



hot *textiles*

Inspiration and techniques with heat tools

Kim Thittichai

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BATSFORD

Acknowledgments

This book is dedicated to Maeve Edwards, an inspirational tutor.

I would like to thank my lovely students of the past seven years. We made a wonderful journey together. As we have all discovered, you are never too old to learn, and the more you learn, the more you realize there is to learn.

I am forever indebted to my friends and family, who have stood by me and supported me all the way through my rather circuitous route to this exciting point.

Special thanks to Mary Sleigh.

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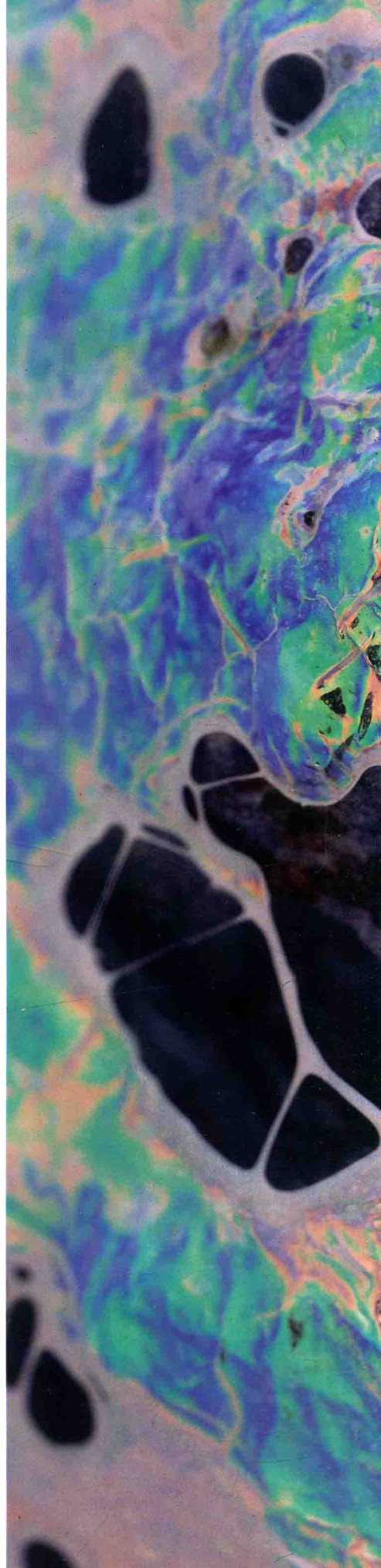
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Front cover: Detail of
work by Sue Davies
(see page 25).

Page 2: Detail of
work by Jan Eldridge
(see page 118).

Right: Detail of bowl
by Sarah Hawkins
(see page 103).





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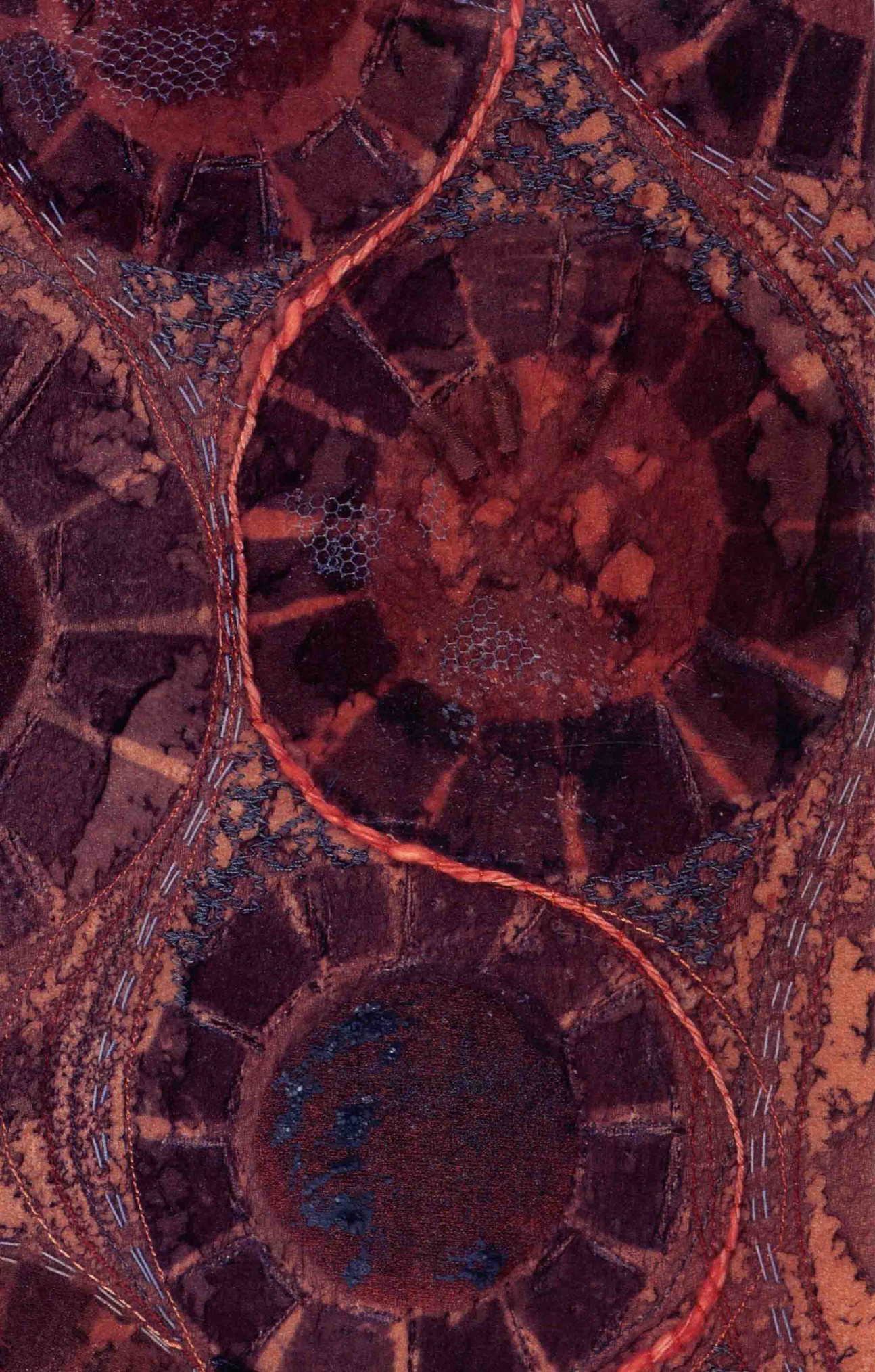
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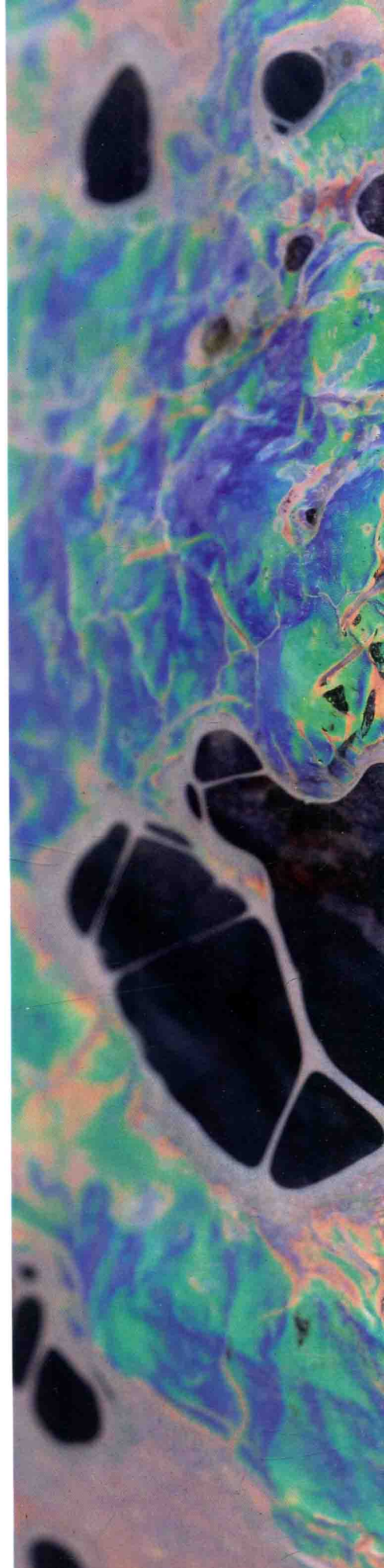
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Introduction

Welcome to *Hot Textiles*. Whether this is your first foray into the exciting world of using heat to work textiles, or whether you already have some experience, there is always something new to learn.

My early training at Brighton Polytechnic (now Brighton University), UK, was in three-dimensional design of wood, metal, ceramics and plastics – I specialized in ceramics and silver. It was not until 1985, as part of my Creative Embroidery diploma at Brighton, that I started paying serious attention to using melted materials (initially plastic bags) in my embroidery work. Both these courses encouraged experimentation with materials before starting to design a piece of work. ‘Learning through play’ isn’t just for toddlers; for an artist it is a very important part of developing your skills and exploring techniques.

Since then I have developed various processes involving plastic bags, cellophane, Bondaweb (Wonder-Under) and Tyvek. Layering materials and techniques has become a favourite way of creating amazing surfaces to stitch.

I came to teaching experimental textiles by a rather circuitous route in 1996. I originally taught traditional courses, but after a while I started to get bored. With my rather mixed training, I find it difficult to keep to traditional courses, and my instincts are to wander away from the narrow path and find out ‘what happens if ...?’ While I fully appreciate the importance of learning traditional techniques, I have always been driven to push things further. I wrote and developed a new 30-week course, and ‘Experimental Textiles’ was born. After a slow start it took off, and has become a very successful course. The techniques I have chosen for this book are the ones I have found the most fun and most useful in my teaching, but there are many more.

Functional versus non-functional

My work is constantly changing as I learn and develop new methods with new materials. I am basically a three-dimensional textile artist. Because most of my work is non-functional – neither clothing nor lighting fixtures nor any other ‘useful’ object – I am continually asked, ‘but what’s it for?’ Most of my large vessels are just that – large vessels. They just stand there, hopefully looking beautiful. I have tried putting lights in them to make them functional, but I feel that I am compromising my work when I do.

I have no idea why I work the way I do; maybe it’s my early training, or always wanting to be different. It certainly seems to be something I am driven to do – we all have to find our own path. My work gives me great pleasure and satisfaction, and I am very lucky to have worked with and learned from tutors whom I greatly respect.



Pelmet Vilene (Pellon)
coloured with fabric paint
then decorated with
painted Bondaweb
(Wonder-Under), sprinkled
snipped threads, glitter, 3D
Medium and hand stitch.

I hope this book will both educate and inspire you. The most important thing to remember when trying any of the techniques in this book is to have fun, but safely.

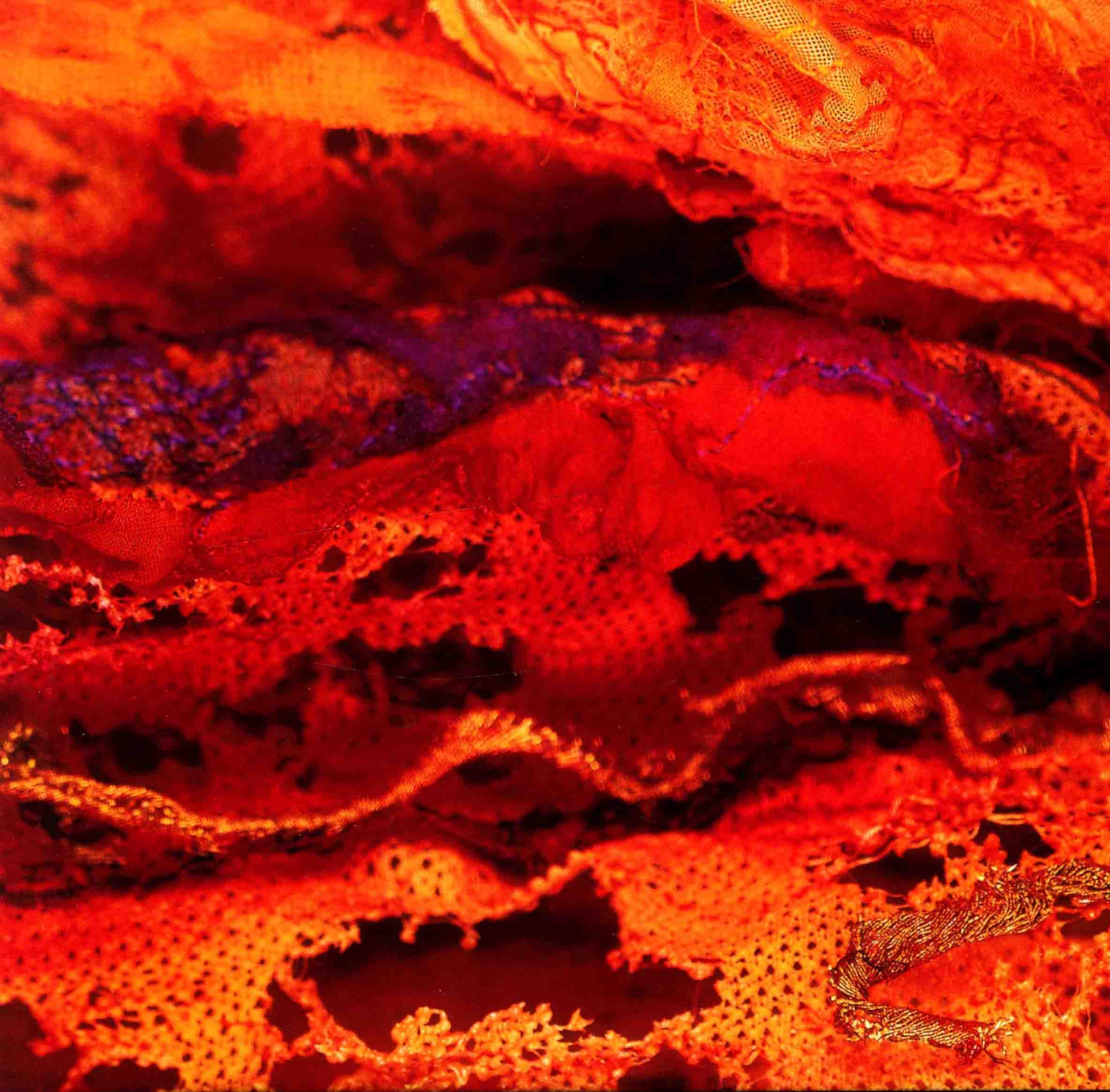
I know it is annoying to have to stop and think before you create but I can't stress enough how important safety is when working with hot tools. If you can get into a safe routine every time you pick up your iron or heat gun you will be the healthier for it.

I hope this book will also excite you. I have included work – ranging from craft right through to fine art – of various students and textile artists, whose contact details are at the back of the book. It is a great privilege to be able to include work that I admire.



Part 1

Tools and Techniques



Before You Start...

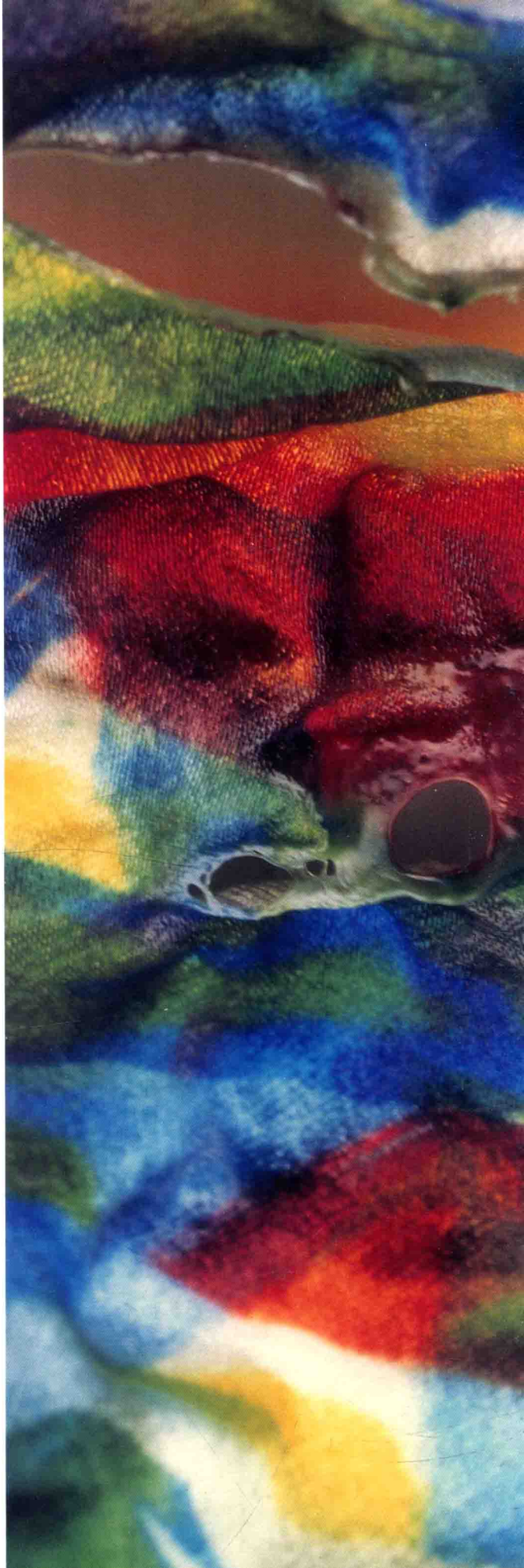
Few of us are lucky enough to have a dedicated work space with specialist tools and equipment; we all muddle along, cutting corners where we judge it expedient. As far as I am aware from my experience, and from interviewing manufacturers and suppliers of products used in this book, none of the materials are life-threatening except perhaps plastic bags. They can be dangerous when melted in large amounts, say 50 at a time. Even melting that amount won't kill you, but you could give yourself a really bad headache. If you have any kind of breathing problem or are pregnant take great care and if in doubt, don't!

Whatever you are doing, even if it is just sitting quietly stitching, a well-ventilated room will help keep you alert and feeling better. If you are unsure of the properties of the product you are melting, work outside the house in the garden, or failing that, open all the windows. I have never suffered any ill effects from the processes covered in this book, but we are all different and the components of materials are changing all the time.

Be aware of the safety of any children and animals around you, in particular when using heat tools and dyes.

- Separate fabrics into natural and synthetic fibres.
- Work on a stable, protected surface.
- Check the flexes on your tools. They should be straight and free of kinks so that no one trips over them.
- Have a roll of baking parchment/paper to hand.
- Make sure you are working in a well-ventilated area.
- Keep a notebook of successes and failures.

White acetate satin that has been transfer printed with disperse dyes then distressed with a heat gun.





Synthetic and natural

You can check if your fabric is synthetic by applying a heat gun to a corner of it (see Tools, page 14). Synthetic fabrics melt while natural fabrics burn, so if it puckers it is synthetic, if it starts to turn brown it is natural, or a mix with a certain amount of natural fibre in it. If your fabric starts to turn brown – STOP. It means your fabric is on the way to catching fire.

Your work surface

Don't be tempted to use the iron and ironing board you use to iron your clothes; they will get contaminated very quickly no matter how careful you are. Irons can be bought very cheaply from your local supermarket. You do not need a steam iron for any of the techniques in this book.

Working on a towel or old curtain covered with baking parchment/paper on a stable table is quite sufficient, and means you can set up anywhere.

Materials

Keep your range of materials small; don't expect to try everything at once. It is better to work through individual materials first, discovering their potential and limits. Once you are confident you know what a single material can do, you can then start to layer different materials. It would be a shame to miss something for the sake of another hour of experimentation.

Plastic shopping bags and bin liners shouldn't give off fumes when melted, especially in the small volumes that we use. But – and it is a big but – manufacturing processes are constantly changing, and one can never be sure what compounds might be included in the plastic one is using. If you are working in a well-ventilated space there should be no problem, but if you start to get a headache – STOP!

If you start to create a piece of work and you are apprehensive about choosing colours, stick to harmonious tones. If you are working with complex or varied textures, on the other hand, you don't need a lot of colour variation as well. The brain can only cope with so much information.

Learning through play

How can you design something if you don't know what the materials you are using will do, and how the techniques work? While it is important to be able to design a piece of work, greater importance needs to be placed on learning through play. If you are relaxed and enjoying your experiments you will remember much more, and this will be helped further by making notes. Inspiration can strike at the strangest times, so try to carry a small notebook and pen with you at all times to jot down ideas or sketches.



Stress can be a barrier to creativity. If you feel 'blank', just 'play' with your materials and don't pressurize yourself. You may be pleasantly surprised at the ideas that start to form.

It is wonderful to have a pallet of techniques to work from, but be warned: don't throw everything you know at one piece of work or it will look like a dog's breakfast. Build up slowly. Jae Maries's 1999 article 'The Butterfly Approach to Embroidery' warned of the dangers of being a 'technique junkie':

'This, in my opinion, is textile art's major drawback. There are so many techniques to try that you can easily become wooed by the technique itself rather than asking yourself if this method of working is really appropriate for your subject matter. The individuality of the creative embroiderer becomes obscured by technique and that personal voice that will distinguish your work from your neighbour's in an exhibition will be smothered by the technique itself.'

All of us need time to master and develop a technique for our own use and make it work for us. It should become a tool to help us externalise our ideas and say something personal. We may dabble forever and never get focused, like the butterfly fluttering from one seductive flower to another.'

Heat-gunned polyester organza.

'The Butterfly Approach to Embroidery', Jae Maries, *The World of Embroidery* magazine, July 1999, Vol 50, no 4 page 219.

