

Jann Haworth was barely off the plane from Los Angeles in 1962, to begin a year of study at the Slade School of Fine Art in London, when she began fabricating the sewn cloth sculptures that were to prove her very distinctive contribution to the nascent Pop Art movement. The works she made over the next five or so years, independently of the soft sculptures being created during the same period by Claes Oldenburg in New York, were highly personal and very specifically rooted in the circumstances of her background and in her experience as a young American woman. References abound not only to American fast foods and newspapers, but also to her native Hollywood (where her father was an Oscar-winning production designer), for example in the deliciously improbable happy family of Mae West, Shirley Temple & W.C. Fields of 1967. Conscious of the fact that a woman's place in the art world was then still a very problematic one " her mother was herself a ceramicist and printmaker she turned this presumed disadvantage on its head not only by dwelling on feminine themes and imagery, including domesticity, family, the home, food, shopping and jewellery, but by clothing that subject matter in techniques and materials that are themselves redolent of women's work: fabrics stuffed and shaped into three-dimensional objects, then sewn together.

We all bring the baggage of our past to every new moment in our lives, but someone transplanted from one country and culture to another experiences this process with an acute self-consciousness unimaginable to those who have lived all their lives in the same place and set themselves goals that were substantially preordained. The contrast between the openness of her native California and the dourness of London in 1962, when it was just emerging from its long post-war gloom and deprivations,

must have been astonishing, particularly to someone as vivacious, spirited and outgoing as the 20-year-old Haworth. The sculptures that she began to make recognised no traditional boundaries and revealed no anxiety about having to conform to particular artistic traditions or methods. The exuberance of her Flowers of 1962, their markedly varied petals reaching upwards like human hands and body parts in a state of ecstasy, express a delight in feminine things that is as immediate and unapologetic as it seems unpremeditated. The spirit of her art here literally blooms and blossoms, expressing the life force of the creative impulse as a giving birth.

Since every artist is conditioned by his or her own temperament, the mood surrounding that work “ whether gloomy and earnest or frivolous and humorous “ should perhaps not have any value judgements attached to it. Yet the unbridled joy and optimism expressed through Haworth’s art is so infectious and life-enhancing that only curmudgeons could fail to have their day brightened by the sight of these works celebrating simple and innocent activities such as eating, drinking, dressing up and consuming popular entertainments such as the comics and the movies. Guiltless pleasures and pure sensuality are animating forces that unify what might otherwise have seemed like disparate imagery, from the larger-than-life charm bracelets festooned on the walls like banners at a regatta to the life-sized Pom-Pom Girl, Cowboy picnicking teddy bears and other figures that populated her art during the 1960s.

Much of Haworth’s imagery during that memorable decade conveyed her memories of America from the transatlantic perspective of her adoptive home. One could say that during all the years that she lived in Great Britain she was continuously unpacking her bags and re-examining their contents, with an objective curiosity rather than just with a romantic nostalgia, and that she never totally accommodated herself to her new

home, however much affection she might have for it. The still life arrangement of Donuts, Coffee & Ceramics pointedly pairs the snack foods and hot drink favoured by her countrymen “ an English artist in her position would more likely have depicted tea and scones “ with blue-and-white crockery of the type commonly found in English rather than American homes. Draped over the table is a facsimile section of colour comics, long a common feature of newspapers in the USA but at that time not something one would expect to find in Britain.

Few of the artists now associated with Pop Art ever consciously signed up for membership to this unofficial club: most drifted into it, in many cases unaware of the similar interests of other artists, and often because they were led in that direction by the popular and contemporary imagery for which they felt a kinship or which attracted them because of its humour or simply because it felt of the moment. Haworth, like her then husband Peter Blake, was one of those whose choices were dictated primarily by affection rather than out of an intellectual or philosophical position. For this Mom of Pop, if one may be so impertinent as to call her that, human considerations were paramount. Who else among her peers would have chosen to make portraits of the elderly, as with the two Old Lady sculptures of 1962 and 1967 (the first of which appeared in 1967 as a Granny with a child on her knees on the cover of The Beatles Sgt. Pepper cover), at a time when the cult of youth, beauty, sexual allure and glamour made anyone over thirty all but invisible? These women have fused with the chairs on which they sit, literally becoming part of the furniture, ignored and unnoticed “ except by the artist who in depicting them confers dignity on them.

Proto-feminist in their celebration of a matriarchal lineage, such sculptures do more than acknowledge the decline and mortality awaiting us all. They

make a poignant case for the value of every life and for the contribution each makes to the common good. The hand-knitted shawl worn by the first Old Lady, and the colourfully geometric quilt pulled over the lap of the second, subtly draw attention to the often overlooked creative contributions made by women to everyday life. By choosing to work exclusively in such materials herself, then considered outside the domain of fine art and even (in masculine terms) as unworthy of it, Haworth reclaimed “ specifically and proudly as womens work “ the worth of a huge area of aesthetic activity written out of most male-dominated histories.

Paula Rego, today the most celebrated female working in Britain to address specifically the question of her perspective as a woman in making art, has spoken to me of her admiration for Jann’s early work and of the encouragement it gave her to pursue such a course in her own art. This acknowledgement is all the more remarkable for the fact that Paula had a head start, having studied at the same art school, the Slade, nearly a decade earlier. Despite their distinct sensibilities and the very different procedures used in the making of their work, they have in common a resolutely unprogrammable attitude in the making of their work. One certainly could not label Haworth’s art as politically feminist, a term which in any case would be misleading in that her art was fully formed before the advent of the radical feminist movement later in the decade. Nor could one assert that she claimed to speak on behalf of other women, a role that would have seemed inappropriate and arrogant to an artist who valued the personal and the intimate and who simply had found the means to speak of her own particular experience in her own voice “ much as David Hockney was doing at that time as a young gay man.

So it is that Haworth’s imagery and cottage-industry methods alike

deliberately, even defiantly, take on feminine attributes at the very moment that other women seeking to assert their place in a world dominated by men would have felt compelled to avoid them. The sultry sex goddess Mae West, though we may now cherish her for her audacity and independence, was not perhaps a model of decorum for serious women in the 1960s, any more than the coquettish little miss Shirley Temple who sits astride her in a sculptural tableau lorded over by that grumpiest of men, the acerbic W. C. Fields. There is, moreover, a girlishness and a love of prettiness to the Charm Bracelets that Haworth fashioned “ on a humorously monumental scale “ out of memories of the jewellery she had worn proudly on her wrists as a child, each charm commemorating a different trip she had taken with her mother or father. Each hanging object becomes a kind of marker in a visual narrative, a three-dimensional equivalent to a comic strip, cinematic storyboard or graphic novel. This narrative emphasis, too, flew in the face of conventional art-world wisdom at a time when formalist values prevailed and any suggestion of literary or illustrational methods were viewed as a threat or, worse, as indicative of a lower order of aesthetic ambition.

Oldenburgs soft sculptures, with which Haworth’s work of that decade has strong affinities, were fabricated with the unacknowledged assistance of his then wife, Patti. That a woman was needed to make those objects, as has much more recently been the case with the team of women employed by Tracy Emin for her wall hangings and other fabric works, is itself indicative of the fact that the materials and methods employed in all these artefacts are in themselves gendered female. Haworth was very aware of this when she chose to make sculpture that was pliable, subject to change and in that sense a direct affront to the heroic and male-dominated sculptural traditions of cast bronze and carved stone. But, having made all her own clothes since the age of eight, it was a decision as natural and

organic as the forms that resulted. Subject to gravity, soft to the touch, as sensuous in their surfaces as human skin, the elements of her sculptures operate as equivalents to the human body whether they explicitly depict figures or surprisingly lively, animated, inanimate objects.

After a hiatus of some years, during which she worked primarily as a book illustrator, Haworth has recently returned to cloth, this time to make paintings as unconventional and organic in their forms as the objects she had made during her first incarnation as a sculptor. Cutting into the surface and dexterously reassembling the shapes into witty images, she has produced works such as *String Crazy Man* and *The Incredible Invisible Woman*, in which a monumentality of scale is deliberately undercut by a delicate fragmentation of form. Just as in the 1960s she had paid homage to favourite artists, such as the German-born American painter Richard Lindner, so in these more recent works she has created reveries about other 20th-century artists whose work she admires and honours as opening up possibilities for her own generation, as in the series she has dedicated to the Dadaist photcollagist Hannah Hoch. The offbeat American draughtsman and collagist Ray Johnson takes his place alongside a series of *Dreaming Painters* including Picasso and other works conceived specifically as portraits. Literature more than ever serves as a springboard, particularly for a series inspired by Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* and an ambitious rendering of T. S. Eliot's *The Hollow Men*.

Jann's own sculptural inventions of the 1960s, of course, remain legitimate objects for re-examination, as in *New Donuts 2005*, in which those high-carb sweet pastries so loved by Americans have been reconfigured as teasingly playful comments on major movements in 20th-century art including Surrealism (via Magritte and Meret Oppenheim), Abstract Expressionism and Pop itself. That the donuts themselves suggest a

particular sexual organ of the human body is, of course, not lost on her. Haworth's visual wit remains as malleable and subtle as her sculptural language, her gentle ruminations on life and human foibles as pertinent and as affecting as they were forty years ago. Her education has continued unabated, with occasional visits to the School of Hard Knocks, but that original innocence and smiling acceptance of the realities of life remain undimmed. A decade or so after her return to the United States, this time to live in the relative wilderness of Utah, she continues to unpack her bags and to discover inside them yet more hidden and unsuspected treasures.