Women and domesticity - investigating common experiences and perspectives through creative collaboration. A collection of hand-embroidered dusters.

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Abstract:
The goal of this project is to explore the common domestic experiences of the modern day woman within her home. It investigates underlying narratives by engaging the community in embroidering their personal perspectives onto a duster.

Traditional dusters were selected as a metaphor for domesticity because they are mundane, yet visually appealing in their brilliant bright yellow. Collectively they proclaim a multitude of opinions, stitched by hand with red thread to represent traditional women’s work and femininity.

The research reveals a broad scope of perspectives including fulfilment, resentment, nostalgia, and antipathy. Common underlying themes communicate a sense of invisibility, un-appreciation and boredom, but also of nurturing and necessity associated with quality of life in the home.

Domestic experience is common to us all; in the home we can research the life we live. ‘Researchers are in some ways always part of the lives and world they are researching’ (Pink 31). Each duster reflects personal contemplation inspired by the lengthy process of hand sewing, creating an artistic response that offers unique insight into modern day home life.

Women & Domesticity – What’s your Perspective?
There is an old saying that a woman’s place is in the home, but in a day and age when in the West at least, a women can in theory be anything and do anything she chooses, is the home still fundamentally considered to be her domain and domestic responsibility? It is also said that a woman’s work is never done, but within the same context, what exactly is a woman’s work? My research project, which asks for perspectives on the relationship between women and domesticity to be embroidered onto a duster, aims to begin to answer these questions.

Where it all began
My recent MA study researched the domestic origins of Fairy Tales. These ever adapting stories have often acted an indicator of the moral and social compass of the time; through our almost unconscious recognition of them in speech, popular culture and contemporary narratives they are responsible for shaping many of our expectations of love, sex, marriage and life in the home (Orenstein, 11). Back in the days when stories were told orally and the Brothers Grimm and Charles Perrault had yet to adapt these tales towards a more patriarchal focus, women told each other these stories to help make sense of the world around them.

In From the Beast to the Blond, when discussing the plight of women, Marina Warner writes that: ‘the matter of fairy tale reflects ... lived experience, with a slant towards the tribulations of women,’ then further credits fairy tales as ‘a historical source, or a fantasy of origin [that] gains credibility as a witness record of lives lived, of characters known’ (Warner xix). The telling of tales provided an opportunity for women to articulate their experiences
with wit and imagination. The staying power of these stories reflects the continuing relevance of their origins and the pleasure experienced through a common understanding of what it means to be a woman, both then and now. Fairy tales reflect a shared experience and imagine fantastic strategies for coping and winning.

For the majority of women these tales would have been told while they worked: cooking, cleaning, child rearing and in many instances running a business from home as well. As a working Mother I can relate to this; the creation of my artwork during the MA mirrored this process and it still does today. I make my art on the train on my way to work, whilst my daughter plays in the park and whilst the potatoes boil. In the absence of a community to share stories with, I write poetry instead.

The need for stitching
In 20,000 Years of Women’s Work Elizabeth Barber argues that working with thread: spinning, weaving, sewing etc, historically became a women’s primary means of earning money out of practicality and necessity. ‘The compatibility of this pursuit with the demands of child care’ (Barber, 30) was crucial; it can be easily taken up and put down again, is by nature repetitive, portable and does not require complete concentration to complete. It is also as task that can be shared and doubtless bound countless communities of women together.

The feminine link to embroidery is strong, in The Subversive Stitch Rozita Parker describes how it ‘has provided a source of pleasure and power for women, while being indissolubly linked to their powerlessness’ (Parker 11). From the 16th and 17th centuries when it was expected of girls as much as eating or sleeping, through the 18th where it became a past time for the rich, into the 19th century where it was linked to the home and into the 20th and 21st century where women have claimed it for both art and leisure; this skill unmistakably visualises the feminine.

From this legacy I drew from skills passed down to me in the home by both my Mother and Grandmother and worked with thread and with cloth to make my art; consequently the idea of embroidering dusters was born.

Promises & Expectations
As part of the practical element of my MA I created a set of 7 hand-embroidered dusters; acting as a metaphor for domesticity they comment upon the expectations of women within a domestic environment. The context of the popular fairy tale phrases, for example: Once Upon a Time or Happily Ever After, juxtaposed with definitions of domesticity, brutality, protectiveness and femininity, questioned the promises told through fairy tales to women and girls. The script font references the ancient nature of these sayings whilst the definitions are designed as concrete poetry in forms related to cloth: an apron, an iron, scissors and a thimble, thus contextualising the content.
**Why Dusters and Red Thread?**
Dusters were selected because they are mundane, unadorned and ignored. I considered tea towels and aprons but these are often displayed and made beautiful. I chose an object that is unacknowledged and kept under the kitchen sink as an aide to visualising the invisibility of domestic tasks. The traditional duster style I selected has a sense of nostalgia and is striking in its vivid yellow with its characteristic red stitched hem; it is pleasurable to embroider too - a reference to the comfort of domesticity. Red thread was chosen to match the hems, and to represent femininity (Gordon122).

Embroidery also has the power to embellish and to make beautiful; for example, embroidered aprons are transformed from a practical garment to one that expresses personality, tradition and fashion. Within my MA project, the embroidered dusters I created, and those created collaboratively through my research, are imbued with new meaning and significance. Through hand-stitched decoration they became more than simply a cloth kept under the sink, they become a voice.

**Working Collaboratively**
The research element of this work, and its development from a personal into a collaborative project, pivots around individual responses to the object and their collective voice, questioning and gathering perspectives on the relationship between women and domesticity. Each duster submission was different and formed from memories and associations unique to each artist. Everyone who took part made art, and was therefore described as an artist although many participants would not have described themselves in this way. Crucially for me I’d lost sight of the practical purpose of the duster and initially wondered why everyone kept referring to cleaning! Working in collaboration reminded me of this and anchored my research. Collaborative working also required me to ‘let go’ of some of my own artistic vision. The ‘rules’, red thread and a yellow duster, were mostly adhered to but the exceptions were actually quite exciting; freedom inspired artistic expression and creativity. Work was accepted from everyone who entered without a screening or selection process. This was important in order to obtain an authentic voice.
These days’ domestic tasks are usually a solitary experience. Although in some cases groups of women who already knew each other met to sew their dusters most collaboration was through the Internet. Moving forward I’d like to run workshops and explore more opportunities for personal interaction and primary research in order that the research is collaborative rather than just participatory.

**Pop Up Exhibitions**

The first pop-up exhibition in February 2015 provided an opportunity for local people to experience the whole collection first-hand and for further discussion. The deadline also prompted a huge final response, within 2-3 weeks the collection grew from 20 to 70 dusters - so it’s not just me that needs a deadline!

The experience of hanging the exhibition mirrored domesticity too. Myself and two other women, with children at our feet, transformed a bare studio into somewhere bright and appealing, more like a home. It felt like pegging washing on the line and once again the legacy of our foremother’s was apparent.
Common Experiences and Perspectives
Over 70 dusters were submitted for the February exhibition, accompanied in most cases by a short supporting statement, which were published and made available to read along with the dusters. This information forms the basis of my research. All of the submissions are unique, but some common themes emerged as discussed in the selection below:

Rage
A shared sense of anger at having to do the cleaning was frequently expressed, particularly so with these two dusters. Both women resented the fact the job was assumed to be their responsibility and not that of other family members. Patterns of behaviour were also evident; they pretended not to care but eventually conceded and cleaned under a cloud of burning anger.

![Fig.4: Amy Mallett & Penelope Chong, 2015](image-url)
Celebration
Joyful acknowledgement of domesticity: the pink feathers are simply fun and bright. Interestingly feather dusting is a mundane task presented as enjoyable, where as the putting on the ‘pinny’ suggests chores that might be considered more pleasurable, such as baking. Another duster, featuring a jar of homemade marmalade, suggested that domesticity was a pleasure although she admitted to employing a cleaner. These dusters pose the question: what defines domesticity? For some it is boring chores, for others a pleasurable pastime. Personal experience inevitably affects the perspective.

Fig. 5: Ana Valls & Judith Berill, 2015

Links to the home as a place of stability and safety
Domesticity is inextricably linked to the home, as reflected in these responses. The duster provided a platform for both sentimental reflection and recognition of the physical anchoring that a home can provide.

Fig. 6: Cate Hursthouse & Michelle Pannell
**Duty and expectation**
Keeping up appearances: pride in the home or pressure to conform and perform? The spiraling text could suggest a whirlwind of action or a falling down, surrounded by rays of cleaned brightness. Requests for a magic wand might solve the problem in a fairy tale land, but for some a woman’s place remains firmly behind the front door.

![Fig. 7: Susan Fynes & Angela Paine, 2015](image1)

**Duty (with reference to modern day living)**
The modern day magic wand: Press the right buttons and technology will do it all for you. The humorous play on words, referencing a rather male PlayStation game involving warfare also implies a battle between ‘tea and buffet parties’ and ‘domestic help’, an amusing scenario that questions the role of domesticity in modern day life.

![Fig. 8: Jackie Batey, 2015](image2)
**Rebellious nonchalance**

Another very common theme: traditional values of pride in the home are replaced by an attitude of rebelliousness. “Why should I clean? What is cleaning? I don’t do it and I don’t care!” I would question just how dirty these peoples houses actually are, is it more a case of pretending that domesticity is not for them because it doesn’t sit comfortably with their feminist values? They also imply a sense that domestic chores are imposed on them, rather than them being a something they’d choose to do for their own state of mind or personal pleasure in a clean home.

![Image of blanket with text: Dusting... and Ironing is Pants]  
*Fig. 9: Ashley Scrase & Jill Tattersall, 2015.*
Reminiscing
Contradictory perspectives on nostalgia: the duster ‘memory’ refers to the embroiderers Mother who found domesticity transformed from a perceived pleasure (caring for and feeding her family, making jam etc) into a bind when her husband developed dementia and she became housebound as his care-giver. In contrast the other duster reveals a fond sense of repetitiveness, a legacy from her mother. Interestingly all the participants cited their Mother as their most important domestic influence.

Fig. 10: Christine Chester & Lynn Dale

Contradictions
These two pieces of work are from the same lady. The first duster reflects upon a group discussion where the invisibility and thanklessness of domestic tasks was discussed at length. Upon further contemplation she stitched another duster within which domesticity has transformed into invisible threads that hold the family together. This transformation was not uncommon although it more usually manifested itself before the dusters was created. It suggests either need to conform within group discussions where feminist ideals were generally held in high regard and ‘rebellious nonchalance’ reigned supreme, or perhaps contemplative time spent with the object supported more reflective and positive thinking.

Fig. 11: Catherine Finn, 2015
Invisibility

Invisibility was a word that came up frequently. Many women said that they just ‘got on with it’ [the domestic chores] but consequently felt that their efforts were taken for granted and went largely unnoticed. ‘Domestic bliss’ is a phrase often banded about by the media, rooted in post-war ideals that sought to send women back into the home after the war (see Fig. 12).

Fig. 12: Housewife Magazine cover, February 1949. Courtesy of MODA.

Over sixty years on these traditional expectations still stand and expectations are high; according to popular press a woman must be a ‘domestic goddess’, successful in her career, a great mother and a whore in the bedroom. Nigella Lawson’s famous cookbook of the same name, with her accompanying media persona, says it all. Recent press reports however imply that even she may be struggling to sit on this particular pedestal, as written by Judith Woods (The Daily Telegraph, 2013): ‘She is the Domestic Goddess who sold us a dream of sensuous pleasure, of home and hearth hedonism, now said to have feet of clay’.

Fig. 13: Vanessa Marr, Invisible Hands, 2015.
Poetry
When seeking out the words to express one-self, poetry can provide these. Several women selected poems, which was an interesting link to my own practice as I wrote poetry whilst embroidering my original dusters. The ‘dust if you must’ poem is a popular, text giving permission to leave the chores for more pleasurable tasks. The other quote is a more reflective perspective on an old text; it’s embroiderer liked the idea that whilst the poet was busy philosophizing his wife was getting on with more practical tasks!

Fig. 14: Alison Smith & Karen Morgan, 2015.

Telling a story
The dusters also acted as a catalyst for reflection and storytelling upon the object, not just surrounding it. This artist tells of her domestic experiences from 1940 to 2015, describing a positive change that has transformed domesticity into a pleasure. It’s worth noting that all the dusters tell a story of sorts.

Fig. 15: Kate Chapman, 2015.
Family experiences
A Mother and Daughter paired response, telling the tale of the husband, or Father’s, missing underpants. Although presented humorously it apparently resulted in quite an argument! Responsibility for items that have been laundered often falls to the one who washes them, rather than the owner of the clothes – many other women related to this.

Collaborative artistic responses
A husband and wife, who are both conceptual artists, submitted this pair of dusters. The husband was the only man to submit and apparently takes more domestic responsibility than his wife; he felt like he was constantly stitching up the holes in their domestic responsibilities, she felt such tasks were best kept to a minimum. Overwhelming their interaction was humorous but gave insight into a more equal domestic relationship. This contradicted the majority, although not all, other responses and I questioned whether the dusters provided sounding board for those who felt disgruntled. Did those who were not unhappy lack the need for a voice?
Response that includes the artist’s own artistic methodology and practice
This artist is a quilter, but was exploring mark-making by recording her movements with a
drawing machine that recorded her movements. The marks here were made as she cleaned
the house. Almost all responses from practicing artists involved exploration of the medium
and methods for exploring it that were not shared by the other ‘non-artist’ participants.
Whilst an element of subjectivity is inevitable, I am a woman after all; art for arts sake in this
context adds another layer to the research but one that is more ambiguous and harder to
interpret.

Fig. 18: Sarah Wells, 2015

Spoken v embroidered responses
I’ve had, and am still having, many conversations about domesticity in response to this
project. I’ve noticed that the thoughtful and time consuming process of embroidery has
prompted reflective thinking and careful selection of words from the participants that have
not been so apparent in the accompanying conversations. The process of embroidery
prompts something deeper and more insightful, it forms a relationship with the past and
consequently the object is transformed into a catalyst for expression. Just as samplers have
traditionally expressed the views of the time, but also subversively rebellious texts (Parker
12), so embroidery continues as a medium for expression through words and context.

Many participants initially said they couldn’t sew and took some encouragement to start.
Interestingly just 50 years ago most women made their own clothes so this indicates a
marked difference in the domestic skills of a modern day women. In fact most people could
sew, they simply lacked confidence and reassurance that it wasn’t the skill, rather the
application, which mattered in this project. The duster ‘I simply don’t have time for this’ (Fig.
19) was stitched quickly in wool rather than embroidery silk, it’s creator stating that she felt
the latter would take too long. The embroidered object became a visual communication of
her busy lifestyle – interaction with the duster was both chore and art, it fell into the same
category of haste through necessity. Similarly the duster ‘I nearly fini….’ (Fig. 20) reflects a
lack of time to complete domestic tasks.
An embroidered response to the home

Each of the dusters has been created in the home, within a context unique to each creator. These different circumstances provide insight into the domestic expectations, values and legacies that inform the home life of over 70 different women, presented with with humour and honesty. Admittedly participation to date has been largely middle aged (aged 30-60) and middle class, but my hope for the project as it grows is to make this broader, opening opportunities for comparisons across class, race, sexuality and age, through interactive workshops and exhibitions.

Fairy tales suggest contradictory perspectives on domesticity; Cinderella is punished with endless domestic chores whilst Snow White finds happiness and fulfilment keeping house for the male dwarfs (The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm). Collectively this collection of embroidered dusters also tells tales full of contradiction; contrasting feelings of resentment and fulfillment compete for the power to choose rather than be assumed into a domestic role. The definition of domesticity is also challenged; to some it means cleaning but to others it about making jam, the former is an expectation and the latter a choice, shop-bought jam being readily available and affordable in the modern post-war domestic landscape. It is evident that domestic roles are changing, but the challenge of juggling home, work and child rearing remains a hot female topic (Hanauer xix).

Overwhelmingly the perspectives of the women involved in this project so far indicate that the primary domestic role is assumed to theirs, with offers of ‘help’ sometimes offered rather than a shared responsibility. Others in the household take on cooking or childcare more willingly but the daily grind of keeping the house clean and tidy, often alongside a paid job, still seems to be a woman’s role. Participants felt satisfaction in a clean house, burning resentment, or utter boredom, but the glass ceiling of domestic tasks prevails; a woman’s work is truly never done and amongst the majority of these 70 or so women at least, her ‘work’ includes that which is considered domestic. In terms of my research, and in the matter of domestic equality in the home, there is much still to be done (fig.21).
Bibliography:


