John Hume, Peacemaker

A Conversation between Brandon Hamber and Deborah Stockdale

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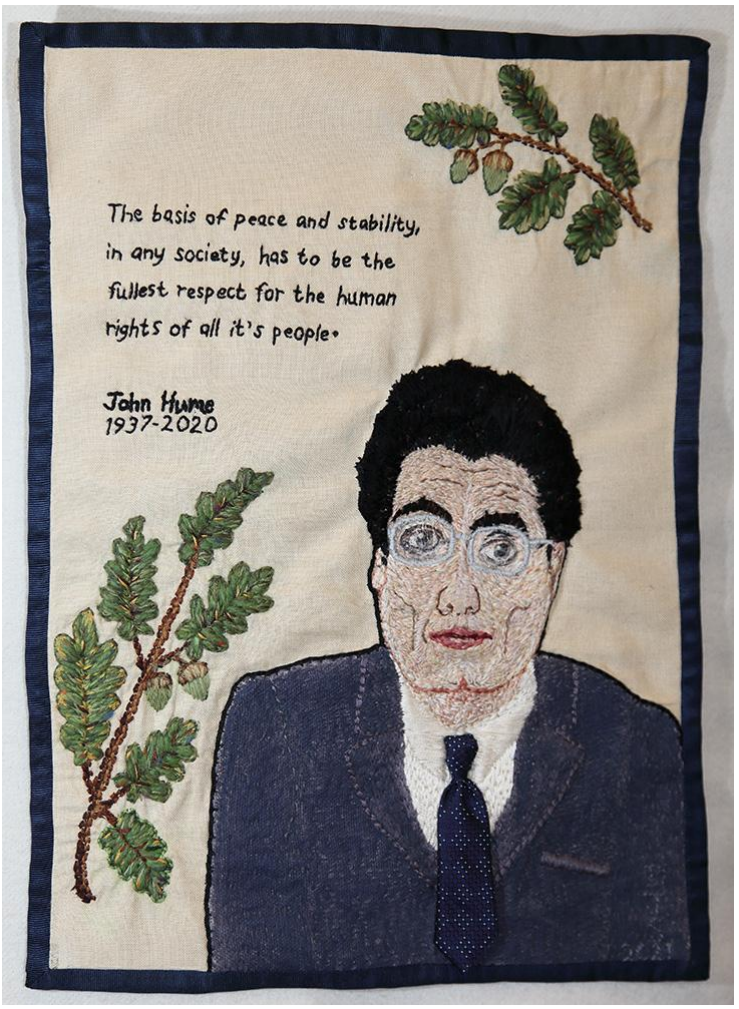

John Hume, Peacemaker, Republic of Ireland embroidered wall hanging, Deborah Stockdale, 2022.
Photo Martin Melaugh, © Conflict Textiles

Brandon Hamber: Well, Deborah. Thanks very much for taking the time today to speak to me about your piece on John Hume; the textile that you've created. So today I'd like to spend a little bit of time talking with you about the process of how the piece came about and also I suppose the content of the piece and how you see it now and where it might go, so that's what we'll focus on but maybe before kicking into that it'd really be helpful for me just for you to tell me a little bit more about yourself as an artist you know how did you get to this point, you know before we talk about this commission specifically, I'd love to hear just a little bit more about you and your work.

Deborah Stockdale: Thank you Brandon. I'm Irish American; I was born in America, and I moved to Ireland in my late twenties, and I've lived here ever since. So predominantly most

of my life has been spent in Ireland. I came from a background of Anthropology and Social Science in my college education and a parallel thread in my life has always been a love of textiles. My family travelled a great deal, and we had textiles from many parts of the world that I grew up with and also, both of my grandmothers were quiltmakers. So, in my late teenage years I started exploring my own journey with textiles. I became a quiltmaker, I learned to weave and make baskets, do natural dyeing and embroidery and crochet and learned a lot of other textile techniques and the history of textiles.

When I moved to Ireland I focused primarily on quilt-making both in cottons and in linens and in tweeds, and I made many quilts over the years, and at a certain point I discovered art quilts which are more free form; they could be imagery, they can be painted, or stencilled, or with different kinds of marking techniques. So, in the early 2000s or late 1990s I started making art quilts and at this point I was asked to begin teaching my techniques to different community groups; I worked with women's groups, with senior groups, with kids, so I had a parallel work life with teaching and art making.

In 2007 I met Roberta [Bacic, founder, and curator Conflict Textiles] by chance. I was working on a group project on Arranmore Island, and we were making a story quilt with about 30 participants in two different venues, so I would travel back and forth from South West Donegal to Arranmore Island, and those women would come over and sit and work with us. I had this interest all my life in quilts that tell stories, from African quilts to different American quilts over the years - so my work started developing more about textiles and stories and at this fortuitous juncture I met Roberta on the ferry to Arranmore Island and we hit it off quite well and she invited me to come and help set up ***The Art of Survival: [International and Irish Quilts]***, her first big show in Derry in 2008.

So, I lent a hand helping to put the quilts on the walls, doing little bits of mending and just taking it all in. So, from that point she asked for my help, and I was glad to give it and we began doing things together. We formulated the hessian background for all the arpilleras that you see today, and I started making those and mounting the arpilleras, I started doing condition reports to show if there was a piece that needed mending or fixing in some way, and I would do that repair work; and she exhibited several of the quilts that I worked on with community groups over the years. I worked with groups in Donegal, and the Donegal Museum commissioned me to facilitate a group to make the woollen Sheep quilt, Caorigh agus Olann (which had a great story about the land evictions and emigration in Gweedore, Co. Donegal) and I made large fabric banners for the ***Flight of the Earls historical events*** that were used all over the county in those years. So, Roberta asked me over the course of a couple of years to facilitate groups in making dolls, and then in creating arpilleras, and I found that very satisfying work. I worked in different community groups both in the north and in the Republic and then I was commissioned to do a long programme called ***Stitching and Unstitching the Troubles***, which took me to 8 different community groups to reflect on their lives during the Troubles, little things and big things. Some of the pieces were very serious, some were quite domestic, ordinary, but they were all quite good work, so that was a significant project that we did together.

I started creating my own arpilleras, I was intrigued by the backstories of the Chilean ones and the fact that these very humble looking textiles had such great strong stories, stories that resonated with people all over the world and it made me reflect on how I could tell stories through my own quilt-making. The first one I did was about rural poverty, about poverty on the farms in Donegal and all over Ireland, how people were struggling to cope with modernisation and bank overdrafts and basically having to change the purpose of their farm or give them up for financial reasons and it was a topic that was present all around me. Then I made other arpilleras about the peace camp in Shannon airport, the people that were protesting against the American military involvement on Irish soil. I made several pieces about disappeared people: one about the Argentinean disappeared called ***They Fell Like Stars From the Skies***, and another one about the Mexican disappeared, which is still an ongoing situation.

So, Roberta was exhibiting my work as it was produced over the course of about ten or twelve years, and they went worldwide. It was a marvellous thing for me to have my work exhibited in such exalted venues including the V&A in London. So between making my own arpilleras, facilitating workshops, mounting the textiles and creating new work, it led me to the point where I was asked to do several commissions; one was the ***Plantation of Ulster quilt***, that's in the Guildhall in Derry, that was a commission through Roberta from the museum services in County Derry and that's been on display for 6 or 7 years now, so when she asked me if I was interested in working on a piece on John Hume I thought a bit about it and then I said yes.

Although in my personal life I knew who John Hume was, I knew his significance in society and in history but I had never met him so this whole thing became a process, and I am always reflecting that artwork is like an iceberg, you see maybe one quarter of it on the surface and three quarters of it is below the surface and that's the work. So, in my usual process, I started with reading articles, looking at newspaper photographs of John Hume, some very iconic ones. They portrayed a very active man who was very involved in all the projects in society that he attempted. I was trying to acquaint myself with who he was and dealing with a kind of larger-than-life person who was so prominent in the news and everything. There was a lot of material to go through, so that was my first stage of working up that project. Then I had a think about it, and I thought 'Well, John Hume was a father, he was a husband, he was a man of his community,' and I read Seán Farren's book about John Hume's life [John Hume: Irish Peacemaker]. I spoke with a few people including Roberta's husband Clem McCartney who knew him casually. Then I was introduced to Mo Hume and I had a chat with Mo Hume and I said 'What was your dad like? What was he like at home? What did he like to do in his off time or was there any off time? What was he like as a dad?' This was something I was more curious about, because every public person comes home and collapses in their armchair and they read the paper and apparently John was very fond of eating biscuits with his tea, and this is the kind of track I was trying to get at, so she chatted a bit to me about that. I found that he was occasionally quite distracted and when he got

home, he would just sort of retreat quietly and read his paper and the hubbub of family life with five kids running around the house and constituency office business and Pat Hume dealing with a lot of the public arrangements and that sort of thing.

So, I was building a picture in my mind of a very busy, super engaged man that was dealing in the highest levels of politics. He was moving in society in America, meeting politicians and movers and shakers there, but he still came home to Derry, he still sat in his armchair and read his paper and ate his biscuits. So I wanted to incorporate both of those kinds of views of him. Through my chat with Mo I was introduced to Pat quite briefly, but she provided Roberta with a couple of neckties that John wore so I wanted to use a bit of necktie in my piece and I also wanted to make a composite portrait, so I was looking at these different pictures, sketching, working up how I would approach this and thinking about techniques. I could've done several different techniques, I could've painted the thing outright on fabric, I could've assembled it with patchwork and appliqué, and then I thought, no, I always did love embroidery and I opted for the embroidered face. I started with Ulster linen – a beautiful natural coloured linen, and I worked up a composite portrait from the images that I had, trying to nail it down. And it is not easy to make portraits, if you've ever known a portrait painter; they will tell you they are one of the most difficult things to do. But I worked away and it was very time consuming, you can only do so many stitches in a day, and I was building up with multiple flesh-coloured threads like beige, pinks and a sort of tawny brown and creating the eyes (which were very difficult) but slowly it came together.

Building up the embroidered face, Photo Deborah Stockdale, © Conflict Textiles

Originally, I had the idea of putting the skyline of Derry behind him, but I thought more about that and I thought that would be too limiting because he did move in wider circles; he was in Belfast as much as he was in Derry, he was in the USA a great deal. I wanted it to be a greater wider picture of an international statesman, which he was.

Then it occurred to me the whole link between Derry (being the Irish for 'oak woodland') and using oak leaves as an ancient symbol of that place. So, after I got the portrait completed, I cut and trimmed it away from the background linen I was working on, and I took a lighter shade of linen and I worked up the oak branches that appear both at the top and along the side, and for the oak branch on the side I put six leaves, which were the six provinces [counties] of Northern Ireland, and for the one on the top I put five leaves, which represent his five children which I know he was very proud of. Those I worked up in both embroidery thread and needlework wool, and there's a small link there between an American embroiderer, whose daughter is a friend, and her name was Jane Kiernan Gabriels from Albany, New York, and she was a famous embroiderer who passed away last year. And her daughter had sent me this wool that she had dyed, so a little bit of John Hume comes from America as well.

The quotation on it, well, I looked through many of John's quotes, I wanted to pin a quote to it to represent them, but I found that singular quote which was the most inclusive quote 'the basis of peace and stability in any society has to be the fullest respect for the human rights of its people'. That for me nailed what he was about and what he started with and what he finished with because within his work: his constituency work in Derry and his work with credit unions in Derry; he was always focused that everyone in that community should have full equal human rights, and that no one would succeed and that peace would not succeed until everybody acknowledged that they were all entitled to full rights under government and law and in society. So that for me consolidated what I thought about John Hume, and I thought it was the most appropriate quote to put on it. I don't know what anyone else thinks about but that was why I did that.

BH: Thanks Deborah, incredible, it's incredible just to hear that journey, the decisions that you made and how you came to them. If you don't mind, I'd like to ask just a couple of sub-questions about some of what you said, because it would just maybe flesh it out a little bit. And I suppose just to go back to right back to the beginning and then I'm going to come back to the piece itself and the quote. You know, you started by talking a bit about your own background and coming from the United States and living probably a large chunk, if not the majority of your life at this stage, in Ireland. So in your work generally, and in this piece specifically, how much do you think your background found its way into this piece? I mean you have so many different techniques, you have personal history, do you feel that background is somewhere in this piece, or in this process, or not necessarily?

DS: I do. I do think my background is part and parcel of what I do as an artist. I don't think that I am in isolation, but as fully immersed in Irish culture and society as I am, well it's over 45 years now and it's a question that comes up quite a bit, is how much my past and my background has influenced my art and I have to say honestly it does. It brings another dimension, to politics, to history, to stories, you know I do honour and respect that. I don't identify with it that much now, but it is part and parcel of what I am and how I work.

BH: Just out of curiosity, you spoke about your grandmothers working on textiles and you learning to make quilts. Are some of those techniques still things that you use today?

DS: Absolutely!

BH: Or has your art developed so much that it is miles away from all that?

DS: No, I use all those techniques and in different combinations, so I guess that makes it more a self-expression. It's not strictly quilting what I do, it's not strictly art what I do; it is textile art, and it does incorporate the traditional techniques of hand quilting, of embroidery, of piecing, of making marks, of painting. My personal artwork outside of the Conflict Textiles work I do, and any of those history commissions, my personal artwork which is you know complicated and ongoing, would have all of these techniques or an arrangement of those techniques, so I have built on what I started with very much. I haven't gone far off track in a lot of ways, it's just expressed differently.

BH: And when you were talking a little bit about your own history and now when you mentioned this as well, you said what really interests you is stories, and then when you talk about, well I mean the two bits to the stories, one bit is how you connect with Roberta and how you get to this place in itself is a story, which is an interesting, and as you said fortuitous, but then becomes a very important relationship and also very important for Conflict Textiles as far as I understand in terms of your influences as you said the look and feel of the textiles and the looking after a lot of the textiles so there's that story and then you also told us the story of how this piece came about and, yeah, maybe you could just elaborate a little bit more on the importance of stories for you, because you mentioned it but I just was curious in hearing a little bit more.

DS: Well, like I said, my training in college was in anthropology and that opened me up to tribal cultures, and cultures that had oral transmission of stories and knowledge, and I realised that this was the basis, this was how society got along, and survived, and thrived, was the use of stories and oral tradition. And then that was always ticking in a way in my head, and if you look at the background of traditional American quilt-making almost every block or little combinations of blocks are the components of a quilt; every block has a story and they all have names so it's 'Trip to the Well' or 'Maggie's Wedding' or 'Lost At Sea'. They all have a name, and they all have a backstory, so it was very conscious when people were making quilts that the blocks that they chose represented a story that they were telling. In African American culture there were many quilts made that had secret significance. They had stories of the underground railway where people were fleeing slavery and journeying towards the northern states before the civil war and the quilts would have clues about how to make this journey, so you would turn right at the big oak tree and you would go along the stream bed and climb this hill and this would be another picture or another block, so they had a coded secret message. Also in other cultures, like in India, which had a tradition of quilt making and also in northern England and Wales, all those quilts have stories and reasons that people made them and how they described them. I think stories are part and parcel of living and we have our own stories that we tell about ourselves, we have stories

that we tell about things we experience, and we have stories that we tell about our group in society, our background, our heritage, and our social position. So to me, life is inextricably linked with stories, and textiles whether conscious or not, express the time they were made; express the materials that they were made from; they express the maker's techniques and ability, and they express the usage they were put to. If someone makes a baby quilt for, say, a grandchild, that becomes a family story which they would tell and the child would have a quilt and the child would tell their children that story too. So, it's a link between time and place, and it's a link between cultures, and it's a link between traditions, and the things that society considers important.

BH: Thank you, it's just so interesting to hear you talk about the quilt and the arpilleras and, stories -I suppose is the main takeaway (and I know I'm digressing here a little bit) but your piece ***They Fell Like Stars From the Sky*** has to be, well, I don't want to say one of my favourites of the collections, because you know the content is so harrowing that you don't want to say it's your favourite, but it's one of the pieces that just always strikes me when I see it, like the story of that is what just comes and comes

DS: And there were multiple stories in that; it was the meshing of three stories in that one piece.

BH: Can you talk a little bit about that piece? I know I'm digressing from the Hume textile but I think it just speaks to the - I want to then talk about the story of the Hume Textile but I was just interested in that-

They Fell like Stars from the Sky / Cayeron del cielo como estrellas, Republic of Ireland arpillera, Deborah Stockdale, 2013. Photo Martin Melaugh, © Conflict Textiles

DS:*They Fell Like Stars [From the Sky]*, the original impulse was my understanding over 30 years ago about the Dirty War in Argentina and the fact that I heard victims of the police state were often taken, drugged, tied up, and thrown alive out of airplanes. Now this is a

random bit of information I heard over 30 years ago, but obviously it's so shocking, so harrowing and it stuck with me. And then when I started learning about the resistance on the ground about the war and how the *Abuelas* (who are the grandmothers of the disappeared) would demonstrate daily in the plaza in Buenos Aires, and that demonstration of solidarity and the grandmothers getting together every day, or once a week to focus the political narrative onto these *disappeared*. That was the second story that I felt very strongly about and thought it was a story of great sadness, and of great hope, and solidarity with each other in a terrible political situation. The third story came to me through Roberta, through a colleague of hers who was a poet and we corresponded. He told me the story of his young wife who was a medical student, just like a new intern doctor, and she was among the disappeared, at the height of her life in her mid-twenties. Vibrant, newly married, and just disappeared off the face of the earth.

So, we connected, and he sent me a couple of photocopies of letters they had written, and he was also very kind to send me a used, very battered, very domestic tablecloth that they had eaten many meals of off obviously, it wasn't brand new, it was stained, and a little bit frayed. And so I used that tablecloth in that piece, I used it on the back, and I also used it for the headscarves for the grandmothers. So taking this hugely difficult... two very, very difficult and awkward to articulate stories: about people being dumped off of planes, and then the grandmothers that kept vigil, this third story tied them together in a very unique and wonderful way for me, because it was the story of many people but it was the story of a very specific person, and it related also to her spouse, who had to live through this, and the fact he was willing to share this with a virtual stranger, to honour his wife, was amazing to me. So that's how that came to be.

On the back of the piece, which most people don't see, is a segment of that tablecloth, and also a photo of this young, very beautiful, vibrant woman taken before she died. So it was a piece that had a huge story but it had a very sweet domestic story and that's how much of life is. We see it in the tragedies unfolding in the last few weeks in Ukraine. I'm sure you see pictures of people taking their pets with them on their refugee voyage. Life is like that; amid great tragedy there's… not particularly joy, but there's very human elements through all of this. And so to me that piece about Argentina represents a huge historical story, and a small domestic glimpse of life in other places and with other people.

BH: Thank you for that. As I say, it's the piece that always sticks with me, so I probably digress for my own personal [reasons]. I wanted to hear a little bit more and have the opportunity to have you in front of me to say that, but as you were talking, I suppose to link it back to the Hume piece, it seems from the way you explained, it's not the same, but you've used a similar technique where there's a similar reasoning, there's the external image of John Hume but then you talked a lot about the man who sat and read the paper with his kids around him, eating biscuits, that you saw that domestic and external political context. Why was that important to you because in a way I know you said the five of the oak leaves represent the children but the picture itself is not particularly domestic; as you say it's a portrait and it's statesman like and powerful in its imagery but you didn't choose to put the

rest of that around, I know it was going on for you.

DS: I just thought he is such an icon you know, his face is instantly recognisable in any context at this point in time, through his work and his accomplishment but, you know, he was just a man coming from the background that he came from, growing up in Derry, working his way up through the political ranks, dealing with almost larger than life people through the peace process. I needed to get a hook to relate to him, I mean even politicians have to sit down, take off their shoes, it doesn't go on every minute of every day. And the pictures that Mo gave me - I was very pleased to see - were of when he was older, when he was retired. There was a couple, one or two where he was on holiday looking relaxed with his hair sort of blowing in the wind, you know, and I thought well this was the same man, he was not a different person, it was all in the same person so I thought this was a chance to portray him that way but I didn't want it to be casual John Hume versus political boffin. It was my take on my image... it's hard to say what it is; I did the best I could and that's how it came out for me.

BH: No it's phenomenal, and I think when you were explaining making it as a portrait and all the tiny pieces of embroidery that gets to make that, and all of the selection of the different colours and relating that it's like a portrait artist, you're creating the portrait, and in some ways it's why we've done it for so long in society, it's such a profound way to honour a person, you know, to take so much time to create the best possible likeness of that

DS: Well, honestly it wasn't the best possible likeness but within the realm of my skill set and the timeframe I had, it was the best that I could do.

BH: Well, that's what I mean, like the best possible likeness a person can create. That's the point.

DS: Well you know it's funny because Colin Davidson, the portrait painter who spoke at the launch of the piece made a comment that I really valued. He said as a painter he would make the brushstrokes then he would step back and look at it and see where he could improve or where to fade or where to add or where to take away and that's a big process on a big scale. Making a detailed embroidered portrait was micromanaging very small stitches at times just to get the line of the lips or the way the eyebrow was or the waviness of the hair; these were nearly microscopic adjustments on the embroidered portrait, so it was thinking of a macro scale and a micro scale; mine was definitely on the micro scale side.

BH: Well, we won't tell Colin, but I think it's harder to do what you're trying to do in some ways, creating a likeness out of such small pieces of material. I think it is phenomenal. What did it mean, I know you talked about it, but what did it mean to you, similar to the other image where you were using the tablecloth, but here you had John's actual neckties, what's it like for you as an artist to have somebody's belongings? And in this case, given to you by Pat, his wife, who's equally famous as John in many ways, how does that feel? I would just be really interested in that.

DS: Well, it was a huge honour that they chose to personally participate in my piece which,

you know, many artists make many portraits but they have no personal input from the family, or the person that they're portraying. I have a background in making quilts that commemorate deceased people. I've done several just with my family members, incorporating shirts, incorporating favourite things, photographs, and things like that. So, I came to this having done several pieces and beside the Argentinean one that we discussed before, I have done this kind of work, incorporating a person's possessions into textiles, so it wasn't too foreign in that way. It was challenging to think of how I could make that tie fit that scale and, you know, neckties have a larger side that usually ends up going in front, and then there's a skinny side that goes behind a normal necktie, so on my piece that was the tip of the skinny side. I didn't have to change it, I just cut it and reknotted it to fit around his neck, so, in a way, it was very good how it worked out, the scale was correct. And it's very moving to handle and use something that belonged to somebody else, there's a great energy in it, a lovely energy, and I was pleased to do that.

BH: Yeah. I think that's what I was getting at, the sort of, the handling of it, that it belonged to somebody else and the decision to cut it or whatever. I've never been in that position myself personally, but yeah, I was just thinking what that feels like inside in that moment, and you're talking about it as actually having an energy, which is really interesting actually, because it comes across as having an energy in the piece I think, because the tie is very visible, so I just find it very interesting that you talk about it as an energy because other people could be so nervous that they could do nothing with it. Do you know what I mean? Maybe I'm talking about myself; I'd probably be too terrified to do anything with it.

DS: Well, most people that work in fabric or textiles have an acquaintance with this phrase and it's 'Measure and mark twice, cut once', so you think about it before you make that initial slash.

BH: No, absolutely, when I'm looking at the piece again now - but maybe it's just because we're talking about it - but the tie is also on the outside of the jacket, so it's sort of like a centrepiece to me when I look at it. Was this a conscious decision for you?

DS: A little bit. Several people told me that John Hume was always a little bit untidy. I'd not say he was messy, or in any way not... but his tie was often a little bit askew, or his shirt collar was a little bit undone, you know, so I wanted to tap into that. He wasn't picture perfect.

BH: No very good, I met him many times and that is true. I don't know how to put that in words, which is what you're trying to do as well, but yeah, he wasn't always like how you get some politicians who look impeccably dressed and like things would bounce off them. John never looked like that, like everything about him was welcoming actually and that included his clothes not being a very tight-fitting suit and tie, so I understand.

DS: He seemed like a natural kind of person to me.

BH: Yeah, exactly, I think that's right. Maybe just the last question on the imagery and the issues, you talked about the American wool, and I thought that was really interesting,

because that sort of US action was so much part of his life and I know you spoke about how that came about. Was that a sort of coincidental thing that happened in the middle of creating?

DS: It was a coincidental thing because - Gosh! I used maybe about 20 or 30 colours of embroidery thread and I just wasn't coming up with the colours I wanted for the oak leaves, and so I'm rooting around in my many baskets and boxes of textile stuff and these yarns came up, and they been hand dyed by this noted embroiderer, my friend's mother, and they were all different soft shades of natural dyes. They weren't bright modern commercial colours, they were all very natural greens, silvery green, brown-y green, you know, and it just was one of those moments where a little clock goes off in your head going 'that's the stuff for the oak leaves'. That's the natural look I wanted, it looked lovely against the linen. It had that texture, and it also had a historical reference to really old tapestries, which I thought was important, you know, coming from his Northern Irish culture, it would've been a thing in some of these big houses and different public buildings to have really beautiful needlepoint tapestries on the walls, and I wanted to reference that long tradition of sewing and textiles in Northern Ireland. So, I just had a handful of these yarns, and I put them down next to the piece, and they just clicked, and that's how they came to be, but I was very happy to honour this very good embroiderer from upstate New York and have that little bit of transnational input.

Hand dyed yarns used for the oak leaves. Photo Deborah Stockdale

BH: Well, I think it's incredibly fitting and it is interesting listening to you, because now when I look at the oak leaves and you talk about that natural shade, I see it much more than, maybe, the first time. It's very actually authentic to the colour of oak leaves at a certain stage.

BH: Yeah, it just has that real feel to it and there are some acorns there as well, which are always so incredible that such a small thing can produce such a massive tree. Maybe I'm getting into my own symbolism?

DS: No, no, that was part of my symbolism too, the acorn's a part and parcel of any oak, and on the back of the piece, it's not really noted in any of the dialogue about it, but I put 'from small acorns great oaks grow' and that was his work as a peacemaker, and as a social facilitator, and a community person. They all started with small acorns: the credit union movement, a small acorn but now it's huge, and same with the peace movement, you know, that he actually opened up the dialogue that these very disparate parties could actually sit down and forge a communication. So the acorns were part of that symbolism, that from very small humble beginnings done really magnificent things have come out through his life.

BH: Well, that's great. I'm always glad when I get something right so that's good. I digress again but my primary school in South Africa had an acorn on the blazer pocket, and that was always the motto that from small acorns big oak trees can grow.

DS: There you go! It fits in your life too.

BH: So, it's a sort of interesting thing but I think it's completely true what you're saying, not only in terms of the co-op and the influence on the peace process but globally, I mean, he's put in the same brackets as Martin Luther King Jr. and Gandhi.

DS: Nelson Mandela.

BH: It's incredible. So maybe we'll move on a tiny bit.

DS: It's probably too much information from me but carry on.

BH: No, I think it's great and I think for anybody interested in the piece, I would certainly want to hear and read more about, so I think it's great for you to talk at length about it. I just want to ask a little bit more about, you spoke about the commission, and the relationship to Roberta, and essentially, you're approached about this commission; I'd just like to hear a little bit more about your relationship to Roberta in terms of how it's commissioned. I mean, Roberta, you know, came to me, and it was also commissioned through my chair. I didn't really have very much to do with it, well, I had nothing to do with it really, other than that fact, but I'd be interested in you and Roberta's relationship, and how this piece came out and I know you've talked about the family and how it came partly from the family, but was that part of how this piece came about, or did you just get on with it and think about it yourself, or was there co-creation that went on?

DS: There was a great deal of co-creation at the beginning. I'm not quite sure why [Roberta] singled me out; I know that she wanted to commemorate him, and I do have this, kind of, history of working on historical projects in my own art practice, and with Conflict Textiles, so I think I can't speak for her, but I'd say she thought it'd be a good match and I'd give it a good shot.

I'm not a quick worker, I do take time just to sit and think; as any artist will tell you a lot of the work is just thinking, and how you internally visualise the outcome. There's always things that happen that are random or unpredictable that are also part of the outcome. Roberta is very good in that, she will suggest something and this has happened for many

different projects; she will suggest, she will give information, and then she'll sit back, and see how I process it and I really value that, because it's not micromanaged. She did not micromanage me, but she did prompt me every now and then, 'How's it going?', that's fine; but she didn't see the end product until she saw the finished piece, so it wasn't like she was over my shoulder going like 'What about John Hume? What about John Hume?' you know. So, it was the initial 'I think this would be a good idea', and then she said 'I would like you to meet Mo and possibly Pat if we can arrange it', and I said I would really value that, and that was set up, and we got the neckties. So, she walks that first step, but I felt very much I was on my own creative path with this. It wasn't a cut and paste job at all; it was definitely me doing the research, and doing the work, and coming out with how I felt about it, and working on it, and working on it, and then working on it some more!

BH: And I mean I know it's probably an impossible question to answer, but how many hours do you think you put into it?

DS: Honestly, I couldn't say Brandon. I could not say.

BH: Like weeks and weeks and weeks?

DS: Weeks, yeah, because you know, the necessity of sewing for four hours, I just couldn't do that every single day, and I couldn't do more than 5 or 6 hours a day just because of how my hand are, now, I have arthritis and what not, so it went on for quite a while. And sometimes, it seemed like I was never getting anywhere, but then I can look back at process pictures and see it was a logical progression and a logical end, and that's the thing.

BH: Yeah, I mean it is a process, I know certainly, you know when you met Mo, I was there on that day, and then Pat came as well. Was that the same day that Pat was there?

DS: Yeah.

BH: And none of us knew at that stage that

DS: That it was her last week or two.

BH: Very short at that stage, but you know, it was amazing just for me, to see you sitting with Mo and talking about John, and knowing the piece was coming, and just to see that tiny insight into how that process happens. I think it is really important; it's part of why we wanted to do these interviews, because I think sometimes someone looking at a piece maybe doesn't know the types of interactions that take place to produce something.

DS: Exactly, I very much wanted to honour him within his family too, that was important to me that they were onboard and happy with what came out of it, and at the launch I definitely felt that they were well touched and pleased at the whole process.

BH: And what was that launch like for you? I know different artists have different views of those types of public things; some don't want to be there, others really relish them. I mean obviously, having an accomplished portrait artist there must have been interesting. How was the launch?

DS: Well, it was odd because of Covid, it wasn't the usual convivial kind of meet-and-greet that I'd be used to at an art or gallery launch that I would've participated in many times, It was a bit odd I wasn't scheduled to speak, and I was glad I didn't have to speak, in a certain way, but then other people were speaking. Colin Davidson spoke quite well, and I appreciated that, and your speech was read. It was gratifying to get it past, to get through it.

I enjoyed speaking with his other family members. His other daughter, and I think his son were there too, and it was nice to put faces to their names and have a wee chat. But it's ultimately very brief these kinds of interactions, but I could tell that they were genuinely pleased with both pieces, the one about their mother as well that Linda Adams did. So yeah, it was okay.

It's a funny feeling when you complete a really big project and step away from it; you're very vested in it but then it goes out in its own world in its own life. It's like launching your children to university or something, you know it'll be fine, but you have to let go. It wasn't my piece to keep and it's out in the world now and that's what it is, that's how that works.

BH: You know, I think that's really interesting, and obviously as you say, Covid made it all very strange, and I couldn't be there because of Covid and it was all a bit odd, but I think the point you make about meeting the family but then really the launching of it, in the true sense of the word launch, that it sort of gets launched out there into the world and you no longer, in a sense, own it, I suppose.

DS: No and I can't make any changes on it either, I'm going 'Ooh that little bit up at the top of his head, I should've fixed that,' but once I make that decision that it's done, it's done, and I've been in this process many, many times in my artwork, and in any really big projects and you just have to say "I can do no more" and that's where you stop.

BH: What's that like? I mean, you spoke about your works being in other galleries, but I'm assuming, we're now at the beginning of this process, and this portrait's probably going to move with different conferences, and events, and activities that are going to take place. Do you think about that once you've done the piece or is it sort of now it's done?
DS: No, no, it's not that I'm worried about. I always value seeing it, especially with Conflict Textiles. My artwork has gone in so many countries, so many spaces. From educational places, to museums, to community halls; the outreach has just been tremendous, what I've experienced with Conflict Textiles. So I have reached a point of equilibrium that it's not personal anymore; it becomes a public process, a public piece. Some people would criticise it, some people would admire it, some people would just be in love with it, but I've learned to separate. You know, it is a part of being an artist; you can't hold on to everything that you make; and it's good in a way, and it's good that it triggers people, and evokes different feelings and different memories for the family, and different ways of looking at things. I think all good art should trigger you in some way, and it should change your views on the world because it's somebody else's expression, and once you enter into that kind of conversation about art, any kind of art, or any kind of craft, or something that somebody has made, you know, it becomes a kind of dialogue between you and the people that appreciate

it. And that's how I look at it, it's a dialogue, I've thrown it out there, other people take it and run with it. That's fine.

BH: I think that's a great way of putting it that it's a dialogue, and in a way maybe it's a good case to move towards the end of our interview. It's been great for me to be part of that dialogue with you, and your dialogue with the piece, and the piece's dialogue with others, and that's a really fitting way to describe John Hume in a sense, who epitomised dialogue in every sense of the word. Is there anything finally you would like to add you've forgotten or wanted to add?

DS: I think I've talked a fair bit here. I'd like to just say the twelve or fifteen years I've been involved with Conflict Textiles and Roberta, watching it grow, and flesh out, and expand, you know, it's just been a wonderful experience as a person and as an artist. That **Conflict Textiles** even exists, and it's so well documented, and bookcased in so many beautiful ways that other people can explore, you know, what we're basically creating here, because the arpilleras themselves are significant, but without the collection and without all the background work between Breege Doherty, and Gillian Robinson, and yourself, and Roberta, and the work I do; that is the significance, that this whole collection has been created, and now it's gone worldwide, and God knows in 10 years what it'll be like. I mean, I probably won't be around to see it, but I've been really blessed to be part of it. Absolutely.

BH: Well, you've been such a massively significant part of it in so many different ways.

DS: Yeah, I'm not always in the front lines, but working away behind the lines.

BH: And, yeah well, that's probably the most important place.

DS: Thank you.

BH: Thanks, I really enjoyed discussing it with you today, and I look forward to working with you more, and also seeing how this piece will travel, and increase dialogue and open minds in exactly the way you said; that's the best way to honour John Hume through this portrait. So thanks very much, Deborah.

DS: Thank you very much yourself. Good chat. Bye-bye.

BH: Bye.

Deborah Stockdale and Conflict Textiles curator Roberta Bacic
Photo Rhianna Stockdale

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