

STITCH

# Louise Saxton

*archivist of memories*







**W**e were once surrounded by things we had made. Not just things made out of necessity but things made out of love and boredom, and because the Internet was not invented yet. From antimacassars to milk jug covers, textile flotsam from the early 20th century now accumulates in junk shops, on shabby chic stands at antique fairs and occasionally (if they were made by someone well known) in museums, galleries and auction houses. Yet very rarely do prices reflect the hours of patient sewing and the pricked fingers that went into the making of these pieces.

Things have not changed that much. Textile arts are still low on the art pecking order, especially in terms of prices. And those who rise to fame are often men, even in the textile art world, even though it is women who own the history of textiles. The best textile art taps into our long history of making as women.

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LOUISE SAXTON





**THIS PAGE**

Louise in her studio with work in progress (above): "Magnolia georgiana," 2014, after George Dionysius Ehret, 1743

Louise pinning "Kookaburra, Laugh Out Loud," 2012, after Anthony Alder, c. 1890



The special relationship that women have to cloth and thread is at the heart of the work of Australian textile artist Louise Saxton. Louise trained as a painter and printmaker in art school but has been working with needlework "detritus" for more than 15 years. As she says, "embroidery threads catch the light in a way that paint doesn't." Louise meticulously constructs, reforms and reconstructs found needlework, using historical paintings as her inspiration. She plies the needlework as if it were paint, creating a new textile work evocative of the painting.

The imagery Louise uses as her starting point is often by women. She loves early naturalist illustrators, especially the women who were behind the men who often took the credit. One of these is Maria Sibylla Merian, a 17th century artist: "She often painted flowers and insects for people to copy or embroider, and I found that really interesting, as that is what I am doing," says Louise. Louise is drawn to natural subjects, and the fleeting fragility of nature, as were many of the women who embroidered domestic needlework over the centuries—"bringing the garden into the home," as Louise describes it.

Her process is intense and laborious. She projects her chosen historical image onto a swathe of very fine bridal tulle, pinned to a wall. She works the tulle as her canvas, first pinning the outline and then filling in the detail. The twist, which is not obvious at first, is that all the composite pieces of needlework—from a tiny scrap to a whole flower—are pinned to the tulle. The pins are left in; no stitching happens. The entire finished work is a pieced-together piece, with an inherent vulnerability borne of both Louise's process and her materials. "The pins bring a sculptural element to the work, they glisten in the light," says Louise. "But there are so many of them in the work that they are a structural element, too." After pinning all the pieces down, she backs the whole thing for stability, then mounts it on a board, cut to the shape of the original image. The finished piece stands off the wall, in relief.

The idea that so much work is simply held together with pins is disconcerting, but the pins are not simply a practical means to an end. Louise has researched how pins were once made. She is fascinated by the industrial revolution and the division of labour it brought about,



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**ARTWORK**

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"Vanitas #1 - The Bather," 2015

Reclaimed needlework, silk,  
beading pins on museum board  
H 92 x W 98 cm

**PAGE 101**

"Vanitas #2 - The Twitcher," 2015

Reclaimed needlework, silk,  
beading pins on museum board  
H 92 x W 98 cm

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"Ellis' Paradise," 2011,  
after Ellis Rowan, 1917

Reclaimed needlework,  
lace pins, nylon tulle  
H 142 x W 99 cm

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"Let the Jungle In," 2013, detail

Reclaimed needlework, lace pins,  
nylon tulle, copper wire, wool  
carpet, bamboo birdcage  
H 150 x W 45 cm

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"Last Gasp," 2013, after  
Maria Sybilla Nerian, c. 1670

Reclaimed needlework,  
lace pins, nylon tulle  
H 98 x W 106 cm









when each of the 18 processes that went into making a pin were given to a separate worker. It was specialization to facilitate mass production. The “pin head grinders” suffered an unfortunate side effect, breathing in the fine metal dust shards, which resulted in a lung disease known as “pointers rot.” Louise’s father also died of a lung disease (though not the same one), and she finds the parallels both fascinating and moving.

Louise lives and works in the Melbourne suburb of Kew, a wealthy place with an ageing population and a lot of “opportunity shops” (charity shops), where she sources her primary material: needlework. She is often gifted needlework, too. “People now give me family collections or find me pieces, so I have a lot of material to work with,” she says. “I have boxes full of the things—tablecloths, tea cloths, doilies, some bed linen, some clothing. But it’s mainly domestic table linen that I extract the embroidery from.”

She deconstructs the embroideries by hand, using fine scissors. This takes time, allowing her to think about the provenance of the material, the women who sewed it and lived with it, until changing home fashions made it redundant. “My materials, when I collect them in the opportunity shops, are just one step away from landfill,” she says. “Often when people give me things I do remember where the piece came from. So there is memory in there, but mostly it’s anonymous.”

Her studio is above a discount shop in a building built in the 1800s. She goes there most days, having given up her “proper” work a year ago. The former domestic space is now refurbished with her artists’ materials and the things she finds inspiring—a “mad haberdasher’s emporium,” as she proudly calls it. The colour-coded boxes of cut pieces look deceptively tidy. “They are my palette,” she says. “When I am making a piece it gets crazy. The whole studio is covered with needlework.”

Louise’s work comes out of the feminist reclaiming of women’s craft in the 1970s and 1980s, led by women like Rozsika Parker, with her groundbreaking book *The Subversive Stitch*, and artists Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago. But Louise’s work comes from a personal place, too: “I grew up in a home where things were made, and I was taught to sew my own clothes before I learned to paint. So for me there is a very personal element to the materials. There have been times when I have thought I couldn’t bear to see another doily ever again. But I keep coming back to it.”

Louise is currently making work for her next solo exhibition in November at Gould Galleries. Among the new pieces is an homage to Diego Rivera: a satisfying nude (who might be Frida Kahlo, at least Louise hopes so) holding flowers. With this work she is using pieces of what were once a pair of velvet curtains and flesh-coloured antique lace, which she found in a flea market in New York. As well, in the corner of her studio is a growing collection of small “kooky” knickknacks in the form of ceramic flower posies, which Louise intends for a porcelain garden in-








stallation. The posies are also redolent of women's domestic lives, but in a different and more robust way than the needleworks. Yet they are still intensely feminine and, it has to be said, almost as unwanted.

Louise's work is slowly moving off the wall to occupy three-dimensional space. Her first three-dimensional assemblage was "Let the Jungle In," made in 2013. It is a bird cage wrapped and pinned with needlework, beautiful and intriguing. She is also starting to use bigger pieces of needlework, leaving them in a more recognizable state, with fringes of shawls dripping on the floor. Recognizing them as the objects they once were makes the needleworks seem more alive and makes their reuse all the more poignant.

Louise continues making her intense pinned works, but these new and bigger explorations suit her, too, and she is excited about making the new works. She is lucky, she says, to be represented by a gallery that gives her the freedom to create as she sees fit, rather than pressuring her to chase the fickle market.

Louise is at the mercy of her chosen materials—all those vibrant pieces of needlework waiting for a new lease on life. She feels the burden of the many hours and hopes, and the history in each scrap. She is also creating new work that more than does justice to all those anonymous women's tactile expressions of homemaking.

In the end, those pieces of needlework are (as we are) just passing through. "Someone asked me, did I feel like I was a custodian of the material? I hadn't considered it, but it keeps coming back to me, because this material just doesn't want to leave me, somehow," says Louise. "I refer to it as a silent collaboration because the work is not mine, I didn't make the materials." 

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