

Rules

Featuring:
 Amanda A'Hara
 JB Bones
 Seb Clarke
 Tori Ferguson
 Megan Hansen-Knarhoi
 Annie Mackenzie
 Angela Meyer
 Athina Moisa
 Katherine Morrison
 Diana Parkes
 Rachelle Pedersen
 Wendy Randall
 Shona Rapira Davies
 Rose Marie Salmon
 Jo Torr
 Ronnie van Hout
 Rosie White
 Roxanna Zamani

No
 Rules:
 Rediscovering
 Embroidery

objectspace

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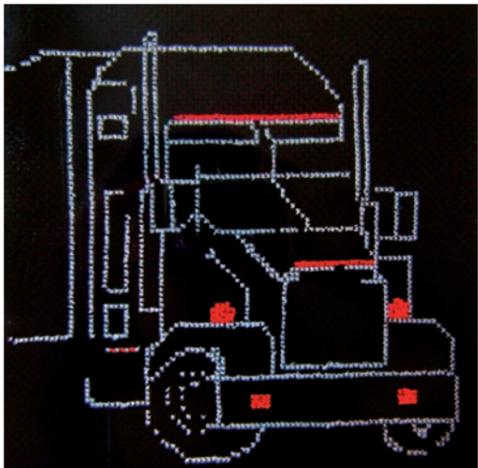
Seb Clarke
Canine Cameos 2008
 Embroidered badges
 Courtesy of the Artist and Toggle



Tori Ferguson
All I Am 2008
 Embroidery on cotton
 handkerchief
 Courtesy Anna Bibby Gallery



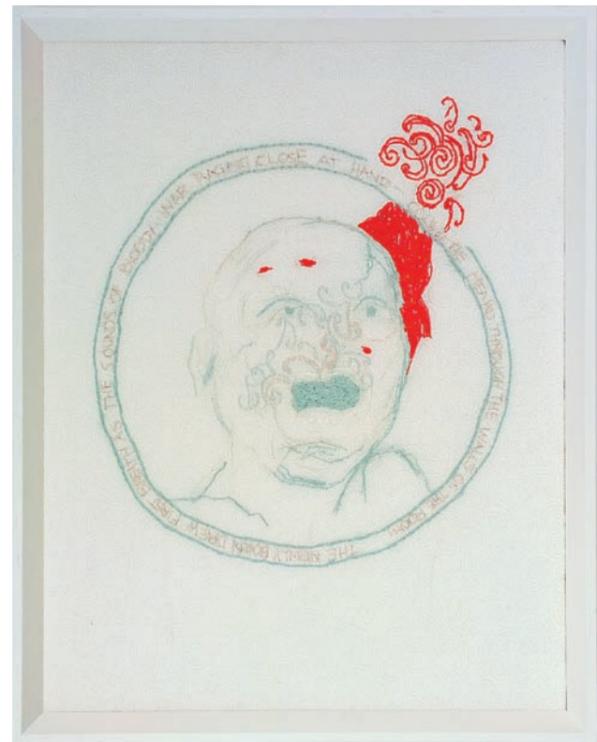
Angela Meyer
What a Honey 2004
 Silver and red thread
 on black adia
 Courtesy of the Artist



Wendy Randall
Journey 2006
 Wool on hessian
 embroidery
 Courtesy of the Artist



Shona Rapira Davies
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 as the sounds of bloody war
 raging close at hand could be
 heard through the walls of the
 room* 2006
 Pencil and stitching on
 printed cotton fabric
 Courtesy of Bowen Galleries



Katherine Morrison
Exhibition Blanket 1996
 Wool blanket pieces,
 wool batting, Cotton sheet
 and threads. Machine and
 hand pieced then hand
 darned, quilted and
 embroidered
 Courtesy of the Artist

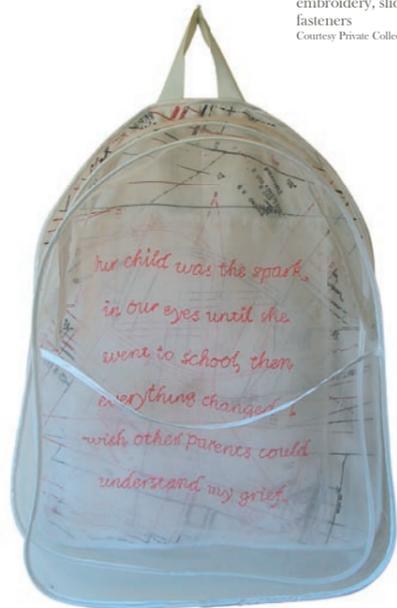
Curated by
 Rosemary McLeod
 Nov 15 — Dec 20
 2008



Diana Parkes
Where Did This Come From?
2004
Embroidery on constructed
linen laundry bag with
design transfer.
Original laundry bag
probably from the 1950's
Courtesy Private Collection



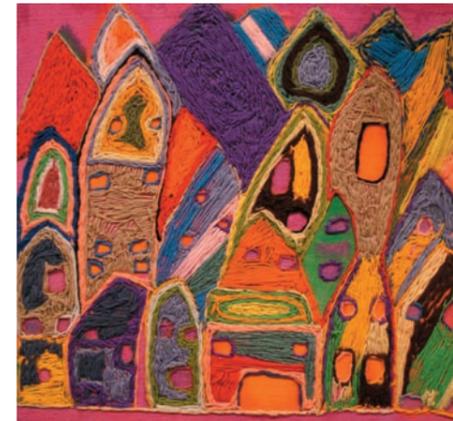
Rosie White
Baggage 2005
Cotton sateen, bridal veil,
boning, screen print, hand
embroidery, slide
fasteners
Courtesy Private Collection



Ronnie Van Hout
Chimp Drawing # 4 2003
Embroidery on cotton
duck
Courtesy Hamish McKay Gallery



Athina Moisa
Hills and Houses 2007
Wool tapestry
Courtesy Private Collection



Roxanna Zamani
My Sister and I 2007
Hand machine embroidery
on 100% cotton, 100%
Polyester thread
Courtesy of the Artist

Megan Hansen-Knarhoi
Bambi Birdie Boner 2004
Cotton
Courtesy Private Collection



JB Bones
Hanging by a Thread 2008
Embroidery on cotton
Courtesy of the Artist and Toggle



Amanda A'Hara
Good Girl Sleeping 2006
Embroidery on felt,
plastic hoop
Courtesy Private Collection



Rose Marie Salmon
Fast Loose and Lovely 2005
Thread and acrylic on
brocade
Courtesy of the Artist



Jo Torr
*The Society Islands -
Huahine* 2008
Embroidered barkcloth
(tapa) with mother of
pearl
Courtesy of the Artist and
Mark Hutchins Gallery



Rachelle Pedersen
Trace 2008
Viscose and cotton thread
on cotton in wooden
embroidery frame
Courtesy of the Artist

Annie Mackenzie
Stitch Cupboard 2008
MDF and red wool
Courtesy of the Artist



Picture this: *Flight of the Conchords'* guys Jermaine and Brett are wooing the same beautiful girl in a recent 2008 episode. Jermaine bakes and decorates an over-the-top cake to win her affections. The proud baker strides into the next room to find flatmate Brett in the act of completing an immaculate (Yvonne Todd-esque) embroidered portrait of the contested woman. Duh! What is going on here - and I'm not talking about the contest or the comedy - embroidery and guys, embroidery and emotion, embroidery and carnality - this is a very interesting embroidery moment.

Just over a year ago something very interesting was happening around embroidery as we were seeing work by tutored and untutored 'embroiderers' that didn't look anything like the traditional. We approached author Rosemary McLeod to see if she was interested in making an investigation into what was going on and were delighted when she said 'yes'. Rosemary was the ideal curator for as her award winning book *Thrift to Fantasy: Home Textile Crafts of the 1930s-1950s* located home textile production, particularly embroidery, in textile, social and personal contexts.

In her essay Rosemary discusses the sources of this new vitality in embroidery. I believe that the internet has also made a critical contribution to this new embroidery moment. The internet has enabled the constitution of the global entity that is called 'indie craft'. The visibility and economic return that the internet has created for these communities of independent and often iconoclastic artists and makers has, I believe, generated a widespread creative confidence for many other artists and makers. In a world where whole generations can now make and broadcast movies from home perhaps it just is no longer daunting, or even remarkable, to embroider. I suspect that one of the outcomes of this particular DIY moment is that many people are developing a new respect for the skills we might call 'craftsmanship' and, as *No Rules* surveys, rediscovering the joys of embroidery.

Objectspace is very grateful to Rosemary McLeod for curating *No Rules: Rediscovery Embroidery*. Based in Wellington Rosemary has been assisted at every step by Objectspace staffer Matt Blomeley who has effectively been the co-curator. We would like to thank the makers, lenders and supporters of *No Rules* including Hamish McKay Gallery, Toggle, Mark Hutchins Gallery, Anna Bibby Gallery, Bowen Galleries, Roar Gallery and Vincent's Art Workshop. Without the continuing support our major funder Creative New Zealand and the significant support of Auckland City Council and The ASB Trusts Objectspace would not be able to present projects such as *No Rules: Rediscovering Embroidery*."

Philip Clarke
Director

To begin with, just why you would embroider was not even a question in the craft's most recent heyday, which culminated in the 1930s through to the 1950s. Then, embroidery was still a valued accomplishment of women living constrained lives, whose creative energy found expression in their homes, either through stitching fine needlework as a display of refinement, by personalising everyday linen, or by exercising ingenuity with needle and thread in times of financial need. Needlework and embroidery skills were handed down from mother to daughter, or friend to friend, and were promoted both through popular specialist needlework magazines and in the pages of general interest women's publications. Designs and subjects, almost always worked from patterns or transfers, reflected changing fashion and interests - current events, the exotic, popular films. Women chose how elaborately they worked these templates, and the colours and stitches they used, and the completed pieces formed part of their dowries - or glory boxes - on marriage. Not much of that work engaged with personally evolved ideas or deeper self-expression, and it came to be regarded as unoriginal and feminine, a doubly pejorative view.

The tradition fell into decline from the 1960s when embroidery was deleted as a school certificate subject and when, with more women entering the full-time workforce, few had the time or inclination to perfect such time-consuming skills. With the flood of cheap imported goods after the 1980s economic reforms, traditional textile hand crafts were fully devalued as domestic economies. By then many women emancipated from home life viewed embroidery as irrelevant anyway, and they no longer practised the domestic rituals in which embroidery had played a part.

Abandoning that tradition was part of women's wider journey of self-discovery. By the 1970s it seemed to have only a residual sentimental or nostalgic value left for most women, if it had any value at all, and this reflected a wider reassessment of the value of women's work, even the notion of value itself. Why were men's traditional, more heroic avenues of artistic expression (painting, sculpture) valued, while women's were not? Why were there so few acknowledged women artists? Why was "feminine" artistic practice seen as automatically unworthy of serious critical assessment?

A rescue package came from an unexpected quarter. Starting around the 1970s, radical artists like Judy Chicago in America claimed stitch as one of their tools of revolt, adopting the traditionally feminine medium, hitherto seen as regressive, and tailoring it to new feminist theory. More recently, British artist Tracey Emin has used stitch to shock, notably in her major work, *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With*. Some makers in *No Rules* also use the deceptive cloak of "feminine" accomplishment for subversive ends.

Why now? We might equally ask why this resurgence has not happened before. Either way, I believe the timing is due to several confluent factors:

Social change: embroidery's revival and its rediscovery have been happening in times of social change and economic uncertainty. When so many former givens (the role of marriage, social policy, race relations, financial systems) are open to contention, that questioning has carried through to the arts in general, blurred the boundaries between art and craft, and stitch has been able to emerge from the margins.

Egalitarianism: Embroidery has traditionally been taught informally, and has no hierarchical or academic structure to form a barrier to those who choose to take it up. While embroiderer's guilds are growing, and they encourage formal learning, I suspect they attract a minority of embroiderers. The many new publications dealing with stitch as a contemporary medium must also play an influential part.

The broadly political: We have a new respect for the hand-made, as against the mass produced. Since the market reforms of the 1980s we have been flooded with cheap, disposable consumer goods, but hand-made articles resist the throw-away impulse. They bear their maker's mark, and are unique. That commands a new respect.

Post-feminism: Women are re-claiming traditional domestic arts on their own terms. Some may reject the careerist male model of success, and look to feminine values and forms of expression, in which embroidery plays a part, as valid forms of self expression once more. A new confidence in the traditionally feminine has emerged.

Alternative values: Careerism, the substitute for domestic life, has become less certain, with even skilled women being unable to count on steady employment. This may be one factor in the current revival of textile crafts in general (knitting, crochet, quilting and embroidery), as in part reclaiming leisure and work/ life balance.

New perspectives: When stitch can be practiced without the need to conform, as was the case in the past, its potential becomes infinite, and a long-neglected avenue opens to artists wanting to challenge the boundaries of their practice.

Serious art engagement: Art dealers are now showing textile works and embroidery as part of mainstream art practice, giving them a new platform for serious consideration.

Embroiderers promote their practice through demanding English City and Guilds embroidery courses, and other formal qualifications taught and promoted at a local level. Classes teaching practice and design are taught all over the country. Textile crafts in general now have a huge following, as craft fairs reveal, but they exist in the shadow of fine arts, and receive little arts attention, to their detriment. Perhaps the revival of embroidery and stitch as strong creative vehicles was always going to be driven from outside. There has been a danger of embroiderers talking to each other, but not to the audience denied them by a narrow arts discourse; of their valuing technical skill over content, tradition over experimentation; and of developing a shared and private aesthetic out of step with contemporary art and design. That is the danger of being excluded from wider discourse in the arts, and it's worth asking why this has happened. All but one of the embroiderers in this exhibition - Diana Parkes is the exception - have no connection with that embroidery world and its received tradition. They have arrived at it through a variety of paths, some from a formal fine arts background, and some from a position of no training at all. Collectively they challenge popular assumptions about embroidery.

- Some assumptions about embroidery are that it:
 - × is a constrained medium
 - × is antithetical to emotion
 - × only suits a domestic scale
 - × is a women's craft
 - × is conformist
 - × is formal
 - × should be admired for the time taken over its execution, and technical skill
 - × should be useful
 - × is a dead medium
 - × has strict rules
 - × incorporates the idea of perfection
 - × is apolitical.

- Some facts about embroidery are that it:
 - × is a medium without limits
 - × can convey emotion eloquently
 - × can be made to any scale that suits its purpose
 - × can be practiced by men - even young men
 - × can be impertinent, rebellious, challenging
 - × can be humorous and informal
 - × can be spontaneous, even gestural
 - × need serve no more than a creative purpose

- × is capable of reinvention
- × can abandon rules
- × can be both creative and imperfect
- × can be political.

There have been conscious attempts in the past to revive embroidery, but what is happening now is not such a structured approach. It is the rediscovery of thread's potential on the stitcher's own terms, making embroidery not stilted, retro or self-conscious, but creatively inevitable.

Embroidery, when it is framed here, is not constrained, but contained. The maker's hand may be evident, not hidden in the neutrality of perfect execution - or maybe there is no hand producing the work, but a machine. Mistakes and imperfections are celebrated. Embroidery becomes drawing, or challenges paint. Embroidery as an art reveals itself in the vocabulary of stitch as well as line; older practitioners prided themselves on the vast range of stitches at their disposal. Yet it is possible to be an excellent embroiderer with only one stitch - as the influential Malcolm Harrison was, with his exercises in running stitch, or as Gordon Crook has been in needlepoint. What happens when you're even liberated from scale or purpose, or in the case of Ronnie van Hout's work on chimpanzee's drawings - from meaning?

A fresh approach emerges from offering a challenge to expectations - of size, subject matter, texture, and also in those cases of gender, because men are claiming a place in the world of stitch. Harrison, Crook and van Hout have helped lead the way towards placing it among the arts on a new footing. Just why men have achieved this is open to debate, but it's worth noting that Crook and van Hout have done so in the course of exploring a variety of media, while Harrison first trained as a dressmaker and tailor; there was no common route.

I want to discuss the works in *No Rules* in the context of some identifiable themes: process; sedition and exploration of gender; biculturalism; historical reflection; emotional expression; embroidery as structural solution; working with scale; embroidery and politics; and the use of recycling and the found.

Process is implicit in our engagement with and evaluation of embroidery. It is the seen story of how a work happens, and the means by which it evolves - which stitches, which thread, which surface, what tactical problems are presented and solved, and technique.

The most formal approach here is Jo Torr's. Her costumes are informed by careful academic thought, research, and the exploration of technical solutions worked out with technology. Her costumes become, in a sense, pristine museum-quality artifacts worthy of examination and study. Stitch is employed as part of their creative story, in which Pacific and European cultures meet and form a new visual aesthetic in a way that has only ever happened in the artist's imagination. These are works of obvious care, thought and attention. Their intention is serious, and embroidery as ornamentation here takes on a new, instructive role.

Ronnie van Hout's chimpanzee drawing seems to be their polar opposite. He begins from an ironic standpoint on several levels, the first being the evident folly of applying the painstaking process of stitch to reproducing what are merely animals' instinctual markings on paper, taking time and effort to recreate what took a second in real time, and engaging with imagery which does not conform to predictable artistic standards of design or content. Van Hout's source is not arbitrary or invented; it is derived from a recorded comparison of the drawings of chimpanzees and children. It invites us to think about humanity's search for meaning in a wider sense. Is science always serious, or is it sometimes absurd? Is the artist's purpose serious - or is he asking us to consider whether he is being absurd? How do we decide what has meaning, and by what criteria?

Torr's embroidery has a machine-generated perfection, (she first draws her motifs, then employs a computerized embroidery machine) while van Hout's rougher stitching echoes the instinctiveness of the hand-drawn original he copies. Each process is appropriate to the maker's intention.

Katherine Morrison came to embroidery through quilting, and to using recycled blankets from initially using fabric. Her blankets are either worked on as they are when found, or dyed by her, then quilted by hand, and embroidered. She engages with the history of the blanket, accentuating and honoring signs of previous use. Her themes relate to caring, nurture and shelter, ideas which old blankets evoke. Her quilts can be used, or hung on the wall as art works.

Wendy Randall embroiders recycled coffee sacks, bartering her embroidered badges in exchange. For her, the use of sacking reflects her mother's hand work in her childhood, when women commonly used this harsh material for textile projects around the home, making aprons and oven cloths which were often embroidered with wool. *Journey* is a narrative work incorporating personal imagery like elephants, a private family motif.

Rose Marie Salmon literally draws with a sewing machine on fabric, a process which can be followed line by line. She leaves her threads loose when she cuts them, rather than trimming them back, as is usual, to the surface. This keeps the viewer engaged in the process: is a piece finished, or is it still under way? Do we continue to watch it unfold? A number of these makers work with sedition and exploration of gender. Salmon's apparent figures of a woman with a whip in fact depict a male friend dressing up in women's clothes in her studio. Unlike the idealized figures of women in old embroidery, or the prim Dolly Varden figures of the 1930s and 40s, she presents women as unabashed sexual identities. Those dangling threads undermine the notion of completion, and the idea of perfection in execution. Where Salmon's work asks when a work is finished, Rachelle Pederson's tangled threads ask what is happening. The strictures of traditional embroidery demand that a work is as tidy at the back as it is at the front, but Pederson's back may be a front, her front a back, and in either case it seems out of control. Yet it sits within the frame, which tells us that the apparent chaos is intentional: she will decide whether apparent failure is success.

Amanda AHara's work challenges the idea of embroidery as a meek, feminine pastime. Her figures of children have an old children's book quality, a naïveté at odds with their true message, that appearances can be misleading. One is a "dirty" or "naughty" girl who explores the world and runs risks; the other is being "good" because she is engaged with housework, an ironic comment on the traditional upbringing of girls. This is reiterated in *How to Paint* a work which also resonates with women's historic circumscribed status. Is fainting itself a coded form of resistance, a literally unconscious rebellion? Megan Hansen-Knarhoi takes this a step further, with her seditious addition to a found vintage, kitsch tapestry of a lawn. If "good" girls embroider, naughty girls can, too. They can also sexualize innocence, especially bogus innocence.

Issues of gender are also raised by the male makers represented here. There is a tradition of men embroidering - notably sailors, while at sea, and soldiers convalescing in wartime, but it has become historic. Can young boys embroider, and is embroidery relevant to them? J B Bones and Seb Clarke show that this is the case, playfully dealing with male aggression, and depicting man's best friend with portraits of dogs. Angela Meyer's works concern her relationship with her father. She has embroidered his truck, as a daughterly act of ironic homage, and also worked light-heartedly with the terms of endearment he used toward his daughters while they were growing up - all of which unconsciously encouraged a negative body image.

Several of these works engage with biculturalism. Diana Parkes's embroidery steps out from the 1930s, when it was intended to be a ready-to-stitch laundry bag featuring a transfer of a European girl. Parkes has dressed her, instead, as a Maori, replacing the European word for laundry with a Maori translation, and so transformed an echo of the past into a contemporary statement. Shona Rapira Davies chose stitch for her series of works prompted by the birth of a [Maori] grandson, an implicit statement - through the use of that medium - of a true bicultural heritage that few Europeans have experienced at first hand. And Jo Torr's dresses, incorporating elements of Pacific and European culture, ask us to consider where we stand as Europeans who colonized the Pacific.

There is implicit historical reflection, too, in Tori Ferguson's fragile lace handkerchiefs, embellished with tentative-seeming stitch. Her works seem to be cries for help from the past, wisps of unfulfilled lives. Van Hout's German soldiers, too, allude to the past, and legends of our wartime heritage. The banality of his comic book image surely asks us to consider what evil is, and how it can seem.

It has been a given that embroidery cannot convey emotion, but the work of Rosie White and Shona Rapira Davies proves that it can. Rapira Davies' series of works on the birth of her grandson resonate with protective love for a fragile newborn in a dangerous and unpredictable world. White's backpack is an eloquent plea for understanding, and an expression of grief, when her child was diagnosed with a learning disability.

It has also been a given that embroidery cannot be gestural, but that is disproven by the work of Athina Moisa, who does not read or write, but communicates her feelings about the world through thread used much as an expressive painter might use brush strokes and paint. Her loose, long stitches are reminiscent of nineteenth century sailors' picture work.

Annie MacKenzie's work opens up the idea of stitch on an unfamiliar surface. Here embroidery is a structural solution in an art school exercise, a reminder that embroidery has always been used for its tensile strength - as in the decorative fagotting once used on hand-made lingerie, which allowed a garment to respond fluently to movement. Roxanna Zamani's portraits challenge ideas of embroidery's scale and potential impact. By taking it out of a domestic sized frame, she engages the viewer in an intimate, even overwhelming, relationship with her subject. Torr's garment size is also considered. Because of its actual human scale it almost invites the viewer to climb into the issues she raises and "wear" them. And Ferguson's slight wisps of cloth, ladies' handkerchiefs, convey the slightness, smallness and despair of their messages. Finally, Rapira Davies' works show how powerfully political ideas can be expressed in a supposedly self-limited medium. There is nothing meek about the intense challenge she offers.

The use of recycled and found materials in work here is no accident. It has emerged as a theme in much contemporary textile work, reflecting wider concerns about consumerism and recycling. Randall rescues sacks; Morrison rescues wool blankets, which domestic fashion has replaced with duvets; Parkes' work is retrieved from the past, Hansen-Knarhoi's is recycled, and Ferguson's work on found vintage handkerchiefs looks backward, even as it beckons towards new beginnings. In ways like these, a forgotten craft is once again finding itself.

Rosemary McLeod
October 2008

“Free yourself of any traditional concept of what embroidery should be ...”

Mariska Karasz, Adventure in Stitches, 1949

Why embroider? For each of the makers represented in *No Rules* there is a different answer, driven by what they wanted to say or to explore - in other words, by their ideas. There wasn't a better way of expressing them than through stitch and thread. This contemporary work defies the usual expectations of the craft, and in viewing *No Rules* it helps to think about its background - where embroidery has come from, and the rules it ignores here.