

JESSICA HEMMINGS ed., *The Textile Reader*. Berg Publishers, London and New York, 2012. 512 pp., 40 b/w illus. £24.99. ISBN: 9781847886347

I am always suspicious of 'Readers'. The term seems to imply the final word, or everything one will ever need to know about a subject. This is confirmed by the contributor list that adds authorial gravitas and reads like a 'who's who?', a homage to the star names of the discipline. Such tomes neatly categorise, classify and select, bringing together the best (whatever that might be) in about 600 pages, in a manner that through this process marginalises other, less well-read texts. But who am I to be wary of this current publishing vogue? Both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, students are increasingly reluctant to read extensively and likewise less keen to trawl through shelves of books, so a text that includes all of one's reading list and some, is financially, and to a certain extent, educationally, viable.

My primary concern with other texts of this type is their tone; they speak, regardless of intention, to a well-versed and read audience — they preach to the choir — and encourage opportunities for academic backslapping that confirm pre-existing knowledge of the discipline, or conversely, instil a desire to critique the editorial and choice of papers. I am suspicious, therefore, because they emphasise a hierarchy that is based on expectation rather than reflection, and as such elevate the anticipated rather than consider the field as a fluid, multifarious and changeable entity.

Hemmings's *The Textile Reader*, however, bears little similarity to that which has been previously described. With a real lightness of touch, she acknowledges the constraints of such a text whilst presenting the reader with a snapshot, a taste, a sense (and I use these words deliberately) of the varied and vibrant scope of textiles as a discipline. Hierarchies are side-lined, and the frequently dominant voices of constructed weave and knit, share centre stage with

print, embroidery, quilting, basketry and tapestry; the past is aligned with the present; art, design, craft and fashion textiles are all in evidence, and academic voices commune with makers through published papers, experiences and new forms of communication, such as artist statements and blogs. Yes; the book includes the great and the good, the expected and anticipated, but equally extends the remit to embrace the innovation within the field, incorporating smaller, new voices, perspectives and media. *The Textile Reader* creates a space in which 'textile', in all its guises, can be understood as more than practice, more than a series of disciplines, methods or materials, but a holistic, all-embracing idea that encompasses the physical to the imaginary and the sensory to the remembered, and everything in-between. This is not to suggest that here an understanding of textiles has been diluted to mean 'everything'; quite the contrary. Here, textiles embraces the possibilities of being anything, boundless innovation, skilful articulation through the mind, body, hand, eye, voice. Hemmings has, it seems, created a text that establishes a democracy whilst acknowledging the vast contribution the subject offers beyond the academy.

What is most apparent in the organisation of texts are the ways in which different perspectives address similar themes. Most obvious is the tactility of textiles — the first section — in which the sensory engagement between body and object, the animate with the inanimate are critiqued psychoanalytically (Hamlyn) as one would expect, but also through the experience of cloth by wearing, draping and feeling (Harper), as well as linguistically, as the experience of touch is communicated through fictional description (Dinesen/Blixen). This example also highlights a theme that runs throughout the Reader — poetics, language, emotion — new approaches to the essence of textiles. So, the emphasis is on sensation and the articulation of the largely subjective (Beesley; Johnson; Barnett; Miller; Hawthorne) and it is this that sets *The Textile Reader*

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apart from others; it appropriates, reorganises and refocuses existing, published work and finds new voices, new interpretations and new ways of understanding and positioning textiles as a result. This Reader is not merely a collection, but more of an interrogation that speaks from the past to the future.

With this in mind, *The Textile Reader* is not a 'page turner', but a constant companion, a new friend that has been there and done that, and thus offers the reader a platform from which to consider and develop the future of the discipline.

JO TURNEY  
*Bath Spa University*