

Drawn Thread is the first of 5 iterations of *The Hand-made Tale; 50 years of craft and design in Queensland*, a series of curatorial offerings celebrating **artisan's** influential 50 years' of operation. Over the course of the last half-century, **artisan** has championed an ongoing conversation around feminism, fiber and emancipation and draws attention to the necessity to keep this dialogue alive in *Drawn Thread*. Female identifying Queensland practitioners who have exhibited with **artisan** throughout its history are interspersed with national artists whose practices champion, advocate and challenge a broad audience's relationship to feminist fiber art. *Drawn Thread* is a celebration of, and call to arms for the continuation of a feminist textile platform to highlight the struggle of women in the hierarchy of the art and craft world.

We all have a relationship with textiles – we wear them, we sleep enshrouded in them and thus have the capacity to be engaged in their messaging. The contextual textile realm has the curious ability of being able to deliver messages softly, luring their unsuspecting prey in to delight in the laborious tactility or the work prior to the message being fully digested. Perhaps more so than other mediums, textile based work has a long and varied lineage of cultural implications that are unpacked with every stitch of every textile artist from before our collective memory even began. The execution of contemporary textiles connects us with so many generations using stitching as domestic labour across the centuries. The memory of textile creation as a nearly exclusive feminine pursuit still sings loud in our historical reckoning. It has offered women a welcoming cultural engagement throughout periods where other means were denied, forbidden or prohibitive. As such, contemporary textiles offer a powerful tool for delivering conversations pertaining to female experience, feminist messaging or connecting with the legacy of domestic craft pioneers.

Feminism is a many faceted, highly nuanced creature that evolves and recalibrates, pending cultural climate. However, at its core, it is a simple desire for equitable treatment of all genders. When **artisan**, known at its inception as *the Craft Association*, was established in 1970, the First Wave of feminism had already paved the way for ongoing conversations, having tackled suffrage, education, and financial independence. The 1970s saw Australia deep in the throes of Second Wave Feminism – labour division, reproductive rights, and establishing facilities for victims of domestic violence among other big picture issues were at the fore. It's quite challenging now to imagine a time prior to female suffrage, but not so hard to engage with the notion of fighting for equality of labour division in the home, given that in heterosexual couples where both partners are employed, women still do 70% of the housework¹. And when, on average, one woman per week is killed by a current or former partner² yet the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children has been repealed and is set to end in 2022³, it is apparent that feminism is a conversation that must endure.

What gains has feminism brought to the stage over the past 50 years in Australia? Introduction of the Pill, maternity leave, the first female to lead a political party, to become a High Court Judge, a Premier, Governor General, the first Aboriginal women elected to Parliament and House of Representatives, the first female Prime Minister. What lofty achievements! While this may be the case, it becomes weighted under the memory of the degree to which our first female Prime Minister was subjected to such public hostility and personal attacks as to necessitate a notorious and now internationally lauded speech regarding the systemic misogyny directed at her and female identifying members of the Australian public. In recent years, after making gains towards

reproductive rights, same-sex marriage, breast feeding in Parliament, and a goodbye and good riddance to the tampon tax, surely we're closer to equality than ever before? No. Our First Nations women, as most of the POC community, aren't able to enjoy the majority of gains made by White Australian borne feminism. This is particularly evident acknowledging Aboriginal women as the fastest growing prison population in Australia⁵ to an overwhelmingly disproportionate degree. Those identifying as First Nations women, an already marginalised population, become further marginalised by exclusion from this conversation. Much work and introspection are yet to be done.

Enter art. The platform of multifarious substance. A targeted expression of cultural deliberation. And in the case of textile arts, a historical channel for decorative subversion. In contemporary times 'craftivism', a craft-based movement disseminating hand crafted items which express messages of political discontent, has gained traction as a grass-roots device for much of the making community from Etsy sellers to institutionally sanctioned fine artists. With a slowly growing international stage, more intrigue is being placed as to the origins and historical gravity of this movement. Stories such as concealed messages being found rendered in Morse code executed in textiles created by WWII prisoners of war declaring 'fuck Hitler'⁵ are coming to light, and then there's the German seamstress who, when incarcerated in an asylum in 1890, stitched her autobiography into a re-tailored hospital gown⁶. I'm sure the more we dig, more examples of the use of textile-based expression will come to light. So while *Drawn Thread* by no means pioneers textiles as conduits for subversive and/or overt contextual dialogue, it does throw a spotlight onto the many ways in which exhibitors from **artisan's** rich 50 year history have utilised textiles to speak to feminist issues plaguing the cultural landscape.

Textile works are starting to permeate spaces traditionally held by more classical mediums such as painting and sculpture, and not just as a novelty offering or afterthought. Textile work has won predominantly painting based national prizes. Embroidery portraiture has found its way into high profile prizes. Exhibitions composed entirely of contemporary textiles have Australia-wide traction and at any given time there are multiple touring exhibitions devoted to contextually rich textile works. First Nations produced textiles are sought after and can be found in sold-out exhibitions and in the retail arms of most major and minor galleries. We no longer need to argue as emphatically for textiles as an equal peer to other fine art mediums as its depth and capacity becomes acknowledged in a more widespread field.

Leah Emery,

Public Programs at Artisan

1. Australian Bureau of Statistics
2. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2018) Family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia, 2018
3. <https://womensagenda.com.au/latest/why-are-family-violence-services-losing-government-support/>
4. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/crime-and-justice/prisoners-australia/latest-release> + [https://theconversation.com/aboriginal-mothers-are-incarcerated-at-alarming-rates-and-their-mental-and-physical-health-suffers-116827#:~:text=Aboriginal%20women%20are%20the%20fastest,than%2080%25\)%20are%20mothers.](https://theconversation.com/aboriginal-mothers-are-incarcerated-at-alarming-rates-and-their-mental-and-physical-health-suffers-116827#:~:text=Aboriginal%20women%20are%20the%20fastest,than%2080%25)%20are%20mothers.)
5. https://makezine.com/2011/12/21/subversive_finds/
6. https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/8qwpzb/mark-my-words-the-subversive-history-of-women-using-thread-as-ink