

CRAFTS MAGAZINE

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LOOKOUT

By Liz Hoggard

'I was sitting in this shopping centre in South London watching everyone go past when I suddenly thought, why don't we ever look at other people properly? It was one of those once in a lifetime revelations,' laughs textile artist Louise Gardiner.

It was a breakthrough for Gardiner who, in the second year of her BA Honours in Textiles at Goldsmiths', was struggling to find a subject of her own. 'The course can be quite daunting,' she remembers. 'You're trying to work out the craft fine art divide, there's a strong emphasis on critical theory and the tutors are very keen for you to experiment with conceptual work – work that has a political or social dimension.'

The discovery that simply people could be the basis of her work gave Gardiner a new burst of confidence. 'I spent days photographing and sketching people around London, fascinated by the different styles of dress, posture and movement.'

For her degree show in June 1994, Gardiner papered the walls of her exhibition space with hundreds of figures all running round in the same direction. The design combined broad humour with a touch of menace – seen individually the figures looked quite normal, but seen together they had a 'crazy claustrophobic' feel. Against this backdrop, she put a series of translucent cotton hangings with embroidered detail. *Marching men* is an 'Escher- esque' study of two groups of men pounding the turf. You are convinced that this is an army on the move, until Gardiner reveals that it was inspired by watching men marching up and down Oxford Street – she wrote her dissertation on the representation of masculinity in advertising.

By contrast the wall-hanging *Eight Rows of Ladies* – a vibrant mix of silkscreen printing and machine embroidery – offers an altogether more humane, more generous view of the crowd. *Eight Rows of Ladies* is inspired, cloche-hatted ladies parading in their finery – some gossiping, some walking serenely.

All Gardiner's hangings, framed pieces and drawings have this 'patronous' quality: 'The rhythm of pattern has always intrigued me.' Although inspired by real people, her figures seem isolated from any specific social landscape. Many have the quality of faded sepia photos or old fashion illustrations – but there is a modernist thrust. 'I'm fascinated by changing notions of identity, by the way we seem to forget that the crowd is made up of individuals.'

This emphasis on singularity informs her technique. After picking out her favourite figures from her photographs, she screen-prints them onto a cotton or calico background. One image will often be repeated to create a row of figures – like a giant extended family. Next she embroiders, paints or prints over the outlines to add individual characteristics. A subtle detail like a pair of red shoes can be a triumphant gesture in the anonymous crowd. Figures are often left deliberately unfinished to create a sense of movement – shoppers in hot pursuit of a bargain – or to emphasise the partial impressionistic way we see other people.

Gardiner is all too aware that the success of her current work has left little time for experiment. She is keen to see if her designs could be turned into animation, but first she is off on a ten-month tour of Australia to 'broaden her scale of reference' and no doubt, hand about in the local shopping malls.