



# making

## CHANGES

CONTEMPORARY CRAFT IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Northern Ireland is a region with a unique textile heritage. In the last 300 years a world-leading industry rapidly developed with attendant impact upon the structural, social and cultural environment in the northeast of the island of Ireland. The resulting cultural significance of Ulster's textile heritage has impacted across the divisions of the urban and the rural, of class, of creed, of wealth and gender. It can be argued that the distinctive character of the 'Ulster' identity owes more to the remnants of the rapid industrialisation and the attendant work practices, urbanisation and wealth creation of the linen industry than the more usual attributions of cultural identity related to political or religious affiliations. Textile heritage is still, perhaps, a factor in defining and uniting the Northern regional identity as subtly distinct from the rest of the island. While the historic linen industry was characterised by rapid development in the nineteenth century, it was an industry ceaselessly in flux throughout the twentieth century, always reacting to changes in technology and fashions, to local and global factors. Work in this exhibition drew these concerns into a contemporary art and design context. 'Re-inventing Linen' is one in a series of innovative 'master-classes' organised by INTERFACE Centre for Research in Art, Technologies and Design at the University of Ulster, Belfast. The initiative was supported by the University's Cultural Development Department, Office of Innovation and Enterprise and by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. INTERFACE also works closely to support the work of Craft Northern Ireland.

The 'Re-inventing Linen' project explored, through concentrated practical studio work, how professional designer-makers can engage in cross-disciplinary transfer of knowledge, learning from each other and from access to new methods. A number of leading professionals and thinkers in the field were invited to work together with a team of textile specialists from INTERFACE in the studio for a short, intense period. The participants included freelance designers, designers and buyers with local and international manufacturers and brands, curatorial and heritage experts, and policy makers and specialists in printed textiles, embroidery, weave, wearable technology, textile colouration and chemistry. The aim was to explore the process of cross-disciplinary collaboration which is so frequently cited as a key in the knowledge-led economy but is actually so difficult to achieve for established professionals who are successful in busy daily jobs. Furthermore, in our specific context, Northern Ireland is often characterised as having lower than desired rates of innovation, research and development<sup>1</sup> and lower entrepreneurship.<sup>2</sup> The Ulster textile industry no longer expects to compete only on cost but rather