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# **Untitled Construction**

# Mark Kirby

Deborah Crowe's exhibition [Construct] is a large installation made primarily of wood-framed barriers or walls that investigates the relationship between textile construction and architecture. This is not an unusual conjunction, as the ideas of architecture have been evident in Crowe's work for some time, and there is also a well-documented history of overlaps between textiles and architecture.1 What is of more interest to me is how many disciplines Crowe has visited en route to this point. These have included fibre, painting, sculpture, print, photography, jewellery, and fashion design, most of which also reappear, in one form or other, within the wooden frameworks of [Construct]. In the past, I have described Crowe's work as an enigma, and suggested that it has an identity crisis, in that I was never certain how to categorise it.2 With [Construct] my uncertainty is more extreme, in that as well as the plethora of creative forms that confront me, there is also a labyrinth type construction, created by a series of passageways and spaces that go no where in particular, that have no definitive experience to offer. I am now wondering if the enigma of Crowe's work, and its identity crisis, has developed into a form of psychosis.

Any apparent psychosis is of course simulated, a conscious strategy of Crowe's to avoid, and comment on, the ideological spaces of nomenclature. This has been a feature of her work for some time, and part of a general interest with the ideological spaces that contain and mould our communal and personal identities. Nevertheless, the suggestion of psychosis being represented in Crowe's work is pertinent, in light of the potential consequences of failing to meet communal expectations, to fit



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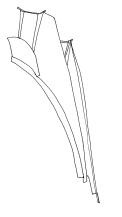
for example, the preferred body form. Australian writer Elisabeth Grosz, in reference to social pressures on body shape, has discussed the de-centring capacity of culture, the aggressive pressures it places onto biological form, particularly of the female, to the point where she doubts its actual existence. Writing on the various spatial disorders of the psychotic, she suggests:

The imaginary anatomy reflects individual, familiar and social beliefs about the body rather than an awareness of its biological 'nature'...Hysteria...the phantom limb, hypochondria, and, indeed, sexuality itself testify to the pliability or fluidity of what is usually considered the inert, fixed, passive, biological body. If it exists at all (and it is no longer clear to me that it does), the biological body exists through the mediation of a series of images or representations of the body and its capacities for movement and action.<sup>3</sup>

If there is an approaching psychosis represented in Crowe's disinclination to present her work within classic taxonomic norms, then the particular mental dysfunction would probably be what Pierre Janet (1859–1947) has termed 'legendary psychasthenia'. This is a condition characterised by a loss or confusion of personal identity and individuality, which includes confusion of spatial distinctions and perceptions.<sup>4</sup> In 1935 social theorist Roger Caillois (1913–1978) adapted Janet's ideas into the arts in the infamous essay 'Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia', published in the Surrealist magazine *Minatoure*, a work that remains of interest to contemporary writers and artists. In it Caillois outlined what the symptoms of an episode of 'legendary psychasthenia' might be:

I know where I am, but I do not feel as though I am in the spot where I find myself. To these dispossessed souls, space seems to be a devouring force. Space pursues them, encircles them, digests them...It ends by replacing them. Then the body separates itself from thought, the individual breaks the boundary of his skin and occupies the other side of his senses. He tries to look at himself from any point whatever in space. He feels himself becoming space, dark space where things cannot be put. He is similar, not similar to something, but just similar. And he invents spaces of which he is the compulsive possession.



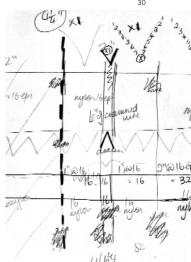


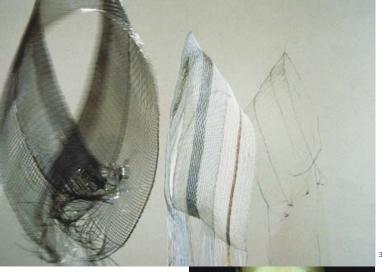


The body in space has been an issue in Crowe's work from early in her career. For her, as for Caillois, space is a relational entity that has abstract as well as physical formulations. This point of view is shared by writer Stephen Foster, who suggests: 'Conventional approaches to space are directly linked to the notion of the physical object, as if space were concrete', however space is also '...a condition of process and knowing – a cognitive pace for posing relationships within abstractions.' And, according to Foster, failure to understand the complexity of space on a scale beyond such daily confines 'corresponds to an inadequacy in appreciating the abstractions entailed in such concepts as society and culture.'6

The body's relation to space, both literal and abstract, was evident in Crowe's first solo exhibition in 1986. Called *Structured Textiles*, this exhibition included a number of large-scale constructions and drawings of structures, which extended into space in a manner approaching the enclosed architectural environments of *[Construct]*. From the early 1990s the figure was more obviously present in a number of works that interrogated the body's containment within literal and abstract environments. This occurred in the *Beneath the Surface* series, which included sculptures and drawings. In the sculptures from this series a cylindrical frame encircled contorted figures made from tousled wire, implying an anxiety caused by containment. The discomfort suggested here became overtly oppressive in the drawings, in which crouching figures were veiled behind 'walls' of drawn marks. Around this time Crowe also produced a number of works

that shifted between sculpture and fashion. These 'garments' caricatured nineteenth century corsets, and emphasised the extreme physical distortions created by that genre of clothing. The series *collared*, which culminated in an exhibition of the same name at the jewellery specialist gallery Fingers in 1999, carried similar themes. It consisted of 'collars' made from folded metallic mesh and others woven from nylon and wire. Hung





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like paintings or displayed as *object d'art*, one or two of these sculptures (or items of jewellery) cut and cramped the neck, providing a pain-threshold test for the fashion conscious (or victim). At other times Crowe made work that protected the body, as in a number of woven shawl-like objects made in the mid 1990s. Around the same time she began to design actual clothing in a brief but successful partnership with fashion designer Kim Fraser, with whom she formed the fashion label FRASER CROWE. Their work *Dual Outlook* (1997), which won the internationally recognised SmokeFree Supreme Fashion Award in 1997, contained a transparent headpiece, woven from nylon

and copper wire, that covered the head and upper body like a protective veil. In garments such as this she maintained her core conceptual concerns, and shifted fashion from being an oppressive activity to an expressive one, by combining clothing's utilitarian function of providing a physical environment for the body with its potential as a conceptual space. That is, a site from which to express and interpret the identity of the wearer.

The implied or absent body was an aspect in the 2000 installation *shift* at The Fisher Gallery, where Crowe suspended from the ceiling

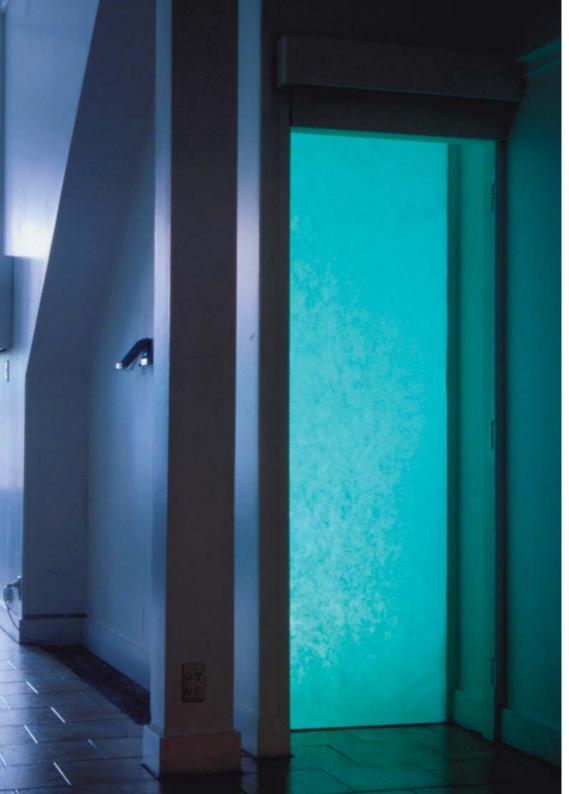
objects woven from nylon filament and wire. During installation of this work the objects were moved into a number of configurations, some of which were documented via subtle graphite drawings on the walls. These forms were hard to locate as any specific species of garment, and were too large to be worn practically. Nevertheless, their connection to clothing suggested a human element, or rather its absence. This sense of absence was taken further by the fact the objects were displayed as if they were being carried by a body, and by a sense of lightness created by the transparency of the forms, and the fact that they would 'shift' when people disturbed the air as they





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moved through the room. This would in turn cause their shadows to gently dance over the walls, and alter their surface reflections, which at times made it difficult to perceptually 'map' their contours. As such *shift* presented an uncertain environment, one inhabited only by the suspicion of a presence, of someone or something transient and fragile.

Crowe often presents space as being ambiguous and perceptually unstable. She did this in the work *Niche* (2001), which was made by enclosing a wedged shaped area under the stairs in Lightbox Gallery with a translucent white screen, purposively making it difficult to view what was inside. She placed

a fluorescent light inside the screened off space, effectively turning it into a projector that emitted a diffused glow onto the walls and those who passed nearby, and concurrently changed a usually empty and inert place into an active environment that extended out from and beyond its physical confines. Crowe extended the idea of the boxed in space in the series sett (2001-2003), which began with a small work built into a window cavity at Compact.7 Here layers of glass and thread implied the structural matrix contained in the walls in order to draw obvious links between textiles and architecture. This was continued in the exhibition sett (2002), which consisted of a number of box like structures placed on the wall in the

manner of framed abstract paintings or relief sculptures. Inside each frame were layers of glass and mirror. Coloured filament was wrapped or 'woven' around each layer, to form a complex array of real and implied spatial planes, which were confused by the reflectivity of the mirrors and the transparency of the glass.<sup>8</sup>

In *Warp* (2003–2005) the abstract woven spatial planes of *sett* were enlarged and removed from their frames to be attached directly onto the wall or suspended between the floor and ceiling. As in *shift* some of these objects cast shadows by being fixed a few centimetres out from the wall, which made them appear both painterly and sculptural. In their abstraction



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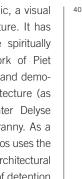
and simplicity they resembled the repetitious geometric form of minimalist artwork, which as Donald Judd argued, also sat between painting and sculpture (and I would suggest architecture too).9 This is most obvious in the biggest piece, Warp #2, which consisted of a group of six large planes that were suspended in a perpendicular format. This created a number of physical projections that if seen from above would form the asymmetrical grid structure of a textile draft, and mimic the architectural plan for a modernist building. As such, a viewer could relate to this work a number of ways, although most obviously by moving around and within it as if it were a collection of small rooms or demarcated spaces.

The one consistent formal element in Crowe's work is the grid, which comes from her grounding in textile practice. In constructed textiles the perpendicular arrangement of materials form grids that provide the structural base of fabric, as well as the framing of architecture, as seen in [Construct]. In other works Crowe made the grid an iconographic feature, as in sett and Warp. In the collared series some of the grids come out of traditional textile structures. The grid is of course a system not uncommon in the visual arts, and is arguably the most frequently exploited piece of iconography since

the nineteenth century. The grid is also schizophrenic, a visual system that supports an unstable conceptual structure. It has for example, been presented as a symbol of the spiritually harmonising forces of the universe (as in the work of Piet Mondrian), and acted as a neutral, non-hierarchical and democratic symbol for mid-century abstraction and architecture (as outlined by Rosalind Krauss).10 However as painter Delyse Thomasos has shown, the grid can also speak of tyranny. As a female descendant of Black American slaves, Thomasos uses the grid to represent 'tools of an oppressive regime: the architectural diagrams for slave transport, the beams and riggers of detention













docks, the jails and bars of incarceration, the cubicles and spaces of torture." In fact, as Krauss has pointed out, the grid is not about freedom at all:

what is striking about the grid is that while it is most effective as a badge of freedom it is extremely restrictive in the actual exercise of freedom. Without doubt the most formulaic construction that could possibly be mapped on a plane surface, the grid is also highly inflexible....the grid is extremely difficult to use in the service of invention.<sup>12</sup>

In [Construct] the viewer is the 'body in space', a contained object, funnelled through a framework of wooden grids that have been woven into the gallery space through carpentry. While visitors are able to see through these structures they are unable to pass through them physically. Rather, various passages direct them into a number of open spaces differentiated by size, shape and light, to view other spaces, some of which they can also only reach with their eyes and imagination. As such the viewer is confronted with various levels of accessibility and constraint, as well as a divergent mix of sense-based experiences. While there are elements of interactivity that allow some physical choice outside of the constraining structures, there remains a sense of unease, a discomfort caused by the restraint. This is carried through in the way some components of [Construct] have been crudely constructed, to the point where it still appears to be under construction; suggesting the 'psychosis' is yet to be resolved.

Mark Kirby is Associate Head of School at Manukau School of Visual Arts. He has written broadly about the Visual Arts in many national and international publications. He has been writing about Deborah Crowe's work since 1997.

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See for example, Bradley Quinn, The Fashion of Architecture, Berg, Oxford, 2003.

2 See for example, the catalogues *collared* (1999) and *sett* (2002), published by Art School Press.

Elizabeth Grosz, 'Lived Spatiality: Spaces of Corporeal Desire', in Brian Boigon (ed), 
Culture Lab, Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 1993, p. 186. On the added 
pressures of cyberspace and simulated realities, she goes on to say: 'The point is 
that the body is not and can never be, left behind. Transcendence can never occur 
at the expense of the body. This is to enter a psychosis, a collective (and thus 
non-pathological) psychosis...', p. 201.

4 Pierre Janet was a French psychiatrist who first provided firm empirical evidence for the existence of subconscious mental processes.

He goes on to say: 'The feeling of personality, considered as the organism's feeling of distinction from its surroundings, of the connection between consciousness and a particular point in space, cannot fail under these conditions to be seriously undermined; one then enters into the psychology of psychasthenia, and more specifically of legendary psychasthenia.' While first published in 1935, it has since been republished in *October* no. 31 (1984), pp. 17–32, and is available online at www.generation-online.org/p/f/pcaillois.htm

Stephen C. Foster, 'The Cognition of Culture', from Steve Yates (ed) Poetics of Space, A Critical Photographic Anthology, University of New Mexico Press, 1995, pp. 102–103.

7 Lightbox was an Auckland based artist run space that no longer operates. Compact is an artist run 'window space', in Auckland's High Street.

A second series of work in *sett* consisted of large-scale digital prints regenerated from photographic details of the 'boxes'. These images were printed onto PVC mesh, which has the texture and density of a robust textile. Because of the close up focus and angles of the photographs the original grid format became twisted and their detail unclear.

9 See Donald Judd, 'Specific Objects', 1964. Arts Yearbook 8 (1965), p. 94; reprinted in Thomas Kellein, Donald Judd: Early Works 1955–1968 (exh. cat.). New York: D.A.P., 2002.

See for example, Rosalind Krauss, 'The Originality of the Avant-garde', October, no. 18, Cambridge, Mass., Fall 1981, republished in Charles Harrison & Paul Wood (eds), Art in Theory, 1900–1990, An Anthology of Changing Ideas, Blackwell, Oxford, 1996, pp. 1060–1065.

Linda Besemer, 'Abstraction: Politics and Possibilities', from X-TRA: Contemporary art Quarterly, vol. 7, issue 3, www.x-traonline.org

12 Rosalind Krauss, 'The Originality of the Avant-garde', in Harrison & Wood, p. 1062.

# **Biography**

### Deborah Crowe Born 1963

### Solo exhibitions and installations

	300 exhibitions and instanations
2005	[Construct], te tuhi – the mark, Pakuranga, Manukau City, New Zealand
2004	Warp, Vavasour Godkin Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand
2002	sett, Vavasour Godkin Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand
2001	sett, Compact, Auckland, New Zealand
2000	shift, Fisher Gallery, Pakuranga, Manukau City, New Zealand
1999	collared, Fingers, Auckland, New Zealand
1986	Structured Textiles, Alloa Museum and Art Gallery, Scotland, UK
	Selected group exhibitions
2004	Full House, Vavasour Godkin Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand
	From A Different Landscape, Horti Hall, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia
2003	Flaunt: Art, Fashion, Culture, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, Auckland, New Zealand
	Shine, Vavasour Godkin Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand
2002	Lush, Platform, Melbourne, Australia
	Screens, Vavasour Godkin Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand
2001	Glacier: altered states, Lightbox, Auckland, New Zealand
	COPYcats, Kingsland Central, Auckland, New Zealand
	Anonevent, Fingers, Auckland, New Zealand
2000	The Emigres II, Te Wa/The Space, Wanganui, New Zealand
	Delight, Artstation, Auckland, New Zealand
	Risk: Transformative Practices, Suter Gallery, Nelson & Dunedin Public Art Gallery, New Zealand
1999	HeadHandsHeart, Centre for Contemporary Art, Christchurch, New Zealand
1997	Smokefree Fashion Awards, Michael Fowler Centre, Wellington, New Zealand
	PaperWeight, Archill Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand
	Fashioning Textiles, Touring exhibition throughout Canada
	Couture to Chaos, Auckland City Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, New Zealand
1996	Smokefree Fashion Awards, Michael Fowler Centre, Wellington, New Zealand
	100 x 100 x 100, The Drawings Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand
	Small is Beautiful, Moray Gallery, Dunedin, New Zealand
	Envoys, Lopdell House Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand

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1995	100 x 100 x 100, The Drawings Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand
	Australian Cotton Fibre Expo, Narrabi, New South Wales, Australia
1994	Deborah Crowe, Freda Brierley, Maggie Gresson, Outreach, Auckland, New Zealand
	Soft Structures, George Fraser Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand
1992	Nga Kaupapa Here Aho – Fibre Interface, Te Taumata Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand
1988	Crafts Council Members Invitational Masterworks, Auckland, New Zealand
1986	Royal Society of Arts, London, UK
1985	Royal Society of Arts, London, UK

### Collections

Te Papa Tongarewa, Museum of New Zealand, Wellington, New Zealand

The Dowse Art Museum, Lower Hutt, New Zealand

Nelson Polytechnic Art Collection, Nelson, New Zealand

James Wallace Collection, Auckland, New Zealand

Glasgow School of Art, Glasgow, Scotland, UK

Private collections in the UK, USA, Canada, New Zealand

### Selected awards and grants

DEBORAH CROWE

- 2005 | Manukau Institute of Technology Research grant towards production of an artist catalogue
- 2004 Creative New Zealand Presentation, Promotion and Audience Development grant towards production of an artist catalogue

Creative New Zealand New Work grant towards production of [Construct]

Manukau Institute of Technology Research grant and Manukau School of Visual Arts funding towards production of [Construct]

- 1999 Nomination in Object Design Category, Seppelt Contemporary Art Awards
  Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney
- 1998 Nomination in Object Design Category, Seppelt Contemporary Art Awards Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney

DEBORAH CROWE IN COLLABORATION WITH KIM FRASER

1998 The New Zealand Smokefree Fashion Awards Moet et Chandon High Fashion Collection Award

Evening Post Flair Avant Garde Award

1997 Supreme Award, The New Zealand Smokefree Fashion Awards

Evening Post Flair Avant Garde Award

Creative New Zealand Presentation, Promotion and Audience Development grant towards travel to *Fashioning Textiles* exhibition to make artist presentations, Toronto, Canada

### Selected publications and essays

- 2005 'Well Thread', Jennifer Purvis, *State of The Arts*, Jan/Mar 2005, iMedia Asia Pacific, NSW. Australia
- 2004 Textiles in Context: locating textiles in contemporary visual practice, Deborah Crowe, Challenging Craft conference, Grays School of Art, Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen, Scotland Icons Nga Taonga; from the Collections of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, (History section) Te Papa Press, Wellington, New Zealand
- 2003 'Visiting Artist profile Deborah Crowe', Mark Kirby, *Artful*, Summer 03/04, Campbelltown City Bicentennial Art Gallery, NSW, Australia
- 2002 Deborah Crowe sett, Mark Kirby, Art School Press, Auckland, New Zealand
- 2000 'Complementary Contradictions', Rhoda Fowler, Deborah Crowe Shift, Fisher Gallery, Pakuranga, Manukau City, New Zealand
- 2000 'Questioning the Familiar', Kelly Thompson, 'Materiality: Symptom and Effect', Leoni Schmidt, 'Sensibility, Taste and Touch', Bridie Lonie, Risk: Transformative Practices, Suter Gallery, Nelson, New Zealand
- 'Collared', Andrea Daly, Object, no. 3 1999, Centre for Contemporary Craft, Sydney, Australia
   'Art, Article or Garment?', ProDesign, June/July 1999, AGM Publishing, Auckland, New Zealand
   'Deborah Crowe at Fingers', Mark Kirby, World Sculpture News, Spring 1999, Asian Art News, Hong Kong

Deborah Crowe collared, Mark Kirby, Art School Press, April 1999, Auckland, New Zealand 'A Marriage of Art and Fashion in New Zealand', Mark Kirby, *Fiberarts* vol. 25, no. 4 Jan/Feb 1999, Altamont Press, USA

- 1998 100 New Zealand Craft Artists, Helen Schamroth, Random House, Godwit Press, Auckland, New Zealand
- 1998 'High Fashion Sculpture', Mark Kirby, *World Sculpture News*, vol. 4, no. 4 Autumn 1998, Asian Art News, Hong Kong
- 1998 'Art as Fashion, Fashion as Art: Deborah Crowe and Kim Fraser', Mark Kirby

  Art New Zealand, no. 87 Winter 1998, The Art Magazine Press Ltd, Auckland, New Zealand
- 1994 The Unbroken Thread A Century of Embroidery and Weaving at Glasgow School of Art, Liz Arthur, Gardner Gibson Print, Glasgow, UK
- 1987 Original Prints Vol II (Cover Image), Elspeth Davie and others, Polygon Books, Edinburgh, UK









## **Acknowledgements**

### [Construct]

Concept: Deborah Crowe, Fabrication: Deborah Crowe & Gary Watson Moving Image: Eldon Booth, Photography: John Collie Installation construction: Murray Green & Gary Watson.

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Deborah Crowe is represented by Vavasour Godkin Gallery, 2nd floor, 35 High St, Auckland, PO Box 105-327 Auckland Central, New Zealand.

Photography in Deborah Crowe [Construct] and other pre-occupations: Kate Alderdice (image 37), John Collie (2, 7, 10-12, 14, 17, 31, 36, 39, 43), Deborah Crowe (22-26, 29, 34, 38, 44), Tony Drayton (33), David Jack (32), Mark McLean (40-42), Rob McEldownie (35), Patrick Reynolds (1, 3-6, 8, 9, 13, 15, 16, 18, 45-48), Gary Sturges (28).

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**3M** Innovation

### List of works

- 1-18 [Construct] 2004 (detail)
- 19 Glasgow School of Art foyer proposal 1985, 300 x 210 mm
- 20 Glidepath Engineering Commission, Auckland 1987, 3000 x 2000 x 200 mm
- Untitled: Beneath the Surface Series (detail) 1996, 500 x 300 29 Untitled: Beneath the Surface x 300 mm
- 22 Untitled: Beneath the Surface Series (detail) 100 x 100 drawings 1996, 100 x 100 mm
- 23 Coats Patons Commission (detail), Glasgow 1986, 1000 x 3000 x 150 mm
- Untitled paper sculpture 1985, 3000 x 2500 x 1500 mm
- 25 Untitled installation (detail) Royal Society of Arts, London 1985, approx 1600 x 2800 x 1500 mm

- 26 Untitled: Beneath the Surface Series drawing (detail) 1997, 800 x 1000 mm
- 27 Bridge drawing 1986, 225 x 175 mm
- 28 Adina 1996. 510 x 360 x 310 mm
- Series drawing (detail) 1997, 800 x 100 mm
- 30 Drafting plan (detail) 1997, 210 x 300 mm
- 31 shift installation (detail) 2000. approx 590 x 1800 x 1600 mm
- 32 collared 1999, 220 x 220 x 120 mm
- 33 FRASER CROWE handwoven shawl 1998, 300 x 1500 mm
- 34 FRASER CROWE bustier 1998, 44 [Construct] working drawing 300 x 44 x 230 mm
- 35 Dual Outlook 1997. 2100 x 1500 x 750 mm

- 36 collared installation (detail) 1999, approx 1000 x 600 x 400 mm
- 37 Niche 2000, 2600 x 900 x 2000 mm
- 38 sett #3 (detail) 2001, 60 x 45 x 50mm
- 39 sett #21 2002. 235 x 235 x 50 mm
- 40 Warp #2 (detail) 2004, 300 x 600 mm
- 41 Warp 2004 Vavasour Godkin Gallery, Auckland, dimensions variable
- 42 Warp #2 (detail) 2004, 2000 x 3500 x 2400 mm
- 43 sett 2001, Compact Auckland, 300 x 300 x 100 mm
- 2003, 525 x 400 mm
- 45-48 [Construct] 2004 (detail)