

# THE WARM AND THE COLD

Taking part in a project to help marginalised people find their creative voice inspired Hayley Mills-Styles to tell stories of her own with fabric and thread

I've been experimenting with fabric and thread for as long as I can remember, so when I decided to go to university, it was natural for me to study textiles. I got my degree in textile crafts at The University of Huddersfield, where I explored new ways of working with materials through techniques such as screen printing and machine embroidery. My decision to study at Manchester Metropolitan University for a Masters in textiles changed my life in so many ways. I was at a low point in my studies when this great opportunity came along.

The Warm and the Cold was created by Lois Blackburn and Philip Davenport, who work collaboratively as arthur+martha to help marginalised people find their creative voice. They work with a variety of people including older hospital patients, Holocaust survivors and children with behavioural problems. The project seemed like a great opportunity to push my creative boundaries and work with a group of people who might not engage with textiles as a means of artistic expression.

The project outline was to work with homeless people to create a group quilt inspired by the Ted Hughes poem of the same name. We worked in two venues in Manchester; the Big Issue offices and the Booth Centre.

I was confident that I had the textile skills to help people create the individual quilt blocks, but my previous teaching experience had been aimed at a very different audience. I had taught art and craft workshops to members of Buns & Roses Women's Institute in my hometown of Leeds where people had signed up for the sessions because they wanted to learn a new skill. For this project I had no idea who we would be working with and what they wanted to get from the sessions.

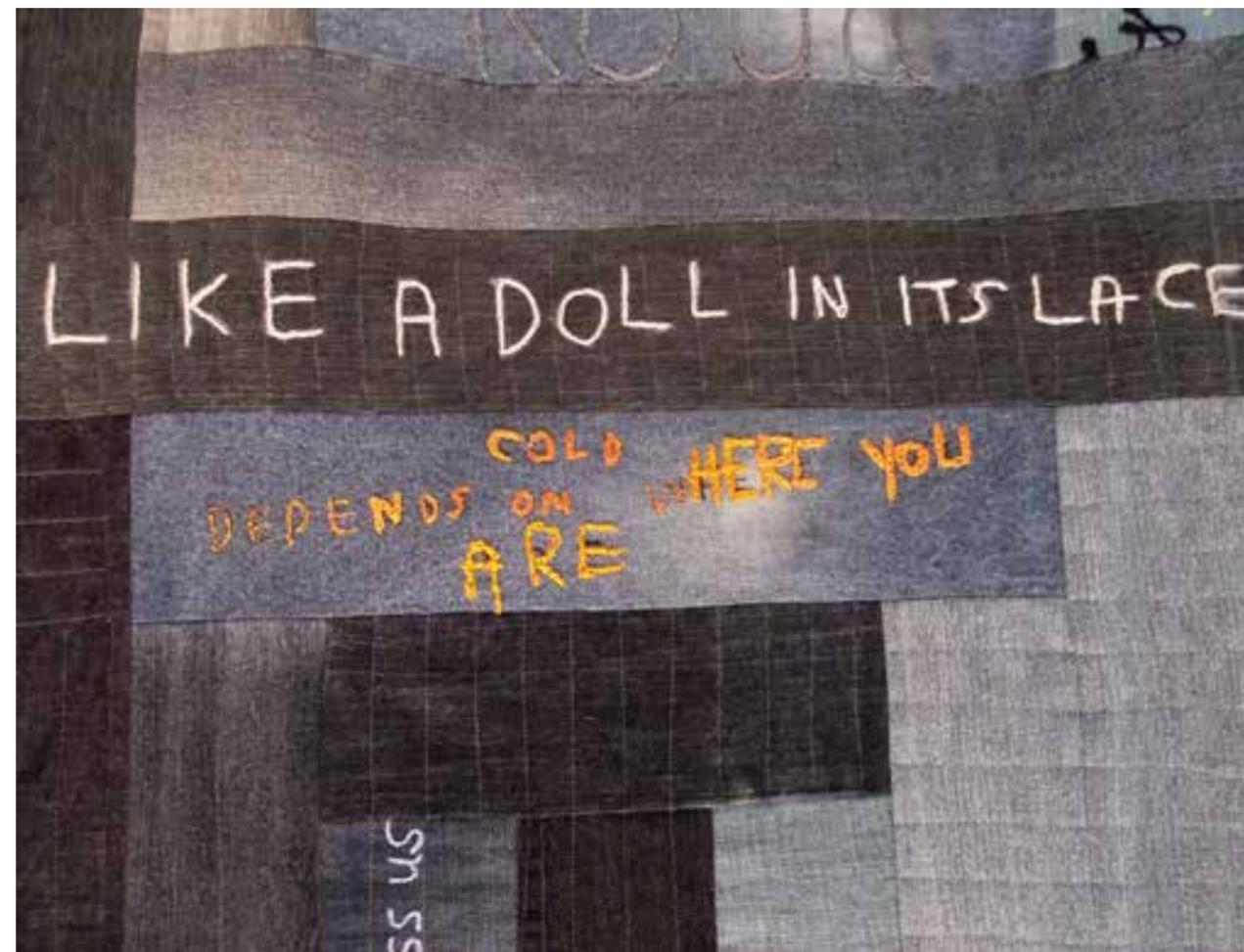
My part in the project began at the Big Issue offices where I met up with Lois

and Phil. Lois was busy stitching text onto pieces of denim, while Phil chatted to an Irish Traveller about his life and in particular his thoughts and feelings in relation to the word 'cold'. It reminded him of his mother passing away just a short time before. I felt privileged to be told such an emotional story and I was overwhelmed that a stranger could share something so personal with us. This conversation captured the aim of the project – to take individual stories and combine them to create a group narrative.

While we chatted, he asked if we had any red and green thread. Lois pulled some tapestry wool from her bag. I plaited three strands together to make a band and tied it round his wrist. He was so grateful and his reaction reminded me of why I love making things for people and using my skills. It reassured me that working on the Warm and the Cold was right for me.

Our afternoons were spent at the Booth Centre, one of the country's leading day centres for homeless people. It was a really great place where people made us feel so welcome. Over time, the group shared their experiences of warmth and cold. One man shared how he had fled from Iran to Iraq in freezing conditions, he told us this harrowing story but kept smiling throughout which was a sign of his strength. Another man shared a story about sleeping on a bus and how the doors constantly opening made him feel so cold. Everyone had a different story to tell and I was moved by just how open and honest people were and how they could share their stories with us.

The second half of these sessions was our time to stitch. Lois and I helped people to stitch onto pieces of denim which she had brought from home. The denim was recycled, and came from old jeans which Lois had deconstructed to reveal interesting areas of wear and tear. I was really inspired by the idea of the denim because it's a fabric that transcends all social and class



barriers, as well as being easy to work with!

We worked with people from different backgrounds and nationalities and wanted to incorporate this diversity into the finished quilt. The first piece of embroidery I completed was a piece written in Hindi and English which had to be in specific colours given to me by the author. I found the delicate lines of the text beautiful and the words, "I feel my body vibrating", so moving. The finished quilt had more than four languages embroidered on it.

Over the course of the project, I visited Manchester several times to attend the group sessions. Being involved from the early stages gave me a chance to be a part of Lois and Phil's discussions and I benefitted enormously from their support and advice. In turn, they benefited from my textile skills and my ability to engage people in the work we were doing.

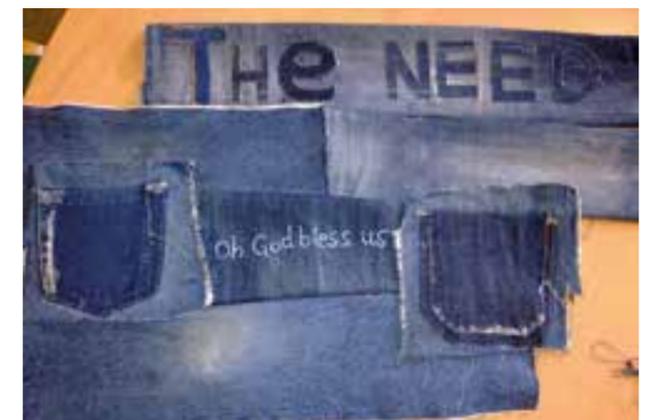
Each week, I took some pieces of the denim home and stitched over the hand written text using a variety of techniques and vibrant colours. The hand embroidery process seemed to give the words the attention and love that they deserved and the details were so beautiful.

The project culminated in an exhibition

at the Holden Gallery. Lois and Phil asked me to help with the installation. This gave me the chance to help with curatorial decisions and the technicalities of installation, a process I was happy to gain experience in.

One of the things I had learnt was that during a group project, you aren't always involved at every stage. I had created several pieces of embroidery for the quilt but I was not involved in stitching them together into the log cabin design that Lois had chosen to create. The day of the install I was amazed at the results and how powerful the finished quilt was. All the details had been beautifully arranged to form a moving piece of artwork which told the story of our time at the Booth Centre and the Big Issue offices.

This project was the first step towards me becoming a freelance artist. The Warm and the Cold inspired me to tell stories with fabric and thread, and since working with arthur+martha, I have gone on to work on several other projects, both solo and collaborative. I now regularly work with different groups of people to engage them with art and craft and help them find their own creative voice. 




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Clockwise from top left: Close up of finished quilt on display at The Holden Gallery; Denim Layout at the Big Issue offices; Denim Details; Hindi & English Text