

# Jan Truman

## Dancing with Shadows – Searching for Light

The aim of this paper is to give a maker's perspective on the importance of handmade crafts and their relevance today in a world that seems ever more attracted to the hi-tec option. I will focus on knitting because that has been my specialist subject for over thirty years. I make aerial sculptures and jewellery and belong to the Devon Guild of Craftsmen and the Designer Jewellers Group.

### Introduction

As a maker I frequently question how my work is physically created, but rarely ask myself why the act of making is so important. So when I began my research for this paper I thought it would be fairly straightforward to investigate different elements and motivations to reveal the secrets behind my passion for making. I spent weeks analysing processes and materials only to find the quest more challenging and complex than I had ever imagined. It was like piecing together a giant jigsaw puzzle, but the harder I tried the more a satisfactory conclusion felt tantalisingly just out of reach.

Frustrated and mentally tired by the slow progress, I emailed a draft copy of my text for comment: 'reads well but ends abruptly' came the reply. Clearly some strands were coming together but something was still missing. Key elements had emerged, a fascination with structures, a sense of connectedness, attraction to light, curiosity, materiality, transformation, control of the process. So what else could it be? Thinking perhaps the text would be clearer with visual references, I found suitable photographic images. However, just days before the conference with my twenty-minute script and accompanying PowerPoint presentation ready, I felt totally disconnected and blocked. It was as if the very journey to unlock my secrets had in fact created lock-out. Not a good feeling, in fact counterproductive to the quest ahead, but I needed to move forward so decided to focus deeper on key questions. Why am I doing this? What is my motivation? How can I best communicate my passion for making?

As I meditated on the problem my frozen brain slowly began to relax and the cloud started to lift. I am a maker, connected by my senses, touch, sight, etc., yet I had no physical objects, just words and pictures; no wonder I felt something was missing. The following morning as I selected pieces of knitting to bring along to illustrate my talk more clarity opened up. It was like the scene from the old black and white movie Frankenstein. I had indeed gathered together all the necessary components, words, pictures and physical examples, yet where was the spark, the lightning bolt? The answer to this nagging question, plus further personal insights, continued to emerge over the following days and throughout the conference and finally just before I presented this paper. I therefore hope the reworking of my conclusion will be as insightful to others as it was to me. I am, however, aware that non-makers and academics understand their world from a different perspective to me, so some readers may find it helpful to view my website where other examples including moving image may help communicate important concepts and themes.

### Knitting and connecting

Knitting is about making and connecting loops to produce an amazing array of textiles which people around the world connect with physically, often subconsciously, every day. Commercial applications for knitting are impressive, yet also commonplace. From luxurious fashion fabrics to the humble pan scrubber, designer creations and mass production runs for the cut and sew industry. You only have to look at the promotional accolades in glossy magazines to see how sophisticated textile has become. Companies such as Nike are keen to reveal that the secret of their Free Flyknit trainers is down to its innovative development of the knitted upper sock and unique flexible sole. But that's not all – their website also tells us how incredibly efficient it is to produce as the knitting process has 'little to no waste'.

On a domestic scale, this age-old process also retains its attraction. Globally, millions of people just love hand knitting; it reaches out beyond gender, ethnicity

or religious belief. A quick internet search reveals this pleasurable activity promotes more than just the physical creation of things. Knitting connects people, tapping into human qualities to encourage friendship, education, emotional support, even environmental campaigns. For example: Francis House Children's Hospice in south Manchester have their volunteer 'Charity Chicken Knitters' to help raise funds.

Battersea Dogs & Cats Home created an educational campaign called 'Staffies – they're softer than you think' to help rebrand the Staffordshire Bull Terrier, inviting people to knit their own soft toy dog by downloading the knitting pattern from their website.

Teddies for Charities is not actually a charity at all, but an online knitting pattern which inspires and helps anyone, anywhere, to knit a few teddies for a good cause near to their own heart.

The Women's Institute decided to celebrate the success of their nationwide Craft Club by entering the Guinness Book of World Records for the most people knitting continuously for fifteen minutes.

Knitting Nannas Against Gas (KNAG) in Australia use knitting as a tool for non-violent political activism – their characteristic yellow and black objects appear regularly on social media sites to raise awareness of campaigns such as 'Lock the Gate'.<sup>1</sup>

So, if the physical act of knitting links to a fundamental human desire or need to connect, could interactions with virtual technologies such as blogging, tweeting, or any internet application leave a feeling of emotional disconnect? To investigate, I turn now to question my own practice and reveal how, through the hands and eyes of a maker, I connect with knitting.

## Wire, not wool

As a textile maker you would expect me to be inquisitive about materials and process, which indeed I am, but I am also totally fascinated by all structures, from the macro to micro. including physical and organisational structures. Although I can appreciate many hi-tec innovations, in my working practice I prefer to use a favourite old knitting machine. My vintage Knitmaster probably dates from the early 1970s. Through the act of making and close contact with the materials, I have developed a distinctive style, which gives me scope to express ideas and connect with other people. I cannot remember when I first learnt to hand knit, probably when I was quite

young; I was always surrounded by knitters – Mom, Nan, aunts, friends. It never seemed difficult, just fun, and I loved making clothes. But after training as a knitwear designer in the late 1970s I realised my true passion lay with the structures, not just the garments you could make with them.

I began questioning the materials to see what they could do. My approach was simple: I experimented with many different threads; basically, if it was even remotely knittable I tested it out. Then one day, following a chance conversation with a friend, I tried knitting with a bit of electrical fuse wire. My response was an immediate affinity, I was seduced by its colour and quirky potential, so much so it has remained my medium of choice ever since.

In the mid 1980s my early wire creations were elaborately constructed, like colourful jigsaws. However, their resulting flatness left me craving a more three-dimensional effect. To do this I needed to understand more fully the properties of the metal, I so continued experimenting.

One line of exploration related to size: just how big could I make the sculptures? A simple question, perhaps, but difficult to unlock because the size-to-weight ratio kept getting in the way. Let me explain. Take a small piece of knitted wire and just bend it into a shape with your hands. It is easy because at this scale the material will support itself, but increase the volume of the wire knitting and it soon becomes heavy and floppy. Its materiality has changed, so to retain the curves of a larger flowing form involves the addition of a support structure. The quest to find solutions that satisfied both this physical challenge and the aesthetic sit close to the heart of my creative passion. Today, many of my sculptures feature spiral-like designs made up of swirling lines. I use a process I call my 'ribbon technique', which basically maximises the properties of the materials. The visual effect I am aiming for is fluid and spontaneous, like a frozen moment in time, captured but not trapped because light will always add the playful illusion of transformation and expansion. This is a description of the making process I typically use.

I begin by visualising the overall form to identify its elemental parts. Each unit is designed separately to consider its colour, shape and texture. Then I translate these into numerical patterns or knitting guides, to allow me to knit the various pieces. The next stage is to transform each long ribbon into a 'sculptable' form by hand-lashing stainless steel wires along the edges. Finally, when all the sections

have been processed, I am now ready to sculpt. This is where intuition takes over and my hand and eye partnership synergise. Slowly the piece emerges as I work to balance the swirls, colours and flourishes. Each sculptural creation is like an adventure – fun, challenging, always different.

The time required to create a conceptually new design is never easy to calculate. I build on my knowledge of the materials and special effects I have achieved, but pretty much all of the making process are slow: preparing the wires, knitting, processing the sections, bringing them together and finally the finishing. So what happens when I have spent hours knitting a piece, only to find it has not achieved what I wanted? I used to make quite a lot of these, but with experience the number is far less. Each contributes something to my learning or could become potential units for something else. Nothing is wasted and nothing is ever too precious either! Chopping up and reworking original unfinished piece has always been an acceptable part of my creative process.

Sustaining the passion for making is as much about exploring the potential of the material and ideas as it is about physically making the finished object. Pushing the boundaries of the materials to see what effect it will have on the structure is very exciting. It is like a journey without destination or time frame, but there is a confidence that something interesting will be discovered. Understanding what does work is as valuable as the unexpected disaster.

To capture in words my creative motivation I have selected a sentence from a book called Making. It was published in 2012 by my favourite London design studio, Heatherwick Studios, creators of the memorable London Olympic torch. Thomas Heatherwick, its founder, writes:

almost every project, whether built or not, is an intense mixture of certainty and doubt, breakthroughs and dead ends, tension and hilarity, frustrations and progress.  
(Heatherwick 2012: 8)

Wise words from these creative visionaries, but it is not quite the whole picture because I would also like to add two more ingredients – curiosity and transformation. Changing one thing into another is thrilling. It could be clay into pots, sand into glass or notes into music, but for me it is the transformation a single thread into a cohesive structure. It is not about a quick-fix of simply churning things out, it is about really understanding the materials, then pushing

them to do more. Makers like me are never satisfied by simply reading or looking at the pictures – I need to physically handle the materials. It is the repetitive actions that slowly build my knowledge to achieve ever better results, like training for an athlete

## Unravelling the code

When I write out one of my knitting guides I use a sort of artistic shorthand. All the basic information I need is there, but how I interpret what looks like a series of numbers and marks is a much more intuitive process. You can think of it like a sheet of music to the untrained eye, just a series of lines and squiggles, but inside my maker's head I have the cipher to interpret the code. So, like a conductor, I am not only free to join up this numerical message as I choose, but I can also change my mind at any time and re-interpret it in many different ways. The end result is therefore an intuitive response, not a predetermined consequence. My knitted pieces each contain individuality, because they are created by a real person, not a pre-programmed machine.

So what is it about the making process that I love so much? Is it the feel of the materials or perhaps my sense of control over them?

Touch certainly is important because many of the intricate processes I use can only be achieved by hand, not automatically via the actions of the knitting machine. However, this also brings unwelcome consequences – prolonged actions will physically wear away my finger nails. So I have to self-regulate both discipline and stamina. I think the sense of control I get from making holds a clue to its allure. The repetitive actions are very familiar, even meditative, and I do feel more balanced and in control when I make things. As I work I can lose myself in a private head space, accompanied by music or typical everyday sounds around me. In my workroom I feel calm – it is easy to forget day-to-day negativities when greed and selfishness just slip away.

Having worked with this medium for over twenty-five years, there is one technique that typifies my work. It is a hand process, meditatively slow to produce, known as bead knitting, and I use it to add colour and texture. But why do I find it so captivating? As a maker I rarely question what to me feels so instinctively right. However, when I stop to consider the reasons it is actually pretty basic. Let me start with the materials.

*Enamelled copper wire.* Available in a range of different gauges, and even the very fine is still strong. It is smooth, colourful and easy to use so I can create a structure that is knitted, but not from a conventional yarn such as wool, cotton or even a manmade fibre. This colourful metal has far more intriguing potential.

Glass beads. There are a number of reasons why I am so attracted to these. Yes, it is to do with colour and the textural quality they will give to the surface, but also their affinity with light. That is to say, it is the effect light has on the beads – transformative, magical, unpredictable, spontaneous, changeable. I think of it like my connection with nature, because the effect I am aiming for is transitory or fleeting, like a rainbow – something that just appears then disappears across a darkened sky, nature's smile perhaps? By using glass beads I can attempt to capture this effect. It may only be a momentary dash of light across the surface, or a change in the intensity of the colour, like illuminated stained glass, to highlight all or just part of a section, or perhaps simply the curve of an outline, but this is enough. It leaves me feeling calm, reassured, like watching sunlight sparkle across water.

Choosing the right bead is therefore vital. Some look lovely on the surface but held to the light they appear cold and black, their colourful beauty just a veneer; these will never glow, so it is important to know your beads. I am always searching for the perfect bead, one that combines changeable colour with transparency. Not that my bead collection is lacking. The shelves in my workroom are lined with an inspirational pallet to choose from, all shapes and sizes, from large right through to really tiny. However, colour and texture alone is still not enough, there is something else. It is more fundamental and it goes back to my passion for structures. Look closely at the knitting and you will see that the surface is not just embellished with beads. Like an embroidered afterthought, these beads actually sit between the knitted loops. They form an integral part of it, each needing to be threaded on to the wire first then knitted in one by one – the process is slow. The metal thread now forms a continuous link passing through every bead as it connects the stitches, side by side, row above with row below, each reliant on the next for stability. The resulting textile is strong, yet flexible with a beautiful jewel-like quality to catch the light. This is my reward for the time-consuming, nail-breaking addiction to beads and light.

So is that all? Colour, texture, form? No, not quite. I've talked about light as an agent to transform the colour of the beads, but what else can it do to the sculptures? Why is light so important to me? I pondered the question for quite a while then realised the connection with shadows. Let us consider the difference between an object and a shadow. A shadow is created when an object blocks out the light, but light can transform an object. Shadows are transitory, there but not there. Objects are physical, touchable. When I look closely at my knitted wire structures I am reminded of this. The stitches are physically there, but so are the gaps in between each wire loop, the holes – both inescapably linked, just two different parts of the whole thing. When light falls upon the sculpture it casts a unique shadow, expanding the piece beyond its physical boundary. The shadow not only connects the work to its immediate environment, but also releases it to dance free across any surface, or playfully distort size and shape. For me the shadow acts like a metaphor for the human soul. A unique part of each one of us, but not physically touchable, yet we connect soul to soul via human emotions: love, anger, sadness, etc. If physically making things taps into a fundamental desire to connect, then the act of transforming one thing into another also has the power to connect because it engages our playful minds. Novelty and fun are more attractive to me than fear and hate.

When I am knitting I am responding physically to the materials. It is a very tactile activity. Although the end result takes time to produce I can still connect with other things at the same time, for example listening to music, talking, and watching television. My hands are busy but my mind is free to think and move around. Sensory connections such as touch, sight, sound all work together, they synergise. I do not feel trapped.

By contrast the appeal of invisible connecting, by that I include the internet and social media, is very different. I am excited and impressed by their potential, but need to master a very different code to connect and interact with them. Fundamentally my senses are limited because computerised hardware does not smile, laugh or offer body language clues to help. It is inanimate until activated by someone else, so my fascination can soon melt into frustration. I can feel blocked and vulnerable, sparking negative emotions – fear, anger, even hate. Wanting to master these new skills comes back to time and repeated effort. It is like learning a whole new language: codes, sequences, shortcuts, passwords, etc. I believe it is important to connect with new technologies, but it does not necessarily follow that I understand the

world any better. Yes, it may be fast, but so is running to a trained athlete. This is like comparing talking and communicating – you need time and a genuine desire to hone the skills needed to communicate effectively. However, knowing what you want to achieve or simply believing in the process can open the way for new collaborations. Skill sharing or interacting with new things on this level is very exciting.

By way of summarising ‘Jan the Maker’ I have identified the importance of the complete experiential journey, relying on my senses and emotions to understand and connect with people, materials and light – all vital for me to comprehend the changing world around me. If any of these elements were removed it would feel far less meaningful, like dancing with shadows, searching for light. Having said that I have not yet mentioned balance, and this is paramount because not all elements or senses are required in equal measure. For me one stands out above the rest, it unites everything like a continuous thread. The element in question is light. But why am I so fascinated and drawn to it? As I delve deeper to understand the answer a picture emerges in my mind. I am at a beach near the shoreline. The thrill I get from connecting with light can be likened to that of skimming pebbles across water. Each time the stone touches the surface it creates tiny ripples. The further it bounces the greater the likelihood of merging the circles, but even as the pebble sinks below the surface the expanding ripples continue to move. This analogy reminds me of life and our own fragile connection with it. Continuing to keep the creative energy flowing within me is important because when it is blocked it triggers a sense of negativity. Negativity is the black hole for my soul. I am lost without light. Nature is my cure, my guide and inspiration. Light is like water and love, essential for life.

So to conclude Jan’s passion for making I return to my love of bead knitting, which allows me to play with colour and light, tapping into my positivity to dispel negativity. However, in the process of writing this paper I now realise I also have a hidden quest for ‘synergy’, that unpredictable spontaneous moment of connection which transports me and others to a new level of consciousness – understanding, then beyond. Synergy cannot be forced or scripted but touches the soul as clear as a rainbow against a dark sky.

Synergy adds the missing sparkle that drives my passion for making ... I wonder what your driver for life is?

## Note

1. KNAG are the knitting NANNAS, an Australian activist group against fracking – drilling for coal bed methane and unconventional gas developments. KNAG Knitted giant yellow triangles as a community blockade to protest against areas of their land being selected for drilling. The campaign called ‘Lock the gate’ (LTG) united ordinary grandmothers and friends by enabling them to say no to something they believe is toxic to their people, the land, and the planet as a whole. See: <http://www.knitting-nannas.com/glossary.php>

## References

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