



# The Found Object

in Textile Art

Cas Holmes



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First published in the United States in 2010 by  
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# Introduction

I collect. Which artist doesn't? My collecting instinct includes books, old textiles, found images from newspapers and magazines, letters and, especially, paper discards. These precious materials are often crumpled, torn and re-used. Fragmentation, erasing and layering are part of a process that marks the passing of time. I often feel like an archaeologist trying to make sense of a trail of found artefacts that I then organize and rearrange while following ideas that result in the creation of new pieces.

Those who re-use materials or use found objects as a part of the creative process do so for a variety of reasons, ranging from virtuous thrift to environmental protection. In a consumer society there is excessive waste, so using discarded materials in textiles can reflect our political and social concerns and anxiety about global warming. The overpowering physical changes to the landscape brought about by man, through farming, building and the overuse of world resources, raise issues about our fragile relationship with the local and global environment. These issues are worthy of consideration as subject matter for the textile artist.

Equally, the use of found objects can inspire because their tactile, atmospheric and versatile qualities aid the visual artist in the creation of original statements. Robert Rauschenberg's *Bed* involved the appropriation of a traditional patchwork quilt, which was then embellished with thick paint. He referred to such works as "combines" and went on to use a variety of media in his assemblages. Tracey Emin, in her Confessional Art pieces, layers and stitches found fabrics with writing to make quiltlike hangings that are full of meaning, but often far from the notion of "comfort" a quilt normally conveys.

At its heart, re-using found materials is a form of alchemy. Old materials are transformed anew and using "waste" (and therefore cheap) materials allows the artist great freedom to take risks and experiment. Often, this transformation converts the products of a post-industrial age, such as the plastic bag and machine-printed textile, into something that is now "one-off" or handmade through its careful working by individual artists or craftspersons as they pursue their unique vision.

The ideas, processes and methods contained in this book are intended to act as a stimulus for the textile artists who like to use found materials as part of their experimental working practice. Most of the materials are free; processes are low-tech; and the qualities of the materials used are celebrated as an aspect of the creative process that has become intrinsically linked to the idea of using items that might otherwise be destroyed. "Waste not, want not" may sound a little old fashioned, but it is also the mantra of a careful and caring creative practice, in which making and meaning have ethical considerations, carrying strong resonances for any textile maker in today's wasteful world.

When all the trees have been cut down,  
When all the animals have been hunted,  
When all the waters are polluted,  
When all the air is unsafe to breathe,  
Only then will you discover you  
cannot eat money.

*Cree prophecy*

**Right:** *Bird and Flower*. Collaged magazines and sweet wrappers, layered and stitched.

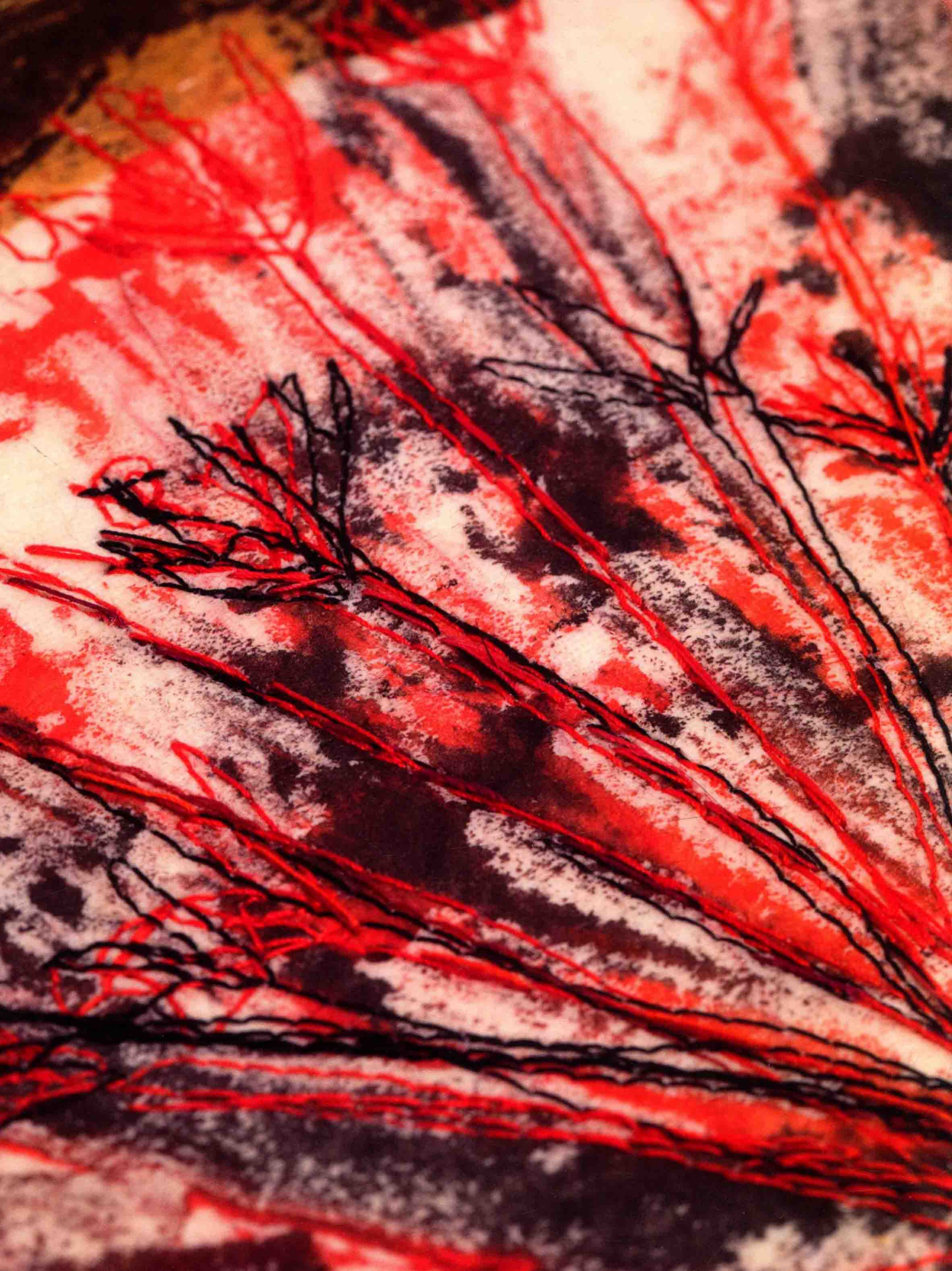
**Below:** Cas Holmes in the studio.













# 1 Beyond the surface

The processes in this section use paper and/or fabric to create new textile surfaces. Most of the materials are found or reclaimed. These finds are built up in layers and then torn and cut to create new surfaces for working. In fact, my partner, Derek, says no item of household waste is ever lost with me around, because I often find a use for it before it is placed in the trash! You never need to start with a blank canvas. Artists have always been inspired by and used found materials to create original statements. The textile artist Michael Brennand-Wood states: “If I can re-invent a throwaway material into something usable then that gives me pleasure” (*The New Alchemists: Recycling*, Craftspace touring catalogue).

It is the materials that inform the process, because they often have a connection to a given place or a particular time. Old fabrics and paper therefore bring with them their own past and stories as they are transformed into new surfaces in a type of alchemy that goes “beyond the surface.”

Most of the methods described in this book involve low-tech techniques and basic art materials, available from your local art or craft store or online supplier. Equally, much of what you will need can be found in the local DIY store or supermarket, or even under your kitchen sink. Fabric can be printed with old household emulsion paint, marked with wax crayons, or stained with food coloring. You do not need a specialist studio or equipment for many of these processes and ideas. Working with a range of found papers and fabrics, you will alter their appearance with paint and dye, and then work them into layers, just as you would a painting or collage.

The whole is then stitched with hand and machine embroidery. The action of sewing combines the layers into a unique textile, which is extremely flexible and can be used for two- or three-dimensional creations.

**Left:** *Umbellifer*. Red and black stitch on a printed background, with stitched lines echoing the printed marks.

# Mark-making with found materials

The surface patterns of fabrics and papers can be changed with the application of simple print- and mark-making methods. In this section, we look at various paint, ink and dye media and the use of found natural and man-made objects in relation to the printed mark and your subject matter. The key is to be brave and experiment with colors, textures, and imagery. You can always re-use those experiments that you feel are less successful by cutting them up and making collages, adding stitching and then printing or making further marks to create more exciting pieces. “Rejected experiments” can also be used to add interest to the drawings and ideas you create to inform and develop your sketchbook or journal.

## Nontraditional coloring media

In addition to the more conventional artist’s paints and media, it is important to experiment and search more unusual supply sources, such as the local hardware store or supermarket or your own storage, looking for emulsion paints and stains for projects. Even the kitchen can be a source of coloring media: food colorings, tea, coffee, some vegetable juices, such as beetroot, or stains from berries can all be used for staining fabric. Food colorings can be very effective: used neat, they produce strong vibrant colors, or they can be diluted with water for softer effects. They are particularly useful when you are working with younger age groups.



**Opposite:** *Remnants from Not so Ordinary Lives.* One of three panels combining textured rubbings, textiles, and print using Indian woodblocks.

**Below:** Dyes and paints for textile and paper use.



## Acrylic paints

Acrylic paints are excellent on any porous surface and can be used on fabric as well as on paper. They are readily available, come ready mixed and, once dry, are machine washable on a cool setting. Experiment with different types of acrylic-based paint, including artists' tubes, match pots, and commercial household paints left over from decorating projects. The latter can be surprisingly effective.

## Fabric paints and dyes

Fabric paints come ready mixed or as a pigment you add to a base. After being painted on the fabric, they are usually fixed by ironing. There is a huge range of media. Some, such as heat-fix silk dyes, can be painted on the fabric like an ink. Others, which are thicker, can be used for printing, as well as diluted for painting. Other media are more watery and can be used for staining the fabric.

Other types of pigments, such as the Brusho® watercolor range or water-based artist's inks, are an excellent source of color for experimental work, but are not permanent. Cold-water, fiber-reactive dyes, such as the Procion range, come in powder form. They are an excellent way of changing the colors of found fabrics through immersion dye methods. Alternatively, they can be used as a strongly colored stain when mixed with water. You can add conventional thickeners, such as Manutex, to the dyes, which makes it easier to paint or even print them onto the fabric. I have also experimented successfully with using ordinary wallpaper paste as a thickener.

You can use dyes left over from the fabric dyeing processes, but please note that Procion cold-water dyes, once mixed into solution with fixing agents, exhaust after three hours and will come away in the wash-and-rinse waters instead of being fixed into the fabric effectively.

Please keep in mind the permanence of the colors in your stained or dyed fabrics if you later intend to wash them or use them in further wet techniques, such as painting or printing.

### Health and safety: dyes, paints, and paste

This is a general guideline for all dye, paint, and paste use. The dyes referred to are the Procion MX range from Colourcraft, but the same safety precautions should be used for all fiber-reactive cold-water dyes.

1. Treat all dyeing materials with great care.
2. Keep a set of utensils just for dyeing.
3. Cover all work surfaces with newspaper or polythene.
4. Wear rubber gloves and wash well after use.
5. Do not inhale the dye powder.
6. It is advisable to wear a mask when handling the powder. Fiber-reactive dyes can produce asthma-like symptoms in some people and it is advisable that people with known respiratory problems not handle them.
7. Store the dyes in containers other than those in which food and drink are stored and clearly label them.
8. Be aware of the presence of boiling water, wet floors, and corrosive substances, such as bleach and washing soda.



## Transfer dyes

Transfer dyes use a method of printing called disperse dyeing, in which you paint dyes onto a piece of paper, allow this to dry, and then transfer the dyes onto cloth by heat and pressure. This is usually done with a domestic iron, which you protect by placing clean newsprint/greaseproof paper between the iron and the textile and paper to be ironed.

Transfer dyes are available both in liquid form and as pastels or crayons for drawing. These products are designed for use with synthetics and polycottons. Transfer dyes can also be used on cotton that has first been treated with Transfix, manufactured by Colourcraft (C&A) Ltd.

Often, when making designs with transfer media for fabric, you can cut out shapes from the stained paper before ironing them on to the fabric. Save the waste bits of paper and use them later to transfer their dye onto other fabrics. Decorative paper bags and papers used for wrapping flowers are often made from the industrial transfer-paper waste from printed fabrics. Experiment with ironing these on fabrics; the residue of transfer dye on the surface of the paper is often enough to produce another transfer print.



**Above:** Transfer print from a floral gift bag onto polycotton fabric.

## Drawing media

A variety of drawing media can be used to make marks. Children's chunky wax crayons are useful for making rubbings (*frottage*) and are a cheap alternative to Markal Paintstiks and oil pastels. In fact, they often give a better mark for rubbings. A range of felt pens and fabric wax crayons or oil pastels can be fixed with an iron. Ink pens, biro, and felt pens, permanent (waterproof) and nonwaterproof, give interesting marks. Quink ink gives a most wonderful blue tint when marks are made to disperse with the addition of water. It is worth experimenting with all types of mark-making media, but check their permanency first. Even some waterproof pens can run with the addition of water, dye and pasting methods, which may not be desirable if you want a permanent mark. Likewise, some acrylics and wax crayons are especially designed for school use and therefore tend to be washable!



# Found materials and objects for the mark-making process

Found objects are useful both as materials and as tools for the creative process.

## Surfaces

As you amass potentially useful waste fabrics and paper, note the different qualities of the surfaces to be printed or painted (fragile, heavy, transparent, opaque, colored, patterned) and consider how these can be used. Collect a range of surface materials:

- Printed surfaces, such as old books, manuscripts, photocopies, tickets, postcards, stamps and envelopes.
- Fabric surfaces, including plain, patterned, lace and scrim.
- Textured surfaces, such as wallpaper, string, crumpled paper, or packaging cardboard.

Tear and cut fabrics and papers. Crumple them and layer them on top of one another prior to printing, painting, rubbing with crayons, or mark making.

**Below:** A selection of papers, soap wrappers, teabags, foils and book pages.

