

Bilston Craft Gallery



earth|atmosphere



Above: Seiko Kinoshita at the dobby loom in her studio Front cover: detail of installation *A Walk in the Rain*, hand-dyed, paper yarn, Kasuri dye technique

seiko kinoshita the shape of things

here is someone called Seiko Kinoshita, a textile artist who may sometimes be found on the roof of Persistence Works in Sheffield with printmaker Neil Woodall. They both like to look at the sky.

I'm tempted to think it was during time on this roof that she conceived the idea that would become her contribution to *Earth* | *Atmosphere* at Bilston Craft Gallery. Learning that Kinoshita spends time contemplating space, it is fitting to find her work represents the 'atmosphere' in the show's title. Over the past decade, the artist's work has developed from wallmounted hangings to large installations of suspended material - countless woven pieces hanging on unseen thread, suggesting some brightly coloured phenomenon tumbling from the sky. Weather has become a recurring theme, expressed through titles such as Rain Rain, or Yuudachi (Japanese summer evening shower). Her work for this national programme of exhibitions – theshape of things - takes weather as a lens for cultural perspectives and positions. Kinoshita is a Japanese artist who has now lived in the UK for over a decade; she continues to be struck by the British national obsession with the weather, observing people's attitudes, and even postures, change according to what is happening outside the window. She suggests this differs from Japan where the weather is less changeable, moving from one defined

season to another. Friends in Japan send her photographs of the first blossoms, declaring 'You'll be missing the Japanese springtime' — she pins them on her studio wall, this year's incarnation of an annual spectacle. Kinoshita's cultural dislocation gives her installations *AWalk in the Rain* and *One Sunny Day* in *Earth* | *Atmosphere* an ethnographic perspective on our treasured national pastime of talking about the weather, albeit a creative and humorous one. In Kinoshita's hands this subject of normative chit-chat becomes an opportunity for aesthetic experience and contemplation. Within the show the visitor passes through a corridor of rain before encountering a shaft of sunshine.

Kinoshita sees her work, and perhaps even the broader purpose of art, as a prism to re-imagine or re-focus the viewer's attention on some easily bypassed detail. The beauty of nature figures repeatedly in her work and the pieces for the shape of things are no exception. While chatting with her about life before she moved to the UK, Kinoshita talks about a year spent after graduation working for a textiles company designing patterns for bed linen. This was not a fulfilling experience as she felt the margins and constrictions of commercial design weigh down upon her. One day, glancing at the sky, she was dismayed to see the season had changed and she hadn't noticed — 'I thought, "I have to quit my job"'. After securing funding, Kinoshita moved to the UK

1

to complete a Masters and set up an artistic practice. Since this epiphany, the artist has immersed herself in a dialogue with the nature that had passed her by. Each subsequent work testifies to and re-enacts this revelation.

In her studio overlooking Sheffield and its distant hills, she pins up photographs of dramatically coloured skies next to the large window from which they were taken, reminders of what has been, and could be. Such immediate experience remains at the centre of her practice, whether causing pleasure or pain. For a 2006 installation, *Rain Rain*, the artist produced the accompanying text:

One sunny Spring day, I was crying, because it was a too sunny, blue sky day. That colour looked so bright and all the world looked so happy except for me. Then I realised I was missing rain, rain... English rain. I don't know what it is, but its raining sound and visual vagueness calms me down and brings a kind of therapy.

This recognition of the emotional quality of weather is evident in Kinoshita's work and contradicts the sense of detachment implied by the Japanese artist-anthropologist observing the British through her studio window. Rather this intense introspective contemplation of nature recalls the sublime and asserts a personal pleasure in the insignificance of self in the face of the awesome.

All modern contemplations of weather may now be coloured by global warming and climate change but there have been several recent, high-profile flirtations between art and weather: namely Olafur Eliasson's Weather Project, 2003, and Antony Gormley's Blind

Light, 2007. These two works enjoyed great popularity, demonstrating the public's attraction to an ersatz phenomenology which captures a direct and experiential quality of nature. As in real life, the experience of the atmospheric phenomenon is instantaneously understood and yet arcane. Whether ecological or phenomenological, our fascination for such work partly manifests a reverence towards some universal and inescapable, possibly celestial, power that we are at the mercy of.

And yet, Earth | Atmosphere doesn't deal in smoke and mirrors but stuff. Kinoshita's atmosphere is presented through material – hand-woven, hand-dyed paper yarn. Many fragments of colour build up to the whole like a painting built from brushstrokes, each connected by a seemingly invisible thread, the cloth floats in front of our eyes. These vivid but translucent elements are suggestive of Japanese traditions including the well-known decorative *origami* but also the more spiritual *shide* and omikuji, both paper constructions found at Shinto shrines. The 900 pieces required to construct One Sunny Day assert their similarities, the repeated shapes and patterns, the recurring rhythms of the 90 year old dobby loom on which they were created. Yet the arrangement hints at chaos, our eyes search the spaces between the forms, as though a gravitational or atomic force held the whole together in some tense equilibrium. We return to the notion of the sublime: if the piece can seem at once the atom and the orrery, then our position as viewer next to it becomes mind-bending. Displaying 'the atmosphere' in a gallery puts the outside on the inside, turning the world inside-out by containing and representing the infinite. There is a tension between

seeing and not-seeing in Kinoshita's work for the shape of things at both a physical and conceptual level. The installations, as networks of small elements, give the impression of a whole; like the phenomenon they represent they may be experienced, but they are not really seen. Kinoshita's motivation for capturing rain and sunshine through weaving is the slippage between seeing and not-seeing as a Japanese expatriate and a British resident.

Kinoshita's practice draws on Japanese cultural traditions and yet presents these in refreshingly contemporary installations with modern themes. As well as echoing paper-folding practices, Kinoshita uses classical textile techniques in her making. Although for the artist it is her surprising contemporary application of Japanese traditions that is at the core of her practice, ironically, showing the majority of her work in the UK, it is received as characteristically Japanese. Kinoshita explains:

...people say 'this is very Japanese'. It's funny. I think people see simplicity, how you choose colour and how you keep designs simple...Maybe because I'm Japanese I can't see it.

Making work for the shape of things is not the first time Kinoshita has engaged with nationality and ethnicity. In 2009 Yellow, an installation at Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery for plAAy: Strange World (a contemporary asian artists' group show), she used colour as a comment on racially stereotyped slang terminology and taxonomy. Kinoshita's engagement with such issues is as an amused and curious onlooker. Her role as cultural outsider was hinted at during her 2007 commission at the Graves Art Gallery and Central Library Building

in Sheffield. The artist was asked to produce work for the stairwell which connects three floors of library and two floors of gallery space. She set about making an installation based on Maurice Maeterlink's 1908 play The Blue Bird. The narrative tells of a brother and sister who believe that they need a bluebird to find happiness; after a long journey around various lands accompanied by a fairy, they arrive back at home only to realise that happiness was there for them the whole time, that contentment and beauty can be found in the everyday. This storyline neatly fits Kinoshita's own commitment to the quotidian beauty of nature. She called the installation Blue Bird: it is made from 580 woven elements in a blur of sky blues, suspended through 12 metres of vertical space, seemingly flying and flitting upwards. This visually stunning and dynamic work materially echoes both the Gallery's and the Library's collections of paper treasures, but was the symbolist story a little abstruse? Kinoshita discovered that although The Blue Bird was part of her own childhood, a ubiquitous children's story in Japan that became a popular animated TV series in 1980, it had no such status in British culture. In fact, barely anyone had heard of it! She bashfully retells this story, which illustrates how our cultural lives and understanding are conditioned by ambient experience.

Kinoshita's approach to cultural identity is lived and pragmatic. She moved to the UK in 1999 and while she currently makes her home here she is emphatic about her sense of nationality.

I'm quite aware that I'm Japanese. However long I stay here I'm Japanese, I grew up already, I didn't have an identity crisis. Yet Kinoshita's ongoing mediation of a Japanese cultural background with her current British environment is apparent in her recent career trajectory which is punctuated with exhibitions and projects that contemplate, and are inspired by, her 'Japaneseness'.

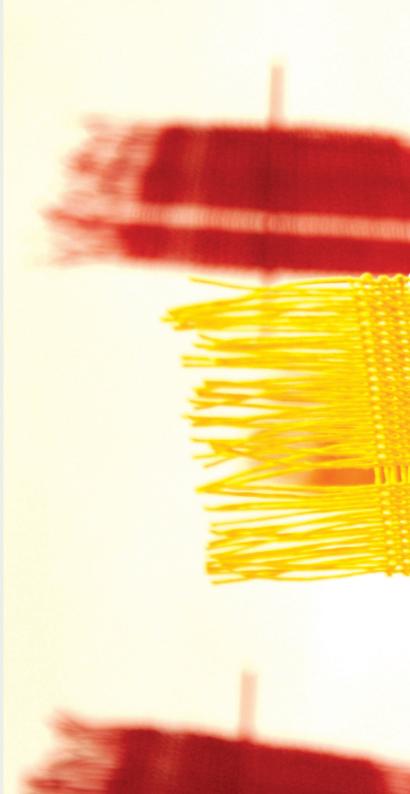
While walking around and through Kinoshita's work for the shape of things, keep an eye on your own responses. Do you smile in the sunshine? Do you see the same therapeutic 'visual vagueness' in the rain that the artist sees? Kinoshita gives us both a version of a universal experience and a personal vision of life in Britain. It is a view where details come in and out of focus, where understanding is found and lost in translation; but above all these woven atmospheres are the declaration of one person's love affair with nature. Although she writes passages to accompany her work, Kinoshita is not comfortable with language, either Japanese or English. For her 2006 work *Float* she observed that making articulates her thoughts.

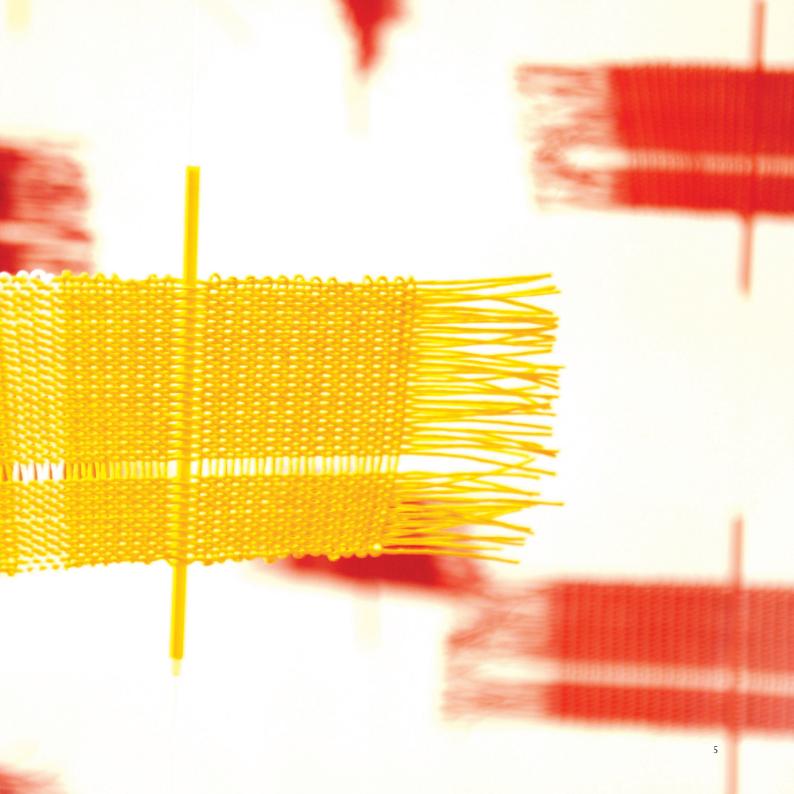
For a long time, this is my dream
I want to float in the sky, without any effort,
just floating without any power
I used to draw this on paper a lot, but now I am
a weaver, so I have woven it

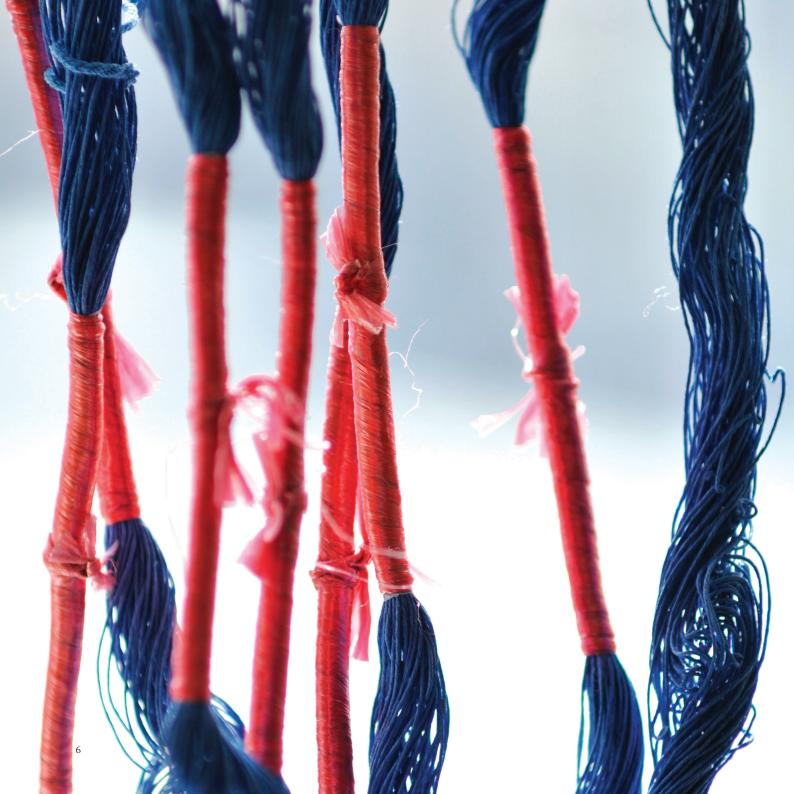
And so we return to the weaver and the printmaker, standing on top of the building in Sheffield, staring up at the sky.

Teleri Lloyd-Jones

Right: One Sunny Day, detail of installation, woven elements (hand-dyed, paper yarn), plastic tubing, fishing line, float stop







exhibition | experiment generating new knowledge

emporary exhibition programming shares some characteristics with the fashion cycle in that it works to engender and satisfy a constant thirst for the new and unanticipated. This could be viewed as broadly populist, especially as museum and gallery programming tends to be more closely linked to marketing and educational philosophies than academic and analytical approaches. However, anyone who has installed an exhibition, or visited a good one, will recognise the potential to generate new knowledge through this act of placing concrete objects in specific spaces. Exhibitions are rarely just a re-statement of current understanding, an embodiment of the craft/design/art histories we cull from books and other narratives. The physical struggle to bring things into relationship with each other is partly driven by pragmatic and aesthetic imperatives but it sets up real-life collisions and resonances of visual and conceptual properties that challenge or illuminate our interpretations. Think of the art history lecturer who puts up two slides side-by-side to illustrate a point, or the television historian who transports us instantaneously from a church in England to a château in France to demonstrate a parallel or a contrast (the colour of the presenter's shirt remaining reassuringly the same – an anchor in spacetime). These cases are one-line simplifications of the complex inter-relationships and significant proximities that we experience in exhibitions. The numerous but finite array of things, displayed in definite respect to one another, exert themselves on each other and the visitor. The exhibition experience differs from reading a text where suitable exemplars can be plucked from anywhere or anytime, and condensed into one meaningful dimension as required by the argument. Real objects are three-dimensional, surprising, contradictory, and assertive, mixing them can catalyse unexpected reactions, and the result can be a previously unimagined observation. That is, exhibitions and experiments have something in common.

The shape of things is self-described as 'an opportunity and a context for considering and debating what distinctive contribution artists make to influence or reflect national identity, to connect Britain with global cultures, and to reference the intercultural nature of British society'. The programme has an ambition to establish a new paradigm for contemporary craft that sheds existing models for the role of cultural references and traditions in this field; it contends that these no longer encompass, nor explain, current creative practice. This is a project to carve out a new body of knowledge, and the totalising challenge of such a venture is reflected in the multiple aims of the programme: new creative work, new commentators, new critical texts, and new audiences perceiving craft in new ways. This is a lot of 'new's ... but the most

Left: detail of threads for installation A Walk in the Rain after hand-dying, showing sections wrapped in plastic to resist dyed colour, paper yarn, Kasuri dye technique

promising thing is that the destination is unclear. A paradigm-shift is not a step-change or a business plan, it is a confluence of new, indisputable evidence and new ways of thinking about it that forces a completely revised framework, and produces previously unthinkable conclusions. As artists, curators, critics, and viewers we may feel at sea, inarticulate, and uncertain about what the shape of things is generating. This is an excellent sign.

Science and the crafts do not tend to see themselves reflected in each other, although much of craft is applied science, and much of science is skill with materials. In the field of science we are quite comfortable with the principles of experiment and observation as a methodology able to generate new discoveries and assess their importance. The mind's eye might conjure someone in a white coat, in a laboratory, with a notebook, or perhaps a computer, recording factual observations. Does this person seem preternaturally calm? Do they make mistakes? Of course experiments of all sorts are plagued by inconsistent, nonsensical results, human error and inclination, lines of enquiry that go nowhere, mirages of extraordinary career-enhancing observations that evaporate on closer inspection. The plot of a murder mystery novel would not be a bad metaphor for the achievement of many important scientific discoveries. But what the scientific method does have is a mission and a set of physical practices for fostering new thinking from within a body of established thinking. This is materially different from modern art's reactive drive for the new and shocking which arises from individualist and dialectical motivations. Good experiments utilise current understanding to set the stage for phenomena

to occur within a limited set of variables *but* with the space to perform unknown and unfamiliar happenings. This partly lies in the design of the experiment, and partly in how it is observed and recorded. I am not suggesting that contemporary craft practice maps onto, or should mimic, the scientific method. However, I wish to emphasise how essential *the shape of things*' support for making new work, and exhibiting it, is to the aims of the programme. Sponsoring nine artists to make ambitious work, and six venues to provide opportunities to encounter it, are crucial conditions for achieving an altered platform for making, interpreting, and consuming contemporary craft.

The shape of things' depressurisation of space for new making and viewing is particularly powerful and merited in the field of contemporary craft. Unlike many strands in the visual arts which chase, helter-skelter, an eternal contemporary, erasing their history, the crafts have an embedded retrograde element. Even the most avant-garde craft missions seem to include harking back, re-enacting, and recollecting, and in our brave new virtual world a fixation on real materials or hand processes can take on a luddite quality. The campaign to build an audience, a coherent critical language, and a commercial value often seems thwarted by the internal contradictions and subversions of contemporary craft (encapsulated by the term itself). But is it this very tension, this psycho-active baggage, that makes craft so personally and critically relevant? In our self-reflective society with our recognition of learning styles and personal pathways, our hypersensitivity and simultaneous anti-discriminatory blindness to nuances of difference and personality, surely contemporary craft is one of the

most complete incarnations of our ambitions to possess unique and authentic histories yet be dynamically flexible and innovative under all circumstances. *The shape of things* explicitly asks a question about the role of this vital link with the past, that makes sense of the future without strangling it.

What about the programme's other explicit question for contemporary craft – how is it inspired by cultural diversity and how is this represented in today's practice? New craft is an old associate of Romantic appropriation of cultural motifs. The aesthetic and decorative schemas of innumerable societies have been adopted as seductive or moral cloaks for craft objects. In a different vein, the reinvention or enactment of traditional or ancient techniques for crafting materials, have imbued 20th century craftworks with the gravity and mystery of a world cultural inheritance. Many beautiful, powerful, and useful objects have been achieved through these creative practices, and a great deal of knowledge and cross-cultural enthusiasm has been accumulated. However, our own complicated multi-cultural and global lives, together with critical discourse in anthropology, philosophy, and economics, no longer permits simplistic borrowings from, or submersions in, exotic artistic vocabularies. The shape of things attempts to start from the 'facts' of current practice rather than imposing an exhibition narrative that selects data and constrains outcomes. The nine programme artists bring unique, complex, and specific approaches to cultural experience and expression. Their works are propositions, questions, and meditations, rather than romances, adventures, or tales of conquest; they speak in the present tense.

As I write this I have a mental picture of what Earth | Atmosphere at Bilston Craft Gallery will look like. We have drawn exhibition plans and drafted interpretation panels. I have some half-platonic, halfwork-in-progress, visions of Halima Cassell's and Seiko Kinoshita's installations for the exhibition. The artists and the exhibitions team have talked about motivations for, and readings of these works. We have imagined how Cassell's sculptural ceramic forms, with their earthy tones and coarse surface textures, will balance and contrast with Kinoshita's suspended, insubstantial, and brightly coloured woven textiles. We have identified themes, of earth and origin, and weather and atmosphere, that complement and refract one another and the premise of the shape of things. But all of this is virtual construction based on deductions, inferences, and pre-existing works. I am not a believer in thoughtexperiments and we look forward to being tested and astonished by the actual Earth | Atmosphere.

The experiment is running now, the reactants and their medium are selected. The challenge remains for us, the viewers, in the observation, recording, and interpretation of the results. Will we recognise the new when we see it? Can we stretch our perceptions and integrate *the shape of things* into a new framework for contemporary craft?

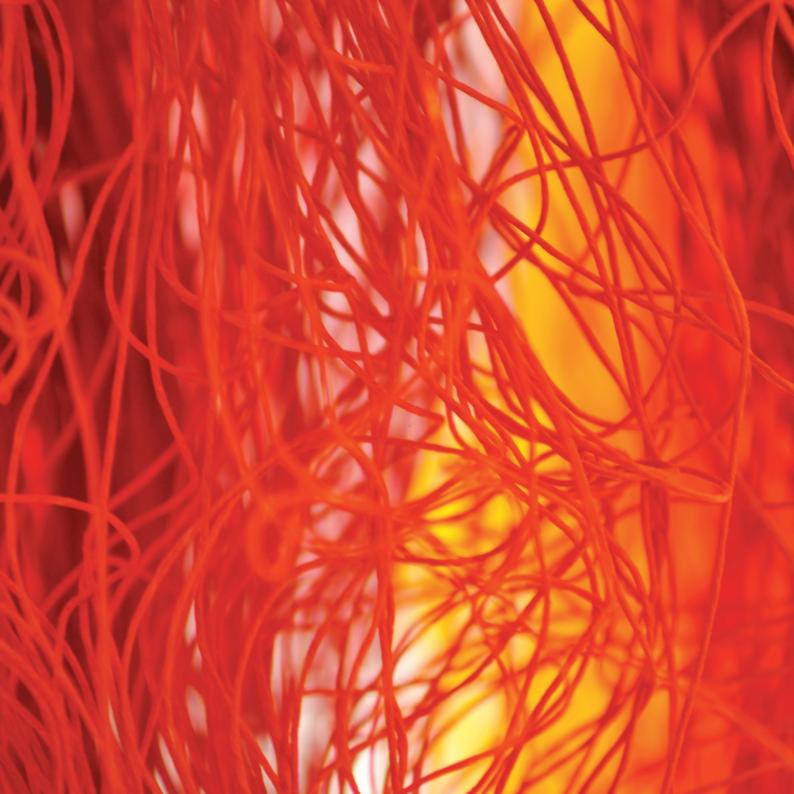
Sophie Heath

Curator of Contemporary Craft, Bilston Craft Gallery

Overleaf, left: detail of threads for installation A Walk in the Rain after hand-dying, paper yarn, Kasuri dye technique

Overleaf, right: detail of threads for installation One Sunny Day after hand-dying, paper yarn





earth atmosphere: the shape of things

he shape of things is a contemporary craft initiative that is taking place over five years. It is providing bursaries to artists to make new craftwork in order to explore the distinctive contribution artists make to influence or reflect national identity, the intercultural nature of British society, and its connection with global cultures through a series of exhibitions, installations, and events between 2006 and 2011.

The origins of the shape of things lie in a report to Arts Council England South West into the potential for creating a contemporary crafts exhibition as part of Decibel, Arts Council England's national initiative to promote diversity in the arts. The report recognised a relative under-representation of black, asian, and minority ethnic craft practitioners and audiences for contemporary crafts, and recommended that exhibitions should be used strategically to explore diversity within contemporary craft practice.

As a consequence, with the financial support and partnership of the Arts Council, and in partnership with Bristol's Museums, Galleries & Archives, the ceramicist Takeshi Yasuda, jeweller Vannetta Seecharran, and weaver Rezia Wahid were invited to make new exploratory works. In the process they considered the role of personal cultural identity within their practice.

The artists presented these new commissions at a symposium organised by the Museum in Bristol in 2006 where a discussion took place with invited delegates, chaired by ceramicist Magdalene Odundo.

The success of this event, together with further encouragement and invaluable financial support from Arts Council England, enabled us to move forward. The shape of things is now working nationally and has received guidance from organisations engaged with the crafts including the Contemporary Arts Society, National Society for Education in Art and Design, Craftspace, SHISHA, Crafts Study Centre, Crafts Council, and Audiences Central.

The shape of things is privileged to be working with an exceptional group of artists and venues. Our first bursary was to Rezia Wahid who coincidentally had been awarded an MBE. Rezia's response to the initial commission was an important influence on the potential of the shape of things. The exhibition took place in 2007 at the Crafts Study Centre and enabled a test of the bursary-exhibition model.

In 2009 eight bursaries were awarded to artists working with craft media to partner with curators and venues to create new work for exhibition in public spaces.

The ambition and scale of each artist's work is realised

through their relationship with the curators of the public museums and galleries taking part.

The shape of things exhibitions in 2010 present the work of Alinah Azadeh and Rosa Nguyen at Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, Halima Cassell and Seiko Kinoshita at Bilston Craft Gallery, Tanvi Kant and Taslim Martin at Touchstones Rochdale, and in 2011 Maggie Scott and Chien-Wei Chang at The City Gallery Leicester.

Work by all these artists will be available to buy in a group exhibition at Flow Gallery, London, in autumn 2010. The participation of a privately run gallery in a joint initiative with public museums is unusual and indicative of the strategic aim of *the shape of things* to connect the work of artists with collectors.

These exhibitions give curators from our museum and gallery partners a rare opportunity to work closely with an artist, from the inception of the artist's work through to its presentation to their audiences and communities. Through its support of artists and exhibition partnerships with museums and galleries, and a series of discussions, workshops, and events, the shape of things aims to encourage a practice, audience and market for contemporary crafts that is representative of the society we live in today. This is perhaps best described in the words of the author and playwright

Bonnie Greer, who chaired a debate at the launch of *the shape of things* programme in November 2009: 'This is some of the most intelligent and articulate explanations of diversity in art that I have ever heard ... This initiative, this collection of people is important now ... This is a movement, this is the beginning'.

David Kay Director, the shape of things

Overleaf, pages 14 and 15: woven elements for installation One Sunny Day, hand-dyed, paper yarn, plastic tubing Image by Seiko Kinoshita

Pages 16 and 17: A Walk in the Rain, detail of installation, hand-dyed, paper yarn, Kasuri dye technique









seiko kinoshita | curriculum vitae

www.seikokinoshita.com

Selected exhibitions

Earth Atmosphere, the shape of things, Bilston Craft Gallery, Wolverhampton
Criteria of Beauty by Soetsu Yanagi, Aqffini Gallery Project, London
plAAy: Strange World, contemporary asian artists' group show, Blackburn Museum & Art Gallery
Paper Foundations, Kettering Museum & Art Gallery
Mama's Art, contemporary textile show, Geborgen Kamers, The Hague, Netherlands
Japan, commissioned installation, Derby Museum and Gallery
Float, installation, The Harley Gallery, Nottinghamshire
Fold, touring exhibition, The HUB National Centre for Craft & Design, Sleaford
Rain Rain, solo show, Yorkshire Artspace, Sheffield
Shaping Space, The Millennium Gallery, Sheffield
Showcase, The Harley Gallery, Nottinghamshire
Suspended, The Workstation, Sheffield
Bessemer Open, The Bessemer Gallery, Sheffield
Green Art?, Yorkshire Artspace Society, Sheffield
Construction, Rufford Craft Centre, Nottinghamshire
Fringe, Rufford Craft Centre, Nottinghamshire
Kyoto Design Competition, The Nichizu Design Museum, Kyoto, Japan

Public art commissions

- 2009 Origami interactive for Out of the Ordinary exhibition, commissioned by The Millennium Gallery, Sheffield Series of framed works for the Intensive Care Unit at Sheffield Children's Hospital Five edge banners for Greystones Primary School, Sheffield
- Tie dye banners and installation for Beck Primary School, Sheffield

 Green stream, Blue stream, installation for Japan Exhibition at Derby Art Gallery and Museum
- 2007 Blue Bird, 12 metre high hand-dyed and woven installation at Graves Art Gallery & Central Library, Sheffield
- 2006 Textile installation for Bridgewater Hall, Manchester Step Up Festival Three woven hangings for the entrance area of Arbourthorne Primary School, Sheffield Four banners for Emmaus Primary School new school hall, Sheffield

Scholarships/grants

- 2007 Inspiral grant for developing web-site and promotional materials
- 2004 Arts Council England, Yorkshire, grant for creating new works for the Millennium Gallery & Harley Gallery
- 2003 Arts Council England, Yorkshire, grant for Suspended exhibition publication
- 2002 Yorkshire Arts Research & Development fund for new material research for larger work The Theo Moorman Trust for Weavers grant to set up weaving studio and purchase a dobby loom
- 1999 Rotary International Ambassadorial scholarship, Overseas Study Scholarship

earth | atmosphere: acknowledgements

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Published by the shape of things April 2010 for the exhibition Earth | Atmosphere, ceramics by Halima Cassell, textiles by Seiko Kinoshita at Bilston Craft Gallery.

The shape of things

Craftspace, 208 The Custard Factory, Gibb Street, Birmingham B9 4AA

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The shape of things provides bursaries to artists to make new craftwork. It explores the distinctive contribution artists make to influence or reflect national identity, the intercultural nature of British society and its connections with global cultures through a series of exhibitions, installations and events from 2010 to 2011.

The shape of things is a not for profit company limited by guarantee and registered in England, No. 6534926. Craftspace is the managing agency, David Kay is the Director, and a formal steering comprises stakeholders and specialists able to advise on development and implementation.

The shape of things programme receives funding from the National Lottery through Arts Council England, investment by our partner museums and galleries and the Athene Trust.

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of things; NSEAD and The Athene Trust for support and funding of the education programme; Our venue partners for their financial commitment and in kind investment of the time of their staff.



The exhibition programme:

Rezia Wahid MBE Crafts Study Centre, Farnham 25 September 2007 – 5 January 2008

Alinah Azadeh / Rosa Nguyen Bristol Museum and Art Gallery 6 February – 18 April 2010

 Halima Cassell / Seiko Kinoshita Bilston Craft Gallery, Wolverhampton 1 May - 10 July 2010

Tanvi Kant / Taslim Martin Touchstones Rochdale 17 July – 3 October 2010

Work by all the artists Flow Gallery, London 9 September – 6 November 2010

Chien-Wei Chang / Maggie Scott The City Gallery, Leicester 2011





Above: weaving on the dobby loom for installation *One Sunny Day* Image by Peter Sheppard

Back cover: detail of installation A Walk in the Rain, hand-dyed, paper yarn, Kasuri dye technique

