

The power of integration, connect together; is enormous, overpowering – but evanescent. One responds to a need – are you together? Yes I am.

I am a puzzle with all my forty-four pieces. Tabula rasa is needed. A map is an object of study; take your time. I am a map. You are a different map.

LOUISE BOURGEOIS, 1997.¹

MICHELE ELLIOT

'some kind of longing: textile works 1995-2015' is the first comprehensive survey exhibition of Michele Elliot's work in textiles. It presents her first formal textile works, which reflect utilitarian textile forms, such as the quilt, or lap work, in the form of small embroideries, alongside ambitious large-scale textile installations where cotton thread, torn fabric or recycled garments disrupt the linear order of architectural space.

Elliot's practice is defined by a unique engagement with abstraction as a metaphor for human connectivity and the mapping of relationships over time. Her work is strongly informed by human relationships and geography, with influences including living alternately on the west and east coasts of Australia, travelling in search of stories relating to her rich cultural heritage and collaborating with artists from many different countries and cultures.

Elliot spent the first ten years of her practice in Perth, Western Australia, focussed on painting and drawing that often included text. By the early 1990s her practice had diversified and she eventually moved away from painting altogether to focus on installation. In the last 20 years she has created a distinctive body of work in textiles that explores the language of cloth and its rich personal and cultural associations.

Elliot's journey towards textiles was serendipitous. In 1991 she created 'cut', a large installation featuring a wall of human hair, stitched into rows using a sewing machine, onto which she hung one small framed collage. Equally luxuriant and repellent, human hair revealed itself as a material capable of profoundly evoking human presence and absence in equal measure. The cultural resonance and sculptural potential of fibre strongly challenged her and took her practice into an entirely new direction.

Human hair, which provided Elliot with this artistic breakthrough, features in the earliest work presented in this survey exhibition, 'cover, slip, sleeve' (1995). A dialogue between the textiles presented flat against the wall and suspended from the ceiling is established in this installation. The work examines the strictures of painting and considers the potential of the two dimensional surface for material expansion, pointing the way forward to Elliot's increasing subjugation of painting and drawing in favour of a richer spatial practice that would exploit the social symbolism of textiles.

'lumen' (2011) recalls Elliot's beginnings as a painter. A series of circular forms evoke a thick impasto of paint. Round forms twist the rectilinear convention of painting, while on closer inspection a rich red surface of silk and velvet invokes a sensuous realm that transcends cool formalism. The relationship between these luscious spheres and the interstitial spaces of the cool white wall is integral to the work.

In Elliot's textile work walls, columns and corners of buildings assume the role of canvas or cloth, with thread traversing and punctuating its surface to establish a tension between hard

angular space and soft, malleable material. Our presumption of permanence is challenged by these soft materials and ephemeral processes which highlight the spaces in-between – both formally in art and metaphorically in life. 'I am drawn to the edge of things, where things begin and end, liminal spaces and the in-between. These edges or boundaries, particularly in relation to the body, are often what lies at the heart of my work', she said.²

'spill' (2006), comprising 10,000 wooden pins hand-made by the artist, combine on the gallery floor in an organic cluster. Conceptually the labour-intensive process of crafting the pegs is as important as the resulting sculptural form it produces. 'spill' introduces the idea of process as a means to establish a communion with ideas that transcends time and geography. The process of making as meditation is a recurring idea in Elliot's expansive textile installations. Making becomes a way of harnessing and rationalising the passing of time. 'spill' dramatically introduces this important concept which has since defined her textile-based practice in the last decade.

Elliot's use of small, humble hardware elements can be easily overlooked through their accumulation in, and intersection with, space and materials to form impressive installations. Hundreds of utilitarian plastic headed mapping pins are equal in material and conceptual importance in Elliot's wall drawing 'some kind of longing'. However, her other threaded wall drawings feature handmade wooden pins, and owe a debt to 'spill'. Each element, whether pin, peg or ever stitch, is not merely functional - they are symbolically integral to the work; each signifying a micro-site of transformation, 'where 'one thing becomes another, changes from one place to the other'.³

Textiles are deliciously tactile, pliable yet robust, inviting artists to explore fresh material and spatial possibilities. Elliot has a strong focus on process and the exploration of materiality. Her use of textiles and other visceral materials compares with other artists of her generation, including the late John Barbour. Russell Smith described Barbour's work in textiles as '... a paradox of making and unmaking; both an undoing and a yet-to-become form...ragged edges and loose threads give the impression that they have been 'unpicked' or 'unmade', while its clear at the same time that they have been quite carefully and deliberately made that way'.⁴

The same description could be applied to Elliot's practice over the last decade. Her investment in process to explore materiality, time and space is especially significant in her eponymous work, 'some kind of longing' (2012), and related wall drawings that have come to distinguish her practice. Here a tension between making and unmaking and the fluidity between notions of the empty gallery space and the completed art object disrupts our perceptions of the corporeal and the intangible.

Liminality is an important idea explored in Elliot's spatial interventions. Luce Irigaray wrote, 'The dwelling places to which one returns to keep and restore one's self are material, for example, one's own house, but they can also be created through a going towards the other and turning back to oneself, an un-covering of oneself and of the other which re-opens the spaces in which each one rests... Such spaces are made of our flesh, our heart, our thinking and our words and they are not always visible, but they exist...'⁵

'some kind of longing' is an ambitious work constructed by labouriously layering strands of blue cotton thread over pins. The work is a distillation of collected images of the Himalayas: photographs from her mother, family postcards and images drawn by Elliot over several visits to Darjeeling. Elliot's mother lived in Darjeeling after marrying a Scottish tea-planter and her two brothers were born there. The faded photographs and quick sketches merge in Elliot's 'wall drawing' but can never adequately represent the Himalayas in a geological sense. Instead the work, and the process of making it, represents a wayfinding in the liminal space of family history. The work brings into question the artist's mimetic intention, as her connection to this place is corporeal and dreamlike in equal measure.

Through the repetition of threading, 'some kind of longing' is a meditation on, and mediation of, time. It recalls English-Australian artist-weaver, Sara Lindsay's exploration of her family history in Sri Lanka through the time-bound practice of tapestry weaving. Lindsay and Elliot both use textiles to recover haptic memories, with the ritual of making serving as a way of communing with the past. 'There are ghosts tangled up in the drawing out of this work, there is the desire to manifest some kind of connection to the past, to make sense of something that now only exists in memory, through the back and forth, through the loops and actions of the drawing', Elliot writes.⁶

The importance of process as a meditation to connect to the past is similarly a motivation behind 'blood is' (2008), a series of small embroideries that Elliot describes as 'small studies or drawings, propositions, enquiries, around the theme of blood, family, proximity and distance, migration, mapping and loss'. The embroideries are '...based on maps of Darjeeling and the circulatory system, mapping veins and arteries'.⁷ They were made on her return to her hometown of Perth for an artist's residency. Her focus was on making 'hemispheres: whispering wall' (2008), a major thread work, but during the residency she also made the embroideries and a conceptually affiliated sketch for 'some kind of longing'.

'whitewash' (2014) and its progenitor 'fathom' (2014) bring together Elliot's ambitious engagement with architectural space with her more intimate embroidery process. In these works she expands her exploration of liminality from the personal to the political with reference to the parlous status

of refugees at sea – between families, countries, nationalities and ideologies – but places the issue in a broader historical context of global inequity. Jacqueline Millner wrote about Elliot's dramatic transmogrification of found clothing in 'whitewash' stating that the '...accumulation suggests the inexorable phenomena of our times: the mass displacement of peoples, the mass waste of throwaway cultures that is the flip side of constant growth, and the conjunction between the two in a world where the value of human life varies wildly depending on class and nationality'.⁸

In 'whitewash' flattened and stiffened found garments are grouped together in flux: flotsam and jetsam in grey – the most liminal of shades. The materiality of the compressed and malformed garments is confronting, as if the inherent memory in the cloth of its previous wearer has been erased. The objects are presented as an amoebic cluster, extending up the wall and spilling onto the floor. On closer inspection the grey forms are more nuanced than they first appear, with stitch and the remnant characteristic of the found cloth coming through. Amidst the black, white and grey of the refugee issue, 'whitewash' is punctuated by occasional elements of muted colour. This could be read as a reference to rare human moments that cut through in the news cycle to challenge our desensitized views of refugees as an anonymous mass adrift in the Mediterranean Sea or the Indian Ocean.

Our haptic memories of cloth are deeply ingrained and artists are increasingly drawn to textiles because of such associative powers. Textiles feature in rituals of birth, initiation and death and evoke in us deep feelings of self, family, community and culture. Cloth sheathes our bodies in a second skin; swaddling us in cultural belonging. Elliot has embraced textiles for its ability to reflect the human condition; in particular, those liminal moments and 'grey spaces' – physical and psychical – in which we dwell amidst uncertainty as we search for a way home.

Anthony Camm
Director
Ararat Regional Art Gallery

1. Bernadac, Marie-Laure and Hans Ulrich Obrist (ed.), *'Louise Bourgeois: Destruction of the Father, Reconstruction of the Father: Writings and Interviews 1923-1997'*, Violette Editions, London, 1998, p. 366.
2. Elliot, Michele in *'Stains on my Chintz'*, exhibition catalogue, The Harrington Street Arts Centre, Kolkata, India, 2010.
3. Bolt, Dr Barbara, exhibition catalogue, *'always between us: recent work by Michele Elliot'*, Span Galleries, Melbourne, 2007.
4. Smith, Russell, *'John Barbour: Tribute (a bibliography of bees)'* in McDonald, Ewan (ed.), *'John Barbour: Hardsoll'*, Australian Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide, 2011.
5. Irigaray, Luce, *'Key Writings'*, Continuum, London/New York, 2004.
6. Elliot, Michele, artist's statement, 2015.
7. Elliot, Michele, artist's statement, 2016.
8. Millner, Dr Jacqueline, exhibition catalogue, *'whitewash'*, Wollongong Art Gallery, 2014.



↑ *whitewash* 2014 found and gifted clothing, cotton thread, ink, mapping pins variable dimension Collection Wollongong Art Gallery, Purchased 2014 Collection of the artist IMAGE: Felicity Jenkins



↑ *fathom* 2014 found and gifted clothing, cotton thread, pins 280 x 140 cm INSTALLATION SHOT: Michele Elliot



↑ *some kind of longing* 2012 (detail) cotton thread, mapping pins 440 x 180 cm IMAGE: Frances Mocnik

SOME KIND OF LONGING:

TEXTILE WORKS 1995-2015

MICHELE ELLIOT

ARARAT REGIONAL ART GALLERY

2 APRIL → 22 MAY 2016

Michele Elliot would like to thank the Ararat Regional Art Gallery, its director, staff and volunteers; John Monteleone and Louise Brand from Wollongong Art Gallery; and Christopher Mills, Joanne Linsdell, Jo Darbyshire and Dominic Lefebvre.

ARARAT REGIONAL ART GALLERY STAFF:

Anthony Camm, Debby Fuller,
David Herbert, Mark Hughes,
Jordan Marani, Maureen Sladdin,
Wendy Stevens, Kylee Whiting

ARARAT REGIONAL ART GALLERY
ADVISORY COMMITTEE:

Anthony Camm, Elizabeth Crauford,
Sue Cunningham, Debbie Herd,
Cr. Fay Hull, Jade Kahle, Neil Manning



TOWN HALL, VINCENT STREET,
ARARAT VICTORIA, 3377, AUSTRALIA
TELEPHONE 03 5352 2836

gallery@ararat.vic.gov.au
www.ararat.vic.gov.au
www.facebook.com/araratgallery
www.micheleelliot.com

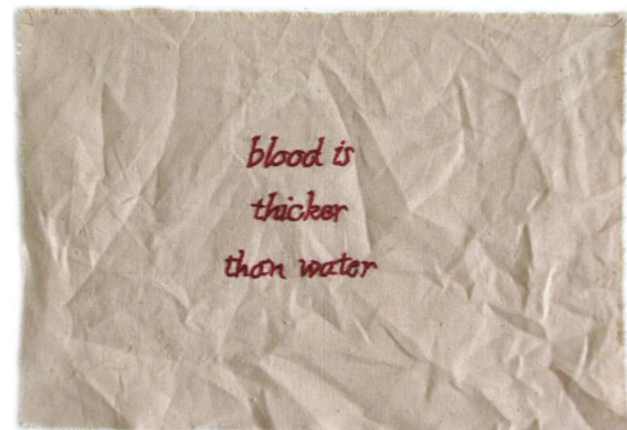


A cultural facility of
Ararat Rural City Council



This project is supported by the
NSW Government through Arts NSW

ISBN: 978-0-9871267-5-7
PUBLISHED BY Ararat Regional Art Gallery, Edition 1000
WRITER – Anthony Camm • CATALOGUE DESIGN – Gravity Design



↑ *lumen* 2011
silk velvet, mountboard,
cotton thread
variable dimensions
IMAGE: Christian Capurro

← *blood is* 2007-2010
(one of a series of six works)
cotton thread on tea-dyed linen
variable dimensions
IMAGE: Michele Elliot



← *cover, slip, sleeve* 1995
silk, hair, wadding, satin
variable dimensions
IMAGE: Michele Elliot



↑ *spill* 2006
10,000 hand-made wooden pins
(each approx. 9cm)
variable dimensions
IMAGE: Christian Capurro

→ FRONT COVER IMAGE:
some kind of longing 2012 (detail)
cotton thread, mapping pins
440 x 180 cm
IMAGE: Frances Mocnik



SOME KIND OF LONGING:
TEXTILE WORKS
1995-2015

MICHELE ELLIOT

ARARAT REGIONAL
ART GALLERY

2 APRIL → 22 MAY
2016