



# life stories

Natasha Kerr's textile panels are poignant, beautifully crafted portraits that celebrate lives as they are really lived. Charlotte Abrahams goes on a voyage of discovery

**portrait: hanson leatherby**



Natasha Kerr has been having a pause. The cause was the birth of her son four years ago and the effect has been interesting. She has made less work obviously, but there has also been a slight shift in both style and subject matter.

For the last two decades, Kerr has been making textile panels that tell the history of her own family in carefully considered arrangements of screen printed, hand painted and hand sewn images and text. It is a rich story filled with displacement, loss and quite a lot of sewing. Her great grandfather, for example, was the son of a tailor and had been a surgeon in Vienna before being forced to come to England in 1936 to escape the Nazis. His wife found purpose in her new English life knitting and crocheting pieces of clothing for department stores.

Kerr spent her childhood surrounded by her family, both literally and through recounted tales. Home was a large house on the unfashionable side of the Wirral, occupied not only by her mother, father and half-sister, but also by her grand and great grandmothers. The elderly women lived at the rear of the house and spoke only German; Kerr and her parents used the front and talked to each other in English. 'It was a very matriarchal household, filled with big personalities,'

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natasha kerr



Kerr says. However, by the time she was 14, the family had suffered seven bereavements in as many years and the only people still left in the house were Kerr and her mother.

Several years later, she was given a cache of family photographs and so, since she was looking for a change of direction having been working as a textile print designer, she decided to start making artworks based on these photographs and the stories behind them. 'I wanted to take the nostalgia and sweetness away from these sepia photographs and tell the real, gritty stories,' she says.

Using linen sheets as a canvas, Kerr stitched bits of personal memorabilia and pieces of original text around a large, screen printed portrait, building the narrative in a circle. Some of the finished panels were framed, others were left as hangings and all were exquisitely crafted. (Kerr is a perfectionist and is deeply committed to the handmade, not out of some rigid notion of craftsmanship – she is far more interested in intent than process – but simply because she prefers the integrity of a handmade object.) A style emerged and her work began to attract attention. *Contemporary Applied Arts* took her on and private commissions rolled in,



but Kerr herself was frustrated. 'I wanted people to see the whole narrative of the work together, rather than just disparate pieces,' she says. 'And I wanted them to see it in a domestic environment instead of a white gallery because my work is about people and families.'

So in 1998, she decided to stage an immersive, multi-sensory solo show in a dilapidated Victorian house in south west London. *There are Things you don't Need to Know* occupied every corner of this three storey building and each member of her family had a place. A panel featuring an image of her grandfather's first wife, cast aside in favour of another woman, hung by the back door; another about her secretly homosexual uncle was hidden away in an under-stairs cupboard. Her great grandmother's death bed and a vast, vividly-coloured photograph of her grandmother in her coffin occupied two of the top bedrooms. 'Photographing people in their coffins seems to have been a family tradition,' Kerr says.

*There are things you don't need to know* was a significant exhibition but, tucked away in Battersea and only open by appointment, it didn't receive the attention it deserved. Nicholas Serota, Director of Tate Museums and Galleries,





called but, not realising who he was, Kerr told him that he would have to book a visit another time.

Kerr may not be a household name but she has made work for Dawn French, Michael Hoppen and Martin Clunes and anyone who went to see *Quilts 1700-2010* at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2010 will have seen her piece *At the End of the Day*. (As will anyone who visited the Museum's shop or travelled on the tube around that time, since it was also used as the lead image on the catalogue and publicity material.) The panel features a photograph of her grandfather lying on the grass, while his mother-in-law dozes in the sunshine next to an empty chair. This image is sewn onto a background that somehow is and is not a Union Jack. It is a piece that speaks eloquently of displacement; simultaneously universal and intensely personal.

*At the End of the Day* was one of the last panels Kerr made using historical family album photographs before her son was born. Now her focus has shifted away from her own family and towards fictional characters. The making process remains the same but the stories that appear on the panels, each one hand painted in Indian ink, are her own creation. 'These new characters may or may not be connected and



displacement flag courtesy of victoria & albert museum

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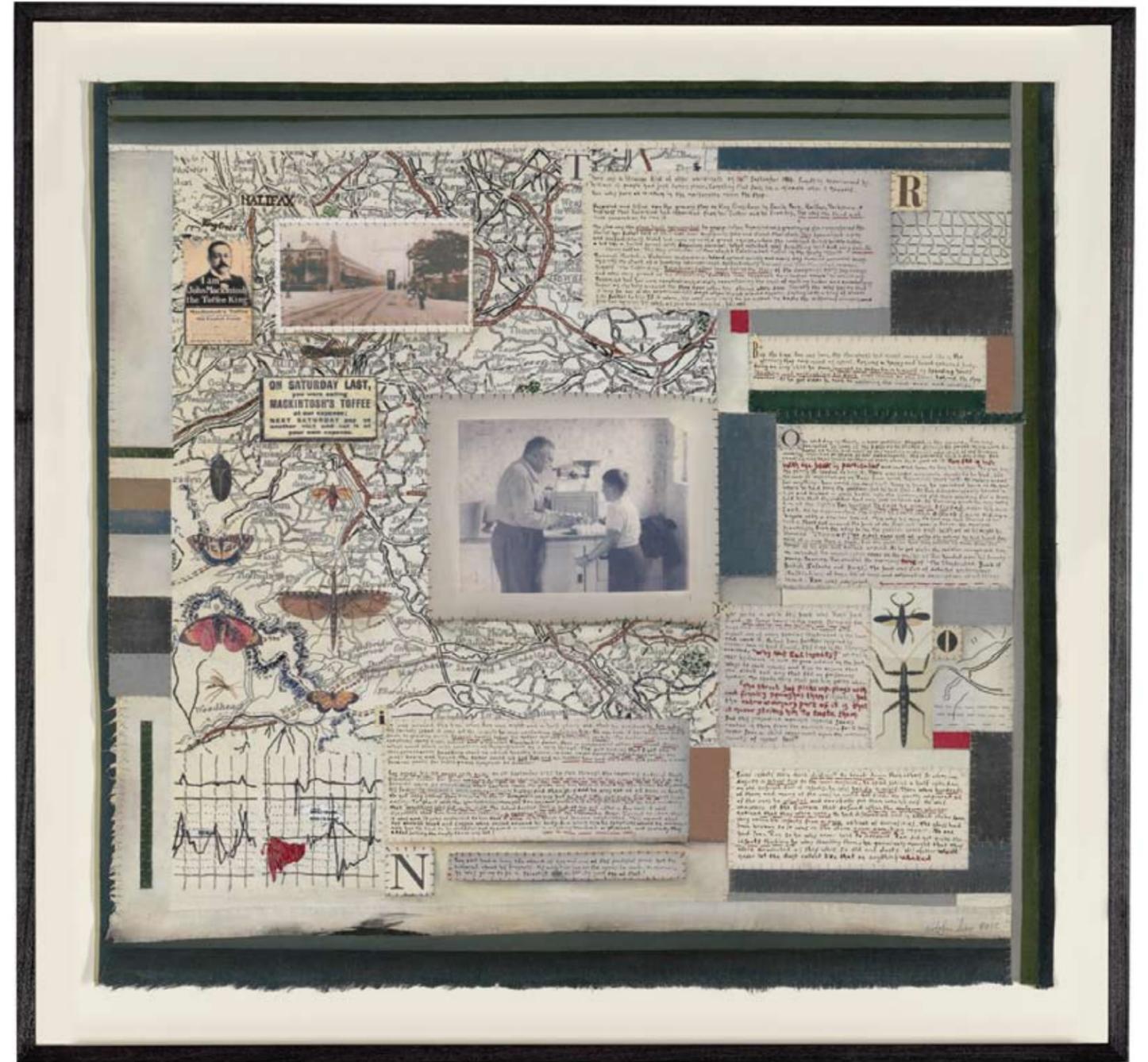
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their lives may be entwined with real people,’ she says. To date, the cast list contains *Pineapple Man* Wally Weaver, Leopold Gold, a Viennese-born watch-maker and Olga Tufnell, the inventor of the *A-Z Dinner Party* and friend of Oscar Wilde.

Kerr has also made at least one piece that isn’t centred around a large central image. *Self Portrait*, which she showed at *Decorex* last autumn as part of Corinne Julius’ *Future Heritage* showcase, is a panel about her own life and the absence of a central portrait is partly down to a reluctance to take centre stage (‘I couldn’t think of anything worse than having a big portrait of me on a piece,’ she says), and partly down to a desire to change the aesthetic slightly. ‘I have been using this quieter time to challenge how I work,’ she says.

She has also been using it to do a part time course in psychoanalysis. This is not a surprise. Kerr’s work, however it develops, is fundamentally about people. ‘I do look at the past and I am fascinated by history,’ she says, ‘but my work is really about human beings and what makes and breaks them.’

*Natasha Kerr is available for commission*  
[www.natashakerr.co.uk](http://www.natashakerr.co.uk)



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