



Crafts Council  
44a Pentonville Road  
London N1 9BY

T +44 (0)20 7806 2500  
media@craftscouncil.org.uk

## **COTTON: LABOUR, LAND AND BODY, 21 SEPTEMBER 2022 – 4 MARCH 2023, CRAFTS COUNCIL GALLERY**

September 2022

Cotton: labour, land and body is an exhibition featuring four artists whose work explores how the production and trade of cotton shaped the relationship between Britain and South Asia, and how those legacies continue to impact thousands of workers today.

Cotton features work by artists Raisa Kabir, Brigid McLeer, Bharti Parmar and Reetu Sattar, and has been curated by Uthra Rajgopal. All the works were commissioned by The Super Slow Way for the British Textile Biennial 2021.

Cotton is present in everybody's lives and is one of the most profitable crops in the world yet the stories and histories that it holds are rarely told. This exhibition looks at the politics of material culture and reveals the dark history of the cotton trade and its colonial legacy, the devastating effects of fast fashion but also the beauty and dignity of the handmade.

Raisa Kabir presents several pieces including, *The art and language of weaving resistance* / 'বুনন-শিল্প প্রতিরোধ ভাষা', a colourful handwoven textile panel containing Bangla script, coded into a complex series of Jamdani patterns. The work responds to the act of cutting pieces of cloth, collated and classified in *The Textile Manufactures of India*, a series of fabric sample books put together in 1866 by John Forbes Watson (two original volumes will be on display, on loan from the Harris Museum & Art Gallery, Preston). The display is part of *Resistances*, an outcome of the Art in Manufacturing Residency Programme, curated by The National Festival of Making and co-commissioned by British Textile Biennial.

Brigid McLeer presents a textile installation that serves as a memorial to the hundreds of workers who die in factories and sweatshops across the world that supply the global garment industry. *Collateral* was created in collaboration with embroiderers in Burnley and is a moving testament to the lives lost to feed the West's never-ending appetite for fast fashion.

Bharti Parmar presents *Khadi* – a series of delicate drawings and sculptures made from Khadi paper and inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's visit to Darwen, Blackburn, in 1931. Invited by the mill owners to see the hardship the workers were suffering because of his call for a boycott of foreign cloth imports from the UK, he was instead cheered by the workers who stood in solidarity with his cause.

Reetu Sattar presents *Shabnam*, a film that explores the historic and continuing relationship between east Lancashire and Bangladesh in the continuous cycle for

the supply and demand of textiles. The film starts with the delicate muslin produced in Dhaka in the 17th century, through to the migration of textile workers to Lancashire in the 20th century and ends with contemporary garment workers in Dhaka.

Crafts Council Gallery is open Wednesday to Saturday, 11am – 5pm. Drop-in or book tickets in advance at <https://crafts-council.arttickets.org.uk/>

Graphic design for Cotton is by Daly & Lyon

## Quotes

"British Textile Biennial are delighted to be working with the Crafts Council to re-contextualise these works, originally commissioned as part of our 2021 programme. The four outstanding artists showing together in 'Cotton' offer deeply personal perspectives on the relationship between material, people and place - global threads which bind us through our shared textile heritage and contemporary experience. It is a great privilege to be able to share these works again to a wider audience who we hope will be inspired to continue a relationship with us towards our BTB 2023 programme and beyond."

**Jenny Rutter, commissioner**

"Of all the natural fibres, cotton has captured the world's attention like none other and throughout its history cotton has been interwoven with empire building and profit. The hands of millions of men, women and children from around the world have quite literally given their land, labour and bodies to this industry and the continuous cycle of consumption. The Crafts Council exhibition brings together four outstanding artists whose work focuses on the political push and pull of the histories of cotton manufacturing and production, rooted in the Indian subcontinent with connections to the textile mills of Lancashire and beyond."

**Uthra Rajgopal, curator**

"Cotton is such an interesting example of a how one material can transform geographies, and the relationships and governance systems within them. The work of these four artists, Raisa Kabir, Brigid McLeer, Bharti Parmar, and Reetu Sattar, playfully explores the impact of this pervasive material and gives voice to communities who have long been silenced in the story of cotton. At a time when the fashion industry continues to exploit countries in South Asia for labour and material wealth, this exhibition advocates a greater understanding of materials, their systems and impact"

**Sumitra Upham, Head of Public Programmes**

- Ends -

For more press information email [media@craftscouncil.org.uk](mailto:media@craftscouncil.org.uk)  
Promotional images can be found [here](#).

[www.craftscouncil.org.uk](http://www.craftscouncil.org.uk)

@craftscouncil on Instagram

@CraftsCouncilUK on Twitter and Facebook

#CottonExhibition

## Notes to Editors

Raisa Kabir is an interdisciplinary artist, educator and weaver. Brought up in Manchester and now based in London, her textile practice explores colonial legacies and the heritage of Bangladeshi weaving, shining a light on labour, migration and the fragmentation of place.

[lids-sewn-shut.typepad.com](https://www.lids-sewn-shut.typepad.com)

Brigid McLeer is an Irish artist and educator based in London. Her work explores how our lives intersect with historic events, and the capacity of images to 'act' within politicised art practices. She works across various media including video, performance, photography, drawing and writing.

[www.brigidmcleer.com](http://www.brigidmcleer.com)

Bharti Parmar is a visual artist and academic living and working in the UK. She has a particular interest in vernacular crafts and systems, which she often subverts to make political statements using a variety of formats ranging from print, photographic installation, sculpture to embroidery.

[www.bhartiparmar.com](http://www.bhartiparmar.com)

Reetu Sattar is an artist working across performance, video, text, objects and photography. Her work explores the tension between performance art and theatre and the movement of bodies inside spaces. Sattar lives and works in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and is particularly interested in the impact of colonialism on muslin, a rare cotton fabric that has longstanding historical and indigenous links to undivided Bengal.

[reetusattar.com](http://reetusattar.com)

Uthra Rajgopal is an independent curator with a specialist interest in South Asian textiles. In 2019 Uthra won the Art Fund New Collecting Award to build a collection of contemporary textile artworks for the Whitworth, specifically artworks made by women artists working in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh and the UK diaspora.

## Cotton programme of events

- Exhibition opening, 20 September 2022
  - A first preview of the exhibition during London Design Festival, with music curated by AZEEMA FM
- Curator tour, 6 October 2022
  - Tour of Cotton: labour, land, and body by the exhibition's curator Uthra Rajgopal
- Workshop, 10 November 2022
  - In collaboration UK India Dosti Folk Art Festival, on the occasion of Amrit Mahotsav, India's 75th Independence Anniversary, this in-person workshop will teach participants embroidery techniques on khadi cotton, led by an artist facilitator in her rural village in India (connected via live-stream)
- Cotton Symposium, November 2022
  - A host of makers, artists and other experts will come together for a wide-ranging discussion about cotton, colonialism and global trade.

## **Cotton supporters**

### **Bagri Foundation**

The Bagri Foundation is a UK registered charity whose main mission is to realise unique, unexpected ideas from and on Asia, weaving traditional culture with contemporary thinking. The Foundation provides support towards artistic and educational projects and establishes collaborative partnerships with institutions that range in scale—from small cultural organisations that share our ethos and mission to large national and international partners like the British Museum and Hayward Gallery in London, Arte Mundi Prize in Cardiff, The Metropolitan Museum of Art of New York, and La Biennale di Venezia. The Foundation's supported projects include film, visual arts, music, literature, courses and lectures, and each of them aims at giving artists and experts from across Asia and the diaspora, or those inspired by the continent, wider visibility on the global stage. [www.bagrifoundation.org](http://www.bagrifoundation.org)

### **The Super Slow Way**

Hosted by the Canal & River Trust, The Super Slow Way is a cultural development programme in Pennine Lancashire that uses the Leeds & Liverpool Canal as a vehicle for bringing people together on a waterway that everyone shares. Their work is shaped by and delivered with local residents from Blackburn to Pendle, working alongside artists, designers, manufacturers and growers, in fact anyone whose energy and imagination can help build more resilient and sustainable communities. [www.superslowway.org.uk](http://www.superslowway.org.uk)

### **British Textile Biennial**

British Textile Biennial throws a spotlight on the nation's creativity, innovation and expression in textiles against the backdrop of the impressive infrastructure of the cotton industry in Pennine Lancashire. With its epic mills and grandiose civic architecture along the country's longest waterway, the Leeds & Liverpool Canal, the landscape tells the story of textiles. This biennial festival celebrates that story in venues across East Lancashire while showcasing its contemporary expression with the community that has textiles in its DNA. British Textile Biennial is produced by The Super Slow Way. [www.britishtextilebiennial.co.uk](http://www.britishtextilebiennial.co.uk)

## About the Crafts Council

The Crafts Council is the national charity for craft. We believe craft skills and knowledge enrich and uplift us as individuals and can change our world for the better. Through our activities we inspire making, empower learning and nurture craft businesses.

We do this by:

- championing craft and its positive impact on society by showing diverse examples of craft and making, and by reaching new communities who have previously felt excluded from our activity
- increasing levels of craft education and participation by equipping and connecting craft educators, and by campaigning for craft on the curriculum
- growing the market for craft by supporting craft businesses and providing leadership to the craft sector
- building a sustainable and inclusive craft sector by providing support, and by listening to new and existing stakeholders in order to co-create relevant and impactful activity

We want to share our power, work with others, and increase the agency of our communities in order to create an inclusive and thriving craft sector.

