

Fibre and Form

Anna Ray

Large print guide

**Please leave in the gallery
for other visitors to use.**

Wall to right of entrance

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UH Arts + Culture and St Albans Museum + Gallery are delighted to present the first major survey exhibition of sculptural textile work by acclaimed artist Anna Ray.

Working from a studio in Hertfordshire, Anna Ray has an impressive international commissioning and exhibition record with her stitched artwork. This solo exhibition focuses on Ray's large-scale sculptural wall pieces created over the past 20 years, and features two newly commissioned works entitled *Mesh* and *Rosette*, which have been fabricated during the pandemic. Also displayed are Ray's studio experiments and sketches which provide a fascinating insight into the artist's practice.

Ray's work is highly accessible and appealing, while also pioneering within the field of art textiles and soft sculpture. Her assemblages are full of joy and life – their palette bright and varied, their surface rich and highly tactile. The artist's practice

is a perpetual experimentation – consistently exploring and pushing the boundaries of the conventions of textile art – across form, scale and assembly. She sees the actions of her body as part of the work; the process of building and dismantling components becoming a form of performance.

“I want my pieces to float, gather or fall naturally – to be themselves, to become exquisite. The qualities – weight, strength, weakness, drape – of the artwork as it develops tend to lead the way in terms of final install, so there is an element of problem solving until the very end of the process.”

This ambitious exhibition gives us glimpses into Ray’s creative process from initial experiments to epic soft sculptures, and offers a unique opportunity to unite and showcase her extraordinary body of work in a new context. The exhibition is extended through an accompanying text by Ann Coxon, Curator of International Art at Tate Modern.

Curated by Inna Allen and Annabel Lucas, UH Arts + Culture

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Inside the Weston Gallery - starting from the cases on the left as you enter.

***Zigzag*, 2006**

Gouache on Fabriano paper

***Crescent*, 2007**

Gouache on Fabriano paper

***Straw*, 2006**

Gouache on Fabriano paper

***Coil*, 2007**

Ink on Fabriano paper

These intricate gouache and ink paintings reference Ray's sculptural textile works. It is curious to see the familiar forms in flat two-dimensional imagery – they offer surprising new readings of the much larger-scale physical pieces, and the shift in scale and medium provides a wider understanding of Ray's oeuvre.

“I have always adored pattern, its potential for movement and its unique power to hold your attention visually and psychologically. I can create

patterns with a slow, delicate, shifting energy or conversely, construct over-the-top, energetic repeats in high and clashing colours.

It is fascinating to look back on this series, as I can see how certain structures or arrangements have materialised in different pieces over time. The hanging threads of *Offcut-ends* closely resemble the multi-coloured striped lines in the ink drawing *Coil*. And the whimsical *Straw* has an overall effect reminiscent of the triangular nature and soft geometry of my new piece *Mesh*".

Along the far wall from left to right.

***Rosette*, 2021**

**Machine and hand stitch, cotton, acrylic,
polyester**

Supported using public funding by the National Lottery through Arts Council England.

The newly commissioned *Rosette* is a bold, brightly painted textile wall piece inspired by Ray's Huguenot ancestors, the Hoinvilles, who were silk weavers and manufacturers of fancy trimmings (Passementerie) in Spitalfields during the 1700-1800s. One of the first to be named refugees, the Huguenots supported themselves by working for the Master Weavers, and by selling handmade embellishments for clothing on the side.

“My ancestors specialised in making tassels, rosettes, pompons, braid, cord and fringing, for clothing and soft furnishings. *Rosette* appears like a magnified piece of Passementerie, it is made up of a collection of flower-like forms that nestle together on the wall, as if a work in progress from a skilled artisan's dwelling.

I have embellished the rosettes with hand-painted ribbons cut from the same cloth. I often manipulate white fabric to explore form and structure before considering the colour and pattern for the surface. This piece has remained predominantly white because I was so taken by the emotional lightness that I drew from it, seen set against the white wall of the studio. It's like the feeling you get with the first glimpses of spring, the sign of a new beginning."

***Mesh*, 2020**

Machine and hand stitch, cotton, acrylic, polyester

Supported using public funding by the National Lottery through Arts Council England.

In contrast to the other works in the exhibition, *Mesh* is a more subdued monochrome structure. Made especially for this exhibition, its component parts are laced imaginatively together, inspired by the boning of clothing from the 1700s. The sculptural elements are slotted in place, stacked and resting, building up within the space. The complex surface is created through a hand-painted and block-printed design which, like *Rosette*, blurs the boundaries between painting and sculpture.

“The V-shaped units of *Mesh* have been hand-stitched into strips which are tied together in situ, forming panels that can be displayed flat, concertinaed or folded into columns. The panels may be opened up and shuttered in myriad ways, like a cage that is opening, or a living skin that has the potential to transform and heal itself. I believe *Mesh* to be a metaphor for our current, constrained situation, and the potential of our eventual release.”

***Bloom (Marguerite)*, 2012**

**Machine and hand stitch, cotton,
polyester, plywood**

***Stripe*, 2014**

**Machine and hand stitch, cotton,
polyester, acrylic paint**

With their organic forms, *Bloom (Marguerite)* and *Stripe* are inspired by flowers and plants in the garden just outside Ray's studio which has become influential for the artist's practice.

"I drift outside to observe, then find myself tending to the plants before going back into the studio to work with other materials. The imagery of the studio and the garden inevitably blend.

In a garden one has to take quite dramatic steps to tame plants. The physical, transformative process of gardening is very close to the constructive and deconstructive aspects of producing my work: making and breaking, repositioning, letting things go wild, wrestling entanglements. I find both processes instinctive and challenging and the results are always surprising."

In the cases at the far end of the gallery

A selection of works and test pieces from the studio including collaborations and early work, 1994–2021, Mixed media

This collection of images and artefacts from her studio in Hertfordshire offers us a privileged view into Anna Ray's practice and the everyday setting that she surrounds herself with.

Ray studied BA(Hons) and MFA Tapestry at Edinburgh College of Art, under the direction of Maureen Hodge, during 1994–99. Over the last 25 years she has been granted major awards for her work and has exhibited nationally and internationally in both fine art and applied art contexts.

Collaboration has been an important part of Ray's practice – evidenced here particularly in objects numbered 4–8.

01 *Garland*, 2018

02 *Rosette* – ribbons and test colours, 2021

03 Handmade painting tools, 2011

04 *Fleur* with Giuseppe Coco, 2012

05 Loom punch cards – a gift from Zoe Acketts at the Bristol Weaving Mill, 2018

06 *Margate Knot* – Dash + Miller sample on paper, 2016

07 *Margate Knot* – Dash + Miller framed edition, 2017

08 3D woven structures, developed in partnership with Lindsey Waterton Taylor, Hannah Robson and Michelle Stephens in the 3D Weaving Innovation Centre at the University of Leeds, 2021

09 Handmade ribbons for *Ribbon Chain*, 2019

10 *Little Devil*, 2014

11 *Sponge*, 2012

12 Table cover used in the making of *Mesh*, 2020

13 Handmade printing blocks for *Mesh*, 2020

14 *Mesh* drawing, 2002

15 Large sketchbook, 1997-98

16 Loom test piece – commission for Facebook London Offices, 2020

17 Patchwork ball – handmade by my mother, 1976

18 *Grandpa's Boat*, 1998

19 *Barriers*, 1998

20 Small sketchbook, 2011

21 *The Blue Book*, Edinburgh College of Art,
Tapestry Departmentm 1963-2008

22 Table covers used in the making of *Weave*,
2020

23 *Loop* test pieces, 2021/2016

24 *Bang*, 2014

25 Templates for *Ribbon Chain*, 2019, and *Weave*,
Rosette and *Mesh*, 2020

26 *Weave* sketch, 2014

27 *Rein*, 1997

28 *Gilt*, 2016

29 *Seam*, 2020

30 Block prints for *Flamenco*, 2021

31 *Fabrica* test piece, 2021

32 Threads left over from *Fabrica*, 2021

33 *Litmus* test piece, 2021

34 Test piece – Art in Manufacturing, National Festival of Making Season 3 residency at Forbo Flooring, 2019

35 *Patchwork*, 2006

36 *Love Heart*, 1999

37 *Lace*, 2021

38 *Net*, 2017

39 *Weave* test pieces, 2020

40 First woven tapestry – translation from a painting by Pierre Bonnard, 1994

41 *Warp* test piece, 2009

42 *Mound*, 2015

43 *Bedroom*, 1995

Large piece covering entire wall

***Margate Knot*, 2016**

Machine and hand stitch, cotton, polyester

Supported using public funding by the National Lottery through Arts Council England. Thanks to curator Karen Wright and Turner Contemporary.

Ray's vast, seminal wall piece *Margate Knot* takes on the appearance of a pointillist painting, yet on closer inspection this energetic mass of 2,000 multi-coloured sewn elements are tied together to create a three-dimensional 'tapestry'.

Originally produced for the exhibition 'Entangled: Threads & Making' at Turner Contemporary in Margate, Ray created the piece with the support of assistants and volunteers from Margate and the surrounding area. The piece is a development from a previous artwork called *Knot*, created nearly 15 years ago by Ray and inspired by the forms of under-wires from bras and the children's game 'Pick Up Sticks'.

The sixteen colours of *Margate Knot* reference the seaside of Margate. "The red harbour marker posts; the wine coloured and acid green seaweed; the colours of wild flowers growing up chalk cliffs; the brightly painted beach swings; a turquoise plastic ice cream sculpture; the buoys and knotted ropes that decorate the harbour arm."

Internal wall nearest gallery entrance

***Offcut-ends*, 2019**

Aquafil yarn developed by Forbo Flooring, oak, stainless steel

Commissioned by the National Festival of Making and Super Slow Way.

Part of the *Offcut* Series, *Offcut-ends* was created during a three-month residency at Forbo Flooring Systems in Lancashire – a collaboration which enabled Ray to push the boundaries of her textile practice. Ray spent time in the factory and took inspiration from the colours and yarns used in the manufacturer's carpet top cloth. *Offcut-ends* references the systematic, linear arrangement of threads in the changeover and tufting processes.

“Changeover is when the threads are heat-sealed together to tuft continuously from one colour to the next, to produce different coloured top cloths. It was a lovely process to witness as the arrangement of lined-up threads – one colour next to another – created hanging, curved forms.”

The residency was part of 'Art in Manufacturing Season 3', a collaboration between the National Festival of Making and Super Slow Way. 'Art in Manufacturing' is a commissioning programme that places artists in residence with industry.

In the centre of the room (label next to gallery door)

***Bad Blood*, 2001**

Hand stitched patchwork, polyester, stainless steel bells

Bad Blood is an early padded work by Ray, inspired by a hand-stitched patchwork toy ball – with a bell inside – that her mother made for her when she was a child (displayed in the cabinet). Ray has always had a fascination with biology and anatomy, and these themes recur in her body of work. *Bad Blood* resembles a model of a molecular structure and is made up of eleven parts that are rearranged each time it is displayed.

Many of Ray's works are in response to her collections of found objects and her memories of things seen, handled and half-remembered throughout her life – including domestic paraphernalia, natural forms, and miscellaneous objects from her research.

“*Bad Blood* is a reaction to the inside of the body, the magnificent processes of microscopic cells and molecules. The object has distorted, multiplied and

divided, becoming a mass of weighty forms, clotting like blood. The exaggerated scale suggests the incredible energy of particles in the body, natural order and natural chaos, the rational and irrational.”

Internal wall at far end of gallery

Ribbon Chain, 2019

Machine and hand stitch, cotton, polyester

Exhibited for the first time, *Ribbon Chain* is a padded sculpture with soft, candy-coloured, interlocking links. Unlike the traditional idea of narrative tapestries, Ray yet again pushes materials and colour, her technique making them abstract.

The sculpture's complex, entangled arrangement invites the viewer to consider its core structure and dimensions. This versatile piece can be outstretched or compressed, wall-hung or suspended. Hand-made ribbons of coloured cotton wind around sections of the artwork, animating and complicating the surface further. *Ribbon Chain* is in fact one continuous length of linked forms and open coils.

“Some of my assemblages come from the haptic, immediate experience of binding, wrapping, stitching, layering, stuffing and cutting. I often pick up a piece of fabric and simply begin manipulating it and then see where this ‘play’ takes me.”

Panel outside gallery

Fibre and Form is extended through a range of digital and live resources and events, including talks, creative activities and collaborative workshops, such as:

Festive Garland Workshop – 5 Dec 2021
Anna Ray Artist Talk – 10 Feb 2022 Soft
Sculpture Workshop – 13 Mar 2022 Family
Block Printing Workshop – 6 Apr 2022

The exhibition and Anna Ray's artistic practice is further explored in a text by Ann Coxon, Curator of International Art at Tate Modern. You can read the essay [here](#) or purchase a copy for yourself in the gallery.

The exhibition is also complemented by two films displayed here on the screen. *In the studio, where I belong* provides a fascinating opportunity to meet the artist behind the exhibition and to find out more about what inspires her, whilst *Making Mesh* illustrates the working methods involved in the artist's creative process.

Enjoy exploring the materials and activities on the trolley to bring you even closer to Anna Ray's practice and artworks.

For full details on events and further information, please visit stalbanismuseums.org.uk



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