

In the World: head, hand, heart

17th Tamworth Fibre Textile

Biennial Touring Exhibition

Flinders University City Gallery

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Reviewed by John Neylon

Do you have any textile art in your house? Not sure? Try the lace doily made by great grandmother. And after that? Don't fret. Textiles have gotten used to being lowly, useful souls. Unless of course it happens to be such an amazing example of hand knotted carpet that human hoofs are off limits. With textiles still sitting somewhere in the public imagination as a 'decorative art/craft' the idea that textile based art could aspire above its station might seem like it's dreaming. But the 1970s changed all that. Textiles got political and relocated into the art house. Twenty years later and 'otherness discouraging' admitted 'marginalised' traditional crafts (including such things as weaving and embroidery) at least into the art house sleep-out. We shouldn't be surprised. Exhibition curator Vivonne Thwaites comments, "Familiarity, and their long shared history with people, are what make textiles such an effective medium for artists. The fact that they are rooted in the everyday gives them a tremendous advantage."

As this exhibition, *In the World* demonstrates, textile-based art is today a very broad church. But it is very special kind of art and not one that routinely delivers the highs that have become associated with large scale installations or computer-mediated art. Many of the works in *Into the World* are intimate in scale and expression. Liz Williamson's *Domestic Damask*, palimpsested panels, for example, Michelle Nikou's Protestant-prim tissue box covers, Toby Richardson's *Unknown, Brooklyn Park* and Chris De Rosa's *Transplant* 'quilt' whisper secrets in a metaphorish kind of way. These and other works in the exhibition feed off our innate sense of connections with fibres and textiles and the whiff of remembrance that blanket stitching, embroidery, unraveled strands, rips, stains, fabric scraps and cast-off clothing can invoke. The presence in the exhibition of traditional items such as Wilma Walker's tremulous (to use an arty western art critical attribution) dilly bags, Osmond Kantilla's printed *Parndanus* designs or Malpiya Davey's *Flash beanie* enriches the context in which the viewer is invited to respond to elements in other works which often exhibit



a split personality; half art and half literature/history. With Kay Lawrence for example, it is the Mormon-chastity-belt-erotic character of sensuous pearl buttons sewn onto bulging '(down) under trousers' in her *No work for a white man* installation, the name yakking on the

hard yakka work shirts in Susanna Castleden's *Abandoned* and the spectacle of a Tasmanian Tiger trap seemingly reclaimed by nature and morphing into a tussock of grass in Beth Hatton's beautifully crafted, mournful gestures of historical vindication.