Juliet D Collins Stitch with Sappho: Community textile installation

Exhibition Celebration Artist Talk transcript

I am really thrilled to be here celebrating this very special moment - the culmination of *Stitch with Sappho*. This artwork has pretty much consumed my entire year so far and it has been a really enriching experience for me. But it isn't just my artwork. Around 60 people participated in the making of this installation.

I did invite them ALL to speak here today. Lucky for you they didn't all rush to put up their hands to public speak so we should be done with the speeches a bit quicker!

Many of the contributors did however send me some words that they wanted to share with you all about about their experience of being involved in *Stitch with Sappho* and I have woven their comments into what I have to say….

Towards the end of the making stage one very regular participant to the workshops - Kelly - commented to me that she and her young daughters who attended with her had gained valuable insight into how much time and effort goes into creating an artwork like this. It had surprised her to learn how much work can be involved in bringing together an art project like this.

And I think that's interesting because when you walk into an exhibition, you see the finished work. You don't see all the decisions, experiments, challenges and problem-solving that sit behind it and got it to this point.

So I thought it would be nice too take this opportunity to share a little bit about that journey for this artwork.

It all started - As with many creative projects - with a crazy idea. About three years ago, I started exploring the ancient Greek poet Sappho as a source of inspiration in my own art practice. I was initially drawn to her as both a queer and feminist historical figure. Themes that were increasingly becoming more central to my practice.

She speaks to us through fragments from a distant and strange ancient world, yet her voice can feel remarkably immediate and personal. And I became really taken with the extraordinary intimacy of her surviving poetry.

And so I got drawn further and further into a bit of a Sappho rabbit hole.

The more I read, the more fascinating the fragments, the gaps and the different interpretations became. I began stitching her words to use in my artwork and I decided it would be really great to create an artwork that brought together all 197

fragments in stitch. It seemed a little daunting to do that on my own so I decided to make it a participatory project and enlist the help of a few others.

Textile-making has a long history of collective practice, and feminist and queer artists have often challenged the idea of the solitary artist working alone. I wanted to draw on *those* traditions — creating a space to share skills, stories, labour and knowledge, and making that collective spirit part of the artwork itself. Rather than simply making work about Sappho, I wanted to create a space where other people could respond to her, using my chosen textile language - thread drawing using freehand machine embroidery.

I applied for opportunities to make the idea happen, and was incredibly fortunate to receive a Magnify Artist Residency with Kingston Arts, followed by the opportunity to exhibit the finished project here.

And having been awarded the opportunity, I then started the practical planning of how to make it all happen — and, of course, discovered that making the idea happen was going to be a bit more complicated than I had anticipated!

One of the biggest challenges was the rather alarming discovery that I couldn't actually use the English translations of Sappho's poetry that I had planned to stitch. While the ancient Greek words of Sappho are in the public domain, contemporary English translations are generally protected by copyright. So I found myself in the slightly ridiculous position of needing to create my own English versions of Sappho's fragments without any understanding of Ancient Greek.To do this I relied upon my my extensive reading of existing translations from modern female authors, I enlisted the help of AI — and, thankfully to my rescue came my wonderful Ancient Greek translator and advisor, Ada Batsaki. Ada's assistance was invaluable, and it is her voice you hear in the gallery reciting Sappho's surviving fragments in Ancient Greek.

Ada and her partner Natasha came to many workshops and really helped create such a lovely atmosphere - Ada reciting Sappho’s words in Ancient Greek to us and Natasha evoking the spirit of Sappho for us by singing and strumming her guitar. (Sappho’s poetry was composed to be performed accompanied to the lyre which is another stringed instrument.)

The Magnify Artist Residency gave me the time and space to experiment and develop the physical language of the exhibition — the layers of *Strata*, the embossments, and the bringing together the found objects, and all the fragments that make up the installation. The Residency also supported what became the most exciting part of the project for me which was the workshops.

I had honestly imagined that perhaps six to eight people might be interested enough in *Stitching the Fragments of Sappho* to come along and do that with me for a couple of hours a week for a few sessions.

Instead, nearly 60 people took part across eight workshops, and many continued to come to my studio after the residency had finished to help finish things off.

The people who came were incredibly diverse — a very intergenerational group, from 5 to 80 years old, with different backgrounds, interests and life experiences.

Some identified as queer and some did not. Some strongly identified with feminism, while others wouldn't necessarily use that word for themselves. Some knew Sappho well; others were encountering her for the first time.

And that diversity is really what thrilled me the most.

Our youngest participant was Alia, who was five at the time — now six! — and a very enthusiastic maker.

We also had 13-year-old Ellie, who came to most of the sessions with her mum, Kelly, and her younger sister joined us for a few sessions too.

Kelly recently told me that they had all walked away with new skills and a new knowledge of Sappho. She said that Ellie, who is usually quite reserved, really flourished as she learned to sew with us, and looked forward to each session so she could continue working on her piece.

What connected people was making.

One participant, Naree said she really enjoyed exploring freehand machine embroidery. She described the experience as a “lovely inclusive space” and said that learning about Sappho and being made aware of her poetry was just delightful.

Nicole said simply: “What stayed with me was the peace and friendship in the room.”

And Maroulla, who only joined us once and stitched two fragments, said she took away “a whole lot of inspiration.”

It was the words of another participant, Julie, that really got me thinking about the relationship between the making experience and the final outcome. Julie described the experience as:

“An embodied exploration of words and materials…”

and spoke about appreciating both the pleasure and focus of individual making alongside “the richness of the collaborative creative experience.”

And I think that really gets to the heart of what I was hoping this project might achieve.

We began with fragments of a voice that has survived for thousands of years.

Each person brought their own fragment — their own experience, ideas, skills and responses.

And through the process of making together, those fragments have become something shared. Individual voices that gain something more by being placed in relation to one another.

It is ultimately a response to Sappho that embraces the fragmentary nature of her legacy.

It pays homage to the gaps, not only in her voice but in the many other voices that have been lost through time.

It embraces the deep relevance of what a voice from the ancient past can still offer us today.

And perhaps what makes Sappho's voice so powerful is that, despite the thousands of years between us, it still speaks from outside the dominant story — a woman's voice, a queer voice, a voice that has somehow survived.

[LONG PAUSE]

I am extremely grateful to everyone who joined me down the Sappho rabbit hole and helped bring this artwork to life.

I would particularly like to thank the Kingston Arts team. You've been such a supportive, friendly and helpful team to work with throughout this project.

And particularly Carolin Casey, who guided me through the artist residency, then ended up curating the exhibition — and, somewhat unexpectedly, overseeing the actual installation of the show! I was incredibly grateful to have you there to make that happen.

And of course, thank you to everyone who participated, contributed, and shared in the process. There were a few behind the scenes helpers that I could not have managed without -

My son James, who turned up at the end of every workshop to help me pack everything away.

My friend Laura who transported the work to the gallery when I was unexpectedly overseas.

My friend Kaylene who ran out to pick up 300 emergency pins during the installation when it was realised I had vastly underestimated the number of pins needed!

And of course thank you to my partner Mel, for all her support, patience and encouragement along the way.

This really is a collective artwork, and I feel very lucky to have made it with you all.

Thank you.

Any questions?

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