

## *One to Twenty*

Sally O'Reilly

The ability to picture a three-dimensional form as its flattened, topological equivalent is at the root of the pattern cutter's skill. Topology is a discipline that shuttles between two and three dimensions; it is at once intrinsically sculptural and drawing-led, as it translates volume into planes and vice versa. In their installation *One to Twenty*, Claire Barber and Steve Swindells combine the two dimensions of a fireman's glove pattern with the four dimensionality of a bouncy castle, creating a topological fact rendered as a material improbability. The title is a reference to the scale of the piece, which, as Swindells explains, 'enlarged the precise glove pattern components to 20 times their original size, producing something that avoids both a literalisation of the glove making industry in Yeovil and an illustration of the fireman's glove, and which requires some kind of negotiation with the object itself, whether that is looking at and/or bouncing on it.'

The visitor is invited to clamber, jump and slither about on the wobbly vinyl structure, perhaps to explore the terrain or to absorb it into the rhythm of tension and release, of on-and off-duty that the average day is made up of. 'The audience were largely unaware of what they were bouncing on, but when they slowed down, because bouncing is harder than it looks, they seemed to become curious about its "unusual" shape and its greyness. Some asked questions, some didn't.' But beyond the initial encounter, once we know that this is a giant fireman's glove, the bubble of fun and fantasy is pricked by very real-world considerations. The heat of fire and the cool technology that fights it brings complex associations to what might at first appear a frothy plaything. And then, in another stage of reading the work, the fact that this is a pattern, in flattened, pre-sewn form, shunts associations from the fireman that wears the glove towards the glover that makes them.

Barber Swindells were interested in how the craft of glove making, which in Somerset is predominately associated with fine ladies gloves, had been applied to the production of the practical, durable fireman's glove:

‘We enjoyed the optimism and resourcefulness involved in relocating traditional craft skills, to produce a sustainable business in fireman's glove manufacturing. Through visiting the company we saw that they had not relinquished traditional equipment, like cutting forms, sewing machine, and glove irons, but kept using and mending them, making new parts rather than replacing them, because they are tough, work well and endure. And yet we noted how the business avoided any nostalgic relationship with traditional craft production; they need to make an artefact that functions well, sells well, and is practical.’

Nostalgia is difficult to avoid when approaching historical source material, but one way of achieving is to subject the historical and the crafted to a process from the far end of the technological and social spectrum – bouncy castle manufacturing perhaps? Barber Swindells had worked with KLC Castles previously, and had found that there was a comparable skill and dexterity involved, as inflatable structures also require a pattern cutter's understanding of the translation between volume and planes. And so it was an instinctive decision for Barber Swindells to bring these two businesses together in the gallery, the forms of one being put through the processes of the other. And there are echoes that rebound between the working life of the glove and the bouncy castle too, as the artists explain: ‘The fireman's glove shrinks and stiffens with use. This flexibility is echoed in the inflatable material that is also malleable and demonstrates suppleness in its context, shape and form.’

Just as the material of the bouncy castle undercuts the nostalgic qualities of the traditional leather glove, its usual context of family entertainment infects viewer reaction too. The usual blandly square play pit in primary colours with walls for safety and a fantasy theme to stand in for the user's own imagination invites uncritical interaction, unpressurised fun; but Barber Swindells were keen to provoke more from participants:

‘Often bouncy castles are placed within enclosed spaces, and if they occur during a fete you pay entry for a specific time frame. We had hoped to create a shape that was open to engage people in movement in diverse ways and to

initiate a form that was compositionally active, presenting opportunities for participants to be inventive within its shape. Also the journey through the piece was important, subtly echoing the family tree of the Southcombe brothers who produce the glove.’

The work was sited in the middle of Yeovil so that people could happen upon it unexpectedly; and its lack of physical boundary, entrance fee or time frame engendered a playful, relaxed arena where people could see the full scale of the 13 metre-long structure immediately, linger with it unselfconsciously and interact according to individual desires and capacities, from tentative first steps to the rambunctiously physical – jumping from one bouncy promontory to the next, somersaulting, skidding and running – to the placidly reflective, with some groups simply lying around chatting. And while the interactive nature of the piece naturally attracted families at the weekends, there was a curious moment of self-reflexivity when firemen visited and clambered across the giant glove pattern, as if exploring their own deconstructed palms.

As with any collaboration, the proclivities of the people involved are never entirely subsumed by the identity of the collaboration as a whole. Barber makes links between *One to Twenty* and her twenty-year engagement with textiles, since her MA in Fine Art Tapestry:

‘I dip into references to textile, cloth and tapestry processes to anchor my approach, using its parameters, which at once allow knowledge and enthusiasm to wander widely, while also derailing conventional and “rational” notions of what cloth or art can look like. I have also, through conversations with writer and curator June Hill over the last four years, reconsidered the broader terms of craft, drawing metaphorical links where a local community acts as the warp – of parallel unconnected lines within a multi cultural community – and how I can bring intervening threads to create a weft of collective associations.’

Swindells, meanwhile, brings a consideration of the aesthetics of amateur or folk artists to their projects. The pair speak of how, despite the pragmatic context, they 'couldn't avoid being drawn in by the aesthetics of the patina of a fireman's glove as it matures, the vibrant sap-green dyes creating a luminous and soft form; and the incredible worn-handled tools and equipment in the factory'. And this in contrast to the ubiquitous grey vinyl at the inflatable company – the paragon of mass production, where the presence of the hand is all but eradicated. But, as Swindells is careful to point out, despite all these ruminations on cultural history and material associations, 'first and foremost, the public, whether young or mature, just wanted to get on it and allow themselves a few seconds of innocence in the sunshine, and perhaps an inner smile or outright laughter – which is abstract, subjective but ultimately invaluable'.