



AT THE CUTTING EDGE CLYDE OLLIVER

Jo Hall



Stone, slate, twine: not the usual stuff of textiles. But then again, as far as Clyde Olliver is concerned, any material is up for grabs. The way he looks at it, each substance tells its own story. 'I could appliqué a dancing figure onto an object and it reads very differently than if I'd embroidered it onto velvet or hessian', he states. 'For me, the medium carries its own kind of connotations and associations.'

Clyde is known for using slate as his primary material and the results challenge what is usually described as embroidery. 'I always start with the material. A friend of mine describes me as someone who wrestles with materials and I think that's actually a very good phrase. It's quite unfashionable as concept is supposed to be everything these days', he

says. 'While I think that concept is important, I like rolling my sleeves up and getting stuck in.'

Clyde's latest body of work, *The Big Stitch*, was a solo show that toured with last year's Knitting and Stitching Shows. While he continued to use slate, Clyde showed the result of his work with stone. 'I'd been thinking that the way stone is dressed is like a textile and this had been fermenting as an idea for a while', he says. 'There's a stela in the British Museum that's carved and almost smooth but it still bears the chisel marks, which make it look like a twill cloth. It's so much like textiles – you couldn't believe it's not. It was an important moment when I saw it'

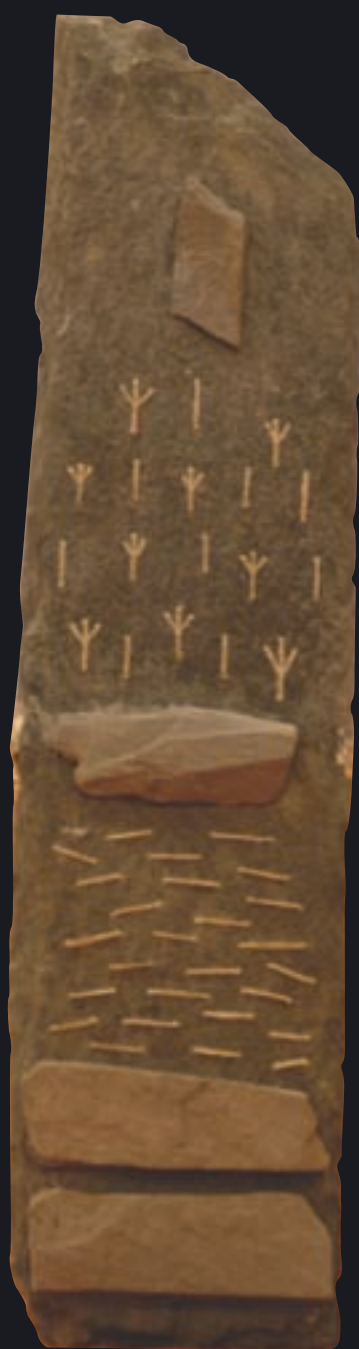
This ancient slab of stone inspired the making of the piece, *Alla Turca*, which is chiselled from Stanton Moor stone but references to stonemasonry run

Opposite, top: The tools Clyde uses aren't among those usually associated with embroidery

From left to right: *Bouchard*. 2003. Sandstone, sisal twine

***Westmorland Tile*. 2003. Roofing tile and linen thread**

***Big Stitch*. 2003. St Bees sandstone, rope**



Clockwise from right:
Swinside Stoop (front).
 2003. Westmorland slate,
 sisal twine and rope

Swinside Stoop (back).

Alla Turca. 2003.
 Stanton Moor stone,
 bailer twine

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throughout all the work. For instance *Bouchard* is named after a hammer. 'It's like a steak tenderiser. It leaves tiny indents all over the surface and that's what I used in this piece; a bouchard hammer and twine. Another piece I'd like to make will reference the scutch hammer, which has claws that scratch into the surface!' Clyde admires the work of German sculptor, Ulrich Ruckriem, whose work exploits the process of quarrying and tries to find new meanings in the extraction, recombination and relocation of stone. For Clyde, also, the interest lies in the raw processing of the stone. 'There's a lot of physicality in carving the sculptural form; even in pieces where I've just taken the stone as I've found it, or taken a bit of broken slab from the stonemason's, it's still tapping into that process!' Ideas for new works tend to come from sketches, or he visits the quarry, hoping that a piece of stone will catch his eye. For instance, the piece, *Swinside Stoop* is the result of a lucky find while walking his dog on route to the Swinside Stone Circle.

Clyde was astounded by the reaction to *The Big Stitch*. 'People were very enthusiastic and very moved', he recalls. 'The nicest thing anyone said was that it looked as if stitch in stone was perfectly ordinary and that it was something that people had always done. I was so glad because it meant that the relationship between the stone and the stitch was resolved. The first pieces I made didn't work and it's about balancing the two media.'

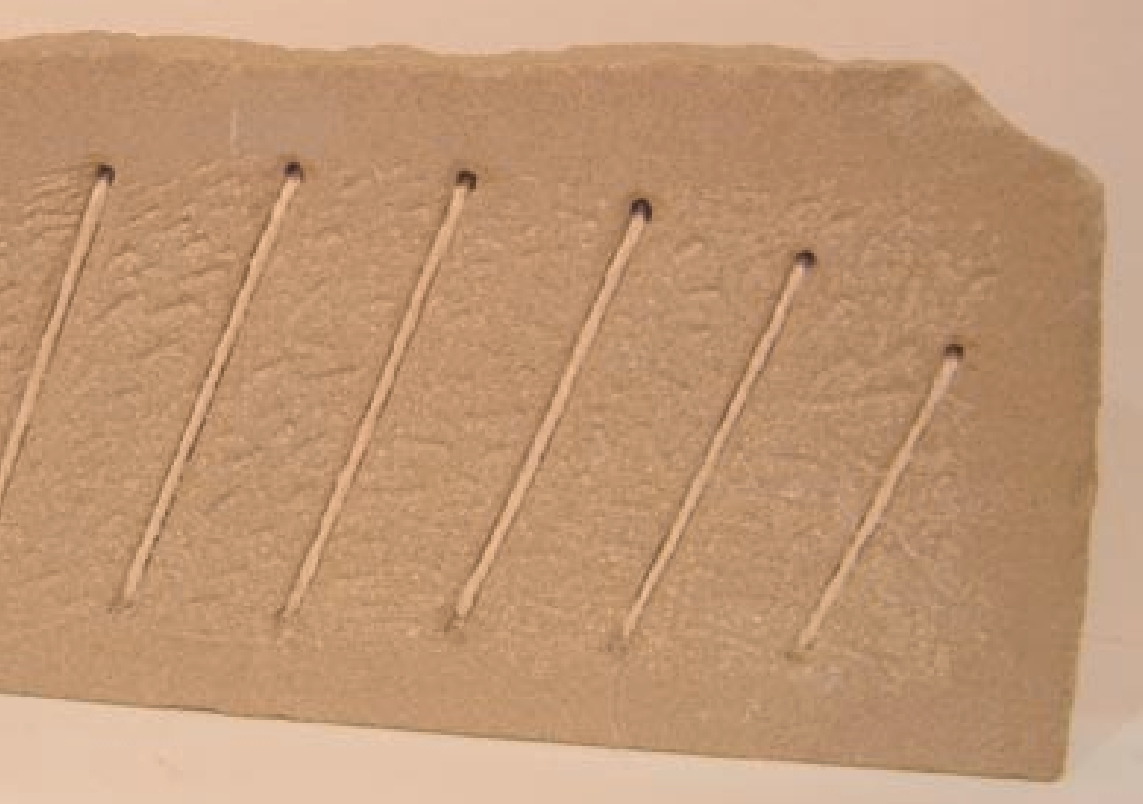
At around 40 years of age, Clyde Olliver was a

comparatively late starter by the time he was getting to grips with the world of contemporary textiles as a mature student. His fascination with stitch originally started when he was growing up on a smallholding in Sussex. 'I used to embroider the old feed sacks secretly because boys weren't supposed to do that sort of thing. I was quite young but I took to textiles straight away. I would embroider things, like a horse, chickens or a cow on to them!'

After a stint working as a theatrical prop maker in Sussex and London, he got a job in his 20s, learning to repair oriental carpets and rugs. According to Clyde it was 'fairly tedious work', with an Armenian teaching about a dozen workers how to reweave holes in carpets, although he adds he learnt a lot. While he was there, Clyde started attending Marta Rogoyska's tapestry weaving class at Morley College and eventually worked for Marta as a studio assistant for 10 years.

At that point, Clyde had lots of technical skill but no art training. 'It was Audrey Walker who actually suggested that I go to art school. Up until then, I had always worked to someone else's design and never done my own thing. She recommended the part-time foundation course at Sir John Cass in London. It was brilliant, as Audrey said it was.' Now when he's giving talks to City & Guilds students, Clyde often suggests taking an art foundation course, 'It's such a good idea if you want to push your needlework forward! It was there that Clyde began working with found objects. 'My design and artistic awareness grew on foundation and I still have my work from then – embroidered squeezed out paint tubes and lager cans. Even then, I wasn't stitching on fabric but onto actual objects. It's basically what I'm still doing.'

From foundation, the next step was a BA in textiles at Goldsmiths College. The experience was, he says, mixed. 'I got a lot from it, I don't want to be con-



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demning but I was suddenly plunged into darkness because there was this very strong climate of feminism that just took every aspect of textiles to itself. Suddenly we weren't learning textiles; we were learning about feminism. I've no problem with that but it wasn't about equality, or about textiles! Despite the challenges he says he faced, the experience encouraged his exploration of working with slate.

'Suddenly, instead of thinking what did my mother do or my grandmother do, it became what did my dad do? He was a builder so I experimented with his materials, which included roofing slate. It was a response to that particular situation at that time. Textiles always had been an open art form for me and I didn't think there was any problem with men doing textiles. I thought it was up for grabs.'

After what he describes as a 'pretty unsuccessful three years', the breakthrough came at his degree show. Drawing on the presence of stone in the landscape, Clyde created large friezes using shards of slate. 'They were canvas with little pieces of slate stitched at right angles. I drilled holes along one edge of the slates and then sewed them to the canvas so they hung out at right-angles. The entire structure relied on cloth; it was flexible so you could move it around but it was also incredibly heavy.'

He sold most of his degree show for 'a king's ransom at the time' but it was Lesley Millar, who was curating the show, Revelation, who offered him his big break. Lesley invited him to make a piece for the show, which opened at the Barbican and toured to Japan.

Since then, Clyde has maintained an interest in developing the notion of landscape in his work. He was invited to produce work for art of the STITCH in 1999. The work, *Aberllefenni* again took slate from the environment – roofing slate from Manchester and slate spoil from the Welsh Hills, referencing the built and natural environments. In his series of *Quar-*

rymen's Quilts, Clyde created quilt patches from stone, sewn to a middle layer of felt, to reflect the dry stone walls and quarries of Wales and Cumbria, where he now lives.

There's no doubt that his approach is challenging, but he justifies the use of such alien materials. 'I feel that I'm still making textile work; that's all I've ever done from age seven onwards. I can't rewrite my own history, even if I'm carving or drawing, it's always there and I feel very comfortable with that.' Instead, his references are simply different. 'I've got some photos of a stoop in Cumbria, which has bailer twine on it. And there's a slate fence that has a bit of blue twine and a bit of old bedstead and I see those as very textiles', he says.

As for the future, he will continue to give his talks based on the tradition of servicemen's embroidery and he says there are still ideas to develop from The Big Stitch, particularly work that will be exhibited outside. 'I've done this thing where I've moved from stitch into stone and I think that I can go forward into carving but I also feel like I'm ready to go back and stitch into fabric in a very textile way.'

Left: *Untitled*. 2003.
Stanton Moor stone, sisal twine

Above: *Construction*. 1996. Shown at the Revelation exhibition.
Slate, felt, canvas, linen, wool and wood

Below: The slate fence with its blue twine and old bedstead, which Clyde has referenced in his work

