

In the fibre of her being

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Atong Atem / Crossing Threads® / Monika Cvitanovic Zaper
Paula do Prado / Julia Gutman / Nadia Hernández
Kate Just / Linda Sok / Tjanpi Desert Weavers

Curated by Sarah Rose

Becoming her

***I wrap your story around my shoulders
let it tangle and knit with mine
as defiant gestures of skin
a complex network of roots.¹***

Cotton, linen, wool, polyester, silk – fibre is felt in nearly every aspect of our lives, and for some, is an intrinsic part of their *being*, attributing to cerebral and divine consciousness, and an awareness of self. French philosopher René Descartes' two-fold definition of substance situates *being* at the threshold of both tangible and intangible conditions, where the *being* of 'human being' can be initially described in terms of a physical presence as a body, parallel to the principle of disembodiment or the notion of being as spiritual.² Echoing this notion, textiles are also culturally situated on the threshold between the functional and the symbolic.³ The common phrase 'with every fibre of my being' nuances this dualism, referring to the very core of our existence, ascribing to the smallest thing that we are made of.

But what is it that we are made of?

I think of skin; a porous network and cellular structure made up of many parts, mediating tissue which enables flow. Fabric has a similar quality - many fibres interlaced, mimicking a membrane, often becoming a second skin we put on over our own. Material, like skin, is pigmented in various shades, patterns and textures. Some have marks, wrinkles and cuts in their surfaces, some possess features that are inherited and some accumulated; swatches of experiences. I think of sinuous, fibrous connective tissues; existing beneath our skin, linking reservoirs of muscles and memories, ligaments and movements. I think of lungs; the movement of breathing, inwards and outwards, reminds us of our existence. Each breath, as vital as the one past, resembles the making process: the puncture of fabric with a needle as the breath in, the pull of thread through the material as the breath out. I think of internal systems; the numerous cycles that operate in the body to maintain equilibrium, the circulatory, menstrual, digestive, nervous systems as examples, and the consequences that prevail in any system when a variable is disrupted or absent. I think of the heart;

circulating blood by way of vascular threads and how this dye connects and tangles us with others. I think of the womb and umbilical cord; a conduit of connective fibres, providing sustenance and growth through an exchange of matter between mother and child. I think of the tongue; the 'mother tongue'- the primary language in which we communicate. For some women, fibre and textiles are the tongue that feels the most natural.

From birth to death, fibre operates as a silent witness to the rhythms and routines of our everyday lives. Revealing and concealing our identities, it performs a vital role in mediating the constantly shifting relationships between the self, others, and the world we inhabit. The values and practices of society are enacted through fibre,⁴ with it being written into the structure of humanity like a language, yet it is a language that is essentially non-discursive.⁵ Language not only expresses our identities, but constructs them. As a mode of transmission or expression which conveys our innermost self, often moving from generation to generation, it can be thought that *being* and language are inextricably intertwined. This is furthered by the imbued linguistic relationship between language and textiles. Think of the familiar expressions: 'spinning a yarn', 'fabricate stories', or 'plot threads', or even perhaps that the English words 'text' and 'textile' have a shared origin with the Latin word 'texere', which means 'to weave'. Academic and artist Sonya Clark equates cloth as a form of DNA, a part of genetic code, which in itself is a language written across the span of a life. Cloth absorbs us, knows something of our humanity, and structures who we are, by providing a unique dialogue.⁶ Textile historian, Elizabeth Wayland Barber has similarly argued that cloth is akin to a coded language, a dialect that has been used for the last twenty thousand years by women to convey social messages - visually, silently, continuously.⁷ In the present, it can be understood that there is a prolonged connection between storytelling and textiles as a forebearer of linguistic traditions, where fibre-based forms can be 'read' like a narrative that chronicles and translates personal experiences, cultural identification,

and socio-cultural life. Cross-culturally, women are often the producers of textile arts, many of whom have inscribed in textiles the text of their lives.⁸ Janis Jefferies refers to this critical use of self, of the feminine and of textile materials and processes as metaphoric signs of new autobiographical patterns within cultural practice. Combined, they operate as a lived tension between the 'I' and the other – the life of the text, the textile and the terrain of the lived.⁹

In the fibre of her being contemplates the role of women as anonymous carriers and preservers of heritage, intersecting diverse cultures, geographies, temporalities and languages. Within many cultures, intergenerational continuity through the transference of knowledge and sharing of narratives – fabrics, recipes, songs – between women is acutely linked to the preservation of customary practices, connectivity and belonging. With fibre as their dialect, these artists speak to their personal and collective histories, exploring legacies of womanhood, female subjectivity, diaspora, resilience, healing and community. The position of textiles as a language is enmeshed as the artists use fibre to navigate their cognatic and gendered lineages, their cultural and hybridised identities, and by extension their sense of self and being.

Historically, there has been a prevalent ideological barrier that saw fibre-based practices relegated as 'women's work'¹⁰ or a form of domesticated craft bound to the household economy. **Nadia Hernández's** multi-layered installation *De lo que somos... (Of what we are...)* (2021) subversively celebrates the domestic space, not as an oppressive force, but one of warming comfort and nostalgic familiarity through cooking and food. Through language, both text and textiles, the artist poetically ponders 'of what we are' a thought provoked when examining her mother's recipes, suggesting that perhaps our identities are shaped by external forces. By incorporating eco-dyed fabrics made in collaboration with her mother and iconography paying homage to her great-Grandmother, Hernandez perhaps offers us her maternal lineage as an answer to her inquisition.

Similarly, it is in this domestic 'domain of women' where **Monika Cvitanovic Zaper's** large-scale work *Lineage* (2020) gives form to a complex and layered engagement with her own matrilineal histories. Positioning memories of her mother's and grandmother's window curtains at the foundation of her work forges a sense of intimacy and vulnerability, which sees the artist place her female ancestors at the core of her practice. The artist carries her ancestors into the context of contemporary art as she seeks her own creative voice, distanced from tradition, yet connected through the transmission of personal, intergenerational memory embedded in the material's fibres.

Memory and knowledge are often embodied in the fibres of living material that is found, shared or inherited. Repurposing material that has been in the hands of another has a somatic quality; it operates as substitutes for people and bodies, it has traces, an absorbed identity; it has been folded and unfolded, it's been worn and used. Maxine Bristow argues that these materials are able to bear witness to our lives through their proximity to our bodies, and provide us with 'convincing testimony, not because they are evident and physically constrain or enable, but often precisely because we do not see them'.¹¹ These traces in material hold and communicate the stories already embedded within their fibres, which are drawn forth and transformed by the hands of the artist. Ancestral memory embodied in fibre can be passed along willingly, handed down indiscernibly, buried beneath subdued layers, or can evoke inherited trauma. Fibre can also offer nurturance, bondage and repair in these occurrences.

In her new installation *Mending fragments of a memory* (2021), Cambodian-Australian artist **Linda Sok** invites the viewer to navigate her cultural inheritance and the complexities of her familial trauma stemming from the Khmer Rouge Regime. Connecting to these past narratives through fabrics inherited from her grandmother and aunt, Sok attempts to soften the trauma and shift the legacy to one of healing by creating a comforting space of contemplation, ritual and memorialisation. Intentional gaps – in knowledge, memory, and fabric – infiltrate the work, exemplifying the artist's disconnection with her grandmother's generation, something often felt by forthcoming generations as a result of diaspora and the barrier this poses for knowledge to be transmitted. Golden

trinkets attempt to mend these gaps – or wounds – by imbuing a sense of value, reconnection and spiritual healing.

Atong Atem's photographs, *Adut* (2015), *Paanda* (2015) and *Morayo* (2015) draw upon her South Sudanese heritage to explore postcolonial traditions, and the personal and cultural identities lived by first and second-generation Africans living in the wake of diaspora. Her hyper-patterned textile environments are layered and hybridised through Western influences interwoven with traditional African fabrics and headdresses, reminding us that Atem's subjects, like herself, are living in a liminal space where their identities are suspended in an 'in-between' state between one nationality and another. Taking ownership of her own narrative, Atem uses fibre as a prop within her photography as a means of communicating a sense of self and identity, actively interrogating the ways in which we construct images and stories to understand ourselves and our surroundings.

Artist **Julia Gutman** turned to embroidery as a process of physical and spiritual repair after tragically losing her close friend. In her new work *The Black Jeans* (2021) the artist responds in protest to the erotically-charged 1937 painting 'The White Skirt' by late Polish-French artist Balthus. Gutman reweaves female subjectivity and brings attention to the abhorrent representation of women throughout art history. Reclaiming authority, Gutman has placed herself into Balthus' signature chair, wearing a modest outfit made out of and imitating the clothes she wore while composing her work. The artist has constructed an image of herself on her own terms, one that captures who she is, not what she is. Made from clothing worn and forgotten by Gutman and her friends, the work is a collection of embodied memories that ignite in solidarity together, provoking a sense of intimacy and reminding us of the power of coming together in moments of despair and protest.

Kate Just also turned to knitting as a healing tool when her mother taught her, as a method of dealing with the grief of tragically losing her brother. The *Feminist Fan* series (2015-17) forms an intimate family portrait revealing a non-biological, yet personal genealogy of Just's artistic influences and those who have informed her. Part retrospection on the past and part speculation for the future, Just fangirls over those who bravely risked it all to pave the path of feminism and challenge art

history discourse. By softening the often 'confronting' subject matter through yarn, Just invites viewers to engage with feminist works they may have formerly felt divided from, providing agency for feminist dialogues to perpetuate, and be shared between generations.

For many non-Western cultures, time and history does not move in a linear manner, but rather in a spiral or circular trajectory from an epicentre.¹² These cyclic movements are inherent in the traditions held by fibre-based practices; from the loops, chains and links of thread, to the passing of knowledge across generations, to female-led gatherings in spherical formations where women knit, sew, and weave together. Collaboration and collectivity in this context are often imperative to incite social connection between community members, and to facilitate spaces for discussion and education.¹³

South-American born, Sydney-based artist **Paula do Prado's** new work *Habla con la luna (Talks with the moon)* (2021) sings a woven song of gratitude to her ancestral 'motherlines' and the women who came before her through abundant cyclic references and nuances to the female body, both spiritually and physically. Made up of many fibres knotted together, netting and lace are symbolic of interwoven networks, paying homage to her intersecting lineages and her custodians who are connected across many geographical waterways, but come together as healers and educators of the interconnectedness of all things.

Circular and bodily formations are similarly embodied in *The Passage* (2021), a new work by **Crossing Threads®** - the collaborative initiative of sisters Lauren and Kass Hernandez. Breaking away from their conceptual inclinations, this work instead reflects on their relationship as collaborative partners, and how fibre has helped them grow spiritually as sisters. Representative of both sisterhood and motherhood - with Kass expecting a Baby Girl in August - the dual weavings are symbolic of the morphing sister/sister and mother/child dynamic, and the interconnectedness between them. The corporal resonance of flesh, veins, placenta and vulvic formations, and the overall resemblance of a womb or ovum, reveals the reverence of their expanding matrilineality and their shifting sense of self and purpose subsequently.

Artists **Ngilan (Margaret) Dodd, Puna Yanima, and Mrs M. Bennett** are just three of over four-hundred Aboriginal women that make up the Tjanpi Desert Weavers, an enterprise of 26 remote communities located on Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (NPY) lands in the Northern Territory, Western Australia and South Australia.¹⁴ Weaving native grass (Tjanpi) into fibre sculptures, baskets and vessels provides agency for these artists to engage with personal narratives and memories, reviving the techniques of ancestors to develop works from then and now which are unique to their cultural identities. This wide-reaching network of mothers, daughters, aunties, sisters, and grandmothers forms the bloodline of desert weaving and reflects Tjanpi's rich history of collaborative practice; a jointly female-specific way of being with one another, and of being in Country.

The artists in the exhibition, intentionally or unintentionally, activate feminism as a praxis, with some considering feminism as a way of being in relation to the world. Through alliances with other women, women can reclaim their right and ability to produce a language that reflects rather than suppresses their desires.¹⁵ *In the fibre of her being* provides an open dialogue for autobiography, connectivity, exchange, and the passing of knowledge between women as an active social document of the female experience. The use of fibre as an authentic language, offers a tactile catalyst in accruing a sense of who we are - something which is interwoven with all other elements that sustain us. Generations overlap and coexist, traversing different voices, times, and guises. The exhibition incites reverence to the legacies felt by and between *all* women; the women who came before and during, those who are being and becoming – those of which we are made of.

Sarah Rose,
Curator

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- 2 Howard Robinson, "Substance", in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Stanford University, 2020. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/substance/>
- 3 Claire Pajackowska, "On Stuff and Nonsense: the Complexity of Cloth," *Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture*, vol. 3, no. 3 (2005), p.223
- 4 David Howes, *Sensual Relations, Engaging the Senses in Culture and Social Theory*, ed. Ann Arbor, (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2003), p.xi
- 5 Christopher Tilley, "Part I, Theoretical Perspectives" in *Handbook of Material Culture*, ed. Christopher Tilley, Webb Keane, Susanne Kuechler, Mike Rowlands, and Patricia Spyer (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006), p.7
- 6 Sonya Clark, "A Legacy: Hair, Language, and Textiles," *American Craft Inquiry*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2017). <https://www.craftcouncil.org/post/legacy-hair-language-and-textiles>
- 7 Elizabeth Wayland Barber, *Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years: Women, Cloth and Society in Early Times*, (New York: Norton & Company, 1994), p.148
- 8 Dorothy Jones, "The floating web," *Artlink*, vol. 12, no. 2 (1992), p.11-12
- 9 Janis Jefferies, "Autobiographical patterns," *n.paradoxa: international feminist art journal*, no. 4 (1997), p. 17. <https://www.ktpress.co.uk/pdf/nparadoxaissue4.pdf>
- 10 Janis Jefferies describes Women's Work as follows: "Textile work is perceived as labour-intensive, slow and painstaking and yet, in a double twist, rendered and devalued as invisible women's work, non-work, or non-productive labour." Janis Jefferies, "Text and textiles: weaving across the borderlines," in *New Feminist Art Criticism*, ed. Katy Deepwell (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), p.164
- 11 Maxine Bristow, "Continuity of Touch: Textile as Silent Witness" in *The Textile Reader*, ed. Jessica Hemmings (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012), p.45
- 12 Julian Baggini, "About time: why western philosophy can only teach us so much," *The Guardian*, 25 September, 2018, 15.00 AEST <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/sep/25/about-time-why-western-philosophy-can-only-teach-us-so-much>
- 13 Sigourney Jacks, "The power of 'women's work': craftivism," 24 April, 2020. <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/essay/the-power-of-womens-work-craftivism/>
- 14 This Indigenous governed and directed social enterprise of the NPY Women's Council provides a platform for women to earn an income through contemporary fibre art in their communities.
- 15 Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993)