

ART & EVENTS

WHAT'S NEW, NOTEWORTHY AND ENTICING IN THE CULTURAL WORLD



RESCUED REMNANTS

THE ENDANGERED SPECIES OF NEEDLEWORK IS EXQUISITELY REVIVED IN COLLAGES OF SALVAGED CRAFT BY MELBOURNE ARTIST LOUISE SAXTON.

Louise Saxton's *Queen Billie*, 2010, after Sarah Stone, 1790 (detail) comments on the fragility of species' environments, with its reclaimed needlework, lace pins and tulle.

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A work in progress, Saxton's *Last Gasp*, 2013, after Maria Sibylla Merian, circa 1670, is an homage to the full-blown tulip featured in Merian's *Flowers in a Chinese Vase* (circa 1670). **Below:** *Major Tom*, 2010, after J & E Gould, circa 1848. **Opposite, from top left:** in her studio, Saxton cuts remnants from reclaimed needlework and colour codes them into boxes. **top right and below left:** before creating new three-dimensional work.



IF YOU CAST a Darwinian eye over Louise Saxton's *Sanctuary* – a body of figurative works built up from the fragments of 'found' craft – you will glean a subtext on the endangerment of domestic species. The struggle for survival is implicit in both her subject matter and media; a selection of flora and fauna reinterpreted into assemblages of domestic textiles, the decorative embroidery of which was once considered the measure of a woman's marital worth. *Queen Billie* is Saxton's reworking of a king parrot painted in 1790 by Sarah Stone – the British artist who rendered 'voyage of discovery' specimens into scientifically accurate artworks for such assiduous collectors as Sir Ashton Lever and Sir Joseph Banks.

Unlike Stone's flat articulation in paint, Saxton's bird is a shallow relief of needle-worked remnants (hand-stitched embroidery excised from textile samplers found in op-shops), all painstakingly pinned onto a swathe of tulle that make an unmistakable statement about the fragility of the species' environments. Saxton's bird floats in the same white space of Stone's science study, and closely approximates its form, but centuries after the species was first made visible to British society, the vicissitudes of progress are apparent in its deceptively pretty plumage. *Queen Billie* is literally underpinned with the warning that eco-systems are in danger. Pull some of the gold pins that create and support its form and this parrot disappears.

Since first exhibited at Heide Museum of Modern Art early last year, *Sanctuary* has evolved into a larger group of works that will soon go on show at Gould Galleries in Melbourne. The species set has diversified, but the minute textile remnants are still there, making comment on the correlation between collecting for the home and natural science. "Many natural history paintings were composed using taxidermy specimens commissioned by collectors," says Saxton. "Being highly decorative in their arrangement, they seem suited to re-interpretation in needlework."

She opens a large natural history book to the inspiration source of recent work – a 'last gasp' tulip painted by Maria Sibylla Merian, the 17th-century illustrator who, aged 52, sailed unattended to the Dutch colony of Suriname to sketch indigenous animals and plants. Counter to the prevailing belief that butterflies came from the soil, Merian was the first to document the chrysalis of the caterpillar. Says Saxton: "She preceded legions of field artists who, contracting malaria and dodging crocodiles, fearlessly contributed to science."

When asked why she makes such time-loaded, historically referential, physically challenging work when all around is fast, ephemeral and ever-more easily made, Saxton declares she is slightly crazy. "There's a lot of pain that goes with all this pinning," she says, placing a fragment within the morass of shifting reds that are becoming Merian's tulip. "It can incur repetitive strain, but I will continue with the cutting, collecting, layering and pinning until all this one-of-a-kind, handmade material disappears."

In evolutionary speak, Saxton is preserving the DNA (domestic needleworked art) of the sewing circle (a species levelled by feminism). Perhaps the 'stitch and bitch' club of the 21st century is simply the species adapting and surviving. ANNEMARIE KIELY
Sanctuary, Gould Galleries, South Yarra Vic, from 1–31 May.



