

in high spirits

Woo Jin Joo, an award-winning textile artist who has only recently left the Royal College of Art, is exhibiting work that revolves around a particular kind of animism, that of the Korean 'Dokkaebi' – or goblin



reature Comforts is at JGM Gallery in London until 21 January, with work by 14 contemporary textile artists who subvert the expectations of the medium while crafting exquisite work. Here, Karolina Dworska throws the spotlight on a recent Royal College of Art graduate, the award-winning Woo Jin Joo.

KD: *What initially attracted you to textiles as a medium?*
WJJ: My interest in art and making began when I was at school. I remember spending a lot of time working in my sketchbook, building ideas around works I wanted to make. Finding the time to research and build ideas is still extremely important in my practice, as well as constant reflection throughout the process.

After school, I decided to pursue textile art at Central Saint Martins. On their foundation course I discovered my fascination with textiles as a medium and opted to make it the focus of my studies. Initially, I thought my path was in designing for fashion and interiors, but by the end of my studies, I realised my fascination was actually rooted in textiles' materiality and exploring the fluid boundary that is encompassed by 'textiles'. Continuing my education at the Royal College of Art, I began to expand and experiment with what textiles meant to me. Now I see myself as a mixed-media artist specialising in soft sculpture and textiles, allowing flexibility in my practice yet focusing on a medium that continues to inspire and excite me.

KD: *What is your favourite textile technique?*

WJJ: My favourite technique is embroidery, and especially freehand machine embroidery on dissolvable backing, resulting in unique free-standing artwork.

KD: *You talk a lot about 're-mystifying' and 're-enchanting' the way in which we engage with everyday materials and objects. Could you tell me a bit more about how this materialises in your practice?*

WJJ: The focus of my practice is on exploring our relationship with the materials and objects in our lives, especially in today's consumer culture, where our engagement with them has become ever-more temporary and fleeting. Through my work, I want to explore alternative ways we can see and engage with these objects and materials, and what these diverse



'IT IS BELIEVED DOKKAEBIS ARE FORMED BY THE SPIRITUAL POSSESSION OF AN INANIMATE OBJECT'

views might lend to rebuilding a relationship that is more lasting, caring and enchanting.

KD: *As if by magic, you transform found objects like lost gloves and old socks into mythical creatures. I'd love to know more about your process and the mythology of the 'Dokkaebi' or Korean 'goblin'.*

WJJ: The East Asian culture I have grown up in is entangled with and influences my practice. The culture and beliefs I was raised in exist on a subconscious level and inform my perspectives and identity. Simultaneously, the culture, art, and mythology of East Asia also provide direct inspiration or visual cues. The 'Dokkaebi' series is a good example of this, where the well-known mythology of East Asia promulgates the belief in objects forming their own spirits. This has inspired me to create new hybrid mystical creatures out of found or old objects. *Can you tell us more about the Dokkaebi?*

Dokkaebis are Korean mythological creatures, a kind of Korean 'goblin'. It is believed they are formed by the spiritual possession of an inanimate object, such as old discarded household tools, brooms and pots. It is thought they have abilities to interact with humans, at times playing tricks on them and at times helping them. I bring this idea of inanimate objects possessing spirit into

Left: Woo Jin Joo's work
Re-new

Above right: Woo Jin Joo's
Glove Dokkaebi

Right: Woo Jin Joo's
Ten Symbols of Longevity

Hi girls - can you please provide size of artwork, materials and date and longer captions!!!



my practice in order to question the way we perceive and build relationships with inanimate objects in today's society.

KD: *What do you think about the association between textiles and femininity and domesticity?*

WJJ: What drew me to textiles is the fluidity of boundaries and the flexibility of the medium to be and become anything. Textiles, whether in art, design, production or as a craft, still have an association with the feminine and domestic, but I think textile art will soon engulf and bend the boundaries and association it has, because there are so many makers 'unbounded' and 'unbothered' by these associations, and this flow of change is irreversible once the boundaries begin to fade.

KD: *Your embroidered work is incredibly intricate and well constructed, and dazzlingly strange and beautiful. Are time consuming craft processes important to you as an artist?*

WJJ: Anni Albers wrote in *Materials as Metaphor*: "Ideas flow from it to us and though we feel to be the creator we are involved in a dialogue with our medium. The more subtly we are tuned to our medium, the more inventive our actions will become. Not listening to it ends in failure." I very much agree with this idea of the maker in dialogue with the medium, and it is often that the making of one work naturally leads to another idea through engagement with the material and allowing space for accidents or new associations to happen.

KD: *Do you have a favourite piece of work?*

WJJ: I have a couple of works that I like, but one work that I am very attached to is 虎死留皮，人死留名。(When a tiger dies, it leaves behind its skin, when a man dies he leaves behind his name). It is one of the early works that has sparked and propelled ideas.

Win Jin Joo won the Fine Art Textile Prize, hosted by the Festival of Quilts, and is shortlisted for the East London Art Prize and the Hari Art Prize. She has been awarded the Arts Council's developing your creative practice grant and the Elephant Trust Award. www.woojinstudio.com Instagram: @woojinstudio

Embroidery is just one of the techniques shown in the exhibition. Weaving, rug-tufting, quilting and hand and machine knitting, as well as soft sculptures, also feature in the show, creating a rich landscape of colourful strange creations, constructed by immensely skilled artists.

The idea for the show initially sprung out of a long chat about Amish quilts between myself and Jennifer, director of JGM Gallery. We both felt the allure of tessellating colourful designs and on a more intrinsic level the amount of intricate, tender care that is required in their construction, really compelling. The core theme of the show eventually developed into blurring the lines between comfort and discomfort; of embracing textile art for its cosy connotations, and enjoying the way it can connect us to each other and our heritage, while pushing its boundaries and subverting all these preconceptions.

Scratchy, silky, soft, itchy, light. The many textures and techniques employed throughout *Creature Comforts* are sure to draw in the viewer and make them marvel at the complex, careful construction of each piece, and the real passion for each craft. There are immensely comforting quilts, some earth-toned and hay-stuffed hang from the ceiling, while others are geometric and sharp, oscillating with dazzling gradients. Dotted around are handwoven stools, handspun and hand-dyed, imbued with such love and vigour for traditional craft.

Strange, enchanted embroidered creatures inhabit the space, accompanied by plushie dog-like beasts clambering out of a pillar. Otherworldly scenes adorn the walls, from surreal, ambiguous tufted landscapes, to tapestries of ancient Roman gardens, infested by human-plant hybrids, and abstracted microscopic forms pixelated into cross-stitch.

The woven and knitted tapestries bring about an atmosphere of surreal conflict. Inner struggles, mysterious threats and impending environmental doom are made immediately accessible to the viewer through the soft appeal of the medium.

Every stitch, every knitted and woven row, every dot of tufted pile has been so skilfully crafted to create each intriguing piece. The trace of the maker's tender touch can be seen in every work. The exhibition traverses the endless playful possibilities of the medium and the ways in which artists embrace and subvert these expectations. The strangeness, energy and intensity at the core of this exhibition reminds us of the importance of playing and having fun with the traditional assumptions of domesticity associated with textile crafts, and the power of its subversion. 🧡

Karolina Dworska

Creature Comforts also includes works by Alice Kettle, Andia Newton, Elina Flyrin, Freddie Robins, Hamish Halley, Heidi Pearce, Karolina Dworska, Lara Salous, Liza Dickson, Lola Pedersen, Martin Maloney, Molly Kent, Sebastian Sochan and Woo Jin Joo. Until 21 January at JGM Gallery, London. www.jgmgallery.com



'THE CORE THEME OF THE SHOW EVENTUALLY DEVELOPED INTO BLURRING THE LINES BETWEEN COMFORT AND DISCOMFORT'



Opposite page: Heidi Pearce's *Dante*, a plushie-style dog, clammers out of a pillar

This page, above far left: Elina Flyrin's *Process* looks at the method behind the work; and left, Flyrin's *That which I hope for* (2022), 183cm x 60 cm, hand-tufted, Axminster yarn and canvas.

Above right: Freddie Robins' *Be Afraid* hits a more disquieting note

Far left: Molly Kent's sinister *They come alive after dark*, 61cm x 47 cm, wool, acrylic and cotton

Below left: Lola Rose Pedersen works in cross-stitch, 3D printing and biosculpture

Below right: Hamish Halley's *Hay quilt* shows the method of its making and repair

