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GREENBACK

Sebastian Di Mauro

3 - 27 April 2019

There are two resources that are especially important to any migrant: money and comfort. Sebastian Di Mauro draws on both in his new series *GREENBACK*, a group of five tactile, embroidered and appliqued blankets redolent with the musty aroma of woven wool – and home. Di Mauro's experience of moving from his long-term Brisbane residence to join his life partner in America's Delaware is intrinsic to both the conception and construction of this series. His experience of emigration echoes that of previous generations of his family; not only is he now an immigrant, but he is of a second-generation Italian-Australian family. Perhaps this mobility is imprinted in his genes? Scientific research into genetic patterns first flagged a phenomenon called epigenetic inheritance in the nineteenth century. Recent research has confirmed that the patterns of our ancestors' lives may be visible in the repeated patterns of our own life habits, choices and traits, even in cases (such as adoption) where environmental factors may not be present.

GREENBACK embraces the foreignness of his new culture with potentially genetic alacrity and, in the construction of this series, extends Di Mauro's characteristic and innovative materiality. While exploring the dislocation found in his move to a place as seemingly familiar as America, Di Mauro's understanding of the intensity of the migration of his four grandparents to Australia from Italy in the early twentieth century has become even stronger. He recalls, "My upbringing was a rich experience living between two very different cultures. It must have been difficult for my grandparents to comprehend the political incarnations of their new land."[1] His own recent experience leads him to conclude that "nothing really prepares you for life in a different country and culture. Subtleties become exaggerated; loss of self is exacerbated when you have no immediate family or lifelong friends for support and nurture."

In these works, Di Mauro takes on the unfamiliarity of his adopted home and culture with the fresh eyes of an arriviste. In order to make them, he learnt new techniques, embroidery and appliqué, which he applied to blankets (part of his earlier artistic lexicon). They refer to the American quilting tradition, which grew out of the country's European colonisation and remains strongly expressive of a culture of adaptability. With scarce resources, colonists could not afford to throw even scraps of fabric away; quilting remains a popular community ritual.

He sought out a quilting tutor, and the works were made with rapidly developed sewing skills. Given the difficulty of working with needles in thick fabrics and Di Mauro's detailed vision of these ornate buildings, they have been a test of perseverance and caused more than a few flesh wounds. Beautifully rendered, they encompass the holistic nature of this journey and its learnings. The use of blankets and their association with nurture is also wrapped within the *GREENBACK* series.

Made from military blankets, the series evokes the force of the current infusion of US financial resources into the military. They physically and symbolically mix these fresh influences of place. Di Mauro tells me, "I thought about this work for two years. It had to be something small as I was working in the dining room of my new home, and I knew it had to be something soft, that I could put in my bag and carry back to Australia with me."

"Greenbacks" – American paper currency – portray the country's history with significant buildings on the reverse side of the notes. These are painstakingly recreated with intriguing sculptural qualities on Di Mauro's blankets. For this exhibition, Di Mauro takes the Lincoln Memorial seen on the $5 note, the US Treasury from the $10, the White House on the $20, the Capitol building rendered on the $50 bill, and the Independence Hall on the $100 (this is the only building of the series not in Washington DC).

The five works hang on the wall with soft undulations, moving gently with the passage of air, evoking transience and the powerful ephemerality of experience. Vegetation is created with organically folded blanket material stitched down, and the straight lines of the familiar façade of the White House, its iconic columns, windows and balustrades, are rendered in embroidered and appliquéd shapes. The scent of the wool and the gently protruding rounded shapes of columns, the wavy fenced border and the American flag that flies at half-mast above the building offers a wry commentary on the political crises that Di Mauro sees currently unfolding in his adopted country. Above the building the words "In God We Trust" echo those etched on the notes themselves. Di Mauro identifies this attitudinal difference to religion between America and Australia. He said, "This text was added to the currency in the 1950s and defies the separation between church and state that is central to democratic principles."[2]

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1 All Sebastian Di Mauro quotes from conversations with the author, February 2019.

2 A letter by Thomas Jefferson from 1802 uses the phrase "separation of church and state", and refers to the First Amendment of the United States Constitution: "I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should 'make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,' thus building a wall of separation between Church & State." https://blogs.voanews.com/all-about-america/2014/12/23/separation-of-church-and-state/. In 1956 President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed "In God We Trust" into law as the official US motto.

Light and shadow are defined most sharply in *GREENBACK* series *$5*, which depicts the Lincoln Memorial. A sense of unknowing pervades the dark areas inside the portico. As a new resident, Di Mauro is exploring what lies behind America and its history. Most ornate is the Capitol Building with its dome and neoclassical façade, which interact with Di Mauro's own Italian heritage. The building was given its name after the Latin "Capitol" by Pierre Charles L'Enfant, a French-American military engineer who designed the city plan for Washington.

Di Mauro sees the greenback as the monetary agent that binds his American experience. It is also powerfully illustrative of the "historical elements that have helped solidify this globally influential nation"; he notes that it is the world's primary reserve currency.

These works are evocative in their sewn imagery, innovative construction, conceptual richness and personal associations. Perhaps there is also a connection, through the generations, in Di Mauro's response to a new place that echo the experiences of his grandparents. Ken Scarlett noted (in 2009) that Di Mauro's aesthetic singularity emerged from links between materials, his life and environment. The *GREENBACK* series is amongst Di Mauro's most tantalising, subtle and perceptive work, with a palpable sense of life and art connecting, using materials that in their tactility and aromas take us home, wherever that may be.

Louise Martin-Chew

Image (above): Sebastian Di Mauro, *$50 (from 'GREENBACK' series)*, 2018-19, US military blankets, cotton thread, 163 x 210cm. Photo: Carl Warner. Courtesy of the artist.

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Sebastian Di Mauro was born in Innisfail, Australia, in 1955 and he currently lives and works in Wilmington, Delaware, USA. He has a PhD from the Queensland College of Art (QCA), Griffith University, where he retired as Associate Professor in 2016. At QCA, he taught sculpture in the Fine Art Program. Over a career spanning four decades he has held over 45 solo exhibitions and his work has been included in excess of 100 group exhibitions in Australia and overseas. His paintings, sculptures, artist books and installations are collected by many of Australia's key art institutions, including the Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, the Art Gallery of Western Australia, McClelland Gallery and Sculpture Park, Bendigo Art Gallery, Besen Collection, Artbank, University of Queensland Art Museum, and Deakin University.

Recognised in 2004 as one of Australia's sculptors to watch in terms of investment, DI Mauro has had his work celebrated in two monographs, *Between Material* (1998) and *Footnotes of a Verdurous Tale* (2009). Di Mauro's work has risen to national prominence through a number of achievements; namely, an Australia Council 'New Work' grant in 1999; the Inaugural Woollahra Sculpture Prize; inclusion in the National Sculpture Prize and Exhibition at the National Gallery of Australia in 2001; residencies with Parks Victoria, Melbourne and later the British School, Rome in 2002; finalist in The McClelland Survey and Award in 2003; the Montalto Sculpture Prize (Mornington Peninsular, Victoria); selection for the Helen Lempriere National Sculpture Award and Exhibition in 2003, 2005 and 2008; the Australia Council's Barcelona Studio in 2009; and a survey exhibition of his work mounted at Queensland University of Technology Art Museum in 2009.

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We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands, winds and waters on which this gallery stands.
We pay our respects to Elders, past, present and future.

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Image (cover): Sebastian Di Mauro, *$5* (from the *GREENBACK* series), 2018–19, US military blankets, cotton thread, 197 x 160cm. Photo: Louis Lim. Courtesy of the artist and Onespace Gallery.

Image (above): Sebastian Di Mauro, 2019. Photo: Carl Warner.

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