Interview with Alison Lowry

Entretien avec Alison Lowry

Fabrice Mourlon
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Alison Lowry is a glass artist living in Saintfield (Belfast) where she works from her studio, Schoolhouse Glass. In 2009 she graduated from the University of Ulster with a First-Class Honours degree in Art and Design. She has won numerous awards and has exhibited both locally and internationally. Her work is held in several public collections, for instance with the National Gallery of Ireland recently acquiring the exhibition (A)Dressing Our Hidden Truths.

Artist’s website: https://alisonlowry.co.uk

Fabrice Mourlon: In your “artist statement” on your website, you state “I am interested in textiles, especially clothing. Fabric preserves the essence of its maker; traces of the wearer become entwined with the warp and weft, allowing physical objects to become containers for memory”. You are using dresses from your family and you are passing on the tradition by transforming your object. Could you elaborate on your work?

Alison Lowry: Well, the christening robe that sparked off this whole body of work was from my dad’s side of the family. So it was that which got me thinking about how this very delicate, very beautiful object has this whole history embedded in it. Obviously, museums use objects in exactly the same way to tell a story. I came to art through studying textiles, i.e. creative embroidery. At that time, I was interested in what type of embroidery [was used on my family’s dress]. It actually came from Scotland. It was probably one of the first embroideries that came off the rolls. It was a mechanised process, so that was kind of interesting, you know, for a start. And my Mum thinks that it probably came to Northern Ireland from Scotland. There would have been a lot of Scottish settlers on the Shankill Road, which is where my granddad was from originally. We think that’s how the material has arrived on the Shankill to be hand-stitched into this beautiful christening robe that was in our family. I think textile is such an emotive, personal type of object, because it touches our skin, it’s the first thing that you feel when you’re born. And of course, a christening robe is the one dress, a dress that both male and female children wear. It’s a ceremonial gown, and it’s kept carefully. It’s not a throwaway object, or didn’t used to be anyway. [I am interested in] how an object could tell us a thousand stories and be quite open-ended at the same time.

My Mum’s family came from the country and we would have a lot of linen tablecloths. If you went to my grandma’s house, there was crochet on the chairs. It was just on everything: crochet, hand-embroidered napkins, the whole nine yards. That would have come from generations and generations past and that’s what
women did. They would have sat around and they would have embroidered and crocheted and done this amazing woman’s work. You know, no merit. It wasn’t craft, certainly wasn’t art. I suppose it’s thanks to those traditions that I became interested in transforming textiles into something that can tell a story.

FM: So the stitching was done in Northern Ireland, on the Shankill?
AL: I don’t know. My granny would’ve known, you know, she would have known the history of that robe. And I think it’s so sad that we don’t have the full story, that it has died with her, but we can only surmise that it was either put together in Scotland and then brought over, or that the fabric came over to the Shankill with settlers. And then somebody else hand-stitched it, I suppose, because that’s what women did. It wouldn’t have been signed. It was not [considered] craft because it wasn’t a man that worked it and it was unpaid and it was just literally a woman’s work. There was no intrinsic value to it. You knew nothing about it. It just was in your family forever.

FM: So, in fact, the idea that you’re piecing back all the stories together is a way of making it up. At least you’re creating a narrative through that.
AL: Yes, we tried as much as possible when I made that original glass christening robe. I went back and worked out who in my family had worn the robe when they’d worn it, whether they were still alive.

FM: Christening is a ceremony. You’re entering the kingdom of God, because you are a Christian. So, it’s a transition as well.
AL: It is, yes. And you know, I am not of the “Christian” tradition. My husband is Catholic, and I would have been brought up in the Protestant tradition, you know, we’re a mixed marriage. I wouldn’t be christening children or any of that. But his Mum and my Mum are both real churchgoers. So I just went with the flow [and my children] were christened at the Catholic Church, all of them. It was very much a ceremonial. Well, actually, I think a christening in the Protestant churches is much more of a thing, whereas it seems to be an add on to the Catholic Church. You know, service isn’t built around the christening. You just sort of shuffle in at the end of a mass and that’s it. Whereas in the Protestant traditions, it is a welcoming of a new member of the church and the whole church turns around and faces the baptismal font. Yeah, it’s a ceremonial thing, you know, probably the first ceremony that you’ll have in your life really.

FM: What was interesting in what you said earlier is that the women’s work was not recognised. Is it a way for you to try to transmit that to the next generation? Or is it a way of acknowledging the work that was done in the private sphere?
AL: Yes, I suppose so, but I’m conflicted over that because I come from a textile background, so why am I not using textiles? I can’t say yes, textile should have a higher status in society, and it does now, interestingly and especially over lockdown. You could look at the work of some female artists like Amanda Coogan or Jennifer
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Trouton who have turned to embroidery. So, embroidery is being brought into the fine art world through the back door. Certainly, when I did my degree, in 2006, textile fibre arts, as they were called, had a lower designation on the fine arts scale. And it’s interesting that these people who have come from a fine art tradition are going to the crafts and are sort of dragging them up, elevating them.

FM: So textile would be both arts and crafts?
AL: Yes. Yes. But I would argue that only very recently has the status been elevated into the fine art realm and it’s kind of being forced in there.

FM: When you studied textile at university, what type of work were you doing?
AL: Printed textiles. At that time, I had worked in a gym for ten years and I did a two-year City and Guilds creative embroidery course. When I was 19, I did my first year in my Art degree, called a foundation year and you do everything that you can basically, and it’s meant to help you decide what you want to specialise in. But it just really confused me because I knew I wanted to work with my hands, but I hated clay. You weren’t offered glass because there was no glass department anywhere in Northern Ireland, and textiles felt too slow, too soft. I went and worked for ten years, in a completely unrelated [job], but I was always dipping in. Eventually I did it one day a week in creative embroidery, which allowed me to build up a portfolio. And then I applied to art college. You see, I was used to having a wage, so I had to go to my husband [and tell him]: “This is a career, you know, this is a different; I’m going to have a job at the end of this”. That’s what I thought the whole way through art college, that I would be going out and just [get] full-time employment, certainly not self-employment. [I decided] that I would work in the very small scrap of the textile industry that we would have been left in Northern Ireland at that stage: printed textiles. [In the third year of my degree] I did specialise in printed textiles and [had to write a brief]. I was working with glass at that stage, and I wrote a brief that a hospital wanted a design piece, so I did this christening robe for a hospital.

FM: And what do you think about the nature of stitching?
AL: There is a real, meditative quality about repetition. If I’m stuck with something like a title or how to move a piece of work forward, I go for a run. Generally, I can find the answer and you get the same thing in stitching or something that you’re very deeply engrossed in. You know, it’s to do with the repetition. There’s something about your mind being blank but you’re still doing something.

FM: Going back to your exhibition (A)Dressing Our Hidden Truths, National Museum of Ireland, Dublin about the Magdalene Laundries and the Mother and Baby Homes, you use the dress and glass to impersonate those women who have been forgotten.
AL: Yes, I mean, the children really. [The exhibition] has nine dressing rooms that are a sort of a living memorial to the Home babies, the Tuam Mother and Baby homes. That story was just horrifying. The fact that they’re still there is horrifying.
All those children would have been christened the minute that they were born, you know, by those nuns [who thought] this wasn’t anything, and they didn’t get thrown and upset because they were un-pure or unbaptised.

**FM:** Were your dresses a sort of re-christening?

**AL:** Yes, I wanted them to be. I wanted them to be white. This purity, you know? But I couldn’t make them white with the process because [it implied] the glue, the fabric burning out the glass and the fact that they’re contained in all this sand. You would almost need a chimney to try and get rid of all the soot and all the crap that’s burnt off. So they all came out grey. And actually, you know, with hindsight, the gray works better because it’s like a stain or a shadow or any of those things. But in my mind’s eye, I tried so hard to make the point.

**FM:** Yes, because in fact, you put the dresses into glass.

**AL:** Basically, yes, I collected [objects] at nine charity shops, went round eBay. I’ve always looked for objects that make me think of things, and sometimes when I get stuck, I go to look on eBay or in shops. Quite a lot of these used to be brilliant antique shops. There’s only a couple left now, but I go for a good hope and see if I can find something that just moves the process on or maybe makes me respond. So sometimes just being around stuff can make you have ideas. But I collected those nine dresses from charity shops, from off the Internet, from, you know, different places. And the technique is that I paint them with PVA glue, the white glue, sprinkle them in fret, and I build up the layers about nine times. Then it goes into a big stainless-steel chip of sand. And it all goes in the kiln, and I take the kiln temperature up to about 900 degrees, so the dress burns away, the glue burns away. And in theory, you’re left with a glass dress at the end of [the process]. [There is] no fabric, no glue, but the glass is fused.

The sand actually acts as a mold. Sand isn’t getting hot enough. That means sand can become glass, but it would probably have to go up to like about 3,500 degrees. If I just put that glass dress in a steady container, in the kiln, and fire it up to that temperature, everything would burn off. But I’d be left with a little puddle of glass at the bottom. So that’s what’s keeping the cape in the ship.

**FM:** And why did you move from textile to glass? Or is there a connection? How do you make the connection?

**AL:** It just made a lot of sense when I started working with glass. I had two kids when I started working with glass. I was never one of those people who thought I was going to get married and have kids. It was not in my big game plan. I was a bit of a rebel. I couldn’t really give a damn being a mother or having a house. So this came as a huge surprise, motherhood and all that it entailed and what it made me feel, and that’s really what I explored. These new feelings that this little fragile baby was so reliant, so vulnerable. I think glass was just the perfect medium to express that. So the first thing I ever made was a slumped glass babygrow. I rolled a babygrow into a piece of clay, took a plaster mold of it. It was just very shallow
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and it’s still a mystery. The glass gave it this very loose shape, and it was really hard to [recognise] the babygrow. Also, in the second year of my degree I’d taken molds of my son’s hands on a bed, had frozen breast milk into them and then had melted them and had taken a video of that. I think also those hands made me sparkle. But what a mutable substance glass physically is, because it can be molded, it can be solid… Everybody who works with glass, [will say] that it just really mirrors us as humans. There’s just so many ways to work with glass and so many things it can say. But I think mostly what drew me in was this fragility, but also this immense strength that it can have.

FM: Isn’t it the same with textile? It’s very fragile.
AL: That’s right. [In fact] the first airplane was covered in linen, its wings were made of linen. So to me, there’s a crossover between textiles and glass. My problem is, if I’m sort of being this advocate for textiles, why the hell am I not working with textiles? The glass art movement was a very male dominated movement.

FM: From what you’re saying there is a dichotomy between the man’s world and the woman’s world which is more private. You merge glass with textile, which is more female orientated. But also at the same time, you said the textile came from your father’s side of the family. It’s interesting to see that crossover.
AL: Indeed.

FM: Where did you learn your lace technique when you were doing your lace?
AL: I went up to the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum. They did this really long running class on Monday night, and I will not be able to remember the woman who taught that. But you just really went up and sat with a whole bunch of the old women.

FM: Was it only elderly women?
AL: Yes, the majority of them. I would have definitely been the youngest and they would have just done their own projects. So, it probably was what the women would have done of an evening, get together and work on their tablecloths because there’s no TV and the men were doing something else or whatever. [This group of women] would have taught me lots of different lace making techniques.

FM: Is there a particular technique from Northern Ireland?
AL: Oh yes, there’s lots of lace making techniques in Ireland. I don’t know if they’re really specific to Northern Ireland. You would have Limerick lace, but there wouldn’t be a huge tradition for bobbing lace here, you know, like in England. Instead, we would have needle laces. You would work on a net and then you would put like a cotton grind over the top, then your pattern on top of that. Carrickmacross or Limerick lace would be worked in a very similar way. And then, that would be hand-stitched and you would put in your little stitches and then you would cut away your pattern, your paper pattern, and then you would start to cut away the
grind as well. I don’t know if there’s actually a tradition that would be Northern Irish. [In Ireland] we have needle [but also] Irish crochet which has a fascinating background. It was introduced during Famine times to families that were really struggling. And if you could imagine, Irish crochet is so tiny, a cotton thread like you would be working on, but with a very, very fine crochet hook. It was sent around all the families, all the cottages that were affected by the Famine. People would have given them the material and everybody would have worked it: men, women and children. And then it would have been collected back up and it would have been taken to Paris. It was sold in Paris, in London for a lot of money.

There’s a really lovely little shop called Sheelan just outside Enniskillen. [The owner] sells all sorts of stuff and I think she calls herself a museum. And there would be also quite a big patchwork tradition in Northern Ireland, like in Derry. The textile curator at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, Valerie Wilson, would say they’ve got a big collection of patchwork quilts, and they would say that the Derry quilts are their prized collection. Because Derry women who worked in factories were allowed to buy scraps of the fabrics and take them home and make these utilitarian quilts. They’re just like roughly hand-stitched together. There was no walling or anything in them. They were super thin and they layered them up. They used them as quilts on the beds.

When I was trying to research what the women wore in the Laundries or what children would have worn in the Industrial Schools, I first went to the textile curator at the museum, the National Museum of Ireland, [and asked whether they had] anything in their collection. And the answer was just, no, because nobody kept them. There is no collection of everyday textiles anywhere, you know. So then I went up to Valerie in the North and said to her, look, would you have anything? And she said, “No, I don’t, but I have some things of that period, things that people would have worn”. If we think of the archives of textiles that we have, they’re changing what the museums are, changing what they’re keeping. But certainly, traditionally, they didn’t keep everyday textiles. And the biggest collection of everyday textiles from the 19th century [is to be found] at the Foundling Museum in London. [Originally] it was where you handed in your baby. If you ever wanted to get that baby back, you left a token, a button off your shirt, a scrap of your scarf or whatever. So the museum now have the largest collection of everyday textiles that ordinary woman would have worn in the United Kingdom.

The interview took place online on 17 December 2021.

Fabrice Mourlon

Université Sorbonne Nouvelle