

Freddie Robins calls herself many things: a knitter, a maker of textile objects and, on the day I meet her at the converted live-work barn she shares with her husband Ben Coode-Adams and their nine year-old daughter Willa, simply an artist. She is of course all three of these things – an artist whose chosen medium is wool, which she knits into objects that explore pertinent issues of the domestic, gender and the human condition – but this reluctance to pin herself down too precisely reflects a shift towards a looser approach to her practice that was triggered by the experience of turning a 16th century Essex barn into a family home.

'We got to a point in the building process when we had spent enough money and made enough decisions,' Robins explains. 'So we decided to use only the materials that we already had on-site. I really enjoyed that philosophy, so I've started to apply it to my work too. Now, rather than deciding what I want to make and then choosing and buying new materials, I am just working with what I already have and allowing the object to dictate the work.'

The work in question consists of a series of pieces called *Out on a Limb* which she is making for the Project Space at COLLECT. When we meet in March, two months before the show opens at London's Saatchi Gallery, her studio is filled with three-dimensional knitted body parts in various stages of completion. (The skins of these forms were made using seamless knitting technology for a project in 2007, and are now filled with expanding foam.) I sit next to a visceral red head that Robins has just placed on a small

IKEA stool, which happens to have a seat made from exactly the same shade of red wool. It is a serendipitous pairing that she is rather pleased with, and she now has plans to embellish the stool with red beaded necklaces. Behind me are two adult-size, knitted figures of no discernible gender. One balances somewhat precariously on its cherry wood stand; the other lies face up on a table, bits of foam leaking from its limbs and a dismembered arm, complete with flint fingers, balanced across its torso. Again, decorative embellishments of some sort are likely.

Decoration is a new departure for Robins, and she is rather enjoying it. 'Up until now, my work has always been quite pared down,' she explains, 'but my decision to work only with things I have has forced me to use all the trimmings, buttons, jewellery and bits of fabric that I have stored in the studio. I'm just pinning and stitching these things to the skins in a completely intuitive way, and the results tread a fine line between beautiful and ugly.'

The two finished pieces certainly sit on this line. *I* features a beaded pupil, encased in a knitted eyelid, staring out from an oval of agate that was originally designed as a rather nasty tea-light holder, while *Limb* is a pink knitted arm covered in sequins, crocheted flowers and beading. This latter piece is humorous (the resemblance to a phallus can't be denied), pretty, kitsch and, with its stump-like end, deeply unsettling. I am enchanted and disturbed in equal measure.

This is of course classic Robins territory. She studied knitting for her BA at Middlesex Polytechnic with the intention of becoming a knitwear



Opposite: Freddie Robins in her studio  
Below: *Limb*, machine-knitted wool, expanding foam, hand-knitted and crochet yarn, glass beads, dressmaking pins, sequins and antique faux pearl necklace, 64 cm, 2013

# OUT ON A LIMB

*...is the title of radical knitter Freddie Robins's latest work. But it could also be an apt description of her position in the art world because, as Charlotte Abrahams explains, she's someone who likes to do things a little differently.*

*Portrait by Julian Anderson*



'LIMB' PHOTO: DOUGLAS ATFIELD

designer (as a child, she had been introduced to knitting as a way of making by her godmother and found she was good at it), only to become fascinated by the cultural preconceptions that surround knitting as a craft. 'My godmother was a fantastic maker,' she explains. 'She used to take me to Miss Selfridge to see what clothes I liked, then go home and make them, so all my associations with knitting and making were about the contemporary. I thought it was a fashionable pursuit, but when I got to art school, I discovered that most people saw it as a passive, benign and rather frumpy activity. That spurred me on. I found I wanted to make knitted objects that subverted these preconceptions.'

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And subvert them she has. In the 24 years since she graduated from the Royal College of Art with an MA in Constructed Textiles, Robins has unsettled her audiences with – among others things – Siamese body suits (*Headcase*), blood-soaked, four-fingered gloves (*Peggy*), and a collection of apparently innocuous woolly buildings called *Knitted Houses of Crime*. These might look like cutesy tea cosies, but in fact they are either the homes of female murderers or the houses where they committed their crimes.

'The issues I deal with through my work – notions of physical perfection, my fears about

death, the problems of accepting my role as a mother, what it is to be human – are common issues, and I want to have a dialogue with my audience about them,' she explains. 'People are drawn to woollen things because they perceive wool as a friendly, domestic material, and that allows me to talk about difficult subjects in a way that other, less familiar materials would not.'

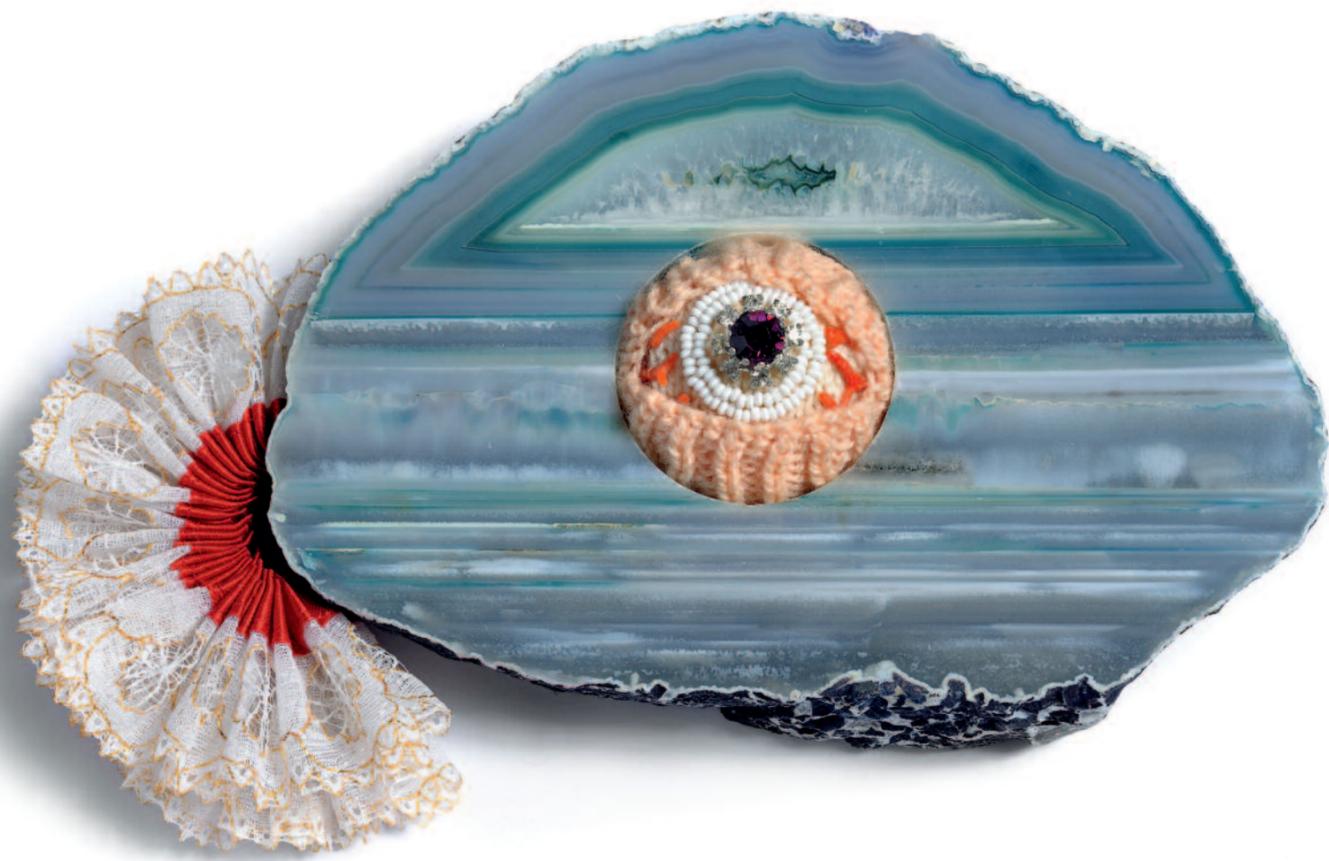
Knitting's current high-fashion status doesn't seem to have affected this dialogue. 'I love the fact that more people are taking part in creative activities,' she says. 'Making is good for us, after all, but the fact that knitting is supposedly fashionable at the moment hasn't changed its perceived value – if anything, it's made it even more accessible.' However, she has noticed that her work is having a huge influence on younger artists. 'I've started to get masses of emails from students who are writing dissertations about what I do,' she says.

Since 2001, Robins has balanced her professional practice with the role of Senior Tutor in Mixed Media at the Royal College of Art. It's a course with a diverse career path – past students range from designer Donna Wilson to multi-media sculptor Rowan Mersh and fashion designer Jane Bowler – but she isn't interested in encouraging students to take up knitting. What does interest her is giving students the confidence to see textiles as a serious artistic medium, and helping them to achieve what they want to achieve.

Teaching is time-consuming, but Robins finds that the creative buzz of the RCA is a good antidote to the solitude of her studio. 'I really like the energy of teaching,' she says, 'and I enjoy the pace it brings



ANYWAY AND 'CRAFT KILLS' PHOTOS: DOUGLAS AITFIELD | 'BAD MOTHER' PHOTO: JULIAN ANDERSON



Clockwise across both pages, from above: *I*, machine knitted wool, glass beads, coral, antique earring, agate, lace, 21 cm wide, 2013; *Feering Bury Farm Barn*, 16th century grade II listed timber-framed barn, Essex; *Bad Mother*, machine-knitted wool, expanding foam, machine-knitted Lurex, needles, glass beads, sequins, crystals, dressmaking pins, 76 cm wide, 2013; *Anyway*, machine-knitted wool, 3 x 3 m, 2002; *Craft Kills* (detail), machine-knitted wool, knitting needles, 2m high, 2002



to my own work.' More recently, it has also given her the perfect excuse to spend time in London.

The family left the city for rural Essex in December 2010 with ambitious plans to convert an ancient barn into a home-cum-studio. The process was filmed for the Channel 4 series *Grand Designs*, an experience Robins remembers as largely positive. 'We thought that taking part in the programme would be a good way to document the project, and would help us push through the work,' she explains. 'It was a really good experience. I have no interest in seeing myself on TV but it was great to have outsiders in the house as a distraction.'

I watched the show when it first aired in 2011, and I remember thinking that the finished building looked too large and too barn-like (it even has a couple of silos in the living space) to ever be a comfortable home, but in reality, it is surprisingly domestic. The wooden structure helps – like wool, wood is a familiar and comforting material – but it's the objects inside that really turn the barn into an appealing living space.

'Objects are the way I interpret the world,' Robins says. 'To live without objects is a denial of human need.'

Both Robins and Coode-Adams, who is also an artist, are life-long collectors, and their home is an extravagant celebration of their things. Robins's favourite places are the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford and London's Wellcome Collection, and you can see their influence in the vitrines which furnish the barn. The contents of these glass cabinets are eclectic, ranging from toys to taxidermy,

but each is carefully themed and the arrangements are precise. In one, dedicated to characters, a roller-skating bear sits next to a beaded South African doll, which in turn sits next to a figure from the film *Planet of the Apes*; in another a knitted skeleton by Janine McLellan lies surrounded by body parts, some plastic, some bone.

These cases are intensely personal but they are also an extension of Robins's professional practice, a link which independent curator Andrée Cooke has asked her to explore for an installation at Spring Studios in London later this year.

'When I first saw Freddie's cases I was absolutely beguiled by them,' says Cooke. 'The

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juxtaposition of objects is absolutely fascinating, and creates a really interesting dynamic, so I asked her to take an area at Spring (which, with its high ceilings and wooden floors, is reminiscent of her domestic space), and create something case based which shows the breadth of her creative thinking.'

Exactly what will go into the two cases has yet to be finalised (Robins is waiting to see whether they will be open or shelved before deciding), but she's keen to do something rather magical, or perhaps a play on the word 'spring' that incorporates her collection of bird's nests. But there's

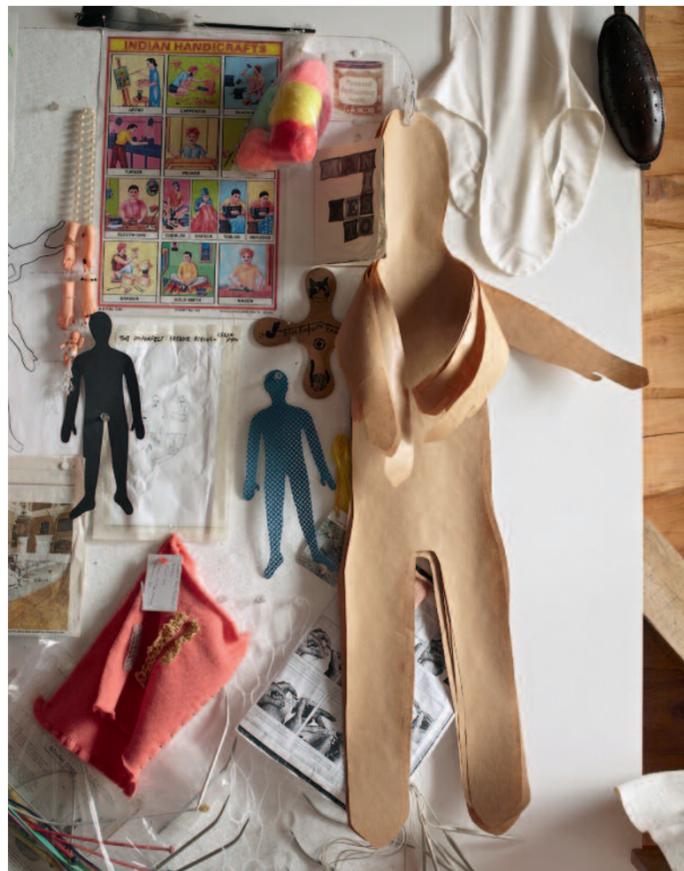
a problem: while Robins is interested in the idea of mixing objects from the collection with objects she has made, it also makes her anxious.

'I like the idea of getting all my things out,' she says, 'but I am worried about the objects leaving me. Both my work and the objects we collect provide a way for me to mediate the space between myself and the outside world but, while the work is made to go out there, the objects are coming in. It's a reversal of the process.'

It's an issue that, for now, remains unresolved, but uncertainty is a state that Robins has learnt to live with since moving to the barn. 'I lost my way when we first moved,' she says, 'and then I developed the more expedient approach to making that's resulted in the work for *COLLECT*. But I still battle with not living in London. I would like my work to have a greater relationship with my outside environment but when I look out of the window at all this beauty, it just infuriates me.'

For an artist whose work is so intimately bound up with who she is, this infuriation can only result in some rather interesting knitted objects. Long may her battle continue.

*'Out on a Limb' will show as part of the Project Space at COLLECT, Saatchi Gallery, Duke of York's HQ, King's Rd, London SW3, from 10-13 May. It is supported by public funding via the National Lottery through Arts Council England. Robins will be showing at Spring Studios, Spring House, 10 Spring Place, London NW5, from 15 May – 15 September 2013. Viewing by appointment only: see details at [www.springstudios.com](http://www.springstudios.com) [www.freddiebobins.com](http://www.freddiebobins.com), [www.collect2013.org.uk](http://www.collect2013.org.uk)*



Far left: studio wall  
Below: *Hacked and Basket case*, both works in progress, 2013



Clockwise from right: *Stumped*, work in progress, 2013; Feering Bury Farm Barn interior, case of dolls and robots sits in front of rebuilt concrete grain silos which contain a spiral staircase; Feering Bury Farm Barn interior