

First love: the Carding Engine

FEBRUARY 24, 2019

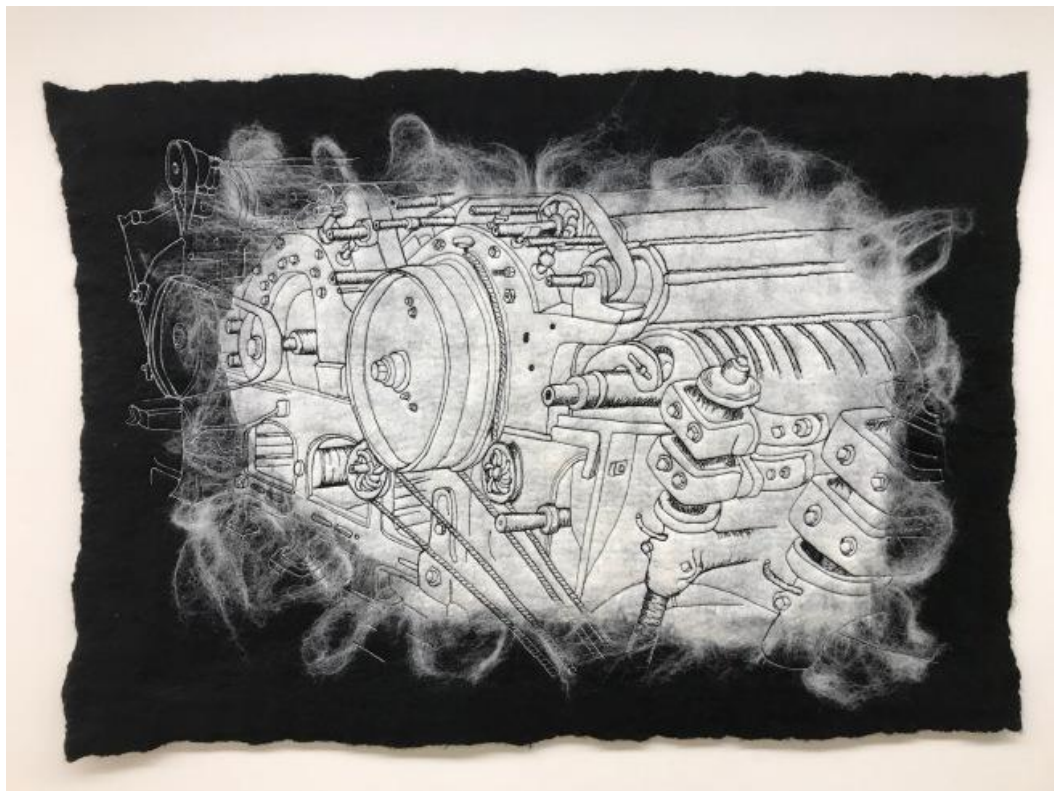
In 2017 I fell in love – tall, dark, powerfully built, with hidden depths and not without a hint of danger. Two years on, my passion for the massive carding engine at Leeds Industrial Museum at Armley Mills remains undiminished.



There are other wonderful machines at the museum, about which I'll write more in due course. But the more I look at the carding engine, the more I see, and the more I appreciate the arching frame, the whorls of axles and drums, the menacing toothed carding cloth, the wispy hints of wool and the base stability of iron.



There is scope here to fill a lifetime of imagination, sketchbooks and creativity.



I came to Armley in 2017 with other members of The International Feltmakers Association, to do research for a joint exhibition, which took place in 2018.

“Wool Stories: The Felted Mill” was a great experience all round and, as it was drawing to its close, I felt bereft.



There was so much more to explore.

S... I had a few conversations, wrote a few emails, had help from some very wonderful people and survived a load of sleepless nights ... but the germ of an idea was born, nurtured and developed.



So now I find myself a couple of months into preparing for my own, solo exhibition at Leeds Industrial Museum.

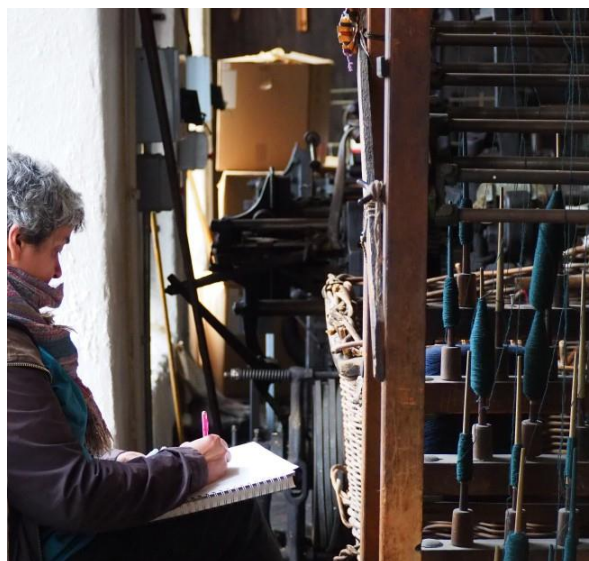
“The Doffer and the Fancy: Reimagining the Machine” will open on 29th June. I’m planning sculptural pieces, sited around the museum, alongside the machines which inspired them, plus sketchbooks,

hangings and displays explaining my processes which will be housed in the exhibition gallery.

I've got so much to do before then, and so much more to learn. I have to confess I am both very excited and absolutely terrified!



This blog is part of the adventure. How do you get from being textile artist who sells work at shows...to creating and organizing an exhibition for the public? How do you start? How do you put an exhibition together? What new skills do you need? How do you channel and harness imagination and skills to celebrate an amazing museum and reimagine what you see for other people to experience?



Much more on this in the weeks to come, so if you're curious about the project, or harbour a secret passion for big machines, or love

textile processes or just want to keep an eye on what I'm up to,
please follow, join the conversation, share, and enjoy the ride!



A different way of seeing



MARCH 8, 2019

I wonder whether artists, left to their own devices, create the sort of exhibitions that they themselves enjoy visiting the most.

When I've really enjoyed an exhibition, it tends to be that I have lost myself in it. I'm not a great reader of wall texts, I don't always seek to understand, at least not as soon as I go in. I'd rather walk round first on my own and immerse myself, taking my pace from the work...not stopping at every piece. I'll read the texts later, if I feel I need some information.



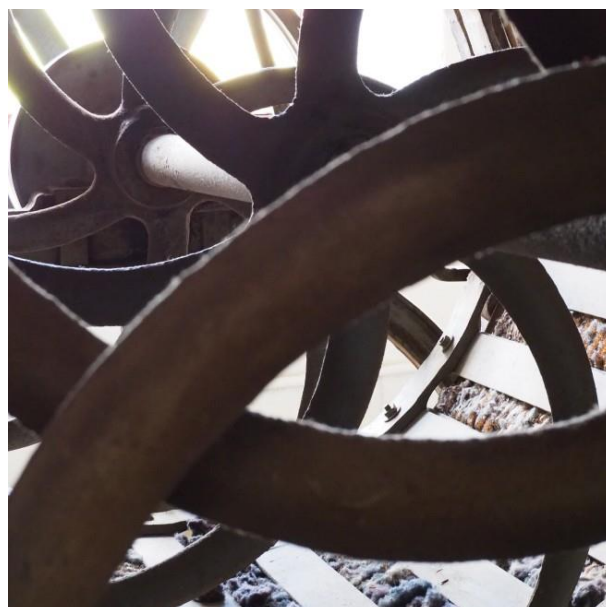
The immersion can take as many forms as there are exhibitions, maybe provoking a dizzying colour rush, or a set of gentle

realisations, or a feeling of comfort or unease or the discovery of something which makes me make a connection and see the world in a different way. I think that's maybe the key for me...initially an experience for the senses or emotions and later a shift in perspective.

Whenever I go to Leeds Industrial Museum, that is how I feel. The machines, the buildings and the site fascinate and entrance me. The forms of the machines are stunning,



their intricacies draw me in,



the stone, the brick, the ironwork, the plaster are a palimpsest of usage over time.



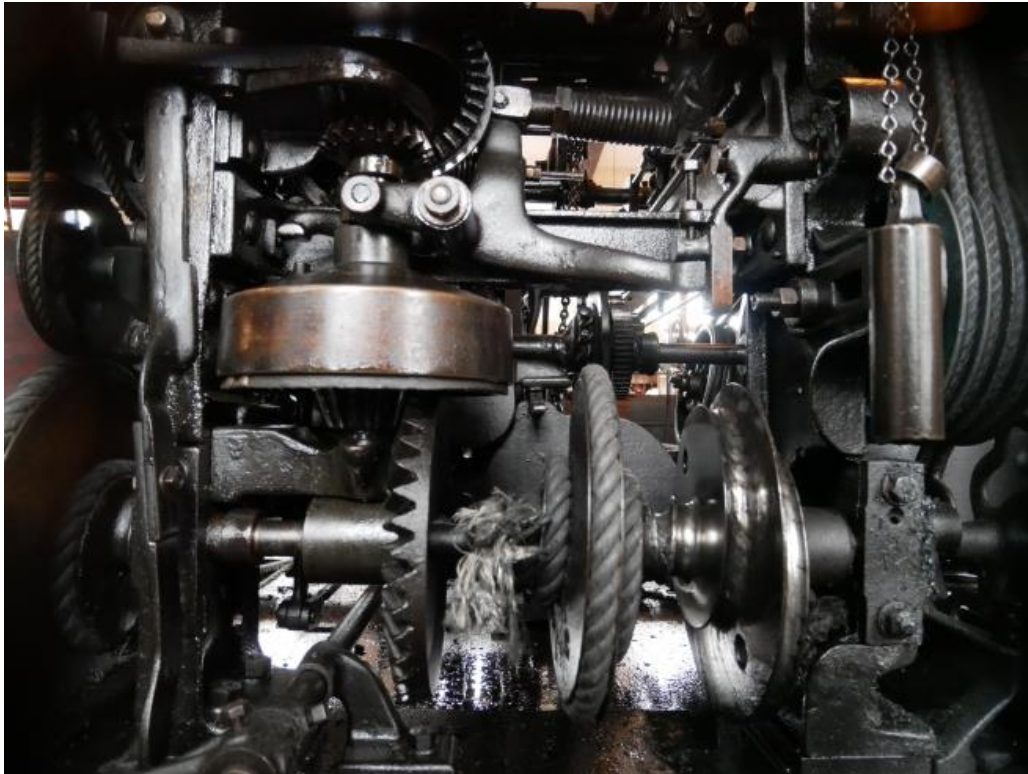
I've spent the greatest part of my life now in West Yorkshire, the birth place of both Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore, and have been infected with a deep love of sculpture. You can move around it, and by doing so, see the work anew, as the light and shadows and perspective change. Run your eyes over the contours and textures and feel them in your imagination. Look through them into their hidden depths and out to the space beyond.



For me the machines at the Museum are sculptures.

I gaze at them, walk round them, look through them.

Lose myself in them.



Leeds Industrial Museum oozes history at every turn and that's what most visitors come for and enjoy there. But an understanding of the past is not all it has to offer. What I want my exhibition to do is explore another way of seeing this amazing place.

Next post: Time to get to work on the first piece...and to meet the Doffer and the Fancy!

Re-imagining

MARCH 17, 2019

The Doffer and the Fancy ... who exactly are they?

For that, we need to go back to my first love – the magnificent carding engine.



The carding engine is made up of sets of rollers, all covered in metal toothed carding cloth. Its purpose is to disentangle the woollen fleece and align all the fibres, ready for spinning.

You feed fleece in at one end and you get lovely soft slivers of wool at the other.

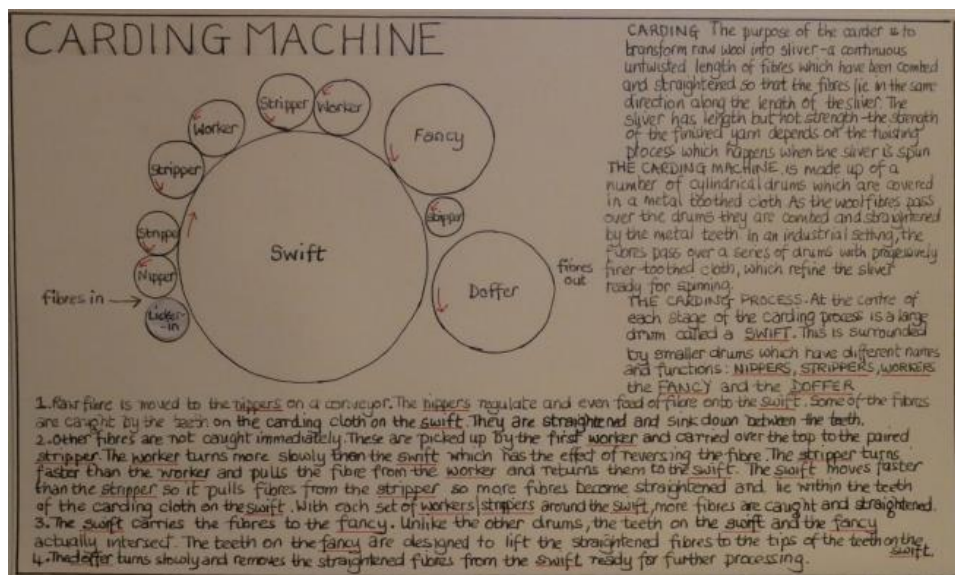


I have a more modest but also much-loved equivalent at home where I prepare fibres for feltmaking, either carding fleece or creating colour blends.



I only have two drums on my carder – one to draw the fibres in, which then feeds them onto the main drum.

I was curious to know why the big carding engine had so many cylinders arrayed around the main drum like a rainbow. So I did some research and discovered that...



...not only do they have different functions, but they also all have names!

The main drum is called the Swift. The deliciously-named Licker-in draws the fibres in and feeds them onto the Swift. A series of Workers and Strippers then keep the fibres on the Swift, catch any loose fibres and feed them back into the system. Finally, the Fancy

raises the fibres a little from the Swift ready for the Doffer to catch them and feed them out from the machine.

For me, the power and resonance of the names immediately imbued the rollers with character and personality. I wanted to stand them up and see them as individuals, but also as a group, close and conspiratorial in their actions.



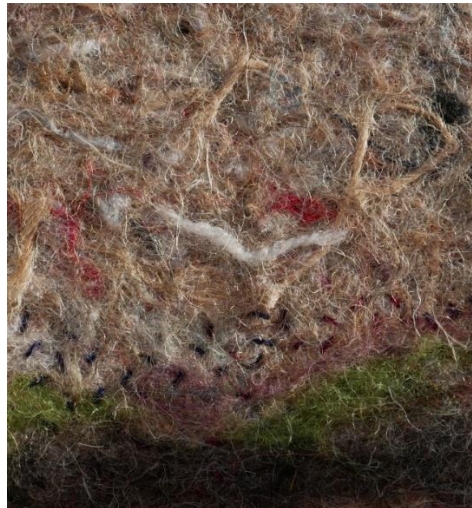
I was struck by the tensions of their work which brought them together as a team but also the tearing apart which was at the heart of what they did. The irresistible force of the rollers to drag in and shred anything (and, sadly, anybody – these were dangerous times for the workforce, adults and children alike) which intentionally or unintentionally fell prey to the teeth of the Licker-in.

My initial plan was to wet-felt spiked cylinders – human sized vessels. I worked out the logistics, but it didn't quite do what I wanted. Too soft. No bite.

Then I came across Texfelt – a Bradford company who make thick needle-felted carpet underlay using recycled woollen textiles. It is beautiful stuff – not too processed so you can still see some of the original fibres – but better than that, it made a connection from the present to the history of the Mill. West Yorkshire mills, including Armley, were famous for the production of shoddy – a cloth made

with a mixture of recycled wool fibres, mixed with a little new wool for strength. I liked the look of the Textfelt underlay, I liked that it was felted, I liked that I could stitch and needlefelt into it and I liked that it was locally produced and resonated with the recycling of the shoddy tradition.

A decision was made.



But what of the teeth? I wanted to introduce a new texture. One hope I have for this exhibition is that it will give me the opportunity to widen the scope of the materials I use. After some experimentation I settled on aluminium mesh – a crisp colour and texture, a good contrast with the underlay and relatively easy to manipulate.



So....materials sorted... time to get making.

Next time: cutting corsets on the floor, struggling with scale and getting sticky with silicone!

On my knees



MARCH 24, 2019

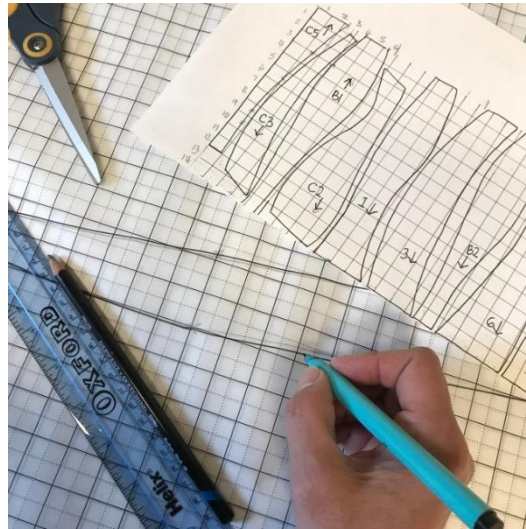
To work on my first piece.

The first thing to do was to make some maquettes so as not to waste the tempting roll of underlay which Texfelt kindly donated...I'm not sure quite what they made of me...middle-aged woman artist enraptured by the aesthetic of their humble and normally unseen product...but they were very generous and threw in a tour of the factory for good measure!

The first maquette was a paper-and-sellotape affair; shortly followed by one made of felt scraps. There were several unpickings and modifications of this, until I was happy with the twisted forms.



Transferring these to squared paper came next and then scaling up to human dimensions onto dressmakers' pattern paper.



I knew things would be tight, so wanted to pin all the pattern pieces out before starting to cut. This necessitated a complete move round of the studio in order to get a clear 5m run.



Cutting underlay proved quite a job and quickly blunted the titanium blades on the rotary cutter...perhaps fortuitously... I ended up with a badly cut, but not amputated finger!



I had, of course, made sure that my sewing machine would cope with sewing such thick fabric, but what my small sample hadn't revealed was the physical difficulty of dealing with such a weight of fabric. I couldn't let the needle and presser foot bear the brunt of this ...but a day of sewing left my shoulders and arms in no doubt that it had been a tussle. I was so stressed at this point I forgot to take a photo! At the end of several days of struggle though, they were standing!



Recycled, felted underlay is designed to resist wear and provide padding, but does not have the strength of a weave nor the fibre length of virgin wool. Concern that the strain on the curved seams, once I stood the figures up, would, over time, tear the felt from under the stitches gave me some sleepless nights.



Aptly for underlay I got back on my knees, but not in prayer. Firstly to work out where to position the cones. My 'alternative technology' (red yarn) approach to 3-D design:



Then, hammer and heavy-duty hole punch in hand, I spent the morning contributing to the creative sound track of the studio with a percussive rhythm unusual for a textile artist!

Meanwhile, back at table level, a small army of aluminium mesh cones were in production. I had thought I would sew these into the underlay, working from the back, but a friend rescued me from what would have been a sisyphian ordeal and suggested I use silicone sealant. Very much learning as I go, here's my first venture into the world of Slow TV – filming myself without getting silicone all over the camera, then hours grappling with simple editing software. There is so much I do not understand in this world!

Sticky, but successful! In a lightbulb moment I also realized that this would also be a way of strengthening the seams by impregnating the underlay spreading the tension and reducing the risk of tearing.

Now to add needlefelt and stitch. Temperatures soared for the time of year, so I took my spiked underlay blanket and worked in the sunshine on the terrace at the studio



Almost done now. But looking back to my original design, I wanted the group to be brought together by a tenuous spiral of fleece, passing around and between the drums. Blood red... for danger.

A visceral dyeing session ensued.



Finally – a little hint of the finished piece. A full photo shoot is for another day!



Creel

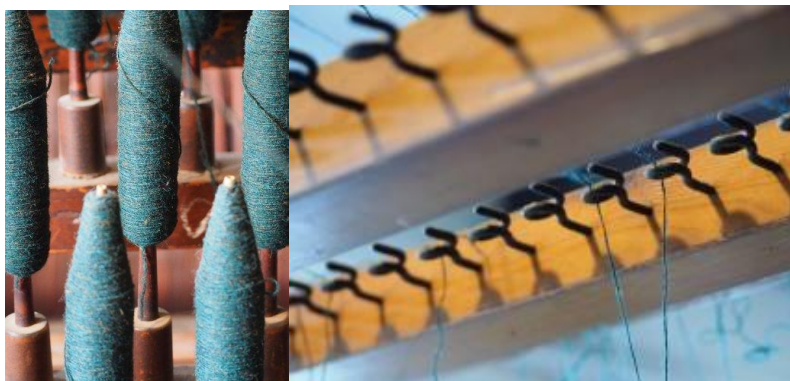
APRIL 6, 2019

I'm going to skip the spinning process for the moment as those pieces are very much in their early stages, but jumping ahead, let me introduce you to The Creel.

Playing an important part in the weaving room, this is a stepped wooden frame, housing 240 bobbins where the warp threads are organised and tensioned before feeding onto a warping beam for the looms.



When I first saw it, it held a number of bobbins of fine, dark green warping thread, some standing true, others slumping over, some feeding up through the hooks and orifices and dangling down in a spidery canopy suggesting the decline of a more orderly former life.



It reminded me of a neglected winter garden, withered and a little untidy. My gaze moved to the nearby window, down to the weeping willows outside, devoid of leaves, their beautiful, translucent forms revealed.



Perhaps I could bring the outside in a little, and 'grow' some forms on this frame.

The idea was born to felt bobbin-like forms, to extend each one up into a single thread and feed this up through the creel frame into a weeping canopy. I wanted to bring in the colours of the green oasis which surrounds the mill, hidden, now incongruously, between the arterial Armley and Kirkstall roads which carry busy commuters to and from Leeds centre, largely unaware of the calm of the river valley just a stone's throw away.

First I felted a sample bobbin.



Then I turned to my sketchbook.



The prospect of felting 240 bobbins was blood-pressure raising, and I was relieved when Chris Sharp, the curator, not only obtained the necessary permissions for this intervention on the creel, but also suggested it would still be effective if I aimed for a partial fill of the pins.

Nonetheless it was quite an undertaking. Alongside the other pieces I was working on, I mentally allocated February to do the felting (first needlefelt to form and then wetfelt to firm), March to dye them and April to add hand stitch, texture and surface decoration.

A donation of fleece from my lovely friend, Elizabeth Stocker and her sheep, Woolly, Curly and Mouse, was most welcome.



I used this as the core wool and added a thin, more loosely felted tonal layer with three natural shades of Bergschaf from Adelaide Walker in Ilkley.

It was slow going, so I took an apprentice. After a long day at the office, Jon spent the evenings needlefelting the cores while I added the tonal fleece. It was a little costly in broken needles initially but his technique improved greatly. Just generally in life I am indebted to him for his patience, tolerance and good humour as I come up with one mad-cap scheme after another...but this deserves a special mention...and I'm sure he'll be delighted if I leave him the finished 130 bobbins in my will!



Gradually, the pile of bobbins grew.





Next time: Colour and texture, and being an individual in the crowd.

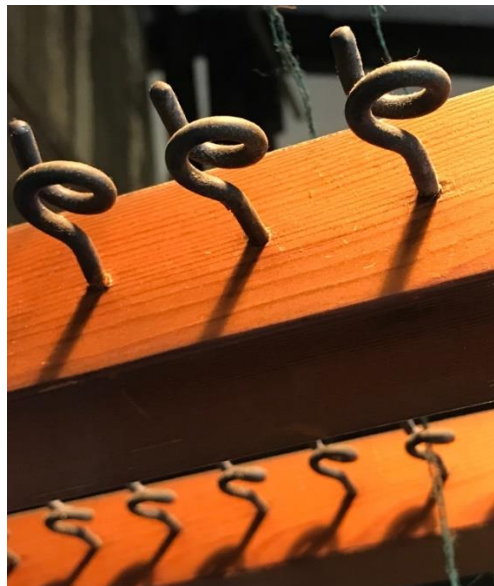
Why put art in an industrial history museum?



APRIL 12, 2019

Installing an artwork actually on a piece of equipment from the museum's collection of machinery brought this question to the fore. I didn't want to obscure the creel frame or distract from it. On the other hand, as an artist, my principal function wasn't to educate – the museum does this well itself. I did want to celebrate this often-ignored piece of equipment and to encourage people to look at it closely, to enjoy it and maybe in so doing also to understand a little of what role it played. So my bobbins take the form of the functional bobbins, and the creel is rigged up as it would have been. Beyond that, in this piece, the joy of colour and texture is the driving force.

The wooden frame of the creel is a beautiful deep auburn.



The colours around the mill outside are constantly changing – greens, oranges, browns, blues, yellows.



It was time to get the dye pots out!



I used acid dyes, so-called because they rely on a vinegar soak to facilitate the chemical bond with the dyes. So for a few days the

house smelled like a pickling factory but I chose my days when the door was open and there were drying possibilities in the garden.

I soaked the bobbins six at a time, dyed each one individually, fixed them in the microwave, rinsed them until my fingers turned green



and then dried them, first in the garden,



then they took over the airing cupboard,



and then the radiators.



After four days of this, I had multi-coloured hands...but also a 130 bobbins rainbow !



Another day of dyeing saw the Blue faced Leicester roving ready to be bundled into 130 5m lengths.



Time then to unite the two elements, to see each bobbin again as an individual in the crowd, to hold it, reform it in part with the felting

needle, reveal the colours of the core wool under the light felting of the Bergschaf and add stitch.



After the frenzy of the dyeing days, this is slow, careful, gentle work. A few each day in the evening and the hope that it will all be finished by June!

The need for photos for a copy deadline for a feature in Felt Matters, the journal of the International Feltmakers Association, meant I took some of the bobbins to the museum and installed them on the creel for a photoshoot. I was both nervous and excited to see whether it would look how I imagined...



One happy felter!

Welcome to the House of Art!

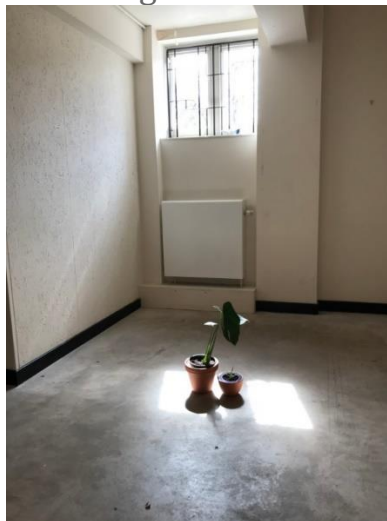


APRIL 19, 2019

It's almost exactly one year since I moved into my studio at The Art House, Wakefield, and what a year it's been! I thought I'd show you around a bit, and introduce you to a few people, as this wonderfully creative place has been hugely important in lots of different ways in helping me to put my exhibition together.

We'd better start with my studio.

The Studio Here's what it looked like on the first day when all I had was a couple of plants and a concrete floor. I worried that the cheese plant and I would need more light!



Then I acquired some furniture – a table for felting, a desk for sewing and some shelves for storage.



12 months on and I seem to be filling the place...despite initial concerns both I and the cheese plant are thriving! Things are likely to get a bit more congested as the exhibition approaches and the sculptures come together...but then they'll all move to the museum...and there will be space to breathe!



It's wonderful to be able to leave projects out and come back to them the next day. My exceedingly tolerant family would say I do that at home anyway! But I can't avoid the feeling that it shouldn't be that way, that we shouldn't have to eat our meals sharing the kitchen table with my latest half-finished creation. In the studio, space and function are streamlined.

Having the physical studio space has been very important but so has the headspace. When I come here, my mind is on my work and there is space to experiment. I thought for a long time that I liked running my business from home and that I didn't want to go 'out' to work. But I realized early last year that I wanted to **think** a bit more about my work and that it was time for a change.

Focus comes more readily here.

It was a good decision.

A creative place Let me show you around a bit. Established in 1994 by a group of disabled and non-disabled artists, the original Art House, right in the heart of Wakefield, was custom built with fully accessible facilities.



Then, when the old Drury Lane library closed next door, the Art House expanded into that building – my studio is in what used to be the basement book store.



Things have continued to develop and over the last couple of years parts of the building have opened to the public much more.

So, we have a reception desk – here's Lois who is one of the team ready to welcome visitors and the beautiful desk was created by two studio holders, Annie and Chris <http://www.artistyoke.com>



We have exhibition spaces where visiting residency artists, and sometimes studio-holders have exhibitions. At the moment we have an exhibition by artist Tony Heaton <http://www.tonyheaton.co.uk>

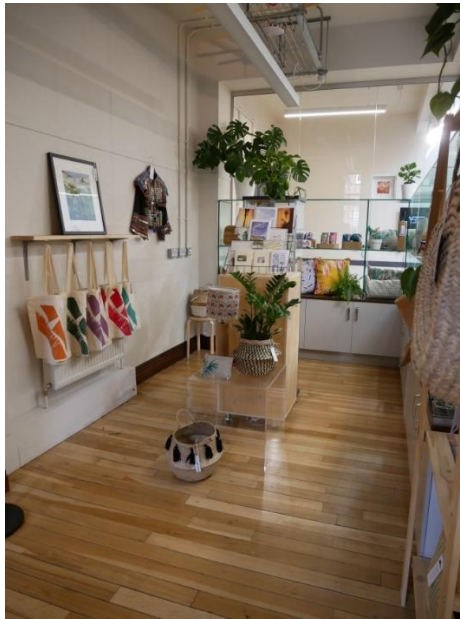


The exhibitions change regularly as do the residency artists and it's lovely to meet them, to chat, exchange perspectives, learn from each other. Some are young, some are older, some experienced, some just starting out, some from the UK and some from overseas. They are a great part of the life here.

There's also a wonderful Italian café – Laura's at The Art House – delicious coffee and very tempting cakes and savoury bakes all handmade by the lovely Laura. @LaurasatTAHWakefield



And we have The Art Shop where studio holders and members sell their work.



There's also a print studio with printmaking equipment, presses, and space to get inky, knowing there is expert help on hand.



There is also an amazing programme of courses, mostly for different printmaking techniques but other things too. I'm really excited to have booked onto an etching course in August – love learning new things! If you'd like to know more about courses, check out the website – <http://www.the-arthouse.org.uk>

Workshops & Courses.		
Bookbinding Three-week course Mondays 29 April – 20 May (Excluding Bank Holiday on 6 May) 18.00 – 20.30 Create some beautiful handmade books on our Bookbinding evening course for beginners using simple glueing and stitching methods.	£65	
The Portrait in Graphite & Charcoal Six-week course Wednesdays 1 May – 5 June 18.00 – 20.30 Centred around drawing from a live model, with opportunities to study from a photograph and works by master artists to skills and confidence.	£90	
Introduction to Printmaking Six-week course Wednesdays 1 May – 5 June 18.00 – 20.30 Explore a range of different printmaking techniques including monoprinting, collagraph, lino printing and screen printing on our beginners' six-week printmaking course.	£120	
Plaster Relief Casting Saturday 04 May 10.00 – 16.00 An introduction to the use of clay and plaster in the production of a cast plaster tile, building impressions and textures or bold abstract designs into its surface.	£30	
Lino Printing Saturday 11 May 11.00 – 16.00 Using our specialist tools and Abion relief press you will carve your own lino block and create an edition of A4 prints to take home.	£30	
Sculpting with Plaster - Modelling Saturday 11 & 18 May 10.00 – 16.00 An introduction to modelling plaster onto armatures in the production of a tabletop sculpture inspired by natural and organic forms.	£180	
Sculpting with Plaster - Casting Monday 12 & 20 May 18.00 – 20.30 Take inspiration from the work of artist Rachel Whiteread as you explore the practicalities and possibilities of plaster casting.	£75	
Gelatin Plate Printing Saturday 25 May 13.00 – 16.00 Learn how to use a gelatin plate to create a series of unique monoprints to take home.	£30	
Bookbinding Saturday 15 June 11.00 – 16.00 Explore some simple stitching and glueing methods to create a series of your own handmade notebooks. Learn how to use tools, materials and techniques to get started in bookbinding.	£50	
Introduction to Printmaking Six-week course Mondays 17 June – 22 July 18.00 – 20.30 Explore a range of different printmaking techniques including monoprinting, collagraph, lino printing and screen printing on our beginners' six-week printmaking course.	£120	
Print Club Six-week course Wednesdays 19 June – 24 July 18.00 – 20.30 The first rule of print club is... tell your friends! Build confidence in the studio and develop your skills in our new technician supported course.	£75	
Screen Printing Photographs Saturday 29 June 11.00 – 16.00 Learn to prepare and print with photographic imagery on our one-day screen printing workshop.	£50	
Design & Screen Print your own Cushion Saturday 5 July 11.00 – 16.00 Design and screen print your own fabric with Print Designer Ellie Way and we will make up your design into a cushion for you to take home.	£55	
Cyanotypes Saturday 20 July 11.00 – 16.00 Explore the photographic printing process of cyanotype to create a range of unique cyan-blue prints in our professional print studio.	£50	
Print & Bind your own Artist Book Saturday 3 August 11.00 – 16.00 Create a series of unique monoprints in our print studio and then use them to create your own artist book using the concertina method of bookbinding.	£50	
Introduction to Etching Wednesdays 7 August – 28 August 18.00 – 20.30 Get started in metal plate etching techniques on our four-week beginners' course using the etching facilities in our professional print studio.	£95	
Visit the-art-house.org.uk for more information and to book your place.		

Unlike some studio complexes which are artist led, The Art House is managed by the staff team – here they are hard at work in the office! From this room, exhibition programmes are planned, funding sought, residencies organised and supported, events and activities marketed, rooms booked out, finances kept in order, the Wakefield Artwalk is organised from here every other month, Open Studios twice a year, alongside a whole programme of workshops and community activities. The Art House is also the first official UK ‘Studio of Sanctuary’ offering, space, support and a friendly welcome to artists who are refugees or asylum seekers.



The staff have been invaluable to me with the exhibition in so many ways – firstly by giving me the kick up the backside to make an exhibition proposal and then in helping me through the other things you have to think about – funding bids, marketing, blog writing, when to do what, how to find a metalsmith and the myriad technical things which terrify me...how do I download a font/ what's a png/ is

rasterizing bad for my health/ why has my cursor changed into three pointy fingers/ how do I embed stuff/ why doesn't this work? Where feltmaking is concerned, I'm on terra firma – but 10 minutes of poster design with Photoshop and I'm a gibbering mess. Yet, despite their heavy workload, the staff always treat my questions with patience, respect and good humour. Thanks guys!

The dog- friendly office – there are three dogs currently on the staff – has also been therapeutic for my life-long fear of all things canine. I'm not saying I'm cured...but let's say the aversion therapy hasn't been as traumatic as Photoshop!

Also this is Garry, the buildings supervisor, who knows the ins and outs of the Art House's many nooks and crannies and keeps the idiosyncrasies of this quirky complex in working order. He's also just cut me a base for my Headstock sculpture out of some unwanted MDF screens which were lurking in a darkened room, so I'm very happy!



Creative People The Art House has nearly 50 studios and houses around 80 artists, makers, and creative businesses.

Just to give you a taste, here are a few people who were in their studios when I went round with my camera earlier this week:

Nick Vaughan is my next door studio neighbour – he is a visual artist currently working in plaster on a piece that will be cast in concrete and on show at the Patchings Festival in Nottingham in May. <http://www.nickvaughan.org>



One very tasty advantage of meeting Nick is that his wife **Alexandra Vaughan** runs a micro-bakery near our home <http://www.thecrowsrestbakehouse.co.uk>. Possibly....no definitely... the best hot cross buns I've ever tasted (and I've tasted quite a few!!!!)



Ellie Way is a freelance printmaker and display artist. As well as having a studio for her own printmaking, she helps other printmakers as a print technician and also runs the Art Shop helping the studio holders to present and sell their work. When I popped in she was making a card display rack for the shop. <http://www.way-welivehere.co.uk>



Jim Souper is a photographer, who is often off on his travels with his camera and exhibits around the UK – you can see his amazing, atmospheric work on his website. <http://www.jimsouper.co.uk>



Helen Thomas is a visual artist, working mostly in paint. I love her curiosity for plants which grow in neglected, marginal spaces. At the moment she's exploring different surfaces for her work and preparing for exhibitions and projects this summer. Helen also teaches workshops and delivers community projects – busy lady! <http://www.toastedorange.co.uk>



Mo Barrangi is an amazing printmaker and illustrator. He has developed a unique printmaking style and exhibits and wins prizes all over the world. <http://www.mobarrangi.com>



Mary Duggan is a jeweller who sells her work in galleries all around the country. She's just back from exhibiting at the British Craft Trade

Fair and here she's busy making a new range of memorial lockets. <http://www.contrarymary.co.uk>



This is just a little selection – there are other visual and graphic artists, printmakers, a historical costumier, a tailor, a clothes designer and more, young and old, straight from college, too-old-to-remember-college, early career of all ages, more experienced.

The great thing about being here with them is the sharing and the inspiration. Learning from other people, seeing new ways, developing understanding, listening, laughing, supporting, being supported. It's a great place to be.

Happy 1st anniversary to me and my studio!

I wonder what the future will hold.

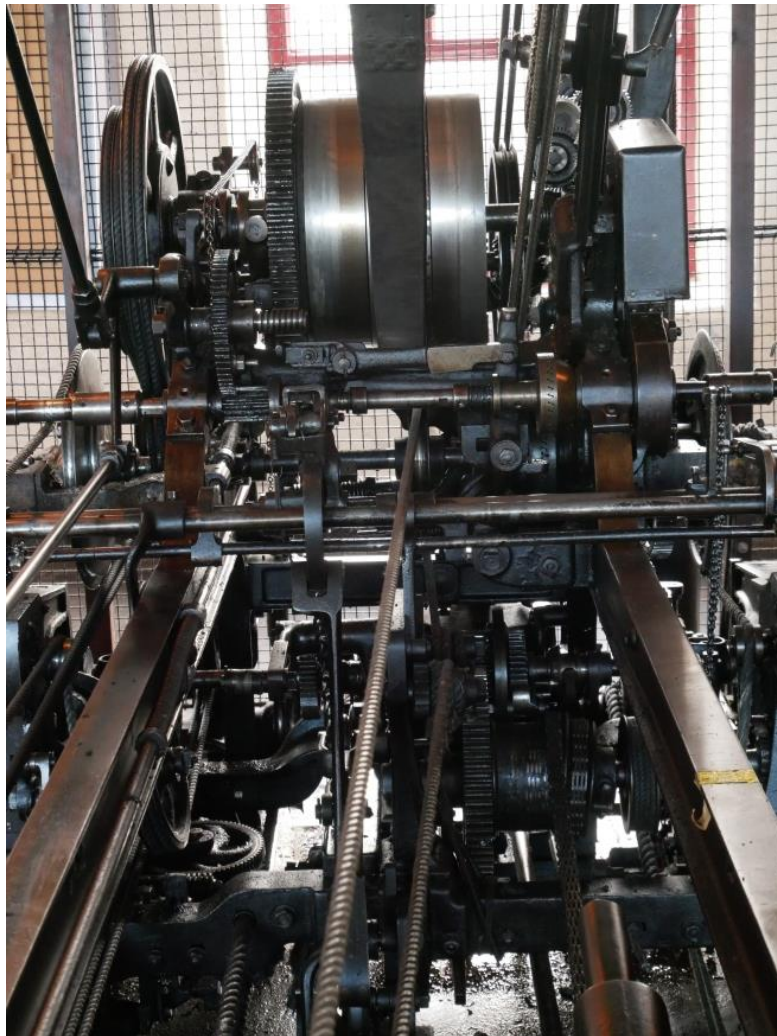
But for now, I have an exhibition to prepare!

Danger: moving parts!

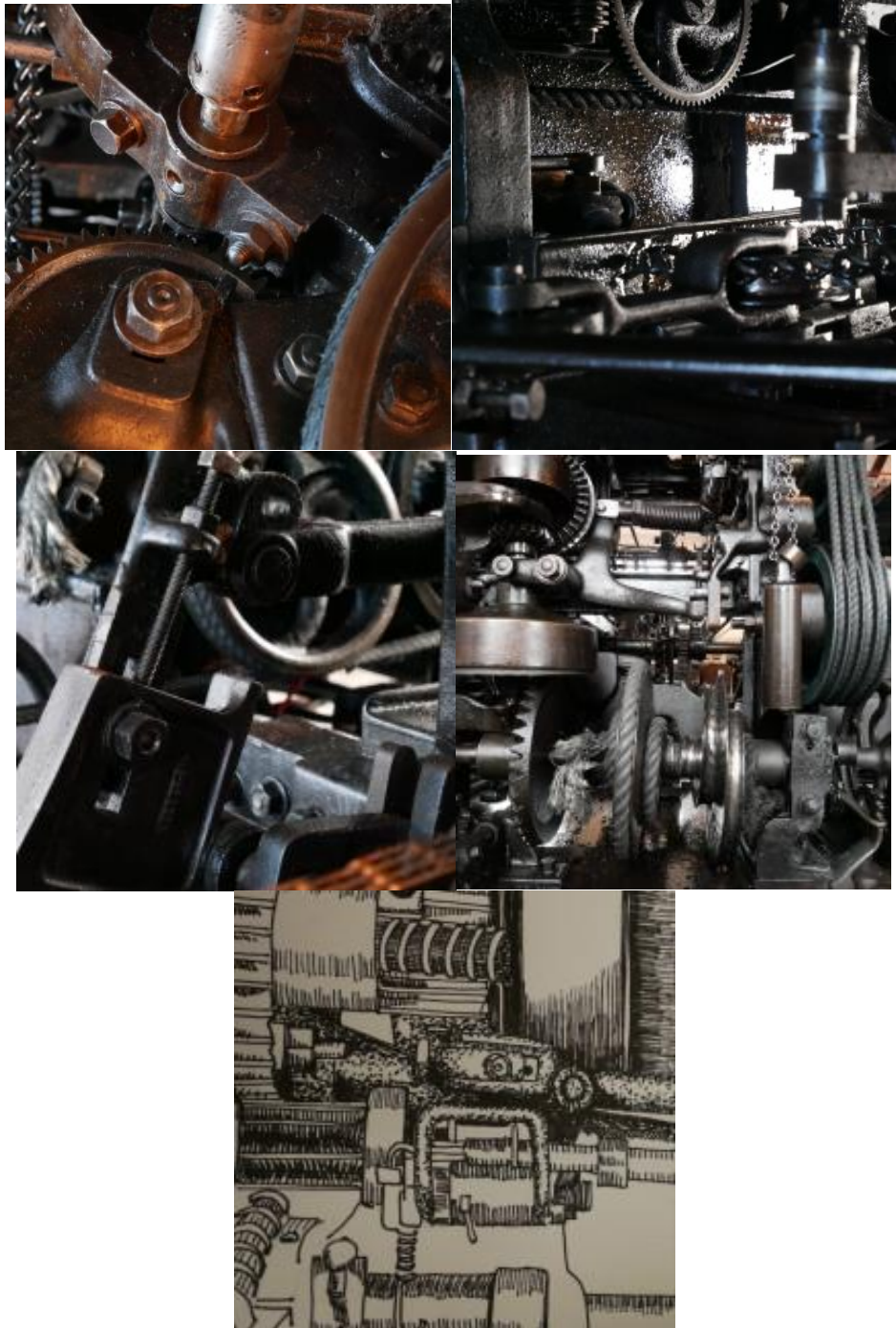


APRIL 27, 2019

Today I'd like to introduce you to another favourite machine. Where the carding machine is huge and imposing, the headstock of the spinning mule is relatively compact, but packs a punch!



Intricate and somehow compressed, it is one of the densest agglomerations of working parts in the textile mill. Its complexity draws me in. What do all these parts do?

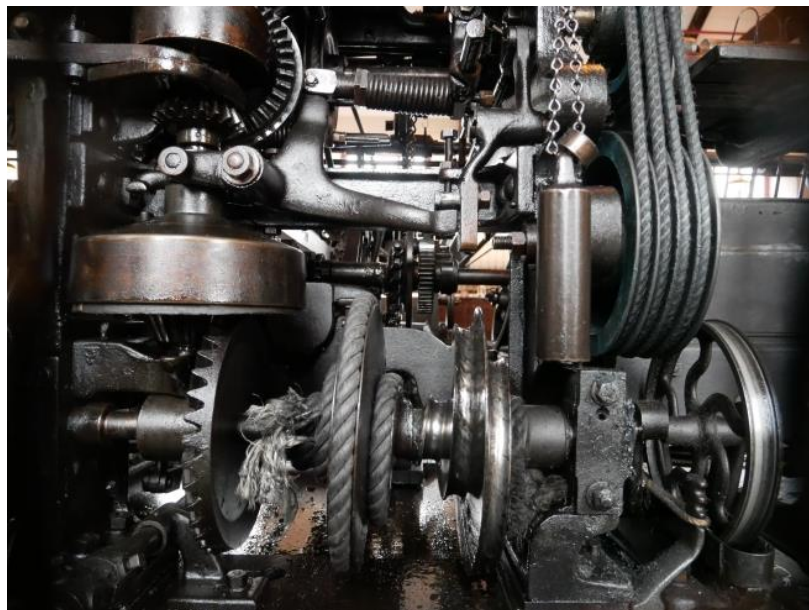


The spinning mule has a complicated action, the carriage moves back and forward extending the slivers of wool in a rippling surface of vibrating fibres, the bobbins spin and the fallers drop down alarmingly. All this, and more, is governed by the headstock.

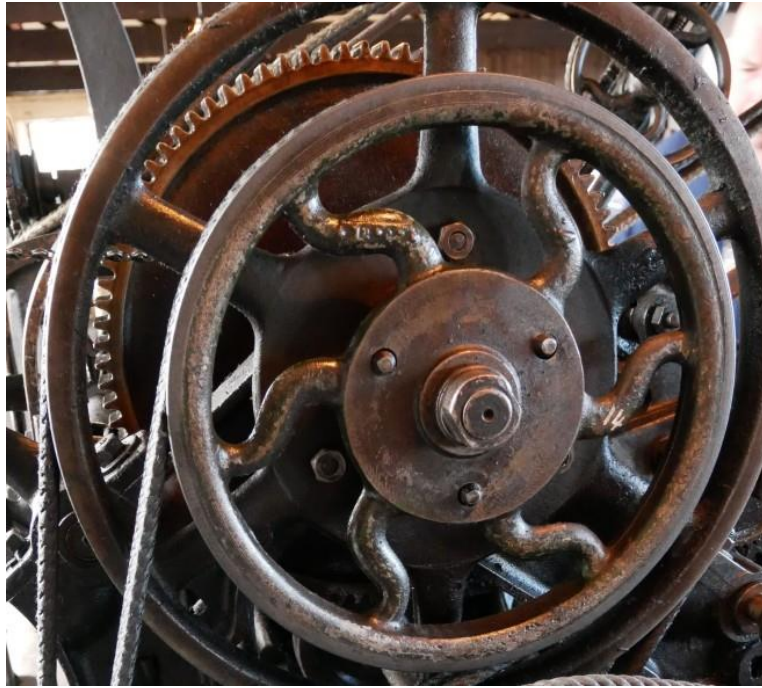


In action the noise is phenomenal.

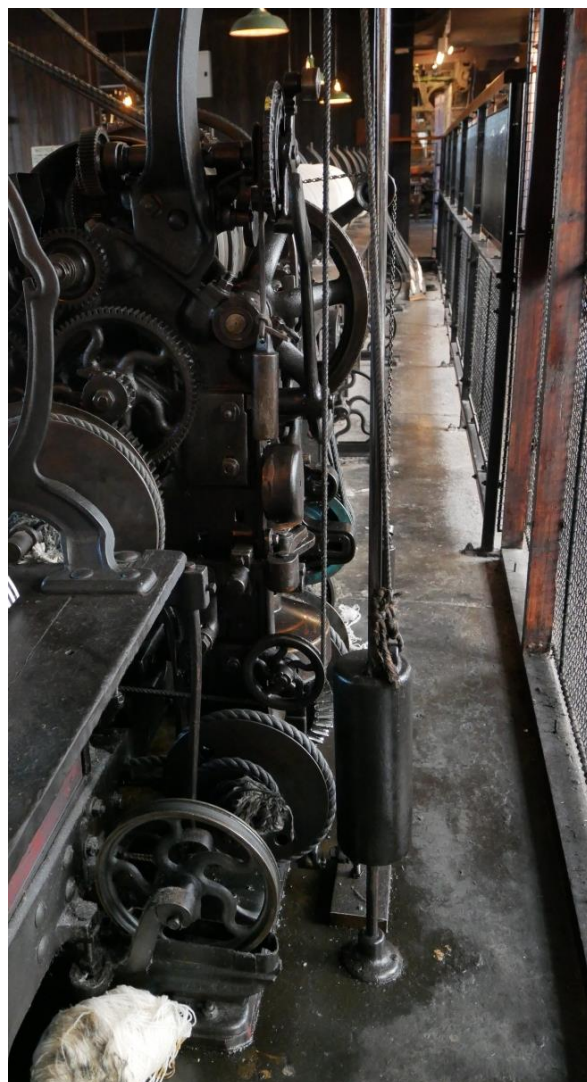
I find it fascinating to watch both working and at rest. It is dark and oily and difficult to make out one element from the rest. My eyes wander from one component to the next trying to follow the transfer of movement from vertical to horizontal back to vertical, from cog to cog to bevel gear to wheel to chain.



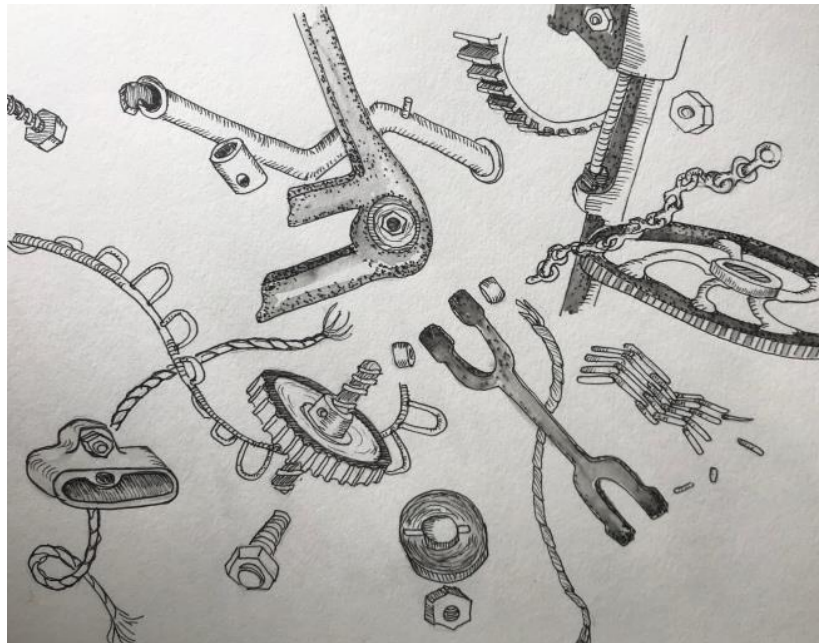
There are beautiful forms here and fascinating interactions. I've lived in Wakefield, home of both Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore, long enough now to have been infused with the joy of the 'pierced form' – of catching sight of more distant elements framed by those nearer to you.



Wise safety precautions at the museum frustrate the desire to be able to walk around the headstock and see the perspective change.



How wonderful it would be to be able to expand this... in the manner of Cornelia Parker's exploded shed (Cold Dark Matter 1991) and see the components in isolation, displaced yet together.



My plan for my headstock piece was to isolate some of my favourite elements and re-imagine them in felt. Visibility is an issue with the machine because all the parts are black and oily and only seen through the safety grille.

Initially I had thought of an explosion of colour for this piece,



but then decided that this would result in more confusion, so I pared it back to natural, white wools, mostly merino with some silk blends to add sheen and some subtle stitching and the contrast of rust coloured dyeing.



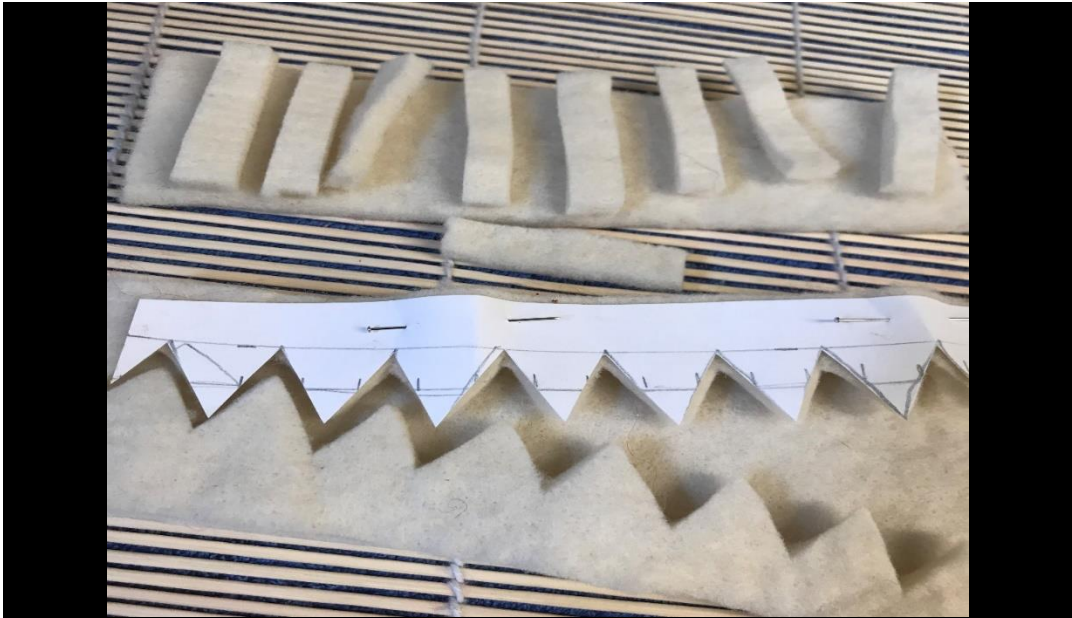
I wanted to set the felt against metal to bring in one of the pervasive contrasts of the mill between hard and soft. Rummaging around at the amazing Dragon Bridge Reclamation in Leeds, I found some enticing rusty metal parts– function unknown to me, but ideas began to form. What I couldn't work out was how to hold it all together – I didn't want the rusty metal to act just as a support structure.



One thing I've learnt with this project is that the answers do not come all at once.

Sometimes you just have to get on with the ideas you have and trust that a master plan will emerge.

So I tried not to think of the whole piece and just got on with the fun of exploring ways of felting components.



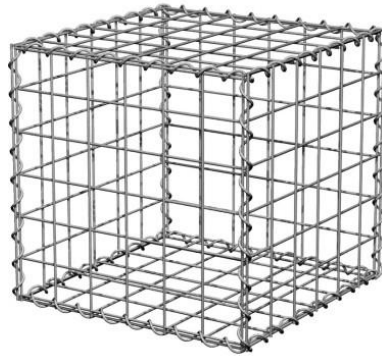
Next time: fitting it all together!

Caged in



MAY 4, 2019

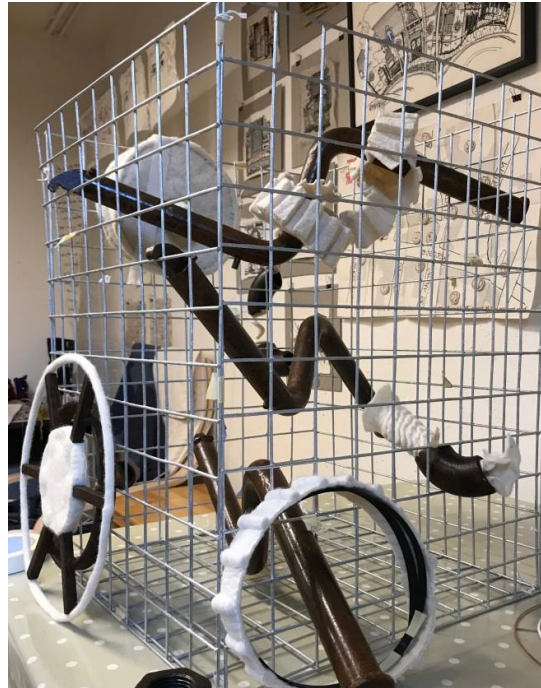
Amassing components for my Headstock I realized that I had two conflicting ideas for this piece. On the one hand I wanted to expand the mechanism and free it from its compression, on the other I wanted to keep it contained. After much research into support options and regret that I don't have welding skills, I came across the gabion – a flat-packed, steel mesh cage designed to be put together and filled with rocks for landscaping purposes. The mesh was strong enough to support the reclamation yard finds, but thin enough not to dominate.



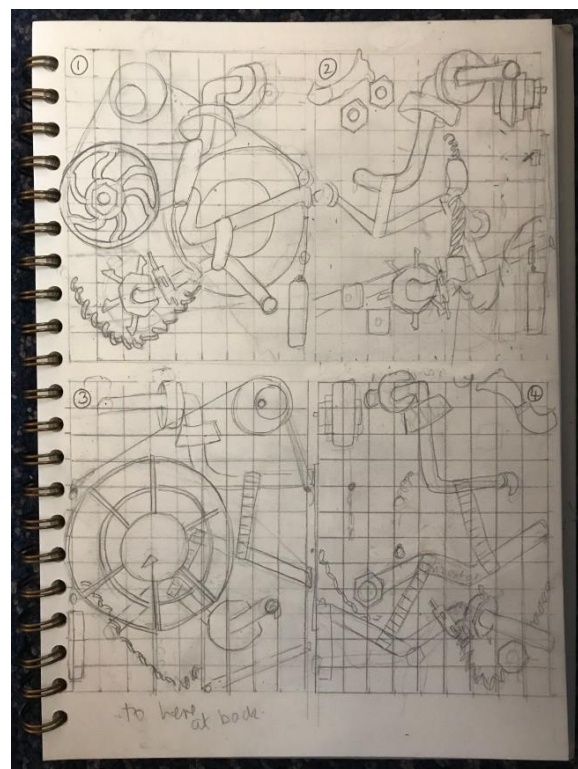
I started playing with positioning the three main axles so that there was interest from each side.



And then adding felt elements to them and considering the space as a whole. There were various configurations and it felt like moving furniture into a new house and then deciding which spaces were cluttered and which looked bare and needed more interest.



Complex plans began to emerge, and not for the first time, did I feel that CAD skills might have been helpful!



A friend popped in and asked me if it was going to 'work' as a machine. I was flattered by his ambition for the piece – it wasn't possible..welll...not in the time scale for this exhibition...but it made me look at ways to link some of the elements and I returned to an earlier idea of felting drive belts.



I knew where this piece was to be positioned in the museum, and was keen for people to move around it in a way they cannot move around the actual headstock. That brought other considerations. Firstly that there should be elements which lead the viewer round from one face of the cage to the next.



And secondly that there should be holes in the cage to draw the viewer in to the internal life of the machine and also to allow the 'machine' to burst out in places. Holes needed to be positioned carefully so as not to compromise strength where it was needed. Thus far, the cage had only been held together with twisted metal foodbag ties, so dismantling was easy. Four hours in the sunshine with a hacksaw gave me the alterations I needed...and a few blisters.



Putting it back together needed a more permanent solution than foodbag ties! I wanted strength without too much bulk. In terms of appearance also some textural interest would be good and I needed to lose the incongruous shiny silver colour. After much thought, experimentation and a high dose of inspiration from one of my sculptural heroes, Phyllida Barlow, I gathered ammunition.



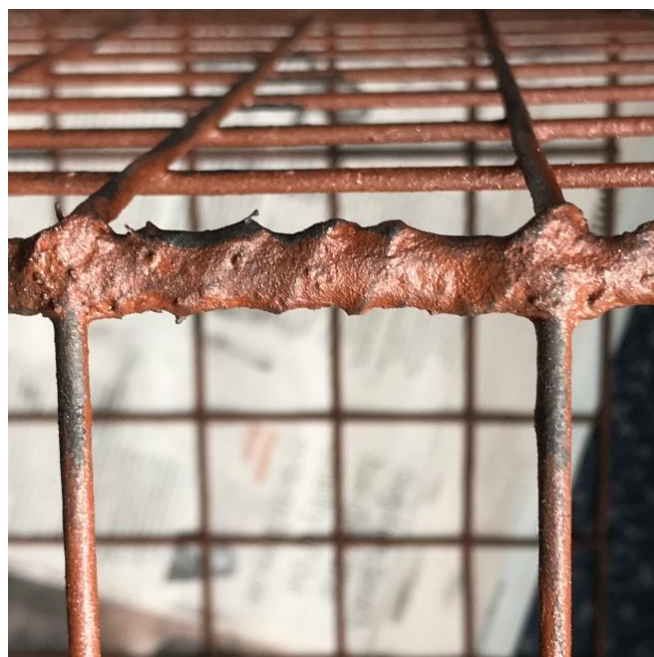
So I bound the edges with gardening wire, bound them with plasterers' jointing mesh and added bonding plaster.



Once that was dry, time to undercoat, spray and hand paint to distress.



Process heavy, but worth the result!



Time to reassemble now, to balance felt with metal, reconsider flow, work on the finer details and consider how to make it safe and durable for inquisitive little visitors' fingers.



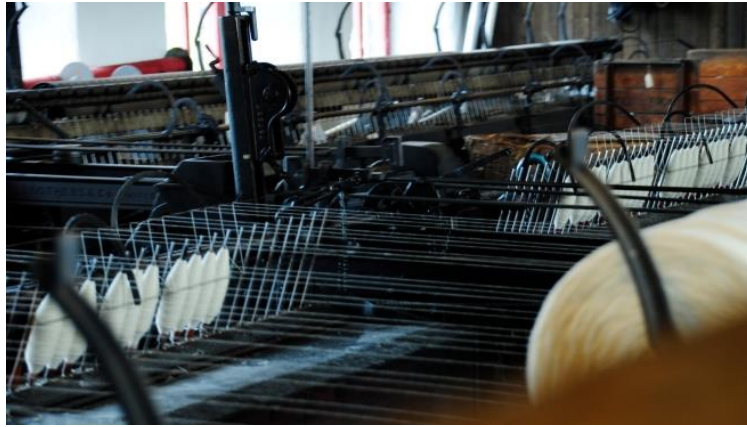
Still some way to go...but it's coming together!

The Harpist and the Piecer



MAY 19, 2019

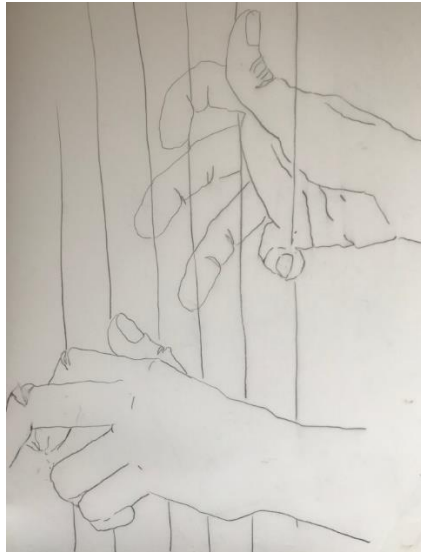
A long vista of vibrating cords extends, lengthening then shortening as the spinning mule works its magic, and twists the wisps of carded wool into a strong yarn. For me, watching the machine in action, always conjures the image of a stringed instrument – a piano or harp maybe.



Watching the demonstration of the job of the 'piecers', I couldn't help but admire the dexterity of their hands and shiver at the danger – the risk of accident and loss. It was the piecer's job to watch for broken threads and to dip their hands between the moving carriage and the spindles, to retrieve the broken ends and to hold them between fingers and thumb in a cupped palm until the twist caught and bound the ends together again.



The same dexterity as a harpist....but with the dark threat for those who were not quick or skilled enough.



How to capture this impression?

Thinking how to unite the two, I linked the shared skill of the women's hands...and they were usually women in both cases. Could I portray them both in the same piece? How to unite the horizontal strings of the mule, with the verticality of the harp?

I started to sketch...



And then to model...



And then to realise that I had designed something beyond my skillset...

I couldn't make all of this out of felt...the hands, yes, the frame, no.



I went back to the museum. Standing any piece anything near the mule would be tricky as it is a working machine. I looked

around...and then up. There was a dark corner, back lit. I had found a site



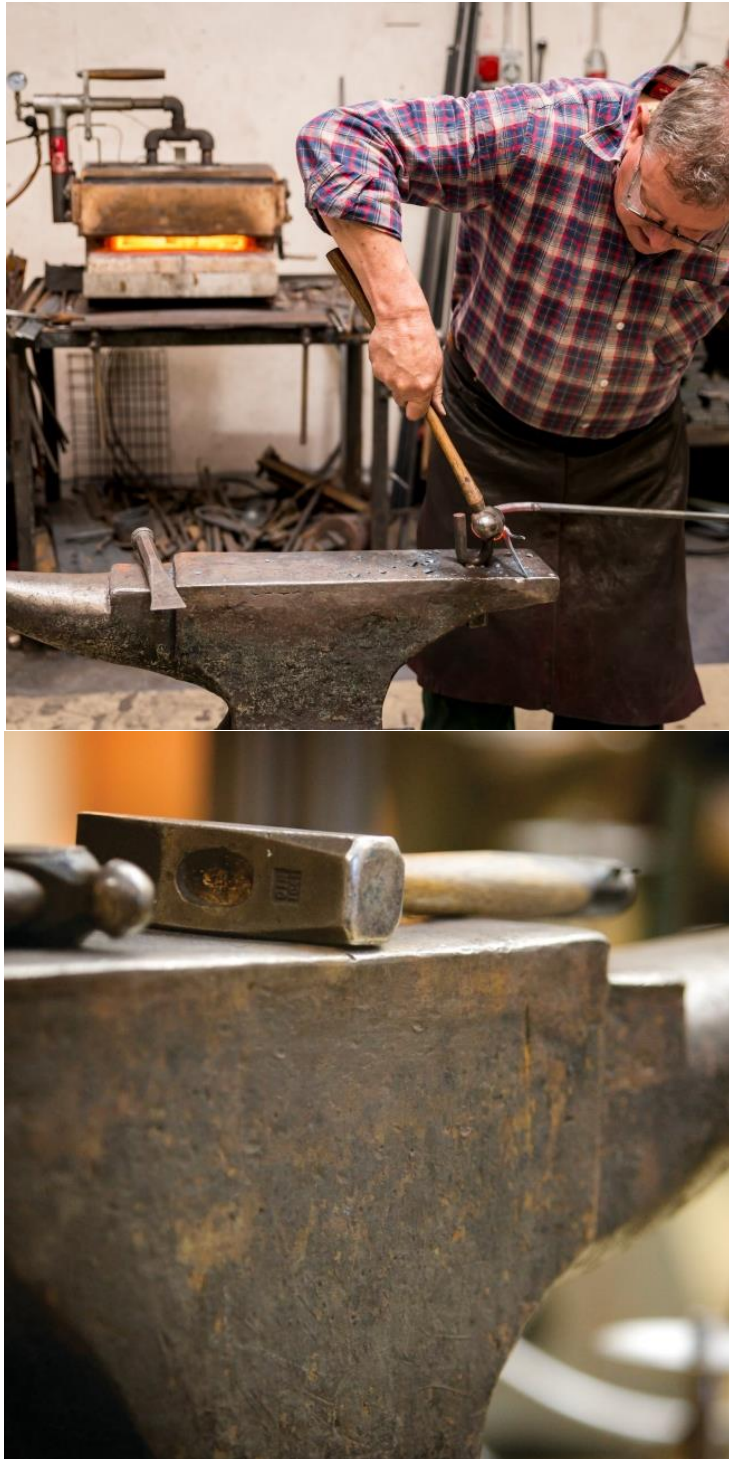
I'd need to ask to move a few things, and the piece would need to be large enough to hold its own, and need to hang, not stand. What is more, I would need help!

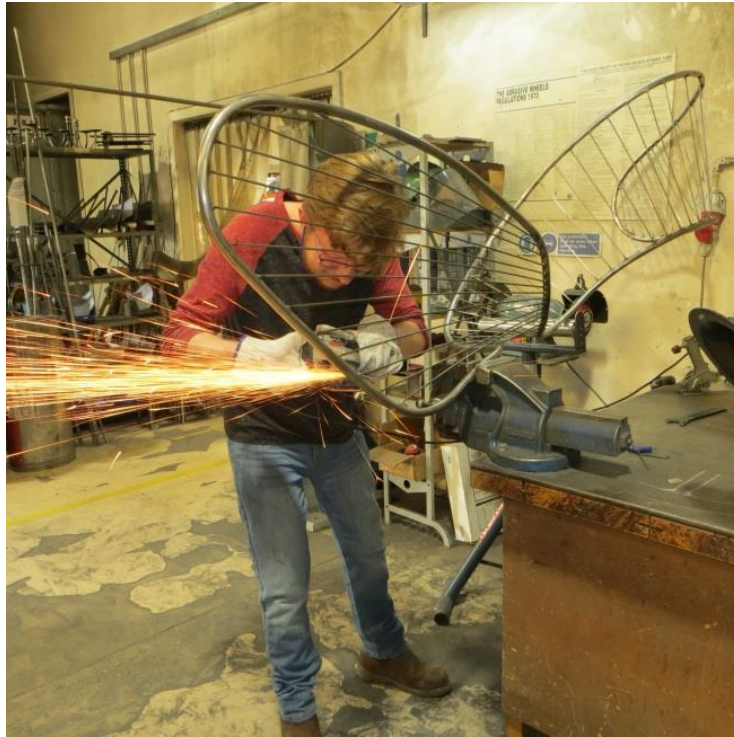
I'd never looked to collaborate like this before and the thought of taking my rather odd idea and my little Blue Peter-esque maquette to anyone and saying, 'I need one of these, can you make it?' seemed utterly bizarre. But it's amazing how connections are made and things happen and soon I was on my way to see Nigel Tyas in Penistone who works in metal and also happens to be married to Elizabeth who donated the wool for Creel. Small and very creative world!



Nigel was great, didn't flinch at my scrappy model, asked a few questions about measurements and requirements, explained a few options, did the thinking he needed to do and agreed to take it on.

Nigel and his team set to work,





A couple of months later, and well before my deadline, I went to collect.

The frame, lying still shrouded in pallet wrap and filling the sitting room, was better than I had dared to hope.



Now, my part... to make the hands!

Hand in hand



MAY 26, 2019

I love to watch hands at work and I know my own hands best, so they often crop up in my work. I practised the hand positions I needed – the piecers' hands cupped and supporting of the delicate fibres they were tasked to mend and the harpists hands, thumbs bent, braced against the strings, sinuous and contorted. These differences were turned on their head in my perception of the nature of the work they did – piecing was hard, pressured, monotonous and dangerous...and harp playing evoked gentility, ethereal melody and the touch of angels.



I wanted to create a delicate cobweb felt effect which would contrast with the metal frame and suggest fleeting movement and a lack of permanence, visible, but translucent against the light from the window. I looked at various wools to use but settled on Wensleydale, mostly for its curl but also for the Yorkshire connection.



Initially I thought of working around a 2-D resist but the position of the hands meant that this would have been difficult to achieve in such a delicate felt. So...back to the aluminium mesh I had used for the Doffer and the Fancy.



And I needed a model, willing to be wrapped, at least partially, in aluminium mesh. Piecing was very largely women's work, but I needed to upscale a little so the hands were to scale on the frame. So a male model would be better. Jon stepped up to the challenge!



First to create the basic form, then to free the model and finally to reshape:

Cobweb felting around the mesh hands was a delicate business, needing little fibre and a lot of soap in the process. There was something very intimate, though, in this felting process – the gentle caressing of the fibres around the form, massaging the soft and delicate skin over the taught framework of metal – bone, muscle, tendon and ligaments – the holding of these fragile hands.



I had initially intended the mesh to be a temporary mould. Then I would slit the felt along the inner arm, the wrist, flay the hands and then refelt to mend the raw edges. But I couldn't bring myself to do it. Justification for not cutting came quickly to mind – leaving the frame in would mean I had fewer problems to overcome in fixing the hands in place, and would mean I didn't have to stiffen them, and the aluminium form would catch reflected light through the fragile skin. If I'm honest though, these were just fortunate side-effects – I had just become too attached to the hands to be that brutal.



I'll be attaching the hands to the frame nearer to installation so watch this space for photos of the finished piece.

Singer



JUNE 16, 2019

I don't know how you'd measure this, but I reckon that the most popular subject for sculpture over the years is the human form. As we all have one, the body seems a very natural starting point for exploration. So, if a sewing machine could sew what it liked, would it, too, turn its mind to its own form?

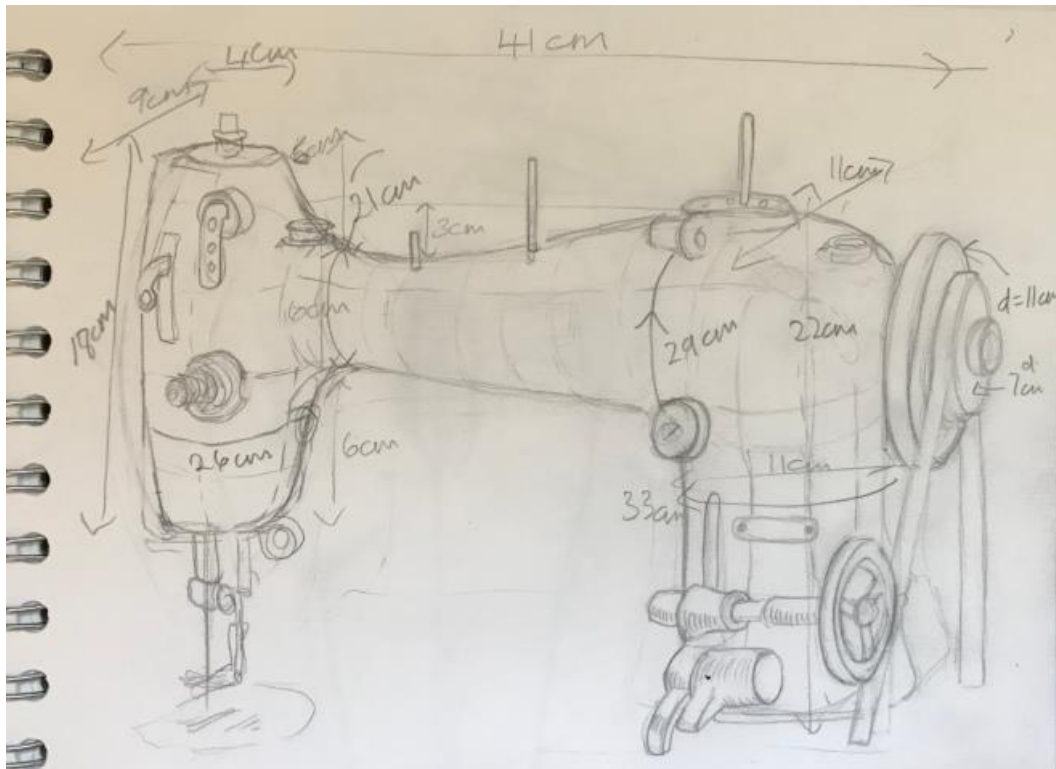


Leeds Industrial Museum has, within its collection, a number of Singer sewing machines. To me, and to many visitors, they bring back memories. My mother's sewing machine was a black and gold Singer. Hers was an electric version and I remember the post-war brown Bakelite foot pedal but lots of visitors remember treadle and hand versions too. On display are a clutch of industrial machines – longer in the body and sleeker than their domestic counterparts, with less decoration, it is easier to admire their stripped back form.



So, where to start?

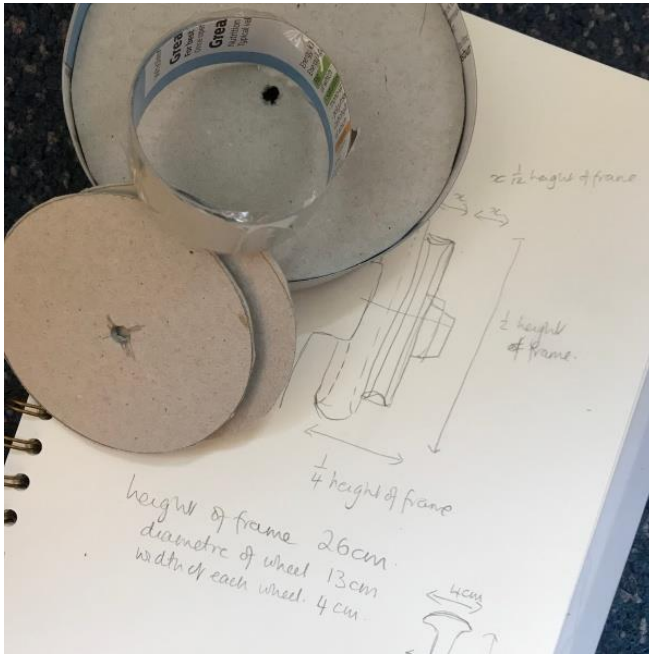
First with the sketch book and a tape measure to take some vital statistics.



To convert this into three dimensions, I would need first to construct a tailor's dummy. Fun with papier mâché ensued.



And then to calculate the intricacies of the balance wheel.



Once I had the dummy I would work out how best to cut the pieces of felt. The first stage was to cut toile pieces out of old shirt cotton, then a version out of commercial felt to work out how the seams and darts would work. Eventually card pattern pieces emerged for the main machine body.



I then needed to look at the details. Some of the more intricate parts like the needle and presser foot took me back to my sketchbook.



Before joining the seams, I needed to add as much of the free motion embroidery as possible while the pieces were flat and also add smaller parts as long as they didn't get in the way of the seams. This was the fun bit.





The lettering on the top was a bit of a challenge, but I was pleased to revisit gothic script. As a child I had an old copy book and used to delight in practising different lettering forms.



Gothic was my favourite, so when I came to sew it, it was very familiar.

Once all the details were done, it was time to sew up some of the seams – and things began to take shape. I had the option of stuffing or stiffening to add sufficient strength and decided on Paverpol fabric stiffener painted on the inside. A messy process!



The tailor's dummy came back into use to shape the machine while the stiffener dried.



It only remained to make the base plate, assemble the machine and have fun with some accessories.





I can't wait to see this one take its place in the museum alongside its black and gold siblings!



The Doffer and the Fancy revisited

MAY 16, 2020 ~ 4 COMMENTS ~ [EDIT](#)"THE DOFFER AND THE FANCY REVISITED"



Photo credit: Jules Lister

Strange times. With museums and galleries closed during lockdown, I've been enjoying online posts about past exhibitions and it got me to thinking back to *The Doffer and the Fancy*. Hard to register where I was this time last year in the whole exhibition-making process, with just over a month to go before opening. My heart goes out to exhibiting artists who find themselves in limbo this year with all that work, and nowhere to show!

Anyway, here's a little trip down memory lane, to Leeds Industrial Museum at Armley Mills last June when *The Doffer and The Fancy: Re-imagining the Machine* opened, and a few insights into the fun we had installing.



Photo credit: Helen Riddle, Jules Lister

The eponymous piece, *The Doffer and the Fancy*, greeted visitors in the first room of their museum tour, standing proudly next to the carding engine. You can see Chris and Andrew from Leeds Industrial Museum (LIM) during install – Andrew appears to have lost something vital inside the sculpture – but actually was checking the internal support system which secured the sculpture to the base and kept it safe for visitors. It was great to see it in place, with the red fleece picking up the colour of the mill window frames. Just around the corner is the magnificent spinning mule, inspiration for *The Piecer and the Harpist*



Photo credit: Jules Lister

Suspended from the ceiling it hangs at the end of the mule, continuing the rhythm of the metal spool holders and catching the light from the mill window. I love the way that this piece blends in with its surroundings – the metal rods, the white, Wensleydale wool, the twist of the ropes on the wall. Visitors catch sight of it out of the corner of their eye and then take a closer look.



Photo credit: Jules Lister, Helen Riddle, Jules Lister

The next piece, *Headstock*, was also inspired by the spinning mule, but in this case by the densely packed machinery that powers it.

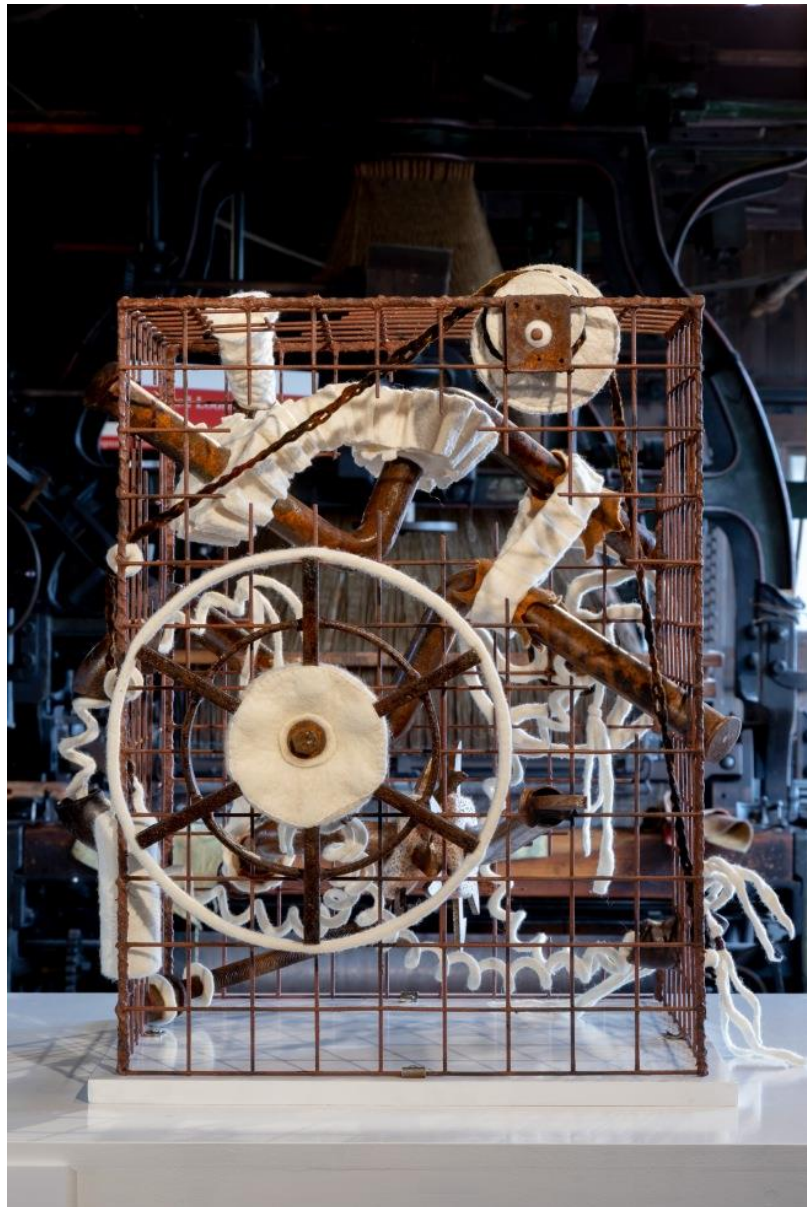


Photo credit: Jules Lister

The lighting really worked here. Much of the museum is quite dark so it was great to make the most of the new spotlights; the shadows on

the plinth reminded me of the sunny days earlier in the year while I was working on this piece. Given that it was partly inspired by Cornelia Parker's *Cold Dark Matter*, being able to incorporate shadows into the piece was important to me.



Photo credit: Jules Lister

I love this photo (thanks Jules)! There's something about seeing these two works in amongst the beautiful forms of the machinery that makes me very happy. *Creel* (in the centre of the photo) was a real favourite with the staff of the museum, and with many visitors. Creel has 130 or so separate parts, so it was a bit of an undertaking to install. I had a colour scheme planned so each pod was numbered so it could be positioned correctly. It took my trusty assistant and I a whole day to install. But it was all worth it in the end!



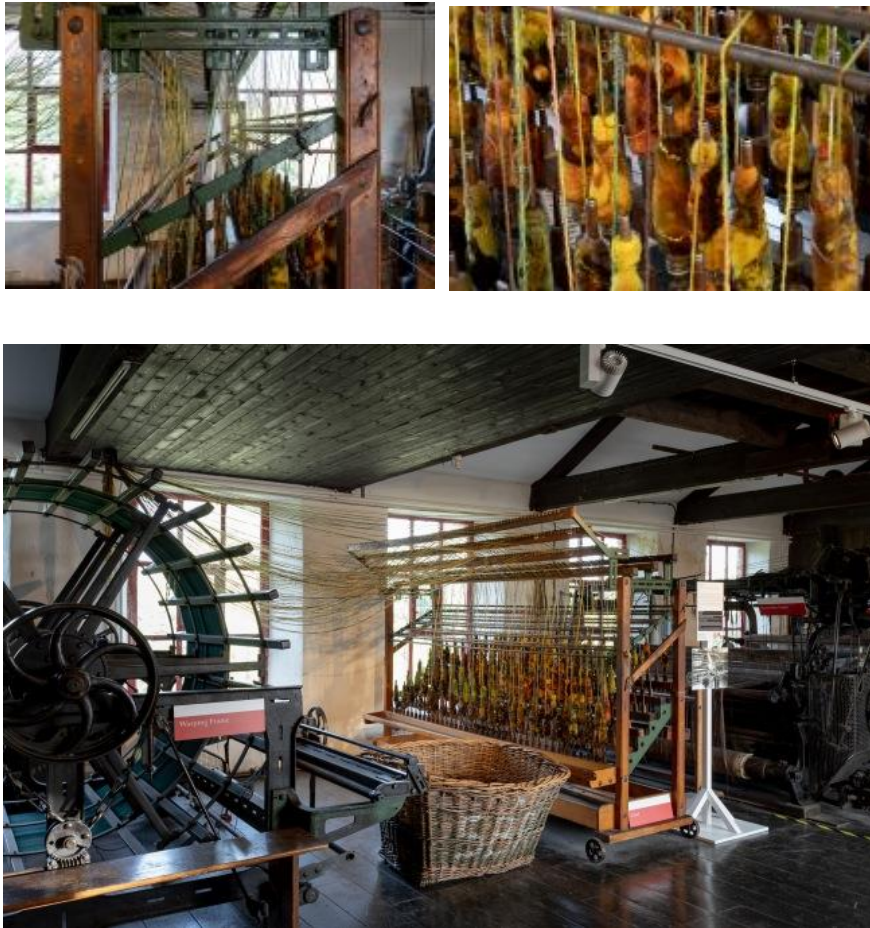


Photo credit: Jules Lister

There's something special about those warm autumnal colours: the museum staff tell me that it is magical in the late afternoon sunshine. They've become so attached to it that this piece is staying on, on extended loan – hopefully when the museum comes out of lockdown, we'll be able to enjoy it again!

By contrast, *River*, was a dream to install. I brought it to the museum rolled up, so, once in position, it unfurled itself. There was a large cogged wheel lying serendipitously nearby under the loom, so it took on a new role, representing the waterwheels.



Photo credit: Jules Lister

Finally (for this post), we head downstairs to the sewing room, to find *Singer*, the smallest of the pieces, but a possible contender for the Peoples' Vote, I think, had we had one.



Photo credit: Jules Lister

Everyone loves a Singer, and this one was in its element here, a Singer amongst Singers.

That's all for now.

Next time, we'll head down to the Mill Space and a little reflection on the exhibition as a whole.

And finally...



JUNE 26, 2020

My favourite part of exhibitions I visit is often the section relating to the artist's process and thinking, and so it was with the Doffer and the Fancy. I was very lucky to be offered the Mill Space, within the museum, to display these elements of my work, and also to be working with Chris Sharp, the curator, who enjoys the creative process of presenting the diverse elements which make an exhibition.



It provided a great opportunity to offer some explanation of the thinking behind each piece. Each vitrine was devoted to one piece – here the sketches and models for The Doffer and the Fancy:



Photo credit: Jules Lister

It was also great to be able to display these alongside material from the Museum's archive.

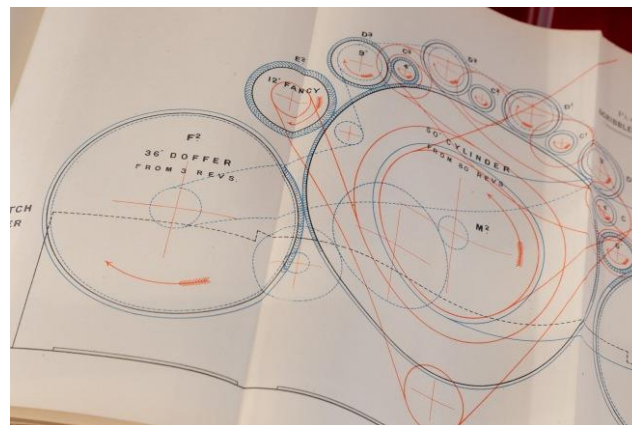


Photo credit: Jules Lister

And here, the Piecer and the Harpist:



Photo credit: Jules Lister

While I gave quite a few tours of the exhibition, I couldn't be there all the time, so including diagrams and samples was important. It was a

reminder to me, too, of the ideas I had rejected along the way, like the red gear cog from when I had imagined Headstock in multicolours.



Photo credit: Jules Lister

For Creel, I had no spare pods for the vitrine, so this was the only piece I had to remake elements for the Mill Space and get my dye pots out again!

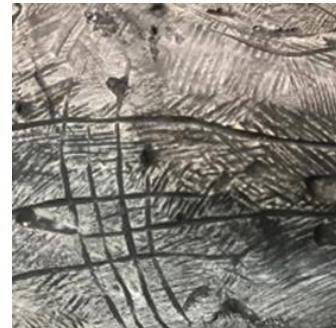




Two more vitrines explored River and Singer.



The museum has a great collection of sewing machines in the stores and it was lovely to be able to show some of these and to include the machine whose dimensions I took for my felt piece. I also included a sewing machine which I had sculpted in plaster on a course with Lewis Robinson at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park. Once the basic form was constructed in plaster around an armature, it was carved and sanded back and, once home, I decided to coat it with beeswax and graphite powder to bring out the surface texture.



The Mill Space was also home to the last exhibition piece, the 5 panel hanging "Thank Gott for Armley Mills" depicting many aspects of the life of the mill, in free motion embroidery on cotton organdie. It looked very much at home in front of the mill window overlooking the river.



Photo credit: Jules Lister

Benjamin Gott, industrialist and philanthropist, who became Mayor of Leeds in 1799 was responsible for establishing the mill in its heyday and his insistence on an innovative fireproof design is probably why the mill still stands today. I realised that my exhibition had not covered key elements of this magical place – you can't do everything! – but I wanted to pay my respects to the mighty façade, the water wheels, the shuttles and the industry-changing Jacquard Loom.

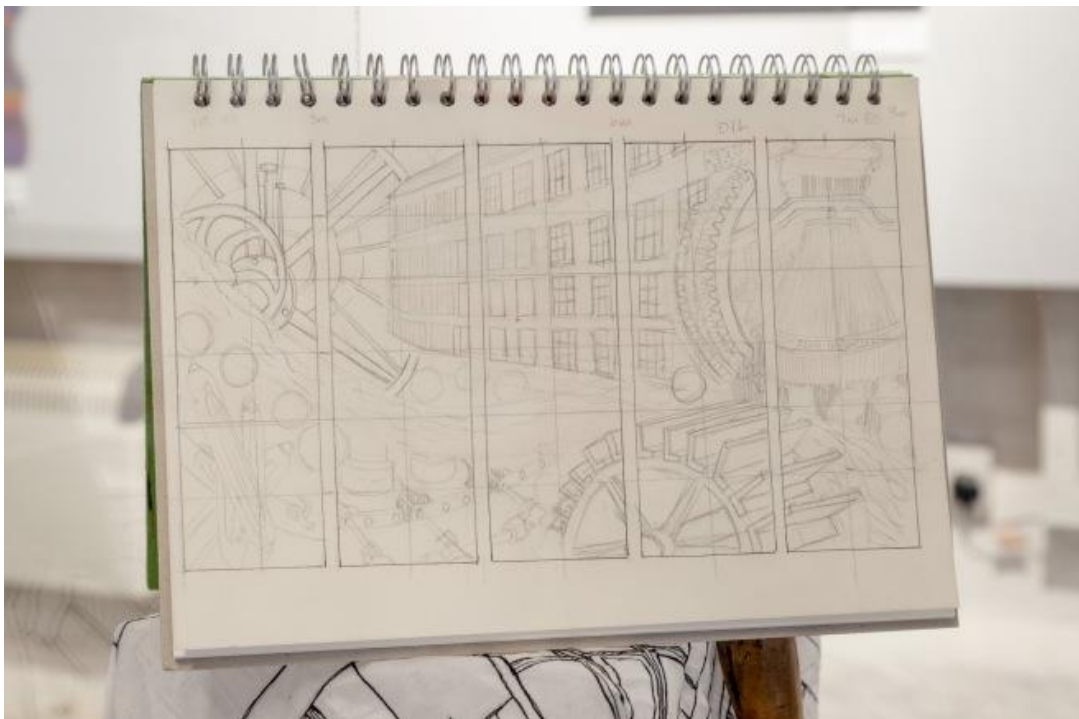


Photo credit: Jules Lister

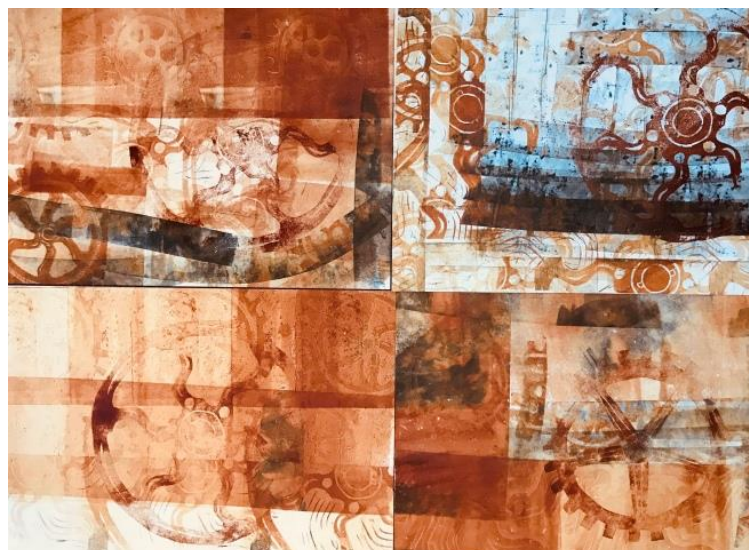
The hangings started life in an A4 sketchbook and the design then stitched onto cotton panels using one continuous line of stitch where possible in each section.



The river was added as a monoprint, and the cogs are lino printed.



The paper I put under the cotton while lino printing (to protect my table) and which I then reused to clean off my rollers, turned out to be quite beautiful things, so I included them too!



Happily, there was a chance to hang some of my 2-dimensional work. The mighty Carding Engine in free-motion embroidery on handmade felt:



Photo credit: Jules Lister

Two views of the Fulling Stocks in hand-dyed and stitched felt:



Photo credit: Jules Lister

And a line drawing of the Headstock – the last piece of work I completed for this exhibition so a fitting final photograph.

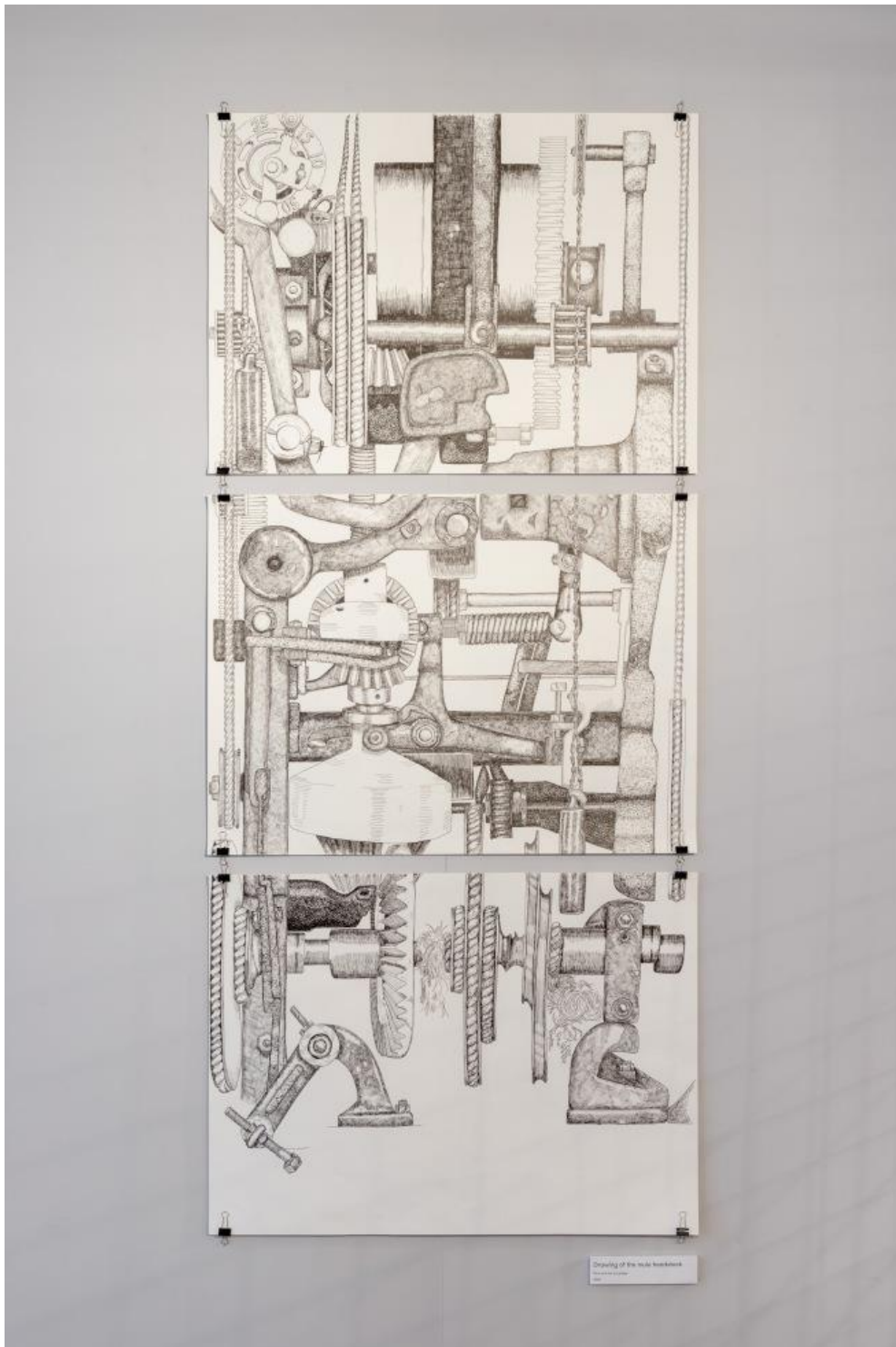


Photo credit: Jules Lister

Time for a quick reflection on the exhibition as a whole.

It was an incredible opportunity for what was my first major exhibition and, for me, it grew from the love of a place and of a set of machines. The work was created over six months and gave me some sleepless nights but also great joy, insights, skills and inspiration to carry forward for future projects.

I am immensely grateful to Leeds Museums and Galleries for the chance to carry this through, and to all the staff at Leeds Industrial Museum for their friendship and support. Especial thanks to Chris Sharp, my curator. Curators, as I said at the exhibition opening, are the unsung heroes of the exhibition world – their names should be up there on the posters and their work recognised. I could not have done this without Chris.

As I write this post, Leeds Industrial Museum, along with all museums and galleries, is closed due to Covid-19. Measures have just been announced for a lifting of many Coronavirus lockdown restrictions to allow for the re-opening of the economy. The future of the arts and cultural sector looks particularly fragile. I think of Leeds Industrial Museum at Armley Mills and how much it has to give to visitors and I hope that, along with museums and galleries across the world, Gott's strong and powerful mill will receive the support it needs to weather this particular storm.