Essay: Geography and Drawing Together

Felix Driver, 2009

In a body of work stretching over more than a decade, the artist Helen Scalway has collaborated with geographers in her projects to map and excavate the entanglements of modern urban living. The best forms of collaboration are those which are the quietest, working slowly to explore, unpick and re-work some of our most taken-for-granted assumptions about the relations between creativity, expertise and knowledge. At least that has been my experience in working with Helen.

Fashioning Diaspora Space is an ambitious research project led by cultural geographer Phil Crang which brings together a variety of researchers at Royal Holloway, University of London, and the Victoria and Albert Museum. It is fundamentally about the history and geography of cultural exchange between Britain and South Asia in both the colonial and the postcolonial periods, as manifested in the specific fields of textiles, dress and fashion. In planning this project, bringing together forms of expertise usually kept in their separate boxes – both archival and ethnographic research, both textile history and fashion studies, both academic scholarship and public engagement – it became clear that something else was needed to loosen the frames which kept these boxes separate. That something, we hoped, would be found in the realm of creative practice.

In its attention to questions of mobility, especially the mobility of pattern itself, Helen Scalway’s work – exemplified by the current exhibition, as well as the Patois of Pattern project which preceded it - echoes the concerns of contemporary academics working in the field of diaspora and migration studies. The patterns she is interested in may take a variety of forms, in buildings, textiles, material objects or in language itself, all of them the media through which meanings are made. However, these mobile patterns are also inherently mutable: attempts to pin them down, as in the museum or in the pattern book, never quite succeed. There is, in her eyes, no such thing as a pattern which stands still.

In addressing the way our experience of pattern is always framed, always dependent on context and location, Helen Scalway’s work draws attention to a key theme in the history of the present urban condition. Here, however, we see pattern not so much as confined by its frames – the museum, the home, the shop – as flowing through and between them. Always, in fact, on the move, not knowing when to stop. Just like drawing.

Felix Driver is Professor of Human Geography at Royal Holloway, University of London