearing Witness* include *The Stitch Tree* project, with over 3,000 contributions of stitched trees from across the world forming another large scale work, *Forest*, in support of refugees. *Thread Bearing Witness* also includes further works from the parallel project *The Travelling Heritage Bureau*, led by Digital Women's Archive North (DWAN). *The Travelling Heritage Bureau* is a co-research project and supportive network with and for displaced women artists. The project aims to ensure the arts practice and cultural heritage of international women visual artists is identified, collected and shared. *The Travelling Heritage Bureau* is collaborating with Alice Kettle to co-design giant sculptural cushions for the Whitworth exhibition. These cushions act as sites to sit and act as metaphor for the occupation of cultural spaces, temporary settling places, allowing visitors to spend time contemplating the other works.

*Thread Bearing Witness* is financially supported by Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester Metropolitan University, Design Manchester, and public funding from the National Lottery through Arts Council England. *Thread Bearing Witness* is also supported by Hampshire Cultural Trust. *The Travelling Heritage Bureau of Displaced Women Artists* is funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. [www.threadbearingwitness.com/](http://www.threadbearingwitness.com/)

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## Notes to editors

Alice Kettle has worked with and is very grateful to a number of other organisations who have contributed to the development of *Thread Bearing Witness*. These include Refugee Action, Southampton Winchester Visitors Group, English Chat Syrian Women's Group, the Rural Refugee Network, Helen Bamber Foundation, Lesvos Solidarity and the Paper People project. SEA launched the *Thread Bearing Witness* project through its inclusion in the *Threads* exhibition at The Winchester Discovery Centre from October 2017 through January 2019, where a 10-year retrospective of Alice Kettle's work also hosted a complimentary exhibition of local embroiderers, and the Stitch Tree project. Any profits from the sale of Alice Kettle's work on *Thread Bearing Witness* will be donated to charities supporting displaced people.

## About Alice Kettle

Alice Kettle is a contemporary textile/fibre artist based in the UK and has established an internationally regarded unique area of practice. Her stitched works, many the size of huge figurative tapestries, exploit the textures and effects made possible through the harnessing of a mechanical process to intuitive, conceptual and creative ends. Alice is currently Professor in Textile Arts in MIRIAD Manchester School of Art at Manchester Metropolitan University. Her work is represented in various public collections including the Crafts Council London, the Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester, Museo Internazionale delle Arti Applicate Oggi, Turin, Italy, Museum of Decorative Art and Design, Riga, Latvia. Commissions include the National Library of Australia, The Scottish High Court in Edinburgh, Gloucester and Winchester Cathedrals, Winchester Discovery Centre, Lloyd's Register and the School of Music & Drama at Manchester University. [www.alicekettle.co.uk](http://www.alicekettle.co.uk)

## About the Whitworth

The Whitworth is part of The University of Manchester. It is home to internationally renowned collections of modern art, textiles, watercolours, prints, drawings and sculpture. Created in 1889 as the first English gallery in a park, the Whitworth has developed a new vision for the role of a university gallery. A creative laboratory within an ambitious university, the Whitworth is a place where good, unusual things happen. The Whitworth re-opened to the public on 14 February 2015 after a major £17 million redevelopment by architects MUMA. The Whitworth has welcomed over one million visitors since re-opening, and more than doubled its previous annual records. The redevelopment has doubled public space and created state-of-the-art new facilities including expanded gallery spaces, a study centre, learning studio, and a collections centre. The gallery was crowned Art Fund Museum of Year 2015, nominated for the prestigious Stirling Prize and named Best Emerging Cultural Destination in Europe. [www.manchester.ac.uk/whitworth](http://www.manchester.ac.uk/whitworth)

**Digital Women's Archive North CIC** is an arts and heritage organisation supporting women and girls to identify, collect, disseminate and celebrate their cultural heritage through creative and digital interventions. We use feminist curatorial and archival practices to support women's active citizenship and self-empowerment.

Our work has a specific interest in supporting the heritage and archival practices of women artists, and the development of arts archives. Twitter: @dwarchivenorth

## Manchester Metropolitan University

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**Design Manchester** was created to provide the voice of design in and connected with Manchester. We are a not-for-profit organisation running events and programmes throughout the year. Our headline activity is DM, the annual design festival for the city, which takes place every October and is now in its fourth year. Design Manchester was established in 2013 with the support of Manchester School of Art, part of Manchester Metropolitan University, which remains a key partner. The highlight of the first festival was a day of presentations by designers from Manchester and around the world in the Town Hall. In 2014, Design Manchester linked up with the Science Festival and also attracted thousands to an exhibition of classic trainers by adidas Spezial. That year also saw our first public design debate. <http://designmcr.com>