

# altered states

Susan Stockwell's work in paper is a personal critique of the links between imperialism, commodification, desire and identity. By Carol Tulloch



I first became aware of Susan Stockwell's work in 2000: her solo exhibition *Accumulations*, at the Economist Plaza Gallery, eloquently presented a visual treatise on imperialism and commodities – both people and products – and nationhood. This was no aggressive statement against British imperialism, but instead, like some of the materials chosen to mediate Stockwell's narrative – stained paper dress-making patterns, coffee filter cups and tissue – it was a delicate yet profound personal critique on a complex aspect of Britain's historical identity. Stockwell feels passionately about Britain's history and culture from all perspectives. Born in Manchester, her father part-Brazilian, her mother British, Stockwell primarily inherited a political stance from her parents who were life-long socialists.

The essence of Stockwell's work is a crossing of the boundaries between craft and fine art. She works in collage, fibre arts, sculpture, installation and sewing, and is happy in this 'in-between world'. Jill Baird, Curator of Education and Public Programmes at the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology, has argued that the 'traversing of traditional borders, whether they are conceptual or physical, is the beginning of creating transformative spaces' – and this is where Stockwell operates.

Travel and personal heritage have been major spurs in Stockwell's work, but – after training at Sheffield Hallam University 1985-1988 and the Royal College of Art 1991-93 – it took a year-long sojourn in the US in 1997 to formalise her work's ideologies: the political aspects of her work were sharpened when she saw aspects of American culture first-hand, its ruthlessness and its racism – as well as the revelation of the wide range of skin colours and tones there. At the same time, she became fascinated by the vast range of papers available in the US – there are 236 different kinds of kitchen rolls alone. This



THIS PAGE and OPPOSITE: 'Empire Dress', recycled Michelin and Ordnance Survey maps, glue, wire frame, 2005



**ABOVE:** 'Trayne', used paper coffee filters, coffee-stained portion cups stitched with cotton thread, 2000  
**OPPOSITE PAGE:** 'Imperial Quilt' and detail, recycled paper maps, cotton thread, 2.3 x 2.2 m, 2005

interest in materials led to such pieces as *Trayne* (2000), a bustled strapless gown made from stained coffee filters of different shades – reflecting what she calls the 'stains of existence'. Stockwell is currently artist in residence at the Shenghua Arts Centre, Nanjing, China, where she has returned to her exploration of ranges of paper types.

Stockwell does not produce or use a pattern for a work; as a sculptor, she works directly with the material. The paper dress-making patterns are reserved for a further dimension of critique of imperialism, colonialism; the construction of new pieces, new

worlds – pieces and worlds to be 'stitched up', their presence reduced or expanded according to who controls whom. For example, in *Pattern of the World* – acquired by the Word and Image Department of the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2002 – Stockwell painted onto paper dress patterns which had been pinned together to create her base 'canvas', a map of the world in tea, to represent Asia and Europe, and coffee in reference to Africa and the Americas.

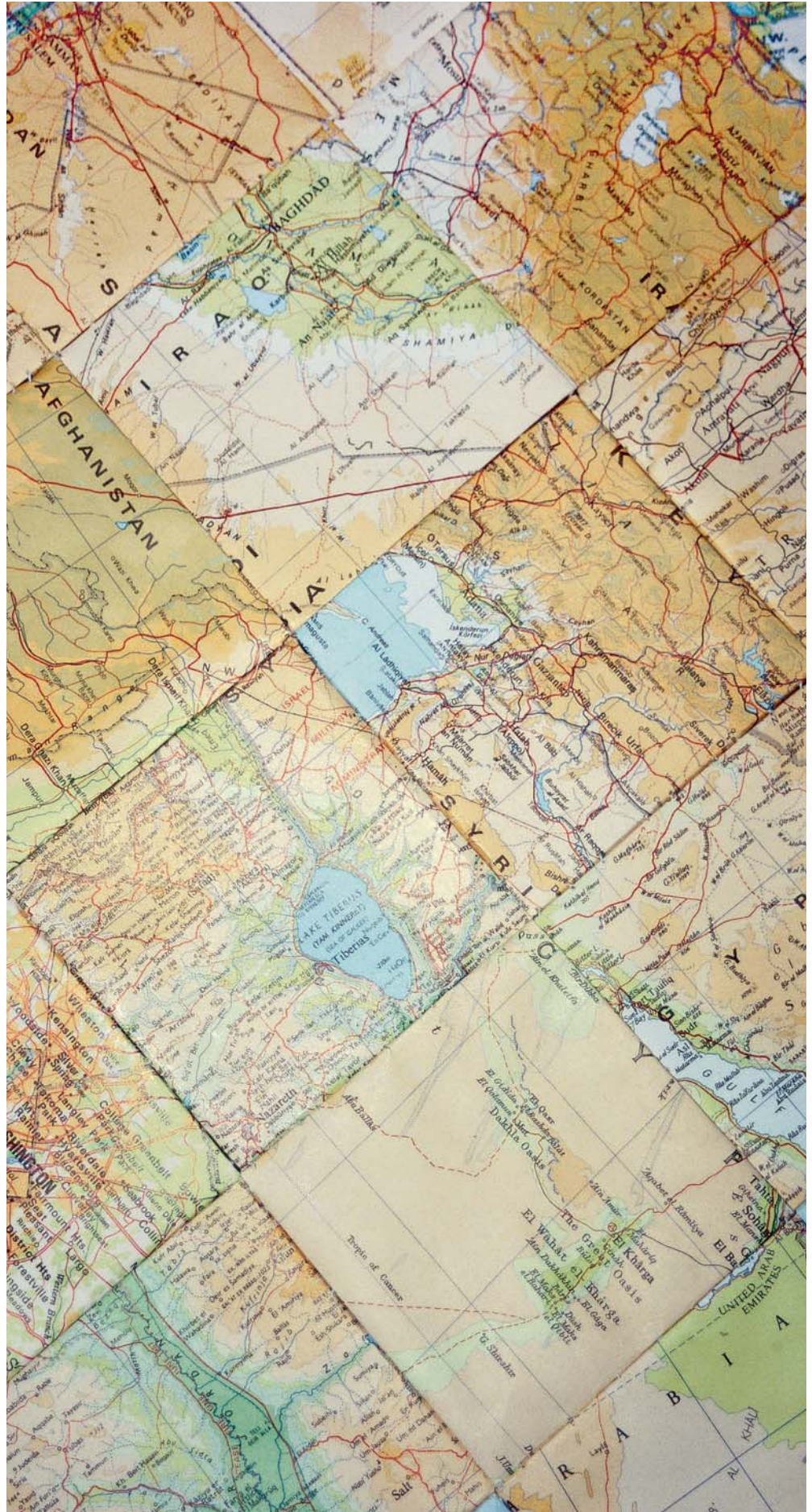
More recently, Stockwell has expanded her repertoire to include quilts. She sees quilting as 'symbolic of the connections between

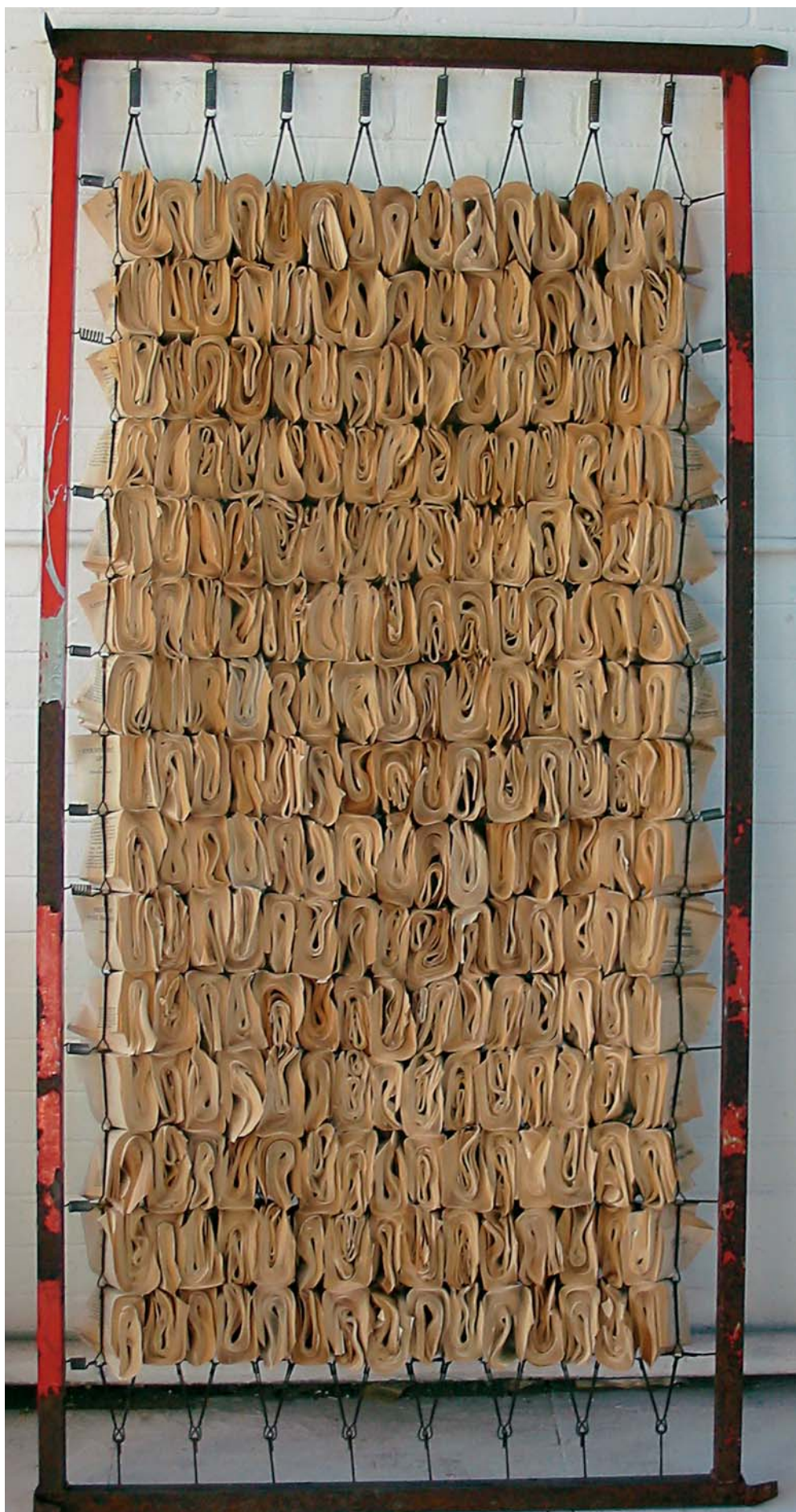
women'; in her own case, her connection with her quilt-making grandmother. Quilting also has a tradition of recycling, the potential to recycle history linking neatly with her visual plays with maps. Quilting can be a metaphor for 'diversity and political correctness': the stitching together of materials can be read as 'connection-making, unification and harmonising'. Her *Imperial Quilt* – first shown in her 2005 solo show *Stitched-Up: Paper and Politics*, at Studio Caparrelli, London – tests such thinking. She describes this piece as beautiful yet disturbing: a map of the world has been cut into small



seven-centimetre patchwork squares and reconfigured by hand-sewing the pieces together. The US makes up the border; other pieces are scattered strategically. Most pertinently, the Middle East and Washington DC are placed at the centre of the quilt, underlining the pervasive presence of American Imperialism. *Imperial Quilt* is also about mass memory, a reminder of the millions round the world who demonstrated against the impending war in Iraq – Stockwell attended the London mass march in February 2003, the diverse throng of women, men and children a human quilt joined together by anger and frustration at the imminent conflict.

Stockwell's current work appears to depart from political commentary, instead exploring romance and desire. But this shift is no great leap for Stockwell, who argues that 'Love and politics are part of the same thing — look at David Blunkett. Most love affairs are political and politics is about desire and aspirations. I think that my work is not just about one aspect.' Not yet shown to the public, the sculpture *BedBook* (2005), as it is tentatively named, developed out of the *Pulp Fantasy Quilt* – a piece composed of Mills and Boon covers linked by long hand-sewn stitches – made for the exhibition *Pulp Fantasy* in 2005. In *BedBook*, Mills and Boon page proofs fill the apertures of an iron bedstead, found discarded in Kings Cross. Some of the titles – *Medicinal Love* and *The Perfect Husband* – are visible, evoking readers' hopes; love, intimacy and passionate romance, graphically located where such feelings are most often acted upon: in bed. Stockwell admits that she embarked on *Pulp Fantasy Quilt* with an ironic eye, but as she read and worked with the books more closely, her attitude became more considered. Jay Dixon, author of *The Romance Fiction of*



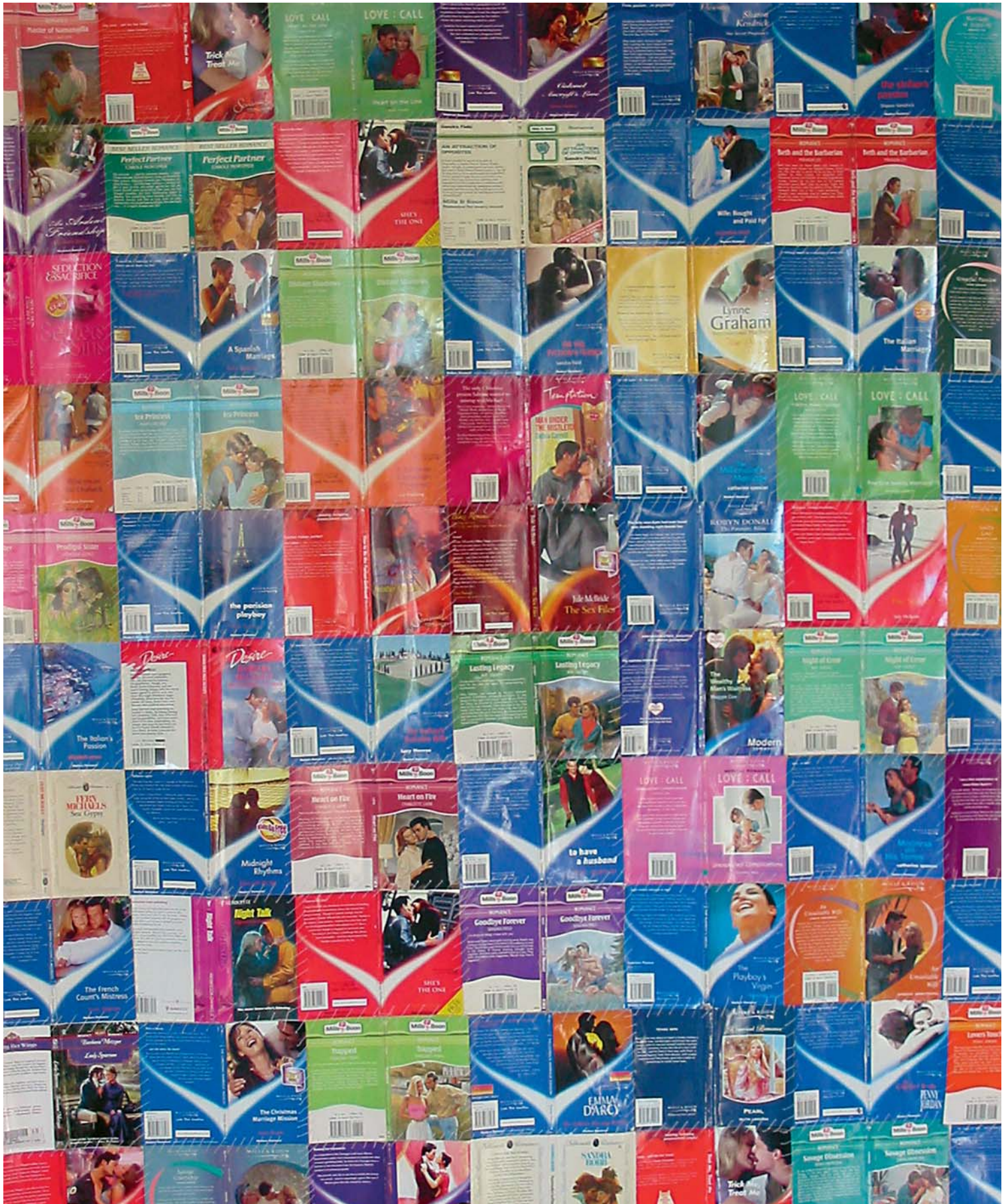


*Mills and Boon, 1909-1990s*, has defended what she considers this much-maligned genre of popular fiction, reassessing it from a feminist perspective. Mills and Boon women, since 1909, have been represented as taking control of their own lives and that of their men, engaging in pre and extra-marital sex: 'The home,' writes Dixon, 'is the place of feminine power into which the hero must be brought.' Rosemary Auchmuty, a specialist in 19th and 20th-century feminist history agrees, arguing that the underlying message in Mills and Boon is that 'women can change men through love... to meet women's standards.' *BedBook* and *Pulp Fantasy Quilt* both explore this territory – after all, what better tools to discuss such issues than a quilt and a bed, complex symbols of home life and relationships encouraging new readings of the concept of love, sexual encounters and the home.

One wonders if deeper links can be made between the Mills and Boon world, and such pieces as *Trayne*. Perhaps we can invoke post-colonial theory, in the shape of African textiles. Historian Jessica Hemmings's claim that 'the intersection between nation and individual continues to search for a balance between the burden of the past and the demands of the hybrid present.' Certainly Stockwell is not the only artist to situate work in this territory – think of Yinka Shonibare's *Gay Victorians*, two Victorian-style bustled dresses using 'traditional' West African fabrics.

Colonialism and imperialism forcibly dispersed people from parts of Africa, via slavery, to European colonies – and while different parts of the African diaspora remain connected through this history, there have been enormous cultural transformations among the constituent parts. Within this discourse, and reflecting it, Stockwell has made personal identity less of a concern in her work than the pursuit of authenticity of self. In complex times – when myriad forms and forces drive cultural process – one thing that can be sincere is the agency of the maker/artist. All of which, for Stockwell, represents further aspects of her interest in the 'stains of existence', and her curiosity about the places in between. ○

Susan Stockwell shows in *Conversations*, a group show at the Ambrosino Gallery, 769 NE 125th St, North Miami, USA, (001) 305 891 5577, from March-May 2006 (dates to be confirmed), where she will be in conversation with Korean-American artist Jean Shin; and in a solo show at 20-21 Visual Arts Centre, St John's Church, Church Square, Scunthorpe, Lincolnshire DN15 6TB, (01724) 297070, in October 2006 (dates to be confirmed).



PHOTOGRAPHS THIS SPREAD © THE ARTIST

THIS PAGE: 'Pulp Fantasy Quilt', Mills and Boon book covers, 2 x 1.4 m, 2005

OPPOSITE PAGE: 'BedBook', recycled Mills and Boon books, bedframe, 1.8 x 1.1 m, 2005