

JOURNEY THROUGH THE FABRIC OF LIFE

Bourn Hall hosts textile exhibition by artist Claire Carter

Turning 40 is one of life's big landmarks, but for Claire Carter it was life changing. She had just married, moved house and was walking the Lycian Way in Turkey when she came across the rocky outcrop the locals called 'Delikkaya' a hole in the rock where there is a rectangular crevice through which people had posted prayers and votives. To Claire it symbolised the void inside her that ached for a child.

Returning to England Claire and her husband decided to end seven years of uncertainty and start fertility treatment at Bourn Hall Clinic in Cambridgeshire. As she began this journey she found it increasingly hard to concentrate on her daily routine and gave up her job

"It is a lonely journey in many ways," Claire explains. "Friends that had children easily feel embarrassed or don't understand the pain, and others don't want to hear you going on and on about it. Yet each phase of the treatment creates new emotions and for me there was a need to express it.

"Working with textiles was a very natural way of capturing and working through those feelings. My work is symbolic rather than representative."

Claire's work, six distinct pieces created with layers of fabrics, quilting and machine embroidery are to be on show to patients within Bourn Hall Clinic during April. Each piece symbolises a different stage of her journey as Claire explains:

'Delikkaya'

"Walking the Lycian Way in Turkey, I encountered a mysterious place in the mountains, a pink cliff called Delikkaya ('hole in the rock'), which interested me. Local people seemed to be putting their hopes and prayers into the letterbox-shaped opening. When I came home I started my first IVF cycle within a few days and remembered the hole in the rock.

The feeling of the emptiness of the hole and also the hope that people placed there had resonances for how I felt during my treatment. I used fabrics which had associations for me...a dress I wore when I was first married, some curtain material from my childhood, fabrics my mother-in-law used for other work and a few new pieces too.

The work evolved during the weeks of treatment at Bourn Hall and is a kind of diary of the process. Amazingly this cycle was successful and I now have a two year old son who brings me great joy every day."

'Seven days of Creation'

This piece was developed during my pregnancy and completed in the weeks after my son was born. It reflects the Genesis story of the creation of the world and sees parallels with the creation of a child.

- Day one Light coming from darkness, and order emerging from chaos 'the formless and void'.
- Day two The separation of the waters: 'let there be a dome in the midst of the waters and let it separate the waters from the waters' and the creation of the sky. The feeling of something solid beginning to emerge.
- Day three Forming seas, dry land and plants. The twist of DNA as the rivers intertwine and seas and plants can be distinguished. A unique identity is becoming clearer.
- Day four Creation of the sun, moon and stars. This was as far as I got before my baby was born and after this I think a different, more confident and representational style emerges.
- Day five Living creatures of sea and sky. The wriggling form has life and direction of its own.
- Day six Living creatures of the earth and humankind. The angel brings a human form into the womb. The miracle of a gift of human life.
- Day seven Rest and celebration

Although delighted with the birth of her son, Claire felt her family was not yet complete and began treatment again.

The next pieces are smaller and more intense and would resonate with anyone who has lost a pregnancy at whatever stage – hope, pain, joy, loss and optimism are captured in equal measure.

'2/40'

"This was made following my first unsuccessful frozen blastocyst transfer. Originally I hoped to make a piece in 40 panels chronicling the 40 weeks of a pregnancy. Here are the two weeks after transfer - representing the hope of implantation and the sadness of the loss of that hope."

'Empty Vessel'

"This piece was made in the days after this unsuccessful cycle. The experience of myself as an empty vessel and the appreciation of a small fragile flower...perhaps alive and blooming for a day or two before fading."

'The colour of hope'

“On my second and last unsuccessful frozen embryo cycle I had two blastocysts transferred. This piece was made during the two week wait - expressing resilient hope, and not daring to hope. It's hard to have both there at the same time but this seems to be the nature of the territory.”

Although Claire has not gained a sibling for her son her life and art is moving forward. She has exhibited her work at a number of venues including the national festival of quilting at the NEC.

She hopes that patients at Bourn Hall will gain pleasure from the exhibition, whatever stage of the journey they are at.

“The work can be viewed on a number of levels so you can take from it what you want. For me the whole experience has been one of personal growth and I am grateful for the caring and calm environment that the staff at Bourn Hall gave me during this time of extreme emotion. It is a very special place and feels the right venue to display all these pieces together.”

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