



LEFT *Morning Coffee and Roses* (detail) a recent work by Cas Holmes. The vine leaf catching the light in the window perfectly captures the sense of being in Cas's garden studio, tucked away under greenery.
OPPOSITE Cas working in her garden studio.

Finding beauty in the **EVERY DAY**

Caroline Zoob talks to renowned textile artist Cas Holmes about the rich seam of inspiration to be found in the everyday, if only we care to look closer.

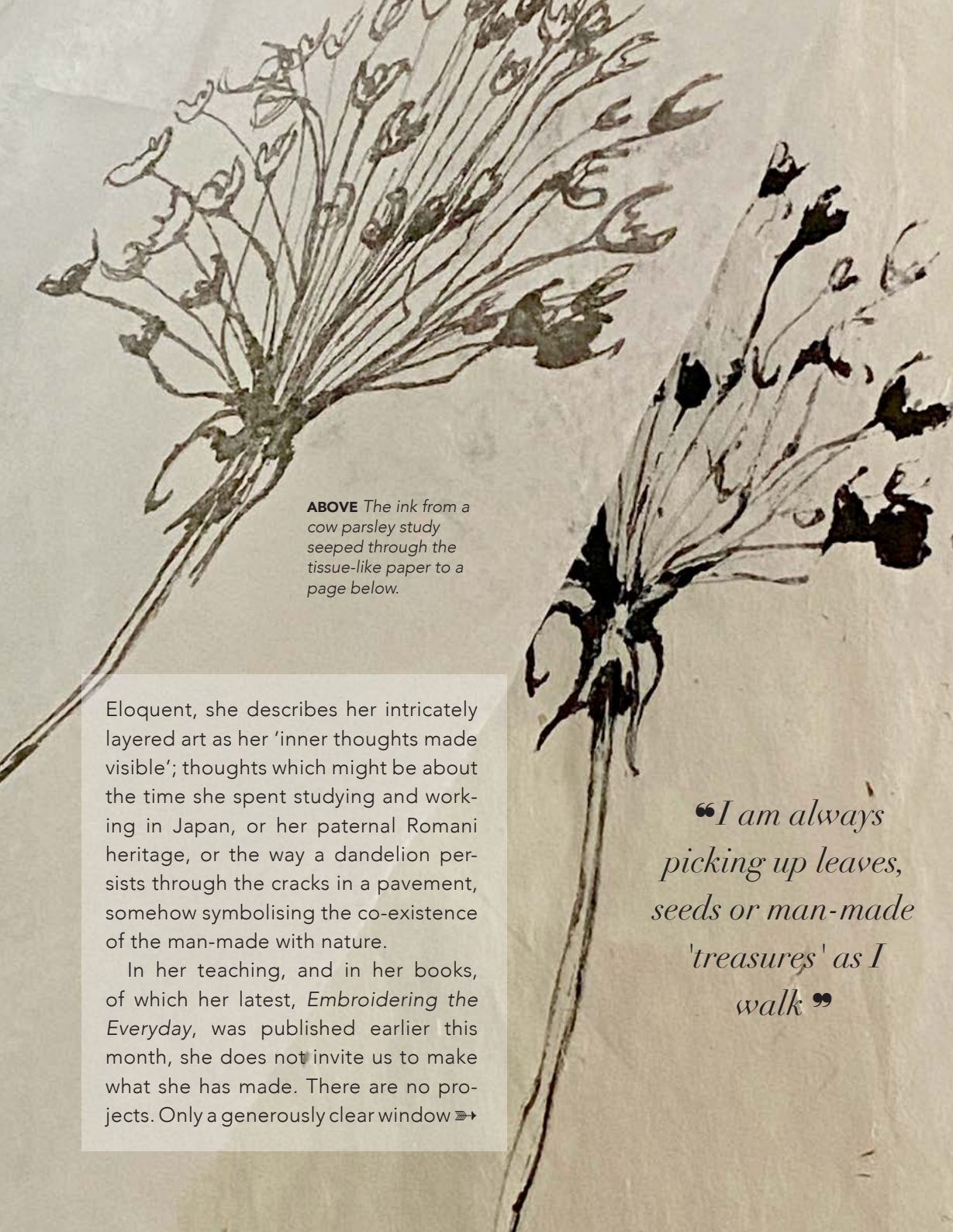
It was with a few nervous knots that I approached Cas Holmes's front door for our meeting. One of our finest textile and mixed-media artists, she has written no fewer than five books for *Batsford* in their Textile Artist series and her work is represented in major collections around the world. Through her books I had learned

that she is interested in themes of identity and space, that she re-uses found or gifted materials and objects, and that she is a deeply thoughtful person who uses her art to respond to and interpret the world around her. Reader, I felt unworthy.

After a warm welcome and with a cup of coffee in hand, we started to talk. ➡

“I see amazing things in the everyday. The ordinary things can become quite extraordinary”





ABOVE The ink from a cow parsley study seeped through the tissue-like paper to a page below.

Eloquent, she describes her intricately layered art as her 'inner thoughts made visible'; thoughts which might be about the time she spent studying and working in Japan, or her paternal Romani heritage, or the way a dandelion persists through the cracks in a pavement, somehow symbolising the co-existence of the man-made with nature.

In her teaching, and in her books, of which her latest, *Embroidering the Everyday*, was published earlier this month, she does not invite us to make what she has made. There are no projects. Only a generously clear window ➡

*"I am always
picking up leaves,
seeds or man-made
'treasures' as I
walk"*



ABOVE Garden sketches in a number of notebooks recording Cas's daily observations of flowers growing between April and October 2020.



LEFT & RIGHT Two of four 'postcards' forming *Cracks in the Pavement*. A base of machine-stitched and painted cloth is used as the surface for watercolour and ink studies of small plants growing in cracked paving slabs.



ABOVE, RIGHT & FOLLOWING PAGES The Walk to the Park. Paper and cloth. Paint, hand and machine stitch. The building is the tiny studio tucked into the bottom of Cas's garden. 'Walking through a place on a regular basis builds on our connection to it ...'

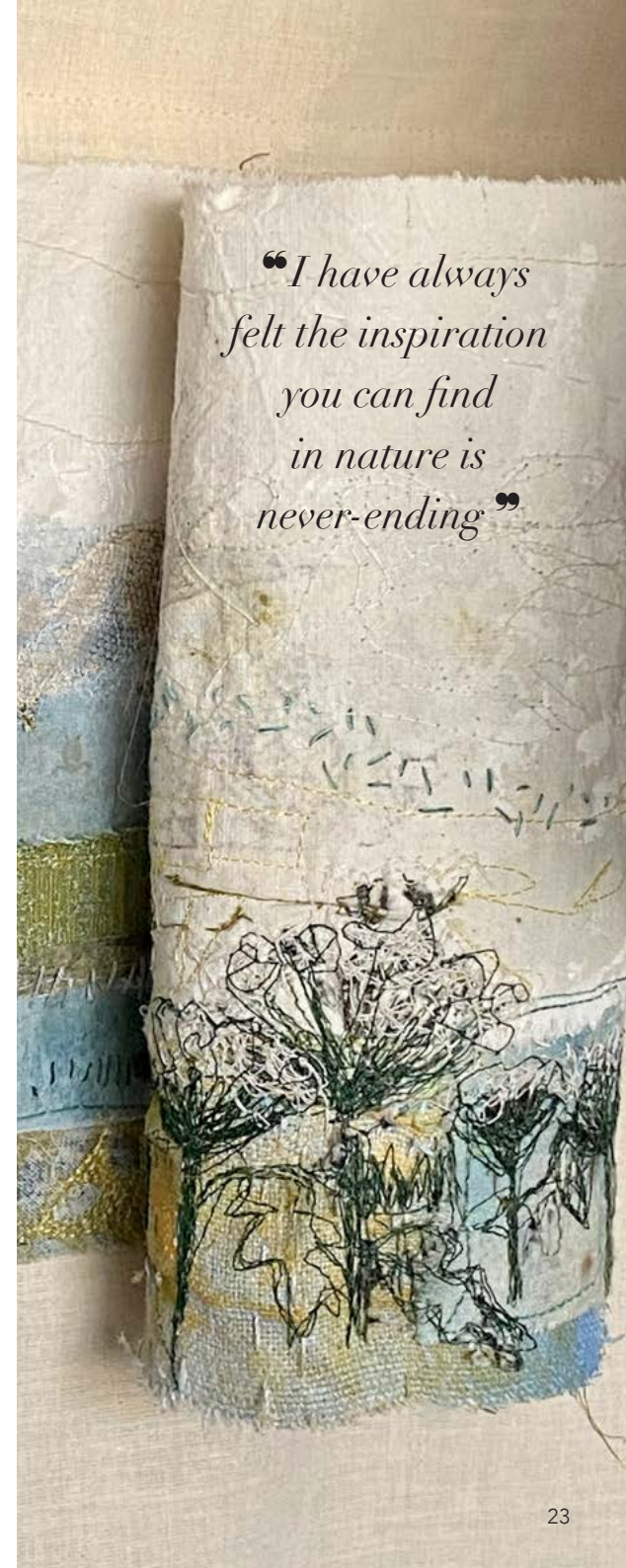
into her key working processes, the many and varied means by which she follows up what she calls 'a line of enquiry'.

Cas's lines of enquiry often strike her while travelling, something she has spent a great deal of time doing in the course of a long career as an artist and teacher. A 'daily exchange with the world outside', often on her mint green bicycle when at home (she does not own a car), and always with her artist's tools ergonomically stored in a small pouch, is essential to her creative practice and well-being. Raw materials and sources of inspiration are often found on these travels: a discarded rag, a seed head, a tarnished button. She travels with her artist's eyes wide open, responding to what she sees and hears, constantly sketching and considering how to translate her thoughts into her art.

So when the government imposed the first lockdown of 2020 in response to the pandemic, Cas admits to having felt 'a little panicky and uncertain'. All workshops and exhibitions were cancelled or postponed. All but essential travel was forbidden. Exercise outside the home was limited to one hour each day.

Yet once the initial shock had been absorbed, Cas found that the enforced slowing down offered an unexpected opportunity not only to consider afresh the motivations underpinning her work, but also to look at and appreciate ➤

*"I have always
felt the inspiration
you can find
in nature is
never-ending"*



“In those quiet days as spring moved on, leaves unfurled and the world slowly turned green and started to wake up. My short walks in the neighbourhood were accompanied by birdsong and warming sunshine.”

CAS HOLMES, EMBROIDERING THE EVERYDAY

with fresh eyes the everyday things around her: the espresso cup in which she takes her essential morning coffee; the sanctuary afforded by her tiny garden, overflowing with greenery and wisteria; the local park to which she walks or cycles whenever she is at home (see previous pages and opposite).

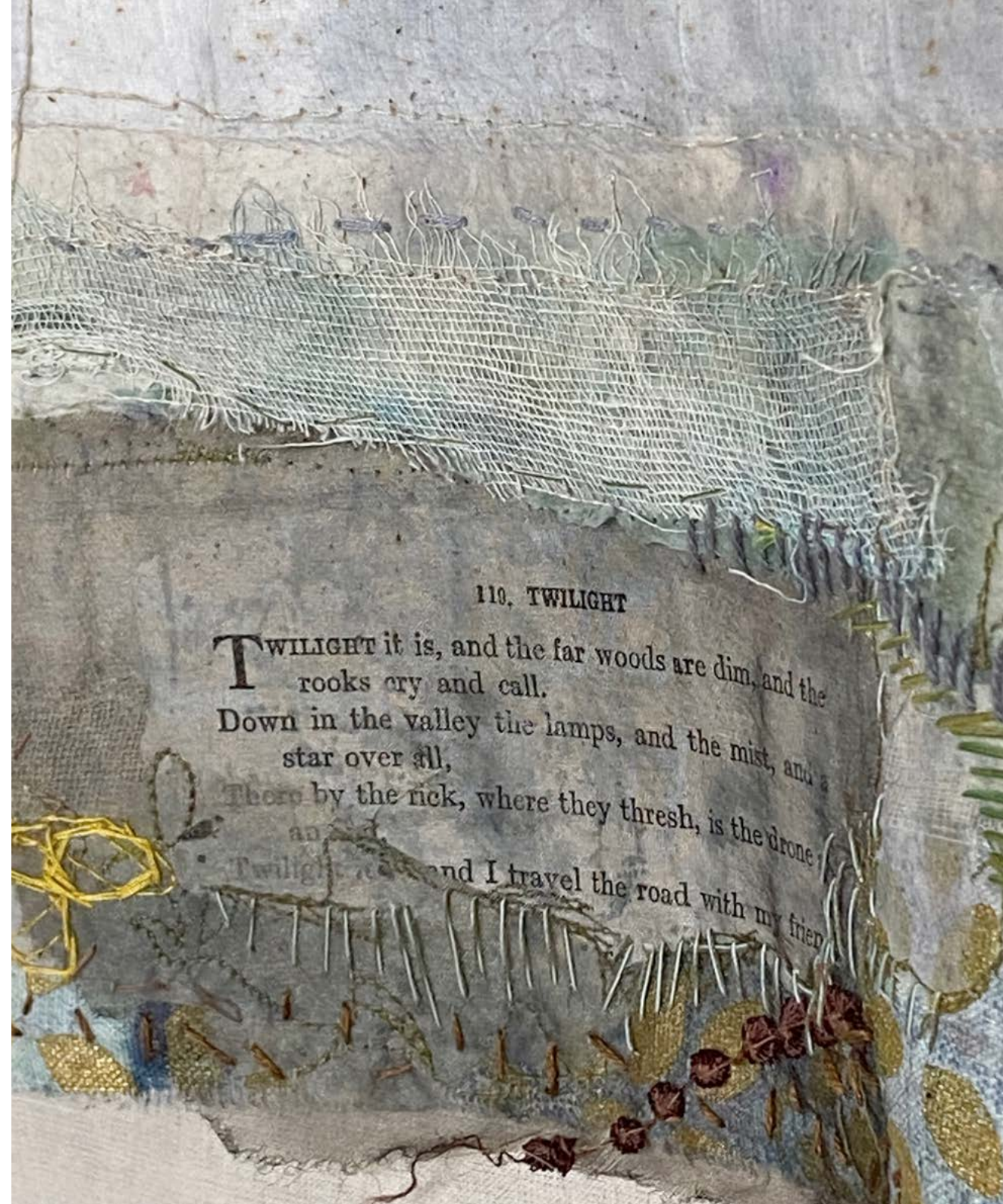
The familiar objects of everyday life have long been the source of inspiration for artists, from Cézanne's bowls of apples to Paul Bonnard's red chequered

tablecloths and enamel coffee pots. Indeed, they have featured in much of Cas's earlier work. However, the particular circumstances of 2020 perhaps forced everyone to reconsider the things they had used every day without ever valuing the comfort or sense ➡

of connection they represented. Cas felt this was something to be explored. A new and, as yet, unseen work (it does not feature in the book) records Cas's walk to the park, taken on most days during lockdown. It is in the form of a long, mixed-media scroll, pinned to the wall such that some of it curves towards the viewer before looping back, rather as one might meander around bends in a path. The starting point

is Cas's garden studio and, throughout the length of the scroll, different times and moods are reflected, from the sunshine and blue skies we all remember from the spring of 2020, to crepuscular greys. Paper, cloth, machine stitch, paint, hand-stitching: all combine to create her journey. As with much of Cas's work, the edges are uneven, borderless. It is not work to be confined within a mount ➡

BELOW Sketches for *The Walk to the Park*. Cas's narrow repertoire of stitches is inspired by traditional folk stitching methods: variations on straight stitches, couching and seed stitch. She often draws with machine stitch, but will use hand-stitching to add weight or texture, often working the ends of the machine threads back into the piece. **OPPOSITE**: *The Walk to the Park* (detail). Poetry by John Masefield.





LEFT & RIGHT Pani Kekkavva Rose 2019 59 x 160 x 0.5cm
Pani kekkavva is the traditional term for an iron kettle in the Romani language. Cas uses the image of the kettle to represent her connection to her Romani forebears. Roses from an old sheer scarf are echoed in the machine and hand embroidery. Cas's grandmother always had roses in her garden and in the decoration on much of the china in her house. Roses feature in the traditional decoration of caravans and barges of many communities of travellers.



or frame and so it seems to float, such that one feels the sky above and the earth below. It perfectly expresses that feeling many of us shared during that glorious spring as everything in nature moved more sharply into focus under eyes with time to look.

For Cas, the journey from an idea to the finished piece of art is not linear. There is no vision of the finished item in her head when she starts. Mostly, she will start with sketching. Cas spent four years training to be a fine art painter and she insists that drawing is one of her daily disciplines, rather like a ballet dancer at the barre. Her striking ink or 'sketch-stitched' birds and plant forms add graphic punctuation to her work. In pursuing a line of thought, she might fill an entire sketchbook with drawings and small watercolour paintings, each desirable miniature works of art. Tiny sample collages might explore a colour palette or test the balance between cloth and paper. She invites the reader to take time to explore and play with different techniques, developing ideas before allowing the final piece to emerge.

It is just over a decade since Cas's first book, *The Found Object in Textile Art*, was published, and while much of the ethos shared in that book continues to inform Cas's current work, her focus has shifted slightly. Always aware of ➡



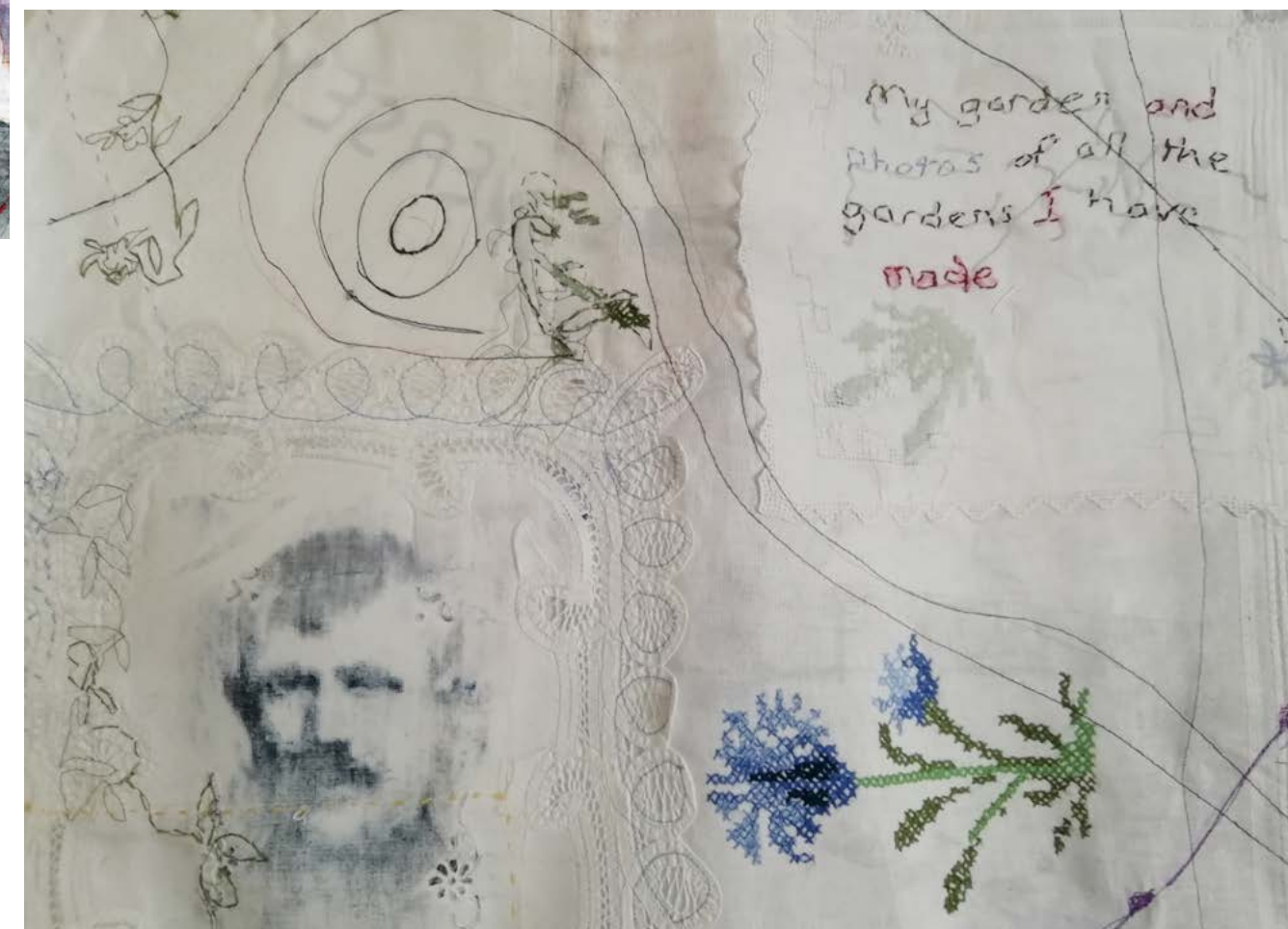


her Romani heritage, which she spent some time in India researching, it is only in relatively recent years that she has addressed it in her work. Invited by the Romani Cultural and Arts Company to participate in an exhibition in their Gypsy Maker series, her work since 2018 has explored themes of identity and place under the title *Spaces, Places and Traces*. The tour of this exhibition was of course postponed and will now take place next year. It will include the triptych *Pani Kekkavva* — the traditional term for an iron kettle in the Romani language. Cas describes the three pieces as representing three different aspects of her 'becoming' Cas. A kettle appears in each piece, representing connection to her Romani forebears and background. The roses represent not only her adored grandmother, but the whole of her Romani heritage, where tea was drunk from proper china cups each evening in the 'stopping places', and roses adorned the *vardo* or

caravan, just as they do the trucks on the roads of northern India, where the Romanis have their roots.

Another exhibition postponed to 2022, under the same title, is set to be installed in the Sint-Anna-Drieskerk in Antwerp and will include recent works *The Shipping Forecast* and *What we value, what we miss*. The Shipping Forecast is a BBC Radio broadcast of weather reports and forecasts for seas around the coasts of the British Isles, delivered four times daily. There are thirty-one zones, which are given out in strict order, beginning with Viking in the north-east, bordering Norway, and proceeding in a clockwise direction round the British Isles. The broadcast is strangely comforting, even without an understanding of the terminology or the slightest idea where Forties, Humber or Dogger may lie. For Cas, when she is travelling, listening to the Shipping Forecast ties her to home. Yet, struck one evening by the news ➡

LEFT *Pied Wagtail: Pani Kekkavva* 2019 (one of a triptych) 64 x 164 x 0.5cm. *Pied* or 'dappled things', holding both dark and light within them, are often thought to bring good luck in Romani tradition. The photographs of her great grandparents and her drawing of the pied wagtail of the title were printed by Cas onto sheer organza cloth, using blue and black oil paints retrieved from a bin. The saffron yellow base cloth is part of a sari given by a friend, the golden colour representative of the gold worn by Romanis. "Gran said you wore your wealth on you". It is also suggestive of the colours of India, the buildings, the marigolds, the heat of the sun.



ABOVE AND RIGHT Details of *The Shipping Forecast*, photographed in Cas's studio. Antwerp was a port from which many thousands emigrated to North America in the early part of the last century. It is also famous for lace-making. Among the materials Cas used were linen cloth, donated by the church, lace and fragments of clothing found on a beach. Isobars and weather maps are picked out in machine stitch.

that over seventeen thousand migrants (and maybe more) had been lost in the waters of Europe since 2014, Cas was moved to use her voice as an artist to record what was happening. She decided to combine elements of the familiar, reassuring tones of the shipping forecast with echoes of the experiences of those who had migrated across those waters, finding them anything but com-

forting and familiar. "I wanted to create a visual voice for the lost migrants. So they are not unseen and cannot be forgotten."

With its blue-grey palette, swirling isobars, shadowy images of Cas's travelling forebears and fragments of news reports hand-stitched onto found scraps of fabric, the piece has an unsettling feel; even without knowing ➡



THE SHIPPING FORECAST
Detail of work in progress,
hanging on the back of
Cas's workroom door.

the background, it immediately communicates a sense of the past, of loss, of uncertainty, rather like being adrift. Another work, started during lockdown, has a similar feel and palette to *The Shipping Forecast*, but explores the way in which recent events have clarified those simple, everyday things which we value, and those which we miss. It is intended that both works will be suspended from the ceiling, free-floating and borderless, into the vaulted space of the church, to be walked through and viewed from both sides in turn. Stitched into each piece is writing that, seen from the front, is 'asemic', meaningless, simply a pattern, suggestive of writing, of communication. As visitors walk back through the hanging panels, the pattern will resolve into legible words, thus juxtaposing the news and experiences of migrants with thoughts about what we value, what we miss. Although not intended to be companion pieces, recent events have

made them, perhaps, inextricably so. The words 'same sea, different boat', quoted so often during 2020, will surely come forcefully to mind, as might these lines from Stephen Poliakoff's 1984 play *Breaking the Silence*:

'Nothing I have ever read or been told in my life has prepared me for this shock, the sheer physical sensation when one is faced with leaving one's native land permanently — like you are being pulled away from a magnetic field and that everything will then stop. It will have been severed.'

Embroidering the Everyday is not only full of inspiration and creative processes, it is a thoughtful and thought-provoking book. It reflects a belief that we are indeed each 'part of the main', connected to others by our human history, by both our individual and shared 'places, spaces, traces', and by the simple, common utensils of our everyday lives ♦

Embroidering the Everyday by Cas Holmes was published by Batsford on 2 September. For new work and forthcoming exhibitions, including the exhibition in Antwerp in June 2022, visit www.casholmes.blogspot.com Cas teaches online through Fibre Arts Take Two. Watch a video about her course, which shows footage of her working on *The Walk to the Park* by following this link: www.fibreartstaketwo.com/courses/casholmes

