

the bigger picture

The Michael Brennand-Wood retrospective that opens this month at Ruthin Craft Centre promises not only to survey the artist's career but reflect upon the development of textiles as an art form since the 1970s

'My student days in the 1970s were a period of serious activity – not constantly going out and having wild times – but being almost wholly preoccupied with embroidery and textiles. I felt that no one had really explored this area and I passionately wanted to do something original,' says Michael Brennand-Wood.

It is this dedication, as well as the characteristic originality of his work and the landmark contributions he has made to both forming and changing our perception of stitch, lace and textiles, which have earned Brennand-Wood a major retrospective at Ruthin Crafts Centre in September.

This will be a wide-ranging survey recording more than 30 years of Brennand-Wood's involvement with the applied arts. It is the first time that all three of Ruthin's galleries are being dedicated to a solo show and will enable viewers to develop a sense of both the innovation and continuity that run through the oeuvre. The exhibition is an opportunity for many people who know only certain examples of his work to sample the extent and breadth of his

prodigious output. The course of his career began in 1977 when Brennand-Wood graduated with an MA Textiles from the then Birmingham Polytechnic (now Birmingham City University). It was only two years later that his and Caroline Broadhead's *Thread Collages* were shown at the Crafts Advisory Committee Gallery, London and subsequently on a UK tour.

This Ruthin retrospective should also be of tremendous help in locating Brennand-Wood's work within the larger international sphere of the applied arts. He is often – and possibly correctly so – termed a maverick. The interdisciplinary nature of his approach to creativity often means that his work eludes pinning down and categorising. However, it should always be kept in mind that he has a profound interest in the historic aspect of textiles and sees himself as functioning within this great ongoing tradition.

What is particularly fascinating is the manner in which Brennand-Wood allies the ancient art of textiles with state of the art technology. An

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Michael Brennand-Wood
Restored and Remixed, 2012
90 x 115 x 4
Painted carpet, acrylic and embroidery on wood panel
PHOTO: PHIL SAYER





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instructive example of this process is *Restored and Remixed*, a knotted rug in which computer embroidered skulls and robot-like transformer figures, as well as meticulous hand-staining, give a wholly different narrative than that which was originally conveyed by this elderly, second-hand artefact.

Brennand-Wood is an artist who expresses his convictions with a vigour and witty forthrightness. He is prepared to say what many might consider to be boat-rocking and perhaps even inflammatory. To cite but one example: 'The cornerstone of art schools used to be anarchy, not simply being bloody-minded, but a will to put yourself into

unfamiliar territory.' Now, he grieves over the fact that much of what is being made in the contemporary world of stitch and textiles is specifically geared to grant applications and securing research funding. All too often he fears that craft artists, having lighted upon a successful format, allow themselves to be trapped in repetitious making modes, the earlier innovation and excitement declining into a safe and formulaic production-line activity.

Forever changes

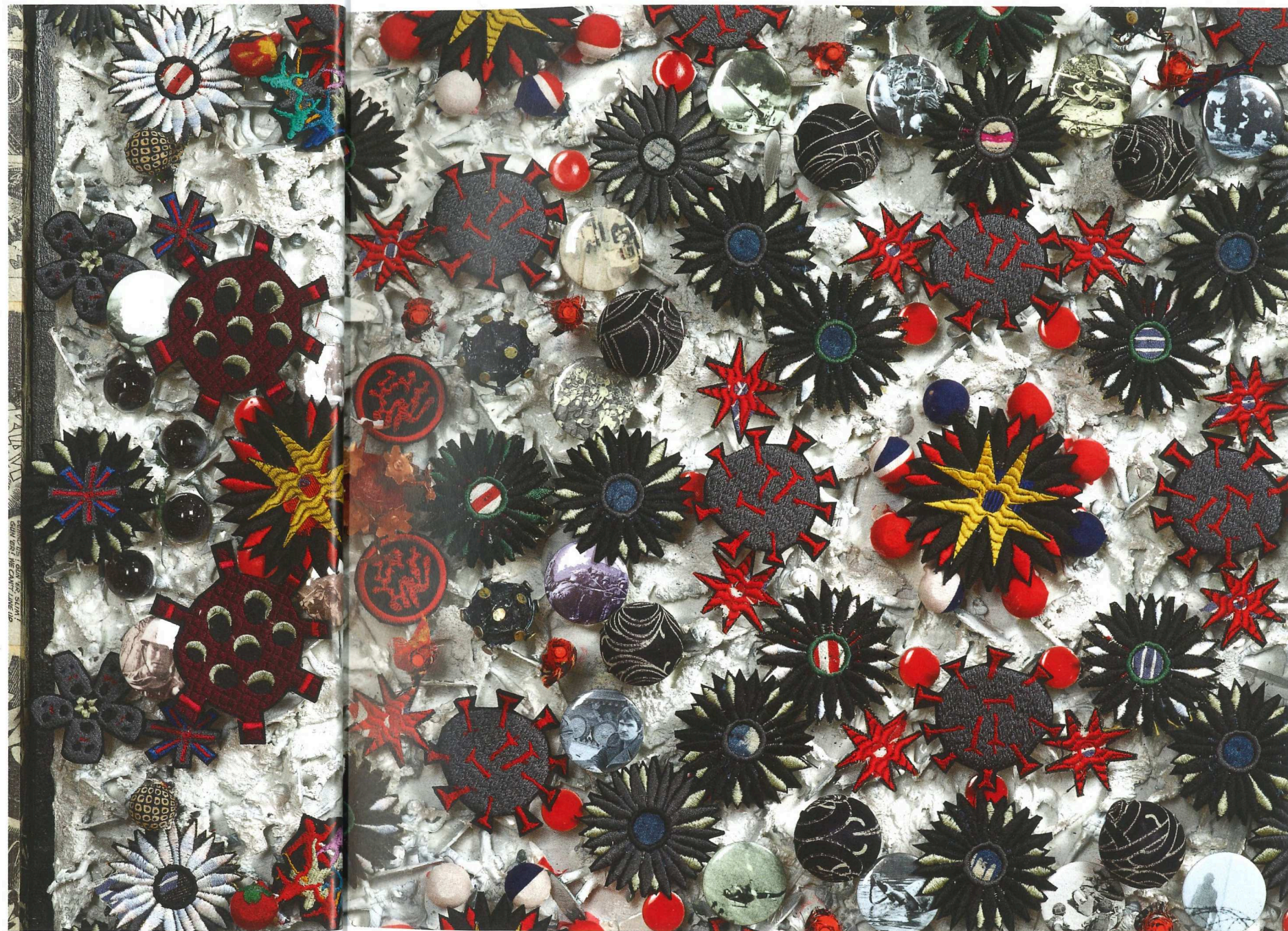
Incidentally, the very title of this exhibition, 'Forever Changes', not only exemplifies Brennand-Wood's great

love and knowledge of music (it was the title of an album released by the band, Love, in 1967) but also refers to the importance of recognising the constant flux underlying all existence. This is the antithesis of the tedious repetition he so deplores: 'The problem with textiles is that they have become ossified, an academic exercise where the main thrust is technically showing off.'

As a young man Brennand-Wood remembers linking in his mind his dawning awareness of the enormous, unrealised potential within embroidery and the excitement of early Modernism, which was characterised by precisely the 'edginess' that he feels is now

absent from so much of what is being created in the applied arts.

Our conception of what is covered in the term 'textile art' has been enlarged by the artefacts emerging from the imagination and studio of Brennand-Wood. His researches into lace have given rise to such stimulating creations as 'Lace – The Final Frontier'. This large wall piece can be assembled and displayed in different formations, all of which underline the delicate, sinister beauty of a 'lace' created by silhouettes of instruments of war, both human and mechanical. Nor should the influence of Brennand-Wood as a teacher be forgotten, for both his academic insights



Left: Michael Brennand-Wood with *Pretty Deadly*

Above: Detail of *Pretty Deadly*, 2011. 90 x 90 x 15cm
Embroidered blooms, toy soliders, acrylic, wire, fabric, glass on wood panel

PHOTO: PETER MENNIM

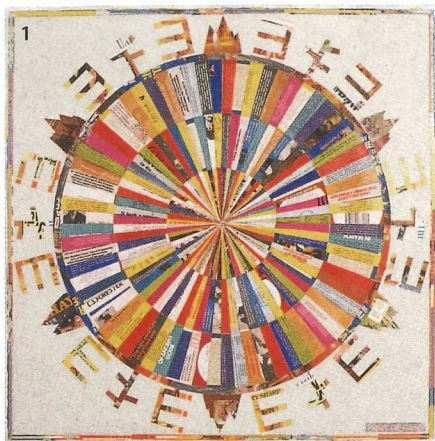


PHOTO: CHRIS GOMERSALL



PHOTO: JAMES AUSTIN

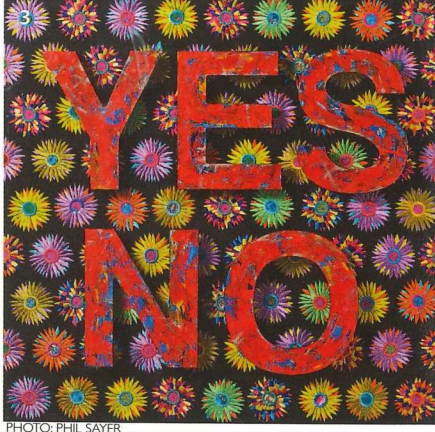


PHOTO: PHIL SAYER



PHOTO: STEPHEN YATES



PHOTO: PETER MENNIM

1. *Port of Call*, 1991. 91 x 106cm. Collage and acrylic on board

2. *Gilt Trip - Private Number*, 2004. 46 x 46 x 7cm. Embroidered blooms, acrylic, wire, fabric, beads on wood panel

3. *Say it with Flowers*, 2012. 60 x 60 x 6cm. Embroidered blooms, acrylic, lettering on wood panel

4. *Stars Underfoot - The Slow Reveal* 2007-08. 700 x 100 x 30cm. Machine embroidered blooms, wire, acrylic, resin, metal and glass on wood panel

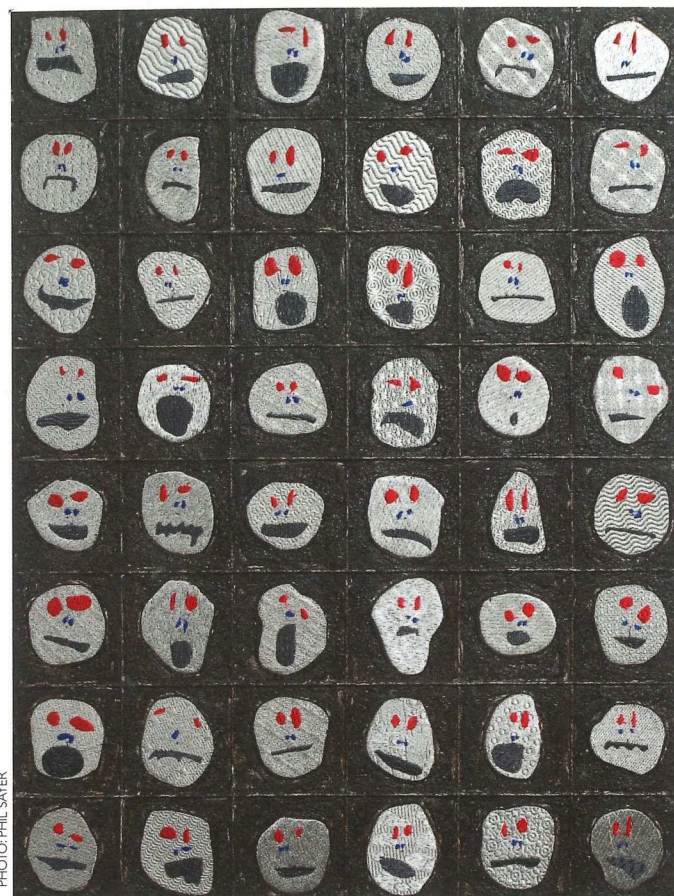
5. *Facebook*, 2011. 50 x 40 x 15cm. Metal, badges, wire, acrylic on wood base

6-7. *Phial-Bodies*, 2008. 90 x 55cm. Machine embroidered blooms, wire, glass, acrylic, fabric, thread and glass tile on wood panel



PHOTO: PETER MENNIM





MEDDLE PHOTOS: PHIL SAYER

Left: *Most Wanted*, 2012. 42 x 56 x 2cm.
Embroidered faces, acrylic, resin, string on wood panel

Above: *Meddle – Memento Mori*, 2012. 85 x 40 x 5cm.
Embroidery, acrylic, wire, toy soldiers, fabric on metal base

Meddle – White Light, 2012. 90 x 35 x 5cm.
Embroidery, acrylic, wire, fabric, toy soldiers on metal base

Below: *Imaginary Landscape – Chaotic Textured Crush*, 1999.
120 x 70 x 10cm. Inlaid fabric in painted wood panel

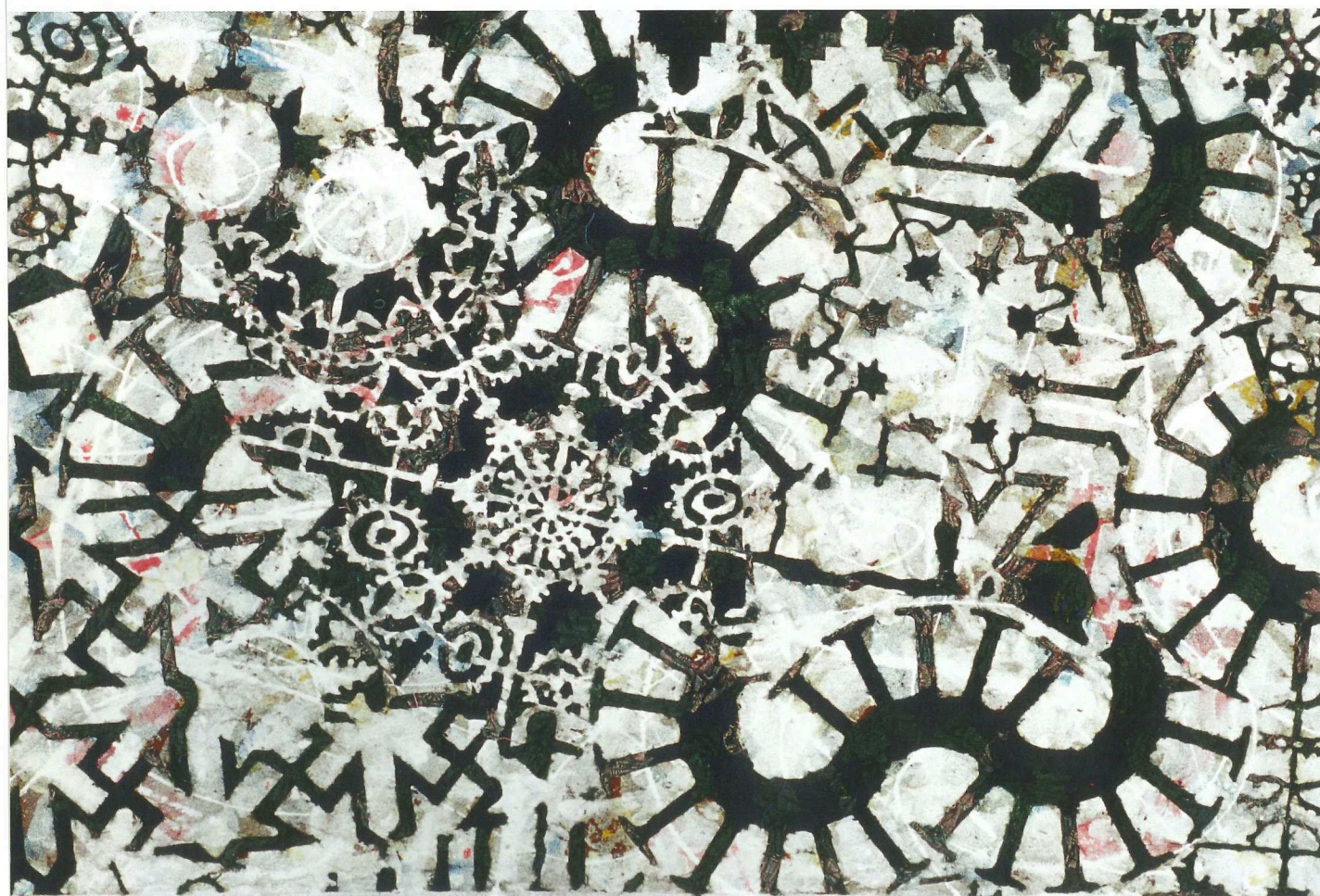
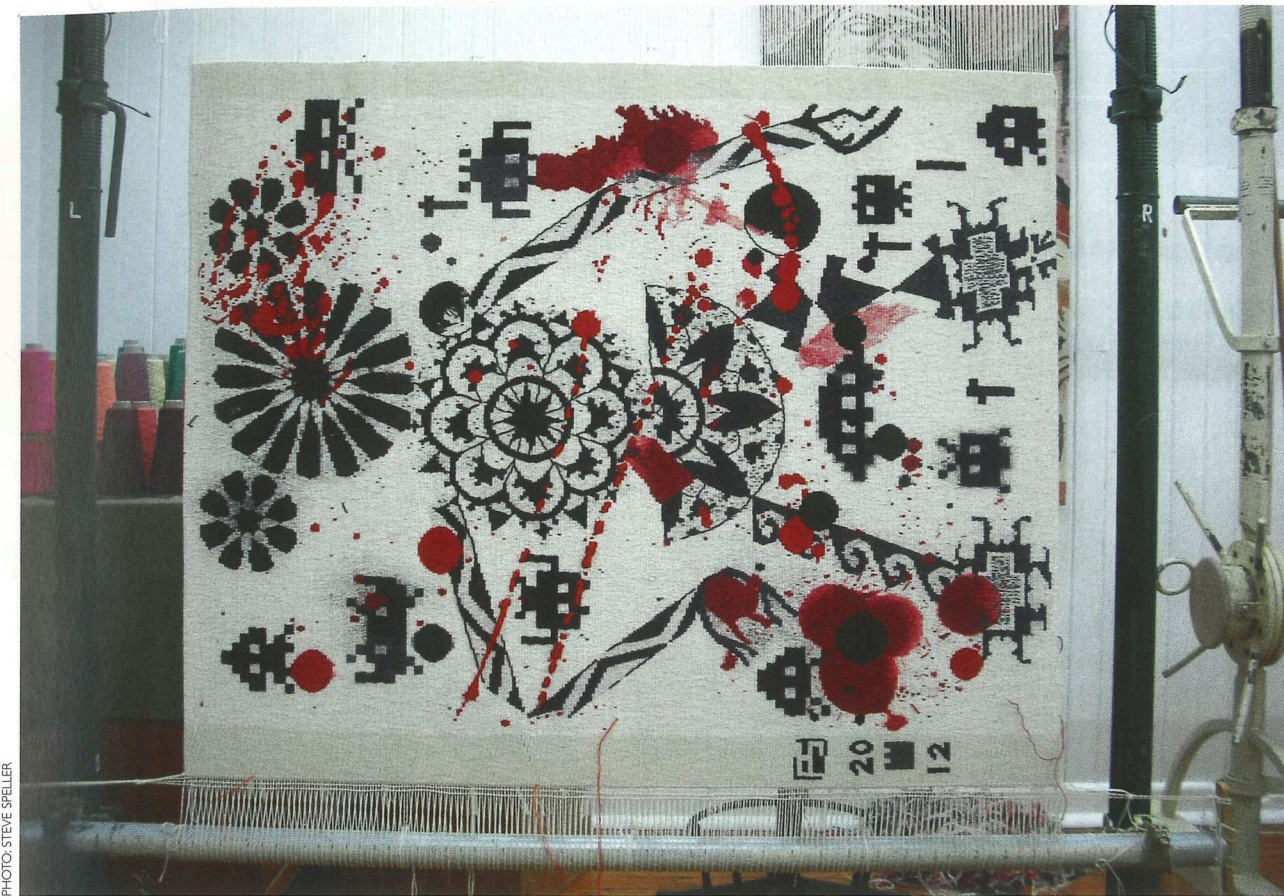


PHOTO: JAMES AUSTIN



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and his work have elicited real enthusiasm among young people.

What is currently preoccupying Brennand-Wood is the desire to achieve 'the complete fusion of the painted mark and the thread mark', and he is hoping that the 'Dream' pieces will realise this. He sees this project as 'putting something together that's not been put together before'. 'The skill will be in the imagery, and the reference points will be artists whom I greatly admire, people such as James Ensor, Hieronymous Bosch and Jean Dubuffet.'

Career survey

Indeed, this should be an exhibition rich with ideas. To see them embodied in seminal pieces such as *Port of Call*, *Seed of Memory*, *Pretty Deadly* and possibly – if space permits – the 21ft-long *Stars Underfoot – The Slow Reveal* should certainly be instructive in furthering our understanding of Brennand-Wood's artistic narrative.

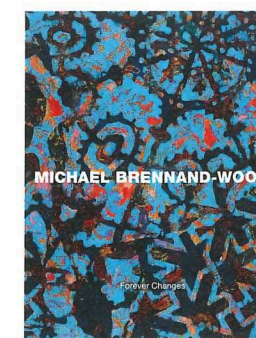
June Hill, the curator of his Ruthin retrospective, using an analogy from the world of greyhound racing, says of the youthful Brennand-Wood that: 'He came out of the traps running hard,' since when he has neither slowed down nor betrayed the first, fine promise. Looking back, Brennand-Wood, who is capable of stringent self-criticism – 'I'm still questioning what I've already done,' – admits to being surprised at the degree of single-mindedness that he showed even when much younger. However, this purposeful determination does not mean that he is following a regimented, consistent and pre-planned career path. This would hardly be the context for a man for whom putting himself at aesthetic risk is a basic necessity, and is manifested when he states: 'I am thrilled that I can say that I know less what I'm doing now than ever before in my life.'

Ian Wilson

www.brennand-wood.com

Forever Changes, a major retrospective of the work of Michael Brennand-Wood goes on show at Ruthin Crafts Centre, Wales from 22 September to 25 November 2012 and Dovecot Gallery, Edinburgh 7 December 2012 to 12 January 2013. A 200-page book accompanies the exhibition.

Above: *Transformer* tapestry, designed by Michael Brennand-Wood. Woven by Philip Sanderson at West Dean Tapestry Studios. Wool, linen cotton and rayon yarn. 123 x 84cm



MICHAEL BRENNAND-WOOD

Forever Changes