

Exhibition Review of the British Textile Biennial, Blackburn (29th September-29th October 2023)

The British Textile Biennial is a charity that takes place every year across East Lancashire. They commission artists to create textile art pieces to present the work within the context of the area. They will present their works in public spaces, galleries, and historic buildings, usually left behind by the textile industry. East Lancashire in the North of England was impacted by the industrial revolution. It was transformed from a quiet countryside into wealthy cotton mill towns, with Blackburn being the most successful. East Lancashire, being a major textile production hub, had a worldwide impact. This industry was a huge booming area that was around 200 years, that left an enormous impact on East Lancashire that now has almost disappeared (British Textile Biennial, 2023). For example, in Burnley it has one of the last surviving cotton mills called the Queen Street Mill, with over a 1000 working looms. It had opened its doors in 1894. Now this mill is a treasured part of the local and regional history (Wilkinson, 2016). About 10% of the manufacturing labour was employed by the British Textile industry until as recently as 1960s (Humphrys, 1984). With the first cotton factory for ring spinning was in Lancashire that was opened in 1877 called the New Ladyhouse Cotton Spinning (Toms, 1998).

The 2023 Biennial's statement explored the idea of a more sustainable relationship we could have with our land, people, and clothing. The exhibition is presented across towns of East Lancashire including Blackburn, Accrington, Burnley, and Barrowford. The exhibition explores the traces of the routes of fibres and different fabrics from the past to

present across the world to and from Northeast Lancashire. Following the journey of cloth spun and woven on the Pennine moors to the current fast fashion sold in the high streets (British Textile Biennial, 2023).

In Blackburn, this year there were six venues in the town centre. These were Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery, The Exchange, The Crypt, Blackburn Cathedral, Prism Contemporary, Tony's Ballroom and Northgate. At most of these venues it presents artworks by two or more artists. This exhibition review will explore some of the key exhibitions in Blackburn. The first Exhibition is in the Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery, called *The Penistone Cloth* (2023). This exhibition is about the story of the cloth. This is a small piece cheap woollen cloth dyed with indigo. It is one of the only surviving examples of cloth made in Britain with a link to the enslaved people in the Americas. This cloth was supplied to a slave owner in England as a sample of material he had purchased. This exhibition goes through the timeline of the Penistone cloth and its relation to slavery, from 1698 to 1865. The timeline includes the end of Royal African Company Monopoly, South Carolina Negro Act, The Penistone Cloth, Emancipation in British Empire and The Lancashire Cotton Famine. For example, The Lancashire Cotton Famine in 186 has had a lot of impact to the towns of Lancashire, with unemployment and poverty, due to the Civil War in America. The civil war was about ending slavery as there were disputes between the United States of America and the Confederate States of America. This war in America led to them cutting-off the cotton supplies to Lancashire that they relied on for their cotton industry to grow. This was slave-grown cotton. This meant that exports of cotton to Lancashire dried up, leaving thousands of people without jobs, plunging them into hunger and poverty. Although many of the textile workers were in a poor situation, they continued to stand in solidarity with enslaved people. It caused many towns like Blackburn in East Lancashire to struggle economically till this day.

Global Threads, Penistone (2023) put in the white painted wood panelling around the room, with the Penistone cloth itself in the middle of the room. This was suggestive of colonial design, which connects to the story of the cloth. Above on the ceiling, there are panelling is a projection made by Illuminos, an animation of the timeline and themes of the complex histories of the Penistone cloth. The installation was designed by MadebyMason and the historic research was done by the Global Threads Research Team. Overall, this exhibition has achieved well to responding to this year's Textile Biennial statement informing the audience the fabric tracing its routes from the Americas to Lancashire.

The next exhibition in the British Textile Biennial in Blackburn is the *Dead White Man (Effigies)* (2023) by an artist called Jeremy Hutchison. For his exhibition he has created a series of sculptures, effigies, billboards, performances, and workshops. His projects are all about exploring the global trade in second-hand clothes. He resurrected our societies discarded clothes as a series of fashion zombies pointing out consumer excess. Hutchison wants to highlight how vast majority of clothes end up in toxic mountain landfills in African Countries like Ghana. He also highlights fashion industries myths of charity and sustainability (British Biennial, 2023).



Figure 1: *Image of Effigies of Dead White Man* (2023)

Figure 2: *Clothing Zombie* (2023) Tony's Ballroom

For the first part of his exhibition, throughout summer, Hutchison hosted a series of workshops taking place in local schools, where they transformed bales of clothes into hundreds of miniature zombies. Those effigies were placed in an empty shop, putting them all on display. The walls and the floor were painted white to have the effigies stand out as the focal point. The next part of the exhibition is in Tony's Ballroom to accompany the project. In the ballroom, it was stripped back to its bare foundation, and dark lighting. Placed in the room, were life size of these effigies, each one lit up by a spotlight. A potential flaw for this is the location of the exhibition is not noticeably clear. Visitors would easily walk past it, not knowing where exactly it is. So, a helpful solution to this would be better signage to the location of the exhibition. This creates a haunting sense of horror, reminding the audience the consequences of fashion, as the audience is forced to walk around each one. It conveys this horror by having these figurines having many layers of clothes, some of them colourful. In the next room, there was film showing Hutchison dressed as a fashion zombie coming out of piles. This exhibition successfully highlights to the audience the overconsumption of fast fashion.



Figure 3: *Dead White Man Exhibition* (2023) Tony's Ballroom

The following exhibition is called *Return to Sender* which a film presented by the Nest Collective from Nairobi. It has similar themes of fast fashion as Hutchisons' work, and it is presented at The Exchange. The exchange is a historic building in the town centre of Blackburn that was a former cotton exchange of local cloth, it opened in 1865. Then in 1924 it opened as a cinema until 2005, laying empty until 2015 (Jacobs, 2019). Having the exhibition held in a former cotton building helps with connecting with the contextual history

of cotton in Blackburn. Although this would have been better achieved, if there was an information card talking about the building's history. By doing so it would give the audience a better understanding of why this exhibition was chosen to be put in The Exchange. Additionally, in the building it was quite dusty, which can help to add to the experience, of those who had to work in a dusty environment. Unfortunately, there are few potential flaws like not being wheelchair friendly, with a small lift and steep stairs. This would of course exclude a lot of people who would like to see this exhibition.

They made the decision to house this film in a house-like structure made from bales of used clothes. These sorts of bales are known as 'Mitumba' from Kenya, which are discarded by America and Europe in huge quantities. Quite often over 40% of these that are not sold in markets end up in landfills, causing pollution to the environment. To pull the audience further into the story and the experience of this exhibition, it is accompanied by a soundtrack, that share sounds and stories recorded at different markets in Nairobi (British Textile Biennial, 2023). This an effective way of informing the audience who are interested in the consequences of fast fashion and how it effects the people who then must deal with the clothes sent to their country from the west.

The next key exhibition is Blackburn is in the Crypt of the Blackburn Cathedral. Inside there are two exhibitions one is called *Material Memory* (2023) and *Common Threads* (2023) by Alice Kettle. The first part of the exhibition is in the main part of the Crypt is Material Memory. This exhibition is a display of different textile fabrics, mainly clothing from the past. They are loaned by families alongside with stories to tell about its history. This exhibition is about challenging the throw away items of culture of our current times. This demonstrates the human desire of holding and caring deeply for items we hold dear. Despite the fact we often buy into fast fashion and often throw them away without second thoughts. Each garment holds our memories within its threads (British Biennial, 2023). Many of the items will have been passed down through several generations. Several of the items also came

from across Uk, for example, Edinburgh, Russia, and Lancaster. Overall, this exhibition was made as a collaboration people for people to see and enjoy. They also did a fantastic job with telling people's stories and what each item means to them.

The exhibition itself had the items, put running down alongside the walls of the crypt, leaving the middle area empty to walk down, warm lighting. At the end of it, in the middle was textile garments of football t-shirts. This is a good exhibition for those who are interested in fashion history of local people of Blackburn. One of the good aspects with how the head of this project decided to work the exhibition with the structure of the crypt. The walls of the crypt although bare were not covered up, as to not take away from the beauty. It also adds that little bit of history that goes on well with the exhibition.



Figure 4: *Material Memory* (2023) The Crypt Blackburn Cathedral

Following along into a smaller well-lit room is the exhibition *Common Threads* (2023) by Alice Kettle. This exhibition is about nurturing a conversation about borders and cultures through the art of embroidery. She did this by coming together women from Pakistan other from different South Asian countries living in East Lancashire. They were living from Burnley, Nelson, and Karachi. The women created a rich tapestry of shared experiences, through which stories, landscapes and environments are vividly conveyed (British Biennial, 2023).

This exhibition displayed the embroidery artworks hung on bars along the walls of the crypt creating a pathway. The walls were stripped bare and left blank, some of them had a white canvas on them. The bricks were left exposed. And the flooring was plain hard flooring. Having the walls stripped of everything, keeps the artworks as the sole focal point, without any distractions. Since, most of the collaborations were done by women who live in Burnley and Nelson, this raises the question of why is this exhibition located in Blackburn instead of Burnley? If it were located more local like Burnley or Nelson where these women live, potentially more people would be able to visit, and it would fit more with the context of the location.

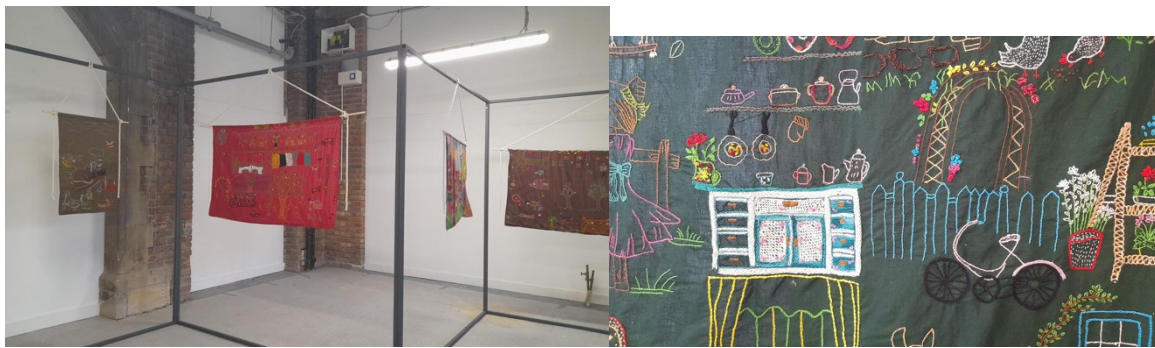


Figure 5: *Common Threads* (2023) The Crypt Blackburn Cathedral

Overall, the British Textile Biennial in Blackburn have done a wonderful job in achieving their goal. Their goal of using public, and historic places within the context of the area. The biennial this year has achieved their goal of exhibitions talking about the idea of a more sustainable relationship we could have with our land, people, and clothing. The exhibitions achieved this by many of them having subjects of sustainability in fashion, environment and relationships between people and their land and their memorable items.

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Images are all taken by Greta Varpiotaite.