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Review: *arttextiles3* exhibition (selectors: Sarat Maharaj, Susan Hiller, Sarah Quinton and Jonathan Watkins), Bury St. Edmunds, 2004.

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It's quite a hike from Hove to Bury St. Edmunds, but it was well worth the long journey to see the *arttextiles3* exhibition, self-titled as the third major survey of British artists working with textiles, on show there until 30 October, and subsequently touring. The show is the result of an open submission selected by Sarat Maharaj, Susan Hiller, Sarah Quinton and Jonathan Watkins, and there are 19 artists represented.

I don't think I have ever been so keenly affected by particular themes jumping out from a series of unconnected works in a group show before. Firstly, I was struck by something to do with mapping out of territories that might be personal, might be political, but somehow seemed explicitly important and implicitly loaded... Secondly, there was some delicious connection between laundered bedlinens, embroidered prayers, home-made, hand-made garments and a troubled, less traditional femininity...

Video work was extremely strong, very competent, exceptionally controlled. The 'best in show' was a video piece by Farhad Ahrarnia titled *Mr Singer* (2003). In a tightly-edited two minutes we see close shots of a traditional Singer sewing machine stitching its red-thread way across the annotated, delineated map of the contested and exploited territory of Iran and its surrounds. My notes, taken during this piece, are fragmented: pastiche of sewing, dotted lines, red dashes, stretched thread, stabbing needles, thrumming rhythm, incessant menace, sounds like distant gunfire... The catalogue gives more concrete information, but this is an exceptional example of a work that simply needs no catalogue support. The sense of regional instability, of piecing and patching of territory, of the rhythm of marching feet and rattling guns, of the 'sewing up' of situations is so potently embedded in this work that it stands out as a masterpiece of modern visual culture...

Joe Scotland hand-sews maps too... a re-pieced, pink fabric edged, gorgeous work, *Sheet 5000* (2003) presents us with the mapped area around Glamorgan as we've never seen it before. Soft-camp, hand-done, lovely and loving, there is a sense here of tender territory personally contested and subjectively reclaimed, gridded with singular experience, space mapped out by human narrative... This work sets a tone for eight additional maps, each carefully named for geographic landscapes (*Hawaii; Gran Canaria*), floor plans (*National Gallery*), public spaces (*Tube Map*), or more ambiguous 'scapes' (*Kath Kidson, BIG STORE OPEN NOW*)... These works erase pictorial or map features entirely, allowing patched white fabric, with occasional tiny printed flower motif, stain or mark, or section of historical whitework embroidery, to propose tales of spaces or places known or unknown...

Cut then to Tajender Sagoo's *Flag of Independence* (2003), a work that challenges everything I know a flag to be – large, certain, aligned, formal. This flag is a 27 x 22 cm. scrap of woven wool and cotton, ragged-edged, and nailed up to the gallery wall. The green, white and orange of

India are present, and Sagoo's catalogue entry references India's declaration of independence from Britain and creation of a new flag-symbol of nationhood. The work resonates with a kind of emotional ambiguity about the potency and meaning of such symbols, and by doing so forms its own powerfully independent, but fundamentally interconnected, 'nation of one'...

Whew, hard acts to follow...but the snippy scissor-cut text - "I'm not your fucking mother" – cut into a black hand-made lacy camisole in Catherine Prior's three-minute video *Black Saturday* (2003) is a strong competitor. I wondered about the scene that might have preceded the careful hand-making of this sexy garment, and the drive to make this other 'flag of independence'. What narrative caused the protagonist in the work to assert careful well-behaved femininity through the cutting, pinning, stitching of fabric, to insist on 'adult woman sexiness' in the wearing of this seductive garment, but to demonstrate so conclusively in the final shots that her role is fundamentally and essentially 'not your fucking mother'? It's a superb piece, tightly constructed, punchy, with a sharp hard sound-track that pre-empts the force of the conclusive text...

The catalogue juxtaposition of Prior's work with Bharti Parmar's seemingly quiet, competent and well-behaved work *The Lord's Prayer* (2000-04) is particularly powerful. In Parmar's work we see a painstaking and sensitive usage of the conventions of historical sampler sewing to examine the positioning of the self. Using her own and 'found' hair, Parmar stitches a complex and highly-personal statement of self, locating herself as a British Christian Asian with a Victorian cultural sensibility. Her use of hair, however, with its fetishistic resonances and bodily references, troubles the apparent certainty of the self-textualisation...

Mary Longford's *Fold / Unfold* (2003) is also a video work. Visually, it operates in familiar territory, showing us female hands folding and unfolding laundered sheets and quilts, pegging them out, smoothing them, putting them away in drawers. What works for me in this piece, however, is again a tendency to subvert that familiarity with something less 'good and wholesome'. The soundtrack, a woman's voice interspersed with traffic sounds, hammering, and other peripheral noises, is a kind of stream of consciousness, the sort of words we might speak inwardly or outwardly as we process events for ourselves... Here, the speaker starts with the muttered "what a bitch", and the tone is set for an irritable, irritating monologue, a part-resentful and part-regretful going-over of a peevisish narrative to do with some other person's heart failure, our protagonist's failure to be there, and the perceived blame operated by another absent person... It operates in mundanity, banality, tedium, with the woman's voice rising and falling in a whispery, muttery discomforting rhythm. It is a compelling work that interlinks laundry-processing and everyday household fabrics with life and death events that are both gargantuan and petty in one...

Arttextiles3 succeeds precisely because it gets the juxtapositioning of the gargantuan and the petty just right...