

## Diminishing to a whisper

an essay by Christopher Young

“I think we are only good at seeing patterns that are on our scale. Which is why it is so hard to understand deep geological time, or the vastness and systems of space, or the scale of wealth.” (RH)

“Seeing patterns allows us to turn the chaos that surrounds us into some sort of order. We like order, it’s safer than chaos.” (EMY)

“I really like to look for patterns in nature ... the recurring change of seasons ... the sounds of birds and other animals at different times of the day ... it is quite repetitive, flora and fauna follow strong patterns.” (KM)

The biological function of artists and art making could be seen as the translation of environmental patterns into narratives.

The recognition of patterns is critical to function. If you see a correlation between action and reaction that can then inform future decisions.

Patterns are comforting. You know—or at least have the illusion that you know—what happens next. You see yourself reflected in others when they agree that a pattern is valid, beautiful and substantial.

You can then see bigger patterns and any variations in those around you, just as the same can be observed in much larger sets.

The communication of patterns in the form of stories has been central to the survival of human groupings. It is how critical information—in particular, what can harm you—about the environment is transferred from generation to generation. Placing these lessons in a narrative and/or visual structure helps with information recall and potentially ensures societal longevity. It was likely advantageous for the storytellers themselves. [\(1\)](#)

With written language, mechanical printing and subsequently the internet, the role of the storyteller has shifted considerably over time.

They evolved at various times to being central to the indoctrination of social groups as well as the communication of morals to illiterate populations.

More recently, they are portrayed as being selfish and/or subversive. They have moved from being cornerstones of a society to often being fringe dwellers.

While the function of stories is less central to our survival, storytelling is still a method for building trust and connection between people, strengthening relationships. It has the potential to uncover knowledge that has been subjugated to dominant ideas. [\(2\)](#)

Ruth Halbert, Elisa Markes-Young and Katharina Meister are all highly skilled but painstakingly slow storytellers. Their motivations might vary but they share taxing processes and a dogged resolution for precision.

Countless hours of work can result in seemingly insubstantial outcomes, with results only being visible after a significant investment of energy and time. Simple mistakes can involve a heart-breaking unravelling and the restarting of a process from scratch.

This confers an earnestness to their artworks, each thick with effort, considered thinking and conceptual fidelity.

While making, Ruth is physically embedded in her loom, climbing into the elaborate contraption each morning. She is surrounded by the clattering of soft wood and dull thumps as the work slowly emerges.

“When there is a kind of rhythm in the sounds then the weaving is going well.” (RH)

Hundreds of taut threads twirl and wind through the machine, looping back and forth to form the ‘warp’. This is visually chaotic but it is carefully designed and managed. The ‘weft’ is then cast left and right via shuttles to create her elaborate patterns and to integrate motifs. By necessity, the works need to be extensively planned with a numerical coding system guiding her movements.

The contrast between the stillness of her final works and the physicality of their creation is vivid. Her complex textile works can “bring what’s hidden into view to be confronted and to celebrate what is unique and what is universal.” (RH)

Elisa and Katharina both work tirelessly, often painfully, with their hands. Blisters, cuts, burst blood vessels, stabbings and calluses are not infrequent.

Paradoxically, in between the bloodshed, tears and plasters, there is also a contemplative quietness that allows space for deep thinking.

“The time and effort that goes into creating elaborate pieces is for me a measure of affect and emotion.” (EMY)

In 2022, Elisa will have been in Australia for 20 years. She has struggled to find comfort in her new environment and continues to feel like an outsider. This has prompted an extensive examination of memory, nostalgia and place.

“I feel that the place that gives you a sense of home isn’t necessarily a physical space defined in geographical terms.” (EMY)

While her work looks specifically at a lost folk art, it more broadly addresses the migrant experience. The balance between integration and remaining connected to personal heritage is a difficult space to negotiate, often leading to feelings of inadequacy or isolation. Threads potentially snap and any loss can be profound.

Katharina focusses her attention on the nexus of art and science. In particular, how creativity can offer unique perspectives on complex problems. She brings an urgency and diligence to her work in that it is deeply rooted in the threat the world faces from climate change.

One of the great challenges the scientific community faces is how to communicate the interaction of so many variables to a largely apathetic populace.

The intricacy, effort and scale of her works directly reflect her intellectual and visceral response to these issues.

“Painting seems too vague for me. Paper cutting and drawing are, in my eyes, more honest. The pencil line or the shape is all you have to express what you want to say; hence you need to be very clear.” (KM)

Further to any expressed intent, the making of artworks is perhaps an artist’s attempt to establish some form of legacy. Artworks can function as an extension of life, potentially allowing the artist to maintain a presence beyond the corporeal.

Regardless of this effort, art—as the artist and as the human being—quickly loses its place in the world. Art that is not deemed ‘valid’ by institutional collecting does not have conservators tasked with its preservation. It is not written about or repurposed or replicated. Its voice diminishes to a whisper.

That disappearing is often quiet, without explosive spectacle or acknowledgement.

Countless startling people with vivid imaginations, brilliant skills and unique outlooks are thus invisible—by design or fate—to history.

Despite possessing often exceptional abilities, if these artists are not amongst any society’s ‘champions’ they are almost as lost to history as the rest of us. This is quite distressing. Those that would otherwise astound us are invisible behind a handful of the ‘chosen’.

As history is written from a place of privilege, it is naïve to suggest that historians capture all that is great, significant and substantial. It is often subject to distortion by contemporaneous societal norms, precluding large swathes of the population, and disproportionately affecting particular genders, minorities or other groupings.

Any discovery of the ‘lost’ excites an audience. Their often tragic stories are not only compelling but they also give us hope that our own eventual disappearance might, some day, be lessened.

## Footnotes

1. In an experiment with the Agta people of the Philippines, storytellers were favoured over people who had equally good reputations for hunting, fishing and foraging. Source: Jeffrey Kluger, *How Telling Stories Makes Us Human*, Time Magazine, December 2017.
2. Lewis Williams, Ronald Labonte, Mike O’Brien, Empowering social action through narratives of identity and culture, *Health Promotion International*, March 2003.