TRIP ABSTRACT

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Title: Closely Held Secrets: Transgressing the surface

‘Hold your beliefs lightly’ (Perry 2010), ‘They are taking it to the people’ (Whalley 2010) and ‘What a load of shit’ (Fisher 2010) do not immediately conjure up the world of ‘embroidery’. However, as titles of contemporary artworks they do represent a decisive moment in art and design where digital technology is accessible to all-comers and can be used and, some may say, abused accordingly.

This paper explores the potential of digital embroidery and its associated aesthetic qualities through reflection on a textile research project and exhibition, Closely Held Secrets (2010), supported by the School of Art & Design, Nottingham Trent University and featuring work by a group of nine visual artists. Although some of the artists, including Grayson Perry and Stella Whalley had interpreted their work using digital embroidery before, none were specialists, but were interested in exploring the process as an alternative media.

A key aim of Closely Held Secrets was to examine and reveal the often hidden, yet instrumental relationship between technician and artist/designer. The paper will include insights into the private dialogue between the originator of an idea and the agent (and mode) of interpretation; how inventive outcomes are informed by vision but ultimately achieved through tacit knowledge and trust.

Analysis of selected artworks from Closely Held Secrets will illustrate how the multi-head embroidery machine can be used prescriptively to replicate full-colour, hand embroidered techniques; sensitively to convey abstract concepts and intuitively to just ‘see what happens’. Significantly it will demonstrate how the technology can be applied beyond its commercial context through creative intervention to translate diverse ideas exploring gender, sexuality, place, ornamentation, craft, and computer graphics through stitch.