

Expanded Textiles

Textiles have always been more than just cloth. For millennia they have carried stories, knowledge, labour and cultural memory through the simple acts of spinning, knotting, weaving and stitching. Threads were among our earliest transmitters of meaning,¹ and in the Middle Ages women exchanged stories through weaving or embroidering cloth, where such work was used “to express themselves and in turn redefine the feminine”.² In the twentieth century, the suspended woven sculptural works of artists such as Magdalena Abakanowicz further liberated textiles from the wall, transforming woven forms into immersive environments. More recently, artists such as Berlinde De Bruyckere continue to challenge material boundaries by employing animal skins, wax, hair, blankets and other textiles to create visceral, often monumental works. Today, artists continue to expand this legacy, challenging gendered stereotypes and distinctions between art and craft, to produce work expressing ecological thinking, embodied knowledge, and material experimentation.

The exhibition *Expanded Textiles* brings together artists who use textiles as a way of thinking, employing textile processes as conceptual frameworks rather than conventional disciplines. These artists work across sculpture, installation, sound, video and photography. Fibre is no longer simply woven or stitched; it is gathered, grown, salvaged, calcified, composted, digitally translated, sung and transformed.

Several artists work directly with locally gathered, discarded, or regenerative matter, embedding place itself into the work. **Jane Richens** painstakingly hand-processes the bark of local *Hibiscus heterophyllus*, transforming its fibres into garments resembling portraits of absent female bodies, reflecting on the intimate relationship between making, place and ecology. In *Plant Portals*, **Joanna Fowles** similarly pays close attention to her local Illawarra ecology, allowing place to determine colour through ongoing experiments with foraged plants, food waste, natural dyeing and mordant painting. The resulting works become ever-evolving chromatic records of place.

For *Held in folds of eiderdown* **Sadhbha Cockburn** hand-harvests Moth Seed Vine seeds, felting and stitching them with hand-spun thread onto industrially fabricated silk. Juxtaposed with found, rusted objects sourced from their rural site, the work suggests an uncanny relationship between nature and man-made. **Sylvia Griffin's** *Stained* likewise embeds place while signalling cycles of ecological damage. Cotton is dyed with the blood-like resin of Angophora trees, before being marked with charcoal from burnt bushland, bringing together living and damaged landscapes through material process.

¹ Anni Albers, *On Weaving* (Wesleyan University Press, 1965).

² Susan Frye, *Pens and Needles: Women's Textualities in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

In *Whispers of the River*, **Catriona Pollard** champions the importance of river ecosystems. Foraged vines and salvaged copper are painstakingly handwoven into sculptural forms, their interconnecting strands echoing tributaries, suggesting the interdependence of river systems. Other artists embed their work in place while simultaneously connecting to family and cultural history. **Rhonda Pryor** responded to the broken and repaired steles she encountered in Greece, translating ideas of care and mending into her works *Plaka* and *Fatih*. Shattered surfaces photographed and printed onto silk are oversewn with thread in a gesture of repair. **Agnieszka Golda's** *Before the Sun* similarly responds to embodied encounters with place. Layers of plant-dyed silk respond to deep time, connecting bushfire-scarred Dharug and Wiradjuri country to archaeological sites in Cyprus.

The importance of inherited knowledge, familial relationships, and ritualistic processes also unites several of the works in the exhibition. For **Sue Pedley**, the Tasmanian woollen blankets dyed in *Gentle Art*, created with her mother Peggy, evoke childhood memories while engaging with histories of family, industry and colonial inheritance. Dyed with native shoreline plants, the blankets become repositories of personal and cultural memory. Originating from a series of short stories, **Elizabeth Day's** two grass root 'casts', *Liverpool/Liverpool* and *Cessnock*, reference migration, colonisation, incarceration and her historic familial links between England and Australia. The text, cast from invasive grass roots, registers Day's sense of injustice through creative opposition.

Intergenerational knowledge also informs Dharug-Dharawal custodian **Venessa Possum's** *Ngurra bayali manga ngaliya (Country speaking lightning relationality)*. Grounded by a legacy of intercultural, environmental material knowledges, Possum's use of resin ink, ochre, binder and sinew on Irish linen is an acknowledgement of her shared ancestry. In **Madeline McGregor's** *Strange Lands* suspended sculptures, the threading and knotting of native rush and twine reference Polish *pajaki* – ritual objects connected to her maternal heritage. The association of *pajaki* with transition strongly resonated with McGregor's experience of becoming a mother.

The connection between physical making and embodied memory recalls the influential American artist Ann Hamilton's references to this labour-as a form of "knowing", through which the body leaves a transparent presence within material. Hamilton has also reflected on how the rhythm of her hands in making, particularly in sewing, recalls and reinforces distinct bodily memories reconnecting her to her grandmother.³ This understanding of making as a form of embodied knowledge resonates throughout *Expanded Textiles*. For each exhibiting artist, physical process and material experimentation are paramount. Traditional

³ Wallach, Amei. "A Conversation with Ann Hamilton in Ohio." American Art, Smithsonian American Art Museum. (Spring 2008, Volume 22, Number 1)

techniques frequently sit alongside experimental processes, emerging technologies and ideas associated with new materialism.⁴

Cecilia Heffer integrates digital and craft technologies to transform the structural properties of traditional lace. In *Data Lace*, recycled and shredded documents become paper lace, while *Lace as Sound* translates lace into a graphic score developed collaboratively with composer Mara Schwerdtfeger. The score was sung communally in a manner recalling the collective rhythms of lace making, before being digitised and knitted using a computerised Shima Seiki machine. Here, a traditionally domestic and embodied process becomes a pathway between craft, sound and digital technology.

Other artists similarly transform familiar textile processes in response to contemporary material and environmental concerns. Responding to the scourge of landfill, **Jane Bodnaruk** weaves strips of discarded natural and synthetic clothing before composting the resulting cloth and collaging into her medallion-like *Conversations 'round Circularity*. **Ellen Ferrier** combines locally sourced handspun wool, foraged tree resin, gelatine and glycerine in *Touching the World Otherwise (kith and kin)*. These materials are transformed into speculative biotextiles that blur the boundaries between textile, organic matter and material experimentation. **Julia Boros** employs loom weaving in repurposing second-hand materials for her *Untitled Vessels*, championing the process while refiguring the results into sculptural forms using modelling paste.

The relationship between material, process and agency becomes particularly evident in the work of **Sylvia Griffin** and **Kath Fries**. Their collaborative work *Soft Metal* comprises naturally dyed fabric, living mycelium and found metal, with the mycelium and fabric substrate carefully stitched onto the corroded metal through tiny, rusted holes. The work collapses distinctions between textile, living matter and industrial residue, suggesting a material world that is active, interconnected and continually transforming. **Kath Fries** extends this investigation into fungi and expanded ecologies in *Matrix I*, combining an inert, found wooden frame with actively decomposing Reishi fungi on sisal. The work invites reflection on our relationships with other-than-human relationships and the unstable boundary between structure, growth and decay.

With *Frigid*, **Nqa Blayed** similarly explores material transformation. Arrowroot and hand-extracted burnt oyster lime are applied to a fibre substructure that slowly calcifies, balancing tensions between hard and soft, restrained and impulsive. Combining traditional

⁴ New Materialism is a theory that rejects the notion that matter is inert or passive, with its own agency and importance, effectively exceeding a human-centric position. Mads Ejning, *New Materialism*, <https://artsandculturalstudies.ku.dk/research/art-and-earth/environmental-humanities-glossary/new-materialism/>

textile techniques with embodied materiality, **Waihan Lee's** *The Endurance of Making*, involves spinning a quantity of fleece equivalent to her own body weight before suspending it in an umbilical-like form. The work foregrounds the value of women's labour, materiality and time, making the physical effort of production inseparable from the finished object.

For **Julie Paterson**, textile making becomes a means of sustained environmental and community engagement. Her ongoing collaborative *Loop Project* responds to multiple mass fish kills along the Baaka (Murray–Darling River) in south-eastern Australia. Slow-stitched fabric scraps are sewn onto 14-metre lengths of backing fabric, each small cross-stitch representing a killed fish. The accumulation of individual gestures transforms grief into a collective act of witnessing. Community participation also extends the practices of Paterson and **Joanna Fowles** into the gallery during the exhibition, Paterson holding a 'Stitch-in' workshop, and Fowles supplying kits for visitors to participate in the *Plant Portals* project.

Across *Expanded Textiles*, fibre becomes a means of exploring relationships: between humans and landscape, labour and care, memory and material, Indigenous and inherited knowledge, waste and renewal, body and ecology. Generosity is embedded in these relationships – be it with natural processes, technologies, between artists, or between artists and audiences. Traditional techniques sit alongside experimental materials; inherited knowledge intersects with contemporary environmental concerns; and processes of making become forms of research, remembrance and connection.

Running through the exhibition is an awareness of, and appreciation for, the intelligence of materials. Rather than treating natural materials as passive resources, these artists position them as artistic collaborators. Fibre can remember, decay, transform, connect and communicate. In expanding what textiles can be, these artists also expand how we might understand our relationships with the material world and with one another.

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