



TANVI KANT CUT · STITCH · ADORN

...and at verbal reporting
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past → played roller
...dashed out
...dashingly changed.

...necker between artist's
...cycle.

...to by 10% = balance



the
shape
of things





TANVI KANT: WORKING WITH LITTLE

Left: pink bandhani; chiffon, cottons Front cover: studio; finished pieces and work in progress



The thinking behind Tanvi Kant's recent work can be traced back to the hand-sewn hem of her mother's sari. Curiosity led Kant to unpick the hem and then parts of the woven cloth in a gesture she explains was driven by the "pure experimentation" encouraged on the Sustainable Design BA course she completed at the University of Derby in 2005. That first examination of cloth led Kant to the new work she has developed for *the shape of things*.

"I often hear textile artists explain that they were taught to sew or knit by their mothers or grandmothers," Kant observes. "I never saw anyone in my family sew. I can't even

use a sewing machine," she admits. During her studies she was encouraged to work with materials that fit her ideas, rather than the other way around, and explains that for her degree show she found herself exploring the ways in which textiles and ceramics could be combined "because they are so opposite".

Shortly after graduation, a grant from Arts Council England in 2007 allowed Kant to take a three week intensive craft study trip to Kutch, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Delhi. The journey revealed a side of India she had not seen on her previous trips to what she calls the "plastic India" of her family visits to southern Gujarat. Inspired by the craftspeople she saw creating "intricate work made without all the mod cons", Kant returned to Britain with a renewed respect for the value of working with little.

Whole cloth and made-to-measure

Sari fabric is unique in its use of a whole piece of cloth – from selvedge to selvedge – that is worn wrapped and draped rather than cut and sewn around the body. Because of this, clothing such as saris celebrate the construction of the textile over the construction of the garment. The textile is the priority.

Mildred Constantine and Laurel Reuter, in their introduction to their study of textiles

used in fine art, note the extraordinary ability of cloth to adapt:

Whole cloth is planar and pliable; it can be given volume. One can animate cloth: drape, crumple, and fold it; compress, pleat, and tuck it; festoon, swag, and swaddle it; burn it and cut it; tear, sew, and furl it; appliqué, quilt, and fabricate it. Cloth is ductile; it expands and contracts. Cloth can be embellished with stitches, dyes or print. Cloth can be burned or scored. It is for each generation to expand the vocabulary of approaches to cloth.¹

Kant works with precisely these attributes, suspending cloth, in her case synthetic chiffon, so that we may enjoy its sheerness, layering and movement using a vocabulary that is increasingly her own.

But Kant has not only chosen to work with the long length of the sari. Also included are fabric remnants left after sewing the cropped and fitted sari top, an often unnoticed addition worn below the dramatic folds and gathers of the sari. The sari shares one enormous benefit over tailored clothing. Pregnancy, weight loss, even injury can be accommodated with a twist, rather than a cut, of the cloth. The short fitted sari top worn underneath is another matter. Cut and sewn to fit each individual, Kant explains that the sari top is essentially

‘size-less’ bespoke tailoring to fit the unique proportions of each woman and girl.

A sari wraps the body, creating folds of fabric to cover and conceal. When washed in more forgiving climates than Britain, lengths of colourful sari cloth are often seen blowing from windows and balconies in the breeze. The colours and embellishments are often eye catching, but without a body to wrap, the cloth reveals very little about the proportions of its wearer. In contrast, the sari top sits close to the body and is made to the measurements of each woman’s individual proportions. When the top is cut and sewn, as other tailored garments would be, the outline of wearer is left behind. Kant explains that the remnants she uses occur when the “pattern of the garment itself (and of the dimensions of the body) have been cut away”. These remnants do not and cannot conceal anything. Instead this cloth traces a curious and intimate outline of the spaces occupied by our own unique measurements.

Binding and wrapping

We tend to think of embroidery as embellishment – a decorative luxury added to the surface of cloth. It is this, but Kant is conscious² of the two fold protective function of embroidery. One is symbolic,

the other structural. Of the symbolic, Annette Weiner and Jane Schneider note in their introduction to *Cloth and Human Experience* that the textile, in its very structure, lends itself to suggestions of connection: “Another characteristic of cloth, which enhances its social and political roles, is how readily its appearance and that of its constituent fibres can evoke ideas of connectedness or tying.”³

But embroidery can also literally strengthen cloth. The Japanese tradition of *sashiko*, for example, which translates as ‘small stitches’ “evolved from a need to conserve and repair garments at a time when cloth was a precious commodity.”⁴ Thus the use of bound and stitched areas can be understood as an effort to, in Kant’s words, “reinforce” the strength of an existing fabric.

In Kant’s earlier pieces of jewellery reclaimed fabric was bound into thin strips and then looped into necklaces, bracelets and rings. In amongst the thread and cloth are sections made of ceramic, units that share a similar organic form but without the material flexibility of cloth. Connecting the textile to the ceramic – and vice versa – creates a striking contrast of materials that share only the attribute of shape. More recently Kant has introduced precious and semi-precious stones with a similar interest in the contrasts created.

Elsewhere Kant’s stitches capture unravelling edges, cloth on the verge of fraying to bits. Janis Jefferies notes, “Unlike the *self*, which is a highly charged concept, the *selvedge* is an unremarkable detail in the construction of woven material or web of cloth.”⁵ Kant gives her attention to the unremarkable in a gesture that suggests a desire to celebrate the overlooked scraps of our material world – to reinstate a lost value.

Sustainability and reuse

Turning fabric off cuts into art confirms not only Kant’s commitment to recycling, but can also be read as a confrontation of the waste produced by the textile and fashion industries. Today a range of approaches by artists and designers are being tested to tackle this problem. At one end of this spectrum are projects that attempt to produce tailored garments that make use, as the sari does, of every centimetre of the bolt of cloth.⁶ At the other end of the spectrum is the ‘upcycling’ agenda⁷ that looks to embed into a design at its inception future lives of greater value than the first. Kant’s practice sits somewhere between these two, tackling waste created through another system – in this case off cuts from the home sewing of a friend’s mother – and rethinking their place and function,

as upcycling encourages, so that they may enjoy a greater value in their new reincarnation.

This work is concurrent with the rise of DIY agendas across the arts. Businesses exploring sustainable models such as Alabama Chanin and Keep and Share have recently begun an 'open source' approach to their products, selling garment patterns and materials alongside the finished product.⁸ Andrea Zittel's 'smockshop' revealed the skill of garment production to the gallery going audience, while providing a source of income for emerging artists.⁹ The Knitting Nation series of 'performances' by Liz Collins similarly take production from inside the studio and factory and make the experience public in an effort to teach a broader community about the skills and time involved in textile production.¹⁰

At the core of this agenda is empowerment. Buy a finished garment if time and money permits; buy a pattern and source a member of the community to stitch or knit for you if time and skills do not permit; or buy the pattern and create for yourself a garment that these businesses hope will result in a long term commitment rather than another throw away purchase.

The suspension of disbelief

Sheer, ghostly garment-bodies leave much to our imaginations. Kant's choice of material evokes the brightly coloured and adorned textiles of India. But Nina Fleshin observes, "Many of the artists who employ empty clothing do so as a way of resisting self-images that have been imposed on them – resisting objectification by those who have the power to objectify them."¹¹ Kant explains that her research trip to India was as much a response to viewers' questions about her heritage, than her own. (Japan, she admits, was another location of choice because of the shared aesthetic values.)

Like ideas, textiles are rarely intended to be static. Look at the energy and expense of the spectacle that is the catwalk. Part of the catwalk is theatre, but another part is function. Clothing is designed for the body. It is the body that animates and suspends the textile so that it can be seen to its best advantage. Without the body, we look to photographs, images that capture cloth moving on the body, even if they are frozen in time. More often than not we need the inspiration of movement to understand the beauty of clothing. Cloth is not meant to be static.

This poses a challenge for the gallery setting. The French artist Annette Messenger brings in fans to inflate and deflate her fabric sculptures, animating the cloth from the ground up.¹² Others such as Caroline Broadhead suspend textiles with great attention to the shadows cast. Broadhead has explained her interest in the ghostly shapes of clothing is “because of its closeness to the human being, but without being a portrait or a study or anything literal”.¹³ Kant similarly suspends the suggestion of the body, but without enough detail to confirm or confine identity.

Meaningful things

Kant presents us not with empty garments, but with the ghost of the garment’s production. “Why do I make when we have so much?” she queries of her own practice. Her conclusion is one we can all learn from: “There is still room for meaningful things in the world. I use my work to remind myself of that.”

Dr Jessica Hemmings

Dr Jessica Hemmings is Associate Director of the Centre for Visual & Cultural Studies at Edinburgh College of Art. Jessica writes articles and exhibition reviews for publications such as *Crafts*, *Selvage* and the *Surface Design Journal* and recently edited a collection of essays entitled *In the Loop: Knitting Now* published by Black Dog Publishers (2010).

¹ Constantine, Mildred and Luarel Reuter. *Whole Cloth*. New York: The Monacelli Press, 1997: 9.

² Interview with the artist May 14, 2010.

³ Weiner, Annette B. and Jane Schneider (eds). *Cloth and Human Experience*. London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989: 2.

⁴ Michele Walker “Japanese Shashiko Textiles” available at <http://www.sashiko.org.uk/publications.php> accessed May 14, 2010.

⁵ Jefferies, Janis. “Self and Self Edges” in *Selvages (Janis Jefferies: writings and artworks since 1980)*. Norwich: Norwich Gallery and School of Art and Design, 2000: 11.

⁶ Rissanen, Timo. “Creating Fashion without the Creation of Fabric Waste” in *Sustainable Fashion, Why Now? A conversation about issues, practices, and possibilities*. Janet Hethorn and Connie Ulasewicz (eds). Fairchild Books, Inc.: New York, 2008: 184–206.

⁷ ‘upcycling’ was coined by William McDonough and Michael Braungart in *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things*. New York: North Point Press, 2002.

⁸ see <http://alabamachanin.com> and www.keepandshare.co.uk

⁹ see <http://www.smockshop.org/> accessed May 13, 2010: “The smockshop is an artist run enterprise that generates income for artists whose work is either non-commercial, or not yet self sustaining.”

¹⁰ see Liz Collins “Knitting Nation” in *In the Loop: Knitting Now*. (Jessica Hemmings, ed) London: Black Dog Publishing, 2010: 90.

¹¹ Fleshin, Nina. “Clothing as Subject.” *Art Journal*. (spring 1995). New York: College Art Association Inc., 1995: 23.

¹² For example “Annette Messenger: The Messengers” at The Hayward, London, March 4 – May 25, 2009.

¹³ Interview with the artist, published in “Caroline Broadhead: interrupted gaze” *Surface Design Journal*, winter 2007: 28–33.



Left: purple and blue stitch necklace; fabric off-cuts, cotton
 Right above: samples, cotton; semi-precious stone, fabric, paper
 Below: suspended installation (detail); fabric off-cuts, embroidery thread





Left: hem necklace; silk and tiger beads

THE SHAPE OF THINGS: A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

The *shape of things* is, inherently, a programme exploring diversity. It involves artists from a range of cultural backgrounds and aims to seek out new audiences to engage with and to prick the interest of a broader range of collectors. Touchstones Rochdale has a history of exhibiting work by black and Asian artists and in the past has shown work by Magdalene Odundo, Chris Ofili and Lorna Simpson¹. More recently emerging artists such as Zarah Hussain, Nafisa Mallu and Alpa Mistry amongst others have exhibited.²

In the recent past public galleries have sought to develop new and more diverse audiences by exhibiting the work of artists whose cultural identity is reflected in the surrounding communities and vice versa. Whilst diversifying audiences should always be encouraged, this approach is now regarded as too narrow; an individual artist should not be placed in a position where he or she is supposed to 'represent' a particular community. Far better that galleries embed diversity in its broadest sense within their exhibition programmes and that showing work by artists from a whole range of cultural and social backgrounds is regarded as the norm. It is not about 'otherness', but about an inclusive outlook which offers audiences the chance to see the breadth of work being produced

by artists in the UK and internationally, which often in itself defies categorisation.

The shape of things provides a platform for artists, but crucially it is about the work they make. Innovative, challenging and rooted in the skill of the artist, their processes and their exploration of materials; the work is key. This programme has always set out to support the highest quality in contemporary craft alongside enabling artists to develop their practice through new ways of thinking, exploring new processes, working with different materials and having the opportunity to experiment.

At the *shape of things* launch event for the current phase of the programme in 2009, chair Bonnie Greer asked about the role of the curator.³ The programme has paired two artists with each of the four venues,⁴ to enable the new work each artist makes through their bursary to be exhibited; clearly there is an important role here for curatorial staff. This role should very much be regarded as a collaboration between curator and artist, continuing the discursive nature of *the shape of things*. The role of the curator is as a conduit, a means of translating the artist's new work from the studio to the gallery, where it moves from the privacy and safety of the artist's space to a public space

to be shared with an audience for the first time. The curator attempts to make this transition as smooth as possible, not only in terms of the practicalities of exhibitions such as transporting works and overseeing their layout in the gallery, but in enabling audiences to discuss, debate and contemplate them. The curator brings a range of skills to these tasks, primarily an ability to organise and project manage whilst at the same time being creative and having an 'eye' for display along with an understanding of likely audiences.

The curator must gain their own understanding of the artist's practice in order to play out this role of mediator between artist and audience. They are there to listen, observe and support, only occasionally reigning things in when necessary. There is a real sense of privilege to this role; it is not something the vast majority of people would ever have the opportunity to do. When the artist and venue pairings were agreed in spring 2009, Tanvi Kant came to visit Touchstones Rochdale for the first time. The process of discussion and collaboration really began at this point; sharing ideas, getting to know more about each other and finding out more about Kant's current work and plans for *the shape of things*. This dialogue has been ongoing ever since. The most

effective way of gaining a real sense of an artist's work is to visit their studio. Exploring where they work and what artists surround themselves with is fascinating. You have the opportunity to examine pieces close up, see work in progress and discuss techniques and making processes. It is an invaluable part of the process of bringing the exhibition together and fulfilling the curator's role as a conduit between artist and audience.

Walking inside Kant's studio is like stepping into an enchanted cave or finding a treasure chest. There is a riot of colour, through the piles of fabrics which Kant re-uses, reels of thread and neckpieces, both finished and in progress, which are hung on the walls and dotted around work surfaces. There are shelves full of books, small sketchbooks with delicate drawings and drawers pulled open to reveal more textile riches. It is warm, inviting and belies the fact it is housed inside a garage. From here Kant makes her ongoing range of neckpieces created by wrapping and binding thread around fabric. It is also where she has developed her new body of work for *the shape of things*. This involves cutting shapes from fabrics and using them whole with stitched embellishment on top, draping or layering to create new neckpieces.

Seeing Kant at work, hand stitching at break-neck speed, thread passing through fabric, is a delight, as is accompanying her on a thread buying trip to her usual haberdashers. These are experiences which as a curator, you want to pass on to audiences through the presentation and interpretation of the work in the gallery. It is unusual to have the opportunity to work with an artist from the very start of them embarking on making a new body of work and to witness the process firsthand. Kant's new body of work will go on to have a lifespan beyond the exhibition here, being exhibited elsewhere and ultimately being worn. Knowing as a curator that you played a small part from the inception of this work and brought it to audiences for this first time is an immensely rewarding experience.

Yvonne Hardman

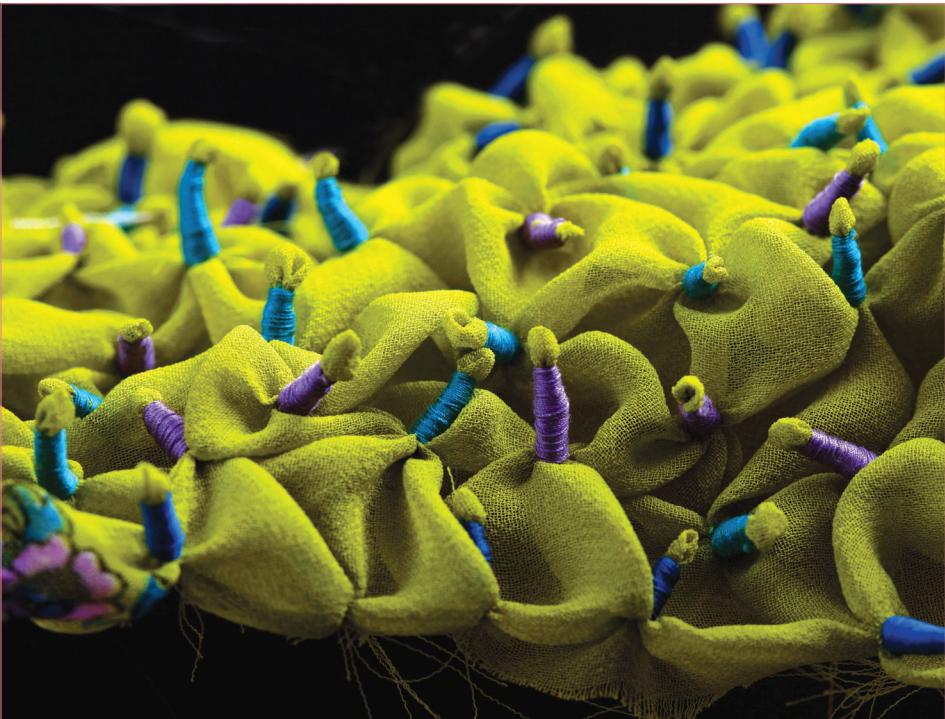
Art Gallery Officer
Touchstones Rochdale

¹ Magdalene Odundo exhibited in *Columbus Drowning*, 1992; Chris Ofili exhibited in *Borderless Print*, 1993; Lorna Simpson exhibited in *The Fortune Teller*, 1992.

² Zarah Hussain's solo show *The Beauty of Abstraction* (a touring exhibition organised by Bradford Museums, Galleries & Heritage) was exhibited 2008/09; Nafisa Mallu's exhibition *A Thousand Mangoes*, part of Shisha's *Parampara* programme, was shown in 2005; Alpa Mistry featured in contemporary textiles show *Eye of the Needle* in 2007.

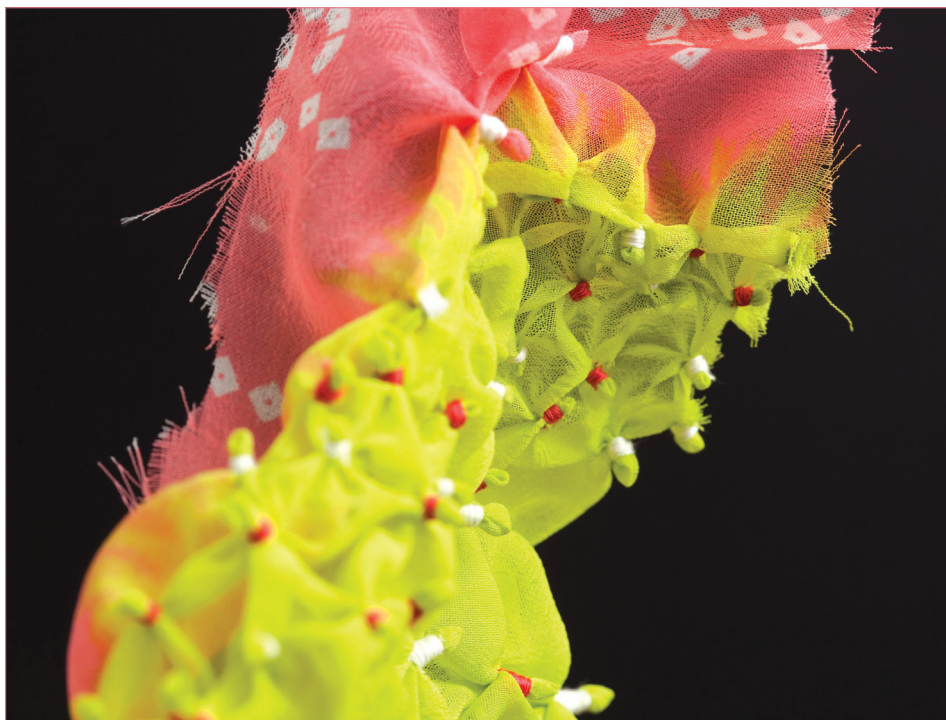
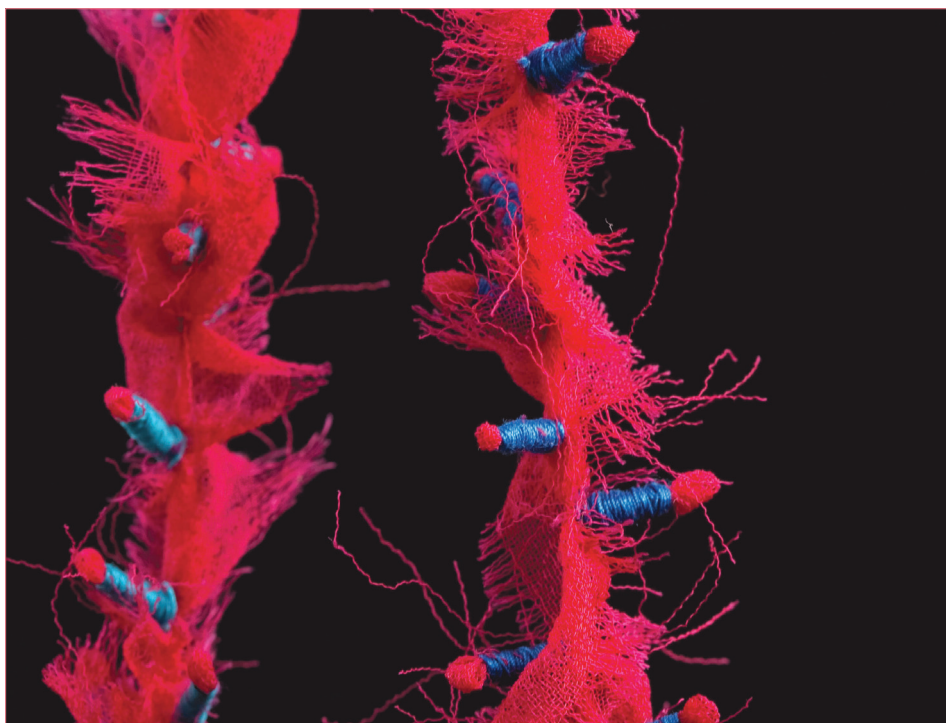
³ *The shape of things* programme was launched at the Royal Society of Arts, London on 10 November 2009.

⁴ In the first phase of *the shape of things* programme artist Rezia Wahid exhibited at the Crafts Study Centre in 2007.



Left above: green and yellow bandhani; synthetic printed chiffon, thread Below: lime bandhani; synthetic printed fabric, cotton

Right above: lime and pink bandhani; synthetic printed chiffon, cotton Below: pink bandhani; synthetic chiffon, thread



THE SHAPE OF THINGS PROGRAMME

The *shape of things* is a contemporary craft initiative that is taking place over five years.

Providing 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 connection with global cultures through a series of exhibitions, installations and events between 2006 and 2011.

The origins of *the shape of things* are 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 exhibition 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 Seecharan and weaver Rezia Wahid were invited to make new exploratory works and in the process

to consider the role of personal cultural identity within their practice.

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

The success of this 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 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.

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, 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 representative of the society we live in today. 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'.

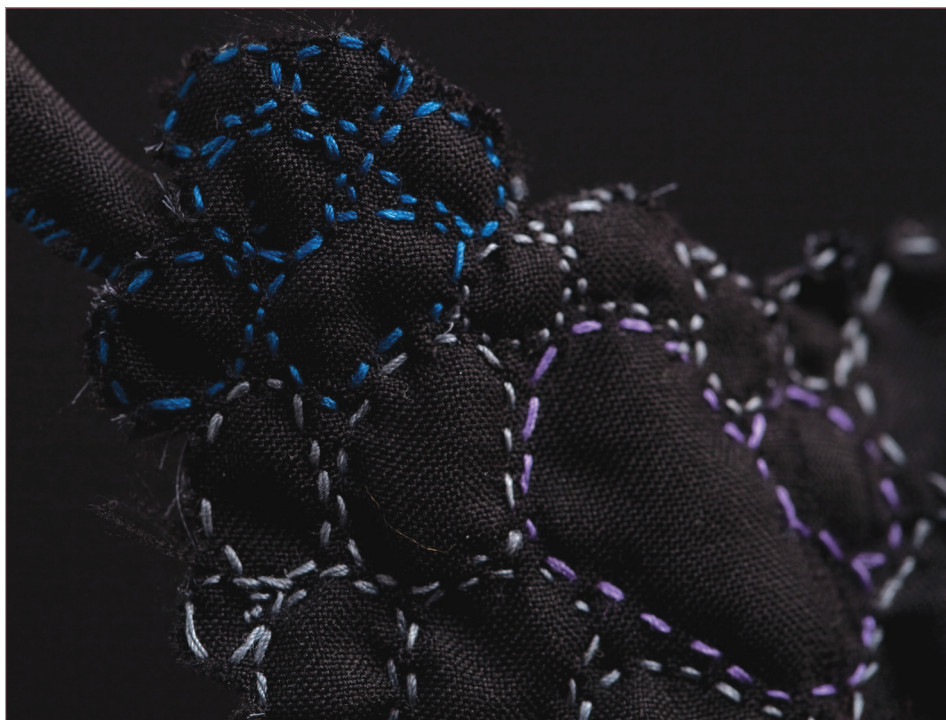
David Kay

Director, *the shape of things*



Left: black bandhani; synthetic chiffon, cotton

Right above: black stitch (detail); dress-making fabric off-cut and cotton Below: black bandhani; synthetic chiffon, cotton



TANVI KANT: CURRICULUM VITAE

www.tanvikant.co.uk

Training

- 2010 Beginning MA Goldsmithing, Silversmithing, Metalwork & Jewellery, Royal College of Art
- 2005 BA (Hons) 3D Design, University of Derby

Selected exhibitions

- 2010 *Cut, Stitch, Adorn* for the shape of things, Touchstones Rochdale
- The shape of things group exhibition at flow gallery
- Portage: Extremes of Scale*, Bonhaga Gallery, Lerwick, Shetland
- Nottingham Castle Open 2010*, Nottingham Castle Museum & Art Gallery
- 2009 The Scottish Gallery, Edinburgh, Scotland
- 2008 *New Organics*, Electrum Gallery, London
- Craftsense*, Bilston Craft Gallery, West Midlands
- XIII Biennale Young Artists from Europe and the Mediterranean*, Bari, Italy
- Make Do and Mend*, Harley Gallery, Nottinghamshire

- 2007 Solo exhibition, The City Gallery, Leicester
- Alchemy*, contemporary jewellery touring exhibition, British Council, Middle East
- Origin: London Craft Fair*, Somerset House, London

- 2006 *Brilliantly Birmingham International Jewellery Festival*, School of Jewellery

- 2005 *Deconstruct: Reconstruct*, Bilston Craft Gallery, West Midlands
- New Designers*, Business Design Centre, London

Awards / grants / residencies

- 2009 The shape of things bursary for the production of new work
- Nominated for Jerwood Contemporary Makers 2009
- 2008 Artist's residency, Arts Reverie, Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India
- 2007 Design Factory Bursary
- National Register of Makers, Crafts Council

- 2006 Crafts Council Development Award
Market Development Grant, Design
Factory

Travel grant for research and
development trip to India, Arts
Council England

Berryman Prize: Craft, Nottingham
Annual Open Exhibition, Nottingham
Castle
- 2007 *Alchemy: Contemporary Jewellery
from Britain*, Dana Andrew & Alison
Moloney (British Council)

Green is The New Black, Tamsin
Blanchard (Hodder and Stoughton)
- 2005 New Designers Association for
Contemporary Jewellers' Award, ACJ

Publications

- 2010 *Ceramic Jewellery*, Joy Bosworth
(A&C Black)
- 2009 *Jewellery Using Textiles Techniques:
Methods and Techniques*, Sarah
Keay (A&C Black)

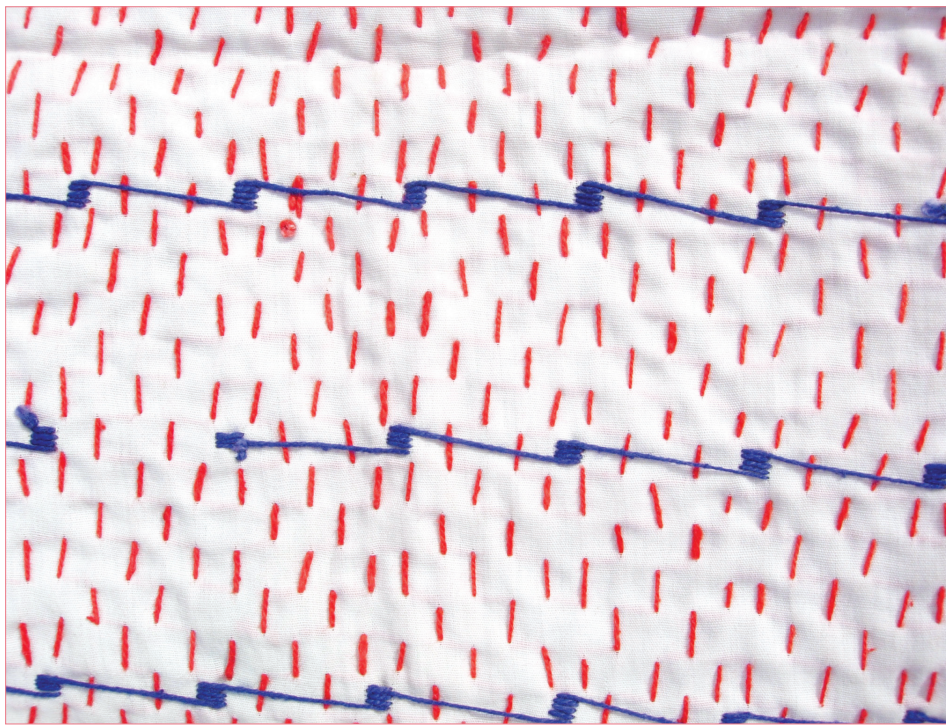
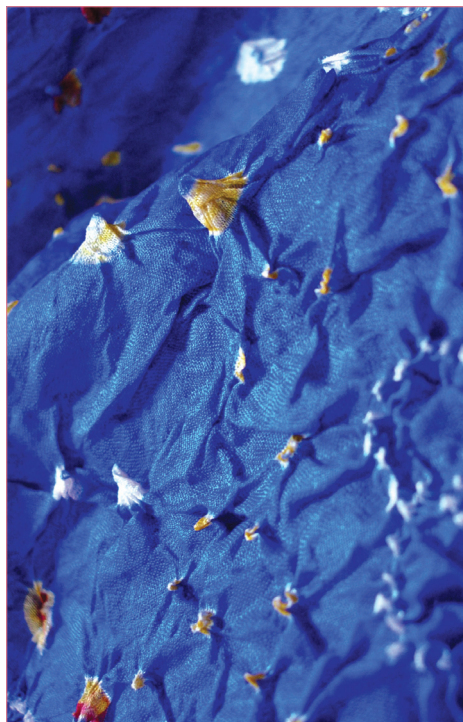
*Non-Precious Jewellery: Methods
and Techniques*, Kathie Murphy
(A&C Black)
- 2008 *The Compendium Finale of
Contemporary Jewellers 2008*
(Darling Publications)

Adorn, Amanda Mansell (Laurence
King Publishing)



Left above: samples; cotton, fabric, paper Below: samples; linen, fabric

Right above: textile sample Below left: bandhani silk scarves Below right: bhandani fabric untied (detail)





CUT, STITCH, ADORN: ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The shape of things

Tanvi Kant: Cut, Stitch, Adorn

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The shape of things

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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 connection 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 group comprises specialists and stakeholders able to advise on development and implementation.

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Touchstones
Rochdale

Link4Life

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The exhibition programme

Rezia Wahid MBE

Crafts Study Centre, Farnham

25 September 2007 – 5 January 2008

Alinah Azadeh / Rosa Nguyen

Bristol's City Museum and Art Gallery

6 February – 18 April 2010

Halima Cassell / Seiko Kinoshita

Bilston Crafts 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

Right: lime bandhani; synthetic printed fabric, cotton Back cover: suspended installation (detail); fabric off-cuts, embroidery thread



