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Narelle Jubelin: Constance Howard Memorial Lecture

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This text is the pre-amble to a longer essay published as follows:

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That Narelle Jubelin now lives in Madrid, and is an internationally acknowledged artist is significant. An international practice, she claims, teases out aspects of dense and meaningful work begun in her country of origin, Australia. That practice relies heavily on the genteel craft of petit point rendered in tiny scale in finest thread on finest fabric. It was appropriate then that Narelle Jubelin delivered the first Constance Howard Memorial Lecture for 2001 on 17 November at Goldsmiths' College, London.

Jubelin is a knowing maker. She knows that the time invested in the creation of such delicate and exquisite works demands reciprocal time from a viewer. She knows the emotive value of the painstaking labour apparent in her stitched pictures. She knows that, having seduced her viewer with the delicate materiality of her work, she can deliver more robust fare.

Note then that her miniscule stitches are not always conventionally ordered in the same direction, but rather move in one direction and then against that grain, though always against the rectilinear order of the base fabric. Use this a clue that, in Jubelin's work, textile convention (the ordered warp and weft of fabric) is matched against textile 'un-convention' or even self-conscious 'poor craft'. Note that a frame may be overwhelmingly heavy or oppressive or dark. Consider the implications of this for the focus of 'the work' or the relation of the textile to the mechanism that constrains it. Note that the subject-matter is, for example, the Centennial Tree where Australia was proclaimed part of the British Empire, but see that the mood is studious rather than celebratory. Note that the staging of her works, always in groups, operational like linguistic signs (dots, brackets, phrases), 'speaks' a complex narrative of difference and misfit. Check one's sense then of unease and discomfort and question why something as seemingly innocuous as an embroidery can be so affective.

Jubelin activates a critique, located in Australia, but pertinent beyond, of systems wherein indigenous people are marginalized. By consciously operating within the so-called 'second class' realm of textiles and craft, she insists on an examination of hierarchies. Where women practitioners have variously used textile means to examine their oppression within the domestic or industrial economy, Jubelin requires that we consider the construction of exclusive national identity, contemporary manifestations of historical colonialism, the politics of geographical exploration, systems of commerce, Imperialism and global trade, and the relational exchanges of art and culture.

So how does sewing do all this?

Narelle Jubelin's selection of imagery is impeccable. She works from photographs and in doing

so she connects with the historical and anthropological use of photography to 'collect' people. The camera was (and arguably is) unmistakably a colonising tool, a powerful divider between those looking and those being examined. Pictorially, petit point 'holds' the image in a similar way to the freeze-frame of photography but the subtle fuzz of even the most tightly twisted thread and the 'fibre pixels' of the stitched surface are closer to the material matter of lived histories than the official glaze of the photographic surface.

Jubelin's task is complex. She has struggled, for example, with the ethics and taboos concerned with being a white woman seeking to in some way 'represent' (or re-present) the location of aboriginal peoples as 'outside', 'beyond', 'primitive', or 'other' within Australian contemporary culture. To 'celebrate' the colonisation of Australia is to further embed that division. But to stitch that act in a 'lower rank' and 'feminine' craft technique, and subvert that technique's association with the European lady's parlour, to enact it in minute scale, diminished by a weighty frame, must surely be to begin to unravel it?

There is some key moment of translation and shift between photograph and stitched representation for Jubelin. Repetition is part of that, for she continues that practice of translation and shift through a range of imagery concerned with the heroic, the superior, the dominant, the established, including bank notes, stamps, colonial architecture and urban planning, iconic monuments and valorisations of the Powerful and the Mighty. And all rendered subversively, mischievously, ironically in tiny stitches with tiny thread on tiny fabric works. A tenuous power surely?

Repetition is apparent not only in the act of the faithfully reproduced stitch, one of thousands created by Jubelin's busy needle, in the repeated attention to virtuous detail. When we move back from the minutiae of her work and focus on the bigger picture of how certain works are hung in relation to others, we see greater lines of reference in the collective works, and more concentrated delineations of power relations within other global hierarchies. Jubelin's mapping between works constitutes a larger embroidery, as ordered and tidily unruly as the micro-works.

Jubelin herself has operated both within and outside hierarchical systems. As a large format formalist painter originally, she volunteers that her path to stitching was ad hoc rather than considered, and that her early stitched works were 'drawings' for the more 'important' practice of painting. Her early reticence to consider the implications of creating a sewn - rather than painted or photographic - image enriches her articulations now of the power of the stitch.