



Stitch
Cult
3 August - 15 September 2018

artisan

Stitch Cult is an exhibition that investigates the social significance of embroidery and its practice, and breaks down preconceptions by exploring what embroidery can be.

Stitch Cult presents a contemporary perspective on the uptake of embroidery by a new generation of Australian artists, whilst acknowledging the practices and virtuosity of the past. The exhibition features recent work from Eddy Carroll, Emma Greenwood, Trudy Inkamala, Liz Payne, Demelza Sherwood, Jeanette Stock and Sera Waters; alongside historical works from the Embroiderers Guild of Queensland Inc. The artists in this exhibition are telling personal and social stories through their work, addressing notions of identity, ritual, embodied knowledge, myth and value. Works included encompass the shifting concerns of materials and form, explore notions around art and craft, and technique versus intuition.

The art of embroidery has been practiced for thousands of years. In essence, surface embroidery is the embellishment of fabric and other substrates with embroidery stitches. Any type of design may be used in surface embroidery, and there are hundreds of documented surface embroidery stitches. In the West, traditions have been at the mercy of trade and fashion, but in other regions embroidery continues to be rooted in ancient beliefs and

superstitions.¹ One of the oldest art forms, embroidery has been used to adorn textiles for domestic use, ecclesiastical purposes and costume and secular ceremonial articles for millennia. Both secular and ecclesiastical embroideries are records of great importance, and reflect the social conditions of the times in which they were made.

One of the world's most recognised artworks, the Bayeux Tapestry is in fact, an embroidery. Estimated to have been created in the late 11th century, the embroidery depicts scenes of the Norman Conquest and the Battle of Hastings in 1066, from the perspective of the conquering Normans. The grouping of the scenes, the dramatic and lively positions of the figures and the considerable detail, show how close an observer the creator was (or creators were) of 11th century life. The Bayeux Tapestry is a mine of information on architecture, colour, costume and armour, and is one of the best records we have of the period, work and life of the times.

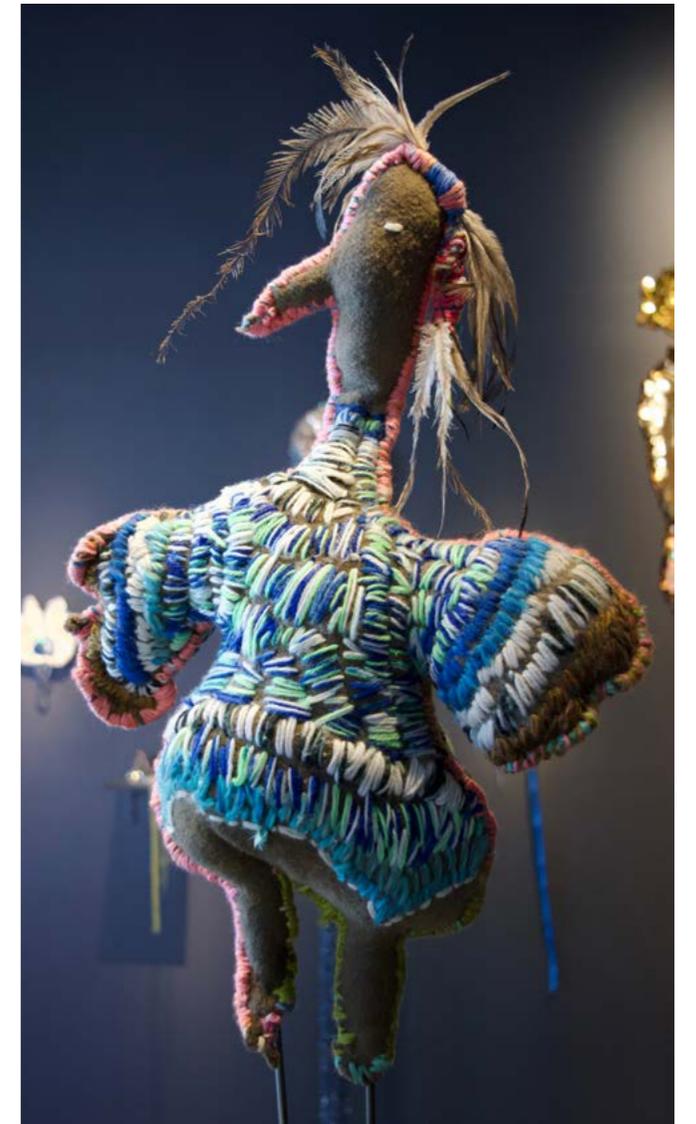
Globally, the social and cultural context of embroidered textiles present a complex web of inter-relations. Textiles are extraordinarily nuanced in their ability to communicate and become potent artefacts of our society, left for future generations to decode and decipher. In recent years, contemporary artists in Australia, broadly influenced by an English heritage of

needlework, have embraced embroidery for its capacity for poignant and reflective narrative.² Stitch Cult includes work by artists contextualized alongside the work of unknown embroiderers, offering an insight into the historical progression of practice, ideas and cross-pollination.

Stitch Cult features recent work from:

- Eddy Carroll
- Emma Greenwood
- Trudy Inkamala
- Liz Payne
- Demelza Sherwood
- Jeanette Stok
- Sera Waters
- Historical works from The Embroiderers' Guild of Queensland Inc.

Cover image: Liz Payne *The shield* (2017) Acrylic on cotton with hand embroidery and beading.



Trudy Inkamala *Big bird* (2018) Naturally dyed woollen blanket, wool, steel. Courtesy Edwina Corlette Gallery.



Sera Waters, from left: *Telling tales on terry towelling: sweat, stains, glares and piles* (2017) Towel, wool, cotton, button, trim, handmade sequins, sequins, found textiles; *Telling tales on terry towelling: the lost flock (foxy tales)* (2017) Towel, wool, cotton, fox fur, found beads, found fabric; *Telling tales on terry towelling: lost to fellmongering* (2017) Towel, wool, cotton, velvet, trim, handmade sequins. Courtesy Hugo Michell Gallery.

Ritual and embodied knowledge

Rituals are features of all known human societies.³ Our lives are filled with many activities that are ostensibly performed for concrete purposes, but which are loaded with purely symbolic actions, and thus partly ritualistic in nature. It comes as no surprise then that many of the artists in Stitch Cult, when asked about why they embroider, speak to the allure of gathering up their equipment (so closely held and intimately known); the meditation inherent in the slowness and repetition of the work; and the reverie and absorption that takes hold when immersed in the timelessness of creation. Evident in their words is a connection with ritual, their own contemporary ritual but also perhaps those of people and years' past.

Many of the artists in Stitch Cult communicate a desire to pay homage to history and past practices (particularly of women) through the process of their embroidery. Jeanette Stok loves the idea that her hands are in some way mimicking those of her mother and grandmother before her, making the same repetitive physical actions, irrespective of the different materials they have used. Eddy Carroll

enters into an ancient language of women's business. She says, "The space I take up when I sew is relative to my body. I move with my work, fold it up and take it with me. Wrap my threads, pierce my needle through and keep everything intact. It's portable and I'm transient. Past, future and present all at once."⁴

The original concept of ritus (the Latin derivative of rite) addresses ideas around the proven or correct way of doing something. The unspoken rituals that threaded through many of the practices of the contemporary artists in this exhibition perhaps derive from a desire to acknowledge past makers. Their engagement with these rituals amend slippages in art historical and cultural understanding and push for an acceptance of embroidery. Their small rituals of care, precision and memory become political in nature, re-instating the value and the vitality in what is often perceived as 'only' women's work.

Embroidery as a vehicle for establishing and questioning identity and myth making

Historically, embroidery has been used as a tool for communication of personal and political narratives, all within the cultural parameters of the times it was created. Embroideries can be seen as points of collision, where social history and material culture meet to investigate and reflect social conditions.

Through its reclamation and use of the domestic-private sphere, contemporary embroidery has evolved to take traditional female experiences as a subject with political and subversive implications. Sera Waters' embroideries and hand-crafted sculptures dwell within the gaps of Australian settler colonial histories, mostly to examine the home-making practices of women. She is fascinated by Australia's past, and particularly the tangled lines of her family and their ongoing legacies today. Waters' research-based practice directs our attention to the intricate and intimate portraits that emerge within the greater discussion of national history. Hers is a practice of reflection and constant re-assessment of the past, and how it operates in the present; and is a way of grasping embodied knowledge shared over generations.

With hand embroidery techniques and limited

stitches, Demelza Sherwood uses needle and thread as a drawing tool. She creates a personal chronicle of lived moments. Her drawings feature friends and family in candid poses, and recall the humour and warmth of times shared. Sherwood's drawings become a composite of stories, and a fertile ground of cloth, emotion and memory. The embroidered snap-shots are rendered on orphaned textiles, table covers and runners, homely items, once sewn by a now anonymous maker.

Trudy Inkamala's whimsical soft sculptures demonstrate the unique style for which the Yarrenyty Arltere Artists are renowned. Her pieces reflect memory and traditional stories as well as exploring contemporary issues and challenges faced by the community. Embodying local flora and fauna, stories of family and country or scenes from everyday life in the Town Camp, Inkamala's sculptures are made from recycled woollen blankets dyed with local plants, tea and corroded metal. Embroidered with brightly coloured wool thread and embellished with feathers, the soft sculptures are filled with character and humour. They are emblematic of the vitality of the Town Camp and its people, and the ingenuity of the Yarrenyty Arltere Artists who, through creativity and perseverance, have reignited the confidence and spirit of their community.



Eddy Carroll, from left: *Galaxy head* (2008) Aida cloth, embroidery thread, satin ribbon, polypropylene; *A wreath to lovers and a beachcomber by the real* (2018) Aida cloth, embroidery thread, ribbon, sequins, polypropylene; *Semi precious* (2016) Hand sewn sequins onto coated vinyl; *Rainbow lorikeet, my alter ego belongs to you - a liberty mask* (2012) Aida cloth, embroidery thread, satin ribbon, polypropylene.

Many of the identities of embroiderers throughout history have remained unknown. In 15th century Europe, centres and workshops were formed to create guilds of highly skilled (and exclusively male) artisans who were predominantly engaged in creating ecclesiastical embroideries. The output of these workshops, called *Opus Anglicanum* or 'English work', was famous throughout Europe.⁵ These master craftspeople's identities remain mostly a mystery. Similarly, with the exception of one work, all of the embroidered aprons from The Embroiderers' Guild of Queensland were made by anonymous craftspeople. These aprons speak to the role of embroidery in Anglo Saxon Australian culture, as a skill that marked a girl's path

into womanhood. It was a craft that conveyed rank and social standing, and a pastime that captured chapters of history with personal flourishes. This erasure of individual identity contrasts with the subject matter of the embroidery – national icons carefully rendered in thread. The aprons are typical of late 1920s and early 1930s Australian embroideries, with their enthusiastic use of symbols of national identity – Phar Lap, floral emblems, the Sydney Opera House. Collectively, the aprons speak of citizens engaged in the process of building national identity, through the lens of an aspirational post-federation narrative. However, the erasure of women's histories and identities is also evident in our inability to attribute these works to individuals.



Demelza Sherwood *Nostalgia for walking (or there's a man dancing!)* (2018) Embroidery and applique on cotton



Emma Greenwood *Blue flowers* (2018) Embroidery on hand made leather kicks.

Redefining embroideries as objects of artistic value and importance

From the Renaissance, a clear division between decorative and fine art emerged and was “reflected in changes in art education, from craft-based workshops to academies; and in the theories of art produced by those academies”.⁶ For a long time, artists, critics, and historians have viewed art history from certain perspectives and placed art into categories based on a system of values, creating a hierarchy of art forms. In this hierarchy of the arts the distinction between art and craft is not only defined by the materials used but also the intentions behind the work, where it is created, by whom, who it is for, and for what purpose.

In this hierarchy, mediums like painting and sculpture have had a certain value placed on them and are perceived to hold a certain status, while other forms of art that serve as adornment or utility are “relegated to a lesser cultural sphere under such terms as ‘applied’, ‘decorative’ or ‘lesser’ arts”.⁷

This hierarchy was maintained by a common opinion that these forms were less intellectually involved and served only domestic and aesthetic needs. Relegated to a domestic framework, embroidered objects have long suffered from being read literally. Slowly, this hierarchy is shifting. Embroidery,

and stitching more broadly as a contemporary craft medium, often challenges long held beliefs about homely, gendered behaviours and everyday life. It disrupts the known distinctions between tradition and innovation, the local and global, in order to engage audiences in more intimate ways. As noted by Dr Belinda Von Mengersen, “the re-emergence of embroidery is part of a broader questioning of the hierarchy of materials that has gained momentum since the 1990s.”⁸ The situation of contemporary works with historical pieces within this exhibition is not to be mistaken for a tokenistic or nostalgic gesture. It instead draws connections to the visibility of the makers and the embedded themes each thread draws out and illustrates.

The artists in *Stitch Cult* individually and collectively redefine embroidery as having artistic value and importance. Conceptually and commercially, contemporary embroidery has re-emerged as a medium of skill and value. Liz Payne’s rich, heavily embellished wall works are bold, colourful, textural and very pattern driven. Inspired by art and textiles from around the world, Payne likes to experiment with shape, symbolism and symmetry. Her works have been recognised within the fashion and design community, having recently collaborated with Australian fashion house Gorman. The labour-intensive nature of Payne’s works also

acts as a mirror to our consumption of textiles in general, realigning our sense of time and value of each stitch.

Like Payne, Eddy Carroll employs a variety of techniques and a diversity of material choice, and she's interested in how new materials enter into traditional textile practices. She adapts traditional embroidery techniques in her works through the introduction of non-traditional materials, highlighting the abundance of potential materials and the disparity in perception of value. The plastic sequins she uses, were once made of celluloid, and before that sequins derived from small metal coins used to adorn costume. Similarly, beads that were once glass and polished stone, can now be mass-produced in plastic.

This relationship to time is very important in all of the work in *Stitch Cult*; both time spent with material and the wider concept of change and the passing of time. Inspired and driven by an enquiry into sustaining and adapting cultures, Eddy Carroll is fascinated by the endless adaptations and material exploration that is intrinsic in the evolution of embroidery. Carroll contrasts her 'slow work' with a fast-paced life. Waters "spends time with each thread and each stitch and makes many minute decisions along

the way."⁹ She uses aspects of her embroidery and its inherent slowness to build and expand on new skills, and create new ways of working through ideas.

It is these new ways of working and understanding that are at the heart of *Stitch Cult*. The works in *Stitch Cult* break down preconceptions by exploring what embroidery can become. They offer an investigative and experimental approach to making art, not least because of the choice of material and artform, and embroidery's political significance. Collectively, the artists in *Stitch Cult* approach embroidery as the robust and dynamic art-form that it is, and the works in this exhibition consider stitch and thread as a drawing tool, a mode of direct mark making that questions materiality, technique, imagery, narrative, concept and embodied knowledge. The artists are personal and social stories through their work, addressing notions of identity, ritual, time, myth and value. The makers are no longer invisible and through a newly found visibility, shed light on embroidery past, present and future.



Jeanette Stok *Protection* (2018) Galvanised wire and wire mesh.



Various makers - unknown, Aprons (1920-30s) Embroidery on calico and linen.
Courtesy of The Embroiderers' Guild of Queensland Inc.

1. Paine, Sheila, *Embroidered Textiles: a world guide to traditional patterns*, Thames and Hudson, 2010
2. von Mengersen, Belinda, *Slipstitch catalogue*, NETS Victoria and Ararat Regional Gallery, 2015
3. Brown, Donald, *Human Universals*. United States: McGraw Hill, 1991 p. 139
4. Greenwood, Emma, communication with artisan June 2018
5. Morris, Justin <http://www.fibre2fashion.com/industry-article/4135/history-of-embroidery> (retrieved June 2018)
6. Parker, Rozsika & Pollock, Griselda, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*, I.B→Tauris, 2013, p44
7. Ibid
8. Waters, Sera, communication with artisan July 2018
9. von Mengersen, Belinda, "Slipstitch: a survey of contemporary narrative-based stitch and embroidery practices in Australia" (2016). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*, 1018

artisan receives financial assistance from its major sponsors, Arts Queensland (State Government) and the Australia Council, the Commonwealth Government's arts funding and advisory body.

