

# THROUGH THE EYE OF A NEEDLE: THE STORY OF TWO ACADEMICS' USE OF FABRIC CRAFTS TO MAKE DEFIANT MESSAGES

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**ABSTRACT** *This paper is the result of our joint reflections on our experiences of creating 'quilts' for the January 2007 New Zealand Quilt Symposium, their acceptance in the 'Human Rights (HR) Challenge' (Bella) and the 'Thinking Outside the Square Challenge' (Joyce). In July, Bella, with grace and good humour, succumbed to an aggressive form of cancer. She was adamant that these stories needed to be told and Bella's story is presented below in the original. When seen through the eye of her now stilled needle, her words seem particularly wise and insightful.*

## **KEYWORDS**

Art, Education, Human rights, Social justice, Quilt exhibits

## **INTRODUCTION**

For generations, quilts have carried messages of protest and defiance and played an important role as tools to present women's subversive voices. Often relegated to the domestic and seen as 'ladies' fancywork', quilts can be powerful pieces of fabric work which are both craft and art. In the traditional sense of craft, they exhibit the proficient execution of learned skills and established patterns. They meet high standards for techniques, materials and abilities. In the traditional sense of art, they hold narratives which have multiple meanings for both the quilter and the audience. They are inherently creative, experimental and innovative. They influence those who gaze upon them in emotional and political ways.

Sitting on the porous border between craft and art, quilts are particularly powerful tools for women's storytelling and defiance. Located in the interstices between 'high' and 'low' culture (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), they bring together the aesthetic/practical, public/domestic and innovative/traditional. Few other sites offer women a medium which is both more ascribed to and used by us than by men, which has been a key part of our identity formation and which can be used readily for both explicit and coded protest (Stalker, 2005b).

Quilts are thus important teaching and learning tools for researchers to study. They provide a place within women's lives where we can take space and learn to express ourselves creatively, emotionally and intellectually and to teach others through a narrative based on our life-worlds. In our case, we were both participants and observers as we learned and taught others about the process of creating fabric

art with defiant messages. In this paper, rather than place our experiences under the harsh glare of an objective, distant, scientific microscope, we look at them through the eyes of our needles.

The image of a needle has a particular relevance to this paper, for upon his acceptance to become the first Māori King in 1858, Potatau Te Wherowhero used the needle as a powerful metaphor for his kingship. He likened his position to the 'eye of the needle through which the white, black and red threads must pass' in the spirit of unity (Oliver, 1990). In the context of this paper, we use the metaphor of the needle to consider the role of art in teaching and learning.

The purpose of this paper is to examine, through the eye of our sharp needles, our personal insights into using fabric to create defiant messages. First, through their lens, we look at the background story of how our quilts originated. Second, we give our individual stories related to the quilts. Third, we describe the quilts and the meanings we ascribed to them. Fourth, we reflect upon that experience and the learnings that emerged from it. Fifth, we stitch together the common threads of our thoughts into a shared concern for such work. Finally, we conclude the paper with a challenge to educators who share our commitment to social justice issues.

## **BACKGROUND**

These quilts both originated from a 'Human Rights (HR) Quilt Challenge' which was part of the 12th New Zealand Quilt Symposium held at Palmerston North, Aotearoa New Zealand, January 19-24, 2007. This challenge was a joint collaboration of the University of Waikato School of Education with the Human Rights Commission (HRC), and asked quilters to focus on the problem and strategies to resolve 'Family violence and violence against women.' Joyce approached the School of Education research fund to support the event and Jill Chrisp, a friend and Senior Advisor for Human Rights and Race Relations at the HRC, arranged for her organisation to fund two awards of \$500 each – a significant award in the quilting world. The event was widely promoted and quilters of different social strata, ages, ethnicities, genders, classes and nationalities produced quilts that taught others about domestic violence, violence against women, and strategies for intervention and support. In the end, the 'Human Rights (HR) Quilt Challenge' received 20 quilts including two from overseas.

Against this background, Bella and her mother entered the 'HR Quilt Challenge' with a quilt entitled 'Poiporotititaparapatua!' Joyce was unable to enter this challenge because she was so closely involved with its initiation and development. Thus, she entered the 'Thinking Outside the Square Challenge' with a quilt entitled 'Nice women.' As colleagues in the same Department in the School of Education, they urged each other on to complete the projects and submit photos for the refereeing process. Both were accepted in their challenges and their 'quilts' hung for the duration of the Symposium. The 'HR Quilt Challenge' quilts have since travelled throughout New Zealand.

### **BELLA'S STORY**

I am not a quilter. This was my first and probably last foray into the world of quilting! However, the 'HR Quilt Challenge' enabled me to reiterate: a) my passion for art that addresses issues of social injustice; b) my commitment towards Māori wellbeing; c) a feminist desire to counter the subjugation of women and the social acceptance of patriarchy; and d) my love of Māori arts and performing arts, especially the artistry of Māori women.

The daughter of an artist and art teacher, I have grown up immersed in the arts and their use to critique social injustice. My mother, a painter, often selected Māori political issues, (the Sealords Deal, the individualisation of Māori land and division of Māori communities as a result, pollution of the environment), as subjects for her work. My own research interests focus on Māori political issues and the potentiality of the arts, especially Māori arts, to reveal and problematise issues of power and social injustice. For example, I have written about how marae murals providing histories about my tribe challenge and compete with existing dominant discourses of 'authoritative' New Zealand history texts that purport the erroneous belief that the tribe has been subjugated (Graham, 1995).

Like many Māori, I am frustrated with the high incidence of domestic violence in Māori families against Māori women and children. I've been to many hui and listened to a lot of 'talk' about this tragic issue. Māori talk a lot about the Māori principles of 'aroha' (love) and 'manaaki' (care) but the domestic violence statistics and the images of bruises on the bodies of dead babies contradict the grand picture of a loving, nurturing society. As a Māori feminist, I get angry when I see the faces of Māori men on television speaking for and about the wellbeing of Māori when I know that they have beaten their wives and girlfriends, if not their children. I get angry when I see the patriarchal, capitalist, entrenchment of neo-liberal thought and practices in New Zealand increasing the gap between the wealthy and the poor (a group dominated by Māori and Pacific Island families). Already stressed by long-term difficult socio-economic conditions, Māori women and children remain the most vulnerable to further deprivations. In this instance, as an educator, I wanted to use art making, that is the production of this quilt, to show how (my) rage can become empowerment (Shapiro, 2006).

Despite the ugly underbelly of Māori society, when I think of the beauty wrought by Māori women and their arts my heart lightens. Memories of my paternal great grandmother weaving korowai (cloak) were at the centre of my research into Taonga Māori and their ability to connect peoples through time and space, and transcend boundaries. Watching my mother paint, karanga (call), waiata (sing) and dance the kopi kopi alongside other Māori women (including myself), I have witnessed the benefits of Māori women's arts performance to inspire, soothe and challenge. I wanted to produce a quilt that reminded us of the beauty of Māori women's art but confronted the viewer with the ugliness carried out on Māori women.

### **BELLA AND MARGARET'S QUILT**

A requirement of the Human Rights Challenge was that the quilt be the result of a collaborative effort involving two or more people. To satisfy this requirement, my mother Margaret came on board as my partner to help with the construction of the quilt. We had produced five korowai in the past and because we had a collection of leftover feathers, decided that the quilt would resemble a korowai. However, for this 'korowai' I wanted to take the accepted image and 'turn (it) around' (Lippard, 1990) in order to challenge Māori society and the larger global, neoliberal mindset that aggravates living conditions for those most vulnerable in Māori society – women and children. Thus, my intention was to “inverse, reverse, perverse” (Lippard, 1990, p. 199) normative Māori images to gain attention and provoke reflection and intervention. The quilt, as an example of the power of art, would act as a “voice of dissent” (Emmanuel & McCaughan, 2006, p. 2).

The quilt required the viewer to start from afar and then to get closer and closer in order to read all of the words on the quilt. From afar, the quilt was easily recognisable as 'Māori' due to the use of red, black and white colours as well as the korowai layout and panels that resembled tukutuku (traditional woven panels in tupuna whare [ancestral house] mainly produced by women). The easily readable section and title for the work was the word “‘Poiporotititaparapatua!’, which literally means ‘twirl the poi and beat it!’” (Huata & Papesch, 2000, p. 146). Thus, Māori society is at its best when we beat poi, and not each other. Poi were arranged at the top of the quilt on top of the rows of white feathers signifying peace. White feathers and small metal tokens etched with the words 'love' 'embrace' and 'nurture' were attached to the handles of the poi.

If one moved further in, the tukutuku panels became words, narratives from Māori women who have been subjected to domestic violence or witnessed the effects on Māori children. These narratives were a tiny selection of the many statements made to me over the years by women reflecting on their experiences of domestic violence. All are friends. Many are very successful, some well known. The silver letters signified the many tears shed when the words were uttered. The narratives written on ragged, frayed patches of black on black material defied normative quilt practice of neat finishing and signified the fractured and fragmented lives of the women and children.

She would come to school covered in bruises and cuts. The whole school knew her Dad beat her and her family up but the cops and the teachers couldn't do anything 'cos her Mum wouldn't press charges.

He was hitting me so hard ... then he used his belt. By the time he was finished my underwear was in shreds and fell off. Blood was everywhere.

These narratives were placed close to the bottom near the red feathers signifying blood, terrible accounts of beatings, blood and no support or help.

My family said that I was making it up. There was no way that he would have beaten me. If he did then it must have been something I had said or done to deserve it.

This narrative, in the middle of the quilt, was an account of the woman not receiving support from family after the 'domestic'. Her family's refusal to believe her and the resulting isolation intensified the violence.



Photo 1. Bella and Margaret's quilt 'Poiporotititaparapatua'

My neighbours heard me screaming and came to my rescue. They took me in, covered me and called the police. The husband then went back to my place to get the kids.

Uncle R. came to visit me at the hospital. He listened and then said that my family were wrong for believing my husband. He said that I wasn't porangi (insane) but that I was traumatised. He believed me.

The two narratives showed instances when the victim had been helped through the intervention and support of others. They were placed at the top because they showed the employment of strategies which are closer to reflecting the principles of aroha (love), awhi (embrace), and manaaki (nurture) that Māori often talk of having. Tiny tokens with these words were laid out in the tukutuku design of purapurawhetu (the 'seeds or stars of the sky') signifying the wellbeing and wealth of a prolific, large, healthy whanau (family), so one had to move very close to read the words. Alas, too often the words aroha, awhi and manaaki remain ideals. They are too seldom everyday domestic practice.

In a sense, this quilt signified a cloak of shame, not the shame of the victim but shame on a society that can talk about aroha and yet enable domestic violence to continue. It exposed groups and individuals that do not support the victim, that aggravate her suffering through their disbelief or disavowal of such things occurring in 'their' families. At the same time, this was a korowai of hope, showing strategies for countering, intervening and exposing domestic violence and supporting the victims.

### **JOYCE'S STORY**

My quilt was the direct result of three things: my research into how women use fabric crafts to make defiant messages, my co-ordination of the 'Human Rights (HR) Quilt Challenge' and my work with feminists from developing countries. In the first instance, my academic expertise is in the area of adult education – a process which I consider to be a tool in the struggle for social justice. I am also a feminist academic; that is, I believe that women throughout the world share, to varying degrees, an oppressive life-world. As well, I have an undergraduate degree in textiles science and design. My love of fabric, fibre, design and art merged with my commitment to social justice and my feminist stance to lead me into an international comparative New Zealand/Canadian project about community art and social justice. It exposed me to women in New Zealand and Canada who proudly used fabric crafts defiantly. It also demonstrated to me the cautious and careful way that Kiwi women did that task in relation to the group, public and confrontational way that Canadians did it. Although I have published widely in this area (Clover & Stalker, in press a, b; Stalker, 2003, 2005a, 2005b; West & Stalker, in press), the 'Thinking Outside the Square Challenge' seemed a perfect outlet to 'walk my talk' about how quilts could carry strong messages of defiance.

In the second instance, the 'HR Quilt Challenge' also pushed me toward creating my own quilt. I knew from a previous joint exhibition of Canadian and New Zealand quilts at the 11th New Zealand Quilt Symposium held at Auckland in 2006, that women would create defiant quilts if they were given safe places to

exhibit (Clover & Stalker, in press b). I was thus a key player in creating the 'HR Quilt Challenge' for the 2007 Symposium.

I was hopeful that the Challenge would be successful, but I was afraid that its separate, so clearly identified, space might be deliberately bypassed by the thousands of quilters who would attend the January 2007 Symposium. I wanted my quilt to carry the same message against violence into the mainstream spaces where it could not be ignored so easily. Finally, I felt strongly that, as the key organiser of the 'HR Quilt Challenge', I could not ethically enter and be judged by the very people that I had helped to select as judges and by the criteria I had devised. Thus, I chose to put my quilt in the 'Thinking Outside the Square Challenge.'

In the final instance, this quilt is also a result of my work with feminists from developing countries and it, in turn, converged with my research into issues like men's misogynistic responses to women's participation in higher education. My research, located in New Zealand, has shown the dark underbelly of violence against women in this country (Stalker, 2001). It mirrored the horrific stories that I heard at international women's conferences of violence perpetrated against women through conflicts, fundamentalisms and globalisation. As a result, I strengthened my analysis of violence against women as a political, economic, social and cultural problem.

My analysis and sense of outrage were deepened by my experiences at New Zealand quilting groups where women would explain to me that the reason that I could not find many defiant fabric crafts was because New Zealand had fewer issues of violence than other countries. It was also evident from quiet discussions after my presentations that the quilting groups were unsafe places to raise these issues. Quilters' naiveté and subtle censure stunned me and I rapidly learned to address the issue before it was raised. I deliberately talked of how every five weeks in our country a woman dies as a result of domestic violence; how every three minutes somewhere in the world a women is raped; how unequal pay is a form of violence against women and so on. I was hopeful that by 2006, when we began the 'HR Quilt Challenge', quilters would be less naïve but I was not confident of that. Thus, I saw my quilt's entry into a mainstream competition as a different way to make visible the issue of violence.

In sum, I approached the task of creating my quilt with personal and professional commitment, evidence of the power of fabric crafts to make political statements, and a knowledge that Kiwi quilters were reluctant to engage in a difficult discourse.



**Photo 2.** Joyce's quilt '*Nice women*'



**Photo 3.** Joyce's quilt '*Nice women*' (detail)



## JOYCE'S QUILT

Let me make clear that, like Bella, I am not a quilter. However, that does not mean that we have not been creative. I have been an enthusiastic sewer since I was very young and I know that Bella, like me, loved the feel of fabrics, the hilarity that fashion can engender and the power of creating art pieces. In these recent years, the major creative outlet for both of us seems to have been through writing and designing university papers to teach. Indeed, that may have been part of why we wanted to do something more obviously creative in an 'arty' way.

It is important for me to emphasise, however, that I have never created a traditional quilt and, aside from using it as doorway to respondents for my research project, I have not been involved with the quilting world. Indeed, the very thought of adding yet another 'rule' to my life makes me feel rather ill. Demands to make my work clean, pretty, tidy and with corners which meet perfectly seem like a metaphor for me to be a controlled and well-behaved woman who follows rules and conventions. Paradoxically, I admire the skill of quilting, the beauty of the fabrics and I treasure the several memory-laden family quilts that hang in my back hall.

I began the process of the quilt, knowing about the issue of women's violence, knowing I could break the boundaries within the 'Thinking Outside the Square Challenge', and knowing that I did not want to spend too much money on the 'quilt.' I also knew from my research that I could be condemned for creating something that was not 'quilty' enough (Clover, & Stalker, in press). During a sleepless night I constructed the basic idea – that nice women sit around while other women die as a result of violence against them. It was an easy progression to represent that as women sitting around drinking tea – the great pastime and welcoming gesture in so many New Zealand homes. Fortunately, my partner is tea-crazy and I quickly collected and dried dozens of used, self-fill, large (60cm by 120cm) tea bags.

The tea bags, on close inspection, were beautiful in their variegations and colouring: rose tea had a tint of rose and lines of pink; Chinese teas produced darker streaks. I arranged bags in clusters of five, machine sewn together along the longer seams with pretty pink thread. Each of the three clusters was suspended at different levels from wooden dowelling by fragile-looking pink thread. One of the clusters tore free at one end and hung raggedly.

Each bag was 'quilted' by a thread in the middle which tied together the traditional three-layer sandwich of teabag fabric, tea leaves and teabag fabric. Four of the threads were pink. One was red and represented the one week in five in which a woman dies as a result of domestic violence. Similarly, the three sets of five bags represented the statistic that somewhere in the world, every three minutes a woman is raped.

When I created the quilt and hung it, it sagged dismally and I considered getting stronger wooden dowelling or steel dowelling. Then I realised that, in fact, this too was appropriate, for the reality of those violences weighs on us even as women drink tea and smile at each other.

As part of the submission we had to write a short description and I created one which I thought sounded sufficiently obtuse and arty to excuse any lack of 'guilty'–

ness in my quilt, sufficiently thoughtful to be taken seriously and sufficiently apolitical not to offend what I presumed would be a conservative review panel.

It has now been ten months since our ‘quilts’ were accepted and hung in the ‘Human Rights Challenge’ (Bella) and the ‘Thinking Outside the Square Challenge’ (Joyce). Several months after the January symposium, we reflected for this paper on the things we learned as a result of our foray into the world of protest fabric art.

### **BELLA’S REFLECTIONS**

For me, the quilt has meant branching out personally and professionally in a different way, using fabric art to put forward ideas and arguments about issues of social justice that I might normally write about in academic text or waiata lyric. I enjoyed the collaborative nature of the work and was deeply appreciative of my mother’s assistance as we worked long hours into the night. Sewing was no easy task for her; cataracts had severely diminished her (now, thankfully, surgically enhanced) eyesight. The challenge for us was only partly about addressing the issue of domestic violence. It was also about actually creating a quilt, attending the quilt exhibition and mixing with ‘quilters’.

Having spent many years preparing for and attending art exhibitions, I was a bit wary about participating in a ‘Quilt Symposium’. My memories of quilt exhibitions, bar those created to remember the lives of HIV/AIDS victims, were of beautifully sewn, gloriously coloured fabrics that soothed and calmed the viewer. Any discussion they elicited tended not to be about a particular ‘topic’ other than how beautiful the quilts were or how skilled the quilter must be. The quilts I remembered, motifs and scenes (such as landscapes), did not provoke or embody rage, grief or sadness. My idea of ‘quilters’ in New Zealand brought to mind a picture of women of a certain age, class and ethnicity focused on the technical and aesthetic aspects of their art. I felt very much on the margin, sure I didn’t ‘fit’ especially when I saw the quilters in the ‘HR Quilt Challenge’, as well as organisers and the hundreds of participants in the Symposium.

In the Challenge, only four of the participants were Māori. Our quilt was the only one dealing specifically with domestic violence in relation to Māori and was identifiably Māori. However, meeting and talking with the other quilters in the Challenge, and viewing their quilts, was a revelation. I learned from women who, explaining their quilts, described their own suffering and rescue from domestic violence. Others considered the wider picture of those around them in their families and their communities. Some preferred to draw our attention to the violence carried out on a global scale, such as the US bombings of Iraq that served to destroy the lives of Iraqi women and children. Many of the quilts were very distressing. All of them required the viewer to stop and think, not just view and appreciate. I watched people as they moved from the other quilt exhibitions into the Challenge space. Many walked through swiftly preferring to return to the more ‘soothing’, less distressing quilts of other galleries. A few commented on the ‘ugliness’ of some of the subjects and asked, ‘Why’d they have to do that?’ Yet, many people, men and women, stayed and engaged with the HR quilts, often quietly discussing between

themselves about domestic violence incidents of their own or those of which they were aware.

A major topic for discussion among the quilters at the 'HR Quilt Challenge' was what to do with quilts at the end of the Symposium. The quilters overwhelmingly agreed that the quilts continue in exhibitions and various displays because of their power to draw our attention to the issue of domestic violence – encouraging people to break the cycle. In my classes, I have used images of Joyce's and my quilts to illustrate not only how arts can serve to highlight issues of social injustice but to exemplify issues of gender and ethnicity in education. My students are of many different ethnic groups, age ranges and nationalities. Yet all have quickly comprehended the political points of the quilts. The powerful images have incited much discussion and student self-reflection. Similar reactions have occurred when I have shown images of the quilt to other people. The most sobering thing is the realisation that they, the students, and I know personally, far too many instances of domestic violence. My hope is that in 50 years time, this quilt will be an artefact useful for historical reflection only; my concern is that it will remain socially relevant, engendering similar responses from viewers.

### **JOYCE'S REFLECTIONS**

I have theorized elsewhere about the power of fabric to make defiant messages (Stalker, 2003, 2005; Clover & Stalker, 2007; West & Stalker, 2007). Through my involvement in the 'HR Quilt Challenge' and in creating my own defiant 'quilt', I experienced first-hand the power of fabric art as a vehicle for teaching and learning. I also had some thought-provoking personal learnings as I moved through the transition from academic to the creator of fabric protest art.

In the first instance, I watched as the HR quilts taught about the issue of violence. As Bella hints at above, they stirred controversy from the moment of arrival at the symposium for judging, to the day they were taken down. The 'HR Quilt Challenge' was judged by our own judges but they had to be hung for that process by the Symposium organisers and I was told that there was a lot of discussion about where they should be hung. Some wanted them placed away from the mainstream areas because 'they might offend some quilters.' Others wanted them front and centre. Fortunately, the final location, at the top of the stairs on the way to other exhibitions, meant that they were likely to be viewed by everyone who came to the Symposium.

I saw first-hand the impact that the 'HR Quilt Challenge' quilts had on viewers. The day after it opened, I sat quietly in the exhibition and saw women in tears, women who could view only a few quilts at a time and women talking quietly with their friends while they contemplated the quilts one by one. It was clear that the quilts were excellent, powerful teaching and learning tools. The quilts clearly raised the awareness of women about issues of violence and I heard quiet conversations among viewers about such situations. Like Bella, I also heard debates about the ways in which some of the HR quilts challenged the quilt rules with their ragged edges and untidy seams. Some commented on how perfectly-stitched quilts could none-the-less carry important messages. Still others queried why anyone

would want to combine the two. In sum, the quilts stirred controversy, discussion and debate, just like any good academic publication would. Meanwhile, my tea-bag quilt hung in the main floor of the exhibition area with the 19 other quilts in the 'Thinking Outside the Square Challenge' and surrounded by hundreds of exquisitely created quilts entered in the other, more traditional challenges.

Upon reflection, I can identify three personal 'learnings' from my experiences as I moved from academic to the creator of fabric protest art. Firstly, I was surprised how, like many of the Kiwi women I interviewed in my research, I anticipated the condemnation of 'nice' people and muted my message. This happened as I simultaneously assured the women in our 'HR Quilt Challenge' that they did not have to produce perfect quilts and that a powerful message was the important thing. I created a 'polite' description, which in fact did not explain clearly the significance of the clusters of five and three. I struggled to make the quilt obviously 'quilt-y' and ensured that I had three traditional layers and tea bags made of something that could be classified as fabric.

Second, I learned that shifting one's professional identity can create very strong feelings of vulnerability. I have published successfully as a feminist academic for many years and more lately as a feminist academic in the area of art and craft (Clover & Stalker, 2005a, 2005b, 2006a, 2006b, in press a, b; Stalker, 2003, 2005a, 2005b, 2006c, in press). However, unlike Bella, the production of art works was very much unknown territory for me. When I created my quilt, I told few of my academic friends of my entry and certainly none of my 'real' quilting friends or art education colleagues. My partner was supportive but didn't really 'get' my tea bag metaphor. The best support came from Bella and her mother, Margaret. Bella was a colleague down the hall who understood how one can play with fabric and make it talk noisily. She and I egged each other on to meet deadlines, to get the quilts made and to send them off to face the judging panels. We talked only fleetingly of our projects, but for me it was enough to make me feel hopeful that my quilt's message could make sense to viewers.

I wrestled with my personal identity as well as my professional identity. I am, after all, the sister in my family that was not the creative one: not the one that could paint, draw and write poetry like the other sisters. Indeed, I was not the one that could quilt, embroider or knit. I clung to my reputation as a sewer – someone who could manipulate and construct fabric garments as an engineer might construct a bridge. As I progressed with my quilt, I unlearned and re-learned that identity. I began to see myself as an artist and to understand the intellectual, intuitive and intimate nature of art-making.

Third, I learned that I might have pushed the boundaries further and harder but I also think that I read the unwritten codes correctly. I could condemn myself as retaining too much of my Canadian, rural, girl's upbringing and my desire to please, conform and succeed. I could say that I am one of the 'too-nice' women depicted by my quilt. However, I believe that it is more complex than that, for the experience gave me new insights into the dilemma that women who create fabric protest art face when they try to exhibit within the fabric craft world. There is a troublesome balance between having a clear, strong voice of protest, raising such issues in a way that does not disaffect viewers, and being accepted for the show by the judges.

My nervousness about having a strong, 'not-nice' voice was vindicated when I saw the other entries and the winner in my category. The winner was exquisite – made of shimmering long strips of plastic, machine top-stitched with white delicate flowers. It followed many of what I consider to be the taken-for-granted rules of quilting – technical skills executed in delicate, precise patterns to create a pleasing and beautiful product. In other words, it seemed that I had read the unwritten codes correctly; it was unlikely that I would be a winner with a ragged, political quilt.

None-the-less, the experience hardened my resolve to push the boundaries much harder at the next symposium. Since the Symposium I have started an 'Exhibitions book' and have identified some competitions in the near future which I will enter. I find it stimulating, exciting and energising to think about how to put messages about women's oppression into mainstream exhibitions of both the fabric and traditional art worlds. I love using fabric, touching it, manipulating it and honouring it. My diversion from publishing the written word into this kind of production is a delightful convergence of my background in textiles science and design, feminist beliefs and my view of adult education as a force for social justice.

In addition, a colleague and I are currently constructing an exhibition entitled 'Threadbare: An exhibition of unruly quilts', which will show in a local Hamilton art gallery. We are gathering a group of potters, woodworkers and jewellers to redefine quilts' traditional fabrics (broadly defined), systems, patterns, layerings, fixings, artisanship and messages.

Finally, I learned about the joy of creativity. It was enervating to feel the thrill of being accepted into a national competition and having to sit on the aisle seat in case I was a winner in my category. It reminded me of how I felt when I saw my first publication in print.

I loved every minute of the creation of my quilt. I found it to be a surprisingly intellectual challenge. Every string and stitch had meaning and had to be planned carefully. It was stimulating and consumed my thinking for days as I planned it. It was a delightful shift to move from word crafting to fabric crafting. The message of protest against violence against women remained the same but the medium changed.

## **STITCHING TOGETHER THE COMMON THREADS**

We have reflected on our experiences through the eyes of our individual needles. In this section, we identify two threads common to our experiences. The first concerns our love of art and fabric and our increased belief in the power of fabric art to be effective tools to teach and help people learn about social justice issues. We heard from the quilters, and we knew from our own experiences, that to create political quilts we had to research and discuss the topic of violence in some depth. We heard from viewers' reactions to the HR quilts that the quilts taught powerful and explicit lessons about the depth and realities of violence in New Zealand and the silences that surround it.

In sum, the quilts imparted knowledge and opened discussions among both creators and viewers about an important issue. The medium of fabric quilts was particularly powerful as it penetrated a context where such issues are not often

discussed. Further, the juxtapositioning of the feminine medium of fabric with the harsh realities of violence made for a particularly strong and powerful teaching tool.

The second thread we shared concerned the quilts as ‘research outputs.’ We could see that our quilts, like good academic papers, gave us credibility and visibility in the broader community. The HR quilts toured the country in 2007 and were seen by over 3000 people. They resulted in television and newspaper coverage, interviews and strong public interest. Jill Chrisp from the Human Rights Commission and Joyce often accompanied them and presented a seminar on their origins and their relationship to the Human Rights Commission agenda. In sum, both Bella and Joyce believed that the quilts, as intellectual outputs, were worthy academic endeavours. The legislated role of universities in New Zealand is to be the ‘critic and conscience of society’ and we believed that, as academics, we helped the University of Waikato to fulfil that role. Furthermore, we viewed them as useful and rewarding additions to our records of written work.

The third thread focused on a concern we shared about this project. Although we have spoken above about the power of this experience both for others and for ourselves, there was no evidence that the quilts actually made a difference. We knew that the quilts raised awareness. We knew that some of them offered strategies to stop family violence and violence against women. In these respects, the quilts explored new and innovative teaching and learning processes.

However, we knew that these outcomes were not enough. Raising awareness is only the first step on a long journey to collective social action by women and men to stop violence. Real and enduring social change requires that we demand that political, economic, social and cultural systems, and laws and legislation are adjusted to end violence. These quilts, both individually and as part of the larger HR project, clearly did not do that. Nonetheless, we hoped that they progressed our journey along the road.

## CONCLUSION

This paper presented our stories: the stories of two conventional academics who entered the world of protest fabric art. We shared a commitment to women and their right to live in a violence-free world, to social justice as an immediate goal and to the joy of using fabric and art as media for protest. Together we entered quilts and were accepted at a traditional quilt symposium. The experience was a learning experience that was both invigorating and thought-provoking.

In the context of our lives as academics, we made commitments to continue to produce and exhibit fabric protest art. We wanted to push our work to the next level so that real change might occur. The key to real, enduring change is a collective commitment and social action to create a world for women free of oppression. Thus, we wanted to use our art work to move the discourses around violence to women from awareness and reflection to collective social action.

It may be that the ‘HR Quilt Challenge’ and our quilts were helpful at beginning a dialogue, but it will take collective commitment and social action to make a real change in women’s lives. Potatau’s call for collective social action in 1858 through his whakataui kō (proverb) ‘Kotahi te kōhao o te ngira, e kuhuna ai,

te miro m , te miro pango me te miro whero' (There is but one eye of the needle through which white, black and red threads must pass) shows educators a way forward (Oliver, 1990).

As educators, the quilt project showed us that the threads must not only go through the eye of the needle, the needle must penetrate the silences. They must uncover the fabrications which hide the truths about family violence and violence against women. Then, together we must stitch a better world. That is the challenge that educators face.

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