

“NINETY”

Victoria Stevens

my grandmother was a seamstress

my mother was a seamstress

I am a seamstress

Ninety is an installation of 90 individual textile works which are predominantly hand-stitched. They represent each year my mother lived without her mother. I produced this body of work for my Master of Fine Arts degree, which I completed in 2017. The pieces are constructed from recycled clothing and utilise various textile processes including shibori, immersion and hand-dyeing, solar printing, appliqué and a variety of stitch and embroidery methods. The works are constructed from cotton, silk, wool and lace, with occasional unavoidable additions of synthetic fibres.

Ninety is my approach to negotiating and recording the construction of my identity as an individual living in contemporary New Zealand. New Zealand is a country of migratory arrivals, people who derive their sense of identity, their tribal roots, from different pathways – the tangata whenua waka migrations, Canterbury's 'first four ships,' postwar immigrant ships. As a Pakeha, I felt culturally ambiguous, with no identifiable 'marks' with which to name myself.¹

Ninety is my journey toward identifying my tribe – seamstresses – and the power of inherited memory. *Ninety* is a show about layers. Layers of fabric, layers of storytelling, layers of pathos. At first look, it is an eclectic blue assortment of a young child's garments and toys. But, the more you look, the more you see, the more you look and begin to appreciate the power in the multiple representations.

In this digital age, the revival of interest in the handmade – slow, mindful, contemplative and labour-intensive² – encourages debate about the second-class status of handwork in relationship to the fine arts.³ My works apply traditional domestic skills, interpreting them in new ways to challenge accepted notions of what textiles can or should depict. Each piece is representational; while each stands alone to tell its own story, they come together as a collection to tell a bigger story.

Femmage artist Miriam Shapiro explains that

Women have always collected things and saved and recycled them because leftovers yielded nourishment in new forms. The decorative functional objects women made often spoke in a secret language, bore a covert imagery. When we read these images in needlework, in paintings, in quilts, rugs and scrapbooks, we sometimes find a cry for help, sometimes an allusion to a secret political alignment, sometimes a moving symbol about the relationship between men and women.⁴



Figure 1. Victoria Stevens, *I Love You Doll*.
Photograph: Victoria Stevens.

The series is cohesive, grounded in a palette of blue, which references the traditional practice of 'blueing' domestic laundry to make it appear new and fresh, defying the passing of time. The blue dye, applied uniquely to each piece, is a metaphor for how experiences strike a person, randomly and unexpected, creating a massive emotional catalogue and constructing personal identity. My experiments with these textiles, changing their shape and their colour, reflect my belief that we are neither static as persons nor bound by our genetics. Every individual carries within them convoluted experiences, stories and backgrounds. How we elect to live and respond to our given circumstances is a question that makes an essential link to my work.

My inspiration is personal. Last century – 1925 in Central Otago, to be precise – my seamstress grandmother died in childbirth. She left a daughter, aged three – my mother, who lived until the age of 93 – and two siblings, aged two and one. I am the third generation of family seamstresses, skilled with fabric and thread. Needlework is the vehicle through which I chose to express myself artistically and, in *Ninety*, merge my personal history with elements of New Zealand's social history. These 90 pieces are a compelling, multi-layered portrait of the women who have influenced me – weaving fabrics old and new, stitching the threads of poems and the poets who wrote them, lacing images and ideas, history, dreams and destinies, humour and poignancy.

Sewing represented the home, women's conventional role of caring for the family, and was associated with concepts of frugality, obedience, domesticity, even sexual morality. Although political inequality meant a woman's silence on these issues could be falsely claimed as agreement, it is woefully accurate that disadvantaged people will work for nothing in order to survive. While stitching provided a refuge for traditional ideas about women before an age of dramatic change, it is extraordinary that within three generations a core domestic skill has all but vanished.⁵

Against the tide of the times, I like stitching by hand as it allows the sewer to become more contemplative and mindful. Textiles bring an emotional warmth, as I am directly involved with the making of clothing. This sense is heightened if they are constructed from repurposed garments, in which it is possible to feel the presence of the people who wore or used them previously. I am inevitably reminded of where clothing comes from, which produces a respect for authenticity and my heritage. Even the tiniest scraps pieced together can become a metaphor for a life lived, through which a social history can be recorded.

Artists using textile skills often have to negotiate ideas that are entrenched in the past, concepts that are involved in the 'gentle arts,' yet by using economically redundant technologies they are able to produce contemporary objects. My dyeing, printing, stitching on the surface of the clothing has brought a tactile awareness not found in some other art forms, and has enabled me to communicate a unique set of sentiments. The over dyeing of preused clothing has

produced a dissonance between the expected and the actual outcome. Blue is the colour of introspection, of the individual looking inward to their own resources. Because dyeing permeates the fabric rather than obliterates what is already there, this process is fundamentally different from overpainting, and the unpredictability of the outcome is part of the process. Experimenting with reactive textile dyes, in particular Japanese Black (which curiously produces the colour blue), the works shifted in character from being solely garments to garments as canvases. This transformation significantly changed their potential reading and also the way in which the multiple works would impact the audience as an experience.

While I relaxed into treating the dresses as canvases rather than literal constructs, I was simultaneously looking at other cultures and their chosen methods of restoring, saving and resurrecting textiles for further wear and for subsequent generations to cherish. I have had a long fascination with indigo dyeing techniques,⁶ and am a follower of Japanese textile practices in terms of repairing and recycling everything, including rags and patches (boro), with generational additions and the cultural legacy ensured by a people valuing their past. While I am not Japanese, I am aware that there is a universal connection within the community of women stitchers which crosses geographical and cultural borders regardless of personal traditions.



Figure 2. Victoria Stevens, *Ninety* exhibition, March 2017, Otago Polytechnic Dunedin School of Art (detail). Photograph: Pam McKinlay.

I see the continuation of domestic traditions such as stitching as an important archival method of celebrating and honouring previous generations, a visual link which is open to viewer interpretation. My practice reflects a repertoire of unfinished but tenuously connected relationships. Whatever the age at which a child is orphaned, the loss of what we knew and what we could have known is palpable. As tattoos are drawn on skin, my stories are written on and within clothing for the present and next generations to read. The connections which I have tried to form with my grandmother through my practice are my attempt to see backwards, to negotiate a way to access her knowledge. To know her and love her:

You can't connect the dots looking forward, you can only connect them looking back. So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect to your future. You have to trust in something; your gut, destiny, life, karma, whatever; because believing that the dots will connect down the road, will give you confidence to follow your heart, even when it leads you off the well worn path. That will make all the difference.⁷

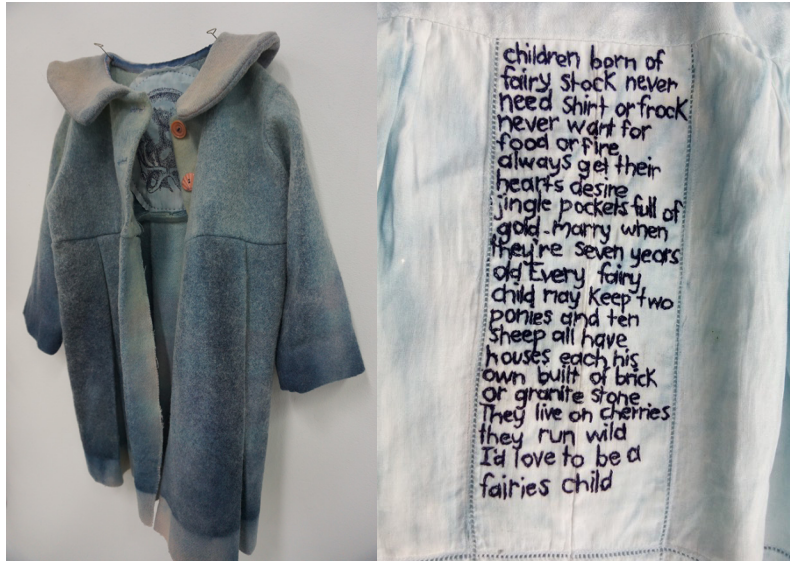


Figure 3. Victoria Stevens, *Warmly Yours*. Photograph: Victoria Stevens.

Figure 4. Victoria Stevens, *I'd Love to be a Fairy's Child* (detail). Photograph: Victoria Stevens.

Victoria Stevens is an artist who lives and works in Central Otago. Her current practice is purposefully based around the use of textiles as clothing. She is a graduate of the Dunedin School of Art, receiving a Bachelor of Visual Arts in 2012, a Bachelor of Visual Arts Honours 1st class in 2014 and a Master of Fine Arts with Distinction in 2017. Her *Ninety* exhibition was an extension of her studies towards her Master of Fine Arts.

- 1 See Julian Baggini, *The Ego Trick: In Search of Self* (London: Granta Books, 2011).
- 2 See Claire Wellesley-Smith, *Slow Stitch: Mindful and Contemplative Textile Art* (London: Batsford, 2015).
- 3 See Rosemary McLeod, *Thrift to Fantasy: Home Textile Crafts of the 1930s-1950s* (Auckland: HarperCollins, 2005).
- 4 Miriam Schapiro and Melissa Meyer, "Waste Not, Want Not: An Inquiry into What Women Saved and Assembled – Femmage," *artcritical*, 24 June 2015, <http://www.artcritical.com/2015/06/24/femme-by-miriam-schapiro-and-melissa-meyer>. "Femmeage: (feminine + collage) composition of paint, fabric, and other materials with deliberate reference to feminine imagery or icons," Thalia Gouma-Peterson, *Miriam Schapiro: Shaping The Fragments of Art and Life* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999).
- 5 See R Parker, *The Subversive Stitch, Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (New York: The Women's Press, 2006).
- 6 See Catherine Legrand, *Indigo: The Colour that Changed the World* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2013).
- 7 Steve Jobs, Stanford University Commencement Address, 2005. See <http://newentrepreneursfoundation.com/steve-jobs-stanford-commencement-speech>.