

RUST DYEING: Corrosion to Creation

BY WENDY FELDBERG

BACKGROUND: Rio Wrenn,
Inventory; 2010; silk, rust, patina,
stainless steel; 24 in x 70 ft.

FAR TOP RIGHT: Cecilia Heffer,
Identidad; 2010; rusted silks and
cottons, eucalyptus and natural dyes;
photo transfer, machine stitched onto
a soluble substrate; 950 x 1200 mm.

FAR BOTTOM RIGHT: Alice Fox,
Tide Marks Book #29 (detail);
2013; artist's book: paper, rust print,
collagraph print; hand stitch;
15 x 210 cm.

Familiar themes in fiber art, concepts such as decay, impermanence, and the fleeting nature of memories, have found apt expression—literal and figurative—in works that use pigments obtained from rusted metals exposed to ageing conditions such as heat, acid, weather, etc. Rust's (iron oxide) long history in mark-making across cultures continues to excite interest among contemporary fiber artists, including those using other natural dyes.

REGINA BENSON

A committed environmentalist, fine artist Regina Benson has developed an impressive body of rusted art textiles distinguished by carefully planned, complex markmaking and an enveloping physical presence. Her large-scale rust-pigmented and printed environmental installations celebrate nature and the history of human culture and, while mourning losses, warn us about future dangers.

For Benson, art, like science, reveals the invisible. Her mastery of complex processes (many of which she freely shares), rooted deeply in expert knowledge of dye chemistry, local Colorado geology, terrain, and plant life, allows her to replicate results without stifling artistic spontaneity. Burying, burning, painting, folding, and successively layering her textiles with rust are methods she uses to communicate powerful and passionate messages about the preservation of beauty and value in human culture in general and in her own natural surroundings in particular. Benson tells us: "As in much of my work, I marry image to process." Thus, the iron oxide pigment (which she prepares after harvesting it from her "rust garden") that prints, stains, and dyes her textile substrates is intended as both messenger and message.

In works that call attention to the threat of environmental pollutants such as acid rain, Benson presents a paradox via beautiful textiles that surround the viewer with their presence. *Hard Rain* and *Western Rain* express her profound attachment to Colorado naturescapes. Though seductively attractive in terms of color and markmaking, rust in these works stands not only for the pleasure of standing in a heavy downpour, but also for the destructive effects of acid rain as it leaches into the soil. Representing loss but with the hope of recovery, the rust-marked works *Unearthed*, *Ancient Message*, and *Eroded Message* witness to cultural values scarred and eroded yet surviving in new form.

Benson's treatment of ancient structures seems to express a contemporary concern: What have we lost or gained since the advent of the



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digital communication age? Explore more of Regina Benson's work at www.reginabenson.com.

ALICE FOX

Alice Fox's art practice combines traditional textile genres such as hand embroidery and weaving with print processes that include natural dyeing and eco printing.

Rust printing is one of several processes in Fox's mark-making repertoire, chosen to convey a personal message about time and a sense of place. During her recent art residency at Spurn Point in northeast England, the coastal landscape attracted Fox to use rusted metal objects washed up on the shore nearby. Because Spurn is a nature reserve and plants are protected, Fox sought other natural or found materials, not only for their interesting mark-making potential,

OSI PHOTOGRAPHY



REGINA BENSON



ALICE FOX



THIS PAGE
 ABOVE: Alice Fox, **Tide Line** (one of 25 units); 2013; tapestry weave in cotton with found metal and seawater; 6 x 12 cm.
 RIGHT: Regina Benson, **Western Rain**; 2009; silk; dimensional curved concave work hangs from ceiling; 54 x 42 x 21 in.

OPPOSITE PAGE
 TOP: Cecilia Heffer, **Abuelo**; 2010; rusted silks and cottons, natural dyes; photo transfer, machine stitched onto a soluble substrate; 18500 x 1650 mm. Photo image: Mapuche Indian in Chile, 1860s by Odber Heffer Bisset



PAUL RYLOU

but also for their capacity to convey an authentic sense of place, especially the coastal landscapes of Spurn: “I wanted to make color that was of the place. I couldn’t pick the plants but there was loads of rusty stuff on the beach.”

In *Spurn Cloth*, *Shifting Sands*, *Tide Line*, and *Tide Marks*, Fox used shoreline flotsam and jetsam, seaweed, and seawater to make marks on textiles and papers, incorporating the prints into artworks.

Using natural fibers and dyes, Fox usually colors her collections of printed and stitched textiles and artist book papers in a soothing range of neutral grays, tans, soft reddish-browns, gentle blacks, creams, and whites. Hand-stitched encrustations, rich and full and melded with layers of seaweed, rust, and tea-tannin printed marks, offer tactile and visual experiences of simplicity, minimalism, and purity of line.

Fox is prudent when working with rusted metals and natural dyes, aware of the need for studio safety and using rust cautiously, chiefly in the context of found materials on the seacoast. As for her art’s longevity: she believes that both she and her rusted works come naturally with a “Best Before” date.

As a new member of the prestigious UK Textile Study Group, Fox is planning collaborative works as well as a book about her artistic processes, including rust printing. Visit www.alicefox.co.uk to keep up with Fox’s new work.

CECILIA HEFFER

Rust pigment prints and dyes in Cecilia Heffer’s work act as changing signifiers of home: the home in Chile she left as a child, and her beloved adoptive home in Australia.

In Heffer’s series *Rust Suite*, rust is employed as a signifier and token of memory. Pictorial and abstract “lace postcards” entitled *Abuelo*, *Retrato*, and *Identidad* tell the story of Heffer’s transition from Chile to Australia, with memories represented by rectangular fragments of travel documents, rusted textiles, and old sepia-toned photographs stitched together. The lace-like openwork structure, symbolic of lost memories, contains gaps to be filled in like postcards yet to be written to herself as she recalls a receding past through the fractured records of her earlier cultural identity.

Notably, it is the colors of rusted metals imprinted on cloth that represent traces of distant memories while stronger, newer impressions often appear in parallel reds and browns of the Australian landscape. Heffer’s work could be read as colored rectangles signifying windows in the heart, simultaneously opening onto all the landscapes so far traversed on her personal journey. Her metaphors suggest that diverse memories of home can merge into one overarching and universal memory of a longed-for place, as yet unattainable.

Rust dyeing (achieved by composting textiles with metals, sometimes combined with eucalyptus dye and tannins) features strongly as both material and metaphor in some of Heffer’s larger textile works. Her installations of “alternative” lace panels integrate traditional textiles with emerging technologies: “My work pays homage to the history of antique lace; I rework it into new lace forms as tokens of its origin.”

Lace Narratives: Rust is a rusted lace panel made of strips. *Lace Narratives: Ebony Lace* alludes to the naturally deconstructive,



CECILIA HEFFER



RIO WRENN



CARMEN O'BRIEN

HERE:
Rio Wrenn,
Demeter Slip;
Collection 2009;
silk/cotton, rust.

“lacefying” effects of rust on metal and is made of hundreds of hand-cut circular motifs, irregular in shape and traced from stones collected from remote Australian beaches. The motifs embed the abstract markings found on the stones. Both “alternative lace” panels are outcomes of Heffer’s deliberate deconstructionist manipulations: the circles and strips are reassembled onto a soluble substrate and then free-motion machine stitched; a new lace work emerges as the substrate backing dissolves in water.

Cecilia Heffer is Senior Lecturer and a researcher in textiles and new technologies at the University of Technology, Sydney, Australia. Learn more about her lace work and other creative undertakings at www.ceciliabeffer.com.

RIO WRENN

Discovering rust as an art medium provided Rio Wrenn with powerful metaphors that continue to underpin a conviction that “personal strength grows in courageous acceptance of one’s own fragility.” Trained in fine art and sculpture, for many years Wrenn has been exploring the potential of rust pigments in combination with natural plant dyes to mark materials, especially silks, as records of cycles of human existence. Her works invite the viewer to share a spiritual viewpoint that we are each in and of the earth, and that one day, we must return there.

Wrenn’s works sensitively, but with wry humor, depict aspects of human life in stages of natural decay; her *Saturation* series of huge rust-printed skeletons on silk is an example. Touching delicately but firmly on the irony of association between her use of fragile

silks as metaphor for human skin and her use of rust to allude to masculine-industrial power, she treats the female body as canvas in her *RAW Underwear Collection* of rust-printed underwear, corsets, dresses, skirts and bustles. Her sense of humor emerges powerfully in skilled and provocative rust prints made from old Chevy car parts in *Indigenous Autos*.

The artist’s rusting process mirrors her concepts in art that speak of birth, death, decay, and re-emergence under new forms which, in turn, re-enter the cycle of life. She composts her substrate materials with everyday metal objects, often including plants as additional pigment sources, and leaves marks to develop from the effects of heat and time.

Wrenn’s current interests are in the historical roots of textile art and iron oxide print traditions of several cultures, including Italy, India, Japan, parts of Africa, and others. Explore Wrenn’s mixed media, installations, and other work at www.riowrenn.com or learn about her production dye studio at www.rawtextiles.com.

Capturing personal realities through the use of rust, works by these four artists convey spiritual intent and contribute maturity of thought, feeling, and expression to the contemporary genre of eco-dyeing.

Fiber artist **Wendy Feldberg** creates eco printed and embroidered art cloth and artist books as botanical records of natural dyes from native plants. www.wendyfeldberg.ca, www.wendyfe.wordpress.com.



ABOVE: Regina Benson,
Unearthed; 2010; silk,
cotton & polyester;
dimensional wall work;
44 x 44 x 8 in.



LEFT: Alice Fox,
Shifting Sands (detail);
2011; rust and seaweed
dyed silk, wool felt;
hand stitch;
15 x 15 cm.