

Artist Louise Saxton in her Melbourne studio.



Louise Saxton,
Ellis' Paradise, 2011
- after Ellis Rowan
1917. Reclaimed
needlework, lace
pins, nylon tulle,
142 x 99cm.
Private collection
Melbourne.
Courtesy: the artist
and Gould Galleries,
Melbourne



NO PLACE LIKE HOME

Artist Louise Saxton uses reclaimed textiles and needlework to create her intricate flora and fauna works. She talks to **Jane O'Sullivan** about her desire to keep this rich cultural tradition alive.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ZAN WIMBERELY. ARTWORK DOCUMENTATION BY GAVIN HANSFORD

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LOVE IT *Artist profile*



Louise describes her studio as “a mad haberdasher’s emporium” filled with boxes of textiles she’s cut and sorted by colour. She composes her images and pins the embroidery motifs to a fine membrane of tulle.

LEFT
Louise Saxton,
Last Gasp, 2013
– after Maria
Sybilla Merian
c.1670. Reclaimed
needlework, lace
pins, nylon tulle,
98 x 106cm.
Private collection
Sydney.
Courtesy: the artist
and Gould Galleries,
Melbourne

Louise Saxton considers her work a kind of painting. But you won’t find brushes in her studio. She uses snippets of reclaimed textiles, from hand-embroidered tablecloths to doilies, and assembles them into brilliantly coloured images of flora and fauna.

Unsurprisingly, it’s a painstaking process. She describes her studio as “a mad haberdasher’s emporium” filled with boxes of textiles she’s cut and sorted by colour. She then composes her images and pins the embroidery motifs to a fine membrane of tulle. The pins, which are left in, act as a sculptural element and the works are also supported with a hidden armature that provides a relief effect.

“My work takes years, a show takes years to make,” she says. Collectors seem prepared to wait. Her last exhibition almost sold out and her upcoming exhibition, *Wild*, at Melbourne’s Gould Galleries in November is her first in two years.

But Saxton didn’t always work with textiles. As a young woman, she studied painting and printmaking at art school in Canberra before moving to Melbourne, where she is now based, and finishing her

studies there. But slowly she moved away from the two-dimensional, developing an installation practice working with found objects from around the home.

Then a project using floral patterned wallpaper prompted her to consider decorative traditions. It led to the idea of using floral textiles, which has proved a rich vein to tap over the past nine years.

“My interest is in the home,” she says. “The garden is always there, connected. Women embroidered largely floral motifs and it was a way of bringing the garden into the home.”

The birds entered her work when she was invited to exhibit at Heide Museum of Modern Art in Victoria. “I wanted to make a body of work that responded to the museum itself. It’s a fabulous historic home ... It’s also a garden and a sanctuary because there’s a lot of wildlife there and the art patron owners of the property were conservationists,” she says. “I wanted to make a piece that responded to that idea of sanctuary, and I was becoming really interested in natural history paintings, and also concerned with environmental issues.”

RIGHT
Louise Saxton,
Adam's dendrobiu,
2014. Reclaimed
botanical book
illustrations by Adam
Forster 1920s, brass
beading pins, pastel,
museum board.
136 x 85cm.
Courtesy: the artist
and Gould Galleries,
Melbourne

"I see the needlework as kind of an endangered species. I know there's a huge craft revival going on, but needlework will never be done in the way that it was."

Louise Saxton



LOVE IT *Artist profile*



RIGHT
Louise Saxton,
Halcyone & Ceyx,
2010 – after Lillian
Medland c.1930.
Reclaimed
needlework, lace
pins, nylon tulle,
76 x 96cm.
Private collection
Melbourne.
Courtesy: the artist
and Gould Galleries,
Melbourne

A project using floral patterned wallpaper prompted Louise to consider decorative traditions. It led to the idea of using floral textiles, which she has continued to explore over the past nine years.

Much of this work took its cue from the compositions of early natural history paintings that she found in books. This coming exhibition is likely to draw on some more diverse influences, including work inspired by a recent month-long residency in Mexico where she encountered a colourful and elaborate form of traditional embroidery from the Tehuantepec area. She also expects to focus more on flora than fauna in this exhibition. However needlework remains central to her current practice as both as an artistic medium and a metaphor.

"There's a whole generation of women's work that's passing away and is now in the op shops," she says. "I see the needlework as kind of an endangered species. I know there's a huge craft revival going on, but needlework will never be done in the way that it was."

She's by no means nostalgic for the days when women's worlds ended at the front door of their homes, but believes that the broad loss of these materials within contemporary culture adds a further dimension to her discussions of species loss.

It's also interesting to note that most of the reclaimed textiles Saxton works with are now donated to her. People feel they can't simply throw away objects that have been made with such care and attention; by giving them to Saxton they are passing on custodianship. It's as though they see her work as another sort of sanctuary.

"These materials are so fabulous, and they're so rich with history but also just so rich domestically as a cultural item that's no longer valued. I want to somehow keep it alive," Saxton says. "It just keeps intriguing me. I get to the end of a body of work and I think I never want to see another doily again, but I can't let go of it at the moment."

Louise Saxton's upcoming exhibition *Wild* exhibits at Gould Galleries in Melbourne in November 2015.

Find Louise

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