

Hetai Patel: 'Cotton Labour' (2022)

By Chris Sharratt

How can history be reframed, a yarn unspun and then remade? It's a question Hetai Patel addresses subtly but without compromise in his public realm artwork, 'Cotton Labour'. Situated in the large outdoor yard at Cromford Mills, Derbyshire – the world's first successful water-powered cotton-spinning mill, built in 1771 – Patel's slightly larger-than-life portraits gently turn the visitors' gaze towards the unnamed, unrecorded people who worked at every stage of the factory's cotton production.

Patel is perhaps best-known for his highly choreographed films exploring ideas of identity, and in 2019 was the winner of the 12th Film London Jarman Award. He has, however, worked in a variety of different media, including photography, drawing and sculpture. With 'Cotton Labour' he has created a temporary sculptural installation that acts as a kind of physical prompt, an invitation to engage. Using recycled textiles as its principal material, it both celebrates and questions, resonating with current debates around working-class representation, decolonisation and sustainability.

Patel's interest in Cromford Mills' undervalued workers is embedded in the sculpture's production and the many hands that laboured to create it. The 22 portraits are based on recently-taken photographs of local Cromford people and members of the community group Bright Ideas Nottingham, which among other things explores links between the slave trade and England's industrial heritage. Also photographed were Patel's own sister and her young children. Copied as line drawings, which were in turn woven by volunteers

onto 8ft-tall wire mesh fence panels, Patel describes the portraits as symbolic of the mainly women and children who worked at the mill, as well as enslaved plantation labour and the Indian cotton industry. The latter connects the artist's own family story to the artwork – both his mother and grandmother worked as cotton pickers in India and Kenya before moving to England.

None of this, however, is explicit; it is not spelled out in the work itself. Instead, Patel creates space, both literal and metaphoric, for us to explore these possible connections, to become entwined with other lives. With the mesh panels arranged in a circle and an opening on one side, we can literally mingle with these people, view them from different sides, observe their shadows on a sunny day, look up at them and see the detail of their faces against the sky. Perhaps most importantly, bearing in mind 'Cotton Labour' is a contemporary artwork rather than an attempt at historic reenactment, this multi-racial collection of figures do not appear to us as ghosts from the past, nor are they constrained by the industrial heritage that surrounds them. Rather, the use of colourful, contemporary fabrics to outline each figure's distinctive features creates a feeling of proximity and connection, a sense that these are people rooted in the present, just like the visitors to Cromford Mills. A sense, too, that the dynamics of class, race and labour they embody are the very things that continue to define and shape our lives in the 21st century, wherever we are in the world.

'Cotton Labour' acknowledges and challenges how the stories we do or don't tell about the past have shaped, and continue to shape, the way we live. This temporary commemoration of forgotten lives, surrounded by the solidness of 18th century mill buildings and the histories these represent, wants us to think about who and where we are now.

