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Employing technology and retaining authenticity; Digital design for machine knitting in contemporary craft

Within this paper craft skill in textile making is addressed, asking if it can only be identified and verified through the purely handmade, when there are routes to incorporate digital technologies as part of the methodology of contemporary textile practice. With a focus on the employment of digital design and electronic domestic knitting machines; the opportunities this combination presents for the designer/maker and external perspectives on products and artefacts created this way, in particular the perceived craftsmanship of these.

The process of making is explored by the maker as well as being addressed from the designer/customer interface.

Working processes of the designer/maker embrace new models of making that view digital technology as an integral component of the textile practice, one which offers not uniformity, but the flexibility to explore, play and create beyond the scope of more traditional textile methods.

The process of using CAD software to design and download patterns to a knitting machine vastly broadens the creative scope for the maker regarding design, customisation and production. It enables the design and production of small-run collections that, due to reduced making time are also affordable to a wider market (than if the technology was not employed). The potential for custom colour-ways and customised design using this technology is also vast with great potential for a much closer relationship between product and consumer.

Regarding skill and craft relating to this process, the development of tacit knowledge gradually built by using the technology and machines parallels the tacit knowledge built thorough mastering a skill by hand. Technology and hand creation are no longer in opposition but interwoven to enable more personalised approaches to textile production.

Whilst makers may accept the 'new authenticity' of pieces incorporating digital technology, how are these received by audiences and consumers? Are they perceived as less valid or unique due to the integration of technology in the making processes? Is this even considered by the viewer/consumer? This piece incorporates feedback from consumers of (digitally designed) machine knitted products as well as those selling these in shop/gallery settings, to begin to consider if a new form of authenticity in textile craft is emerging and being accepted.

The future landscape of craft in relation to new developments in the field of machine knitting is also considered as is the inter-relation between product and consumer develops as a result of the employment of this technology.

Presentation of this paper will include traditional power-point delivery with the integration of video and physical artefacts.