On the Surface

Fibretex can be coloured, stitched and layered with other fabrics to create a wide range of textural surfaces

by Janice Hay

Fibretex, also known as Tyvetex, is similiar to Tyvek (Fibrefilm), but it is much softer and more fabric-like, which makes it easier to stitch. Made from polyethylene fibres with two outside skins trapping an inner layer of loose fibres, Fibretex reacts to heat by shrinking and distorting, making it ideal for creating textured surfaces. It is usually sold in starter packs or by the metre, and is non-toxic.

What you need

- Fibretex
- Iron and ironing board
- A soft towel
- Baking parchment (silicone paper)
- Colouring materials and tools
- Selection of fabrics
- Face mask

Optional:

- Heat tools
- Respirator
- Wire and wire or card frame
- Sewing machine
- Plastic-headed pins
- Cork mat

The techniques used to create this piece are described in the article.

Heating the Fibretex

Always wear a respirator or mask and work in a well-ventilated area.

Heat can be applied to the Fibretex in various ways. An iron, a craft tool or a hot air tool can be used for some of the effects, but a normal hairdryer isn't hot enough. To make marks, use a soldering iron or a wood-burning tool. Whichever method you use, strict safety precautions must be applied. Make sure tools have a stand to rest on when they are cooling, and ensure that all loose wires are hidden. If you are using metal pins and wire, allow the work to cool before you touch it.

Workshop samples were all heated with a domestic iron. Fold a towel and put it on the ironing board. Set a piece of baking parchment on top of the towel, and place the Fibretex on the baking parchment, with the right side face down. Cover with another piece of baking parchment.

Move the heated iron over the paper to heat. As all irons vary, it's a good idea to do a few small experimental samples to test the heat settings of your iron, and to

Left: Lines of machine stitching on painted calico over Fibretex, before and after heating with an iron

Centre left: Machine-stitched grid on painted calico over Fibretex, before and after heating with an iron

Bottom left: Free machining and hand couching on transfer-dyed lace over coloured Fibretex

get the feel of how quickly the Fibretex shrinks. It will shrink up to 50%, but if too much heat is applied it will disappear altogether. Try the silk/wool setting first and if it takes too long to react, turn the heat up a notch. Hardly any pressure is required – simply 'float' or 'hover' the iron over the baking parchment and keep checking to see the effect. It can be ironed from both sides and may sometimes need this. Try a sample of each.

Colouring the Fibretex

Colour only needs to be applied when the Fibretex is going to show. It is best to colour both sides of the Fibretex as the distorting process sometimes allows the underside to appear. Colour can be added before and/or after heating, but colouring beforehand allows the heat to deepen the colour, enriching the effect.

The Fibretex has two different surfaces; one side is smooth and this takes the colour better than the underside, which is perforated. Use non-toxic colouring materials, which can be brushed, sponged or sprayed on. Try using silk paints, inks and metallic or pearlised paints, bearing in mind the safety precautions. Oil and wax-based products are *not* suitable.

The samples for this workshop were all coloured with Setacolor transparent Tagger spray paints, a fairly new product. Lay the Fibretex on protective newspapers and spray, laying one colour over another to your liking.

Stitching the Fibretex

As Fibretex is fairly firm, it can be stitched with or without a hoop. All the usual stitches can be achieved either by hand or machine. The density of the stitching will affect the amount of shrinkage: the closer the stitching, the less shrinkage will occur. Different effects will also be achieved depending on how the edges are treated, and cutting into the Fibretex also changes its distorting elements. Experiment with a few variations to see the difference.

Free machining can be worked, or try machining with the stitch length at 0 and use a darning foot, moving the fabric carefully to achieve a free effect. A slight residue builds up on the needle, which will need cleaning from time to time. Textured threads etc. can be couched down before heating to add yet more texture.

Above: Transfer-dyed poly-sheer over coloured Fibretex and polyester fabric, free machined, heated with an iron

Above: Transfer-dyed poly-sheer over coloured Fibretex, stitched in lines, before and after heating with an iron

Above: Transfer-dyed paper weaving used for background of main piece

Right: Strips of coloured Fibretex with transfer-dyed chiffon, woven over a metal frame, free-machined, cut from frame and heated with an iron

Above: Coloured Fibretex over calico, couched with textured threads and heated with an iron. Covered with a layer of poly-sheer and more couched threads and heated with a soldering iron. This was then cut into strips and applied to a background. More Fibretex was put behind and heated with an iron, then the whole piece was applied to Tissutex and gold sequins and beads were added.

Above: Machining the layers for the background

Making backgrounds

Fibretex can be used in conjunction with other fabrics to make wonderful textured surfaces. Any type of fabric is suitable; an added bonus of synthetic fibres is that they each react to heat in their own way. Some of the more exciting fabrics like metallics and organzas can be used, and polyester has the advantage of taking transfer-dyes well. Lightweight sheers and soft fabrics give the best results for textural distortion, while heavier ones, such as felt, keep their original shape.

Some ideas

a Lay the Fibretex behind fabrics and machine in rows to create ridges. Stitch in grids or all over to produce a lumpy effect.

b Lay the Fibretex between fabrics, to make a sandwich. Depending on your choice of fabrics and the amount of heat applied, a huge variety of textures can be achieved.

c Laying the Fibretex on top of other fabrics creates a different effect. This also works well over papers, and for this the soft towel can be removed when ironing.

d Strips of Fibretex can be incorporated into fabric weaving. This can be done over a frame or by any other method. Also, different-coloured strips of Fibretex can be interwoven with each other on their own and then heated.

e Shapes of different-coloured Fibretex can be pieced together either on their own or with other fabrics to give a distorted patchwork effect after heating.

f Strips of painted Fibretex can be wrapped around wools and other fibres, and may include wire, to create bendable pieces. Wire couched onto Fibretex will give the option of creating three-dimensional pieces.

The background for the main piece was done by sandwiching painted Fibretex between transfer-dyed fabrics (a sheer was on top), machining over the shapes in variegated metallic thread and heating with an iron.

Making shapes

Whatever shapes you need, begin by creating a template

Far left: Coloured Fibretex over patterned polyester and metallic fabrics, stitched, cut and heated with an iron

Left: Pieced coloured Fibretex with transfer-dyed poly-sheer and Tissutex, heated with an iron

Below left: Leaves cut out from coloured Fibretex, heated with an iron followed by a hot air tool. Some were stitched before they were cut out. The very skeletal leaf was heated with a hot air tool only, laid on soluble fabric and machine stitched with 'veins'. The soluble fabric was then dissolved away.

in firm paper or card, making the shapes large enough to allow for shrinkage.

Flower shapes: For a simple flower shape, draw around the end of a jar or bottle, cut out the circle and then cut out pieces towards the centre. For a four-petal shape, cut a square of paper, and cut out a triangle from all four sides. Draw around the templates onto the Fibretex. Cut out the shapes and heat with the iron. Alternatively, machine stitch around the shapes before cutting them out (you will need to do this if you have incorporated a layer or layers of other fabrics), then cut out as close to the stitching as possible. Heat with an iron.

The flower shapes of the main piece were worked in this way, in several sizes. Some of them were stitched and layered together to make a double variety of clematis, with tiny bits of Fibretex and beads added for centres.

Look at other flower

Drawn flower shapes

Cut-out shapes

Flower shapes after heating with an iron

Above: Painted Fibretex, machine stitched, embossed using pen and powder, heated with a craft tool. *Jennifer Smith*

Above: Painted Fibretex covered in hand stitches, including the edges, with a smaller, heavily stitched piece of Fibretex on top. Heated using a craft tool, more paint added and areas highlighted with metallic paint. *Jennifer Smith*

Opposite page:

Top: Sandwich of coloured Fibretex between synthetic sparkle fabrics, free machined and heated with a hot air tool. *Suzanne Harvey*

Centre: Threads wrapped around a wire frame with strips of coloured Fibretex woven through in places. Free-machined, heated with a hot air tool and cut from frame. *Suzanne Harvey*

shapes and experiment with different types.

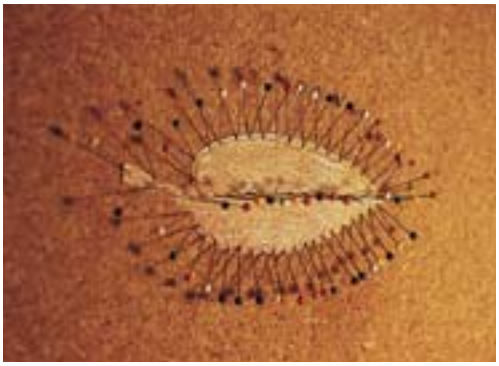
Leaf shapes: Pick some leaves from the garden, draw around them onto the paper and cut out. There are lots of shapes to choose from, or draw simple leaf shapes you are familiar with. Choose whether to add machine stitching. To help keep the leaf shape, use plastic-headed pins to pin the cut-out leaf onto a cork mat (you may like to place a layer of baking parchment over the cork mat for protection). After heating with the iron, the leaves will appear quite bubbly, and may need further heating with a hot air tool. If you like the idea of skeletal leaf shapes, cutting into parts of the leaf allows the Fibretex to break up more easily, then heat with a hot air tool. If the leaf shapes shrink too much or the resulting holes are too large, put the shapes onto cold-water soluble fabric and machine-stitch 'veins', making sure all the stitches and Fibretex join up; trim and then dissolve away the soluble fabric and allow to dry.

Stalks and supports: After deciding on the finished length of the stalk or support, cut a piece of wire 2 cm longer than the finished length and bend over 1 cm at each end. Cut a strip of Fibretex 2.5 cm wide. Pad the wire by wrapping with some thick wool or fibres and then make a 'parcel' by wrapping the strip of Fibretex along the whole length. Place the 'parcel' between sheets of baking parchment and heat with the iron, turning it over a couple of times. Marks can be added by using a soldering iron with a fine tip, and then further wrapping, with threads or fibres, can be done to decorate. Instead of wire and wool, coloured pipe-cleaners could be used.

The supports for the main piece were done in this way, tying them together at intervals to represent chicken wire.

Above: Three layers of different-coloured Fibretex machined together and heated with a hot air tool to reveal all of the colours. *Suzanne Harvey*

Above: A selection of leaf shapes



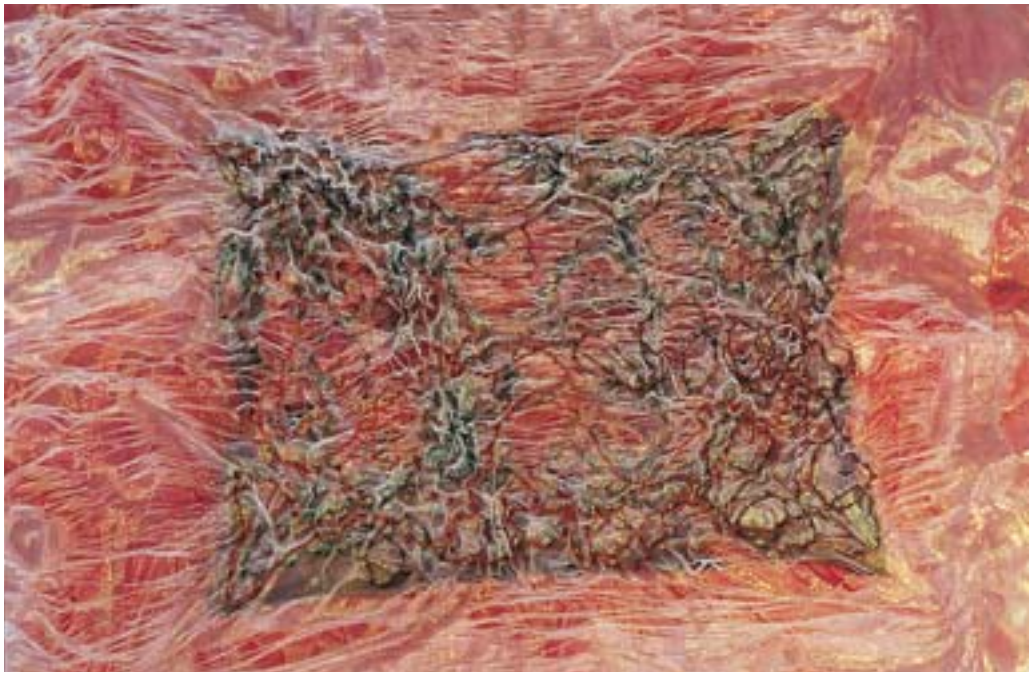
Above: To help keep the leaf shape, pin the cut-out leaf onto a cork mat before heating

Further reading

Surfaces for Stitch by Gwen Hedley. Published by B T Batsford, price £17.99.

Gardens and More by Jan Beaney and Jean Littlejohn. Published by Double Trouble Enterprises, price £6.

Both books are available from the Embroiderers' Guild Bookshop – see page 39 for ordering details.



Above: Long, wide strip of coloured Fibretex, velvet, sheer and metallic fabrics free-machined together with lengths of wire couched down. Heated with a hot air tool and twisted into shape. *Suzanne Harvey*

Suppliers

- Art Van Go (Fibretex, heat tools, non-toxic iridescent and pearl powders and fabric medium). Tel: 01438 814946. Email: art@artvango.co.uk Website: www.artvango.co.uk
- Craftynotions.com (Fibretex, embossing powders and dissolvable fabrics). Tel: 01636 659890. Email: enquiries@craftynotions.com
- Variegations (Fibretex, wires, heat tools and dissolvable fabrics). Tel: 01422 832411. Email: variegat@globalnet.co.uk Website: www.variegations.com
- Rainbow Silks (Fibretex, embossing powders and heat tools). Tel: 01494 862111. Email: caroline@rainbowsilks.co.uk Website: www.rainbowsilks.co.uk
- Ivy House Studio (Tagger spray paints, Fibretex, heat tools, embossing powders and fabric medium). Tel: 01502 740414. Email: ivyhousestudio@hotmail.com

Suggestions

- Any of the pieces can be worked on after heating with an iron.
- To highlight some areas, add more colour or metallic paint.
- To add more texture, small distorted pieces can be sewn on. They could also be covered with a sheer fabric and stitched to incorporate them into the background.
- Embossing powder can be added to the Fibretex before heating to create highlights.
- Try using with painted Bondaweb, nappy liners, etc. These can be burnt back with a hot air tool to create a distressed effect.
- More stitching can be added after heating, provided the Fibretex hasn't become too brittle.
- Beads and scraps of fabric could be added.
- To make beads, wrap Fibretex around sticks. Place between sheets of baking parchment and heat with the iron, turning to heat all round.