

Oblivion

An essay by Lee Kinsella

Oblivion is a contemporary art exhibition of rich, hand-made material. Together, artists Ruth Halbert, Elisa Markes-Young and Katharina Meister, with curator Christopher Young have created an environment which emboldens viewers to experience and engage with stitched, woven and paper-cut works as three-dimensional forms. As such, I will be considering their contributions in terms of what Jane Rendell calls 'critical spatial practice', describing how each artist chooses to occupy the space and enable a shared engagement. (1) Makers and viewers alike are active in this space as invention and imagination are encouraged, questions posed and curiosity piqued.

Neuroscientists recognise that making and interacting with art forges particular neurological pathways. As individuals, we are enmeshed and reliant upon countless delicate networks of communication, whether that be the neurological networks in our brain or the fungal threads in the soil beneath our feet which connect and support organisms and plants. In this exhibition, the artists work across disciplines as autoethnographers, researchers, scientists and historians to present logical and rational forms of knowledge, such as birth and death dates, supplanted by the tacit, haptic and experiential. Viewers move through the gallery to interact with each piece such that information is transmitted via bodily engagement. In relying more on such 'soft' forms of knowledge gain and transfer, the artists are able to resist and reframe the dominant narrative of global corporate capitalism to instead emphasize the interconnectedness between humans, animals and the environment.

At the centre of the gallery is *The forest/Skogen*, 2020, by Ruth Halbert, a tall expanse of hand woven double-weave fabric where a wool cloth of deep greens and russet reds interweaves a neutral-toned cloth. The technique of double-weave allows two fabrics to be woven simultaneously while interchanging sides, forming a piece that has no 'wrong' side, but two complementary faces. (2) The artwork extends up into a metaphorical canopy which harbours and supports the other pieces as they rise towards the vaulted roof. We sense ancient trees in a forest expressed via the height and length of vertical bands in a geometric and highly stylised rendering of the Karri forests of the Southern Hemisphere, contrasting with the lush colouration of dormant Beech trees and the upright Spruce and Fir forests of the Northern Hemisphere. Halbert has acknowledged her formative experiences of these vastly different forests in the one piece. During a residency in Sweden in 2014 she was introduced to a community of weavers in a remote forested region and this was the impetus for her to relocate to Denmark, Western Australia, to be with ancient Australian forests and embark on a weaving practice.

Using donated yarn and created on a Swedish loom, this work is a ready metaphor for the process by which work in this exhibition has been realised. With the fringed ends at the base and draped across the Jarrah floorboards of the Bunbury Regional Art Gallery, the artists are very much tethered to this place and their lived experience informs their practice, although each draws upon cultural and technical traditions that originate from distant lands. Through the application of their technical skills, memory and imagination, the artists occupy material and conceptual realms. These makers intertwine their practices and share and support each other's making in recognition of their shared impetus to create evocative objects of immense beauty. Drawing upon deeply embedded social rituals and cultural forms, they forge expressive works that reflect their current engagements on the unceded lands of the Nyoongar peoples of the Southwest of Western Australia.

So how do such concepts sit in relation to the exhibition title, *Oblivion*? The title is inspired by the song *Ocalić od zapomnienia* (To Save from Oblivion), a composition by Marek Grechuta, set to the poetry of K. I. Gałczyński. The poem describes the ways in which the author seeks to retain memories of his wife and keep her, and their shared past, from oblivion. He comments upon broad cycles of life and the mundane details of the everyday, from which he extracts shimmering recollections:

*And a veil of the birds' songs
On your shoulder, like a coat,
A rug on a hallway that overflows
The backyard...[\(3\)](#)*

As demonstrated in the poem, time is not linear but folds in every direction. In this exhibition, time is marked and expressed in hand stitches, paper cuts and countless movements of a shuttle and yarn. Concepts of time can find form in the manipulation of materials – a changeable matrix that can flex and fold. Similarly, memories, nostalgia, and intellectual engagements permit us to replay the past and occupy other potential realities. Each artist marks their many hours of labour in the resolutely analogue materiality of their chosen creative expressions. All are united in their engagements with swirling social relationships and communities that are vibrant and alive in expression of dance, music, poetry and of life and love.

Elisa Markes-Young's recent work draws upon a vanishing historical Polish tradition of making outfits for sleigh rides from tulle and paper. As an economic necessity, dresses made of tulle and paper-cut decorations [\(4\)](#) were created for sleigh rides to balls and, on arrival, women would change into their other, more expensive, fabric ball gowns. There is much of the light and swirl of these remarkable social occasions in Markes-Young's work:

In my head, I see a colourful snowstorm hanging in the air because the tulle is barely visible.
[\(5\)](#)

The flurry of making and the heightened excitement as ball-goers travelled through the snow-covered countryside is reflected in the swirling vortex of *We Set Off At Dusk*, 2021, made from thread, paper, sequins and bugles on tulle. Each stitched sequin, lustre of gold paper and paper-cut flower is a contemporary link and reactivation of the historical tradition. There is a richness and effusiveness in the piece, *And After We Shall Dance And Feast #02*, 2021, in which innocuous materials of paper, thread, glue and iron-on fabric are made more precious and remarkable with the addition of sequins, glass bugles, tulle and gold foil.

Markes-Young and Halbert challenge the limits of the grid and structure upon which they rely to find creative solutions. For example, Halbert's Colonial screen, 2021, is a transparent, almost skeletal, numerical register of the birth and death dates of 15 of her colonial/settler female ancestors and represent the very few historical details of these women's lives that remain in official records. Whereas Markes-Young experiments by gluing and stitching to create a depth of field, such that her flower forms are often built from composite parts in different layers, in the realisation of a single, full bloom. Her work extends beyond two-dimensions as the artist strategically layers and folds, choosing to show some of her work moving outwards into the space and some as wall-mounted pieces.

Katharina Meister creates worlds where human technology works in synchronicity, and sympathetically, with nature by beginning with intricate drawings. From there, her wooden,

box-framed works act as portals into vast alternate realities, with fully realised three-dimensional elements that have leapt from her drawings. These serve as small models or maquettes for (yet to be realised) larger-scale works that exist in the artist's mind as animated, fully-realised environments.

She extends the European folk art tradition, Scherenschnitte, that is characterised by the distinctive silhouettes created from cut black paper or card. In the case of *Podland*, 2021, Meister has created a towering paper-cut that measures 280cm × 230cm and which permits viewers to teeter at its edge to gaze into a vast alternate world.

Nomads and Podland, 2021, are inspired by the fruit of Marri trees, and Meister's three-dimensional renderings of these timeless future/past worlds include investigations of technology based on the mechanics of wind-borne seeds. Meister finds much inspiration in nature and these visual investigations are tangible expressions of her curiosity and awe. Her energy and passions – she is currently studying environmental science, looking to work with animation and presents a podcast series, Creative Ecology (6) – inform and fuel her artistic practice. She recognises the need to communicate science in a manner that is both expressive and arresting in the hope that it may elicit behavioural change in her audience. 'Solastalgia' is a term attributed to Professor Glenn Albrecht to describe an existential nostalgia for nature as we witness so much destruction. (7) Rather than succumbing to solastalgia and becoming inert, Meister instead focuses on seeds as symbols for potential growth and positive change, beckoning new beginnings and understandings of our interrelationships with, and reliance upon, other life, to encourage more sensitive and responsive technological developments.

Meister, Markes-Young and Halbert selectively draw from various craft traditions in the realisation of innovative contemporary art. Meister and Markes-Young share the experience of migrants who have moved across the globe and been separated from family and culture, while Halbert's thin history of a few generations in this land descended from colonial perpetrators has its own displacement. Individuals trail personal histories and cultural forms and, on this basis, each maker forges distinct expressions. They acknowledge the deep histories of this place and the legacy of our colonial/settler past, including uncomfortable realisations of the dispossession of Aboriginal people and the reality of stolen lands. These makers are the thread that unifies and informs our past and present.

We must thank Halbert, Meister and Markes-Young for offering their new work as means by which we can reconsider how we engage with our immediate environment and determine what it is that we value and wish to retain. These makers work beyond the conventional boundaries of 'artist' and 'craftsperson' as they demonstrate a remarkable capacity to draw from traditional practices and historical narratives in the creation of contemporary art that is reflective, innovative and transforming. They provide tangible connections to the past, comment upon contemporary life and encourage consideration of our desired futures.

Note: I am indebted to Dr Belinda von Mengersen for her insights and discussion in relation to textile practices, presented in keynote presentation, "Textile lucidity", Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, The University of Western Australia, 16 November 2019, <https://soundcloud.com/lwagtalks/social-fabric-symposium-introductions-keynote>, last accessed 25.8.2021.

Footnotes

1. Jane Rendell, “Only resist: a feminist approach to critical spatial practice”, *The Architectural Review*, March 2018, www.architectural-review.com/essays/only-resist-a-feminist-approach-to-critical-spatial-practice, accessed 25.8.2021
2. Thanks to Ruth Halbert for this technical description.
3. My thanks to Elisa for her translation and explanations. Note from Elisa: “While this seemingly official translation is certainly formally superior, I think this is at the expense of certain ‘romance’ of the Polish original. A ‘veil of bird song’ definitely conjures a different, more ‘ethereal’ picture than a ‘coat of noisy forest birds’.”
4. An example of a paper cut dress is held in the collection of the Ethnographic Museum of Kraków.
5. Quote from artists’ talk, Ron Middleton Gallery, Bunbury Regional Art Gallery, 7 August 2021, <https://youtu.be/6GE1mOCt51o>, last accessed 25.8.2021.
6. katharina-meister.com/podcast
7. Glenn Albrecht, “‘Solastalgia’ A New Concept in Health and Identity”, *Philosophy Activism Nature*, no 3, 2005, p 41-55.