



Acknowledgements

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Michele Elliot: whitewash, Wollongong Art Gallery, 1 March - 11 May 2014

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**WOLLONGONG
ART GALLERY**



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Michele Elliot
whitewash

Foreword

The relationship between the artist, their art and the viewer is fundamentally a dialogue, and that exchange can at times be impassioned and profound.

While some artists are moved solely by a need for creative self-expression by the nature of the materials they use and by aesthetic and stylistic considerations, others have a very different approach. For these artists, their work takes on a stronger socio-political stance and becomes a vehicle for questioning the status quo and what we think we know. For the viewer, this can be both challenging and rewarding.

Michele Elliot's exhibition *whitewash* is a response to issues surrounding boats, border control and the current political climate of disregard toward asylum seekers.

The title *whitewash* is a clever and ironic reference to both a mundane laundering process and the glossing over and covering up of crimes or scandals in the context of governments and other organisations.

Michele's elegant installation evokes a floating memorial through a field of ghost-like forms. Issues surrounding asylum seekers and refugees continue to be a subject of considerable community concern and the Gallery would like to thank the artist for her commitment to developing and presenting this body of work.

We hope the exhibition will help provide some insight and understanding of these very complex issues and make an important contribution to this ongoing important community and national debate. We hope you enjoy the exhibition.

John Monteleone
Program Director

Michele Elliot: whitewash

There is something very intimate about mending clothes by hand. You hold to your body an object that regularly touches someone else's body; you pierce it and fondle it; you might even bring it your lips as you bite off the excess thread. In these times of mass manufactured, disposable fashion, getting out the home sewing kit is becoming a thing of the past: it's quicker and easier to simply replace an article by buying another. Yet that moment with someone else's clothes in your hands can bring you closer not only to them, but also to that other body, the one that first created the piece. S/he has had close contact with this cloth too, but her presence has been practically erased. Looking to match the stitch, tracing how the seams run, puts you in mind of that anonymous, disposable labourer, whose skills and value are systemically undermined by the giant wheels of globalization.

Stitching has been at the centre of Michele Elliot's practice for many years. Through this slow and painstaking technique, Elliot has developed a language that evokes tenderness, intimacy and the desire to make reparation. For Elliot, stitching is a form of drawing, a three-dimensional line that literally draws things together and physically connects disparate times and spaces. Stitching also carries Elliot's work over into the realm of textiles, where beauty and functionality, the one-off and the mass-produced, and art and craft are in constant play.

In *whitewash*, Elliot has begun with found objects, namely discarded clothes and their many associations. Selecting these partly on account of their origins, partly on their sculptural appeal, Elliot has fashioned them with dressmaking pins before running over them with needle and thread in patterns that resemble contour lines on a map. The clothes become terrain; they come to map the space the bodies they invoke have travelled. Through Elliot's gestures, the abstraction of that

displacement is quietly rendered material, and the possibility for connection and reconnection, for human care, revived.

As the stitched garments gather along the wall in Elliot's installation, their 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. Yet this gathering also resonates in another way. For, instead of unravelling into undifferentiated rag - so often the fate of the once-consumed, then uselessly hoarded, and finally dumped clothes of wealthy societies - these discarded items have been rescued, fortified and rendered unique by a loving hand. Their dignity and integrity reinstated, their coming together can then be read as solidarity, empathy and resilience.

Michele Elliot's work is steeped in these very values, her eye trained to pick out beauty in humble things, her hand expert in making connections between the seemingly disparate and isolated. Through her stitching-drawing, she aesthetically transforms items that crowd our everyday. She pulls them out of their ordinary trajectory and invites us to regard them differently, to imagine the complex systems of labour and traffic, fashion and shelter, in which they circulate, and to consider our own place within these.

Dr Jacqueline Millner

Jacqueline Millner teaches in the Critical Studies program at Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney, and writes widely on contemporary art. Her book *Conceptual Beauty* on Australian contemporary art was published in 2010, while her latest books *Australian Artists in the Contemporary Museum* (with Jennifer Barrett, Ashgate) and *Fashionable Art* (with Adam Geczy, Bloomsbury) are due for release in 2014.

