

Christopher Duncan and Joseph Yen



Trusting Our Hands

RDS Gallery

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by Jane Malthus

Christopher Duncan's and Joe Yen's works in this exhibition use textiles as a vehicle and take inspiration from geometric abstraction to make their cloths and garments. Dedicated to slowing the mad pace of city life that has lost touch with natural rhythms, Joe makes at a studio gallery called Tür on Auckland's Karangahape Road where Christopher's weaves are displayed alongside work of a few other designers.

Textiles, whether fibres, yarns, or fabrics, are a fertile and intense medium for artists. Having been part of human life for thousands of years they carry and convey personal, geographical, cultural and technological histories and knowledge. Their colours, naturally occurring or applied by dyeing or printing are equally loaded messengers. Christopher and Joe are both mindful of the long memories built into their textile fibre and material choices but don't let those overburden their artworks.

Lines or stripes and square or rectangular shapes convey histories too. Reminiscent of natural and built environments and the works of many other artists, here they are made textural and tactile, given internal structure from warp and weft yarns, and sculptural shape from folds or wrinkles.

Christopher weaves yarn by hand into beautiful cloths that can hang as art works, be worn as shawls or cut and sewn into garments. His yarns are spun (by others) from natural fibres: merino, alpaca, mohair, possum, cotton, linen, and some are then wrapped in gold leaf. Most are newly spun; some come from older sources, such as deceased estates. Stripes of colour and texture result from using different fibres, yarns and weave structures, then hand- (or actually feet-) fulling the textile after it comes off the loom, by stamping on it in a bath. These techniques are ages old, but still used around the world as well as in the revival of slow textiles and fashion.

Juxtaposing different fibres in the same cloth creates texture, highlights visual and tactile differences between stripes and mixes other fibre properties, such as wool or hair's ability to trap air and keep the wearer warm with linen's lustre and cotton and wool's absorbency. These cloths exude comfort.

Weaving is such an integrated combination of art and science. The weaver needs technical knowledge and expertise, a deep understanding of the properties and interactions of fibres, skill in

colour and pattern, and a mathematical mind to work out the threading of the loom in order to create particular weave structures. This must be combined with a passion for creativity and intuition in order to make beautiful and appealing cloth. Once at the loom Christopher works instinctively, letting his loom's rhythm and his own textile artefact memories inspire his choices of yarn, weave types, colour and areas of inlaid wefts. While the stripes and rectangles grow from changing the weft yarn or adding extra wefts, the resultant patterns in the cloth can surprise even the weaver, because most of the cloth is hidden during the making process.

Joe's equally creative and intuitive process begins with previously worn garments. He unpicks worn silk or cotton kimonos to create new garments that reference rural Japanese dress and the tradition of Boro garments, as well as western patchwork practices. Working in a subtle but nevertheless lively palette, and with mostly square or rectangular shapes, different cloths are joined together, overlapped, or placed adjacent to one another in his exhibition garments. The patches are, like those in Boro garments, functional as well as decorative, as some of the reused fabrics are delicate after their previous lives and the cleaning they receive prior to their new iterations. Some patches are stitched by hand to emphasise their shape or edges. The weave structures and printed, dyed or woven patterns in the cloths lure the eye to parts of the garment, and remind the wearer and viewer of the original use of these textiles.

Full of repeating shapes and patterns and abstract and seemingly random placements, they attract the gaze and tease the mind while draping and folding on the body. These garments hold memories of other wearers, places and times, but are practical for us, now and tomorrow, with their many functional pockets allowing us to carry our current preoccupations, and hidden layers in some to add warmth. Their ongoing life of wear and fading, washing and drying will evolve them further, adding to their stories.

Christopher Duncan, who began weaving in 2012, following a career in the fashion industry, is one of the most prominent weavers of his generation. He has exhibited extensively in New Zealand, including the Pah Homestead, and Objectspace, and was awarded Dame Doreen's Gift (Blumhardt Foundation) in 2018. Duncan's work is exhibited throughout New Zealand and Japan and is held in the collections of Auckland Museum Tamaki Paenga Hira.

Joseph Yen is an Auckland based craftsman working in clothing design and silver, who works under the moniker, Thyen. He is interested in ideas of memory, pattern and repetition which are reflected in a distinct combination of pattern-making and collage. In addition to practicing his own craft constructing unique pieces of clothing and jewellery, Yen runs a small gallery, Tür, on Karangahape Road.

Jane Malthus is a dress historian and honorary curator for the dress collection at the Otago Museum with a background in textiles, clothing and fashion, history and fine arts. Her research explores historical, social and cultural intersections and implications of dress and textiles used by nineteenth and twentieth century New Zealanders. Recent work includes a chapter, 'Dressing Settlers in New Zealand: Global Inter-connections', for *Dressing Global Bodies: The Politics of Fashion in World History, 1600-2000*, ed. Beverly Lemire and Giorgio Riello (Routledge UK, 1919), and a conference paper investigating current issues of textile materials supply at 'The End of Fashion', an international conference held at Massey University.

Cover image: 'Untitled stripes 3' (Christopher Duncan, 2020, linen, alpaca, merino, mohair, old Japanese cotton, silk & gold)

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Published September 2020 by RDS Gallery, on the occasion of the exhibition 'Christopher Duncan and Joseph Yen with Kate Fitzharris: Trusting Our Hands', 11 September – 3 October 2020, RDS Gallery, 6 Castle Street, Dunedin.

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