

Ailie Snow

journeys in thought

Michelle Smithard writes: Ailie Snow spent a long weekend with us at Studio Textiles in Wellington recently, teaching a four-day class and hanging an exhibition of her work. It was too good an opportunity to miss to catch up with her and discuss her work and her life as a textile artist. I hope through this column to introduce you to (or re-acquaint you with) this inspirational Auckland textile and book artist.

Within moments of arriving at the studio Ailie asked me what my intentions were for my new space. I was to discover later that 'intention' is important in her life and her work, Ailie being purposeful in what she does and having the right attitude to whatever may or may not happen. Her ability to apply herself to her work becomes apparent as well with a prolific output of journaling, artworks and teaching, all managed around the rest of her life.

Ailie explains "I am both very serious and very light-hearted about my work. I do like to keep myself amused and I put my very best effort into every piece."

Ailie brought an exhibition entitled 'Threshold' to Wellington, featuring her most recent series of six small works. These works capture the coastal landscape at Mitimiti as she experienced it through the hours of a single day from 8am to sunset. Also included in the exhibition were two canvases from Ailie's earlier "Apparent Horizons" series, again inspired by, and an abstraction of, another coastline. Ailie defined the threshold as being the point at which the subconscious becomes the conscious, the merging of the sea with the sky at the horizon, and the merging of Ailie with her surroundings.

The exhibition was completed with a diary piece consisting of one small stitched fragment for every day of the year, and a number of handmade books exploring ideas, relationships and events in Ailie's life. The exhibition was a selection of moments in time, place and thought.

Ailie "feels most 'at home' with [her]self being on the beach or near the sea", and the sea, sky and land are among the recurring themes in her pieces. She also tends to work in series as "this gives me time to really work through an idea, to try several ways of telling my story, to develop a theme, to explore the possibilities."

Ailie described how this process worked in the creation of another earlier series, the popular 'Ladies'. "I was trying to find a way to put figures into my work [when] these shapes appeared, I liked these shapes, saw the possibilities, began to develop them. Very simply at first, [but] over the years they have gradually developed into observations, or comments, on states of being, states that I recognise and understand, and other people seem to as well."

States of being and ideas Ailie "is trying to understand and assimilate from inner work, conversations, reading and writing" are also recurring themes in her pieces. She explores a myriad of ideas and inspirations relating to life, art and the human condition in her many journals. The pages are filled with her thoughts, with the thoughts of others, and her response to both, all accompanied with drawn, painted and collaged imagery. They are a part of her exploration of "the small personal intimate details of a life... journeys in thought, stories of my life."

Words and narrative and the concept of story are favourite and powerful tools for Ailie in her thoughts, and in her creative life. She researches and analyses the words she uses, and loves the words of others which inspire in her a strong sense of imagery and feeling. Words are an important conceptual and visual aspect of Ailie's book art. With titles such as 'Rant', 'Heart Songs' and 'Empty Words' She includes her own words, words of poetry and prose, and song lyrics in the stories of her books.

Ailie developed the passion for handmade books while studying design and creates her books from many materials including cloth, acetate, envelopes, even plaster of paris. The finished pieces may maintain a traditional book form, or fold out from a box, hang on the wall, or stand as a screen. Ailie's intention in her use of materials is often "to use the stuff that most people throw away".

She rejoices in creating something from what others may regard as rubbish; either the tiny off-cuts from the quilters table or "old, worn, used and disintegrating cloth". Both hold a sense of "something gone before, the cloth passing through another person's hands, being a part of their life and work, a story already begun and I'm just continuing it..."

Ailie deliberately chooses the simplest of techniques for creating her fabric assemblages, using variations on running stitch to "suture... the small scraps of cloth together". She loves the process of creating, both the making of the numerous decisions that go into developing a piece and the physical actions of book making, painting, assemblage, and stitch, "I find there is a certain therapeutic aspect in the making of things".

This love of both the process of inspiration and creation is something Ailie freely shares with students in her teaching. Her primary intention in her teaching is to give students a vocabulary and a grammar to explore their own thoughts and stories and to express themselves in their work. For Ailie the vocabulary and grammar she seeks to impart is a combination of both the selected techniques and the all important process of generating and developing inspiration and ideas. For many people attending her classes this can be their first exposure to using words and ideas as well as imagery as the starting point for a piece of creative work.

This insight into her creative process is part of her popularity as a teacher. Through the medium of her classes and the journals and workbooks she brings along, there is a sense of glimpsing into her journey through thoughts - the process of inspiration to execution - a glimpse of the mystical secret of the artist at work in a way rarely seen.

Of course what you see is not the whole story, it cannot be. Ailie quotes Georges Braque when he says. "...there are certain mysteries in my own work which even I don't understand, nor do I try to."

Ailie Snow, like a number of other textile artists, far from resembling the reclusive painter or illusive installation artist, has much in common with the musician or poet who melds a work portfolio as creator, teacher, performer. Viewing Ailie's work, attending her classes, and talking to her prompts your own journey in thought; about your own stories, your own art practice and your own intentions. This is a part of her inspiration and her intention. □