

*'Calstock Viaduct, River Tamar Tavistock', 2015, silk, wool and cotton fabrics, textile paint and machine embroidery, 16.5 x 24 cm*

## Threads of Figuration THE TEXTILE ART OF JACQUE WAKELY

Stitchery and machine embroidery are the techniques used by English artist Jacqué Wakely to create evocative images of landscapes redolent of the coasts, hills and dales of the British Isles. Profile by Tim Saunders.

**S**INCE she was a child making clothes for her prized dolls, Jacqué Wakely has fostered a passion for textiles that is now stronger than ever.

Her collection started with a single doll given by her mother and from there it grew to more than 100 mainly Victorian dolls (and five dolls houses; one built with her brother). This further improved her garment making skills. Her dolls boast finely tailored combinations and

petticoats that can't even be seen but Wakely, a member of the Costume Society, knows they are there. It was six years ago when a friend enquired: 'Have you ever tried machine embroidery?' This question brought about a fundamental change of direction for Wakely, who initially dismissed the idea as 'roses around the door' and not for her. However, she approached it from right angles and the first machine embroidered piece she produced was of cliffs in Cornwall.

Gradually, as galleries seemed keen to show her pictures and clients bought them, she was spurred into a new world of creativity. Combining her advanced skills and knowledge of sewing and embroidery techniques Wakely, perhaps uniquely, makes evocative embroidered landscape works. These are produced on her old Swiss made Bernina 801 "Sport" electric sewing machine. 'It's very much non-automatic and reliable,' she says. 'I want to be in charge of what it does. I bought it secondhand from Queen Margaret University when they were selling off old machines. I oil it but don't have it serviced. Machines should be our servants not our masters!'

Wakely changes threads like an artist mixes paints. She has hundreds of fabrics and thousands of rolls of thread. 'I have boxes of different coloured fabrics and a variety

*'Moored at Crinan – "Leader" an old Brixham Trawler', 2013, silk, wool and cotton fabrics, pigment, machine embroidery, 20 x 25 cm*



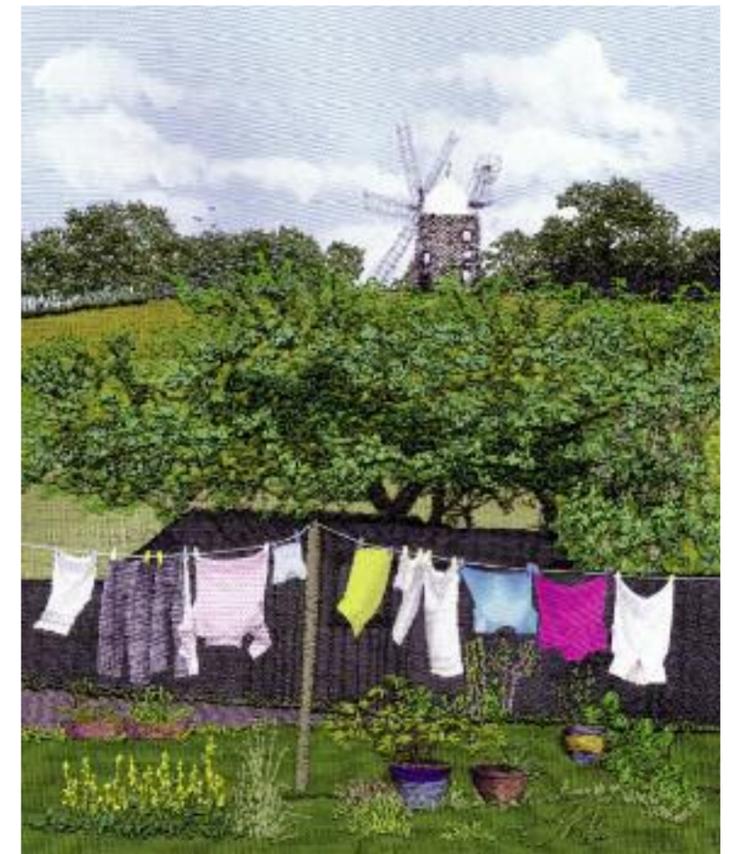
*'Cambria, Masts & Gaffs – "Cambria" Thames Barge', 2012, sail canvas, cotton tape, silk, watercolour, threads and machine embroidery with hand-rigging, 29 x 17.5 cm*

of threads including glittery ones – whatever I can find even from car boot sales. I'm often asked why I don't belong to the Embroiderers Guild and it's because I'm an artist who is also an embroiderer.'

Over the past six years Wakely has produced at least 130 works. With sales stretching across the UK and Europe and as far as Australia, she has even gained a collector. The start of the creative process involves Wakely taking photographs of selected landscapes with a digital camera. 'The location can be anywhere in the British Isles,' she says. 'Next week, for example, I'm off to Cornwall to take photos of tin mine workings and possibly venture underground. I've been going there since the 1960s.' Wakely uses her photographic imagery, layering textiles, textures and threads with machine, hand embroidery and beading to create figurative imagery – redolent of the coasts, hills and dales of Great Britain.

Inspiration comes in various forms, from washing on a clothes line – how a sheet blows in the wind or a rugby kit sits on the line – to a majestic viaduct or pebbles on a beach. 'Sunset and moonlight can affect what I'm thinking because they have a completely different effect on a landscape in terms of light and shadow. I'm receptive to what I am looking at.' Using her own photographs, she will often refer to three or four when producing a piece. 'It can sometimes take years before a photo germinates in my mind and I actually use it; but on other occasions when I can take a photo it is used immediately. I never manipulate these photographs digitally because I simply abhor computers! But I do that on the sewing machine instead. Most of my shots are used as source material.' After making a tracing Wakely starts work. Some colours

*'Sundown over the Isle (Mull, Western Isles)', 2012, silk, silk floss, watercolour, non-woven canvas, machine embroidery, 24 x 16.5 cm*



*'Washing Day at Pittenweem, (Fife, Scotland)', 2014, silks, cotton and viscose fabrics, textile and watercolour paint, machine and hand embroidery, 16.5 x 24 cm*





'Distant Whitby', triptych, 2014, silk fabrics and machine embroidery, each panel worked separately then stretched over boards, 21.5 x 36 cm

can prove extremely difficult to reproduce. 'I've found green a particularly challenging colour to work with,' she says, adding that she has a deep-seated dislike for the colour even though her mother often dressed her in green blouses and jumpers when she was small. 'Although I've no green walls or carpets in my house, I have at least 150 different green threads. A plain green field, or a stand of trees are not just plain green but many different hues and textures according to the season or time of day. I rarely use black because it's a deadening colour but I do use dark colours such as browns. I spend ages assessing and changing threads.'

Where a typical embroiderer might prefer a standard tension on the thread never adjusting the factory setting, Wakely is forever tinkering and altering the settings on

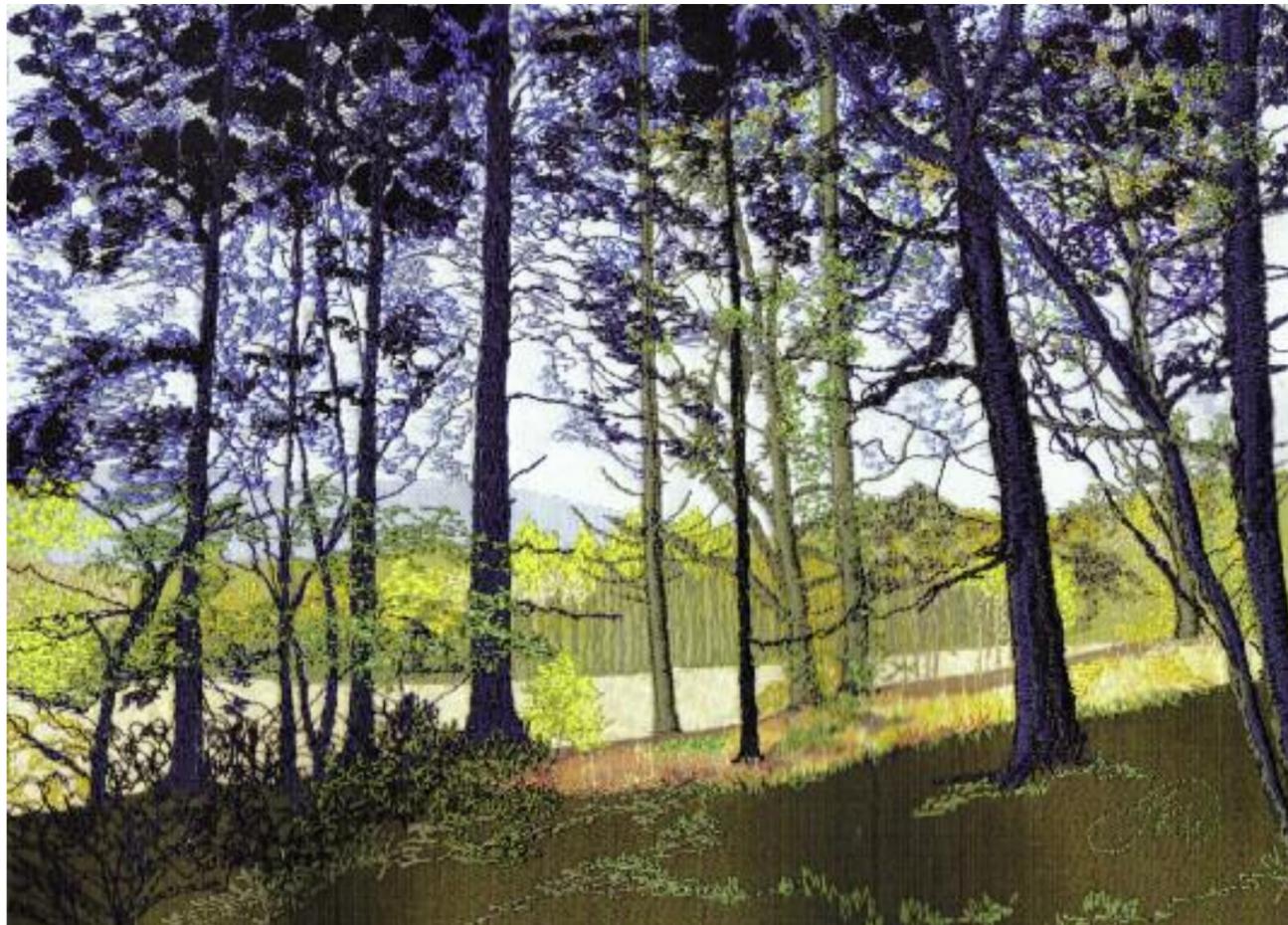


'Summer Swallows', 2014, silk, hand and machine embroidery, textile paint, 16 x 22.5 cm

her sewing machine to achieve the optimum result; in much the same way as a mechanic fine tunes an engine. 'A tight top tension can bring the spool thread to the right side of the picture,' she explains. 'I'm continually changing the tensions on my thread to give a desired effect.' She adds that a crochet thread could not be put through the eye of a needle, so thick yarns are wound onto the spool then worked from the back.

The subject matter of a piece determines the choice of threads used as they work in different ways and give dissimilar results. For instance, she may use perlé or crochet cotton for waves and textile dyes or watercolour paints for skies and clouds together with silk floss.

Arguably, her success has been largely due to hard graft and determination. 'It was only in the final few months



'Approaching Autumn, Eskdale Lake District', 2014, silks, cotton tape, lace and machine embroidery, 16.5 x 23 cm



'Clyde Crows (Scottish Borders)', 2014, various silk and wool fabrics, painted clouds, machine embroidery, 16.5 x 26.5 cm

of my time at grammar school that a dedicated art teacher joined the staff and I discovered that there was a kiln. It was frustrating, but the headmaster was more interested in science,' she recalls. 'That didn't put me off and if anything made me more resolute to pursue a career in art.'

After O-levels, Nottingham-born Wakely studied graphic design at Nottingham College of Art, which secured her a job at John Players, the famous cigarette manufacturer, where she designed lettering and packaging. Eventually she took a Bachelor of Arts degree in textiles and started making wedding dresses for private clients as well as lecturing. Necessity has always been a key motivator for Wakely and it was during this time that she embroidered a sampler showing her house. Samplers were originally schoolroom exercises in the 19th century used as a means of training schoolgirls to cross-stitch and to prepare them for life as housemaids in stately homes. They were often passed down through the generations but her family never had one.

After taking a Postgraduate Certificate in Education in Edinburgh she lectured on degree courses in design, garment construction and performance at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh.

Elected an Associate of the Royal Birmingham Society of Artists (RBSA) in 2010, she became a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts in 2011 and a Full Member of the RBSA in 2012.

#### Tim Saunders

Jacqué Wakely has designed interiors (as well as all the interiors of her dolls houses), costumes for the theatre and lingerie for a well-known brand. She has designed clothes for a boutique and designed and made a range of knitwear inspired by Persian carpet patterns under her own label. She has also designed and made many wedding dresses as well as original clothing for private clients. Additionally, she has trained factory machinists, taught machine knitting and creative embroidery. She still enjoys teaching dressmaking and won the RBSA's Tanner Prize in 2009.



Jacqué Wakely



'Washing Day at Pittenweem (Fife, Scotland)', 2014, silks, cotton and viscose fabrics, machine and hand embroidery, watercolour paint, 16.5 x 24 cm



'Cley Mill (Norfolk)', 2014, silk, wool, watercolour and embroidery, 16.5 x 25 cm