

Exhibition Review

Françoise Dupré, *Autres Mers (Other Seas)*:
Crafting the Everyday, Here and There

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**The Women's Library, London Metropolitan University, London,
May 26–October 1, 2011**

It is no coincidence that sculptor Françoise Dupré has chosen the Women's Library as the venue for her solo exhibition. Formerly an East London washhouse, now the Women's Library, it is today the cultural "home" of the most extensive collection of women's history in the UK. This internationally renowned resource, tucked away in the heart of East London's Whitechapel district aims to inspire and share issues concerning women's lives. It is a highly appropriate venue for this exhibition.

Oriented around domesticity and the complexity of women's lives, Dupré's work celebrates women's collective and individual creativity by repositioning the crafts of knitting and stitching, commonly associated with the domestic, within a site-specific context. Two primary areas of investigation are intertwined here; first, the performative quality of knitting

and stitching, and secondly, the transformation of space through ornament and crafting. Concerned with form and structure, Dupré's installations respond sympathetically to this challenging gallery space. This complex interior, housing an enclosed seminar area, together with a balcony and walkway above are clearly of inspiration to Dupré where every piece has been carefully crafted and considered within this spatial setting (Figure 1).

The interior has been transformed and feels reminiscent of a walled city with highly patterned traditional Byzantine architecture. The attention to detail, together with the execution of the installations, clearly marks Dupré as a highly accomplished craftswoman.

Formally trained through minimalist principles, Dupré directly responds to the space

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Figure 1

A view of the gallery encompassing: *Fruits étrangers (Strange Fruits)*, 2009–2011 (center)—plastic bottle tops, recycled metal rings from lampshades, curtain wire, hooks, waxed twine, white plastic-coated galvanized wire, cable ties, and clothes airers. Hanging installation. *Fence*, 2011 (left)—white plastic-coated galvanized wire, Lycra tights and fabric, electric tape, Gaffa tape, bamboo canes, cup hooks, and rubber tubing. Wall and floor installation. *Venus*, 2002–2011 (back wall)—children's socks, thread, and wadding. Installation in four glass cabinets around the Exhibition Hall. *Pods*, 2009–2011 (center ground)—Lycra tights and fabric, lenses, netting, rice, Gaffa tape, and socks. Floor and hanging installation. Image credit: FXP.



and alters the gallery by creating ephemeral installations using recognizable everyday materials made by easily accessible craft skills such as French (spool) knitting techniques and stitching. A small glass case houses Dupré's personal collection of spools, many of which are handmade using found everyday objects: bobbins, chopsticks, nails, and gaffer tape, clearly illustrating Dupré's intention to make work and use tools obtainable to all. I was immediately drawn to these beautiful primitive tools, their simplicity and child-like quality draws the visitor in, and there is clearly something for all within this exhibition.

A collection of "bricollage," Do-it-Yourself paraphernalia are used to create the installation work: bamboo sticks, gaffer tape, and hooks, together with yarns, plastic tubing, bra strap ribbons, electric wire, plastic bottle tops, and polypropylene shopping bags are all exploited to symbolize the

rituals of everyday life through the creation of highly colorful and patterned installations. The concept of the "make do and mend" culture is clearly embodied here. The use of these functional materials and methods belies or contradicts the complexity implicit within the pieces. Concerned with "the art making in the everyday" (de Certeau 1980) Dupré examines the ways in which we individualize mass culture by transforming things from a utilitarian status into a new creative visual context. Further, the concepts of "making special" (Dissanayake 1995) and "crafting of space" (Alfody and Helland 2008) permeate the work.

As you enter the gallery, a wall of brightly colored decorative flower motifs engulfs you. These patterns, influenced by a resurgence of interest in textile craft making, reference traditional patterns such as the intricate Fair Isle knitting patterns of the Shetland Islands, together with decorative surfaces

such as patterned wallpapers. Made from large polypropylene bags, commonly used by women to transport personal belongings such as shopping and clothing from one from place to another, *Screens (flowers)* (2011) reappropriates this familiar material to create highly patterned wall pieces that encompass these everyday experiences of women (Figure 2).

Overwhelming pattern becomes a reference here to the power of ornament to change the building's form and structure into a sculptural surface. Influenced by Louise Bourgeois's early work, Dupré creates work that encompasses a hybrid of human

and architectural attributes, which, through metaphor suggests layers of complex and contradictory ideas around femininity and the home.

A woman who carries packages is responsible for what she carries and they are very fragile, and she is totally responsible. Yes, it is a fear of not being a good mother. (Morris 2007)

As a French-born, London-based artist, Dupré is interested in the unspoken language of women's visual crafts and culture. Her practice considers a broad range of sociocultural contexts and in part focuses on the transnational experience for many women.

Through her work Dupré reveals vernacular and creative skills that are hidden, often marginalized, and lost through transient migration, war, and globalization. The use of bags as a portable vessel references the stories of travel by women where the qualities of textiles as a portable medium are used as metaphor (Figure 3).

Renowned for her community-based and residential projects, Dupré has developed her own artist-led collaborative-participatory model of art in the public sphere. This, however, is not the main concern for this particular exhibition, which explores her core issues as a solo artist.

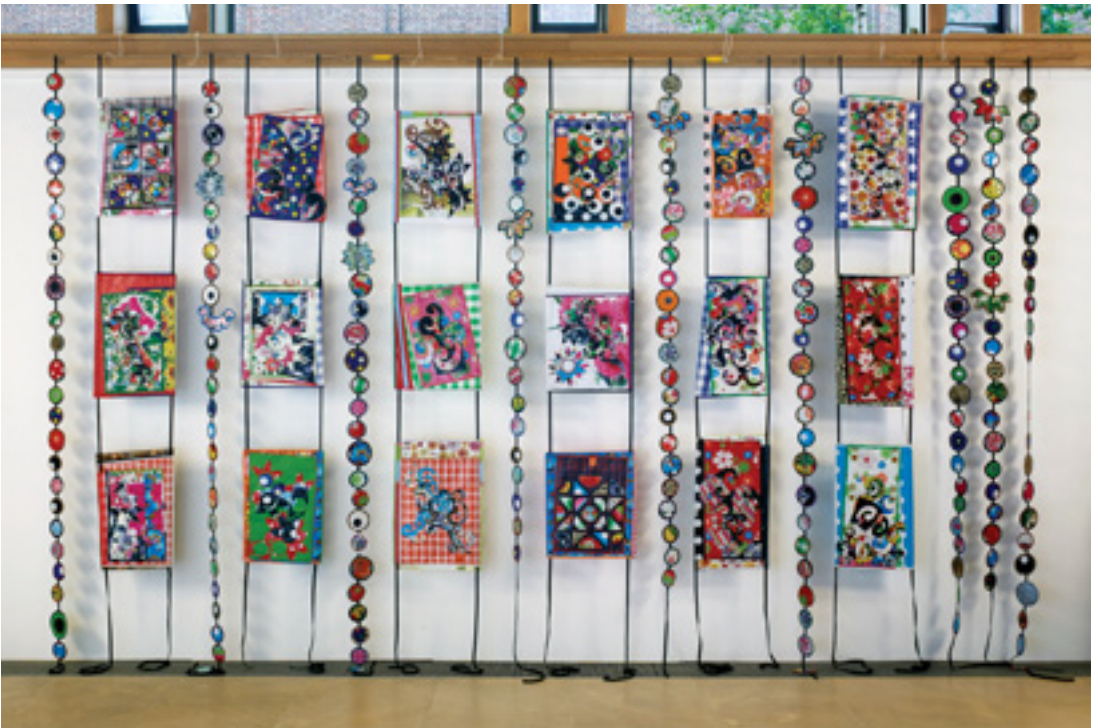


Figure 2

Screens (flowers), 2011—woven and printed polythene from carrier bags, black spiral sleeve tape, thread, quilting pins, bamboo canes, and white plastic-coated galvanized wire. Wall hanging installation. Image credit: Françoise Dupré.

Figure 3

Screens (flowers), 2011—woven and printed polythene from carrier bags, black spiral sleeve tape, thread, quilting pins. Image credit: Françoise Dupré.



There is only one piece in the exhibition that has been generated through her collaborative-participatory projects. *OUVRAGE [uvra:z]* part of the “here and there” research project and residency at the French Cultural Centre in Mostar, which was realized through a series of workshops with women and has been reinstalled specially for the exhibition. Displayed in the glass cabinet normally reserved for the Library’s collection of suffragette banners, this large collaborative work celebrates the collective

experience of “crafting” together, sharing memories and telling stories, and clearly evokes parallels with the lives of the suffragettes. In conversation with Dupré, she explains her decision to include this artwork in the exhibition:

The aim of my collaborative participatory projects is always, like with my individual work, about making an artwork/ installation to be publicly viewed.

Within an enclosed glass cabinet there are two rows of colorful

Figure 4

Venus, 2002–2011—children's socks, thread, and wadding. Image credit: FXP.



knitted sculptures (*Venus*, 2002–2011; Figure 4). On closer inspection, these playful almost child-like primitive pieces reveal their material: a child's sock carefully unstitched and faced with another. These stuffed pieces are clearly symbolic and reference the iconic female figures, symbols of fertility and rejuvenation within Cycladic sculpture. Here, Dupré again clearly references her muse, Bourgeoise, this time in her "soft" fabric work such as *Fragile Goddess*, 2002 (Morris 2007).

What was striking for me about this exhibition was the diversity with which Dupré employs her skills as sculptor, interior designer, craft maker, and pattern maker to recontextualize knitting and stitching to visually celebrate the lives of women across cultures and artistic boundaries. Her accessible use of pattern, color, and ornamental skills breathe new life into feminism where Decoration with a capital D, is reactivated here as a powerful instrument for political engagement.

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