

'One Island Two Names', 2020, earth pigments on vintage hemp:
Capturing the atmosphere and colours of Lewis and Harris in the
Outer Hebrides - the remote empty landscape of barren peat bogs
that has inspired the unique Harris Tweed yarns



designer profile

SUSIE KOREN

Anne Williams talks to textile artist Susie Koren about her
wonderful landscape-inspired artworks...



Solitary walking is fundamental to textile artist Susie Koren's creativity. Not only does it provide a tangible link to the landscape – a recurring theme in her work – but it stills her mind. “Quietness and seclusion are core to my textile practice. By walking alone before starting work, I take that focus into the studio,” she remarks. Although she doesn't live at the coast, it was a constant presence in her childhood – her father was in the Navy – and continues to exert a strong pull. Indeed, many of her latest pieces have been influenced by unaccompanied walks she has taken along [the](#) shoreline. Recently, a trip to the wild and dramatic Isles of Lewis and Harris in the Outer [Hebrides informed](#) several ‘Land Sea Sky’ works.

“The blurred horizontal lines where the rugged cliffs and deserted windswept beaches meet the ebb and flow of the sea, which merges with the vastness of the sky, are never straight and are perpetually moving. It's the light, atmosphere and emptiness I experience that I strive to capture in my work,” Susie tells us.

DEVELOPING SKILLS

Susie has been a maker for as long as she can remember, gravitating towards textiles at a young age. “My mother is a keen embroiderer, though her efforts at teaching me were unsuccessful. But I remember making dolls clothes and hexagon patches from my maternal grandmother's fabric scraps,” she says. However, her first introduction to quilts was in her teens, when the family lived on the east coast of the United States and visited an Amish settlement. “I wasn't aware of the significance at the time, but I just adored the quilts,” Susie recalls.

It was later, in a mid-career break to raise her young children, that Susie learnt to make

quilts herself. She says, “I realised this was my opportunity to learn to sew properly. I worked as an interior designer, so I wasn't interested in making soft-furnishings. But those Amish quilts must have lodged somewhere as, somewhat rashly, I signed up for the two-year City & Guilds (C&G) Certificate course in Patchwork and Quilting”. Her only experience of patchwork prior to this was a one-day workshop on making an Ohio Star block. “My C&G tutor, Lee Brown, had the patience of a saint as she had an absolute beginner on her hands with me,” Susie laughs. “But I loved it and went on to do the two-year Diploma course with Lee as well.”

As part of the Certificate course, students have to put together a portfolio of samples. An excellent grounding in basic quilt-making skills, it is also an ideal way to find out likes and dislikes, [and](#) Susie discovered her love of hand-stitching. “[I](#) [use](#) myself in the slow, absorbing process of [hand-stitching,](#)” she says.

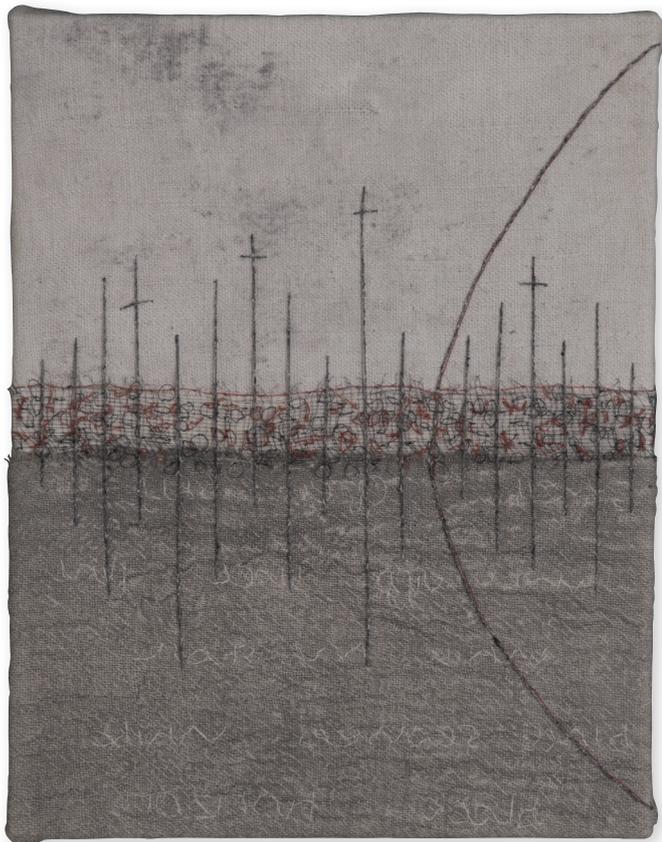
During her Diploma course, which aims to advance students' talents, Susie dabbled with surface design and recognised its potential for her own work. Following her studies, she joined day-a-month workshops at Committed to Cloth, a studio specialising in teaching surface design processes. Initially, she was so enamoured that she switched to producing art cloth, but soon concluded that single-layer work wasn't for her. Susie says, “I felt the cloth needed something extra, which brought me back to layers and stitch, though not in the form of the three-layer quilts I'd been making previously”.

TIME OUT

Inspired by landscape, Susie always carries a small sketchbook on her walks in which to set down her observations. “If you stop to

Above left, ‘Standing Stones’, 2020, natural dyed vintage hemp using birch leaves, and porcelain shavings made by Susie: This work references maps, contour lines and the ancient Calanais Standing Stones on the Isle of Lewis that link well-trodden paths, both visibly and invisibly

Above right, ‘Volets de Luberon’, 2017, [earth](#) pigments on cotton and linen: A response to [my](#) return visit to the ochre quarry in Roussillon in Southern France, which, [back](#) [in](#) 2008, had inspired [my](#) research into using earth pigments in [my](#) work. The house shutters in the village are a paintbox of local earth pigments



draw or paint, you become immersed in your surroundings. I record things like colours, textures and lines that might translate into fabric and stitch. And working in situ means I can match my paints directly with the colours I see – sometimes I even use pigments from the land itself. I do take a few reference photos, but my sketches are the most evocative reminders,” she comments. Susie’s sketchbooks also contain jottings, fabric swatches, leaflets, fragments of found items like small shards of rock – anything that relates to her subject. She also collects larger objects such as shells, stones and driftwood, which are displayed in curated ‘inspiration corners’ around her studio.

Susie undertakes research as well. Ahead of planned trips, like her visit to the Outer Hebrides, she spends hours poring over Ordnance Survey and satellite maps, familiarising herself with the area’s geography and devising routes for walks she will take. She is also fascinated by a region’s past – who lived there, when, why and how they inhabited the land. Susie says, “Our ancestors left their traces on the landscape, shaping what we see today, which I find intriguing”.

Through thoughtful consideration of all her compiled resources, Susie’s ideas evolve. “As I reflect, so the essence of what a place means to me becomes apparent. This period of quiet contemplation is, in effect, my sampling. The process of making is spontaneous and intuitive,” Susie describes.

CONNECTING WITH THE LANDSCAPE

For some years, Susie has used raw earth pigments in her work, which yield the subtle

muted colour palette she favours. Her discovery of these natural pigments was made on a visit to the village of Roussillon whilst holidaying in Southern France, an area famous for its ochre deposits and quarries. Mining ceased in the 1930s, but visitors can learn about this once-important industry in a museum based in a former factory. There is also an Ochre Conservatory that hosts workshops and sells raw earth pigments. Susie says, “I was captivated and came away with a few pots of regional pigments, convinced I wanted to do something with them in my textile work.”

So that they ‘hold onto’ cloth, pigments have to be mixed with a binder, therefore, Susie’s first task was to find a suitable binding agent. “I struggled to find something that gave pleasing results,” she admits. “Acrylic binders are easy to use but they give the fabric a plastic feel I dislike. Eventually, I found a recipe employing soya milk as a binder. Using an organic agent appealed to me, so I began to experiment”.

Given that the pigments are suspended in the soya milk, Susie was instinctively led towards fine art techniques to get the colour onto her cloth. “Just as you would when painting onto an artist’s canvas, more than one layer of pigment needs to be applied. Blending the colours and letting them dry forms crusty patches of earth on the fabric’s surface, reconnecting my work back to the land. I also love the painterly effect this technique produces,” she says.

The painterliness of her wonderful work is further enhanced by Susie’s use of natural fabrics, especially vintage linen and hemp. Invariably, old cloth has an existing ‘patina’, such as a worn

Above left, ‘Sea Defences II’, 2019, vintage linen: A site-specific work using chalk ground from the cliffs and monoprinted in the rock pools at Birling Gap, East Sussex. The hand-stitching creates texture and text, and references to seaweed, groyne and tide

Above right, ‘End Grain’, 2020, earth pigments on vintage linen: Man meets the sea – a recurring mantra. The groyne march out to sea to protect the coasts from tidal erosion, their weathered end grain exposed to the elements



Above, 'Catenary Boat', 2018, earth pigments on cotton: An ongoing exploration of using a catenary curve - the curve that a hanging chain assumes under its own weight when supported only at its ends

Right, 'Luskentryre Sands', 2020, earth pigments on vintage hemp: This piece was made in response to Susie's retreat on Lewis and Harris in the Outer Hebrides. A sweeping white sandy beach, on the distant horizon the big skies on Harris's west coast with a croft on the distant headland

and uneven areas, patching, fraying, maybe holes or seams, all of which take up the pigment differently, enriching the textural qualities of the surface. "My work isn't about the cloth, but the cloth is inherent to its character. I also like that each old scrap has its own history and that I'm adding to its ongoing story by including it," Susie comments.

Once all her fabrics are painted, compositions are created by collaging smaller pieces onto a background cloth. Often, the basting stitches are left in place, akin to the underlying structure of grid lines on a map. Next, hand-stitching adds another layer of interest. Mainly, cottons in a range of thicknesses are used, but Susie also has a selection of more esoteric threads, such as silk-covered stainless steel, and various tapes which are perfect for couching.

"For me, stitching is drawing in thread. I follow marks, contours and other geological references relating to the landscape. Sometimes, working from the reverse, I also stitch observational words from my sketchbook, giving additional context to the piece. Stitch also forms undulations and wonderful textures, just like you find on the land's surface. The act of stitching is an integral part of it, too. The meditative repetition of the needle going up and down through the cloth gives me a feeling of being at one with the work and what it represents," Susie explains. There is undoubtedly an integrity to Susie's work, with the interconnection between



artist, place, materials and processes clearly evident. Of late, she has taken this forward by stitching her own hand-made porcelain shavings to some of her textile pieces, imparting a fragile, three-dimensional element. Like her pigments, porcelain's ingredients come from the earth, yet another association with the land.

And her latest investigations... using foraged pigments and clay to make her own paints and porcelain. A truly holistic approach to her wonderful unique and personal art. 🌱



Meet the designer

Susie studied interior design at the Chelsea School of Art in the early 1980s and still works as an interior designer. Alongside her design practice she dedicates time to developing her personal textile artwork which is inspired by the landscape. Her work has been published in several books, and she has exhibited and sold in the UK, Europe and the USA. This autumn she has a piece ('Pull of the Moon', see directional) on show in the prestigious 8th European Quilt Triennial exhibition, which opens 10 October 2021 and runs until 16 January 2022 at the Textile Collection Max Berk, Brahmstrasse 8 69118 Heidelberg-Ziegelhausen, Heidelberg, Germany (www.museum.heidelberg.de).

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