On the nature of using and reusing: An interview with Eliza Kentridge

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Childhood memories and strong family ties are at the base of both Eliza Kentridge's visual art and her poetry. Raised in a Jewish family in South Africa, her parents were anti-apartheid lawyers. After relocating to the UK in her twenties, she now divides her time between her Wivenhoe studio in Essex and her father's London home. Her work creates a dreamlike, enthralling visual world, often contrasting with that of her brother, artist William Kentridge. Akin Oladimeji spoke to the artist on 23 July 2024 about her practice and her exhibition 'Tethering' at Cecilia Brunson Projects, London (11 July – 9 August 2024).

Focusing on intimate, domestic materials, Eliza Kentridge's art reflects the shared experiences of many women artists, exploring the interconnected roles of creator, mother, caregiver and homemaker. The centrepiece of the exhibition at Cecilia Brunson Projects was a large installation made from a patchwork of teabags brewed, dried, emptied and stitched together. The marbled background of copper and caramel tones is overlaid with intricate embroidery, forming a constellation of imagined figures and abstract botanical, cosmic and heraldic symbols. The slow, careful process of embroidery and quilting extends and memorialises time spent with family. Accompanying the larger installation were smaller works, such as napkins collected from various places. Stitched in vibrant thread with deliberate care, these napkins are embroidered with words from cookbooks or with circular designs that resemble the marks left by cups or glasses. Slow to create, they evoke a meditative state of thoughtfulness and comfort in the home and among loved ones. These embroidered pieces celebrate the beauty of everyday life and mark time spent caring for those close to her.

Akin Oladimeji: I want to start with the figure of the *tokoloshe* that occurs in the work. How does it fit into your artistic lexicon?

Eliza Kentridge: The *tokoloshe* is a figure from Southern African mythology, Nguni I think, and it's not something I know much about. But I know that it is quite a nasty sort of spirit that is regarded as frightening. And I think there is a sort of sexual connotation, and the myth that it kills babies in the night... that sort of thing. But my *tokoloshe* has nothing to do with any of that. Actually, mine is a very benign figure. When I was about twenty, a very close friend gave me a carving that he had bought at a shop in South Africa. It was like a crafted carving of balsa wood of this figure with long ears. It had a face, and looked a bit like a hyena maybe, but it was wearing a jacket, a very smart little black jacket and trousers. It had little feet, but it had these big ears and it was called the *tokoloshe*. I still have it and it has the sweetest expression. After my degree, which was English literature, I started to try and be a freelance illustrator and get a bit more into art, and I was doing these quite detailed sort of pen drawings and objects, and I started drawing this *tokoloshe* in great detail. Over the years, it has become my sort of go-to thing when I'm not quite sure what I want to draw, or if I feel I need to add something. Sometimes it is more human looking, sometimes it looks more like a cat. Some people have thought it's a rabbit, but they are very interested in what it's called. But I just always call it a *tokoloshe* because that's what the original thing was called, but it doesn't have any sort of big spiritual significance for me.

Eliza Kentridge, detail of *Untitled*, 2022–present, embroidery installation, photo by Eliot Gelberg-Wilson

AO: I was thinking about how embroidery reminds me of quilting, and sewing, which seem to be female-gendered activities. Are you inspired by other women artists doing that kind of work?

EK: I am inspired by women artists, but I think initially it comes from me having learnt to sew as a child, and my mother sewed and I was taught sewing at school. My grandmother, my father's mother, was a great embroiderer and tapestry maker. And because I grew up in South Africa as a privileged white child, we had people who looked after us. These two women, one of whom in particular, Helen Tolé, used to sew in the evenings, as many domestic workers did, and they made the most exquisite delicate embroideries. In fact, when I really started bringing embroidery into my practice years ago, I tried to replicate that here and there. They were very intricate stitches. So those are my initial influences. I learnt sewing at school; my brothers learnt woodwork, but I didn't. I think it has maybe changed a bit now, but, yes, there are women artists I am interested in. I was always interested in Tracey Emin and her blankets and quilts, and Louise Bourgeois when I discovered her. There is also Annie Albers – all of those fairly obvious people one might be interested in. But I have also been quite interested in some men who have used textiles in their practice. The thing I did battle with, and I think it's ongoing although it's much less of an issue now, is that sewing is seen as 'girly' and as a craft and not worthy of being called art. Although I think that is changing quite a lot.

Eliza Kentridge, *My Friend's Napkin*, 2020, embroidered linen, photo by Lucy Dawkins, courtesy of the artist and Cecilia Brunson Projects

AO: Do you think sewing kind of subverts any patriarchal ideals nowadays? Are contemporary female artists fighting against those stereotypes?

EK: Oh, I think they are. I think it's become a much more visible sort of practice. It's come out of the domestic world and more into the public realm and into the artworld. But I have felt that when men sew, maybe it gets noticed more. I remember going to a Frieze fair, one of the early ones, and there were some quite beautiful embroidered pieces by men. I can't remember who they were, and it was sort of unusual. And I was like, 'Oh, it's a man'. Maybe that helped make it more interesting to the collector, possibly, but for me personally, I like the female… I like the domestic, the way it links to a domestic realm and yet can rise above it. That's just for me, because I live in this… I live a quite domestic sort of life, and it fits in well with my world. But there are people I follow on Instagram who are men that are quilters and embroiderers. So I think it's become much more OK for boys to say they do this (sewing, that is).

AO: Your fellow South African, Igshaan Adams, [1] seems to do loads of sewing and, or at least use fabric. That's the thing that stands out for me in his practice.

EK: It's really interesting. I was very influenced by the Asafo flags from Ghana, the Fante flags. Do you know them? They're stunning. They're big, they're not embroidered, but they're sewn, these applique banners, which have a sort of quasi-military look, like local military groups that meet and wave their flags. It must come from some much earlier time when people were actually fighting. But they all illustrate these different proverbs. I had seen this exhibition, and I loved it. And so I've made many flags, although they've been framed and not actually hung as flags. Also, there's an Asafo Instagram account. And I look at it and they seem to be made by men sitting with sewing machines in some small places around Ghana. And, of course, tailors have often mainly been men.

AO: My tailor in Lagos is a man.

EK: There you go. So what sewing is done by men, and what sewing is done by women? Also, a few years ago the V&A had a big quilt exhibition. Did you see that? Do you remember? There was a huge one made by prisoners, and they used to be made by men on ships. So I don't know if it's perhaps a more modern thing that men don't sew, maybe.

AO: You've mentioned domesticity. How does being a mother and part-time carer for your father impact on your work, your practice?

EK: Being a mother obviously came before being a part-time carer for my dad. I got back into my practice, changed into being more sewing-based when I had my second child because I didn't have a studio. I was working in the house, I had a toddler and I was holding a baby. I had been making papier-mâché figures and drawing with pastels, and it was very messy. I couldn't really do that and hold the baby. But sewing was clean. I could put it away easily when I needed to. And it was something I'd always done since I was a child. So it was nice coming back to it. I kind of gave myself permission to do that. She's nearly 30, that child. So I've been doing that for a long time, but I've always drawn as well and did collage and printmaking. But I would fit that into school hours, obviously, and so I kind of worked part-time as an artist. I did that when they were growing up. They're all grown up now, but I'm still on call as a mother. Two of them live outside London, and I do visit them now and then. My partner lives in South Africa. So I travel around quite a bit, and to have a medium I can easily just take with me is nice. Sewing is a very transportable medium, especially as I've been moving around more; I used to have a studio but I no longer do. It's harder for me to have stuff on the walls that I'm working on, which is frustrating at times. It really helps if you can put stuff up and step back and come back and see it the next day. I miss that, actually. And I'm sure one day I will have that again. But for now, my lifestyle is sort of nomadic. My practice sort of fits into my lifestyle and being with my dad. That's why the tea and quiltmaking have been a big thing in the last couple of years, but also some very quick collage paper collages which I love doing, which is a sort of antidote to the slowness of the sewing.

Eliza Kentridge, *Untitled*, 2022–present, embroidery installation, photo by Lucy Dawkins, courtesy of the artist and Cecilia Brunson Projects

AO: How did the hieroglyphics form part of the narrative in the tapestry as well?

EK: I think once I started working with the teabags, I saw that they reminded me of ancient parchment and cave paintings. Just the actual teabags without any embellishment. They're quite extraordinary looking, and sort of old forms. I started seeing the shape of teabags and the possibilities of images on the teabags everywhere I went. So I went to the British Museum and was looking at hieroglyphics in the ancient Egyptian section. I thought that I could make a version of those on the teabags. There's no big narrative; it's not that I've learned what they mean and I'm trying to spell out a message – but I just thought, I think

they're very beautiful. But they're actually rather hard to reproduce in sewing because of their sort of angular nature and trying to also get the colouring. It doesn't work so well on the teabags. There are other things I've taken from the British Museum. I also started taking photographs wherever I went of its floor tiles, which are patterned like in museums in Berlin, where I stayed for a while. They have rather amazing tiles, they're wooden, like parquet flooring, so I thought 'let me try and see if I can do that on teabags'.

AO: That's fascinating. So, speaking of tea bags, Arte Povera comes to mind when I see your work. Were you deliberately alluding to that?

EK: No; I knew about Arte Povera, but I hadn't thought about it till you sent me your questions and I looked the artists up again. Of course, they're all about using these found, rough materials that are there in the world and getting away from studio art painting practice. So I have in my mind the thought that you can use anything to make art, which comes from having seen that kind of work but also from other people making art out of all kinds of stuff. What was interesting was that I hadn't realised Alighiero Boetti, whose work I've seen many times, made tapestries – but he didn't really make them. He had women from Afghanistan doing that, and I think I was very critical when I first saw them because I really liked them. Do you know them? Those rugs were made for him. He designed them. So when I first saw them years ago, I thought, 'It's such a cheat. Such a male thing. Of course he's got the idea. He gets the kudos, but the women don't.' But now I kind of think, 'Well, they had work. They have this dignity in doing the work. He paid them.' I think there were some instances where they could add their own words. So I think I am less critical of him in that sense. But I don't think I could ever do it, to go and find a thousand women to sew something for me. I would feel... not that I could afford it either. But I think that's the way you get noticed: people help you make things on large scales.

AO: Exactly, I mean, there's a reason why Anselm Kiefer's work... anytime he shows at the White Cube gallery, why everyone is amazed by the epic scale.

EK: How does he do it? Does he have helpers?

AO: Of course.

EK: I have seen some Anselm Kiefer's. They are huge, aren't they?

AO: Yes, they tend to be gargantuan. And that's because he has lots of assistance, of course.

EK: I'm not against that. I think it's nice if you can have collaborative working and help when you have the vision. When I started working with the teabags, I was thinking of El Anatsui's works, which I've loved since I first saw them years ago. Of course one person can't physically make those things.

AO: Of course not, no.

EK: I probably could say, 'OK, I'm gonna get a little team of helpers, and we'll work on the tea bags together.' And maybe one day I will, but I think I'm sort of selfish. It's like, 'No, I'm doing it for myself.' But it is an ongoing project. I may get the help sewing them together. I do have help with gathering them and drying them, emptying them out. Suzanne, who looks after my dad... a fabulous woman... we have a sort of teabag farm drying out the teabags that we use in the house. But with the actual sewing there is something in me that's a bit resistant. Whereas my brother, of course, does his own drawings. He has all these great ideas. He has his very beautiful lettering that he does. But he's got a wobbly hand. He has a studio assistant who paints beautifully, so it is Damon who does the lettering. There are other people who will do the woodcarving because William can't do all that carving.

Eliza Kentridge, detail of *Untitled*, 2022–present, embroidery installation, photo by Lucy Dawkins, courtesy of the artist and Cecilia Brunson Projects

AO: Your art raises ideas of sustainability. Do you feel an artist can steer viewers towards being more conscious of recycling and being ecofriendly?

EK: I think it can, probably. I know with my own art, with the teabags – which is hardly saving the planet because they're not very biodegradable – I don't think so. It just saves them from landfill. But I think what people are interested in is that I've used them. At first they don't recognise what they are. Often, they never thought of a teabag as something you could reuse in any way. And so I think it makes people interested in how things can be reused or saved. I think children probably could be quite influenced by the work. Also, I use lots of everyday materials that otherwise would be thrown away. It's probably to do with coming from South Africa. All over Africa, where people don't have access or don't have resources or art materials, the beautiful things people make out of plastic bags, out of wire, out of junk, are exquisite. Some of it's not that great, but there are a lot of very beautiful things, and there's lots of ingenuity when you are creative but cash strapped.

AO: I noticed that.

EK: Yes. And even if you just want to draw, if you can just get a stick or a stone and scratch it on the pavement you could. So I keep telling myself, 'OK, I'm not allowed to buy any more material. I have a lot of fabric and threads, don't buy any more.' I've got to use up what I've got, which could take me years. I did hear people kind of marvelling at the use of tea bags and maybe considering, 'Oh, so maybe it's not just a throwaway kind of object.' So you never know how people will reconsider the everyday item. El Anatsui, with the huge hangings made out of bottle tops... that's material that's been saved from being chucked out and wasted.

AO: So you're also an award-winning poet. How does your poetry inform your visual art practice?

EK: They sort of exist together and separately. I don't tend to be writing poetry when I'm immersed in making something visual, or vice versa. I think I'm a very visually interested person. I like looking at things and noticing things, but the poetry is often like an actual sort of rendering of things I've seen and felt and remembered. It's slightly different things going on, but they're coming from the same brain, I guess. I've always liked writing and using words. There's a piece of the poetry that they put on the wall at Cecilia Brunson, which was nice. I wasn't really expecting that and it slightly aligns with the visual pieces, even though it was written long before I actually started thinking of working with teabags. So it's interesting where you find the connections, but it's because it's coming from the same person.

AO: Exactly, they kind of feed on each other in a way, even indirectly. Subconsciously, I'm sure these things work that way. And speaking of things feeding on each other, do you see a link now in how you and your brother, William, exhibit a sense of humour and using words in your work?

EK: I do think we have similarities. We do at times have a lot of the same humour. William didn't use words in his art for quite a long time. He is much more of an intellectual than I am, much more of a heavy-hitting artist. And I'm completely inspired by him and all of that. But I'm not in competition, and it's good to be quite a lot younger. Being a little sister makes life easier, I think. But I do remember, when I started making these works based on road signs, which I then adapted, and I told him about it, and I was all excited, and he said 'that's such a great idea'. He then revealed he had also just made this thing with words, and so it turned out we had been doing it separately but simultaneously. We've never worked together. I've been around him working quite a lot, but we've never done anything together.

AO: You were probably his first studio assistant.

EK: In a sense. Me and my younger brother loved helping when we were quite young, helping with his high school projects, silkscreen posters and things. But when I go back to Johannesburg, I really like being around in his two studios. He's very generous and encourages me to come in and use them. And, so, yeah, I feel very lucky to be his sister.

AO: What future projects are you excited about?

EK: Good question. Well, this teabag project seems to have legs. I feel like people are very interested, and it can just go on almost forever. So I am definitely going to keep making more embroidered tea bags, but possibly do things differently. I might make some changes here and there and probably replicate a lot of stuff too. But I think I also want to get back, maybe, to making some more flags. I'm part of a printmaking collective in the village where I live, and I've not been there very much. I really want to get back to some nice old-fashioned drypoint etching or actual drawing. I think I need to get back to a bit of drawing, but in terms of something bigger, I think I need to push the teabags as far as I can.

[1] See 'Igshaan Adams' on the Boston Institute of Contemporary Art's website

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Akin Oladimeji is a critic, lecturer and writer. He is about to start a PhD funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council at University College, London.

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