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front cover

Louise Saxton



Above: "Weep", created by Louise Saxton for the spring 2009 opening of her exhibition, "Salvage" at Elsie Gallery, Malmsbury Victoria; size 350 x 177cm. Details: Gouldian Finch (left) and Red-Tailed Black Cockatoo at right.

Covers: a detail of Louise Saxton's "Blue Wren" (2009) appears on the front cover of this issue and in full on the back cover; size is 64 x 54cm. Private collection.

Both works made from reclaimed needlework; steel embroidery pins and nylon bridal tulle. Photography by Gavin Hansford.

Inga Walton's article on Louise Saxton, ALL THAT WAS OLD IS NEW AGAIN can be found on pages 26-28 of this issue.



Louise Saxton

All that was Old is New Again

By Inga Walton



Louise Saxton's intricate and meticulously constructed assemblages have achieved considerable prominence over the past year. A suite of her "Re-collection: specimen" (2007-08) works is included in "Momentum", the 18th Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial touring exhibition. "Home Tree" (2008) was a finalist in the Inaugural Wangaratta Contemporary Textile Award, and acquired for the Exhibitions Gallery permanent collection. She participated in a further four group exhibitions, and held a solo show, "Salvage", which coincided with the Kyneton Arts Festival.¹

"Coming from a painting and printmaking background, it is inspiring to be selected for such prominent fibre and textile surveys", Saxton enthuses. "It's been a fantastic year in terms of opportunities, my practice has grown both materially and in confidence through inclusion in these exhibitions. It has been immensely rewarding to have this large body of work, most originally made for the touring exhibition "dot-net-dot-au" [with Tim Craker, 2008] in South East Asia, disseminated to an Australian audience".

Saxton is also a finalist in the prestigious international PFAFF Art Embroidery Challenge 2009, on the theme 'Landscape-Let us travel'. As it transpired, the invitation to submit a concept to PFAFF occurred via coverage in this very publication. "The French curator, Jacqueline Govin, saw my work in the review of "Momentum" *Textile Fibre Forum* ran in issue #91 and made contact through my NAVA website", Saxton relates. "So it's great to know that a local magazine is reaching an international audience to the benefit of Australian artists".

Though delighted by the acknowledgement her work has garnered, Saxton has found wrangling deadlines to be one of the most challenging aspects. "Jacqueline discovered my work and made contact quite late in the selection process, so after my proposal was accepted, I only had two months to make the work". The paired "Aviatus Hemiptera (Travel Bug)" and "Aviatus-Maladeus Hemiptera (Travel Sickness Bug)" (2009) were entirely constructed from reclaimed machine embroidery, which was stitched to silk, and installed on a swathe of bridal tulle.

"Hundreds of individual machine embroidered motifs within the insects have been stitched down using a 1950s Singer Sewing machine, which I inherited from a relative", she notes. "The vintage machine can be slowed to a stitch-by-stitch pace, allowing me the control necessary for securing so many separate pieces within one form".

Saxton's wider interest in decorative arts traditions such as embossing, furniture and wallpaper patterns, tiling, quilting, and collage inform her mosaic-like creations. She seeks to reconfigure these vintage and (primarily) hand-embroidered elements: fragments of lace, fabric and trim harvested from doilies, table linen and runners, handkerchiefs, clothing, and fabric remnants. It is as if Saxton is providing a creative reincarnation for items commonly associated with the culturally obsolete idea of the bridal 'glory box' or trousseau.

Always on the hunt for what is a dwindling supply of viable items, Saxton gratefully receives donations of items found discarded

in wardrobes, attics, linen chests and drawers. As well she scours charity shops and markets. "Over the period I've been working solely with these materials, I've come to think of this diminishing resource as my palette; collecting, extracting, and sorting them into various shades of colour to then be reconstructed and exhibited", she comments.

Louise Saxton appears above, photographed by Gavin Hansford in her studio. She is at work on HOME TREE, acquired by the Wangaratta Exhibitions Gallery for its permanent collection. Also shown, TRAVEL BUG and TRAVEL SICKNESS BUG - which appears in full (photographed by Andrew Wuttke). The complete installation measures 250 x 120cm; insects average 81 x 90cm.



After carefully removing the desired sections from their redundant original supports, she secures them in place through a painstaking process of pinning, gluing, backing, and stitching.

This oft-repeated ritual has become a form of dialogue between Saxton and the original, usually anonymous maker. "I think I also now have a 'heightened sensory awareness' of those generations of (mostly) women who made the original objects", she agrees. "Recently I was extracting a delicate floral motif appliquéd onto a vintage (probably 1940's) handkerchief of the finest, almost translucent cotton. When I hold an object like that in my hand there are very strong sensory experiences - firstly in the texture and feel of the quality linens and cottons, which in themselves are becoming more expensive to buy new, and rarer to find used; then it comes in the cotton or silks of the embroidery, crochet or lace; and then in the form of the motif itself, as well as in the complexity of the handiwork".

In "reclaiming the detritus of the home for art", as she puts it, Saxton recalls activities common in her own childhood, but which have diminished in subsequent generations. "There is the sense of memory and remembering - my mother and nanna always sewing, crocheting, knitting, embroidering. They were always making things for themselves and for others".

Many of Saxton's works were inspired by her month-long residency at the fourteen-acre garden estate of Rimbin Dahan, half an hour north of Kuala Lumpur, in 2006. The aesthetic linkage to gardens continues with her newest piece. "When [gallery owner] Janice Hunter told me in the winter that she would plant a weeping cherry tree in the exquisite garden [surrounding the gallery] for the spring opening of my "Salvage" exhibition, I wanted to weep, and so a new work entitled "Weep" (2009) was created", Saxton explains. "It is a very significant work for me, both personally and in terms of developing my practice, the largest, and in many ways the most ambitious.

The form, like many others in the collection, is inspired by Asian decorative motifs and spiritual imagery - in this case a sixteenth century Islamic window carving (*Jali*) of a tree of life. I imagined it as an inverted lung, referencing both personal encounters with lung disease (my father died of complications from lung disease in 2007), and the idea that trees are the 'lungs of the planet'".



Integral to Saxton's work is the use of 'negative' forms to 'outline' animals and objects, or to delineate the space once occupied by needlework. These void 'templates' signify the potential for vulnerability and loss across all cultures, of traditions and of species, and convey Saxton's hopes for a future of renewal. Within the sprawling canopy can be glimpsed the endangered Leadbeater's and Pygmy possums, the Koala, the Red-tailed Black Cockatoo, the Gouldian Finch, and the Helmeted Honey-eater.

Another smaller work, "Garland" (2009), was adapted by Saxton to mark a potentially sad journey, "Initially the design was empty in the centre, but when I found out that one of my dearest friends Suzana was leaving Australia to return to Croatia after seventeen years, and knowing how heart-breaking it was for her to have to leave, I decided it would be my parting gift to her", she reveals. "I infilled the centre with blue surrounding the negative motif of Australia. I thought the work very appropriate, as there are many motifs which relate to the journey of immigration - and both birds and boats have special meaning for her. As it turns out she is coming back!"

Recently Saxton's practice has extended to undertaking several commission works on a more intimate scale. "Blue Wren" (2009), shown on the covers of this issue, involved extensive consultation, as it uses a portion of the textiles inherited by a friend from her late Aunt. "I felt more of a sense of responsibility to 'get it right', if you like, and to honour that particular person's memory and my friend's relationship to her."

"This pressure was eased somewhat by us approaching it in a collaborative way", Saxton recalls. "We discussed various options regarding the central negative motif to be used, which had particular personal meaning to life on her Aunt's farm - and the importance of all of those things to my friend's childhood. Together we went through the collection and chose the colours which would work together with the idea, and the ones my friend would allow to be cut up". The unusual shape of the outer formation was Saxton's idea, "It's based on a 1920s Shelley cake plate which I inherited from my Grandfather, and in that way the work is invested with meaning from both our pasts". ▶▶▶

Shown this page: Helmeted Honey-eater, a detail of WEEP which appears on the inside front cover of this issue; it was exhibited at Elsie Gallery, Malmesbury, Victoria from 6-20 September 2009. Also shown, GARLAND (2009), 58cm diameter, reclaimed needlework, steel embroidery pins, nylon bridal tulle; private collection. Photography by Gavin Hansford.



Saxton's delicate compositions seem to drift on the netting, appearing as cloud-like swarms of colour and animation, teeming with vibrancy. She makes reference to natural history prototypes going back to the eighteenth century, as well as the entomological specimen boxes still found in museums and private collections today.

In its quiet way, Saxton's work also remonstrates against disposable culture, mass production, and the erosion of an entire skills base dedicated to the hand-made and bespoke. "I've never really thought of myself as being the custodian of the original work, but in light of the sense of commitment I feel to the materials, I suppose there is a kind of custodial role", she reflects.

"Red Cloud #2" (2009) was made as a smaller interpretation of the original work which graphic designer Dianna Wells loved, but it was too large for her to acquire. "Dianna has designed several exhibition catalogues for me. She responded personally to the Chinese cloud motif, as it reminded her of imagery she had photographed in India some years earlier", Saxton says. "The piece was constructed from my own embroidery collection because, even though

Dianna has a collection of her Mother's embroidery, she couldn't bear the thought of it being cut up".

Saxton will soon be in transit herself as she makes plans to visit the PFAFF exhibition in Paris, including a detour to the Royal School of Embroidery, London.² Meanwhile she is working to finish an entry intended for the exhibition "GREEN: A Color and A Cause" at the Textile Museum, Washington D.C.³. "It returns me to stitching the embroidery down, rather than precariously pinning, to a new support of sheer silk".

Saxton's determination to rescue these remnants of the past - the concerted effort of female endeavour vested in such small tokens of history - is a lesson in the transience and shifting values attached to such 'material' items. In re-casting these distinctive and sprightly fragments into contemporary works, Saxton makes a compelling statement against a society that accepts the imperative of built-in obsolescence, while discarding such unique pieces of hand-crafted industry.

Louise Saxton can be contacted through her NAVA page: www.visualarts.net.au/gallery/louisexasxon

Inga Walton is a Melbourne-based writer and arts consultant. Her previous article was about "Persuasion: Fashion in the Age of Jane Austen" (#95).

Dates:

"2009 PFAFF Art Embroidery Challenge" L'Hôtel des Archevêques de Sens, Bibliothèque Forney, 1 rue du Figuier, Paris 75004, France. (9 March-31 June, 2010) www.pfaff.com

"Momentum", The 18th Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial touring exhibition: www.tamworthregionalgallery.com.au/biennial.php

Western Plains Cultural Centre- Dubbo Regional Gallery, NSW (6 February-14 March, 2010)

Hawkesbury Regional Gallery & Museum, NSW (26 March-2 May, 2010)

Glasshouse Gallery, NSW (5 August-3 October, 2010)

Jam Factory Contemporary Craft & Design, SA (29 October-5 December, 2010)

(Endnotes)

(1)

(2) www.royal-needlework.co.uk

(3) April-September, 2011: www.textilemuseum.org



Louise Saxton

See also pages 26 - 28 and Inside Front Cover

