

Edges of Existence exhibition essay

By Nicole O'Loughlin

If you take your eyes off this page and look down you will see that your body is enclosed in cloth. (I am assuming here, dear Reader, that you are not naked.)

(St Clair, 2019, p. xi)

In the *Edges of Existence* exhibition at Contemporary Art Tasmania fibres are woven, hanging, sculpted, stretched taut, felted, knitted, stitched together, and waving in the wind over a body. Regardless of the diverse ways artists have, and continue, to work with fibre, historically it was delegated to a lesser art, *domestic, decorative, craft, or women's work* (Hessel, 2022). The hierarchy between paint and thread, for example, was determined mainly because of *who* and *where* it was made, locking women and people of marginalised communities out of the Western fine art canon (Parker, 2010). However, this demarcation allows women and diverse perspectives to become more potent because of the connection to the feminine (Gipson, 2022). This is not solely in the way things are crafted by artists but extends to production of textile, which is intertwined with politics.

Their stories reveal wool not only as material, but as witness — holding traces of altered geographies, interrupted routes, and enduring relationships between people, animals and land.

(Salous & Vogel, 2026, p. 3)

Colonisation has forced fabrication and culturally significant needlework to be unravelled, to be stopped, to be appropriated, to be destroyed, to be discounted in the world's history. I am stitching this essay together on the land of the Muwinina in Lutruwita/Tasmania, where we witness the importance of weaving for Palawa women in sustained cultural practice and relationship to Country (Gough, 2009). Across cultures, despite displacement and attempted erasure,

textile traditions reach back through time. Embroidered and woven symbols passed down through generations maintain strong links with origins (Paine, 1990). Globally, stitching and the creation of textiles becomes a political act — an act of resistance by the oppressed.

Textiles offer a distinct blueprint for the movements and transformations that have taken place with time to shape the hybrid cultures and identities of the present...textiles do not adhere to borders and existed before them.

(Vesters, 2025)

Textiles are not solely present in the physical realm — language and mythology attest to the importance of fibre in humans' existence. The words text and textile both come from the Latin *texere* — to weave (St Clair, 2019). Within mythology and across many cultures, spinners controlled human destiny, the sisters cutting the thread to determine the length of life. Because of the interwoven nature of textiles into every facet of our lives, when viewing works made with fibres, I do so with my whole body — allowing emotions, memories, and senses to influence the reading of the work.

Sewing pieces of fabric together was believed to endow the pieced cloth with a spiritual power, the needle's magical strength permeating every join, the more joins, the greater the potency.

(Hunter, 2019)

The artists in this show approach textiles with their own material understanding of working in the medium. They pick up threads of their worlds and insert them into ours. The works confront us with unrest, memory, loss, grief, love, discontent, community, tension, and diverse perspectives and experiences.

Emma Buswell uses what has been discarded as inspiration and a hyper-saturated palette echoes the colours of the

Australian bush. She uses a familiar painting, linking to the colonial industrialisation of the land. In the tautness of the work, stretching it onto the frame, Buswell's work reinforces Australiana's culture stretched to its limits.

Hannah Gartside's leather gloves are arranged in an intimate moment. The appendages looping through holes, intertwining together. A sense of touch, the hands and fingers arranged wrestling and caressing. The anthropomorphism of these inanimate objects creates a sense of play, and voyeurism into intimacy.

Beth Hatton's work asks us to consider animal species discarded. The work feels poignant and relevant today, extinct animal floor rugs ready to wipe our feet on as we enter the collapse of the world as we know it. For me, the coarse wool feels itchy to my skin, reinforcing the message of an uncomfortable sense of grating or unease.

Nadia Hernández uses textiles combined with paint in a bold, layered way that embraces the weight and tension of cloth. It hangs over us, above us, more than the body. In her installations she uses text, patterns, motifs, and silhouettes backed by gestural drawings. The floating cloud shapes are foreshadowed with the poetic words of her family to fabricate new understanding and meaning.

Jemima Wyman's immersive draping cloth, collaged with smoke from protests around the world, evokes a bodily memory of burning and tear gas. Yet the way she arranges them, creating a camouflage of unrest, invites me to walk into the cascading cloth, to immerse myself into the clouds of the glowing world on fire.

Both Lisa Rime and Ayman Kaake remind us that textiles can carry us into and out of this world. Rime fashions baby sculptures from discarded dog hair, resting together in foetal positions. In the gentleness of the sculptures, we can also reflect on loss and the catharsis for Rime that occurred making the works as her dog passed away and her

grandmother also approached the end of her life. She plays with the softness of the fur, combined with the confrontation of newborns frozen in time.

Kaake's video installation links to stories untold, a reconciliation and healing of past using cloth — as both a substituted death shroud and an embodied weight of culture and mourning. The black fabric, adorned with poetic Arabic script, flaps and wraps around the body, the elements of the wind creating a battle between body, memory, longing, culture, and justice.

Both Anisha Sawaid and Jonny Scholes use weaving in a way that links to data and computer-generated information, albeit in vastly separate ways. Sawaid's work is a poetic marriage between science and art that also connects to her own Bedouin Palestinian heritage. Her work acts as slow reckoning of resilience and survival — both through the content, highlighting Wollemi Pine resilience, and cultural hand-crafted practices. The metallic railings they are hung on provide a platform to view them as specimens and things to be examined.

Scholes' use of AI to collate global news into tapestries is also in conversation with Wyman's work. The hazy machine-made tapestries reiterate the static of a screen, like the never-ending doom scroll or news feed, digested by an AI system programmed to decide what is worthy and what is not. His work links to power structures, and how tapestries were once created by the affluent and dominant culture to immortalise their chosen knowledge and narratives.

Textile practice as an active resistance, healing and reconciliation is something that happens across the globe. Emma Rani Hodges's quilted banners embody her collaboration with community members. The cascading piecemeal fabrics show what it is to be a part of a community with diverse voices represented, and that there are no straight and defined edges within belonging.

Bonni Que's vessels woven and sculpted from found materials come together as a collective, interspersed with other items. A stretched pair of stockings balances in between hard and soft. This work reminds us again of our bodies, intimacy, the body as a vessel with its conflicting softness, roughness, and interwoven histories.

The Tassie Nannas persistence and dedication is emblematic of textiles as a political act. I often see them sitting in the mall in Nipaluna/Hobart knitting and displaying their banners advocating for refugees. They are akin to the group *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* who I saw in Argentina — peacefully seeking justice with their white head scarves embroidered with the names of missing family members. The women in Tassie Nannas fundamentally understand the practice of resistance, slowness, patience, and persistence to bring light to social justice causes.

The yarning or quilting circle, sewing bee or “stitch and bitch” are emblematic of the simultaneity of weaving and oral traditions. These spaces diametrically oppose the singular phallogocentric of mainstream cultural transmission: they are feminine, circular, lateral, reciprocal and plural.

(Yore, 2025, p. 106)

Edges of Existence asks you to consider these works in relation to your understandings — what memory and sensory underpinnings you bring to the experience. Artists working with textiles interweave their own DNA into the works, the duty of care that comes from making something in textiles is a sacred act, one that links to healing and reclaiming. Artists working in textiles, like the ones in this exhibition, bring with them a long history of material knowledge, patience, and slowness. In today's screen based, algorithmic saturation of information and mainstream culture, textile practice is fundamental to realigning with an interconnectedness.

References

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Other suggested reading

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- The Textile Reader*, edited by Jessica Hemings, 2012, published by Bloomsbury
- Textile Fine Art*, Helen Adams, 2025, Laurence King
- TEXTILES X ART, How textiles are shaping contemporary art*, Ramona Barry, Beck Johnson, 2025, Thames and Hudson