



London artist

**SUSAN STOCKWELL**

London artist Susan Stockwell (Manchester, 1962) creates sculptures, installations, collages, films and drawings. Her work has been exhibited all over the world: at the Victoria & Albert Museum and Tate Modern in London, in New York and recently also at the Tropenmuseum.

## Made from everyday objects

In 2018, the museum acquired its impressive work *Territory Dress*, specially made for NMVW. The dress / installation will be featured in the major exhibition on the legacies of colonialism and slavery. Stockwell is best known for work that she makes on site, including for museums and galleries, but also for metro stations and churches. She uses everyday objects such as toilet paper, recycled computer parts, rubber, tea, and banknotes from all over the world and converts them into accessible and telling works of art.

In her work she expresses 'a connection between that material culture and its history, and between their materiality and contemporary issues'. Stockwell wants to connect to collective memories, desires and environmental shortcomings; aspects that address and challenge social, racial and gender inequality and injustice.

Photo: *Territory Dress* close-up Susan Stockwell 2018 made by Daan van Dartel



## Sewing was my first language

Susan Stockwell was born in the 1960s in Manchester. A city that, while creative and vibrant, struggles with the shabby legacy of a major textile industry: the Industrial Revolution and British colonialism. Her father is a historian and socialist; Susan grows up in a politically aware family. Social injustice such as the class system, poverty and racism have shaped it from an early age. It is these themes that she will incorporate as an artist.

The shape of much of her work is closely related to another important influence on her life: sewing. From an early age she learned to sew and draw and elaborate patterns: "Sewing was my first language." In 1993 she obtained her MA from the Royal College of Art. The first sculpture she makes in the form of a dress is her *Coffee Dress* in 1999, a work of art in which her different identities come together.

## Geo-politics & women's rights

From coffee she goes to tea and then to maps, cartography, and then to study other trade products such as rubber, wool and tobacco. All this from a geo-political perspective. For her, cartography and setting boundaries is a male activity. The importance of women and women's rights also plays an important role in her life. She combines this in her design and artistry.

In her series of dresses she brings this theme together into beautiful works of art. Initially, the dresses seduce, their beauty and delicate nature, because they are made of paper. Only when you get closer do you see what it is about: trade, money, power, injustice. Stockwell made several dresses that refer to this: after *Coffee Dress* (1999) came *Cartographic Dress* (2003), *Empire Dress* (2005), *Colonial Dress* (2008), *Highland Dress* (2009), and *Money Dress* (2010).

Photo: Studio Susan Stockwell, 2018. *Territory Dress* in **the collection of NMVW**



## Origin and present

*Territory Dress* (2018), now in the collection of the NMVW, is a material analysis of the colonial history of the Netherlands. Former colonies are central to an exploiting Europe. Details and big gestures come together in the form of a dress in combination of different fashion styles. She attracts and repels, questions and proves. Curator of Popular Culture and Fashion, Daan van Dartel, wrote **a blog about this dress on Modemuze**.

Other work by Stockwell also examines the qualities of materials in combination with histories and contemporary issues of globalization and power relations. In the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern, for example, she made a fleet of money boats that visitors could "play with."

Photo: *Sail Away* with Esme Susan Stockwell 2013 Tate Turbine Hall created by Miles Roberts

## A new look

In these times of corona, her work from the 90s is very topical again. In this she used toilet paper for large-scale installations, which returned to the factory for recycling after the duration of the exhibition. Stockwell says of this: "They contain 'stains of existence' and act as ready-made signifiers, which I sculpt and interweave in ways that delicately reveal their obscured politics, environmental harm and hidden beauty." Toilet paper as a daily object full of hidden beauty; Stockwell creates new perspectives.