Y FIBRE

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An exhibition of work by male textile artists at the Ewart Gallery

3 – 16 March 2015

Curated by Jane Theau

Catalogue essay by Belinda von Helgerson

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Catalogue Essay – Y Fibre

Belinda von Mengersen

Y Fibre, curated by Jane Théau, presents a collection of contemporary visual artworks constructed by male artists using fibre or textile materials. Within this show there are many contradictions including the initial, most obvious – that of gender-specificity and craftwork bias. In simple terms, the audience may justly ask: why are these male artists using fibre or textile? What do these materials and methods offer them? And how do they rationalise the labour that is entailed?

The answers to these intriguing rhetorical questions are embedded within the exhibition, where each artist offers an array of alternative answers. In many cases these questions are being asked by the artists themselves of their work; in others they may have been prompted by audience response or inquisitiveness.

Significantly, the artists are drawn to fibre and textile materials and methods for reasons that span and intersect both the conceptual and the practical. For many of the artists represented here this inquiry is complex: a dialogue that cannot be easily categorised into separate parts. Textile and fibre are evocative materials because of their tactility and their embedded symbolic, metaphoric and cultural history. However, for many of these artists the choice of fibre textiles is provocative because of the materials' ability to act as agents for subversion. Thus, for many the essential preoccupations are the inherent question of gender and the over-riding perception of fibre textiles as domestic mediums rather than fine-arts ones. Despite this, however, what is occurring in this collection is a re-claiming of fibre and textiles' capacity to evoke meaning and articulate both personal and socio-political narratives. The apparent softness in the work is deceptive, for many of these stories are emotionally charged, articulating the conflict between constructed self-entity and societal expectations.

Historically, gender has not always determined who practised needlecraft, for, as Rozsika Parker writes in *The Subversive Stitch*, 'up until the 18th century the majority of embroiderers to the Kings were men' . Following this, embroidery was deliberately culturally re-defined in terms of a domestic and feminine space. More recently in contemporary textile theory the needle has been re-defined by Parker as being akin to the pen. This theory describes how needlecraft practices have been, and continue to be used for 'the production of alternate discourses of power' referring to examples of how needlework has served 'as a form of rhetoric with the potential to shape identity, build community, and prompt engagement with social action'. In this exhibition the documented capacity of needlecraft for subversion, identity and cultural construction has been harnessed by the artists. Brett Alexander's works speak in direct response to his understanding of this contemporary theoretical discourse, aligning his practice conceptually to the marginalisation of both craft practices within the visual arts and queer culture within society.

Matt Siwerski describes wanting to establish his own meanings and mythology through the use of re-purposed materials and a direct drawn and graphically gestural approach to free-machine embroidery. Troy Emery uses textiles for their capacity to mimic the textures and gestures of taxidermy, his sculptures showcasing many of the contradictory and complex aspects of the relationship between animals and humans. Luke Temby constructs imagined identities in a series of fibre textile busts which indicate roles in society and usurped authority; here, the use of pliable materials controverts the perceived aggression of each represented figure.

Tim Gresham applies himself to the labour of tapestry weaving, yet allows ideas, colouration and pattern design to evolve along the way rather than being pre-conceived. In this sense he is attempting to 'draw' with tapestry, as opposed to the traditional reproduction of fine artworks and the use of cartoons. Gresham subverts many of the conventions of traditional tapestry in the same way

as other artists in this show subvert the conventions of embroidery. Lucas Grogan, for example, ad-libs in crewel embroidery and stitch, spacing out letters and narrating through text and material in pseudo textile-samplers, admonishments, reminders and crude verse.

In addition, fibre and textiles possess an inherent plasticity. Unlike resistant materials, they are malleable, and in many cases this offers the visual artist a wide scope for experimentation and sculptural or three-dimensional outcomes. Sebastian Di Mauro describes how his use of neoprene for *Float* (2006) – a sculpture both conceptual and practical – signifies the incongruity between artificiality and nature: one mimicking the other.

Many of these artists use stitch for the same reason: its flexibility and malleability. Some artists in this show literally stitch messages and text into cloth, while others use imagery or sculptural forms. John Parkes uses stitching to bond layers of re-purposed clothes together, some recognisable as garments or other utilitarian or domestic textile items otherwise destined for land-fill. The worn or scorched sections of these clothes are closely examined, leaving as they do tender traces of use and the whole item bound through stitch – a contrary strengthening. Parkes addresses the question of labour in terms of transformation, outlining the time spent and 'acts of making' as necessary to re-envision the material. It is the labour of the making which enables this eclipse to occur. Tony Dyer speaks about the reflective and autobiographical nature of his photographic, pieced and stitched works. Paul Yore also consciously entrenches time into his works through an inordinate number of petite point stitches. Yore's needlepoint works rephrase a known domestic form through the application of sweetly seditious text.

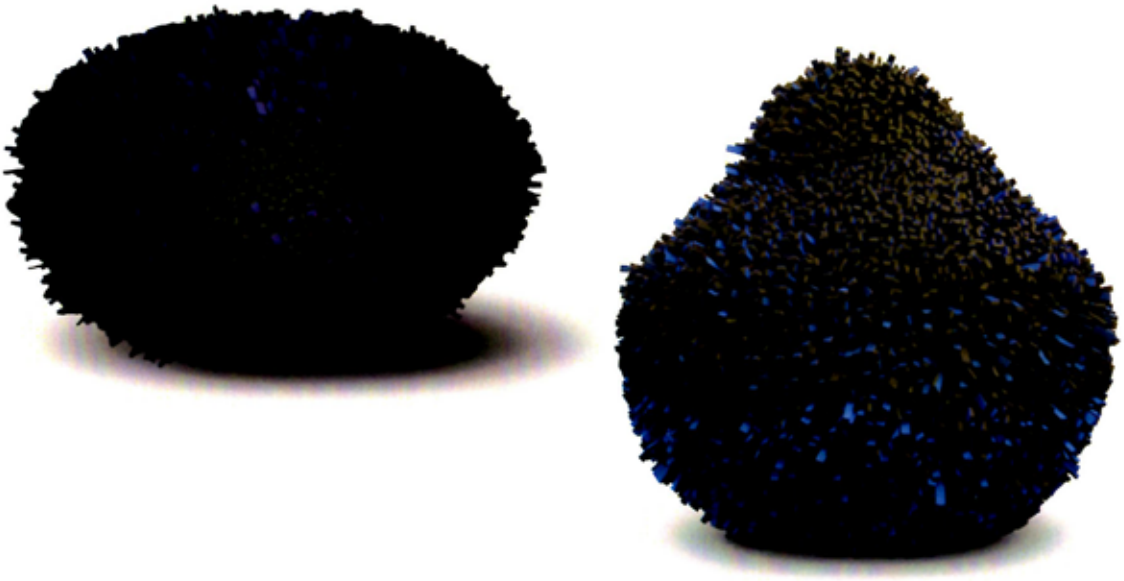
Mankind's relationship to cloth is emotionally loaded because of our innumerable encounters with cloth, ranging from the pragmatic or mundane through to the most ornamental and symbolic. This exhibition features a unique aspect of contemporary

practice in the Australian visual arts arena, a timely survey in light of recent international shows including Boys Who Sew, curated by Janis Jefferies which included a number of Brett Alexander's works. Jefferies describes the curatorial premise of that show in this way: 'the exhibition explores issues of gender and why artists engage with "handmade" techniques to develop their visual art practice. Most of the artists don't use sewing in the traditional sense – and exhibits include soft sculpture, machine-embroidered portraits on organza, collages...'. In *Y Fibre* Théau echoes Jefferies curatorial intent and re-frames this mode of practice from an Australian perspective. Many of these international exhibitions, especially in the UK, have been contextualised through the rise of both textile and craft theory. Locally, Anthony Camm, curator of Ararat Regional Art Gallery in Victoria, has recently shown a number of male visual artists predominantly using fibre and textiles. A John Corbett retrospective, followed by a joint exhibition of work by John Parkes and Paull McKee, and the recent acquisition of Lucas Grogan's work for the gallery's permanent collection have allowed Camm to highlight a discrete idiosyncratic milieu within contemporary visual art practices incorporating fibre and textiles.

This exhibition invades our imagination through its syncopated array of entropic and unravelling stories. Each artist working with fibre, textile and thread offers a poignant personal narrative. These knowing narratives question our modes of social and cultural identity construction, asking us to reconsider, re-perceive, refresh and re-align our vision.

Glow and *Rise* are from the 'Archimedes' Bath' series of blue neoprene sculptures (Sullivan + Strumpf Fine Art in 2007) which were created from a public artwork commissioned for the Brisbane Magistrates Court in 2005 titled *Blur Between*. When artists were briefed for this commission they were told that those people who were charged with a criminal offence were often in a very troubled state. They could be angry and aggressive and could take out their frustration on the public artworks sited throughout the building. I took this into account when conceptualizing this artwork, envisaging the creation of a stress ball – something that may smooth and calm these troubled individuals.

Materiality is significant in the conceptual underpinnings of this artwork. Neoprene provided the perfect solution. It is soft to touch but also has direct links to the sea. It is used to fabricate wet suits, which are often worn by people when encountering the ocean. The ocean horizon line provided the focus for this work as a place where the two essential elements of water and air meet. I have often ventured to the sea's edge to contemplate. Endlessness, eternity, calmness and tranquillity are concepts imbued in this work.



Rise from 'Archimedes Bath' series 2006, 48 x 90 x 52 cm Woven neoprene, fibre glass, plastic mesh, glue
Glow from 'Archimedes Bath' series, 2007, 67 x 102 x 77cm, woven neoprene, fibre glass, plastic mesh, glue
Courtesy of the artist and CREATIVEMOVE

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