



ABBOTSLEIGH

GS Grace
CossingtonSmithGallery



Connecting Thread

19 July to 22 August 2019

Grace Cossington Smith Gallery and Abbotsleigh are delighted to present the exhibition *Connecting Thread*.

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Cover

Sarah Contos, *Before Transcending Moonlight (Gloria #1)*
Courtesy the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

Connecting Thread

19 July to 22 August 2019

Robert Brain
Sarah Contos
Sylvia Griffin
Elizabeth Pulie
Mona Ryder



TOGGLING THE GORDIAN KNOT

A structured thread is formed from ideas. Artworks within *Connecting Thread* are not inert twine nor objects from centuries of tradition; these artworks are a weaving of the conceptual and the material. Each artwork is an invisible performative action by the artist interweaving the political, cultural and autobiographical into an intractable understanding of the contemporary present through the audience experience.

Sculptural, political and pictorial, *Connecting Thread* reminds us that fibre arts are from a long and varied tradition. However, it was the late 20th century practitioners who broke the craft-arts debate, which had bound fibre artists to women's practice and the utilitarian. Significantly, this period emphasised materiality, which was born from the labour of repetitive movements while also politicising the creative hand of the artist. Within this framework, fibre arts became socially engaged with major cultural subjects such as feminism, identity politics, domesticity and labour. As fibre arts became an interdisciplinary approach to contemporary politics the question remains: how do we begin to understand a genre that is bound by historical traditions yet traverses future concerns, while never losing the sense of the present? To understand this tripartite relationship of tenses is to understand the notion of weaving concepts through time, that is, its etymological relationship to *wyrd* and the modern otherworldly weird. The term *wyrd* has disputed origins without precise meanings across cultures and time. Rather than a word or term, *wyrd* is considered a concept for fate or destiny. Spanning Anglo-Saxon, Nordic and Celtic cultures *wyrd* (within Nordic mythology) took on the personification of Norns, and interestingly became a feminine noun. Norns were female creatures that personified the past, present and future, who wove the fates of all beings. Remembering that fate has no moral conscience, the three Norns shaped lives by weaving the layers of the past within the present, creating a future by cutting the thread to end one's life. The warp and weft of their actions represent the layers of past actions as a merging of timelines.


Our contemporary use of the word weird is linked to the origins of *wyrd* as a gatherer of knowledge in temporal dimensions that set them apart from others. In this way, we can understand artists to enact the *wyrd* of our day as their role is to weave knowledge, disciplines, history, cultures, materiality, and biographical experience into new perspectives. Conversely, as artists are the weavers of knowledge across time, they are dually the unravellers. This places contemporary artists in a binary, as it is their role to question, unpack and disorder the status quo. This unthreading of the accepted while simultaneously creating the new is what binds them in an eternal Gordian knot.



Connecting Thread brings together artists who have interwoven the concept of *wyrd* through explorations of materiality with autobiographical details, cultural histories and personal reflections that transcend fixed notions of knowledge, time, action and place.

Elizabeth Pulie's concerns are from a post-medium perspective, whereby her research-led practice positions the conceptual as equal to the material. Furthermore, the personal is also woven into her practice. Her movement from painting to fibre was a response to partake in a feminist exhibition. Pulie's response was to pay tribute to the second wave feminist artist who worked with textiles. Yet, it was also an intuitive response as she incorporated a personal love of macramé, sewing and tapestry. Her works undermine the traditions associated with working with textiles as they combine coarse threads of jute or twine into beautiful structures rather than luxe silks or wool. To add structure to the soft elements, she mounts the works on board where they become a relief sculpture, such as *#89 (Art...Contemporary of Itself)*, 2018. The titles are randomly chosen chapters from Baudrillard's *The Conspiracy of Art*. Here Pulie weaves these words into a different time and place, actioning the *wyrd*. As arbitrary as the titles remain, Pulie has positioned her works within the temporal intertwining invisible domestic action, allowing multiple interpretations of her work and acceptability of these viewpoints.


Similarly, **Sarah Contos** plays upon the ambiguity of interpretation. As a bricoleur of meanings, Contos offers a space for the viewer to recall and relate to her art. While the artist invests in the politics of feminism, popular culture, history and identity issues, she does not hermetically seal their interpretation. Within *Women's Demonstration in Front of Parliament House*, 2017, Contos has collaged found objects onto a soft fabric backdrop. This politically charged work combines elements of eroticism and pastiche dislocating the demonstration. Her work is a deed of a contemporary Norn, intertwining the tenses of past, present and future. *Before Transcending Moonlight (Gloria #1)*, 2017, brings drama to her work, a fusion of the episodic and past as silent screen star Gloria Swanson is offered a voice by contemporary active audience engagement. Her free-standing sculpture *Cocktails and Dreams*, 2017 is evocative by its very colour: a pastiche of camp cloths



reminiscent of 1980s Alexis Carrington outfits. The artist relies upon our emotional recall attached to the elements of her art, particularly the fabric which has a daily relationship with our corporeal selves yet permeates our psychological selves.

Mona Ryder's works build a collective installation that is theatrical and awaiting a drama to unfold. This holds the viewer in suspension playing upon the paradigm of tenses of time. Her work is imbued with a sense of place, personal experience and memories. Space is Ryder's temporal medium and undermines the soft form of her fabric to consciously fill space with sculptures. Ryder's works unravel themes of motherhood, marriage, the rituals of religion and domesticity through materials that are carriers of their history. Her process of materiality is to repurpose as much as possible. This repurposing interweaves the material's history, carrying with it invisible actions of the presence of the past, with present day interactions through sculpture and installations. Ryder's *Ballroom Essence*, 2016-19 is one such votive offering, combining a past action through the abandoned shoes; a present positioning through the viewer and a reminder of future intentions through prayer.

Robert Brain's compositions are a complex matrix of the personal and historical that are easily accessible via the humour he shares with audiences. The composite images are a weaving of his former career as an anthropologist; memory, cultural appropriation and the anecdotal. The role of pastiche is an urgent reminder of clashing cultures and intersecting timelines, hence the wyrd. The artist's personal view is that everything is stolen or borrowed rendering little original. *Robert in Bangwa Greeting the Chief* (made in later years) creates a scene of collapsing timelines – visual cultures with personal memory. Here the artist has inserted a portrait of himself as a young man, painted from a memory years after the literal meeting. Brain has distorted the proportions and tilts perspectives. There is an influence of African geometric fabrics clashing with modernist carpets rendering his interiors highly decorative and reminiscent of Vuillard. Brain's non-traditional stitches further enhance the scene's clashing rhythms. This is an ongoing practice within Brain's oeuvre as he moves with ease from running stitch to tapestry, enhancing the eye's movement from the figurative to the formal patterns. That is, the thread's flow moves diagonally or laterally depending on where his free-flowing design takes him. The unravelling of the constructed woven narratives within Brain's works provides the viewer with the ultimate Gordian knot.



Sylvia Griffin's work also combines personal histories with universal themes and transglobal contexts. Her intersections are never singular and tenderly draw the viewer to her personal family history. The experience of post-holocaust immigration is dually told through the universal and particular. *An Archaeology of Diaspora CU*, 2018 builds a stratum of storytelling, through the family linen which simultaneously hides and exposes chosen objects that are practical, sentimental and carry hope for their future. Comforting the transport of these objects is her mother's dowry linen, embedded with its own memory through the embroidered initials of her maiden name. Griffin's relationship with her mother is further explored through the profound installation *Unknitting/rewind*, 2016, in which a video of the artist unravels a cardigan hand-knitted by her mother. It then shows the process of reknitting it alongside the literal cardigan in situ as an iteration of her mother's experience. However, this profound, performative action is not a singular mapping of her mother's labour. The cardigan is, in fact, a hand-me-down, and now an heirloom that carries the female experience within the Griffin bloodline. The cardigan was first made for her older sister before being handed down to Griffin who subsequently gave it to her own daughter. Here, the artist gives it back to audiences today.

Connecting Thread by its very title holds an intention for the audience to bring forth their own life experiences and unravel the understanding before them in each artwork. There is an expectation that the audience will thread and weave their knowledge and draw connections between themselves and the artworks, thus continuing the cycle of the wyrd. As cultural conduits of fate enacting the contemporary version of a Norn the collected artists have also woven their knowledge and autobiographical experiences as invisible actions across time. Their dual role of unraveller and simultaneous purveyor of ideas places their practice within the binary of a metaphorical Gordian knot. Perhaps it is not the role of the artist to unravel or toggle the Gordian knot of their creations, but us, the audience.

Lizzy Marshall, 2019
Independent Curator



ROBERT BRAIN

Artist

Born in Tasmania, Brain is an anthropologist, academic and tapestry artist. He studied anthropology in London, lectured at English and Italian universities, worked and studied in the Congo Republic, Cameroon and Mali and has written and translated many books.

He has been making his tapestries since working alone in the African bush where needlework became a passion and then an all-consuming profession. His themes are many, original and varied – ranging from landscapes and portraiture, architectural and animal scenes to floor mats and carpets. Brain borrows subjects from well-known paintings, using these and other classical themes as a starting point for his often humorous and provocative explorations.

He now lives in the Blue Mountains, west of Sydney and has a spectacular garden which is opened to the public every spring, with proceeds going to a local charity.

Artwork

His technique in all the tapestries is a simple one and always the same: a rough outline of the subject is outlined on the canvas with wool and needle, using a simple canvas stitch and details are added or removed as the picture progresses. This building up of a picture means that the final product is always vastly different from the original inspiration, often surprising the artist himself.

The tapestries reveal Brain's experiences and as Glenn Barkley stated in 2016, 'art is the thing that binds all the parts of Brain's remarkable life together.'

Top: *Intrepid explorers, Neal and Robert setting out for the Adelaide Hills*, 1985
tapestry
157 x 102 cm (framed)

Robert in Bangwa Greeting the Chief
tapestry
87.5 x 92 cm (framed)



SARAH CONTOS

Artist

By layering and manipulating sourced objects, personal artefacts and vestiges of popular culture, Contos draws attention to emotional and theatrical relationships between imagery, form and materiality. Her work explores how these interactions trigger intimate experiential responses within a broader collective memory.

She is represented by Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery and STATION Gallery.

Artwork

Women's Demonstration in Front of Parliament House, 2017 was commissioned for '1917: The Great Strike' exhibited in Carriageworks. Taking the form of an elaborate patchwork quilt, Contos's large-scale textile work honours the important contribution made by women to the Great Strike.

In her use of collage and assemblage, Contos draws on the political strategies, monochromatic palette and subversive spirit of Dada. The fragmented silver chains evoke a fine piece of feminine jewellery and the attached charms are screen printed images of tokens given to the strikers. The work and title make reference to a critical moment in the strike's evolution: the storming of Parliament House by several hundred women, some of whom may have worked at the Eveleigh Railway Workshops as seamstresses or upholstresses. The appliquéd materiality of Contos's quilt pays tribute to the vital work done by these female workers, while also acknowledging those women who were responsible for their families' wellbeing at a time of tremendous hardship and privation. At the same time, it gestures to the solidarity of community and to the pride taken in that which is handmade.

In *Before Transcending Moonlight* and *Cocktails and Dreams* both from the exhibition *Daughter Universe, 2017*, the artist uses drama, fantasy and artifice to combine the silent film era with the gregarious tinselled 1980s. Here fabric is used three dimensionally to suggest an 'in-flight' sensibility or having anti gravitational properties. Drawing upon DIY backyard puppet theatres and magic shows, the selected works are reinterpretations of cinematic history, while also pondering how Hollywood offers a parallel universe we inhabit as individuals for a set duration of time.





Women's Demonstration in Front of Parliament House, 2017
Screen print on cotton and lamé, various fabrics, poly-fil
thread, hardware and found gloves
272 x 286 cm

SYLVIA GRIFFIN

Artist

Sylvia Griffin is a multi-discipline artist and writer living in Sydney. Her practice spans sculpture, drawing, installation, textiles, video and photography. Sylvia holds a PhD from Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney, and has contributed to several peer-reviewed journals, books and conferences. She has exhibited both nationally and internationally, received various prizes, grants and scholarships and has been shortlisted for several national awards, winning the 2013 Willoughby Sculpture Prize.

Artwork

The video *Unknitting/Rewind* records the unravelling of a childhood cardigan knitted by Griffin's mother for her older sister in the 1960s that she then inherited and subsequently passed down to her own daughter. The decision to unpick this cardigan was made partly from Griffin's desire to 'unravel' a history, but also to reconnect with her mother through retracing her creative process, albeit in reverse. Mapping the cardigan before unravelling, then later reknitting it, the new garment literally retains 55+ years of memory held in the wool. The embodied process and ritual-like immersion involved in unravelling and remaking the cardigan provided comfort and connection alongside more difficult emotions.

In *An Archaeology of Diaspora*, the vitrine is filled to the brim with objects buried between layers and layers of family linen brought to Australia by Griffin's parents on leaving Europe; salvaged goods, treasured objects, mementos, practical pieces and her mother's dowry linen. While each object may have its own story to tell, here they combine to form an archaeology of diaspora: layers of memory and material evidence of a previous life brought to the new country to make the unfamiliar familiar.

Top: *An Archaeology of Diaspora CU*, 2018
linen, personal family items
75 x 45 x 111 cm

Unknitting/rewind, December 2016
video, textile, timber and chair
Photographs courtesy Giselle Haber



ELIZABETH PULIE

Artist

Pulie has exhibited her work since 1989. Until 2002 a sense of art as decoration and commodity informed her decorative painting project, while from 2002 until 2006 she focused on a relational practice. Her work has recently opened to new media such as weaving, collage and embroidery. Recent exhibitions include *The National 2017: New Australian Art*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney (2017); *Unfinished Business: Perspectives on Art and Feminism*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne (2017); and *The Conspiracy of Art* by Jean Baudrillard, Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney (2018). Pulie is represented by Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney.

Artwork

Baudrillard wrote an essay, 'The Conspiracy of Art', in 1996, and it's also the title of an anthology of his writing edited by Sylvère Lotringer 2005. These works are titled after chapter titles in the book and form a kind of tribute to it. Here Baudrillard refers to contemporary art as a case of 'insider trading', as something that is 'formed according to the rules of its own game'. His ideas were useful to Pulie's research and practice concerning contemporary art as the end of art. While Baudrillard refers only minimally to ideas of the end, he describes contemporary art as a situation of entrapment; a state wherein it is impossible to both participate within contemporary art and remain critical or objective about it, things that Pulie had long felt in relation to her own practice.

Materially, this work comes from Pulie's desire to reuse old work to make new work, to recycle and lose some bulk in the studio and stop putting new stuff out into the world. Pulie likes to use contrasting materials and forms and combine opposites, such as natural fibres with synthetic, or embroidery with painting. Her initial use of hessian as a medium in 2012 was both pragmatic and aesthetic. Pulie made what she considered to be a tribute to second-wave feminism: four-metre high banners that were based on the female form, exaggerating the sense of the female form as a feminist trope. The size of these works meant that she needed a lot of fabric. Hessian was cheap and easy to paint on, and it referenced the particular aesthetic of the 70s and second-wave feminism. The problem with hessian is that it creases when it's stored, so with these works Pulie glued the fabric to wooden boards to give them a more permanent rigidity.



#89 (*Art...Contemporary of Itself*), 2018
acrylic, hessian, cotton on board
61 x 46 cm

Courtesy the artist and Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney

MONA RYDER

Artist

Queensland born Ryder has explored themes of domesticity, gender politics and memory through her multi-media practice, spanning over four decades. Her work is included in significant National, State, regional and private collections.

In an ongoing analysis of mortality and the human state, Ryder creates an incongruity through the use of iconography and juxtapositions of materiality. Theatricality pervades her work across all mediums, building tensions, raising questions and creating a dual sense of disquiet and warmth, with an underlying edge of wry humour.

Her work has been exhibited widely, both here and overseas and is informed by extensive travel and study.

Artwork

Ryder is intrigued with the different transitions and rituals in life; the experience of turbulence, emotions, love, destiny, loss and longing. We all interact differently with these and interconnect uniquely with others around us.

In Ballroom Essence, a red velvet curtain creates a theatrical setting for this installation in an historical house. An altar, shoes, font and lavish embroideries with curved frames set the scene for a drama unfolding. The curtains fall and flow across the floor forming a small stage or alcove. The altar's shelves are stacked with bottles decorated with milagros and filled with red liquid. On the back is a warning: 'Do not drink' like *Alice in Wonderland* (the 'drink me' potion radically changing our perceptions). Each year we hope the next will be better and our fortunes will change. The bottles of *Ballroom Essence* are perhaps physical affirmations that all will be well – just believe. Children's shoes sit quietly in front of the altar with the belief and the promise of an enchanting future that will be theirs, a future that will outshine the present and past.

Embroideries tell of a liaison of an electric relationship between two lovers that goes wrong. Two of the small embroideries begin to tell of a couple deeply in love and the accelerated demise and eventual parting. One of these has a silver envelope and electrical cords between a pair of male and retreating female shoes. Framed works expand on the drama that follows and the tears that flow.





Ballroom Essence, 2016-19

curtains, curtain rod with mussel shell finials, altar
mirror, shoes joined with mussel shells and roses
bottles, milagros and ribbon, filled with red fluid
child's shoes filled with mussel shells covered in silk
pedestal with mussel shell bowl filled with stockings
five embroideries
Size variable

THE WORKS

ROBERT BRAIN

*Self-portrait after Antonello
Da Messina*, 1993

tapestry
69.5 x 64 cm (framed)

*Intrepid explorers, Neal and Robert,
setting out for the Adelaide Hills*, 1985

tapestry
157 x 102 cm (framed)

Parliament House, 2012
140 x 63.5 cm (framed)

Bara-Orou, 2011
tapestry
75 x 66 (framed)

*Restoring Giotto (showing
half-finished restoration)*, 2013
tapestry
86.5 x 66 cm (framed)

Robert in Bangwa Greeting the Chief
tapestry
87.5 x 92 cm (framed)

Rhinoceros, 2014
tapestry
93 x 113.5 cm (framed)

Kabuki golfer, 2016
wool on canvas
61 x 49.5 cm (framed)

*Embroidered Carpet on Australian
Wildflowers Theme*, 2012-2014
wool on canvas
5 x 4 metres (approximately)

SARAH CONTOS

*Women's Demonstration in Front of
Parliament House*, 2017
screen print on cotton and lamé, various
fabrics, poly-fil, thread, hardware and
found gloves
272 x 286 cm

*Before Transcending Moonlight
(Gloria #1)*, 2017
screen print on canvas and
metallic fabric, aluminium
105 x 103 x 29 cm

Cocktails and Dreams, 2017
metallic fabric, aluminium, epoxy
poly-fil, thread, hardwares
228 x 100 x 25 cm

Courtesy the artist and Roslyn Oxley9
Gallery, Sydney

SYLVIA GRIFFIN

An Archaeology of Diaspora CU, 2018
linen, personal family items
75 x 45 x 111 cm

Unknitting/rewind, December 2016
video (12 minutes), textile
timber and chair

ELIZABETH PULIE

#39, 2013

acrylic on hessian, metal rod
176 x 100 cm

#60 (*Thesis II*), 2015,

jute, fabric, modelling clay, bamboo
256 x 143.5 cm

#61 (*Divinity Theory*), 2015

acrylic, wool, hessian, cotton, bamboo
246 x 140.5 cm

#84 (*Introduction: The Piracy of*

Art by S. Lotringer), 2018

jute, mixed fibre, acrylic on canvas
76 x 61 cm

#89 (*Art...Contemporary of Itself*), 2018

hessian, cotton, acrylic on board
61 x 46 cm

#91 (*Aesthetic Illusion and Disillusion*), 2018

hessian, wool and acrylic on board
41 x 51 cm

Courtesy the artist and Sarah Cottier
Gallery, Sydney

MONA RYDER

Ballroom Essence, 2016-19

curtains, curtain rod with mussel
shell finials, altar, mirror, shoes joined
with mussel shells and roses, bottles,
milagros and ribbon, filled with red fluid,
child's shoes filled with mussel shells
covered in silk, pedestal with mussel
shell bowl filled with stockings
size variable

Drowning

Listen

Silver Tears

Tear Fall

The Split

2016

old curved glass frames, hand and
machine stitched embroideries, appliqué
artificial greenery and silk flowers,
milagros, paint, silver jewellery
62 x 48 cm



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