



JOURNEY THROUGH THE MYTHSCAPES THE WORK OF ALICE KETTLE

Penny Burnfield



JAMES NEWELL

Sometimes an opportunity comes along at just the right moment. For Alice Kettle, the opportunity in question was not just the offer of a solo exhibition but the chance to return to a more personal narrative through her work.

Alice had been working on several large, site-specific commissions – including three altar frontals for Gloucester Cathedral – when Bankfield Museum in Halifax approached her. Bankfield, with one of the best collections of textiles in Britain, including many pieces by contemporary artists, had already purchased Alice's *Trees 2* in 2000. Now the idea was to stage a one-person show that would tour for two years.

Mythscape opened in January at Bankfield. It has been the catalyst for a new body of work, bringing

together several themes that have appeared through Kettle's embroideries over the years. Ever fascinated by the classical world, she has taken the time to delve deeper into this rich source of inspiration. Re-reading Homer's *Odyssey* – the epic account of Odysseus's wanderings, which is peopled with the rich characters of myth and legend – provided a vivid series of poetic pictures for a visual narrative. 'I was amazed', says Alice, 'It's all there – all of our lives'. By chance she had seen the Victorian reproduction of the Bayeux Tapestry at Reading Museum. 'I had not realised how fascinating it was; it inspired me to tell a story through my textiles'. Indeed, of the work she produced, Alice admits making, 'a homage to Greece, bringing together Classical themes, challenges, journeys, expectations

Odyssey. 2003.
180 x 385cm



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and the longing for home.' And Alice has a great affection for modern Greece which literally colours the work: the vivid blue of the sea; the intense light; chalky tints bleached by the sun and the richness of gold, which links and unifies her work.

Alice started the work with a quick watercolour and pencil sketch. This grew into the large, landscape, *Odyssey*. The rest of the work followed from there. If one compares the sketch and the finished piece, one can appreciate how she has captured the spontaneity of the painting and the patches of colour in the embroidery, with only subtle alteration. Similarly the gestural figure drawing is echoed by the machine-embroidered line, which, for technical reasons, had to be worked from the back of the piece. This is no accident. 'I want the story to sweep energetically across the work, forming a rhythm which undulates like the sea', says Alice.

Her smaller pieces also extend the myth. *Lotos-Eaters* shows a figure in a dreamy state, losing himself in reverie, with another man asleep at his feet. *Bag of Winds* captures two of Odysseus's foolish crewmen allowing the winds to escape with tremendous vigour – the winds which were to carry them home. *Scylla* and *Charybdis* form a pair and these are shown either side of a doorway, so the viewer has to pass between them. In a second large-scale piece, Hermes holds a sprig of herb and a lotos flower next to a group of sleepers. This work is also a tribute to Evie – one of Alice's friends killed in a tragic accident.

Alice is also enjoying some new technical departures in her work. The horizontal, landscape format of *Odyssey* and the folding after stitching of *Metamorphosis* and *Cyclops* gives a bas-relief quality to the surface, which is already made three-dimensional by the intensity of the machine stitching. And some



Left: *Lotos-Eaters and Hermes* (in memory of Evie). 2003. 180 x 285cm

Below: *Lotos-Eaters and Hermes* sketch. 2003. Watercolour, pencil, coloured pencil, gold gouache. 21.5 x 30cm

Opposite top: *Rite of Passage* (detail). 2003 (floorpiece). 250x155cm

Opposite below: *Bag of Winds*. 2003. 90 x 60cm

details now have to be added by hand – 'I've never done that before', says Alice. But some things remain the same – the largest piece is 180 x 385cm and, as predicted, the sheer scale gives great authority.

Some of Alice's past work has sometimes spread from the wall onto the floor but *Rite of Passage* is shown entirely on the floor, as footsteps cross the sand in their own personal Odyssey. It conveys a sense of the journey of life, which underlies the work – all the challenges and expectations, the joys and disappointments that make up the human state. Homer's Odysseus spent many years making his way home from Troy, through countless adventures and frustrations. Alice speaks of the difficult decisions everyone has to make: 'When he finds happiness with Calypso, he has to choose to leave. In the end, he finds strength through acceptance of suffering. In both the poem and the textiles, his journey is an allegory of all our lives!'

The Odyssey is also a symbol of the voyage of discovery that all artists must make – pushing out into the unknown, the struggles, satisfactions and surprises that this brings – fighting both physically and mentally with the work – of knowing how to begin and when to stop. It is a personal evolution.

Mythscares will travel around ten different venues over two years. Some of the work has already been seen at the Knitting and Stitching Show, and to this will be added new pieces, preliminary sketches and some older work which ties in with the theme, such as the four-part *Creation* and the powerful crucifix-like triptych *Towers*. The show will change and evolve according to the venue and as fresh embroideries are completed. There is an excellent catalogue to accompany the exhibition and a video of Alice at work will also be on view.



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If there is time, Alice would like to make a piece about Penelope's Bed, which in Homer's poem was formed from trees growing out of the ground. This will connect with her recent series of works concerning trees in relationship to people, which started on a residency in Australia in 1997.

For any artist there can be a great satisfaction in tying together a number of personal themes to make a whole that is greater than the parts. Classical times, modern Greece, storytelling, trees, the human condition: all are here, layered within the work.

A fully illustrated 64-page catalogue, *Alice Kettle: Mythscares* is available from the EG bookshop, at £15.00, plus p&p.

EXHIBITIONS DATES

Bankfield Museum, Halifax: 17 Jan – 14 Mar, 2004
 mac, Birmingham: 20 March – 9 May, 2004
 The Gallery, Ruthin: 30 May – 25 July, 2004
 Southampton Art Gallery: 31 July – Sept 26, 2004
 Hove Museum and Gallery: 2 Oct – 28 Nov, 2004

Brewery Arts Centre, Kendal: 4 Dec – 20 Jan, 2005
 Southill Park, Brackenhill: 6 Feb – 9 April, 2005
 Cheltenham Art Gallery: 15 April – 10 June, 2005
 Myles Meehan Gallery, Darlington: 10 September – 29 July, 2005
 Harley Gallery, Welbeck: 16 Sept – 5 Nov, 2005