

Draw(ing) Thread

Words by Louise R Mayhew

History looms large over this exhibition.

Drawn Thread gathers together Australian textile works from the past 50 years. Threads in the exhibition stretch from the present back to 1971, when Janet Brereton crafted her huge and hanging *Red Form* and second wave feminism transitioned women's domestic labours from the private into the public, from the personal into the political. Longer threads connect Beata Batorowicz with father figures from Modern art, Ruth Stoneley with colonial quilt-making, Robert Brain with Baroque painting and Jill Kinnear with China's Neolithic silk trade. Shorter and more intimate threads link the pieces gathered here to autobiographical narratives and the daily rituals of making, stitch by stitch.

Close observation of the physical threads on show offers one method for engaging with Drawn Thread. Find the smallest neatest stitches. Observe the radiant colour and possibilities of sequins. Admire the traditional skills and revel in moves beyond needlework conventions toward sculpture, installation, assemblage and craftivism. Think through what it means for Jill Kinnear to re/create woven forms with paper and transfer them to the digital screen. Imagine running your hands across the surface of each piece and sink into the comfort of Michelle Vine's fur-lined bath. As you lie there, let me take you on another journey through this show. Follow the needle of my words as I weave between the artists and pull their artworks close.

The exhibition's threads swirl across the gallery. They weave over and under. They stretch from the natural world of fibres to the land and colonisation, through the kitchen to the bedroom and on to the Church. They heave with density around women's work, gender roles and history's love for male genius. And they skirt through identity politics, pedagogy, intuition, fetish, ritual, memory, decoration, text and the grid. With their lines we could weave a hundred essays. The following text writes out just one.

Ruth Stoneley crafted quilts for three decades. *Shot to Pieces* (1986) and *Untitled* (c. early 1990s) reveal her intelligent positioning as both artist and crafter. Her restrained colour palette calls to mind Kazimir Malevich's Suprematist experiments and Minimalism's geometric rejection of Abstract Expressionism. And yet, the works are also sensuous and tactile. They conjure the labour, skill and *handiwork* of the artist. Their size suggests they would function just as successfully spread across a guest bed (craft) as they hang on artisan's walls (art).

Across both quilts, small incursions of red ripple with symbolic possibility. The two circles of *Shot to Pieces* indicate gunshot wounds while the red slit of *Untitled* suggests the hidden and delicate flesh of a vagina. If we think of these quilts in terms of Roland Barthes' *punctum*, then the red viscerally extends from each quilt toward us in a piercing action. The quilts are both wounded and wounding.

Violence is present in all needlework. Finished objects document the act of piercing, methodically and repeatedly. Sera Waters' *Sampler for a Colonised Land* (2019) elicits the vision of a needle moving in and out, up and down, and the concentration required by young girls to keep their fingers safe from the needle's sharp tip. In turn, Waters' sampler speaks to the way young women's bodies are socialised as

feminine: controlled, cautious, quiet. Violence is more explicitly present in Robert Brain's *Judith & Holofernes, with thanks to Mr Caravaggio* (2017) where bright red blood spurts from Holofernes' throat. Brain's remaking in the multi-coloured Pop aesthetic of Andy Warhol shifts the scene's murderous drama into the realm of theatre and a love for gore. The same impulse is present in Waters' *Dribbling Blood* (2010), which renders blood in a delightfully sequined form, a kind of costume for the wall.

Costuming leads us to Beata Batorowicz' oversized braces and Karla Dickens' excessively decorated garments. Both artists speak to the gendered adornment of the body and long histories of patriarchal, religious and colonial power. In Batorowicz' *Daddy's WWII Braces* (2002) an absent father figure is made nightmarishly large. The suspenders creep across the floor and up the wall. Batorowicz' savvy deployment of scale translates the historical item into an artwork while her titling, from the perspective of a child, recalls a British recruitment poster for World War 1. Sitting on her father's knee, a young girl asks: "Daddy, what did you do in the Great war?" (1915). Against this week's confirmation of Australian soldiers' war crimes in Afghanistan, Batorowicz' work takes on a chilling tone. Dickens' works are equally daunting and strange. The knickers of *Warrior Woman XII* (2017) heave with rosary beads. A little plastic baby Jesus sits within their strings. The assemblage is a literalisation of Catholicism as chastity belt, made tacky and cheap. Themes of control are stronger, and darker, in *Unlucky Bastard* (2017) which uses the disturbing shape of a straitjacket as a canvas. Dickens' text makes clear the racial divides of "luck" and "justice" within colonial Australia.

Autobiographical narratives weave throughout the exhibition, surfacing in unexpected places. Janet Brereton's *Modern Woman* (1991) depicts a young Caucasian woman against a gridded background of yellow, pink and purple. Forgoing the kind of verisimilitude that is possible in painting, Brereton highlights the material construction of her tapestry, interweaving the woman's face with the gridded squares. The dissolution of foreground and background flattens the picture plane in a manoeuvre common to Modern art and transforms the subject into a cyborg (part human, part digital). Read in conjunction with the subject's future-looking gaze we might interpret the work as indicative of Brereton's confidence in women's futures. This reading becomes heartbreaking on learning more about the work. It was the artist's final tapestry, dedicated to the young women who nursed her during the final years of a terminal illness. Brereton passed away the following year.

Sue-Ching Lascelles and Kate Just continue this attention to women's pasts and futures via maternal genealogies. Lascelles explains her work is filled with autobiographical symbolism. Proliferating plastic bags in *New Skin, Old Moon* (2020) stand in for childhood memories of moving house and her mother, while the hopeless game of snakes and ladders represents the artist's feelings of inadequacy as a mother. A similar kind of whimsy is present in Just's work, though here the tone is brighter. Just borrows from fan culture to express her admiration for women artists through knitted portraits. In *Feminist Fan #40 (Julie Rrap)*, Just celebrates the Australian artist Julie Rrap. If this act positions Rrap as Just's artistic Mother, then Elizabeth Taylor enters as Grandmother. The photograph that Just based her fan portrait on is Rrap's *Camouflage #3 (Elizabeth)* (2000). In *this* work, Rrap presents herself in a part-human part-horse mimicry of the Hollywood star.

Sue-Ching Lascelles was taught by Jill Kinnear. The two artists' inclusion in *Drawn Thread* indicates the curators' understanding of history as generational knowledge. It flows through teachers to students and

through mothers to daughters. Significantly, Kinnear's *Reinforcement* (2020) and Lascelles' *New Skin, Old Moon* were both made this year, making explicit Drawn Thread's contention that feminist history has more in common with a river than an ocean. As time flows forward, generations overlap and coexist rather than separating into different waves. The same understanding underpins the curators' decision to include two works, made decades apart, by many of the artists in the show. Rather than boxing artists in to singular moments of fame or relevance, this decision honours the real breadth of their lives.

Mona Ryder exemplifies the reality of artistic practice as durational. Ryder regularly returns to her artworks, shifting elements, redeploying parts of one work in another, and amending her titles along the way. *The Tattooed Land* (1990–2020) updates Ryder's earlier works: *The Tattooed Man* (1990) and *The Tattooed Land* (1989–2020). The use of fur and skin draws Ryder into conversation with Batorowicz' rat while her faux fruit calls to mind the dining room table of *Womanhouse* (1972). Together, the black curtains, painted hides and cornucopia of fruit upon a fur-lined wooden stand sit somewhere between the symbolism of Surrealism and Neo-Dada's grungier combines. The abundance of references in Ryder's works make for multiple entry points and methods of interpretation while her scavenged objects and rich textures tempt audiences' touch.

Louise Bourgeois, famous for her looming sculptures of spiders and her intimate embroideries, reminds us that needlework is also an act of repair. For her, needle and thread are the tools of her seamstress mother. In turn, needlework symbolises industrialness, creativity and care. Via this thread we weave away from the violence, dark humour and subversiveness of Drawn Thread and back to the comforting space of Michelle Vine's *Affirmation Tub*. Vine originally conceived this work as a panacea to the artworld's ocularcentrism and gallery rules against touch. Her practice makes space for children in galleries and encourages us to interact with art. In this new world of COVID-19, Vine's attention to our social needs for intimacy is radically heightened. In this context, her calming soundscape of affirmations and the pleasure of a fur-lined bathtub take on new significance. Settle in. Enjoy.