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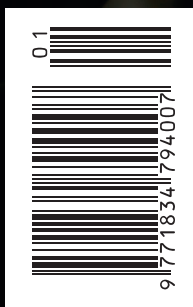
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TEELAH GEORGE

by Elli Walsh







Skys the Limit

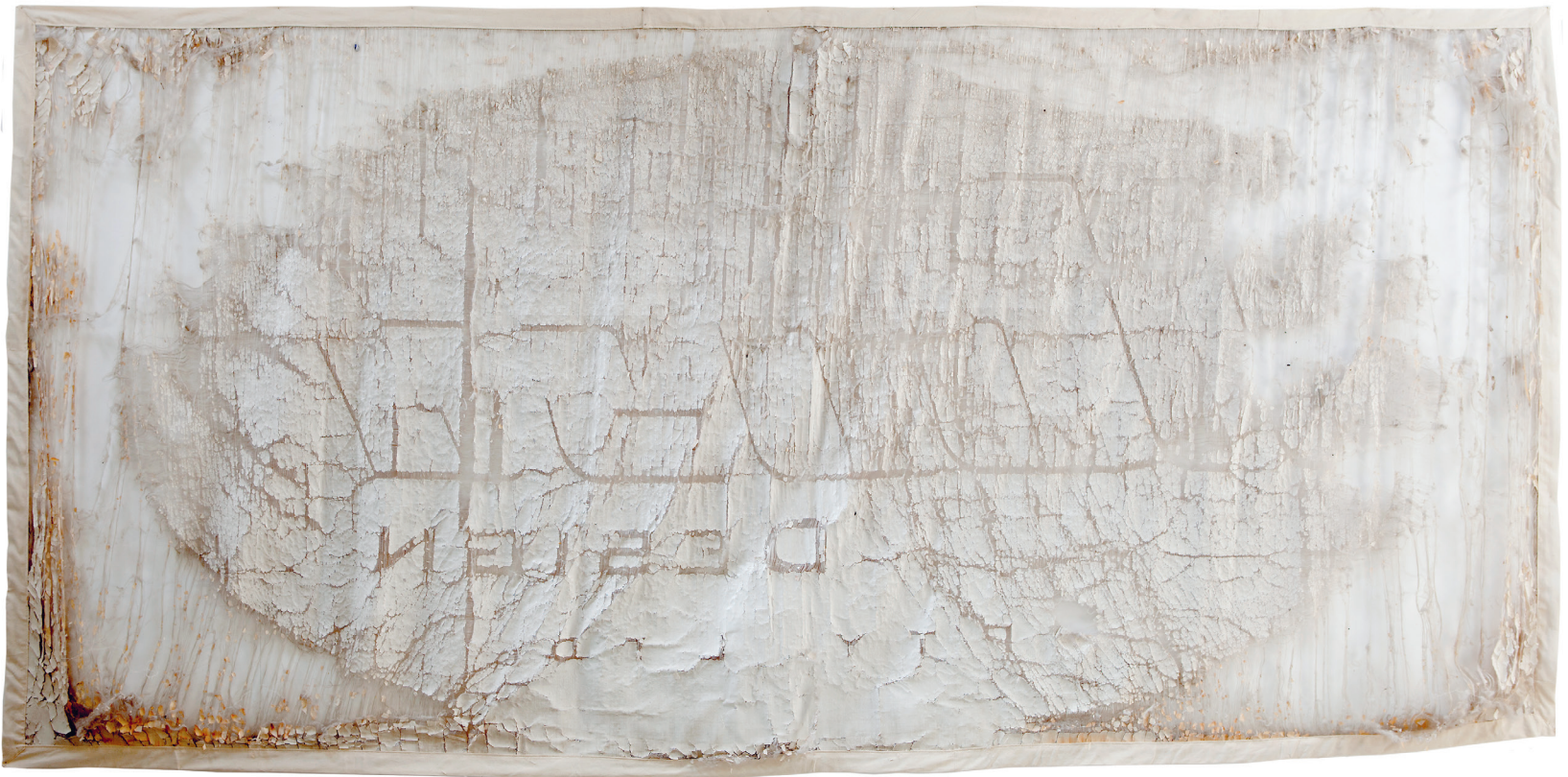
TEELAH GEORGE

THERE IS ALWAYS A SINGLE, STEADY THREAD WEAVING THE FABRIC OF AN ARTIST'S OEUVRE. AN ARTERY THAT CIRCULATES THROUGH TIME, CARRYING WITHIN IT THE LIFEblood OF CREATION. FOR TEELAH GEORGE, THIS THREAD IS HER HAND. LITERALLY AND EMBLEMATICALLY, THE ARTIST'S HAND BRINGS TOGETHER MATERIALITY AND LABOUR WITH TIME AND MEMORY – RELATIONSHIPS THAT HAVE RIPPLED THROUGH GEORGE'S PRACTICE FOR OVER A DECADE. USING EMBROIDERY, PAINT AND BRONZE, SHE ENGAGES WITH MEDIUM IN A PROFOUNDLY GENERATIVE WAY, HEMMING THIS ECONOMY OF MATERIAL WITH A STOCKPILE OF STORIES.

Story
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Long-held interests in history suffuse George's practice as she excavates archives and collections to explore how medium can manifest both presence and absence. The artist's fascination with time and space can be traced back to childhood, when her family moved from the Perth 'hills' to a rural property in Gidgegannup. There, they lived in a hay barn with no walls or phone line, and a generator for electricity. Her parents' vision of building a house never transpired, and they lived in that shed for seven years. Life here wasn't easy – George remembers the floods, the drought and the plagues of locusts pinging against the tin shed; it was almost biblical. She describes the different 'feelings' of various parts of the property as she would roam the bush, with her pet rat Millie, in search of archaeological clues forging historical narratives – rock circles or old campsites; treasures. 'To this day I can still walk through it in my mind', she reflects, 'I remember how it changed and where to find particular plants'. This formative time seeded George's interest in the relationship between history and materiality, anthropology and the Anthropocene.

The inquisitive mode sharpened at Gidgegannup shaped George's earliest works, which pulsate with the wonder of traversing temporal frontiers. Her first solo show, at Perth's OK Gallery, explored a family memoir coiled around the communal history of the Meatworks at Wyndham. Portraits of characters mined from her family's photographic archives nourished her burgeoning fascination with



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amateur archiving and documenting history. At this time, George had returned home from three years living in Belfast and had only just begun making art again since completing her Honours in 2007. Back in Australia, she felt lost and alone. She recalls, 'Going through my family archive with the possibility of finding something that I could respond to seemed like a hopeful gesture.' The abstracted complexion of the memoir, with its glitches and gaps of remembrance, spoke to Teelah of a relatable sincerity; the fallibility of the human hand and mind. Her 2013 series *Ugliest man competition* incarnates the distant histories and departed memories of the abattoir workers. In these chimeric portraits, spectral sheaths of oil and enamel materialise vestiges of the past, diluted and malformed by time. They are ghosts, summoned from their cavitory abyss by but a few defining words: 'The Hygienic Butcher (Ted Scot)', 'Cockroach (Ian Mclean)', 'Frank Thomas (Scrub Turkey)'.

Around this time George met Melbourne-based artist Richard Lewer, during a residency at Fremantle Art Centre. Lewer became her informal yet seminal mentor, teaching her the merit of discipline and the modalities of the art world. Looking back, George fondly analogises him as a 'boxing coach'. Assisting him in the studio, she discovered new perspectives in working with paint and materiality; learning that accidents are inherent to the artistic process. Lewer helped George find her feet – and her hands.



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Her fascination with the materiality of archives inevitably led to explorations of paper and cardboard – the way it ages, with incidental shards of tape and tears as temporal markers. Old envelopes, weathered cardboard and yellowing paper ensnared Teelah's imagination. For her, the inherent vice of the material was a thing of beauty, and poetry. These elements formed a subversive visual language, an errant aesthetic, relating to the bygone stories and histories she was looking at. In series such as 'Used to stop doors from rattling in frames' (2014), George started employing blu-tak, contemplating its dichotomous ubiquity and invisibility. Perpetually malleable, it may remain frozen in place for years or fall away after minutes – a volatile relationship to time and medium motoring George's output. These blu-tak drawings on paper were intended to change over time; a slowly evolving history unfolding (quite literally) within the formal bounds of the frame.

Obsession – the relentless, compulsive thrust through labyrinthine canals guided by that single, steady conceptual thread – is a mighty force in George's practice. When an idea, or material, floats into the artist's orbit, gravity anchors it deeply and irreversibly within her psyche. In 2015 George would routinely pass by a derelict banner – an old surf shop advertisement – bleached and bruised from the

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- 01 *Sky Piece*, 2016-17, thread, linen, bronze and oil paint, 270 x 210 cm, Museum of Contemporary Art Collection
 - 02 *Effect of Dose on Taste (New Phase)*, 2015, found vinyl banner, canvas, thread, leaves, photographic documentation, 197 x 400 cm
 - 03 *Frank Thomas (Scrub Turkey)*, 2013, oil and enamel on board, 39 x 29 cm
 - 04 *The boxer is the lover with the flower is the naked motif*, 2019-2020, thread, linen and bronze, 180 x 150 cm
 - 05 *A soft gap*, 2018, oil, cotton twine on canvas, 79 x 63 cm
 - 06 *Painted sampler*, 2020, oil paint, canvas, thread, 46 x 40 x 3 cm
 - 07 *A harp*, 2020, bronze, 110 x 90 x 5 cm

“ Going through my family archive with the possibility of finding something that I could respond to seemed like a hopeful gesture ”



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sun. To her, this absurd vinyl object flapping in the wind was a thing of beauty. She grew obsessed with it, and eventually approached the shop owner who let her climb up on a ladder and take it down. In the resulting work, *Effect of Dose on Taste (New Phase)* (2015), a sewn canvas edge binds the banner's cracked elephant-skin surface and corroded plastic threads, which dangle like unstrung guitar strings. This piece won second prize in the 2015 Fremantle Print Award before being exhibited in Adelaide, after which George instructed the gallery to destroy it. What remains now is a photograph held in the University of Western Australia Collection – its documentation encapsulating the human will to keep, collect and archive materials regardless of their inevitable demise. Here again, we see the irreversible meeting of materiality with the immaterial.

George has always been interested in material culture and objecthood, nurtured while studying textiles at Curtin University. Early on, she grew enamoured with the rags she was using when

painting rather than the painted boards themselves. She treats her paintings like a tactile object, generative in their 'objectness', where processes of layering and removal, revelation and concealment, symptomise the snag-filled fabric of the human archive. In recent works, she incorporates residues from previous paintings – cannibalising them, re-painting them, wrenching them from their stretcher. Layers unravel at the edges in paintings such as *A Soft Gap* (2017) and *Painted sampler* (2020), unearthing old incarnations and veiled narratives, while buried texture haunts the works' surfaces with revenant force.

Embroidery became a natural extension of this tactual engagement with surface, and a new painterly expression for the archive. The domestic craft of needlework is, for George, a ritual embodying the desire to keep and tell stories; a physicalisation of material and memory, repetition and labour. Her slowly accumulating stitches form cartographic indexes of time, pointing to the ceaseless





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“ Teelah’s art trumpets the joy of materiality – the primordial delight of tactility and the infinite potential of the human hand ”



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labour of what has traditionally been a gendered medium. Yet her embroideries are not decorative like archetypal modes; rather, George unravels the feminine virtue sewn deep within this tradition. Never following a design, she works responsively, splicing shapes and reworking surfaces such that the pretty florals, didactic letters and prim patterns of conventional samplers are supplanted by a Frankensteinian patchwork of chromatic density, amorphous abstraction and deformed decoration. Coursing through these compositions are exposed seams, trims and hems; mechanics as aesthetics. Rather than compiling individual fragments, George tends to her embroideries singularly, so they quickly become heavy and difficult, laboursome and rough. Stitching here is a subversive act, channelling the rough physicality of the craft – needles, cuts, callouses. The works are a crucible of labour, sparking an irreverent relationship with tradition.

For four years, George has been building her 'Sky Piece' textile series, the first of which was included in the 2017 'Primavera' show at the Museum of Contemporary Art – a seminal moment for the artist, signifying her transition into a national context. This *Sky Piece* (2016/17) was stitched as the artist listened to an eighty-year-old woman, Althea Dorris Barber, orating her reminiscences of life in Western Australia during the early twentieth century. The memories of 'women's work' – sewing clothes, quilts and furnishings – are seamed into George's embroidery via her own labour. Together, these 'Sky Piece' embroideries represent her attempt to materialise the universally familiar yet utterly immaterial sky. 'It is at once a humble and profound gesture,

and kind of absurd too, which I like', she explains. There is poesy in this preposterous pursuit of piecing together the infinite; every patch like a stanza, each stitch a word. Almost audible are lines from Wislawa Szymborska's poem *View with a grain of sand* – one of George's favourites – 'all this beneath a sky by nature skyless / in which the sun sets without setting at all'. A galaxy of imperfect stitches in varying shades of blue flutter across a raft of linen offcuts, iridescent like fish scales in their density. One feels as though they might dissolve into these luscious expansive surfaces as we realise that our bodies – just like each thread – are simply matter. George will continue to make her 'Sky Pieces' and when she is no longer able to the series will be complete. Then, she will show the works together in one space – a groping gesture towards cosmic immensity and, at the same time, a humble self-reflexive acceptance of human finitude. This sweeping installation will form a single imperfect sky in a tumbling confluence of history, time and the feeble present. For a fleeting minute, hand and sky will touch.

In her recent show at Gallery 9, 'The boxer / Is the lover with the flower / Is the naked motif', George took for inspiration the 'sampler', which is a piece of embroidery traditionally used as a demonstration of skill and an instrument of learning. Researching historic samplers in museum collections throughout Berlin, London, Paris, Belfast and the Western Australian Historical Society, the artist fixated on their mistakes and mishaps; the moments where the maker's humanity is laid bare. George grew obsessed with the classic motif of 'the boxer', a man offering a flower to his lover that has mutated over the centuries into a fighting



“ Sometimes creating is the most frustrating thing in the world, other times it is the most elated I have felt ”

figure with upturned arm. She venerates this replication of error, just as she values the glitches of the archive, the fallibility of blu-tak or the deterioration of an old banner. In the show's title piece, she memorialises the 'mistake', with headless figures and disembodied limbs embedded in threaded fields of rust, bruising and patina.

Complimenting and contradicting her embroideries, bronze has featured in George's works since she first used it supportive rings in her debut *Sky Piece*. She recalls, 'I absolutely fell for it as a medium, it articulated so much that I had been thinking about, to do with material hierarchy and support structures'. She became fascinated with uniting textile and bronze in an empathetic way. Recording the handling of the softer wax models they are cast from, these shiny skeletal appendages recast the gendered hierarchy of materiality. Bronze is, historically, permanent and patriarchal, standing stiff against the perishability and domesticity of textiles. Yet George flips this inherited status by enlisting bronze as a structural support for her embroideries. She recalibrates differences in vulnerability, giving gravitas to the historically humble pursuit of needlework. The twisted bronze framework of *A Harp* (2020) feels at once frail and fortified; a ribcage for George's embroideries. Within each gnarled crater we can feel the willingness of the wax and the gentle compression of George's hands – a softness that betrays the ostensible 'monumentality' of the medium.

Teelah's art trumpets the joy of materiality – the primordial delight of tactility and the infinite potential of the human hand. 'I am at a

point now where I know myself, and I know how to work. Making art is something I have to do', she says. 'Sometimes creating is the most frustrating thing in the world, other times it is the most elated I have felt. It is powerful, it makes me feel powerful.' ■

teelahgeorge.com

[@teelah_george](https://www.instagram.com/teelah_george)

EXHIBITIONS

Teelah George
February 2021
Weasel Gallery; Auckland Art Fair, NZ

Weathering
March 2021
SIC Space, Helsinki

LOVE IN BRIGHT LANDSCAPES: ON MYTH AND NARRATIVE IN ART FROM PERTH AND LOS ANGELES

July 2021
PICA, Perth

WA Focus
July - August 2021
Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth

08 *Map for a harp*, 2019-2020, oil paint and thread on linen, 125 x 110 x 5 cm

09 *A clearing, a periphery*, 2019, thread, linen, bronze, 105 x 97 cm

10 *Rust*, 2020, thread on linen, 46 x 40 x 3 cm

11 *Patina*, 2020, thread on linen, 46 x 40 x 3 cm

Courtesy the artist, Gallery 9, Sydney and Neon Parc, Melbourne