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**EMBROIDERY AS A FEMINIST TOOL FOR SUBVERSION AND HEALING**

*by*

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**VOLUME I**

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## Declaration

I declare that this dissertation is, apart from the recognised assistance and otherwise indicated, my own unaided work. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree Master of Art in Visual Art, in the Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture, University of Johannesburg. It has not been previously submitted by me to any other institution or university for examination or to obtain any other diploma or degree.



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## Abstract

This study is concerned with investigating how embroidery may be used as a tool for both subversion and healing within artmaking. My approach to artmaking and theories around stitching, unpacking trauma and confronting abuse are contextualised with reference to the works of South African artist Willemien de Villiers. Through my analysis of de Villiers works *Bruid*, *Locker Room* series, *Manhood*, *Shallow Grave*, *Hooked/Unhooked baby* and *Bride 1 (Child Bride)* I explore how embroidery is used as a means of articulating and engaging with trauma.

I explore how embroidery in the West was used in the past as both a tool for inculcation of ideas of appropriate feminine conduct but also for liberation. This discussion of embroidery is foregrounded in Parker's (1996) writing on the subject, in which she discusses how embroidery was introduced as a tool to control females but how many women and later feminist artists adapted needlework as a tool for communication.

Notions of femininity, domesticity, healing and ambivalence prevalent within de Villiers' work help inform my own practical body of work. A crucial theme in both de Villiers' work and my own is notions of abuse and an ambivalence towards domesticity. Through the use of embroidery and domestic linens both de Villiers and I confront ideas around the female body, abjection and ultimately the ability to evoke a sense of healing through fabric-like surfaces. I make use of oil paint rendering surfaces of fabric held in embroidery hoops. Paint in my work acts as an appropriate medium for me to render realistic skin and fabric-like surfaces. My study draws from multiple feminist paradigms such as materialist, postmodern and psychoanalytical ones.

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## Introduction

Small scars make lace of my flesh  
thin silk tangled in skin  
incisions, lacerations  
cover the pale surface  
taut threads of red unravel  
flowers bloom<sup>1</sup>

I begin on the surface of the paper, carefully drawing with pastels and exposing the fragility of the skin through each mark. I then take up my needle, drawing it in and out of the surface of the paper, tracing the scars and wounds on my psyche and body in an attempt to heal. *Fix me* (Figs. 0.1-0.3) is a triptych of stitched works in pastel and embroidery on paper. The work consists of a microscopic view of skin carefully rendered onto paper. The small circular drawings are covered in threads which trace and map out the skin's surface. Along these ambiguous areas of embroidery is the poem above. These drawings were among the first works I created when I began my studies, drawing on feelings of distress and trauma. In these works (Figs. 0.1-0.3) I refer to the recurrence of psychological violence and pain I often experience when tracing over scars on my skin. Purple, ochre, pink and peach areas of skin are rendered depicting small fragments of broken and bruised skin. Lines, folds and contusions on the skin are traced by thread in varying densities – sometimes in thick areas of satin stitching, at other times in thin areas of back stitching and suturing (Fig. 0.2). The triptych depicts the skin in three stages: wounding, bruising and healing, detailing the healing process undergone by skin. This progression of healing is meant to elicit a sense of hope and restoration.

My work is informed by my personal experiences of trauma and violence. For me, the act of embroidering or painting is meditative, satisfying, and offers solace and comfort. The process of stitching is cathartic and feels almost as if I am attempting to slowly piece myself back together: stitch by stitch I feel my psychic wounds closing up. When

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<sup>1</sup> *Fix me* a poem written by Jaylin Richardson (2018).

I am making art, I feel safe. The soft feel of fabric, canvas and thread calms me, holding me in its embrace. In these processes I find an escape from my fears and anxieties. Through the material surface and rhythmic nature of sewing, I feel an embodied experience, where my traumas and anxieties may be unpacked and worked through.

The circular format in which the drawing is placed emphasises the subject's microscopic nature, while also having similarities with the circular and oval formats of embroidery hoops and specimen trays. The fragile and ephemeral skin is held within this circle, like fabric in an embroidery hoop. The work was created by layering a very light close-up digital image of bruised skin. This is then worked over by layers of pastel and stitching which disrupt the surface of the once-clean paper.

The text derives from the poem *Fix me*, which I wrote in 2018 during my stay at a psychiatric hospital. The poem recounts my experience of pain and trauma imbued in my skin and flesh. I refer to the pale faded scars on my body as lace as they move over the body, exposing small areas of untouched skin that are similar to the way lace lies on the body. The work speaks to my experience of depression and the desire to kill myself, retracing old wounds and self-harm scars. The two lines of the poem “taut threads of red unravel flowers bloom” speaks to the act of self-harm but instead of red threads unravelling into something violent they are transformed into blooming flowers.

Flesh, fabric and embroidery act as a terrain for me to map out and trace physical and psychological trauma, while evoking a sense of healing. The stitching and putting together of the fragments of torn paper offers a way of healing. The action of mending is further referenced through the suture-like stitches which cover the surface of the drawn skin. The title of the work refers to a desperate attempt at mending and healing myself from past traumas.

Throughout my adolescence I struggled with my emotions, often turning to self-destructive behaviour to deal with my depressive episodes. When I was eighteen years old, I was diagnosed with major depressive disorder / unipolar disorder.<sup>2</sup> After

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<sup>2</sup> “Unipolar connotes a difference between major depression and bipolar depression, which refers to an oscillating state between depression and mania. Instead, unipolar depression is

my diagnosis I felt weak and out of control. My doctor prescribed a plethora of drugs to control my mood disorders. I had little control in this process and was forced to take whatever drug he felt necessary. A lot of the pills I took had negative effects such as weight gain, nausea, acne and insomnia, which led to a deep self-hatred. Due to my disorder and trauma from earlier violent events in my life, I found myself breaking down in public on multiple occasions, which resulted in me being called various derogatory names like 'weak' and 'crazy bitch'. I often struggled to contain my emotions and act 'properly' as a lady should. From a young age I remember feeling a sense of ambivalence and anxiety towards expectations inflicted on women in contemporary society. At the height of my depression in 2018, I attempted to take my own life, resulting in hospitalisation and admittance into a psychiatric hospital. During my time in the hospital, I turned to artmaking, which provided me with a profound sense of solace and helped me reclaim control over my emotions.

While growing up, my mother was never particularly interested in very 'feminine' activities. She was a practical woman who hardly spent any time on doing her makeup or decorating the house with doilies and ornaments. I feel her resistance or disregard for these objects and actions had a profound effect on me and my experience of femininity. Although my mother was not interested in any decorative pursuits she did however competently fulfil her domestic roles. My mother was the breadwinner in our family: she went to work every day while also fulfilling the role of dedicated wife and mother. I often recall feeling upset and frustrated while I watched her carry out all these domestic duties and chores, wondering why even when a woman functioned as sole provider, she still had the role of domesticity cast upon her. Despite my feelings of frustration towards domestic activities I still felt a pull towards sewing and stitching. When I began stitching and embroidering my mind was immediately changed, and I felt connected to the object and was provided with a profound sense of solace. My interests in stitching and sewing are used to explore the concept of 'women's work' with reference to my own practice. By bringing embroidery into a contemporary framework of healing, I unpack both my trauma, ambivalence and need to heal through my body of work. I further utilise paint to capture and represent both skin and fabric. I

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solely focused on the 'lows', or the negative emotions and symptoms that you may have experienced" (Lieber 2019:[sp]).

create a sense of ambiguity in the work by rendering patterned lace and skin simultaneously. Painting like embroidery functions in my work as an expression of healing, in which the process becomes meditative ultimately resulting in a sense of catharsis. Painting and art-making act as a healing process, in which my personal trauma has the potential to be transformed.

My exposure to psychological and physical violence has inspired me to create artworks that translate my lived experiences of trauma and mental disorder from a gendered perspective. In *Fix me* (Fig. 0.1), I began to consider how textiles and sewing techniques might work within this general focus, invoking the possibility of healing from trauma. After creating this work, I decided to move away from working on paper and towards what I felt were more appropriate mediums like discarded domestic linens and painted canvases. Through my research, I attempt to transform personal traumatic events by encrypting the surface of my works with signifiers of female trauma. I use textile and sewing techniques as a medium because these can be deployed to evoke a process of reflection and introspection, ultimately culminating in a sense of healing. My work engages with sewing and embroidery<sup>3</sup> as a way of mending my trauma, while connecting to a larger history of female trauma through the stitched surface. Because of its repetitive process and cyclic application, embroidery and stitching resonate with the idea of catharsis and healing. Through the act of embroidery, I invoke the idea of healing and ‘mending’ myself. Embroidery and painting are time- and labour-intensive activities; the exacting accuracy and slow rhythmic process of crafting stitches invokes the idea of seeking a kind of solace in times of anguish. I consider the needle as a tool which repairs, forgives and heals.

Through the making of artworks that include or refer to embroidery, I use feminist paradigms to investigate how needlework can serve as a tool for healing. In my research, I engage with the works of South African artist Willemien de Villiers to contextualise my own practice, revealing how her work engages with psychological repair and mending through a feminist lens. De Villiers’ works provide insight into how embroidery can be used as tool to challenge and subvert notions of femininity. My interest in de Villiers’ works derives from her use of domestic linens as a canvas for

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<sup>3</sup> While traditionally embroidery refers to stitches used to ‘decorate surfaces’ creating ornamental designs, in my project I use embroidery to define techniques I employ using a needle and thread.

articulating trauma and violence. De Villiers' deliberate employment of staining and tearing, to express violation and challenge gender norms around containment, purity and cleanliness, is of particular interest to me as I negotiate my own female body and expected roles as a woman.

### **Theoretical positioning**

My research is situated within feminism. This research functions within more than one feminist paradigm and draws from materialist, postmodern and psychoanalytical feminist ideas. The research embraces interpretations and explanations of relevant theories germane to the enquiry. This entails an analysis of relevant theories on feminist art, subversive embroidery and sewing, artmaking as healing and abject theory.

A common thread in both de Villiers' works and my own is the use of textiles and embroidery to facilitate healing. A vital text in my study is Rozsika Parker's seminal book *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and making of the feminine* (1996), which provides a chronicled history of embroidery. I make use of Parker's (1996) writing in my explanation of textile work and sewing as a subversive feminine act. Stitching as means of subversion has been prevalent throughout embroidery. Through the unassuming means of stitching, women were able to express themselves and communicate. Parker (1996) explains that stitching allowed women the ability to subtly express their opinions and communicate (Parker 1996). Women's choice of thread, colours and themes were all ways in which they were able to express themselves (Parker 1996). Parker (1996) provides insight into the history of embroidery and how embroidery is linked to stereotypes of femininity, describing textile work as both a source of self-expression for women and as a reminder of women's powerlessness historically. In the chapter *A Naturally Revolutionary Art?* she considers embroidery and the feminine in a contemporary context. Parker (1996:215) discusses how embroidery, which she describes as being identified by the Victorians as intrinsically linked to femininity, has been used explicitly as critique by feminists. Parker's insight into the use of embroidery by women and artists helps frame my study of de Villiers' work as well as my own practice.



I make use of Alicia Chansky's *A Stitch in Time: Third-Wave Feminist Reclamation of Needled Imagery* in the *Journal of Popular Culture* (2010) in my explanation of Third-Wave feminism and artmaking. According to Chansky (2010:682), embroidery and sewing offer women a positive and productive means of channelling their emotions. This text provides further insight into the evolution of needlework and embroidery within feminism.

I also use Courtney Weida's writings on ambivalence in her book *Artistic Ambivalence in Clay: Portraits of Pottery, Ceramics, and Gender*. Weida (2011:6) provides the following definition of femininity: "Feminine [can be] defined as a socially-constructed and fluid category of descriptions that can be applied to persons and objects (and especially, in this case, aesthetics) in order to designate qualities pertaining to or representing aspects of female gender". She uses ambivalence as an artistic lens to establish how feminist artists unpack issues surrounding gender within their works. Ideas around ambivalence are explored in relation to my practical body of work (Weida 2011:14).

In her book *Radical Decadence: Excess in Contemporary Feminist Textiles and Craft* (2017), Julia Skelly unpacks the use of fabric and stitching in feminist artists' work as a way of questioning gender roles of art and craft. Skelly (2017:4) explains that the practice of textile art and embroidery, which historically was used to control women, is now employed by contemporary artists to challenge boundaries regarding gender and art.

Writings around sampler making and subversive stitching offer a framework for understanding the potential power of the needle in relation to feminist art. In *An Essamplaire Essai on the Rhetoricity of Needlework Sampler-Making: A Contribution to Theorizing and Historicizing Rhetorical Praxis* in *Rhetoric Review* (2002:312), Maureen Daly Goggin discusses the complex relationship between femininity and needlework:

The relationship historically between needlework and women has been far more complex than previously assumed and than commonly held views certainly grant. For women of all stations in life and in all socioeconomic classes, needlework has been both a domestic and domesticating labor, both a tool of oppression and an instrument of liberation, both a professional endeavor and a leisure

pastime, both an avenue for crossing class boundaries and a barrier confirming class status. It has been constructed and pursued as a religious duty and a secular pleasure, as a prison sentence and an escape, as an innocuous pastime and a powerful political weapon.

Goggin (2002:312-13) provides insight into the history of needlework and its implications for social constructions of femininity. She sees the needle as a powerful rhetorical tool which carries the potential to reveal meanings. She outlines the meaning of sampler making and how samplers were used by women to covertly communicate, thus subverting their original purposes. Goggin's writings on samplers as rhetorical tools are particularly relevant in my discussion of de Villiers' work.

I rely on Danyse Gollick's *Crass-Stitches: Reclaiming Dysphemism and Domesticity* in *The English Languages: History, Diaspora, Culture* (2019) in my explanation of what she terms a 'crass' stitch. The notion of crass stitching is explored with reference to works done by de Villiers that use both stitching and dysphemistic words. Reclaiming these dysphemistic words serves as a tool of subversion in which women who have been labelled and dismissed by patriarchal society can use these terms in a productive way to create pieces of art (Gollick 2019:53). De Villiers use of profane words such as "Frigid bitch" classifies her embroidery as crass stitching. Gollick (2019:56) states: "What makes the modern feminist cross-stitches particularly intriguing and shocking is their flippant and playful use of subversive language, specifically the viscerally affective: cunt".

Claire Pajaczkowska's chapter *Tension, Time and Tenderness: Indexical Traces of Touch in Textiles* in *Digital and Other Virtualities. New Encounters: Arts, Cultures, Concepts*, edited by Antony Bryant and Griselda Pollock (2010), helps underscore how touch, fabric and the body are related. Pajaczkowska (2010) explains that embodied knowledge and memories are established through "indexical traces of the touch" found through holding and touching fabric. She (2010) draws on the relationship between skin and cloth, stating that from birth individuals are in close proximity to fibre and cloth on a daily basis.

Jay Prosser's chapter *Skin memories* in *Thinking Through the Skin*, edited by Sara Ahmed, and Jackie Stacey (2001), proves useful in understanding the skin as a site

which records memories and therefore may reveal trauma. As Prosser (2001: 52) states:

We become aware of skin as a visible surface through memory. If someone touching our skin brings us immediately into the present, the look of our skin – both to others and to ourselves – brings to its surface a remembered past. It is a phenomenological function of skin to record. Skin re-members, both literally in its material surface and metaphorically in resignifying on this surface, not only race, sex and age, but the quite detailed specificities of life histories. In its colour, texture, accumulated marks and blemishes, it remembers something of our class, labour/leisure activities, even (in the use of cosmetic surgery and/or skincare products) our most intimate psychic relation to our bodies. Skin is the body's memory of our lives.

Because skin can be read as a canvas which records marks and traces of an individual's life, it is able to contain and reveal trauma imbedded within its surface (Prosser 2001:53). The above theories provide a basis on which to further develop ideas around fabric as flesh in relation to my own art practice. I link the skin to theories of abjection as well as the articulation of trauma through the surface of an artwork with reference to Griselda Pollock's writings on trauma and feminist art.

Throughout my discussion I refer to Julia Kristeva's critical analysis of abjection in her book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982). Stained, painted and punctured surfaces are explored in light of the term abject, which is used when describing thresholds between body and outside world and when referencing bodily matter that is expelled. For Kristeva (1982:73) the body is abject as it discharges bodily fluids through the threshold of the body, such as the skin disrupting the ideal of a "clean and proper" body. Kristeva explains:

When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk – harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail paring – I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire (Kristeva 1982:2).

As stated by Kristeva (1982:2), an individual experiences revulsion and confronts the abject when in contact with bodily fluids as because they escape the borders of the body, evoking a loss of control.

Imogen Tyler's chapter *Skin Tight* in *Thinking Through the Skin*, edited by Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey (2001), provides insight into how the skin functions as abject. Tyler (2001:77) references Kristeva's theory of abjection with reference to crossing the "subject/object" boundary. Human skin is therefore abject as it breaches the boundary between the self and outside world (Tyler 2001:77).

I consider Jenna Sorkin's *Stain: On Cloth, stigma and shame* (2000) in my exploration of stains and abjection. "Cloth holds the sometimes-unbearable gift of memory. And its memory is exacting it does not forget even the benign scars of accident" (Sorkin 2000:77). According to Jenna Sorkin (2000:77), stains are difficult to hide, and draw the viewers' attention to the damaged or stained area. In this they mark an individual or the stained surface, immediately allowing for a variety of judgements to be made). Like physical wounds and sores on the body, stains on cloth act as wounds and scars which map traumatic or violent events.

I consider Elizabeth Grosz's writing in *Volatile bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (1994) in relation to Kristeva's (1982) writings on the abject body, using this to understand how embroidery and stains are employed as tools of subversion in both de Villiers' and my work. In Grosz's (1994:192) writing she links the abject to the "lived experience" of the body and cultural markers which inform the perception and meaning of the body. Grosz (1994:192) further explains that societies' interest in "selectively marking the body, the privileging of some parts and functions while resolutely minimizing or underrepresented other parts and functions" trivialises the body. This selective marking acts as a device that allows woman's bodies to be 'othered'.

Grosz (1994:193) explains abjection regarding boundaries of the body:

"Body fluids attest to the permeability of the body, its necessary dependence on an outside, its liability to collapse into this outside (that is what death implies), to the perilous divisions between the body's inside and its outside .... They attest to a certain irreducible 'dirt' or disgust, a horror of the unknown or the unspecifiable that permeates, lurks, lingers, and at times leaks out of the body, a testimony of the fraudulence or impossibility of the 'clean' and 'proper'.

Themes of abjection and stains, which are prevalent in both de Villiers' and my own work, are explored with reference to Kristeva's (1982) and Grosz's (1994) theories.

Although my research does fit within the category of art therapy, it is important to consider certain writings on art therapy in order to gain a more holistic view of arts potential to assist in emotional healing. Here I rely on texts around art therapy and relevant case studies which illuminate the healing function of needlework.

Cathy Malchiodi's book *The Art Therapy Sourcebook* (2007) is helpful in my explanation of how art can act as a valuable method of healing and emotional reparation. Malchiodi (2007:5) explains that creative activity can provide relief from traumatic experiences, emotional stress and pain.

Providing insight into how textile work and story cloths can be used as a means of therapy is Lisa Garlock's article *Stories in the Cloth: Art Therapy and Narrative Textile in Art Therapy* (2016). Garlock (2016:58) illustrates how stitching and story cloths are used by survivors of gender-based violence as a way of coming to terms with and healing past traumas. This is of particular interest to me in the case of de Villiers' *Domestic* series in which she references domestic and gender-based violence. Garlock (2016:58) asserts that the creation of a story cloth "is in itself subversive". The slow process of sewing allows for difficult emotions to be processed. The repetition and rhythm offered by cutting fabric and sewing material culminated in a calmness among the survivors (Garlock 2016:60).

There is repetition in the creative process of making a story cloth, whether it's cutting material, sewing fabric pieces, or crocheting a border. Along with repetition, sewing uses two hands simultaneously, adding an element of bilateral stimulation, used by many therapists when working with trauma survivors (Garlock 2016:60).

It is important to briefly highlight literature which addresses the concept of mending, as I employ this term to reference psychological healing in de Villiers' and my works. The term mending has strong associations with sewing, materials and femininity. Unlike the term repair, which could refer to the restoration of a variety of objects, mending speaks specifically to the restoration of fabric. In her article "A Stitch in Time: Changing cultural Constructions of Craft and Mending" in *Culture Unbound*, Anna

König (2013) discusses the concept of domestic mending. König's writing provides helpful insight into how mending is a powerful social and cultural activity. She discusses the historical implications of mending as a feminine and domestic activity which was often rendered unimportant and mundane.

In her essay *Long live the thing! Temporal ubiquity in a smart vintage wardrobe* Jonnet Middleton (2012:15) sees mending as a transformative action, which changes the way we view and interact with materials. "Visible mending reminds us of the materiality and the temporality of the thing. The delicate patchwork of repair is the narrative of its suffering and endurance. Each new darn declares the thing's power; humans think if worth mending, it should not be thrown away" (2012:15).

Sewing is often undervalued within art practice and regarded as slow and undemanding 'women's work'. In her essay *Cloth, Memory and Loss* (2015), Pennina Barnett proposes an alternative way of viewing sewing. Barnett (2015:2) suggests that rather than thinking of 'slow' in a negative light, one might view the slowing of time as something positive. The slow repetitive process allows you to take time to reflect and deliberate, to appreciate the materials' tactility and simultaneously allow yourself to heal.

A key text in my research is Bracha Ettinger's *Fragilization and Resistance* (2009). Ettinger's theories of self-fragilisation aid in my understanding of how artmaking can lead to a sense of healing. Ettinger (2009:8) focuses on how art can transform traces of traumatic events or memory; she considers painting and artmaking as a secure space wherein these traces are transformed. Ettinger (2009:22) sees art as a passageway which provides a kind of transformative space, premised on the intimate relationship between compassionate relations to others and aesthetic processes. Through Ettinger's (2009:23) concept of self-fragilisation she argues that certain things can only be conveyed through making oneself vulnerable.

There is very little literature on de Villiers' works. All that exists are a few online articles, blog posts and YouTube interviews. De Villiers' personal blog *Waking up to the dream: present tense* ([sa]) provides insight into her artmaking process and personal accounts of how her embroidery can facilitate catharsis and healing. Heidi Ingram's online essay on a blog about textiles, *Willemien de Villiers: From conception*

to creation (2019:[sp]), aids in my understanding of de Villiers' employment of embroidery as a way of confronting feminist issues. Ingram (2019:[sp]) discusses de Villiers' use of domestic fabrics and staining as a way of exploring patriarchal expectations and restrictions prevalent within contemporary culture. In a brief introduction to four works by way of captions, Needle and thread rebellions for a broken world, Karin Schimke (2019: [sp]) asserts that de Villiers employs embroidery as a way of drawing attention to materials and art forms which have been historically consigned to domesticity and servitude. Schimke (2019:[sp]) describes how the staining of cloth in de Villiers' work functions as a tool which aims to subvert the pervasive tropes of women's purity and delicacy. In an interview with Sharlene Khan (2020:[sp]), de Villiers provides insight into the use of stains in her work, as well as some background information to her Bride series. An article An anatomy of an artist by Jo Hall discusses de Villiers' works which deal with gender-based violence and abuse. But these various texts and interviews provide only very basic information on de Villiers and her artwork, and her work is not discussed in a sustained way in any scholarly publications. Thus, while the discussion contextualises my own art practice, it simultaneously addresses a gap in the literature.

## **Research Methods**

This is a qualitative research study. I use critical visual analyses of selected artworks by contemporary South African artist Willemien de Villiers. Through this, I investigate her approach to artmaking as a means confronting female trauma and healing. My interview with de Villiers provided significant insight into the themes present within her works as well as her making processes and how they affect the final result of the artwork. I gleaned more information about how she works with themes of healing and mending through embroidery than is in the existent literature on her. I couple my research on de Villiers' practice with background readings on feminist strategies used in embroidery, locating and examining additional texts to those discussed in the theoretical positioning. I briefly analyse de Villiers' writing in her first novel *Kitchen Casualties* (2003), which provides further insight into themes echoed in her visual artworks. My analysis of de Villiers' use of embroidery and theories which underpin its potential to subversive and healing contribute to my understanding of my own work and processes.

In my studio-based practice, I use old discarded domestic linens to refer to the women who used and made these materials before and also as traces of the female body. I use painting, embroidery, staining and cutting as a way of unpacking my experience as a female while engaging with materials and practices undertaken by women before me. I rework old, discarded linens into pieces of art which can be seen to contain marks of my trauma, as well as evoke a healing process. These processes are discussed in more detail in my second chapter.

## Chapter Outline

In Chapter 1, which is titled Subversive embroidery and healing in selected works by Willemien de Villiers, I include a brief history and background to embroidery in the West and how it was used in the past as both a tool for inculcation of ideas of appropriate feminine conduct but also for liberation. This discussion of embroidery is foregrounded in Parker's (1996) writing on the subject, in which she discusses how embroidery was introduced as a tool to control females but how many women and later feminist artists adapted needlework as a tool for communication. I discuss the background and use of samplers with reference to Elizabeth Parker's famous sampler, which demonstrates the rhetorical abilities of stitching.

I discuss de Villiers' background as an artist and her interest in embroidery with reference to various feminist theories. I provide brief insight into the writing in her first novel *Kitchen Casualties* (2003), which underscores themes of violence and domesticity seen in her embroideries. This is followed by an analysis of de Villiers' work, focusing on how she uses staining and embroidery in her works as a means of subversion. I then investigate de Villiers' use of 'crass-stitching' to confront and decommission dysphemistic and derogatory terms used to describe women, in her *Locker Room* series (2017) with reference to Gollick (2019). Thereafter I unpack the possibility of evoking the idea of healing and mending through the stitched surface with reference to de Villiers' work. Through my analysis and interpretation of her *Domestic* series (2018), I explore de Villiers' relationship with abuse and how she articulates this through her surfaces of stains, rips and stitches. Lastly, I refer to de Villiers' use of colour as well as stains through reference to Julia Kristeva's (1982) theory of abjection. Theories of abjection are further explored through writings by Elizabeth Grosz, which are applied to de Villiers' work *Hooked/unhooked baby* (2017).



My focus in discussing de Villiers' works is to demonstrate how her engagement with embroidery and themes of personal trauma and healing are dealt with through the use of found linens, the use of the colour red and stitching. I identify relevant theories needed to analyse de Villiers' works with reference to feminist art and embroidery. De Villiers' use of staining and embroidery serve not only as a practice of subversion and rebellion against domestic traditions and expectations, but also as a way of metaphorically and psychologically enabling healing. Theories and visual tropes such as abjection, red thread and stains help establish a framework against which my practical work may be read.

In Chapter 2, Mending myself through embroidered and painted surfaces, I examine my own artworks and processes with reference to theories unpacked in Chapter 1. This chapter is divided into eight sections, each of which focuses on a specific series of work with reference to relevant theories and texts which aid in the interpretation of the work. I discuss how I purposefully employ needlework which has been gendered as discussed in Chapter 1 as a means of subversion. In my practice I use discarded domestic linens, which I then stain and embroider wounds onto, evoking a sense of skin and physical trauma. The disruption of these once clean and beautiful objects makes reference to my ambivalence towards domestic practices. In my painted works I explore the visual relationship between fabric and flesh. Common visual metaphors in my work like fabric, flesh and wounding, are expanded on with reference to Didier Anzieu's (1989) theories around the skin. Fabric acts as a visual metaphor for flesh in my body of work, in which marks and trauma are inscribed on the skin. I discuss the role of lace in my work and how I use it as a visual metaphor for scars. I refer to Caruth's (1996) and Pollock's (2013) ideas about trauma and how I use my practice as a way of working through trauma.

Throughout my discussion I refer to how the artmaking processes involved in painting, embroidering and staining have provided me with a psychological and physical outlet to express my emotions, ultimately culminating in a sense of catharsis and healing. I briefly refer to case studies conducted by Francis Reynolds, Cathy Malchioldi, Anne Futterman Collier in my argument on how embroidery and artmaking can serve as appropriate outlets for trauma.

In my conclusion I outline the findings of my research, with a particular focus on how the concept of embroidery has the potential to evoke healing processes and allow individuals, particularly females, the opportunity to express themselves historically and in contemporary society. I reflect on my body of work with reference to de Villiers' surfaces as a way of expressing the significance of fabric and embroidery in the process of healing.



# Chapter 1

## ***Subversive embroidery and healing in selected works by Willemien de Villiers***

The needle is an appropriate material representation of women who are balancing both their anger over oppression and pride in their gender. The needle stabs as it creates, forcing thread or yarn into the act of creation. From a violent action comes the birth of a new whole. Women are channeling their rage, frustration, guilt, and other difficult emotions into a powerfully productive activity (Chansky 2010:682).

As Chansky (2010:682) notes, stitching can be seen as an appropriate tool for women to express themselves. Embroidery and needlework have often been relegated to the realm of domestic arts and women's work. Such creations were perceived as less valuable than those of men and primarily consigned to the category of 'craft' within the canon of Western art (Chansky 2010:685). Traditionally, needlework in the West was considered 'decorative' and 'feminine' and was associated with the embellishing of domestic spaces (Emery 2017:1). Second-wave feminism attempted to reclaim women's position within cultural production and to liberate historical works by women, including needlework, from the pejorative associations they had acquired (Chansky 2010:685). This liberation led to feminist artists' employment of needlework as a tool for subversion (Chansky 2010:685).

Second-wave and third-wave feminism<sup>4</sup> attempted to recognise and acknowledge traditional feminine activities such as needlework as important in negotiating female identity (Myzelev 2015:25). The women's movement sought to reclaim textile art as a valuable art form, which offered women a space to express themselves (Chansky 2010:686). According to Chansky (2010:686) the newly found appreciation for needlework provides "contemporary artists with a sense of pride in the historical traditions of women". Embroidery and stitching provide a connection to the past, offering women an opportunity to connect to domestic traditions of their foremothers (Chansky 2010:685). Contemporary feminist embroidery is able to transform

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<sup>4</sup> These movements attempted to redefine both gendered hierarchies, placing emphasis on women's experiences and individualities.

traditional craft into activism. For example, with thread and needle, women use the historically delicate nature of 'women's work' to interpret violence and personal trauma via artworks. As a response to the typically taken-for-granted value of women's work in relation to textiles, artists' and theorists have repositioned fibre works as subversive practices of resistance.

This feminist interest in needlework and embroidery has included artists in South Africa who have also worked in related ways to highlight issues around femininity and also cultivate a sense of healing from trauma. Brenda Schmahmann (2005) explains that, while there are a few occasional instances of feminist art practices earlier, feminist art can be dated to the 1980s, where it emerged against a backdrop of political turmoil. But while many feminist artists also expressed anti-apartheid sentiments, issues of gender actually only became part of a liberation agenda in the early 1990s, in the run-up to the first democratic election (2005:29).

Marion Arnold (2005:13) explains that the acceptance of feminism as an art practice was largely due to the impact of postmodernism, as it embraced inclusiveness and diversity, breaking down the hierarchies between art and craft. Arnold (2005:13) states:

South African revisionist art historians and exhibition curators, abandoning reliance on western definitions of art, expanded creative concepts of visual culture to accommodate African artefacts and aesthetics as well as objects defined as 'women's work'.

She (2005:13) goes on to explain that work created by women such as embroidery, tapestry, ceramics, and basketry was afforded a sense of value within this new postmodern framework. Modernity offered female artists the opportunity for diversification and routes to self-assertion.

Joan Alkema (2012:42) explains that South African women have historically used needlework for a variety of reasons:

To clothe their children, to beautify their homes and to prove their piety, women stitched. Many altar cloths were embroidered by Afrikaner women for the three main Afrikaans churches, mirroring the embroidered altar cloths produced for the cathedrals by the

pious women of Europe during the Renaissance. During the Anglo-Boer War women in the concentration camps used needle craft and their knowledge of other craft to survive in the camps. After the war women turned to various forms of craft and domestic practices as an income to subsidise their husbands.

Alkema (2012:43) also observes that the tradition of using traditional 'home crafts' like embroidery and stitching continues among South African women. These techniques were later adopted by artists to defy gender norms. Fabric carries strong emotions, allowing violence, pain and joy to materialise in the imagery (Garlock 2016:58). This deployment of embroidery as healing has been recognised widely and has informed a number of embroidery projects locally as well as internationally.<sup>5</sup> Many South African artists have used needlework and embroidery within their visual language to address specific issues and concepts. These artists include Hannalie Taute, Senzeni Marasela, Ilené Bothma and embroidery projects such as the Keiskamma Art Project, among others. In this chapter I investigate the role of needlework and embroidery as a tool for communicating feminist meanings, as well as evoking a sense of healing. I contextualise my approach to embroidery as a tool for healing and subversion by examining the works of a contemporary South African feminist artist, Willemien de Villiers. I analyse selected works by de Villiers in order to deepen my understanding of the theories and artistic processes explored in my own work. I discuss artworks which I feel have an affiliation to my own artmaking process and imageries which explore themes of trauma, abjection, shame, memory and healing.

De Villiers deploys embroidery in her art practice as a way of addressing issues of gender as well as engaging with the needle as a tool for healing and mending. Using themes of abuse, domesticity, violence and reproduction, de Villiers' embroideries are employed in such a way that they challenge established gender roles by using objects associated with femininity and anatomical diagrams, which are embroidered onto vintage and discarded domestic linens.

I investigate visual strategies in de Villiers' works which deconstruct, redraw and bind the female through the notion of the subversive stitch. My focus is on de Villiers' engagement with needle and thread as a medium and how her use of textiles and

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<sup>5</sup> An example of an international embroidery project is the Common Threads project, a non-profit which deals with survivors of gender-based violence using story cloths (Common Threads Project [sa]:[sp]).

embroidery contributes to the meaning and interpretation of her artworks. My focus in discussing these works is how de Villiers has used the medium of embroidery and discarded linens to make feminist commentary as well as evoke a sense of healing within herself. My aim is to investigate through an analysis of selected works by de Villiers, how embroidery can negotiate trauma while simultaneously making feminist commentary. The works I discuss are *Bruid* (Fig. 1.2), *Locker Room* series (Figs. 1.3-1.5), *Manhood* (Fig. 1.6), *Shallow Grave* (Fig. 1.7), *Hooked/Unhooked baby* (Fig. 1.8) and *Bride 1 (Child Bride)* (Figs. 1.9-1.10).

This chapter is divided into seven sections. I begin my study with an overview of sampler-making in the West. This is followed by examination of how needlework and embroidery can be used to articulate trauma, which is unpacked through my analysis of Elizabeth Parker's sampler (Fig. 1.1). I then focus on de Villiers' work, examining how she deploys staining and tearing in her works. I then briefly refer to de Villiers' literary work *Kitchen Casualties* (2003), which provides insight into themes of domesticity, abuse and misogyny, which are echoed through her visual works. I then investigate de Villiers' use of 'crass-stitching' to confront and decommission dysphemistic and derogatory terms used to describe women, in her *Locker Room* series (Figs. 1.3-1.5). Thereafter I explore possibility of healing through the stitched surface with reference to de Villiers' work. Through an interpretation of her work *Shallow Grave*, which forms part of her *Domestic* series (Fig. 1.7), I explore de Villiers' relationship with abuse and the negotiation of this through the stitched surface. Finally, I contextualise de Villiers' use of colour as well as stains through reference to Julia Kristeva's (1982) theory of abjection. My focus in discussing de Villiers' works is to demonstrate how her engagement with embroidery and themes of personal trauma and healing are dealt with through the use of found linens, the use of the colour red and stitching.

### ***Tearing and Staining***

De Villiers engages with practices specifically regarded as 'women's work', unpacking issues around femininity and domesticity within South Africa (Ingram 2019: [sp]). Her personal experience of sexual abuse in her childhood years greatly influenced the content of her work, which engages with themes of domesticity, misogyny, the confrontation of painful traumas and healing (Ingram 2019: [sp]). Collecting unwanted

domestic linens, de Villiers unpicks, mends and re-embroiders them. De Villiers recognises the potential power of the needle and uses it for psychological reparation.

De Villiers' stained and torn cloths capture traces of everyday life and accidents and she transforms these discarded and undesirable materials into objects of beauty and desirability. De Villiers' embroidery is used in such a way that it accentuates feminine stereotypes of domesticity and shame, drawing attention to the expectations placed on women in domestic settings. By drawing on traditions of samplers and cross-stitching, de Villiers' stitched works seem to engage with a broader history of female resistance and subversion. For example, in the work *Bruid* (Fig. 1.2) the surface of an old tablecloth, presumably once beautiful, neat and filled with delicate lacework, erupts with rough stitches. In this work de Villiers employs purposefully 'bad' embroidery to render an image of a crudely stitched female body. The figure appears in a field of red, pink and beige stitches, her face replaced by a lacework flower. Floral and plant motifs are a recurring theme in de Villiers' works; the lacework flower which covers the figure's face in this work grants the woman a kind of anonymity.

In this work de Villiers was dealing with notions of the term 'bride' and what associations are made with brides. She unpacks notions of femininity and domesticity, which is associated with wives and mothers. Directly above the figure's head is a vagina-like motif stitched in solid red thread. The bright red cross-stitches which appear next to and around this vagina may be read as menstrual stains. The idea of the red stain also refers to the idea of the virgin bride and antiquated ideals around chastity. As explained by de Villiers (Khan 2020:[sp]), while menstrual stains may be shameful, the blood stain produced on a bride's wedding was vitally important in many cultures to prove the woman's virginity and purity. The stains in her works may therefore be read as markers of expectations and rules that surround femininity and marriage. Through her messy stitching, de Villiers emphasises the history present in the textiles she works with and how embroidery can be used to explore and account for the women who used the object before. Her creation of stitches that sit around the border of the stain may be seen as paradoxical, as they both emphasise the stain, which may be read as subversive and, in a way, also enclose or contain it.

### ***Subversive samplers: histories of stitching personal narratives and meaning***

Limited to practicing art with needle and thread, women have nevertheless sewn a subversive stitch—managed to make meanings of their own in the very medium intended to inculcate self-effacement (Parker 1989: 215).

Rozsika Parker (1989) chronicles the expectations placed on women and how embroidery embodied the feminine, submissiveness and piety. Parker (1989:215) provides insight into how embroidery has been used historically as a tool through which ideals of femininity such as patience, obedience and docility have been inculcated in women. She (1989) explains that embroidery is still devalued and linked to domesticity within patriarchal hierarchies. “In the Victorian era, handmade items of embroidery were painstakingly sewn by middle-class women and could therefore not compete with articles which were mass produced in factories” (Van de Merwe 1992:795). Due to the time-consuming nature of stitching and embroidery, it was seen as an appropriate occupation for females, “forcing women into domestic seclusion and making it synonymous with female subjection and women’s role as ‘angels in the house’” (Van der Merwe 1992:796).

Embroidery schools were set up in “the late 19th and early 20th centuries in Europe” to educate young women (Van der Merwe 1992:796). The skills and knowledge of embroidery were meant to provide them with economic and moral upliftment (Van der Merwe 1992:796). Although needlework was used to educate women into being submissive, some in fact used stitching as a subversive medium which “provide[d] a weapon of resistance to the constraints of femininity” (Parker 1989:209).

According to Denise Jones (2020:66), sewing involves working towards a functional end product such as clothes, curtains and bedding, whereas “embroidering explores what is in excess of function”. Because embroidery is used to embellish or decorate functional objects, it has the ability to be subversive and can be used to communicate individuality (Jones 2020: 182).

Sewing and embroidery serve as a reflective literary discourse in which women who were denied pen and paper used the needle as a means of communication (Von dem



Hagen 2019:12). Samplers and embroidered cloths may be seen as objects which contain and reflect personal information regarding their makers' social and economic standing as well as their cultural views. As Von dem Hagen (2019: 12) points out, these have long been used by women to communicate issues surrounding gender. She also notes:

To view a sampler is to understand that this piece of linen is inscribed with thoughts, feelings, ideas and values; that the person who sewed it was writing a message about herself and her world; and that story would probably not have projected differently had it been written with pen in a journal entry or a novel (Von dem Hagen 2019:12).

Historically, traditionally embroidered samplers showcased young women's skills in needlework, which were linked with their readiness for a genteel marriage (Van Horn 2005:223). Growing up, Victorian girls made "marking samplers" as practice exercises, embroidering letters and different types of stitches, while older and slightly more skilled girls would often create more complex patterns (Goggin 2009:33). Samplers were pieces of cloth used for practising stitch combinations (Von dem Hagen 2019:12). Many samplers used slightly altered generic patterns in order to create more personal and idiosyncratic works (Goggin 2009:33). The marking sampler was a commonly used sampler created by young girls to practise different fonts, numbers and alphabetic characters which were used to label and monogram domestic and personal items (Goggin 2012:31). These styles would often be practised by stitching "hymns, proverbs, psalms and other sections from the Bible and other moral texts" (Goggin 2012:32).

But while samplers have historically relegated women to the domestic realm of household beautification; these objects may be viewed as more than decorative pieces of fabric used as a means of displaying the necessary skills for housekeeping (Von dem Hagen 2019:8). Samplers can be considered an anthropological tool in colonial culture revealing information about their makers' place in society. Heather Pristash, Inez Schaechterle and Sue Carter Wood (2009:15) observe that it was common for women to make personal statements through their choice of colour, patterns and text within embroidery. Due to women's position in patriarchal culture, stitchers would use coded forms of meaning to communicate truths about their lives without being overtly controversial (Pristash et al. 2009:15). The rhetorical meaning

of needlework is not solely reliant on the finished product itself: rather, the time-consuming process of creating, sewing and stitching the object may be read as a space and time of empowerment in itself (Pristash et al. 2009:15).

According to Goggin (2009:33) sampler making is a practice that has been used throughout history in a variety of cultures around the world. Samplers intended to impart lessons about piety and subservience, and skilful needlework was meant to advertise marriageability (Goggin 2009:33). Embroidery, needlework and sewing were prioritised over all other forms of academic education, enforcing boundaries of “normative feminine identity performance” (Gruner 2017:18). Feminist scholars such as Goggin and Parker offer an alternative reading of needlework in which it may be recognised as a creative outlet for women and a medium of their own.

According to Róisín Quinn-Lautrefin (2018:[sp]) for the majority of women textiles were the only material possessions they had to pass down and therefore “the production, but also the ownership of textiles was important in terms of female legacy”. Quinn-Lautrefin (2018:[sp]) further asserts that most women could sew but were not able to write, which meant women were able to record their lives only through textiles. Needlework afforded Victorian women a means of narrating and expressing their own feelings (Quinn-Lautrefin 2018:[sp]).

Art forms associated with women, such as sewing, embroidery and crafts, have been connected to the developments and articulations of feminist thought throughout history (Sallee 2016:114). Handcrafted objects often evoke women’s attitudes towards gender roles, domesticity and the body, as well as their connection to past generations of women who made similar objects (Sallee 2016:114). Handmade objects like samplers and quilts have a long history of articulating subversion and serve as visual documentation of issues experienced by women (Sallee 2016:118). Stitched objects may, therefore, function as repositories for personal, social, religious and political testimonies which can then be transmitted and communicated to other women.

Women have used needle and thread to communicate through text as well as motifs and symbols (Goggin 2009:33). Goggin (2009:33) explains that samplers may be seen as similar to notebooks, as they are mundane items which offer individuals an opportunity to document and record. Goggin (2002:315) discusses the rhetorical

power of the needle and sees embroidery as a form of “meaningful mark-making”. Goggin (2016:4) explains that the familiarity women had with stitches provided them with a way of communicating in a covert way, as they were able to alter their work and create new meanings. Goggin (2016:5) explains how “the power to perform magic with the needle comes through the embroiderer’s familiarity with stitches”.

Gollick (2009:50) argues that although embroidery is often seen as an instrument of patriarchal values and a means of restricting women to the domestic sphere, the act of creating a sampler required hours of solitary reflection and engagement with a community of women. The time it took to create samplers afforded women a space of their own, where they could process and contemplate their surroundings (Gollick 2009:50). The needle became a tool of liberation and a device used to express and communicate issues of femininity which could not be communicated out loud.

An example of a sampler used to communicate trauma covertly in the stitched surface, which is often considered meaningful by feminist scholars (Goggin 2009, Trinkwon 2006), is a sampler done by English servant Elizabeth Parker in 1830 (Fig.1.1).

As I cannot write I put this down simply and freely as I might speak to a person to whose intimacy and tenderness, I can fully intrust myself and who I know will bear with all my weaknesses .... (Elizabeth Parker in 1830).

At first glance, Parker’s sampler can be read as an ordinary plain-stitch sampler done in red thread, a domestic activity, usually done by young females, presumably to practise their stitching abilities for genteel marriage (Goggin 2012:32). Upon closer inspection, however, Parker’s sampler reveals the trauma of her life. On this fabric Parker cross-stitched her account of the physical abuse she experienced by her employer; she articulates her suicidal thoughts and prayers in forty-six lines of stitched text (Goggin 2012:33).

During the time in which Parker stitched her biography, her communicative tools (needle and thread) were ideological objects of English femininity (Emery 2015:[sp]). Elizabeth Emery (2015:[sp]) explains that in nineteenth-century England stitching with needle and thread was not merely a creative activity but also reflected good feminine behaviour: “Even as the teaching of literacy became more widely accessible to both

boys and girls in nineteenth century England, needle and thread were diligently used to teach girls how to write” (Emery 2015:[sp]). Embroidery was equated with femininity to the extent that it was perceived as the natural domain of women to live their lives through the act of stitching (Emery 2015:[sp]). On the other hand, ink and paper were inscribed as masculine and seen as tools of the male writer (Emery 2015:[sp]).

Parker’s cross-stitched discourse serves as an example of how women who were denied access to paper and pen turned to a space of familiarity where they could express themselves freely. But in so doing, she in fact defied conventions associated with the form. As Mary Lou Trinkwon (2006: 23) explains: “Her narrative Sampler, positions her into view; into the gaze of others as she leaks out of any coherent category of the feminine, at the same time breaking out of the traditional Sampler form”.

Goggin (2012:37) suggests that Parker’s sampler can be read in terms of Dominick LaCapra’s concept of writing trauma. LaCapra (in Goggin 2012:37) defines the concept of writing trauma as a way of working through a traumatic event by documenting it and therefore being able to slowly process and unpack the event. Parker’s sampler provided her with a space of introspection where she was able to grapple with her psychological trauma and wounds through the stitched surface.

Goggin (2012:39) argues that understanding the “material space as a powerful rhetorical space helps us to rethink what counts as rhetorical praxis and artifact and who counts in its production, performance and circulation”. Embroidery and needlework in this context may be read as an act of both resistance and healing. Like Parker’s sampler women’s embroideries have acted as spaces of contemplation, in which traumas of daily life could be confronted and mended. Although stitching and particularly the construction of samplers was meant to feminise and inculcate traditional values in women, through women’s subversive use the medium has the potential to allow for the articulation of personal thoughts and expressions. Through needlework Parker was able to articulate her feelings, which allowed her a sense of ownership and psychological escape from her trauma (Trinkwon 2006:23). The subversion of embroidery and samplers indicates how women can purposefully employ needlework to subvert and express emotions.

### *Kitchen Casualties*

While she works primarily as a visual artist, De Villiers has also in fact written two novels. I discuss one of these which has resonance with her artwork. De Villiers' *Kitchen Casualties*, which she published in 2003, provides complementary insight into themes of domesticity and violence explored in her stitched works, painting a picture of sexual abuse, lies and denial. *Kitchen Casualties* follows the lives of four generations of South African women – Ruth, Gloria, Isabel and Morgan – and a legacy of trauma and sexual abuse. The story is set against the backdrop of the kitchen, as the main character Isabel prepares for her daughter's farewell party. The events unfold during the course of a day, interwoven with numerous flashbacks to the past. Threat and vulnerability intrude in the otherwise clean and safe kitchen through the fragmentary memories of the women. It is through these flashbacks that the reader realises that the kitchen is not safe, but rather a place where abuse takes place. As the stories of these four women unfold, they reveal past traumas and the violence which took place in the domestic setting of the kitchen (de Villiers 2003). The kitchen, which often carries connotations of happiness and love, along with fragrances of baking and cooking, serves as an appropriate metaphor for the fragile barrier between a world of love and a world of violence and abuse (de Villiers 2003).

De Villiers' oeuvre speaks largely to influences of patriarchy, the female body and abuse. Embroidery and stitching often conjure up notions of femininity and domesticity. The title of the novel *Kitchen Casualties* can be seen as a paradox, as the word "kitchen" carries connotations of warmth and nurturing, while the term "casualties" connotes violence and pain. Similarly to her stitched works, in *Kitchen Casualties* de Villiers juxtaposes the idea of traditional domesticity with violence and abuse. The façade of 'domestic bliss' and homeliness is constantly threatened by subversive and covert violence:

Another lace handkerchief, a faded blue, is wrapped around a shard of mirror ... One of its sharp points has pushed through the lacework and pricks her finger as she lifts it out. She sucks the drop of blood away, then traces the tip of the shard over the old scar on her wrists (de Villiers 2003:185).

## ***Crass-stitching***

De Villiers' *Locker Room* works (Figs. 1.3-1.5) are an ongoing series of small-scale embroideries which deal with names used by men to describe women. The title "locker room" refers to the expression "locker-room talk"<sup>6</sup> which is defined as conversations that take place between 'like-minded' men, in which they discuss women and sexual encounters in derogatory terms (Locker Room Talk [sa]:[sp]).

De Villiers' delicate stitches pierce the surface of a tea towel marked with signs of normative feminine beauty such as a stitched floral bouquet (Gruner 2017:16). De Villiers participates in what Mariah Gruner (2017:16) refers to as "a growing trend of subversive stitchers who perform liberated feminist selfhood by highlighting a contrast with oppressors of the past, thereby suggesting fundamental difference from the meanings of historical embroidery". While originally samplers incorporated hymns and Bible verses, de Villiers instead stitches derogatory phrases used to describe women. De Villiers (2019) explains her use of derogatory terms like 'cunt', 'bitch' and 'frigid bitch' contrasted with traditionally beautiful embroideries of flowers: "By using pretty embroideries of flowers as a backdrop to these derogatory terms I highlight the double standards that exist in the minds of so many boys and men" (de Villiers in interview with author 2020:[sp]).

In *Untitled* (Fig. 1.4) the work is made up of a heavily stitched surface, with cross-stitched text reading "cunt" enfolded in lace. The derogatory phrases used in this series were sourced by de Villiers from her Instagram community (de Villiers 2020). De Villiers asked her female Instagram followers to send her words and names routinely used by men to describe them as girls and women (de Villiers, 2020). She explains that she was overwhelmed by the responses and disturbed to learn that not much had changed:

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<sup>6</sup> "On October 9, 2016 during the second presidential debate, Donald Trump was asked by debate moderators to respond to a recently released audio recording in which Trump can be heard boasting about grabbing women without their consent. The term 'locker-room talk' was used by Trump to justify the discourse overheard in the tape" (Sheets 2003:52).

Research on Instagram confirmed what I instinctively knew: woman after woman posted words they grew up with hearing and were still hearing: slut, bitch, puta, whore, frigid, cow etc. I was struck by how much hurt many still felt and especially how diminished they felt at the time. I've printed hundreds of these words on calico and am slowly stitching them using cross stitch, then cutting them out one by one (in Hall 2021:14).

De Villiers' work employs what Gollick (2019:50) refers to as a 'crass-stitch', a cross stitch which uses vulgar words such as "cunt", often in feminised font coupled with floral ornamentation. Gollick (2019:50) discusses the rising popularity of cross-stitching as a medium for reflecting on contemporary issues surrounding gender. According to Gollick (2019:49), there has been a rising interest in craft in recent years, with an increasing number of people learning to embroider, sew, knit and crochet, she refers to this as the "craft revolution". Modern crafts and DIY use various forms of stitching and embroidery to express social grievances and critique (Gollick 2019:49). The choice by feminist artists to use mediums which are rooted in gendered stereotypes offers women a way of communicating in a language which may be easily recognised by other women.

Gollick (2019:49) believes that contemporary women have "reinvigorated" the art of domestic embroidery through their use of traditionally dysphemistic words. The popular trope of using 'crass' words in current feminist cross-stitching along with decorative floral motifs attempts to reframe the context of these words (Gollick 2019:49). De Villiers' series attempts to both draw attention to and reframe the derogatory phrases many females are labelled by. The process of cross-stitching requires hours of arduous and intricate needlework, which causes its maker to slow down and reflect, aiding in the dissipation of emotions such as anger, anxiety and stress (Gollick 2019:53). Therefore, the medium of crass-stitching has the potential to destabilise the violence of the dysphemistic word (Gollick 2019:53).

Since the early 1970s many feminist artists have similarly been using embroidery as a tool for reclaiming female agency and destabilising patriarchal expectations of women and art (Birnbau 2008:19). Embroidery as a technique in the 21st century is a part of the movement of DIY, the return of the handmade and craftivism.<sup>7</sup> According

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<sup>7</sup> Coined by activist and artist Betsy Greer, 'craftivism' refers to works which use crafting techniques to create works which raise awareness around social or political issues (Greer [sa]:[sp]).

to David McFadden (2008:9), the reinvention of embroidery and the use of fibre has become a poignant tool for feminist artists. For contemporary feminists, like de Villiers, creating embroideries imbued with political and personal contentions provides a way of reclaiming this technique and transforming it from a “humble handcraft dismissed as women’s work” (McFadden 2008:9). Betsy Greer (2014:8) states that embroidery can be a potent form of activism, stating that: “in activating communities we see how craftivism can aid communities and foster strength and empowerment”.

Although de Villiers makes use of profanities, which would not have been used in traditional samplers, her work displays an awareness of the generations of women who also stitched their frustrations and trauma into fabric. For de Villiers, domestic linens such as tea-towels, handkerchiefs and doilies are materials charged with residues of the women who used them previously. Her work uses embroidery as a means of conveying feminist meanings. The use of both embroidery and found cloth allows a connection to be made between past and present.

The very laborious nature of stitching meant that de Villiers spent a significant amount of time contemplating this language and by using fragile lace, stitching and pink tones, de Villiers reframes these terms. As Jessica Hemmings (2011:30) notes:

If something is going to take a long time to make, it is unlikely that the ideas it contains are flippant or accidental. If something is produced swiftly, intention may or may not be present. This is not to say that labour in and of itself creates meaning, but it is harder to dismiss meaning from an object that has considerable time invested in its creation.

De Villiers uses textile and sewing techniques as a medium because they evoke a process of reflection and introspection, ultimately culminating in a sense of healing. Because of their repetitive process and cyclic application, embroidery and stitching resonate with the idea of catharsis and healing. Embroidery is a time and labour-intensive activity; the exacting accuracy and slow rhythmic process of crafting stitches invokes the idea of seeking a kind of solace in times of anguish. Andrea Liu (2019:[sp]) describes the needle as a multi-faceted object, a tool, symbol and weapon. The needle functions in society as an object which can be used to mend both “cloth and skin, as well as relationships and society” (Liu 2019:[sp]). De Villiers’ embroidery subverts and



challenged normative conventions of femininity using the sampler form as a way to explore female ambivalence and dissent.

### ***Mending as metaphor: healing through the stitched surface***

Embroidery and stitching in de Villiers' work act as metaphors for mending, in which she uses the stitch as a kind of suture which closes and repairs psychological wounds and trauma. In my research the term 'mending' functions metaphorically and literally: I discuss textile works which are physically mended and fixed, as well as the psychological idea of mending through artwork.

The needle is a multifaceted tool. On the surface it is a tool which is sharp, cold and painful. However, it can be used to repair, construct and mend (Labarre [sa]:7). This tool can be used to repair skin and cloth. Used in both medical and personal contexts, it is a tool chiefly used for transformation (Labarre [sa]:7). The needle's primary function is that of reconstruction, as it is an instrument which can be used to carry sutures as well as construct material. The needle's form and function both carry connotations of femininity (Labarre [sa]:7). Camille Labarre ([sa]:7) sees the needle as an object imbued with qualities of femininity – an object which can conceive, construct and restore. Labarre ([sa]:7) observes that the needle and pin are anatomically identical, apart from the needle's eye (hole) which can be likened to the female body and genitalia. The needle has an innate ability to create – unlike the pin, which can hold things together only temporarily, assisting the needle in an object's construction: "This ingenious metaphor for the feminine and the masculine mirrors not only differences in anatomy, but also in character. Both objects pierce, but with opposite intentions: one heals while the other just hurts. One is loving, the other is a brute" (Labarre [sa]:6). The needle and embroidery have a dichotomous nature – one of violence and healing, threading and stitching. Likewise, both signify damage and repair, despair and hope. When stitches heal and repair, they bear witness to some form of violence which needs mending (Labarre [sa]:6).

Sewing accumulates and connects cloth; it binds together and transforms fabric into functional objects (Hemmings 2005:69). The act of stitching lends itself to notions of mending and construction, while simultaneously deconstructing and disrupting the surface (Hemmings 2005:70). The needle has to pierce the surface in order to mend

it, “causing minute ruptures along the course it works to secure” (Hemmings 2005:70). The needle presents a contradiction, as it is both healing and wounding, both the penetrator and the penetrated.<sup>8</sup> The needle and thread repeatedly enter and puncture the surface during stitching, leaving behind a trail of thread which does not exist on the surface of the cloth but is embedded into it (Hemmings 2005: 65).

De Villiers sees embroidery as a meditative act in which past traumas, stains and scars can be confronted and healed: “Repeat patterns console me, maybe because I frequently imagine my body’s molecular functions to play out as a continuous patterned chain of actions: hurt and healing, disease and repair” (de Villiers [sa]:[sp]). For de Villiers, the entire process of making allows a space for contemplation and healing, which begins with picking out a piece of fabric from her piles of vintage cloths (de Villiers, 2020). Textile work and cloth evoke tacit memory. De Villiers refers to her artmaking process as a “healing ritual” (de Villiers, 2020), in which she places emphasis on the therapeutic value of the physical activities involved in her artmaking. While the themes and imagery play a role in this, the physical actions of feeling the cloth and preparing the mediums for staining are therapeutic.

According to Malchiodi (2007:4), the sensory and tactile qualities of art making offer a way to unpack complex emotions experienced in cases of emotional trauma, loss or abuse. Engaging with the tactility of art materials can be seen as “self-soothing and relaxing and as such, assist in the art making process of emotional reparation and healing” (Malchiodi 2007:4). Malchiodi (2007:5) explains the meaning of catharsis within an art therapy context, observing that it is a process of expression and discharging of strong emotions.

The densely worked floral border in *Manhood* (Fig. 1.6) again evokes the sampler form. The decorative border is disrupted by a series of brown stains which erupt throughout the surface of the cloth. The fluid and uncontrollable nature of the spills is contrasted by the carefully stitched botanical and anatomical figures which populate the cloth. Below there is an erratic jumble of bubonic and obscured forms. The centre of the cloth is marked by a pale blue square which holds multiple anatomical diagrams

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<sup>8</sup> In order for the needle and thread to enter the cloth, the thread must first go through the needle therefore penetrating it (Labarre [sa]:7).

of reproductive organs, as well as a pink flower. Directly below, de Villiers has carefully stitched two male faces whose heads are being directed forward by two hands which hold their jaws tightly. The stitched figures are forced to confront one another and the uterus-like form which exists between their gazes. De Villiers use of anatomical and biological illustrations expresses her deep interest in both human and plant morphology. In many of de Villiers' works the body is alluded to using stains and anatomical diagrams of reproductive organs. De Villiers (2020) explains her use of reproductive organs: "I use soft, gentle shades of pink to stitch images of male reproduction organs. In this way, I de-weaponise/soften that which is used to control, hurt, rape". The use of thread and stitching challenges the masculinity of the male genitals depicted; the various pink tones 'soften' these organs which may be associated with violence.

By accepting the definition of femininity as a gendered relationship to the stitch, feminist artists such as de Villiers can negotiate and challenge issues of gender, subverting traditional and gendered expectations associated with this medium. Feminist author Michelle Massé (1992) recommends a subversive response for women dismissed by patriarchal society. Massé (1992:250) explains that responding with aggression draws attention to the resistance; subversion gradually and surreptitiously undermines the domination. The power of subversion is that, while performing accepted behaviours, such as stitching with head and eyes lowered, there is a sense of quiet rebellion (Massé 1992:250). Many stitched works can be seen as coded and multi-layered, which conceal what was regarded as less socially acceptable opinions. Due to the position of stitching as a form related primarily to femininity, it is an appropriate way of subtly and privately expressing opinions about patriarchal society.

## ***Confronting abuse through stitching***

De Villiers' *Domestic* series engages directly with issues of domestic and gender-based violence in a South African context. De Villiers (Hall 2021:39) indicates that she confronts themes and issues of violence in an effort to work through and process her strong emotions towards this subject:

As a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, I tend to have a heightened response to gender based violence. South Africa has the highest rate of rape in the world<sup>1</sup> driven in part, I believe, by deeply entrenched patriarchal systems (active across all cultures) which are, in turn, rooted in different religious belief systems. While working with residual issues surrounding my own healing, I became obsessed with newspaper reports on rape and other forms of violence against women. In 2017 I produced a small series of about five works, which I called *Domestic*, using actual phrases used in these reports. It was cathartic, but also deeply upsetting, to spend hour after hour stitching a deeply felt pain.

De Villiers uses headlines from a variety of newspaper reports which describe horrific incidents of domestic violence. Through these works de Villiers attempts to harness her intense emotions towards these violent acts in a positive way; she uses her art as an act of 'witnessing' and as an attempt to raise awareness and promote conversation around the proliferation of violence in contemporary South African society. Through de Villiers' repetitive and ritualised processes, through painstakingly detailed stitches and sutures, she works through the scourge of violence experienced by South African women daily. The title of her series *Domestic* (see Fig. 1.7) reflects the domestic in the context of violence and homeliness. She connects these embroideries to the domestic sphere, where the front is carefully embroidered (marking out the stains in precisely stitched circles which encompass the marks), whereas the back holds the trace of the labour, displaying all the loose threads and knots.

De Villiers' works, which often deal with the dichotomous relationships between things, are largely influenced by the contemporary social landscape of South Africa, as she explains: "South Africa is a country of contradictions and extremes. There is incredible natural beauty and spectacular scenery, wildlife and indigenous flora, but also intense human suffering, poverty and inequality" (De Villiers in Hall 2021:37). De Villiers' use of sensitive subject matter and stitching in which she deals with the experience of

violent events may evoke feelings of empathy in the viewer towards the pain and trauma commonly experienced by South African women. Her work *Shallow Grave* (Fig. 1.7) makes reference to a newspaper article which describes the events of a woman's murder and burial in a shallow grave under the perpetrator's bed.

The work depicts two nude female bodies stitched in red thread on either side of the composition. In the centre de Villiers has stitched a circle in red thread, the circular womb-like shape holds two blue sparrows. On the top and bottom of the square de Villiers has cross-stitched a phrase in light grey thread. The stitched words read "A shallow grave under his bed". In this work, which forms part of de Villiers' *Domestic* series, themes of violation are particularly pronounced. The figures' visibly open wombs suggest a dichotomy between intimacy and violence. De Villiers has emphasised the sense of beauty in the women's forms and their ability to create life through her depiction of their open womb areas, which show carefully stitched renderings of their internal organs. This beauty is, however, contrasted with the cross-stitched words, which speak to the violation and abuse that women in South Africa experience. In this series de Villiers places the threatened female body at the centre of the works, which signals scenes of a situation particular to South Africa – i.e. a particular of high rates of rape and abuse. The gaping stomach reveals the women's internal bodies and reproductive systems. The red and pink orifices and holes, which draw in the viewer through delicate stitching, upon closer inspection force the viewer to witness the aggression of the perpetrator and vulnerability of the victim.

Lisa Garlock (2016:58) illustrates how stitching and story cloths are used by survivors of gender-based violence as a way of coming to terms with, and healing, past traumas. Garlock (2016:58) asserts that the slow process of sewing allows for difficult emotions to be processed. The repetition and rhythm offered by cutting fabric and sewing material culminates in a calmness among the survivors of trauma (Garlock 2016:60).

In de Villiers' works her stitched threads act as a narrative of disappearance and re-emergence. Not only does the technique of stitching differ in certain areas of the work, but also the nature in which she performs and uses the stitch varies dramatically. In certain areas her stitches may be read as delicate and suggest a maternal domestic touch evocative of care, whereas other areas are rough and chaotic, evoking violence

and anger. The haphazard stitches lead the viewer towards an unbearable tactile visuality founded on pain, suffering and violence.

The rough stitching challenges notions of the feminine as a locus of nurturing. The prominence of scars and interruption of the cloth/skin plays a significant role in de Villiers' work in general. Scars act as evidence of a physical wound that has been repaired by the body, forever marking the point of a painful encounter or violent event. While wounds may heal and be forgotten about, scars act as a connection to the past – a kind of painful memory which reminds an individual of the painful event. Scars may present the wounded body as whole and healed on the surface, but pain and destruction may still be present and hidden underneath or internally.

In *Hooked/unhooked-baby* (Fig. 1.8) de Villiers combines references to haberdashery with patches and crudely cross-stitched flowers in her altered domestic linen. The surface of the cloth is built up of layers of white stitches, which serve as a backdrop for a variety of patches which outline the centre of the work, comprising thirteen bra hooks. De Villiers' inclusion of fasteners and hooks, which are used specifically for the construction of female undergarments like corsets which were used to hold women's bodies in place, refers to societal expectations of women. According to Candela Delgado-Marin (2013) women's bodies are immediately paired with appendages and accessories which eclipse the natural female body. Accessories and embellishments modify the natural female appearance and "shape it to accommodate men's sexual desires and preconceptions of femininity" (Delgado-Marin 2013:[sp]). The bra fasteners further communicate the idea of acceptable beauty standards and containment.

The fact that the bra fasteners are attached flatly to the linen and are thus unable to reach each other and close evokes a sense of loss of control. De Villiers defies patriarchal expectations around control of the female body through her intentional placement of fasteners sewn onto the fabric in such a way that they cannot physically close.

De Villiers deliberately uses 'feminine' imagery and colours in her work as a way of drawing in the viewer (de Villiers, 2020). She explains that it is important that her work appears inoffensive and mild at first glance in order to make the brutal messages

expressed in her work initially more palatable for the viewer. De Villiers' embroideries appear aesthetically beautiful in their form and colour, while ironically expressing the violent realities experienced by women. The soft colours and intricate stitching contrast with the violent messages being communicated in her works: the initial prettiness of her works draws viewers in, and only once they examine the work are they made aware of the shocking nature of the content. This somewhat 'soft' nature of embroidery is discussed by Chansky (2010:682), who explains that one of "primary strengths" of embroidery is that due to its associations with domesticity and comfort, the medium is able to draw in viewers and catch them "off guard".

These embroideries are time intensive, requiring hours of stitching. She stitches in such a way that she invokes a sense of herself often feeling lost and alone in the mess of domesticity – an approach in which she envisages herself as part of a community with other women who have stitched about similar issues. As observed by Mariah Gruner (2019:29), through stitching into the surfaces of vintage cloths that have been handled and punctured before, contemporary embroidery artists engage in and "revalue an archive of making". De Villiers works with domestic linens, as they signify disposability, bodily traces and feminine performances of propriety (Gruner 2019:29).

Paul Connerton (2011:29) proposes that due to women's underrepresentation in most recorded history, women used stitching, sewing and embroidery to create an art of memory. Connerton (2011:29) explains how fabric can hold memories:

[Cloth is] a privileged material because it is yielding, because it is not stone or bronze or steel. When a memorial is made of stone or bronze or steel the rhetoric of the materiality implicitly claims that the memory of the dead recorded there will last forever. Cloth carries no such illusions of enduring witness. It is fragile, it frays, it fades, it needs mending. It remembers the dead by sewing together mere fragments of their lives.

De Villiers' domestic linens directly engage with the idea of fabric as a receptacle for bodily fluids and stains. In relation to textile works Mariah Gruner (2017:22) explains that cloths and handkerchiefs function as containers for memories as well as bodily fluids. Gruner (2017:22) further explains that the bodily and abject associations of the handkerchief are closely linked to the observation of women's bodies. With reference to Will Fischer, Gruner (2017:22) states:

In the early modern period, English women were paradigmatically associated with handkerchiefs. The display of a pristine, delicately embroidered “hand-kercher” demonstrated women’s purity and wealth, but also implied fundamental “leaky” qualities, the porosity and danger of their embodied states.

De Villiers’ works reveal these “leaky qualities” through marks, stains, tears and overflowing threads. The use of specific materials such as old linens and household items to stain her works evokes a sense of ambivalence. Her use of profanities, stains and phrases serves to reject the constraints of traditional embroidery and instead embrace a form of crude honesty in which her emotions can be expressed.

In de Villiers’ works, body parts and stains have been re-stitched to evoke a sense of discomfort in the viewer. Instead of attempting to clean or disguise these stains, de Villiers emphasises these markers of bodily fluids. Julia Kristeva’s (1982) notion of abjection provides valuable insight into understanding this relationship between inside and outside, clean and dirty presented by de Villiers.

Kristeva (1982:53) explains abjection as the “collapse of the border between inside and outside”, self and other. Abjection refers to the negotiation of boundaries of the self, which occurs when an infant separates itself from its mother, allowing a formation of the distinction between inner and outer (Kristeva 1982:53). The abject is not only the physically repulsive but can also be seen as that which disrupts identity, cultural and social systems (Kristeva 1982:53). Kristeva (1982:2) further explains the abject body as a body that may evoke a sense of horror and revulsion through its processes of physical wasting and ultimately death.

Elizabeth Grosz (1994:192) links the abject to the body and the social and the social specifications that inform its perception and meaning. Grosz (1994:192) further explains that societies’ interest in “selectively marking the body, the privileging of some parts and functions while resolutely minimizing or leaving un- or underrepresented other parts and functions” devalues the female body in particular. This selective marking acts as a device that allows woman’s bodies to be ‘othered’. Grosz (1994:198) argues that female bodily fluids are more frequently seen by society as unclean.

Due to societies’ sensitivity towards the female body and the expectations about hygiene and acceptable/unacceptable behaviours, it is often employed within



abjection. Lynda Nead (1990:326) states that the representation of the female body draws attention to the power of patriarchy, which appropriates women's bodies as possessions. The representation of the abject female body thus acts as a site for the contestation of patriarchal power and ideologies. The grotesque nature of the abject offers women a way of dismantling patriarchal representations of the female.

The abject acts as a tool for feminine reclamation through the re-representation of the female body as an abject body that leaks and exposes itself – in striking contrast to phallogentric<sup>9</sup> representations of the woman.

As Luce Irigaray (1985:113) observes: “[f]luids are implicitly associated with femininity, maternity, menstruation and the body. Fluids are subordinated to that which is concrete and solid.” Expectations around the containment and concealment of the reproductive body in society<sup>10</sup> have created the impression that an uncontained body is abnormal: only when it is covered up and contained is the body seen as acting normally (Green-Cole 2020:788). According to Ruth Green-Cole (2014:798) patriarchal beliefs subjugate women's blood by controlling how it is seen and “thematized as waste, dirty and abject”. This locates the female body as something unclean and monstrous. Female bodily fluids, particularly menstrual blood, have been codified as unruly and vulgar, hence requiring containment and regulation (Green-Cole 2020:788). In this way, stains can be seen as intricately linked to femininity. Green-Cole (2020:787) asserts that although blood is not biologically gendered, “society's values transform it into female, dirty, discharge, abject, shame”.

### *Seeing red: domestic and bodily stains*

De Villiers' works are intimate and force the viewer to consider the presence of bodies and traces left by touch. Using found linens, de Villiers renders figures who might have interacted with the surface of the cloth. The medium of needlework is bound up with notions of tradition, inheritance and history. In an interview with Sharlene Khan (2020: [sp]), de Villiers states: “If somebody gifts me a beautiful cloth full of stains, they talk to me deeply and I know what story to tell.” She is drawn to vintage and discarded

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<sup>9</sup> Relating to the phallus or penis (Soanes 2002:628).

<sup>10</sup> An example of this would be the expectation for women to cover themselves when breastfeeding (Green-Cole 2020:787).

linens. Her use of old and stained fabric speaks to the memories and legacies of the women who used them before. In her work *Bride 1 (Child Bride)* (Fig. 1.9) de Villiers makes use of an old tablecloth passed down from generations of women.

The fabric comprises four panels, joined by bands of crochet cotton lace, and appears severely stained and torn. In the centre de Villiers has embroidered the word “Bride”, and this is accompanied by embroidered stains. In an interview with Khan (2020:[sp]), de Villiers reveals she was gifted a 120-year-old tablecloth, which belonged to a Dutch missionary’s wife. De Villiers (in Khan 2020:[sp]) explains that she was touched by the devotion the missionary’s wife had put into the tablecloth, imaging how many times it was mended and cleaned:

I am mostly drawn to very used and mended, stained cloth. They come with a history. Stains are frozen moments in time – coffee was spilled, a glass of wine fell over, gravy left a trail from dish to plate. I’m moved by the attempts to remove them; by the attempts to mend. I suppose the storyteller in me responds to these scenarios. Mostly I amplify the already existing stains by adding my own – subverting the ideal of superficial beauty and order that form a large part of women’s work.

According to Sorkin (2008:78), once cloth is torn and stained it is impossible to make it whole again without leaving some kind of record. De Villiers’ employment of stitching does not attempt to fully repair holes or cover stains evident in the linen, but rather places emphasis on these scars, drawing attention to them and the traumatic memories they evoke. The intentional domestic staining of the cloth using household items celebrates stains that women have been historically trained to remove as wives and mothers. The process of staining provides de Villiers with a sense of freedom, allowing her to rebel against stereotypical domestic duties associated with femininity: “These endless rituals of cleaning, of ‘making nice’ have always fallen to women ... I find it liberating to stain things” (de Villiers cited in Schimke 2019:[sp]). Many of de Villiers’ works use stains as a starting point, building on them, obscuring, blurring the lines and boundaries. She is working with memories of domesticity, the anamorphous, faded, implied and vaguely familiar stains.

De Villiers often distresses her found fabric more, adding stains using household items like tea, coffee, beetroot, red wine and turmeric. These stains are often small but painful evocations of wounds. Marks or stains from domestic use draw attention

to the item's history. The linens reveal their age and use through frayed edges and faded stains. In her work *Bride (Child Bride)* (Fig. 1.9), the bright red stitches and scab-like formations which populate the white cloth speak to the corporeal body, evocative of small wounds and openings in the female body.

Colour has the potential to communicate social, cultural and symbolic meanings. Different colours have connotations which convey different messages to the viewer. In an interview with de Villiers (2020:[sp]), she explains:

The full range of the colour red – from soft pinks all the way to deep ox blood red – helps to express the feminist themes I work with patriarchy and toxic masculinity (and how it contributes to domestic violence), as well as the fecund and deeply creative qualities of femaleness.

In de Villiers' work the colour red represents stains, flesh, bodily fluids and scars. The red speaks to the female body, which is often associated with the body's reproductive and monstrous functions. The different shades of red in de Villiers' works are used in such a way that they refer to the female body and bodily fluids, like menstrual blood.

The various shades of red used in de Villiers' embroideries call attention to the corporeal body. She explains that red in her work "speaks of blood and guts; of vitality and life and it can signal a warning, or draw attention, like a red stop sign would" (de Villiers 2020). Her blood-red stains are accompanied by sensitively stitched botanical illustrations drawing attention to the female body, reproduction and nature.

In an interview with Khan (2020:[sp]), de Villiers explains that stains are essential in her work, as often the first stain experienced by women is the menstrual stain. She recalls the shame she felt when she experienced her first menstrual cycle and how she bundled her underwear up into the "tiniest" ball (Khan 2020:[sp]). Themes of shame and stains are echoed throughout de Villiers' oeuvre, as she (2004:91) writes about the character Morgan in her novel:

When she was younger her underpants were often stained, despite the wad of rags between her legs. She threw the previous day's dirty rags in a wooden crate from her father's South Coast travels – it remained hidden at the bottom of her cupboard until the smell seeped into the room. The stained rags were then buried in the garden.

De Villiers' persistent use of red and pink threads in her work persuades the viewer to contemplate the abject, the fearful side of femininity, which rituals and disciplinary body practices serve to conceal and contain (Delgado-Marin 2013:[sp]). Her careful portrayal of the body's organs, systems and fluids in thread can be seen as a way for her to make sense of and work through stigmas surrounding the female body.

### **Conclusion**

De Villiers' work deals with the difficulties and traumas she faces as a female in South Africa. Like many women before her she uses her artmaking process as a tool for healing and making sense of the rampant violence experienced by women historically and currently.

Due to their functional quality and relationship to domesticity, textiles have been historically dismissed as simply craft. As indicated in this chapter, feminist movements have reclaimed these mediums as modes of representation and female expression, providing women with a place to communicate freely. I argue that Elizabeth Parker's sampler serves as an autobiographical object which is inscribed with the labour of healing. The concept of embroidery as both healing and a mode of self-expression is evident in de Villiers' works. By exploiting the immanent qualities and associations of found linens and stains, de Villiers is able to invoke the female body, expressing both its fragility and strength – and ability to be healed and mended.

In her ongoing explorations of gender-based violence issues related to the labelling and treatment of women by men in contemporary society, de Villiers refers to the profanities and names often used to describe women. By utilising the crass-stitch de Villiers processes these obscene and violent terms, decommissioning their power through each thoughtful stitch. I argue that her thoughtful employment of stitching as a tool of reclamation aids in de Villiers own personal process of healing, through embroidery's laborious and time-intensive qualities.

De Villiers' works display the techniques and motifs expected of traditional samplers and embroidery through her use of delicate floral motifs, but include subversive content and often crass or bad embroidery stitched to convey commentary on expectations of femininity and the containment of the female body. This is evident in

her works *Bruid* (Fig. 1.2), *Manhood* (Fig.1 .6), *Hooked/unhooked baby* (Fig. 1.8) and *Shallow Grave* (Fig. 1.7).

Employing stains, anatomical diagrams and botanical imagery, de Villiers is able to process specific traumas experienced only by females. Transforming abandoned and useless linens, de Villiers is able to honour the original efforts of the cloth's maker, while transforming these disregarded items into evocative objects of self-expression. I find my work to be analogous to that of de Villiers in many respects. De Villiers' use of the act of embroidery and artmaking as a process of confronting and healing traumas is of particular importance to me. Her exploration of embroidery and cloth as a vehicle for negotiating trauma while simultaneously making feminist commentary is further explored in my own works. The work of de Villiers is violent yet sensitive and speaks of personal pain, abuse and the female experience. I see her obsessive seeking to capture and embroider stains and moments of violence as an embedded need to both subvert and control expectations around femininity.

Through my analysis of de Villiers' work, I unpacked concepts around artmaking, such as the abject and crass-stitching which inform my own body of work. De Villiers' use of her art-making process as a healing process, in which her trauma has the potential to be transformed into something beautiful, resonates with my own practice. Similarly to de Villiers, my practical body of work responds to personal experiences of female trauma and distress. Embroidery provides an individual with a space for reflection and self-inscription. It allows individuals the opportunity to excavate traces of trauma, abuse and illness in order to heal. De Villiers' use of discarded linens and the process of embroidering allows her to release pent-up emotions through embroidering, tearing and staining.

My analysis of de Villiers' works and themes of abuse, abjection, staining and healing helps to contextualise my own embroideries and paintings, which are discussed in Chapter 2.

## Chapter 2

### *Mending myself through embroidered and painted surfaces*

In *Lacerated* (Figs. 2.1 & 2.2), a transparent lace cloth – originally devised as a fly net – is penetrated by an accumulation of sewing pins which erupt from its surface. This once beautiful and delicate fly net, used to cover and protect food, is rendered useless by the gaping hole in its centre. The hole appears to be in the process of being put back together with loose red thread and pins. As mentioned in my discussion of de Villiers' work in Chapter 1, the pin is not able to mend fabric permanently but is instead used as a quick method of holding pieces of fabric together in preparation for stitching (Liu 2019:[sp]). Therefore, the placement of the pins in this work speaks to a haphazard attempt to heal and mend. The pins symbolise the act of survival, trying to frantically hold the pieces together. Rather than being a healing presence, though, the pins appear violent, sticking out from beneath the ephemeral white surface of the net and lace border. This violent presence is emphasised by the placement of the pins: the sharp point of the pin facing upwards threatens to pierce anyone who handles the piece of fabric. The pins hold together the fabric as a temporary reconstruction, but they cannot fully mend the cloth.

The site of the hole-as-wound and piercing is contained by the embroidery hoop, which appears to be helping secure the layers of fabric together. The cloth is decorated with small brown stains of ambiguous origin,<sup>11</sup> which speak to a cloth's usual use for cleanliness and containment. Crudely stitched letters form around the edge of the embroidery hoop. The edges and centre of the cloth evoke a bodily empathy, drawing on similarities between membranes of skin with that of the "skin" of the cloth. The pins speak to the body being invaded, distorted, abused and violated. The excess of red threads, which appear from underneath the surface of the cloth, elicits a sense of ruptured blood vessels and bruising as indices of violence.

The thin, transparent appearance of the cloth resembles ambiguous but intimate body shapes. The cut and stitched fabric suggests that it was used and worn, leaving suggestive stains and marks. The material's folds, small stains and wounds act as

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<sup>11</sup> The viewer is unsure if these stains are blood, food or excrement.

traces of the body with its memories and marks of violence. Sewing and embroidery are generally used to pull together seams, embellish, and decorate. Through my embroidery, I create the impression that I am attempting to mend the wounded and stained surface of these discarded objects. The process of embroidering, staining and piercing alters the fabric's surface, while medically, stitching skin aids in the skin's healing process. My stitches therefore function as a paradox in the sense that they both heal and violate the surface. Objects like nets are often associated with ideas of privacy and decency, as they are commonly used in windows and veils for privacy and modesty (Quarini 2015:27). These fabric objects can be seen as protective layers which separate, conceal and divide things, separating the inside from outside. The object is both decorative and practical. The intervention of my 'bad' stitching and staining on this once precious object suggests my ambivalent feelings towards idealised domestic practices.

This work can be seen as the catalyst for my work and interest in embroidery and domestic linens. The fly net belonged to my grandmother and was used for many years by my mother before it got its first tear and was ultimately discarded by her. Thus, I was first introduced to the world of needlework and textiles by my mother, who also had a collection of delicately sewn objects created by my grandmother. Although I remember being mesmerised by these objects and having a deep desire to create beautiful objects of my own, I began stitching and sewing only in 2018. Stitching became a way for me to connect with these feminine practices. Debbie Stoller (2003:9) expresses a similar sentiment as she explains:

Whenever I would take up the needles, I would feel myself connected not only to my own mother, grandmother and great-grandmother, but also to the women who had developed the craft, the women who had known, as I did, the rhythmic click-click-click of one's knitting needles.

At the beginning of 2020 I began collecting old discarded domestic linens such as tea towels, doilies and pillowcases, many of which I bought from charity and thrift shops or received from people around me. These linens, which were imbued with the history of the women who made and used them, provided a valuable starting point for my work. Using objects and practices which are often associated with domestic practices

allowed me to unpack and subvert expectations around femininity<sup>12</sup> as well as providing me with a surface through which to heal. The use of these linens, which have a history embedded in their fibres, is crucial to me as I unpack embroidery and mending as practices that hold the potential to be defiant and provocative.

I see these mediums as traces of the women in history and my family. As discussed in Chapter 1, embroidery subtly reveals information about its makers. The patterns used in the embroidery, textures of the fabrics and even stains and tears give insight into the cultural and personal aspects of their lives. Material objects such as fabric and cloth can be considered artifacts, where their “physical or representational form – their size, shape, colour, design, weight, and volume” (Grassby 2005:593) symbolise past or present cultures and identities.

In this chapter I explicate my body of practical work with reference to relevant theoretical and critical discussions of the previous chapter. The concepts considered in the previous chapter, such as trauma, materiality, domestic linens, catharsis and abjection, inform my own practice in which I unpack my personal experiences of trauma through stained, embroidered and painted surfaces.

Four groups of work are discussed in this chapter: a collection of embroidered cloths called *Trousseau: Discarded Flesh*, a cloth piece called *I am not Broken*, a series of circular and oval paintings titled *Veiled Wounds*, and a series of large-scale paintings titled *Folded Flesh*. In my works, the female body and flesh is suggested through visual metaphors, such as lace, folded fabric and stains. The works are shaped by physical and psychological experiences associated with sexuality, loss, abuse and violation.

Like many other feminist artists,<sup>13</sup> I have consciously employed materials that are stereotypically gendered as feminine in my work. I use discarded tea towels, table linens and similar household items that, in themselves, reference domesticity and decorative purposes. I consider these objects and fabrics as pieces of skin and flesh, onto which stains and embroidered ‘scars’ and ‘wounds’ are placed. My process

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<sup>12</sup> Stereotypical associations such as women relegated to the kitchen and domestic realm.

<sup>13</sup> These include Judy Chicago, Mariam Shapiro, Louise Bourgeois and Willemien de Villiers, who was discussed in Chapter 1.



involves both machine and hand-stitching, wilful staining and tearing of these found fabrics.

### ***Fabric as Flesh***

Skin is a boundary surface. It encloses and holds together our bodies. It is also the largest sensory organ and receives sensory impressions from the outside world (Anzieu 1898:102). Skin defines the inside of the body from the outside, acting as a container, however because skin is an intermediary surface it also plays a significant role in how bodies are in contact with environments (Anzieu 1898:129). Skin could be seen as a vital aspect of bodily life (Anzieu 1898:102). Heidi Kellet (2017:70) expands on this when she states:

At the very core of skin's nature is a paradox—it is both a boundary that seals off the interior parts of the body from the exterior world and a porous interface that brings bodies and objects in the world into relation. On the one hand, skin is everything to us: it is a vitally protective envelope that makes us visible, and it mediates, stores, filters, and supports our experiences of being a body in the world. On the other hand, skin is nothing to us: it is a fleshy sheath so constant and permanent that we are often blind to it, allowing us to take it for granted through the increasing use of cosmetic surgery and other forms of epidermal modification (e.g., tattoo, piercing, scarring, sub-dermal implantations) and render it seemingly invisible when it is not out of bounds or causing pain.

Kellet (2017:70) describes skin as paradoxical in the sense that, while serving as a boundary, it also connects us to the inside of our bodies and the abject. Skin may be read as a liminal<sup>14</sup> space which is exposed to the threat of abjection because it is susceptible to rupturing from inside and vulnerable to invasion from outside. The natural processes gone through by skin mean that it is “constantly in a process of decay and regeneration” (Watson 2010:39), shedding dead skin cells and expelling fluids from its surface. Substances that emanate from the skin and body may be seen as abject because they cross the boundary between the inside of the body and the outside world. Although skin acts as a container covering and protecting our bodies, it is also on the cusp. Substances which come directly from the skin that escape its control, such as blood, sweat, discharge and breast milk, are categorised as more

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<sup>14</sup> Skin occupies the space around the body but also encloses the body, existing in a state of transition between two thresholds.

abject. I associate these abject notions of the skin with the feminine. As Grosz (1994:203) observes, the female body is “inscribed as a mode of seepage ... lacking self-containment ... a formlessness that engulfs all form, a disorder that threatens all order”.

Claudia Benthien (2002:3) notes: “In contemporary art, the surface of the body is defined as a projection surface and a fetish, a place of wounds and stigmatization, an individual dress or a cover to be modified”. A number of contemporary artists working within feminist frameworks<sup>15</sup> engage with skin and flesh as visual trope to unpack issues of race, sexuality and identity, surface or metaphor. The carnality of flesh and skin provides artists with a valuable field of metaphor and associations to be made with the body as an object, where cultural and social meanings may be inscribed. Using the body, particularly the skin as a surface covered and marked by patterns and wounds, is of particular interest to me, as I use the concept of fabric as a kind of second skin which alludes to the wounded female body. The marks I create on the fabric and skin-like surfaces refer not only to scars and wounds but also to marks of beauty and decoration.

Fabric and flesh are analogous due to their capacity to conceal, and act as a surface. Textiles have a familiar presence throughout individuals' lives. When babies are born, they are often covered in fabric, and during life individuals are in frequent contact with cloth in the form of clothing and upholstered furniture (Lee 2019:9). In this sense cloth, fabric, and textiles are the most intimate and relatable materials that are in permanent contact with the body (Lee 2019:3). Clothing has many similarities to actual skin; it is soft and sometimes even odorous as it absorbs fluids and marks from the outside world (Entwistle 2002:133). Joanne Entwistle (2000:327) explains that fabrics and clothes mark the threshold between “self and other”, as well as enforce standards of containment. Solveigh Goett (2016:122) links textiles to:

the tear of pain and happiness, the sweat of anxiety and excitement both part of the self and absorbed by cloth, perception and affection, inside and out, body and object interwoven in memory. Folds, entanglements and creases, comfort and restraint, interwoven strands, loose ends, unravelling threads, seams and knots, wear

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<sup>15</sup> Artists such as Berni Searle, Leora Farber and Penny Siopis.

and tear, invention and imagination, magic and symbolism, are all embedded in the fabrics of our lives.

Textiles hold a close relationship to the lived body, making them markers of memories and experiences (Briggs-Goode & Baxter 2020:33). In many ways fabric is a significant material: it constitutes the majority of my practical work and has also served as a barrier for me, as I often used it to conceal scars on my body.

As skin caresses skin, cloth caresses skin, skin caresses cloth, they exist in proximal relationship. To think of this as an interlacing between skin, cloth, and skin is to think of an intricate crisscrossing of threads that can be loosened or tightened accordingly (Dormor 2018:125).

As Catherine Dormor (2018:125) acknowledges, this intimate relationship between cloth and body serves as the basis for a bodily understanding of cloth. The intimate relationship between cloth and skin or fabric and flesh may also evoke the erotic and feminine. As clothing has a close relationship to the body, fabrics may be read as a 'second skin'. Objects such as handkerchiefs and underwear are often in close proximity to the human body and absorb bodily stains and spills. The fabric's soft, impermanent nature evokes the human form. Using the idea of fabric as flesh, my works represent the body in a non-literal way: they are abstracted, fragmented and broken pieces of the female body which attempt to depict the realities of flesh, from benign scars to gaping wounds. I use paint, embroidery and pastels to enhance and reflect the qualities of skin, especially through trauma, scars, blemishes, blood and bruising.

My artistic process includes staining fabric to create flesh and skin-like patterns and textures which evoke a sense of trauma, bruising and rupture. The method of puncturing, stitching and suturing cloth mimics that of medical practices and skin healing. Stitching and embroidery are physical acts of transformation, the alteration of one material by another. My embroidered doilies and tea towels are an attempt to disrupt and subvert the domestic. As Leslie Kanés Weisman (1994:28) notes, females are often closely linked to the home and domesticity: "[G]irls are taught to relate to personal body space, interiors and the domestic sphere, and boys to reflect upon public outdoor space". The notion of the domestic as feminine is a concept I have often struggled with: like de Villiers' attitudes towards "making nice" and cleaning up, I feel

a strong sense of resentment. The process of taking embroidered and sewn objects which were once used within the domestic sphere and as objects used to serve men and perform household chores is liberating as I stain, cut and damage the surfaces which I 'should' be attempting to fix and clean. The act of staining and dirtying these objects allows me to subvert expectations surrounding femininity and duties within society. Fabrics and stitching are often associated with femininity, through routine domestic activities that use cloth such as housework, cleaning and child-rearing. By subverting these traditions, I am able to signal my resistance to them.

In *Contusion* (Fig. 2.3) an embroidery hoop holds a section of fabric covered in a light yellow and purple hue reminiscent of bruised skin. Alongside the bruise is a roughly stitched area rendered in red, purple, beige and green thread, emphasising the state of the abraded surface. On the bottom corner of the handkerchief there are small embroidered flowers done in blue and pink thread. The delicately embroidered flowers, contrasted with the harshly bruised area of skin, evokes notions of trauma, the skin appears compromised and fragile. The use of the handkerchief is significant, as such items are what Yi Fu Tuan (2002: 2017) calls a "border-line surface". He explains: "Outside and inside are both intimate – they are always ready to be reversed. If there exists a border-line surface between such an inside and outside, this surface is painful on both sides". Louise Purbrick (1976:117) explains that fabric objects like handkerchiefs "mediate the physical and moral, the private and public, the personal and political". Handkerchiefs are often read as symbols of geniality and cleanliness, as they are used to clean and wipe. However, the intervention of the bruised area of skin suggests a transgression (Purbrick 1976:117). The use of colour and stitching evokes flesh through its forms and tone. The fragility and delicacy of the discarded linens draw on the fragility of the body and skin. Any object which has been previously used and handled carries particular traces and histories of the body. Discarded domestic linens offer a surface to explore the historical associations of propriety and cleanliness and my resistance against constraints of domesticity.

My use of embroidery and staining decoration both embellishes and corrupts the fabric not only on its exterior but throughout its threads, transforming these objects. In *Discarded Flesh* (Figs. 2.4-2.8), intricate patterns of embroidery become sites of disruption, and the fabric is disfigured by these embellishments and stains. Traditional

embroidery techniques like back stitches and satin stitches are used to create these bruised areas referencing gender-specific crafts. However, the unconventional subject matter such as stains, bruises and wounds which are used to embellish the surface attempt to subvert and redefine handwork and associations made with the feminine through embroidery. This 'redefinition' of handiwork is evident within the stitching and staining of works by de Villiers, who uses her embroidered surface as a way of defying traditional expectations of women.

### **Trousseau: Discarded Flesh series**

“Reiterated over and over again ... the home is portrayed as a female site, the interstices of which encompass the pleasures and pains of woman's experience” (Kotik 1994: 81).

As can be seen, many of the objects I work on were already stained when I received them, bearing traces of their former domestic lives (see Figs. 2.3-2.7). In most of the pieces, however, I have emphasised and added stains to the cloths, subverting the purpose of these cloths and defying my domestic desire to preserve and clean. Through embroidery I grapple with notions of femininity and gender, healing and violation. In my work I employ items that are imbued with connotations of femininity and its rituals through years of gendered coding. These linens therefore act as carriers of femininity and traces of the female body.

Krista McCracken (2019:[sp]) remarks:

Regardless of its historical or cultural particulars, the skills of embroidery have often traditionally been passed down through families and communities. This transmission of knowledge was often connected to gender roles and kinship ties. In the nineteenth century, embroidery was taught to middle and upper-class young women, alongside other arts and academic subjects, as a way to demonstrate feminine qualities and reinforce a woman's suitability for marriage.

Females are often taught to sew by their mothers, grandmothers and other women in their families, connecting them to an extensive history and culture of domesticity. Women in the West were often required to sew and embroider objects for their dowry or trousseau (McCracken 2019:[sp]). Traditional matrilineal dowries contained domestic objects, passed down or crafted for the future marital home (Gray 2018:5). Objects such as embroidered tablecloths, curtains, bed linen, pillowcases, towels,

doilies, and intimate apparel would be monogrammed and initialled, demonstrating their makers' hand-crafting abilities (Gray 2018:5).

Historically, in the West, dowries played a role in officially defining marriage and symbolised the relationship between families (Gray 2018:6). Dowries also played a significant role in life events such as “christenings, church confirmations, engagements and marriages and, finally, the burying of the deceased” (Gray 2018:6). Dowry collections and trousseaus were often embedded with the traces of the events they were used and created for (Gray 2018:6). Elizabeth Gray (2018:6) observes that

dowry objects are inscribed with a myriad of stitches that form personalised monograms of the owners and stitched floriferous gardens plus geometric designs and are often filled with rich meanings and cultural imagery that denoted their ancestries. In this way, these dowry collections are archives of stitched iconography encoded as an everyday potent reminder of the sacredness of love, virtue, marriage, family, life and death.

In this series of work (Figs. 2.3-2.8), I see my collection of domestic linens as evocative of dowry in the form of a trousseau. The title *Trousseau: Discarded flesh* refers to the fact that these objects were discarded and abandoned by their previous owners and makers but were once presumably carefully crafted and used in ways similar to those in dowry collections. I see each of these unique domestic linens as a part of a larger history of female crafting and making. Unlike traditional, beautiful, stitched objects which would form part of a woman's collection, these linens are stained, broken and torn. Many contain decoratively stitched borders and floral motifs which I interrupt with stains and loose stitching.

I can recall that I felt ambivalent about domestic duties and chores for most of my younger life. The ambivalent responses I still feel towards certain domestic duties and expectations surrounding femininity are echoed through my subversive stitching and painting. Ambivalence relates to having opposing feelings towards expectations of women and may be read as a shared anxiety throughout women's history, seen through the work and lives of artists and within the current feminist movement (Weida 2011:183).<sup>16</sup> Courtney Lee Weida (2011:183) examines the role of ambivalence for contemporary female artists who subvert the confines of feminine expectations

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<sup>16</sup> Artists like Orly Cogan, Ghada Amer and Sue Richardson.

through their practice of ceramics which, like sewing and embroidery, may be read as a traditional female activity. Weida (2011:183) states:

By definition, the concept of ambivalence characterizes the nuances, contradictions, tensions, and dualisms associated with women's works and women's lives. It applies to shifts and fluctuations in beliefs and actions: where one is torn between opposite, yet coexisting desires.

Ambivalence plays a role in my work, allowing me to embrace feelings of uncertainty, conflicting ideas and emotions towards patriarchal culture and my own role as a woman. My painting and embroidery practices embody personal, psychological and physical experiences, negotiating boundaries of feminine trauma. I use objects like lace and doilies in contrast with bruised and disrupted skin to create a sense of unease and ultimately explore my ambivalent feelings towards expectations that have been placed on me since an early age. With reference to women's art, Lucy Lippard (1976:56) suggests that using familiar domestic settings and objects is a strategy employed by feminist artists to subvert and confront these realities. She (1976:56) states:

[W]omen make art to escape, overwhelm, or transform daily realities . . . so it makes sense that those women artists who do focus on domestic imagery often seem to be taking off from, rather than getting off on, the implications of floors and brooms and dirty laundry. They work from such imagery because it's there, because it's what they know best, because they can't escape it.

Stitched and embroidered objects created for domestic use have often been relegated to the domestic sphere, devaluing and dismissing the proficient skills needed to create the works (McCracken 2019:[sp]). But, as discussed in Chapter 1 with reference to samplers,<sup>17</sup> embroidered works often reveal deep personal feelings of their makers and provide rich cultural insight into the situations of that current time. These objects very subtly reveal information about their makers attitudes towards their lives.

In my *Trousseau: Discarded Flesh* series (Figs 2.3-2.8), the beauty of the original decorative surfaces, adorned with flowers and lace borders, is interrupted by roughly embroidered scars. In these works, I have used embroidery floss and a satin stitch to create the illusion of scars, stretchmarks and cuts in the process of healing. The use

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<sup>17</sup> I looked specifically at Elizabeth Parker's sampler, which expresses her traumatic experiences and depression.

of stitching to create scars and stretchmarks is done to further evoke the skin-like qualities of the fabric. The thick beige stitches (see Fig. 2.5) draw on stretch marks, which often carry connotations of femininity in their indexical traces of pregnancy (Harris 2013:30). The use of these marks, which are linked to femininity, further draws a connection to my body and my frustration towards expectations of women being scar and stretchmark free.

In contemporary society females are pressured to conceal marks of aging and transgression (Ahmed & Stacey 2001:1). Ahmed and Stacey (2001:1) state:

[I]n consumer culture we are encouraged to read skin, especially feminine skin as something that needs to be worked upon, in order to be protected from the passage of time or the severity of the external world, and in order to retain its marker of gender difference in the softness of feel. We may be encouraged to fear 'skin conditions' and to use creams to prevent the signs of ageing from appearing on our skins. We may worry about the stretch marks that tear (through) the skin, both an affect and sign of the expansion and contradiction of our bodily forms.

Attempting to conceal signs of ageing, wounded or torn skin is often done to reinforce notions around the contained and 'flawless' female body (Ahmed & Stacy 2001:1). As Tyler observes, "this emphasis on the surface of the body simultaneously invokes the familiar construction of femininity as nothing but surface: the visual construction of women as desirable objects for the male gaze" (2001:71). Society is often pressured to see the female body as an object which should be manipulated and protected from aging, a surface which constantly needs to be controlled. Rachel Alpha Johnston Hurst (2008:115) argues that the male tendency to fetishise female body parts leads to beauty being ascribed to the surface, and "a superficial ruse or a lure is deeply embedded in sexist contempt for femininity and this contributes to the feminization of the skin" (Alpha Johnston Hurst 2008:115).

The surface of the cloth (see Fig. 2.5) is embellished with beige, pink and white threads decorating the surface with scars that would typically be considered 'ugly.' The cloth is torn and stitched back together, depicting the act of mending. The process of embroidering these wounds allows me to symbolically control my body and the way it is viewed. The scars of stretchmarks which populate the fabric create a contrast



between beauty and wounding. The floral motifs visibly deconstructed and reconstructed speak to this contrast created between femininity and violence.

Pajackowska (2010:134) states: “the stitch pierces, punctuates, penetrates [...] and in a single gesture it combines both aspects of the paradox of destruction and creation”. Given the invasive nature of needlework, which both breaks and heals, I use the process of needlework and cloth as a metaphor for disrupting the body's flesh while simultaneously healing. I emphasise this duality in the process of stitching by leaving behind pins in the fabric. Due to my interest in the process of healing through art making, I chose to focus on the idea of scars, both open and healed. Using a variety of soft, almost flesh-coloured threads,<sup>18</sup> I have stitched the fabric with an abstract pattern that traces the contours of the fabric, accentuating the distinct stains, folds and wounds.

Embroidery and fabric appears soft and somewhat pleasant to look at and touch – in contrast with physical wounds, which appear repulsive and abject and are often concealed under plasters, bandages and clothing while in the healing process (Paugam 2016:22). Depicting bruises and abraded areas of flesh through thread is a way for me to create and heal wounds. Though wounds are normally abject and evoke a sense of disgust, by embroidering wounds I am able to create a dichotomy between beauty and the abject, healing and disruption.

### **Stitched flowers: soft but violent**

The work *I am not broken* (Figs. 2.9-2.11) consists of a long piece of sheer fabric, covered in paragraphs of text sewn in red thread, as well as bulbous sack-like pockets created from light pink netting. Small flowers cast in latex are stitched into these sacs, creating small womb-like areas. The carefully embroidered text comes from a diary entry I wrote to myself. In this work I unpack my feelings of inadequacy and my perceptions of the restraints placed upon femininity, through the intricately embroidered surface. The process of stitching text is slow and careful; using my sewing machine it becomes like a ritualised process. Creating *I am not broken* (Figs. 2.9-2.11) involved sewing numerous lines of text, using my sewing machine. Through repetitive movements of sewing, there are hundreds of lines interweaving to create a

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<sup>18</sup> I refer to the term ‘flesh coloured’ to describe my own flesh and skin.

body of text in crimson threads. These labour- and time-intensive processes provide me with a sense of relief and a space for reflection, in which I am able to process my feelings and emotions. This work emerged as a personal reflection of my past traumas and feelings of anxiety, depression and uncertainty. Like painting and embroidery, creative writing offers a space of quiet contemplation, a space where I can come to terms with and process personal trauma and pain. Recounting experiences of feeling broken and helpless provides me with a sense of control, resistance and resilience. I explore these intimate traumas and violence in my art as a way of expressing difficult-to-process emotions. My works are about exploring past violence while seeking a sense of acceptance, and catharsis in response to my past trauma. The process of slow stitching and the use of latex flowers, which operate as fragile skin-like forms, attempts to place emphasis on the broken body and skin. The latex which was used to create the flowers is used for its skin-like qualities. The latex evokes eroticism and the sense of touch. The flowers placed in the net pockets draw on the tradition of floral motifs often used historically in embroideries.

The process of creating the latex flowers involved pouring a liquid latex into a silicone mould in the form of a flower. Latex, in its elasticity, colour and texture, offers me a surface that is closely linked to human skin. Therefore, I use latex as a medium which, like lace, contains a duality of beauty and abjection. In this work I was primarily concerned with creating an object that could be read as both beautiful and abject, an object which expressed my feelings and is linked to femininity. In its veil-like nature, the object is associated with femininity, marriage and, ultimately, the domestic. Traditional connotations of beauty associated with flowers are destabilised through the subversion of familiar material which is replaced with the latex which replicates human skin. The duality of skin as abject and beautiful is highlighted by Sheila Cavanagh, Angela Failler and Alpha Johnston Hurst (2013:2):

The fact that skin, or representations of skin, can signify beauty and abjection at once, or evoke attraction and repulsion simultaneously, draws attention to the skin's capacity to bear multiple and contradictory meanings, skin doth fester and flower.

The womb-like finely woven pink netting provides a more amorphous enclosure as well as an added layer of separation around the flowers. The womb has historically been associated with the monstrous, as it exists on the threshold between inside and

outside (Creed 2007:49). Within patriarchal discourse the womb acts a symbol of the impurity and animality present within the woman's body (Creed 2007:49). The womb in its monstrosity acts as a vessel sitting on the border of life and death, but I read the womb as a symbol for rebirth. In this work I reference a healing process, where these small protective and womb-like pouches are life giving and regenerative.

The flowers, which are normally seen as symbols of beauty, often signifying femininity and purity, are rendered abject through the latex (see Fig. 2.10). The use of latex plays an important role in describing the abject nature of the female body. Mary Brooks (2008:[sp]) explains that there are a number of writings which address the concept of flowers in embroideries as a common motif used in the Victorian era: "flower symbolism was used in floral embroidery designs as a method through which women could silently express themselves". Flowers appear as common motifs and symbols on embroideries and were often used by women to communicate specific ideas (Brooks 2008:[sp]). Using the idea of flowers as symbols of normative femininity and motifs closely linked with embroidery practices, the latex flowers in my work attempt to subvert and disrupt tropes of beauty and femininity through their abject nature.

In my work, I use sheer fabric, red thread and latex, which replicates the texture of skin. In stitching, my needle penetrates the fabric, puncturing and changing both its surface appearance and structure. This alters and changes the surface of the cloth, just like I have been changed by my trauma. The stitches, which create small holes in the fabric, ultimately damage the fabric, while the small sac-like areas keep the latex flowers safe. This dichotomy between safety and violence expresses the way I have often felt discarded and damaged, while also safe.

### ***Folded Flesh***

When I began this project, I knew that I wanted to paint. I was aware that paint suited my purposes, as its tactility has historically been used in the West to invoke female flesh. In Renaissance paintings of the female nude by Titian, for example, there is not only an analogy between the facture of pigment and that of flesh but also between a canvas support and skin. As Natasha Seaman (2021: [sp]) explained in a discussion of a 2021 exhibition of the *Poesie* paintings at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston:

Titian was an early innovator of using canvas as a support. Rather than gessoing it into a facsimile of wooden panel, he kept the weave visible, facilitating meltingly soft edges and a convincing sense of the matte surface of skin. In his later years, he revolutionized the application of oil paint, using traditional glazes but also impastos, and often applying paint with large brushes or his fingers.

This historical association of paint and its fabric support with flesh and skin, and with not only palpability and touch but also bodily violation, was apt for me to reference critically in my own project.

However, I was unsure of the subject matter or how to approach physically depicting what I wanted to articulate. This work emerged as a process of trying to articulate and depict a broken but beautiful body; a body covered in both lace and scars. The process of painting, layering and thinning the oil paints is an attempt to emphasise the paint's abilities to take on the forms and layers of skin. I felt confident that oil paint was an appropriate material to use to imitate and render fabric and flesh. I began the works by photographing pieces of fabric in embroidery hoops. As I started painting the surface of fabric and lace, I became attracted to the ambiguous qualities with which I was presented. The harder I tried to paint the accurate folds and texture of fabric, the more ambiguous and body-like the paintings started to become. Similarly, the use of fabric as a metaphor for wounded skin in my embroideries became depictions of both fabric and flesh in my paintings. In these painted works, I seek to draw on the ambiguous relationship between skin and cloth and containment and release. Rather than creating figurative paintings or representational images, these paintings draw on the ambiguity of being both body and fabric. The paintings do not appear entirely conclusive or fully reveal their subject matter, existing between abstraction and figuration. The textures of folds, stained and torn surfaces visible in the works refer to material traces of violence and marks left behind by trauma.

The skin acts as a record of physical trauma; it denotes areas of pain and change through scars and stretchmarks (Watson 2010:28). Through my use of different mediums, I create a metaphorical broken and scarred skin. This skin does not express or depict real physical wounds or the wounds of my self-harm, but rather speaks to the emotional pain and wounds of my psyche. The oil paint and lace create ruptures in the surface of the painting. This medium thus acts as a metaphor for the fragility of the

female body and my own body. According to Amy Watson (2010:28), the skin acts as a palimpsest which records thoughts and past events through scars.

The simplified biomorphic forms used in my painting *In Folded Flesh I* (Fig. 2.12) are symbolic of abstract segments of skin that reveal representations of damaged and healing skin, ultimately speaking to pain and violence. The paintings are meant to be ambiguous in nature, simultaneously representing skin and pieces of fabric, sheets folded and scrunched up. In many ways the paintings are of stained fabrics crumpled up from the process of being scrubbed in an attempt to remove both trace and shame. The folds of fabric, painted in soft tones of pinks, peaches and beiges, mimic the folds in skin and the body (see Fig. 2.12). The skin-like areas are rendered in layers of oil paint which are then layered with the silhouettes of sprayed-through lace in contrasting colours. This process of layering emphasises the ambiguous relationship between cloth and skin. I work with pink and flesh-toned colours in order to mimic my own flesh while drawing on ideas of femininity, and bodily abjection.

### ***Painting as breathing***

The intimate spaces of my paintings function simultaneously as an expression of my anguish and depression, while exploring the possibility for healing through the painted surface. Painting is a physical activity in which the body is present in the painted surface, every mark, brushstroke or stain mark where the body has been, therefore creating artworks in which my own body is intrinsically embedded. Painting and art-making function as a healing process, in which my personal trauma has the potential to be transformed into something beautiful. The process allows me to release pent-up emotions through mark-making, embroidery and painting. My artworks thus express certain trauma and emotions that are too painful and difficult to translate into words or literal imagery.

The entire process of painting is cathartic for me; from priming the canvas, to mixing the colours and finally applying the paint to the surface. The viscosity and texture of oil paint, which takes long periods of time to dry and often remains wet underneath the dried surface, also has a likeness to skin (Watson 2019:80). The subtle scarring of the paint and areas of thickness often simulate scarred and opened flesh and evoke a

sense of the lived-in body. The idea of the skin as more than a “passive surface” is discussed by Cavanagh et al. (2013:4):

As a condition of human subjectivity and a primary site of its negotiation, skin bears multiple, complex pressures both from within and without, and generates a range of expressions particular to persons, cultures and environments. Skin separates us from and connects us to others and to objects in the world. We feel our skins as intimately our own and yet they are continually shared by encounter and exchange.

My painted works speak of skin as an embodied experience, and in this section of the chapter I attempt to map out my own embodied experiences in painterly terms. My paintings can be seen as situated between figuration and abstraction. Despite the fact that many of the works can be seen to depict cloth and embroidery hoops, they also assert a certain ambiguity where fabric and embroidery hoop becomes flesh. Similarly, to human skin, the paint has the potential to rupture, bleed and scar, a process of abjection. Like my works on fabric, the paintings evoke a sense of the haptic. The rendering of fabric and flesh, materials which are soft and ubiquitous throughout an individual’s life, may call on memories of touch. In my painted works, the act of painting can be seen as a metaphor for the process of both violating and healing flesh.

My painting practice embodies personal psychological and physical experiences of trauma which are explored through the surface of the canvas. Creating these works served as a way of working through past traumas and events through the action of painting. Often while I paint, I am able to compose myself. The coordination and focus required to create my surfaces slows my breathing, ultimately calming me down. The rhythmic motion of applying paint to my canvas and slowly mixing colours allows me an escape from reality.

The material surfaces of my paintings record traumatic moments inflicted on the physical human body through the skin. In these works the surfaces act as a boundary and site of exchange between the interior and exterior. The evocative painted surfaces through their colour and texture speak to the transformative processes that the skin undergoes when healing. The painted flesh and lace unpack my memories of traumatic experiences through form, material, and surface. Fragmented pieces of

skin and wounded textures evoke the sense of a traumatised body. Through my painting and stitching I often feel a sense of catharsis.

Noreen Kruse (1979:164) defines catharsis as a purgation or purification of emotions. Processes of cutting, embroidery and sewing signify a form of psychological healing and catharsis. Catharsis refers to an “emotional discharge” resulting from distressful and unpleasant emotions (Bielby 1997:4). Roman Meinhold (2016:96) defines catharsis as “homoeopathic distress discharge of the body–soul–mind–complex resulting in a relieving pleasure”. Meinhold (2016:96) places significance on the rituals related to catharsis, explaining that the process generally relies on repetition and pattern. This drawing out of negative emotions may allow for an emotional “recharge” (Meinhold 2016:106). Strong feelings of disgust, hatred and anguish are often imbued in my works, but through these works and repetitive processes I ‘purge’ myself from these emotions, enacting catharsis.

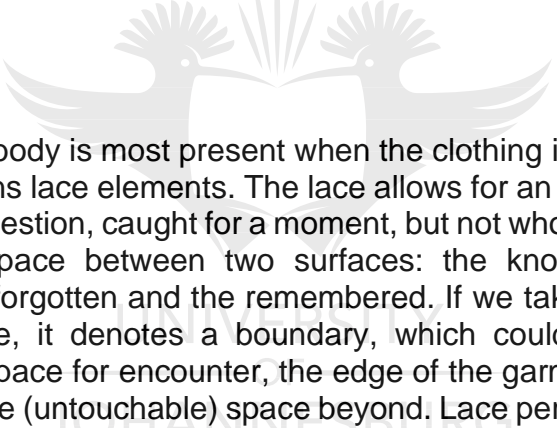
Ettinger (2009:8) focuses on how art can transform painful traces of traumatic events. She considers painting and artmaking a secure space wherein these traces are transformed. Ettinger (2009:22) sees art as a passageway which provides a transformative space, premised on the intimate relationship between compassionate relations to others and aesthetic processes. Art provides an individual with a space for reflection and self-inscription, which is cathartic. It allows individuals the opportunity to excavate traces of trauma, abuse and illness in order to heal. Ettinger (in Evans 2016:[sp]) sees the surfaces of artworks as transformative spaces in which awareness and empathy of the traumatic experiences of others are evoked. As stated above, trauma-related art finds traces of the wound not only in the traumatised individual but in those who engage with the work. As in Ettinger’s (2009) writing on painting and artmaking, in my work I seek to heal traces of personal and historical feminine traumas through the painted and stitched surface.

The flesh-coloured forms resemble indiscernible and ambiguous body shapes, while the depicted fabric is used and worn, suffused with suggestive stains and marks. The lace and fabric-like forms present in the paintings draw on the tradition of crafts and sewing. As before, the skin and cloth act as a paradoxical site, one of both healing and violence. The carefully painted embroidery hoop *In Folded Flesh II* (Fig. 2.14) appears to hold the skin tightly. The fact that the skin is in the embroidery hoop

suggests that it is in the process of being, or is about to be, stitched into. Although the skin does not appear overtly wounded, the faded red mark of a doily is present towards the bottom of the embroidery hoop. The intricate patterns carefully rendered in red may be read as scar-like, reminiscent of burst blood vessels.

Each of the paintings which form part of the *Folded Flesh* series (Figs. 2.12-2.17) take on different colours and hues evocative of wounds and healing skin. The works range from dark purples and bright oranges to deep browns and light beiges. My paintings, in contrast with my embroideries, do not emphasise scars or wounding but, rather, draw on ideas of the skin in the process of healing. In these works, my goal was to paint works which speak to a process of healing, as there are no overt violations or wounds visible, but rather the depiction of the folded fabric and skin appears almost smooth in certain places. The presence of the lace which covers the top layer of the flesh, however, starts to create a very subtle suggestion of scars.

### **Lace as scars**



The glimpsed body is most present when the clothing is made from lace, or contains lace elements. The lace allows for an undefined, a hoped for suggestion, caught for a moment, but not wholly revealed. An intimate space between two surfaces: the known and the unknown; the forgotten and the remembered. If we take the use of lace in lingerie, it denotes a boundary, which could become a borderline: a space for encounter, the edge of the garment and the beginning of the (untouchable) space beyond. Lace performs as the erotic edge between the open and the secret, the pure and the impure, innocence and transgression, providing the perfect *mise-en-scène*, leading yet fugitive, high definition and low definition, occupying the foreground and then receding to become a backdrop (Millar 2010:12).

Lace is a textile which has a complex and rich history and is often associated with femininity. Due to this textile's common association with the female body,<sup>19</sup> I see lace as an appropriate tool to disrupt this association and to express my ambivalence about it. Millar (2010:12) observes that lace may describe a threshold, revealing glimpses of the interior body and skin underneath. There is a sense of concealment and display

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<sup>19</sup> Lace is a fabric used primarily for the construction of feminine items. Garments which are made solely for and marketed towards women, like wedding dresses, veils and lingerie, are all made from lace.



present within lace, where on one hand the skin is mostly covered, while on the other the small gaps between the threads reveal what is underneath.

Lace as a medium in art is used by many feminist artists, with the late feminist artist Miriam Shapiro at the forefront of this visual trope. Schapiro (Seiberling, 1976: 63) describes the use of lace in her work:

... for me it is a metaphor for space, history, ideology, politics. It conveys a lot of messages. It's strong, fragile, varied in pattern and form, structured, romantic, functional. I think most women would like to be like lace.

Schapiro popularised the use of lace in feminist art during the 1970s in her depiction and use of *femmagés*<sup>20</sup> (Buttress 2013:31). In her works she achieves layers through her use of lace and other fabrics pasted onto her works or stencilling using paints. In the 1970s, Shapiro created many of her pieces from domestic linens like tablecloths, curtains, and aprons, directly referencing the domestic and feminine (Chansky 2010:687). Similar to my work, her *femmagés* are made up of layers of different textures. The qualities of fabric and lace offered Shapiro a means to unpack her emotions and inner feelings, while engaging with other issues relating to womanhood (Seiberling 1976:63).

Joy Buttress (2013:47) explains the value of lace as a visual symbol, arguing that it connects the viewer to femininity and womanhood through its abilities to both conceal and accentuate certain areas of the body. Lace therefore enables gender-related experiences to be expressed through patterns and stitches. Lace fabric reveals small areas of the skin and body through overlaid threads, exposing areas of flesh which would be covered by other fabrics (Buttress 2013:47). As lace is often constructed as feminine, many feminist artists<sup>21</sup> have made reference to it to challenge and complicate notions of gender and ideas regarding women's work. As in my own works, many of these artists subvert the social construction of femininity by disrupting 'beautiful' lace surfaces.

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<sup>20</sup> Term used to include "activities as they were practiced by women using traditional women's techniques to achieve their art-sewing, piecing, hooking, cutting, appliquéing, cooking and the like – activities also engaged in by men but assigned in history to women" (Schapiro & Meyer [sa]:[sp])

<sup>21</sup> Miriam Shapiro, Anne Wilson and Kira O'Reilly, for example.

In my painting series *Folded Flesh* (Figs. 2.12-2.17), the outer skin appears opened. The outer surfaces of these paintings become a palimpsest of scars, suggesting that healing has taken place. In these works, patterns created by the lace and embroidery act as a signifier of scars, connecting it to both beauty and violence. The construction and structure of lace, which is defined by small holes in the fabric, means that “skin is exposed when worn over the naked body, revealing and concealing the surface of our intimate space as it moves” (Buttress 2013:47). The role of uncovered skin and flesh is significant to understanding why lace can be read as erotic and alluring. The use of lace placed over skin to reveal layers beneath is explored in my painted works. The lace used in my work enables me to reference feminine domestic practices as well as explore the female body as a site of trauma. The lace further speaks to themes of concealment and revealment, themes which may be read in terms of my experience of trauma and expressing my emotions. I deal with certain traumas through my painting, negotiating with myself about what to cover with the lace and which parts to reveal or enhance.

The physical act of painting allows me to free my emotional psyche from the weight of undesired emotions and past experiences. My paintings are both alluring and uneasy, allowing me to work through emotional pain. Painting offers me a means of navigating my personal trauma and healing processes.

### ***Mending my broken skin***

As Cathy Caruth (1996:4) observes: “[t]rauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature — the way it was precisely not known in the first instance — returns to haunt the survivor later on”. Many ideas in my body of work correlate with my attempts at healing through the stitched and painted surface confronting traumas of my past.

These paintings explore the body through form and fabric. They act as palimpsests of memory and bear the physical marks of wounds and pain – but, most importantly, also healing and regrowth. The surfaces are rendered ambiguous and fragmented by my intervention of lace and mark making. In this way, my paintings can be read as slightly abstract, acting as ambiguous fragments of the flesh.

As discussed in Chapter 1, needlework has come to signify femininity (Parker 1984:6). Like embroidery, various forms of needlework, like knitting, sewing and tapestry, have been engendered with ideas associated with femininity, such as service, selflessness, docility and obedience (Parker 1984:6). I too use processes of stitching and collage to explore my experience as a female. Materials such as oil paint, beads and lace are used to expose and negotiate the merged terrains of the body and femininity. I use the mediums of handcrafting and needlework as a way of connecting with the histories of women who have used them before as well as subverting expectations associated with these objects.

Another series of works that use painting and lace, titled *Veiled Wounds I-V* (Figs. 2.18-2.23), comprise a set of oval and circular canvases in various sizes. The size and round shape of the canvases draw on the embroidery hoop, with the canvas acting as pieces of flesh and fabric caught in the hoop. These works are different from my larger paintings, as I include collage, beads and stitching onto their surfaces. Like my *Folded Flesh* series, each canvas takes on a different colour of the wounded skin and surface. The colours of the body range in temperature from warm pink fleshy hues to cooler bluish purples, which suggests the body undergoing healing of bruising and damage. In *Veiled Wounds I* (Fig. 2.18), the surface of the canvas is painted in brown flesh colour. After painting the canvas, I sprayed a net-like pattern forming an indication of bruises and wounded skin. I then covered it in thick paint pressed through the surface of a flower-shaped stencil. I then added a layer of red, pink and white beads. The texture and colour of the beads in relation to the fine net-like wounds create a sense of raised skin. The scale and round shape of these works evokes voyeurism and intimacy, like looking at the body through a microscope or as a kind of specimen. I see these works as specimens and samples of trauma, but where I am able to unpack each trauma through specific painterly and material moments without attempting to depict the specific traumatic events themselves. Pennina Barnett (2015:3) describes the term repair with reference to an object (skin or cloth) which needs to be made “whole” again. In these works, I use suturing and sewing to close up traumatic wounds (Barnett 2015:3).

Mark Seltzer (1997:3) explains the notion of trauma with reference to what he describes as wound culture in order to locate trauma as a phenomenon which occurs

between the physical and psychical. 'Wound culture' as defined by Seltzer (1997:3) refers to contemporary societies' growing fascination with violence, gore and the mutilated bodies that proliferate in media such as crime novels, films, gaming and real incidents such as car accidents on the news. Seltzer (1997:3) further refers to trauma as a "borderland concept", as it functions not only between physical and psychic states, but between "individual and collective, private and public orders of things."

The etymology of trauma stems from the Greek phrase for an object which pierces the body. It was originally used as a medical term to describe the process of examining the body by penetrating the skin to explore its interior (Pollock 2013:3). This term was later adopted by psychologists as a device which aided in the comprehension of the shocking experiences prevalent in modern life and warfare at the end of the nineteenth century (Pollock 2013:2). Trauma as defined by Griselda Pollock (2013:2) refers to psychological responses brought upon by assaults and experiences which cannot be processed and understood by the psyche, and thus they become psychological wounds. These wounds, unlike physical injuries or lacerations, are not subject to the process of organic healing, but rather become like a virus, inhabiting the psyche silently and unconsciously (Pollock 2013:2). Sigmund Freud (1961:67) uses the analogy of a physical wound in order to theorise about psychological trauma, in which he describes trauma as something which extends beyond the limits of logic and physicality. Freud (1961:65) is concerned with the incomprehensible impact of traumatic events on individuals.

Traumas such as life-threatening events and catastrophes are defined as exceptions to ordinary experience due to the fact that people are unaware that such events will occur: their minds do not have time to process the trauma they experience and thus they are affected more profoundly. Freud (1961:67) describes the wound of trauma as psychic rather than physical, meaning trauma manifests as a rupture, between fantasy and reality and past and present experience.

Pollock (2013:4) proposes that art which engages with trauma should not be approached in terms of the traumatic encounter itself, but rather through the traces of the encounter which inhabit a space and time. Jill Bennet (2005:2) reinforces this notion of irrepresentability by explaining trauma as something traditionally defined

beyond both language and representation, in turn, defying conformities of characterisation.

Bennet (2005:7) regards "... trauma related art to be understood as transactive rather than communicative." This art often touches the viewer by eliciting an emotional response, but it does not directly express the specific details of an individual's experience (Bennet 2005:7). Therefore, affective responses engendered by these kinds of artworks are not created through the configuration of easily recognisable characters and the sympathetic responses they evoke, but rather from the viewer's direct engagement with the sensation inscribed within the work. Bennet (2005:12) suggests that trauma can never be recognised as purely subjective: "...neither inside nor outside, it is always live and negotiated at an intersection." Bennet (2005:22) discusses the boundary between insides and outsides, describing trauma as not just an interior condition, but as a transformative process which impacts as much on the body as on its surrounding environment. The transformative process discussed by Bennet (2005:22) is present in my work through the physical act both of embroidering and painting. By reinforcing ideas of flesh in healing processes, my paintings provide a visual representation of the transformative process so viewers may consider the potential for healing.

During the painting and stitching processes employed in the making of *Veiled Wounds I-V* (Fig 2.18-2.23), I was able to work through and process certain thoughts and feelings. The use of the stencil and beads in this series refers to the conscious deployment of craft. Feminine objects like beads, stencils and collage are often considered craft, as they are closely related to artistic activities done in the home (Greenhalgh 1997:28). Items like beads, stencils and fabric were often seen as merely 'craft-like' and associated with women. These concepts of women's work and craft refer back to issues unpacked in my analysis of de Villiers' works. By pairing the use of seemingly domestic and craft objects such as stencils, flowers and lace with the implied bloody and wounded surface, I attempt to subvert expectations of femininity and delicacy. Parker (1996:16) suggests that the women who use mediums previously regarded as "women's work" for artistic expression are able to redefine female experiences and challenge hierarchies.

### ***Therapy process and stitching in my works***

Similarly to de Villiers, the process of stitching and embroidery offers me a way of calming down and working through my thoughts and emotions. In my interview with de Villiers (2020:[sp]) she explains:

The repetitive action of stitching by hand is very calming and inherently meditative. On a purely physical level, it feels restoring, forcing my mind to slow down and enter a neutral space that invites/allows contemplation. Every step of my process echoes this – looking through my piles of vintage cloths to find the right one, the physical contact with the soft fabric, their smell, as well as preparing the stains I might need, using domestic items such as coffee, turmeric, tea, wine. The entire process becomes a healing ritual. The themes and imagery play a role – but it is mostly the physical actions that are very therapeutic.

I feel an affinity with de Villiers' processes. Like her, I find embroidering and painting meditative, a productive space to explore my feelings. The use of making, especially with textiles and needle, to enable healing is explored in the work of a many medical practitioners and art therapy groups.

Reynolds (2004) conducted interviews with a number of women suffering from mental illness, grief, trauma and chronic illness. The women undertook several artistic activities to aid in their healing process. Reynolds (2004:58) suggested that “the textile arts allow women to cope with grief, depression, and a wide range of physical impairments to express, restore, and manage their illnesses, while simultaneously experiencing joy, confidence, and social connectivity”. Needlework’s ability to calm the mind makes it a suitable technique in art therapy to aid in healing trauma or recuperate from illness (Reynolds 2004:58). Reynolds (2004:7) explains that creating with textiles offered the women a healthy and productive means of self-expression: “through their choice of colour, texture and image, these women felt enabled to discharge the feelings of entrapment and fear that their illnesses had generated”.

Another medical practitioner, Ann Futterman Collier (2012:52), examines women who use stitching as way of dealing with trauma. She conducted a comparative study with women who use other means of expression like meditation, yoga, creative writing and exercising. In her studies Collier (2012:52) explains that the women who used textiles were able to deal with and alter their negative moods through the rhythmic nature of

stitching. She (2011:105) explains that “textile making allows them to calm themselves, to feel centered, to have control over a small part of their lives, to have social opportunities, and, for some, to just immerse themselves in the sheer pleasure of the creative process”.

Collier (2011:111) describes the concept of flow, which is “a mental state in which a person is fully engaged in an activity, has mastery yet feels challenged by the activity, becomes completely absorbed, feels an energized focus, and finds the activity to be intrinsically rewarding”. Collier (2012:111) further asserts that the women who used textile processes excelled at communicating their feelings and controlling their temperaments.

Malchiodi (2002:19) explains the difference between the concepts of cure and healing. A medical cure involves treatments which ultimately remove an illness, whereas healing refers to an inner process in which a person’s balance is restored. Creating art from experiences of wounding can be understood to offer the maker a possible way to heal old traumas and transform them into something that can be looked at publicly (Malchiodi 2002:19).

Embroidery and textile work thus provide a platform in which trauma can be explored and worked through. These notions of needlework and crafting as healing and restorative are of particular interest to me, as I use the needle as a tool to ‘mend’ myself.

### ***Conclusion***

I use textiles and stitching in my work as a way of dealing with and working through my past traumas, as well as unpacking personal conceptions of femininity. My artworks often require long periods of time, where the repetitive motion of both painting and stitching offers a way of working through my complex emotions. The techniques requiring such long periods of time and laborious and intricate work helped me unpack and control my emotions.

In this body of work I have used stitching as a metaphor for healing and mending myself. I have unpacked concepts of therapy and women’s work, which have allowed me to explore the use of domestic linens, sewing and painting in order to understand

and come to terms with past traumas. Ambiguity, as a destabilising impetus, is suggested through various strategies of containment, in relation to the abject as simultaneously threatening and liberating. In this sense my work also gestures towards an ambivalent catharsis. Through these works I am afforded a sense of healing: both painting and stitching allow me to confront my trauma. Beyond the deterioration, bruised skin and tearing my work attempts to evoke a sense of healing and resistance, as well as a sense of emotional preservation.





## **Conclusion**

In and out, behind, across.  
The formal gesture binds the cloth.  
The stitchery's a surgeon's rhyme,  
a Chinese stamp, a pantomime of print.  
Then spoor. Then trail of red.  
Scabs rise, stigmata from the thread.  
A cotton chronicle congealed.  
A histogram of welts and weals.

The woman plies her ancient art.  
Her needle sutures as it darts,  
scoring, scripting, scarring, stitching,  
the invisible mending of the heart

Ingrid de Kok *Mending* (de Kok 2006:72)

As alluded to by South African poet Ingrid de Kok in her poem titled "Mending" (2006), the needle may be used by women to sew, stitch, bind and mend cloth both physically and psychologically. As I have argued throughout my discussion the needle is a potent tool which may be used physically and symbolically to heal 'invisible' wounds. In de Villiers' stitched works *Bruid* (Fig. 1.2), *Locker Room series* (Figs. 1.3-1.6) and *Hooked/unhooked baby* (Fig. 1.8), she uses the needle as a tool for healing. As Parker (1996) observes, the needle serves as a powerful tool for women: it offers liberation through a tool meant to inculcate normative gender values and subdue women. Throughout my research I have argued for needlework's subversive qualities and potential to heal.

My research project has employed physical and theoretical concepts about embroidery as a means through which to explore abuse, healing and mending through artmaking. This has been achieved by reflecting on the writings of Parker (1996), Goggin (2002), Kristeva (1982) and Ettinger (2009), among others. I have drawn upon theoretical frameworks such as fabric as flesh, trauma studies and healing through artmaking. The surfaces of fabric and canvas operate as spaces informed by trauma, violence and femininity. My work also explores ambivalence and tension between

ideals about feminine control and cleanliness, on the one hand, and my own lived experience of femininity, on the other.

I discussed the notion of demonstrating and subverting femininity through embroidery as highlighted by Parker (1996). My own embroideries and paintings document my interest in needlework and how these practices may be used to deal with and heal from trauma. Like de Villiers, I subvert aspects of the ideal normative performance of femininity, which in patriarchal discourse is often related to cleanliness and purity, through my dirty, stained, torn and haphazardly stitched surfaces. This subversion provides me with an opportunity to resist certain constraints of femininity and engage with my personal emotions and experiences regarding female expectations.

Through my analysis of de Villiers' works, I was able to establish a critical framework which informed the analysis of my own practice. Both de Villiers' and my practice are influenced by trauma and violence. In her work de Villiers references gender-based violence and trauma. These events are articulated through her depiction of female figures, newspaper clippings, crass-stitching and stained domestic linens. She uses embroidery and staining in an attempt to reclaim power and also heal. Through her work *Hooked/Unhooked baby* (Fig. 1.8), de Villiers employs notions of abjection and confinement of the female body, raising questions around female representation and expectations. These concepts, such as mending through stitching and abjection, inform my own practical body of work.

By working with textiles and embroidery, objects which have been historically gendered, I have been able to negotiate hegemonies of gender as well as engage with the larger female history of 'women's work'. The material surface of my paintings and embroidery allows my physical presence to be captured in their making. I considered fabric as flesh surface in my works – a site of exchange between trauma, abjection and healing. The bruising and wounding evident in my works refer to the healing processes of the body and skin in which trauma and violence are ultimately transformed. My stitched and painted works describe fabric as something which can be read as skin, containing memories and bodily stains. Theories around skin and abjection have informed my research, providing me with a means to unpack my experiences related to my own body and the abject.

Through my stained surfaces and visceral surfaces, I have attempted to unpack my own traumas. In my work I see the needle and wound as more than just puncture and piercing: they act as symbols of transformation, and, most importantly, the ability to heal. Using stitching to articulate trauma in contemporary art poses interesting questions about the relationship between making and feeling and skin and cloth.

While I have considered these ideas in Willemien de Villiers' work and my own, this is a rich area of investigation which touches on other artists' works as well. My hope is that my engagement here might prompt further research, and that it could, for example, encourage a comprehensive study of various artists, including works by Christy O'Connor, April Dauscha, Jessica Harrison, Celia de Villiers and Dominique Vitali, among others.



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