

# TOIL AND RUBBLE

Clare Lane's lifelong passion for architecture and stitch collide in a hyper-realist take on the urban environment, writes Jo Hall

**CLARE LANE'S 'EUREKA' moment came during the second year of her textile degree. After approaching the architect-artist Dan Dubowitz, best known for his work on wastelands, he invited her to the site where he was working in Glasgow, an abandoned and deconsecrated Catholic seminary.**

'It was amazing,' says Clare. 'It was completed in 1966 and only survived for about five years before the seminary closed and the building left obsolete.' She shows me the

photographs that Dubowitz took of the empty, modernist building. One in particular stands out – a haunting shot of the vandalised concrete altar, lit with a single, dramatic shaft of light from above. 'That was a real turning point for me – the idea of looking at ruins that didn't fit in with the idea of being romantic', says Clare. 'My dissertation became about how we value our ancient ruins but urban dereliction is something that we don't really see and yet, on a very physical, objective level, they are one and the same thing.'



Ancoats, 2005, 97 x 76cm

The potential that Clare Lane sees in architecture lies not in some perfect Georgian pile in the country but within the urban landscape: in the rubbish-strewn city streets; in the overgrown warehouses that line the canals of Leeds, Manchester and Liverpool and in the derelict decay most of us would rather ignore. But Lane is drawn towards these empty buildings; even those that are derelict. 'I remember when I was a child, there was an old children's home that had been left empty and we used to love going in there. The

emptiness oozes potential but it is also the caretaker for the story of every person who had ever lived in that building.'

Clare Lane likes to talk about 'pavement pounding' – where she hits the streets, camera in hand, snapping hundreds of shots of buildings in various states of decay. She then returns to her studio (located in a light and airy home in Leeds) where she produces the images for her canvases, which are eventually digitally printed and then embroidered.

It's a scene that has played out time again throughout her



life: she originally trained as a building surveyor and worked in Liverpool and London, before moving to Leeds. However the call to be creative was never far away. A keen stitcher since the age of 11 ('it was a real passion'), she took night classes in every creative subject she could find throughout her surveying career. After nine years, she became a lecturer at Leeds Met ('teaching is in our blood: my father was a lecturer and his father was a teacher'). She worked there for nine years, also picking up an MA in Architectural History and Conservation from Leicester, which she describes as 'a feast of looking; of observing what was around you'. But it was becoming a full-time parent that finally allowed her to 'go and do what I'd always wanted to do, which was textiles'.

She opted for printed textiles and surface pattern design. 'It really opened up my horizons as to what was possible. The funny thing was that I went onto the textile course thinking 'no

more buildings'. But in the second year, there was a brief with an architectural feel to it and, so, that was it'.

### The process

Clare's work is almost entirely process driven. Once she has the raw material – hundreds of photographic images – she begins to manipulate them. 'I might get them printed up, cut them out or draw elements of them but, ultimately, it's about playing with the bank of images I've got'. Sometimes she selects a single image to work on but more often than not, she will create a montage. Using a graphics pad and working in Photoshop, Lane shows me how she enlarges the images so that she can work on tiny sections. She painstakingly redraws each line and enhances each shape and colour.

'The right image can take months to get ready. I completely re-work it: re-colouring everything. When I'm

working on an image, I'm usually looking at the colours and pattern, and working in an abstract way. It's only when I step back and look at it I get the overall image.'

Her eye is practiced – not only in terms of colour and composition (her use of which instils her work with a kind of hyper-realism) but also in the challenging matter of scale. Her final pieces are large – anywhere from one metre to a potential 50 metres in length – but they are only ever finally viewed at full scale once they are returned from the printer, a Manchester company she discovered while on a two-year residency at MMU's textiles department, as part of the Crafts Council's Next Move scheme. It was there that she began to perfect her technique of working with digital print on canvas but also, more importantly, it was there she discovered a symbiosis between print and machine embroidery.

Up to that point, she had only managed to create what she



Main image: Blackburn Commission, detail from finished piece. June 2006

Above: *Abstract I*, 129 x 130cm

Top: *Backstage*, (detail), 160 x 114cm



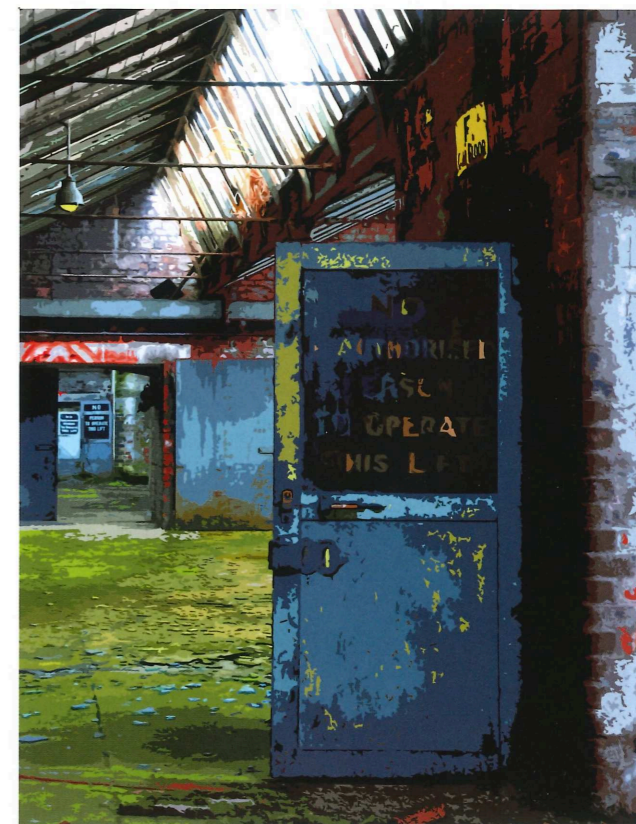
Clare Lane



Above: *Spitalfields in Transition*, 2006. 200 x 120cm

Below: *Mooney and Sons*, 2006. 110 x 75cm

Above right: *No unauthorised person*, 2008. 160 x 108cm



describes as 'flat prints', which were not, to her mind, final pieces. She explored the machine room at Manchester and fell in love with the Irish machine. 'I was completely hooked. I love it: it's like a graphic pen – you just move the paper instead of the pen and you get these wonderful lines. You can draw with it, although I tend to infill with big, chunky stitches but there's so much flexibility to it.'

## Stitched relief

For Lane, stitching sections within the canvas helps to resolve the image: 'Part of what does it for me is the relief – the flatness of the printed surface against the brightness of the stitch.' She will often stitch one way, before changing direction but always in solid blocks of colour that are not immediately obvious on first view. 'Sometimes the stitch really throws an image, especially black, where you get this really bizarre play of depth,' she explains.

Since then, Lane has been exhibiting and selling her work successfully. She has undertaken several commissions and her pieces are in demand by galleries. She even staged her first solo show in May, as part of the annual Stroudwater International Textiles Festival.

Yet while she has perfected a formula (camera, computer, digital print and embroidery) her enthusiasm ensures that she is keen to push the medium further. She only ever produces limited editions of five, and the embroidery on each piece is unique. 'My work definitely builds up in stages. Where I am now is that I want to be more involved in the printing process – to find a way of interrupting it somehow, as that's the only distant element at the moment.'

Buildings and architecture have been – and remain – a key passion in her life. Her latest project concerns the historic Stanley Dock complex of warehouses in Liverpool but her ultimate goal is to find a way to work directly on buildings, at full life-size. 'My website is called urban fabric and I think it is the everydayness of our urban environment that interests me. There are architects with grand ideas that are often constructing something new and possibly monumental to fit into an already existing habitat. And it's not just sitting against other buildings, it's sitting against rubbish, traffic lights, street markings: It's all that ephemera which makes a sort of visual cacophony of the places we walk through. That is what I find really interesting.'

'It's a kind of accidental build-up: there's no overall scheme as such, unless you go to somewhere like Canary Wharf, which I think is far spookier than any derelict building. There's the feeling of being on a film set but waiting for the cameraman to fill the scene.'

[www.urban-fabric.co.uk](http://www.urban-fabric.co.uk)

Artist-maker Clare Lane graduated from Leeds College of Art & Design with a degree in Printed Textiles and Surface Pattern in 2003, after already obtaining her Masters in Architectural Building Conservation at De Montfort University in 1993. In 2004, she was accepted on to the Crafts Council's Next Move Scheme undertaking a two-year residency in the Textile Department at Manchester Metropolitan University. She staged her first solo show in May 2008 as part of the Stroudwater International Textile Festival.