

Freedom within the cage

By Lucinda Bennett

For a very long time, the days went by, each one just like the day before, then I began to think, and everything changed. Before, nothing happened other than this repetition of identical gestures, and time seemed to stand still, even if I was vaguely aware that I was growing and that time was passing.¹

The state of not knowing the time is one I consider to be the ultimate luxury, precious in its rarity, reserved for Sundays and the very best vacations. But if the ability to track time was taken from me, I would feel the loss, feel unmoored, panicked. If every clock stopped all at once, how would we know where to be, what to do next? Perhaps if it really was every clock in the whole world, and we were all equally adrift, it wouldn't be so bad. Perhaps we would be forced to slow down, to figure out new methods of tracing time, or to remember old ones, even the oldest ones of all.

Trapped in an underground bunker from childhood into adolescence, the narrator of Jacqueline Harpman's *I Who Have Never Known Men* learns to measure time by counting her own heartbeats. For her and the 39 women who share her cage, this knowledge is revolutionary:

Inside the bars, my strong, regular heart fuelled by youthful anger had restored to us our own territory; we'd established an area of freedom.²

In Rachel Hope Peary's work, time is measured through gesture, each stitch recording a moment, each moment gently held with the net of the completed piece, hours twined around a frame, wood that grew over years, cut and carved and sanded back just to be here, in this moment with you. These are works that record the unevenness of time, how our hearts do not beat like a metronome, fear and excitement will hasten them and the rhythm will slow when we breathe deep, when we sleep, are unwell, as we age.

Sometimes, time is woven into a radiant net, golden and wrinkled like onion skins, or else many snippets of time that are all the same colour are patched together, loose webs of blood-stained thread forming a haphazard spidery quilt. In another piece, time is an accordion, soft sage strands like hair caught in a kelp green grid, lines stretching from the top cedar bar to the only other bar at the bottom so the threads are only pulled taut on the vertical and the middle tries to squeeze back together.

In her reflections on this body of work, Peary describes a teaching that guided her making, the energy of which manifested around following her intuition, wherever it may lead.³ Instead of conceptualising *then* making, Peary leaned into the opposite, trusting the process would reveal the narrative, and so she wove without a

roadmap, stitched blindly, slowly, tediously, and when she arrived at her destination, there was the grid, that famously fraught thing:

*Duck/rabbit: a grid is always two things at once, a door onto empty space and a mesh or cage. Does it let you out or hold you in? Both might be appealing, needful, or then again alarming, even dangerous.*⁴

Writing her reflection, Peary conjures the key to her cages: “Gesture is expression, synonymous with freedom.”⁵ These are gestural grids, stitches dropped in rebellion, rules made to be broken, grids that haven’t quite sprung the coop but have established an area of freedom within the cage, found a form of unfolding that can take place within these borders.

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In the world of Harpman’s story, needlework is important, a privilege for how it fills the time, absorbing body and mind in a task, done slowly and savoured because there is a paucity of thread but a terrifying abundance of time. The women try to sew with hair, plucking them from the heads of those with the longest tresses, but the hairs break, and so they gather more hairs and carefully plait them to form a stronger yarn.

Peary’s gestures measure time and so they are made of it, “endless hours of stitching and weaving... Row after row after row, over under, over under for going on 4 hours that day after weeks and weeks at it...”; an abstract, giddy, billowing, dissolving amount of time woven into grids, mounted on walls.⁶ And at the same time, everything else. Clocks ticking, hearts beating fast and slow, limbs lengthening, hair growing, curves forming, some wishing the time away, wondering when it will end, others cherishing every last drop of it, pulling hairs from the plug to plait into more of it, weaving tight webs to keep it from slipping out.

¹ Jacqueline Harpman, *I Who Have Never Known Men* (Random House, New York: 2019), 10.

² Harpman, 33.

³ Peary has practiced Trika Shaivism for many years, her spiritual learnings intrinsically entwined with her making and her life.

⁴ Olivia Laing, *Everybody* (Picador, London: 2021), 157.

⁵ Rachel Hope Peary, *The Edges in the Middle* (artist’s notes from June 2024)

⁶ Ibid.