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**VISUAL ART**

A poignant Western Sydney exhibition demands we pay attention to visions that women have long made material. By *Neha Kale*.

# In the fibre of her being

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Julia Gutman's *The Black Jeans* (2021) is made of her friends' donated clothes.

CREDIT: SIMON HEWSON

A swath of fabric hangs from the ceiling. It falls in a way that recalls the mundane, the homely: a makeshift hammock strung up on a balcony or a bedsheet airing in the sun. The patchworked surface reveals a field of tiny metal flowers hiding between blue love-hearts and sections of plaid adorned with filigree charms.

There are glimmers of gold everywhere – the broken strands of a necklace, an intricate brooch. The swath becomes an object that wears its secrets, shrunk to the contents of a jewellery box; something mysterious that eludes the viewer's grasp.

*Mending fragments of a memory* (2021) by Australian–Cambodian artist Linda Sok is one of five new works commissioned for *In the fibre of her being*, an exhibition curated by Sarah Rose now showing at Fairfield City Museum & Gallery. The work, which unfolds at the centre of a far wall, riffs on the life of the artist's grandmother, who stitched her jewellery to the inside of her clothing while fleeing the Khmer Rouge.

Textile and text share a Latin root, *texere* or “to weave”. From mediaeval tapestries to Afghan war rugs, women have long spun fibre into cultural documents, using thread to invent a language for their experience. Sok's grandmother sold her jewellery to fund her children's safety. In the work, holes and tears speak to the untranslatable parts of matrilineal inheritance, the silent sacrifices made by one generation of women so the generations that follow can sustain another kind of life.

## *Fibre is tactile and intimate, linked to our first and most formative impressions.*

Current conversations about gender and power have renewed the cultural interest in textiles. It's a form – as the critic Lucy Lippard argued in her 1978 essay “Making Something Out of Nothing” – that has always been associated with craft and “women's work”, the kinds of making that take place not in studios and galleries but bedrooms and lounges. These domestic spaces are understood as private and feminine rather than public and masculine and, as a consequence, we devalue them. This old idea, after Me Too, feels strangely new again.

This notion, however important, too often casts the middle-class white woman as its subject, overlooking how the division between art and craft, artist and artisan, plays out differently beyond the West. Although *In the fibre of her being*, which features nine artists, is a compact show, it makes space for all kinds of visual traditions. It focuses on the specific ways women's bodies encounter the world and finds common threads in the process.

The language of fibre, as Rose points out in the catalogue essay, echoes the language of the body. When we're hurt, we get stitches. Our muscles are made of tissue. There are parallels too between our physical and social bodies.

Across from *Mending fragments of a memory* hangs *De lo que somos ...* (Of what we are ...), a 2021 installation by Nadia Hernández. Hernández, who was born in Venezuela, grapples with the political crises that wrack her country under president Nicolás Maduro. But she renders her textiles, collage and paintings in a jaunty palette that defies violent history with freewheeling expression and joy. The phrase “of what we are” – painted across a wall in red, block letters – is inspired by lists of ingredients from her mother's recipes.

Hernández pays homage to her great-grandmother via a paper mobile adorned with ribbons, a symbol of activism that also evokes the streamers from a child's party. For Hernández, the women in her family offer a source of nourishment: her mother's kitchen is a space of resistance.

Fibre is tactile and intimate, linked to our first and most formative impressions. There are no wall texts in the exhibition. While there's a feminist logic in stamping textiles made by women with the imprimatur of the art world, this show is led by another impulse. It invites the viewer to see the works as gifts or offerings, acts of creation that are less interested in masculine hierarchies and more in the fabric of the everyday.

Towards the far end of the room, *Lineage*, a 2021 work by Croatian–Australian artist Monika Cvitanovic Zaper, nods to her mother's job as a seamstress. Smudges and blots recall the imprints of domesticity: a mark on a wall, the trace of a coffee cup. They play out on a polyester backdrop, like the hand-sewn curtains with which the artist grew up.

When Kate Just lost her brother, her mother taught her how to knit. The artist's *Feminist Fan* series (2015-17) features yarn portraits of feminist heroes that have shaped her trajectory. Here, odes to Russia's Pussy Riot and China's Feminist Five reclaim the figure of the fangirl, so often ridiculed in the culture. It also rethinks what kinship can be.

A stitch can join, but it can also tether. Sometimes, matrilineal ties can feel like a kind of bondage. *The Passage* – a pair of soft sculptures by Crossing Threads®, a collaborative project by Lauren and Kass Hernandez, Australian-born sisters from a Filipino background – imagines pregnancy as a site of physical transformation and psychic rupture. Strips of hemp, leather and tussah silk – made from wild silkworms – wind tighter and tighter, pulled by an unseen tension. The forms, attached by coiled ropes that resemble umbilical cords, mimic the puckered insides of a womb.

For Paula do Prado, who was born on Charrúa land in Uruguay, cycles of life mirror the cycles of the Earth. Her technicolour 2021 weaving *Habla con la luna / Talks with the moon* evokes a fishing net, while the presence of the women that protect her ancestral waterways recur as eyes and breasts.

Across the room is a basket festooned with emu feathers by artist Puna Yanima of the Yankunyjatjara language group. She's part of the Tjanpi Desert Weavers, a collective of 400 Anangu and Yarnangu women artists from the Central and Western Desert who harvest Tjanpi or native grass before spinning it into artworks. Here female artistry isn't a solo endeavour but an act of collaboration, carried out with Country itself.

Womanhood, however we define it, is a lesson in metamorphosis. For too long these phases of becoming have been exploited by the so-called great men of art history, such as Balthus, the Polish-French artist who famously eroticised prepubescent girls. Commanding one corner of the show, Julia Gutman's powerful *The Black Jeans* is a riposte to Balthus's 1937 painting *The white skirt*, in which his wife, Antoinette, appears in a bralette and unbuttoned shirt.

In *The Black Jeans*, patched out of clothes donated by friends, Gutman represents herself as an artist dressed to work, the author of her own image. The work chimes with Atong Atem's electric 2015 *Studio Series* in which Black women, resplendent in African wax prints, gaze at the camera, refusing the dehumanising instincts of colonial photography. These works don't just subvert. They ask us to pay attention to visions that women have long made material. To look more closely at the legacies that are already here.

In the fibre of her being *shows at Fairfield City Museum & Gallery, Sydney, until February 12, 2022.*

*This article was first published in the print edition of The Saturday Paper on Nov 13, 2021 as "Weaving resistance".*

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