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THE SWAN MAIDEN

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Figure 1. Sophie Aitken, *The Maidens*, 2025, hand embroidery, 300x300mm.

This article reflects on a year-long study of the Swan Maiden myth, central to my BVA Honours project at the Dunedin School of Art. The Swan Maiden is a story of theft and transformation. In traditional Northern and Central European folklore, a swan transforms into a woman using a magical feathered cloak. A hunter becomes captivated by her and steals her cloak, trapping her in the human world against her will. Unable to return to her swan form, she is forced into the roles of wife and mother as they marry and have a daughter together. She remains bound to

these imposed roles until she is able to reclaim her cloak and escape.[1] Historically framed through a patriarchal lens, the maiden is positioned as a passive object of possession. My research and installation of embroidered cushions at the Dunedin School of Art 2025 *SITE* exhibition, *The Swan Maiden*, rework this narrative. This article likewise repositions the Swan Maiden as an active subject whose experience of captivity within patriarchal expectations of womanhood and journey towards reclaiming agency over her identity and body are centred through the slow, labour-intensive process of hand-stitched embroidery.

The *Swan Maiden* myth is part of the "Animal Bride" archetype,[2] found globally in figures such as the Scottish Selkie[3] and Russian Rusalka.[4] These myths work to control what is seen as the "untamed" feminine. By stealing the object of transformation (a skin, a cloak or feathers), the hunter enacts a form of violent domestication, forcing the maiden into the roles of wife and mother. The Swan Maiden's ability to shift between human and animal form symbolises an identity that resists the fixed social roles expected of women. While her human form is often shown as passive, her swan form embodies an untamed freedom. This metamorphosis is a metaphor for the ongoing struggle between the identities women are expected to perform and the identities they live out for themselves. As Marina Warner argues, fairy tales often act as spaces where women's experiences of power and powerlessness are shared.[5] Within this context, the *Swan Maiden* myth can be seen as a narrative that reflects on systems of control over the female body.



Figure 2. Sophie Aitken, *The Swan Maiden*, 2025, hand embroidery, 300x300mm.

Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection describes the abject as that which disturbs identity, system and order, causing both fascination and disgust as it disrupts the boundary between the human and the animal, the self and the other.[6] Drawing on this concept, my work explores the collapse of boundaries through the Swan Maiden's metamorphosis. Building on Kristeva's theory of abjection, Barbara Creed's concept of the 'monstrous feminine' examines how patriarchal culture construes the female body as threatening when it crosses boundaries of control, purity and order. Creed argues that figures associated with bodily transformation, reproduction and bodily excess are made out to be monstrous because they challenge idealised representations of femininity.[7] Drawing on Creed's theory, my work shows the Swan Maiden's transformation as a disruption of the graceful and contained feminine body, replacing the romanticised image of the swan with a visceral and unstable transformation. By placing this transformation within the modern kitchen, traditionally associated with cleanliness and containment, the work shifts the domestic space into something unstable, disrupted by the Swan Maiden's porous, transforming body. Placed within this environment, the Swan Maiden's metamorphic form forces a confrontation between the ordered interior and the disordered self. In doing so, the project brings the Swan Maiden into the present, where women's identities continue to be negotiated within the home.

My methodology is grounded in feminist materiality that reclaims the "subversive stitch," a concept coined by art historian Rozsika Parker to describe how embroidery, while historically used to



Figure 3. Sophie Aitken, *The Robe*, 2025, hand embroidery, 300x300mm.



Figure 4. Sophie Aitken, *Metamorphosis 1*, 2025, hand embroidery, 300x300mm.

keep women quiet and busy at home, also gave them a secret place for self-expression and defiance.[8] By choosing this medium, my work deliberately inhabits the space it seeks to critique. The slow, repetitive act of hand stitching felt like a reflection of the Swan Maiden's own domestic entrapment and the invisible labour of the household. The use of white satin, a fabric associated with the civilised woman, establishes a surface of idealised and performative purity. This pure material is then turned into a functional object of the domestic space. As a cushion, it references the roles of wife and homemaker forced upon the Swan Maiden. From there, it is subverted through my interpretation of the myth and her 'monstrous' transformation.

This project sits alongside the work of feminist artists who have used domestic craft as a form of political expression. Like Judy Chicago and Faith Ringgold, who use embroidery and quilting to elevate 'women's work' into the space of high art and storytelling, I use the cushion as a site to retell and reshape narrative.[9] However, my work is also influenced by the visceral bodily politics of Kiki Smith.[10] By depicting the Swan Maiden's metamorphosis as a grotesque breaking of the skin, I translate Smith's exploration of the unstable female body into a textile critique. Together, these influences position the work between traditional craft and contemporary, abject resistance.

The series opens with an embroidery of the Swan Maiden and her sisters standing on the shore. Although they appear mostly human, their downcast gazes suggest unease within their temporary human forms. Swans bathe nearby, reinforcing their true nature, while a navy outline of the hunter is subtly hidden within the forest. Navy was chosen as a recurring motif, because it evokes authority, positioning the hunter as an intrusive presence and foreshadowing the capture that defines the myth.

The second cushion depicts the maiden gazing away, her expression distant, while a swan is draped around her neck like a massive, living adornment. This image evokes a dual sense of tenderness and entrapment. The swan is not shown as a suffocating force, but as a weight that physically embodies the Swan Maiden's divided identity.

The pivotal moment of violation is then depicted. The Swan Maiden is alone in the water, her sisters having already taken flight. She watches in horror as the hunter's hands enter the frame to seize her feathered cloak, the source of her autonomy. Rather than a human reaction, her neck and face lean forward with an open-mouthed cry, mirroring the territorial aggression of a swan.

This piece shifts to the Swan Maiden in a state of metamorphosis. She kneels on the ground, reaching upward in a gesture that is a plea and a reclamation. Her body appears to be ripping apart as feathers emerge. Set within a modern kitchen and embroidered entirely in the same navy thread used to depict the hunter, the image represents the domestic interior as an extension of his authority, symbolising how patriarchal structures continue to shape the Swan Maiden's identity and framing her struggle as an ongoing negotiation within the modern home.

The series shifts to an embroidery that depicts the silhouette of a ballerina overlaid with a swan, merging human and animal. This references both the Swan Maiden's dual identity and the ballet *Swan Lake*. While the Swan Maiden story is not widely known, *Swan Lake* and Darren Aronofsky's 2010 film, *Black Swan*, provide a familiar cultural reference point through themes of sacrifice and entrapment. The work connects these narratives to the ballerina's performative femininity and tragic beauty.



Figure 5. Sophie Aitken, *The Ballerina*, 2025, hand embroidery, 300x300mm.



Figure 6. Sophie Aitken, *Metamorphosis 2*, 2025, hand embroidery, 300x300mm.

In a more intimate study of metamorphosis, another embroidery presents the Swan Maiden in a transitional state. She looks downward with a human eye and mouth, yet her 'civilised' face is broken by a large beak emerging from its centre. Her hair is pulled into a tight, disciplined bun, her neck has already begun to curve into the elongated form of a swan, and her shoulders are submerged by feathers, capturing the instability of her identity.

The series concludes with the mother and daughter as swans, flying side by side. While this represents their escape, their bodies are entangled, forms merging and overlapping to suggest the shared struggle that led to their freedom. By including the daughter in this act of escape, the work shifts towards a narrative of generational freedom.

The cushion is traditionally an object of rest and comfort, yet here it is also a canvas for scenes of captivity and resistance. This juxtaposition reinforces the tension between a soft, familiar surface and the myth's unsettling nature, suggesting that the home is not a neutral space but a site where identity is imposed and contested. In many traditional versions of the Swan Maiden myth, her escape is temporary. The maiden is often forced to abandon her daughter and is eventually recaptured by the hunter. However, in this version, the Swan Maiden escapes with her daughter, rejecting both the role of obedient wife and the narrative of her recapture. In doing so, the cycle of captivity is broken, shifting the ending towards a possibility of liberation across generations.



Figure 7. Sophie Aitken, *The Swans*, 2025, hand embroidery, 300x300mm.

Throughout this project, my understanding of transformation evolved from a physical metamorphosis to a way of reimagining inherited folklore through women's experiences. The process of making revealed transformation as an ongoing negotiation rather than a singular moment of change. Initially, my engagement with the Swan Maiden myth focused on captivity and possession. Through the process of making, my practice shifted towards agency and reclamation, treating the myth as a site where inherited narratives can be reconsidered. The project seeks to contributes to contemporary feminist reinterpretations of myth by demonstrating how embroidery and myth can work together as a method for generating new understandings of womanhood and agency.

Sophie Aitken is a visual artist based in Otepoti Dunedin. She graduated from the Dunedin School of Art in 2025 with a Bachelor of Visual Arts with Honours. Working across sculpture and textiles, her practice explores themes of femininity, identity, and mythology, with a focus on the expectations and roles placed upon women.

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