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CONVERSATION AND ENCOUNTER

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CONVERSATION AND ENCOUNTER

Belinda Von Mengrsen

I would like to offer some insight into the work of three unique Australian textile artists: Ruth Hadlow, Elisa Markes-Young and Wendy Lugg. All three work across cultural borders drawing influence and inspiration – aesthetic, technical and conceptual – from specific objects of textile material culture. Hadlow responds to her encounters with West Timorese woven cloth; Markes-Young her memories of traditional Polish domestic cloths and paper-cuts; and Lugg to utilitarian Japanese Boro.

Each response involves a process of ‘reading’ and reflecting upon individual textile pieces: a silent dialogue or ‘conversation,’ which is then interpolated into their own work. The most intriguing aspect of these encounters is the artists’ capacity to deeply and irrevocably respond at both the conceptual and physical level. All three activate the knowledge gleaned from their observations and interactions and apply it within their own visual art practices. These practices produce new contemporary visual artworks. The main focus of this paper is to consider how these artists apply their observations within their making and thinking practices.

To ask the question: *How do these cultural items both inform and transform their art making?*

Textile artists often employ items of material culture as a basis for primary research within their practice. However, when cultural items are thus used, it can be easy to assume a simplistic process: straightforward plundering and superficial re-appropriation. For Hadlow, Markes-Young and Lugg, however, a relationship with a textile cultural sample is ongoing and conversational: the site not of conclusion or containment, but of complex unfolding. Such research practice moves far beyond aesthetic analysis, relying rather upon a set of terms and methodologies. Some of Hadlow, Markes-Young and Lugg’s unique approaches to objects of textile material culture are tacit, but others are more corporeal or simply just practical in their application.

Hadlow has described the use of traditional West Timorese woven textiles in her practice as “objects to think with”¹, Markes-Young describes her childhood memories of traditional Polish needlework, (I quote): “After multiple migrations I don’t really belong anywhere and my memories are the closest I have to a home. They – together with the associated fallibility and fragility – form the core of my artistic practice”². Lugg describes a process of “working-in-response-to”³ and alongside traditional Boro and Sashiko Japanese textiles. It is this notion of the cultural piece, through fact or memory operating as a conceptual device, which characterises the work of these artists. For Hadlow, Markes-Young and Lugg, then, it can be seen that the physical sample of textile material culture is both an object of traditional aesthetic influence but also, more uniquely, a ‘conceptual tool’. The item itself becomes the

¹ Ruth Hadlow, “The Library of Translation Exercises: dis/location and art practice in West Timor”, *Art Monthly Australia*, no. 244 (2011): 75.

² Elisa Markes-Young, Artist’s statement, *Sensorial Loop: 1st Tamworth Textile Triennial, 2011-2013*. Exhibition Catalogue, ed. Patrick Snelling. (Tamworth: Tamworth Regional Gallery, 2011), 19.

³ Wendy Lugg, *Common Threads*. Exhibition catalogue, co-curators and eds. Wendy Lugg and Sue Leighton-White, Kansas, USA: Belger Arts Center (2005).

site of research. While Hadlow physically maps the space between two cultures in her artwork through pieces of traditional Timorese hand-woven cloth, Lugg intuitively investigates used, worn and repaired Japanese Boro cloths, re-positioning them within and alongside her own practice. Markes-Young invents faux stitch techniques and design structures, drawing fragments from her memory of encounters with Polish needlecraft. Such processes come about through the initial encounter, where the cultural textile item enables a re-seeing or conversation. Between the object and the artist a dialogue begins, each unfolding in response to the other. The result is not a reflection of existing culture or a representation of the artist at a particular point in time, but rather an entirely new creation made possible only by combination: what each enables the other to be.

Within this type of research practice, concept and process are inextricably linked. Research works here in conversation. This discussion considers how these artists work, how their practices operate as forms of creative-practice-based-research. Mieke Bal, a visual art historian and theorist describes the elusive process of research as having four aspects⁴:

1. analogy - a form of logic ... between recognition and discovery;
2. motivation – to understand on levels that logic and facts alone cannot provide;
3. serendipity – mostly remains unacknowledged; [and]
4. secrecy – discretion [a measured approach].

These four aspects offer an insight into the ‘tools’ or methodology for the creative practice based research modes of Hadlow, Markes-Young and Lugg.

Ruth Hadlow - *Pulang* (2013) and *Patternbook* (2005-2010)

Hadlow engages with traditional West Timorese textiles to explore conceptual, physical and philosophical ideas within her work. Her practice encompasses several distinctive modes: visual textile-based temporal installation; writing; digital book publication; and performative lectures. “As part of my doctoral research, I wanted to conduct an exploration into approaching West Timorese textiles as poetic generative material rather than as cultural artifacts⁵,” Hadlow explains. “Traditional textiles are usually seen from the perspectives of the museum, the collector, or the anthropologist; I was interested in considering them from the perspective of an artist – as objects to think with”⁶.

Images from Hadlow’s *Patternbook* (2005-2010) wall-drawings, installations and an artist’s book series (Fig. 1, Fig. 2):

⁴ Mieke Bal, “Research Practice: New Words on Cold Cases” in *What is Research in the Visual Arts? Obsession, Archive, Encounter*, ed. Michael Ann Holly, and Marquard Smith (Massachusetts: Sterling and Francis Clarke Art Institute, 2008), 206.

⁵ Ruth Hadlow, “The Library of Translation Exercises: dis/location and art practice in West Timor”, *Art Monthly Australia*, no. 244 (2011): 75.

⁶ Ruth Hadlow, “The Library of Translation Exercises: dis/location and art practice in West Timor”, *Art Monthly Australia*, no. 244 (2011): 75.

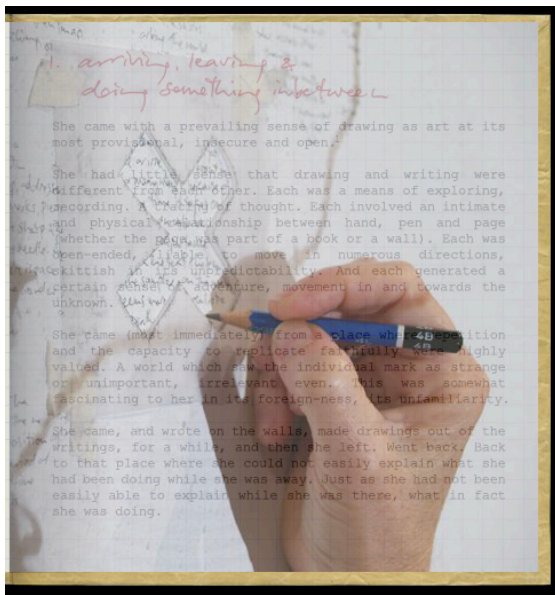


Figure 1, left. Ruth Hadlow, *Patternbook* (2010), virtual book image still, 'arriving, leaving & doing something in-between', (detail) <http://www.ruthhadlow.net/patternbook>, image courtesy of the artist.

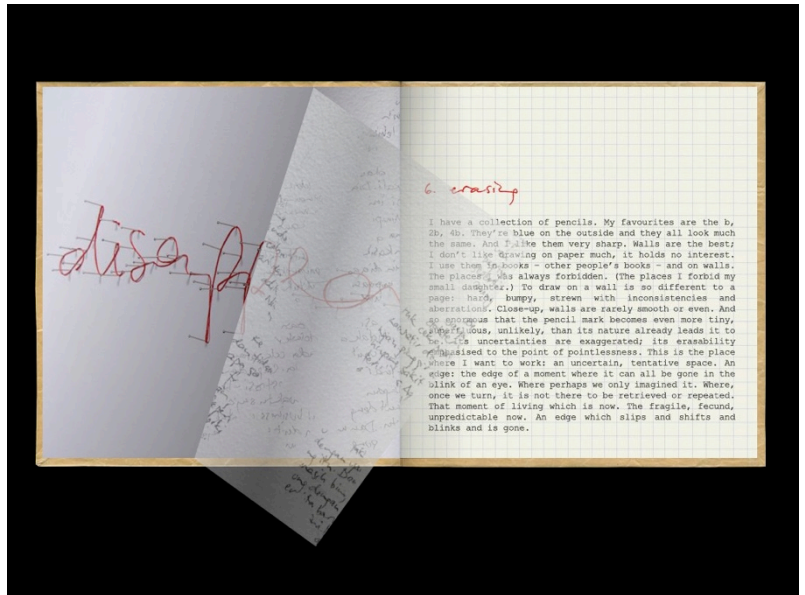


Figure 2, right. Ruth Hadlow, *Patternbook* (2010), virtual book image still, 'disappeared'; 'drawing', (detail) <http://www.ruthhadlow.net/patternbook>, image courtesy of the artist.

When Hadlow moved to West Timor she began to study contemporary examples of the traditional West Timorese supplementary weft back-strap loom woven pieces. Many of these contained figurative elements, some obviously European in influence, like this house motif (Fig. 3).



Figure 3. *Besikama* (Ina Lalak, approx. 2000), sui-supplementary weft house motif, West Timor, Indonesia, photographed by Ruth Hadlow.

Hadlow discovered that some of the motifs used by the weaver came from an old western pattern-book for cross-stitch embroidery. This confluence of imagery led her to rethink her practice. She began to draw some of these motifs directly onto the wall in pencil as a temporary installation. So, the textiles and the pattern book together inspired this series. Some of the woven motifs translated by Hadlow into temporal wall-drawings can be seen in Fig. 3, Fig. 4 and Fig. 5.



Figure 4. Besikama sui-supplementary weft rooster & figure motif, West Timor, Indonesia, photographed by Ruth Hadlow.



Figure 5. Buna-supplementary weft gecko motif, West Timor, Indonesia, photographed by Ruth Hadlow.

In *Patternbook* (2005-2010) (Fig. 1, Fig. 2, Fig. 6) the wall drawing developed in the shape of cross-stitches. In *Pulang* (2013) the motifs were filled with text (Fig. 7) – a narrative about the development of the work, written in response to the weaving and the experience of living in West Timor as an Australian, forever between cultures. *Patternbook* (2005-2010) became an interactive digital book with a sound-track. The images and text are all from Hadlow's own work.

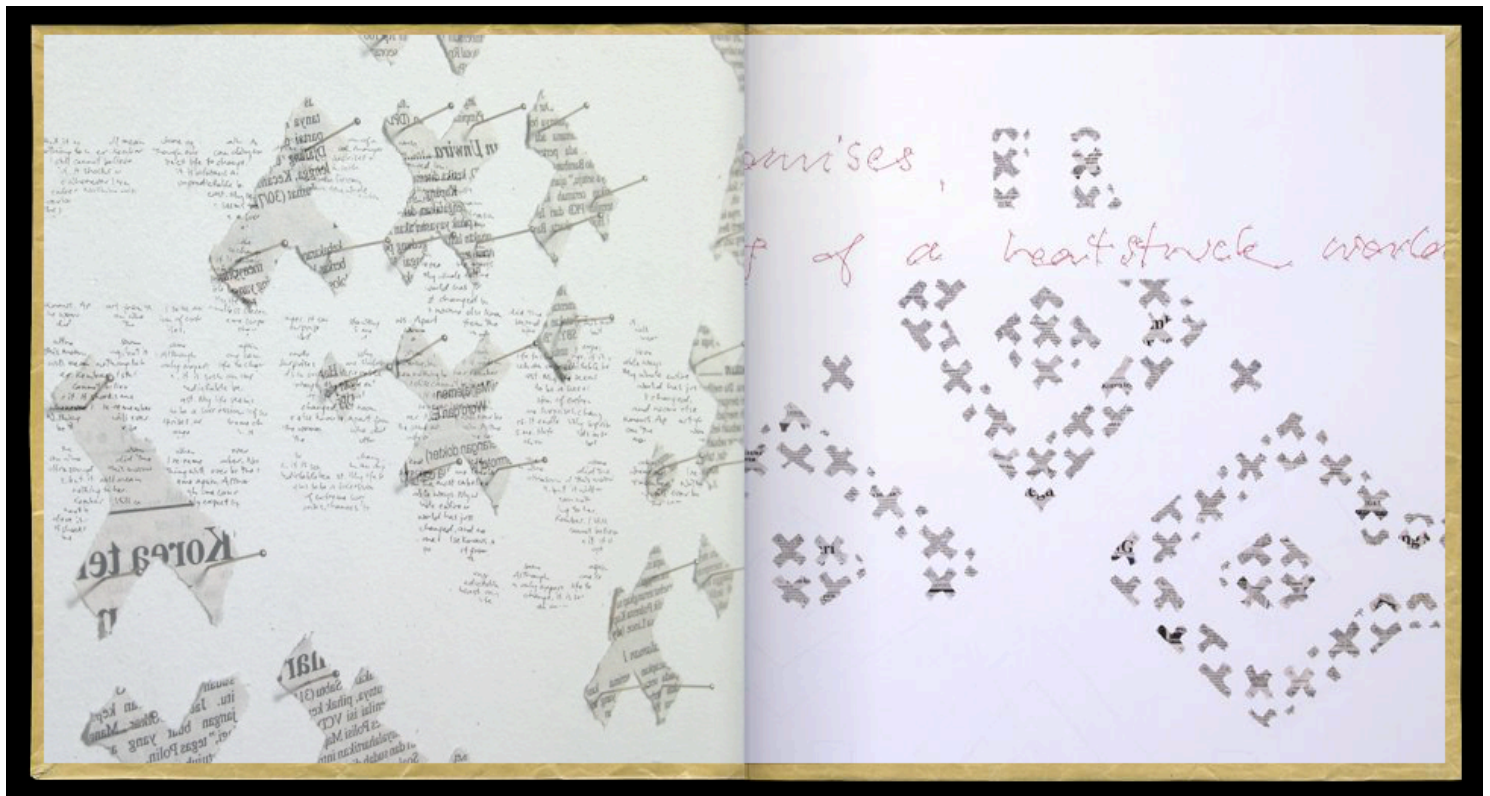


Figure 6. Ruth Hadlow, *Patternbook* (2010), virtual book image still, 'wall drawing', (detail)
<http://www.ruthhadlow.net/patternbook>, image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 7. Ruth Hadlow, *Pulang* (2013), *The Articulated Line* exhibition, curated by Michele Elliot, Articulate gallery, Sydney, 2013, image courtesy of the artist.

While cultural textile objects offer a rich and varied provenance to draw from, the artist must engage only with what speaks most clearly to them. Hadlow discusses how she seeks to dislocate from a sense of ‘otherness’ and romanticism within cultural objects⁷. She chooses not to incorporate physical objects within her work, instead conducting a live conversation with the artifact, incorporating the gleanings into her pieces. This is done in a cyclic manner, examining and deriving motifs from the cloth. Hadlow explains:

“In *Patternbook* (2005) the drawings were comprised of penciled handwriting in English and Indonesian, in the form of X’s, which in turn formed motifs derived from a cross-stitch pattern book lent to me by a Timorese weaver, Ina Lalak. She had incorporated the European cross stitch motifs into her weaving, translating what can be described as a foreign text and, through that process, creating what I think of as a material creole”.⁸

⁷ Ruth Hadlow, “The Library of Translation Exercises: Mapping the Mind” (PhD. seminar paper, University of South Australia, 2006).

⁸ Ruth Hadlow, “The Library of Translation Exercises: Mapping the Mind” (PhD. seminar paper, University of South Australia, 2006).

This approach of interlacing (moving between modes of practice) can be understood as intrinsic to Hadlow's process. It is also addressed by Tim Ingold in his inter-disciplinary text *Making: Anthropology, Archeology, Art and Architecture*, where he asks the question:

“What then is the relation between thinking and making? To this, the theorist and the craftsman would give different answers. It is not that the former only thinks and the latter only makes, but that the one *makes through thinking* and the other *thinks through making*.”⁹

Ingold describes this notion of ‘thinking through making’ as an “art of inquiry”¹⁰ focusing on the materiality of craft-based making practices such as those of Hadlow, Markes-Young and Lugg. This explanation provides an insight into the relationship between artists and their materials: an interchange of ideas through different modes of communication. However, can such an understanding be applied more broadly to conceptual visual artists working in contemporary textiles? Can Hadlow, Markes-Young and Lugg's methodologies, in selecting and responding to cultural textile items offer a new perception for ‘an art of inquiry’ and new ways of working and thinking?

Elisa Markes-Young - *The Strange Quiet of Things Misplaced* (2007-2011)

Elisa Markes-Young's work in *The Strange Quiet of Things Misplaced* (2007-2011), operates outside the conventions of traditional needlecraft practice, using instead what she calls ‘faux’¹¹ techniques. With no formal training other than a few basic hand embroidery and crochet stitches learnt as a child, Markes-Young has developed her technique in an abstract manner. Her starting point is often a memory: in particular, childhood encounters with traditional Polish textiles gifted to her father, a medical doctor, in lieu of a conventional fee. Rather than re-visiting this collection, however, Markes-Young develops, or ‘draws’ her own patterns and stitches in an intuitive way in response to images summoned up by memory. With a limited vocabulary of stitches at her disposal, Markes-Young innovates, employing the childhood learning tool of mimicry: it is as though she imagines how such patterns or techniques should look. The result is that her works mimic, rather than re-interpret, traditional motifs. She references traditional stitch structures and patterns but disrupts their original, logical or symmetrical flow. A simulation of traditional needlecraft patterns is thus employed and then disrupted, or extrapolated.

⁹ Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archeology Art and Architecture* (Abingdon, Oxon & New York: Routledge, 2013), 6.

¹⁰ Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archeology Art and Architecture* (Abingdon, Oxon & New York: Routledge, 2013), 6.

¹¹ Elisa Markes-Young, “Discussion about aspects of Young's material and conceptual practice” (letter, personal communication, June 2013).



Figure 8, left. Elisa Markes-Young, The Strange Quiet of Things Misplaced #27 (2010), image courtesy the artist, photographed by Christopher Young.

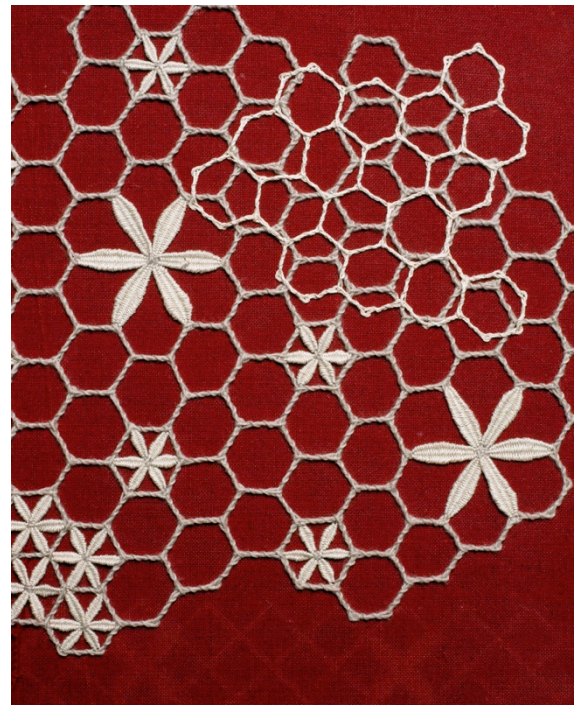


Figure 9, right. Elisa Markes-Young, The Strange Quiet of Things Misplaced #27 (2010), (detail), image courtesy the artist, photographed by Christopher Young.

Working in this way means that, effectively, the patterns used in this series cannot be fully planned, laid out or completed in advance. Instead, this intuitive way of working contributes to the disrupted patterns of the resulting work. These pieces initially appear to contain logical patterns, but on closer inspection the viewer observes their imperfections and deviations. Markes-Young's use of minimal craft techniques and materials in a spontaneous way operates as a form of drawing. Her pseudo patterns within this series are improvisations, resisting conventional order and hinting at erasure and deconstruction.

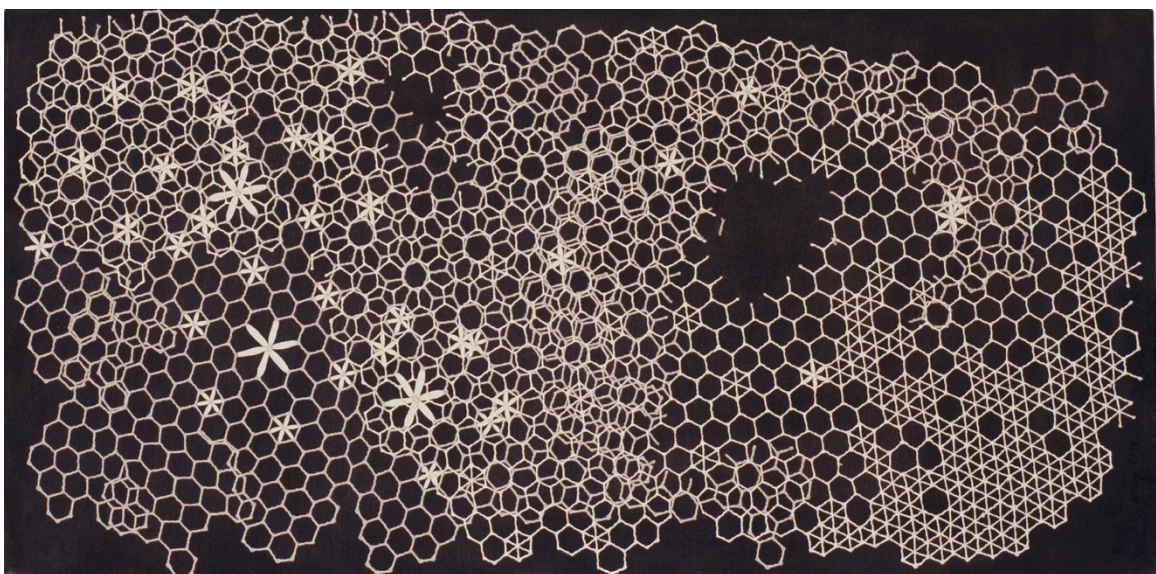


Figure 10. Elisa Markes-Young, The Strange Quiet of Things Misplaced #28 (2010), image courtesy the artist, photographed by Christopher Young.

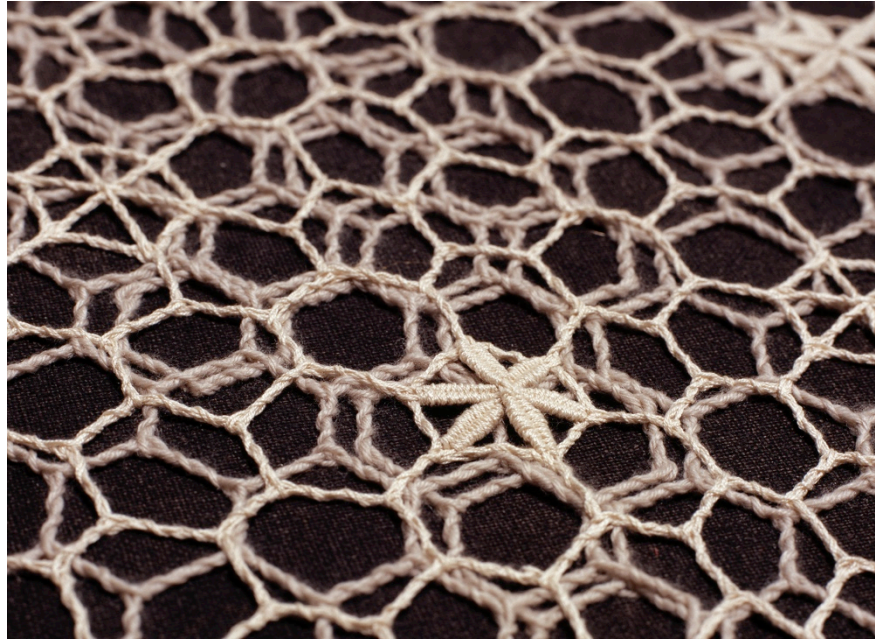


Figure 11. Elisa Markes-Young, The Strange Quiet of Things Misplaced #28 (2010), (detail), image courtesy the artist, photographed by Christopher Young.

Memory is a shifting site, and, for Markes-Young, an encounter with memory is both conceptual (ideas-based) and physical (material or craft practice-based). Her work focuses on a dialogue between concept and practice and considers how craft, material and memory pollinate each other. It seems that the unfixed nature of memory operates as a poetic device for the artist, both in her understanding of the enigmatic concepts of memory and her personal migrant history, and also in the way she works with craft techniques and materials. Visually, through a series of net-like images and disrupted pattern structures, Markes-Young's work reflects the workings of memory itself.

Wendy Lugg - *Common Threads* (1999-2005)

Wendy Lugg began working with Japanese Boro textiles by deconstructing and reconstructing them. They were then made into new pieces, mirroring her subjective take on the Australian Wagga quilt and the practice of 'making-do'. The contemporary quilt pieces that she constructed were hand-stitched, mimicking the running lines of Boro and Sashiko. A perceptive shift occurred when she began to exhibit the found objects and her own constructed textile quilts together. This provided the viewer with a context, whereby the 'original' item could become a kind of teaching tool.

The *Common Threads* exhibition (in multiple iterations from 1999-2005, Fig. 12) comprised historical, utilitarian Japanese textiles stitched for everyday use, and Lugg's contemporary works made in response.

“[Lugg's] work incorporated vintage Japanese cloth, embedded with memory, to explore the art of making-do, a common heritage shared with the Japanese makers of the old textiles in the exhibition.”¹²

¹² Wendy Lugg, *Common Threads*. Exhibition catalogue, co-curators and eds. Wendy Lugg and Sue Leighton-White, Kansas, USA: Belger Arts Center (2005).



Figure 12. Wendy Lugg, Common Threads (2005), (co-curated by Lugg and Leighton-White, 2005) installation view at the Belger Arts Centre, Kansas City, USA, image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 13. Wendy Lugg, Threadbare III (2000), image courtesy of the artist.

Australian Wagga quilts are very simple, made from recycled materials like floursacks, or tailors' samples, made by men or women out of necessity.¹³ Placed in a Western fine-art exhibition context, these used and deliberately re-purposed textiles provide an alternative

¹³ Wendy Hucker, "Wagga Rugs", (Tumbarumba: Pioneer Women's Hut, Australian National Quilt Register). No date. <http://www.collectionsaustralia.net/nqr/wendy.php>

type of provenance. They draw on a utilitarian heritage and a socially unrecognised value-structure. Lugg places her work alongside traditional Japanese Boro, allowing for both to be re-seen and re-contextualised. This creates a dialogue between the pieces, a deliberate space where the viewer may reflect upon what is subtly yet palpably enabled.

Encounter

Within the visual arts, the term ‘encounter’ usually relates to the way a viewer perceives a work. This discussion, however, considers the encounter between artist and artwork at the site of investigative, process-based practice. As craft theorist Sue Rowley explains, “many artists ... invoke craft precisely to reflect critically on questions of ... temporal experience”¹⁴. Here, perhaps, is a key to the sense of authenticity that radiates from Hadlow, Markes-Young and Lugg’s work. Rowley’s words also provide recognition of, and a context for Markes-Young’s need to entertain, to engage with, her own memories. This particular, highly-focused craft practice is, in fact, a questioning of her own sense of lived experience and also the insecure and fluid nature of her memories. Such encounters seem to offer little comfort: taking the form not of nostalgia, but of rigorous interrogation. The resulting sense of unease may be identified in the following definition of ‘encounter’:

1. To be faced with something, especially something new, strange, unpleasant, difficult or dangerous;
2. To meet somebody unexpectedly.¹⁵ (Oxford 1995: 379)

The suggestion of conceptual, metaphorical and physical ‘tension’ in this word, and its application to an understanding of Markes-Young’s series, implies a possibility of transformation and encourages close looking. The concept is not without precedent: visual art theorist Mieke Bal has used ‘encounter’ to describe an act which takes place during the process of researching in the visual arts¹⁶, linking the concept to both research and imagination. For Markes-Young, then, in whose work the connection between personal research into memory and imaginative making practice is intrinsic, ‘encounter’ encapsulates an essential, yet uneasy relationship. As conceptual artists and textile practitioners, Hadlow, Markes-Young and Lugg interpolate objects of textile material culture in multiple ways. What they perceive in the objects they focus on cannot be simply articulated.

Mieke Bal¹⁷ suggests that what is most interesting about the research process is the discovery of that which is not known and cannot be assumed. Textiles as objects of material culture are complex. While it may initially seem that Hadlow, Markes-Young and Lugg are looking merely at aesthetics, or the craft-skills employed in the item’s construction, this cannot fully explain the scope of knowledge represented by the object or its capacity to operate as a tool for thinking.

¹⁴ Sue Rowley, *Reinventing Textiles*, volume 1: Tradition and Innovation, ed. Sue Rowley, In Catherine Harper, ed. *Textiles: Critical and Primary Sources, Volume 1, Identity* (London & New York: BERG, 2012), 235.

¹⁵ Hornby, *Oxford Advanced Learner’s English Dictionary of Current English*. Ed. J. Crowther, 5th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 379.

¹⁶ Mieke Bal, “Research Practice: New Words on Cold Cases” in *What is Research in the Visual Arts? Obsession, Archive, Encounter*, ed. Michael Ann Holly, and Marquard Smith (Massachusetts: Sterling and Francis Clarke Art Institute, 2008), 206.

¹⁷ Mieke Bal, “Research Practice: New Words on Cold Cases” in *What is Research in the Visual Arts? Obsession, Archive, Encounter*, ed. Michael Ann Holly, and Marquard Smith (Massachusetts: Sterling and Francis Clarke Art Institute, 2008), 206.

According to theorist Paul Carter, ‘material thinking’ is a kind of exchange: “...what happens when matter stands in-between the collaborators supplying the discursive situation of their work,”¹⁸ This is exactly what Hadlow, Markes-Young and Lugg engage in: “...the making process always issues from, and folds back into a social relation... It is this back-and-forth or discourse, that provides the testing-ground of new ideas, and which establishes their interest,”¹⁹ Carter also examines the potential of a cultural object to remain changeable: “...from the point of view of creative research, materials are always in a state of becoming. They are ... colloidal, humid and combinatory”²⁰

In this way, ‘conversation’ is intrinsic to Hadlow, Markes-Young and Lugg’s practices, where the encounter re-shapes both the artist and the work through physical and conceptual dialogue. It is through the ‘performance’ of making that new ideas emerge: being ready to engage with whatever arises in ‘conversation’ with the object.²¹ Artists like Hadlow, Markes-Young and Lugg are re-seeing and re-interpolating cues from the intrinsic, dense subtleties of textile language and meaning within a cultural space, a space where the textiles are “...culturally situated on the threshold between the functional and the symbolic”.²² It is this in-between territory that these textile artists are drawn to, and play upon, within the solitary spaces of their own practice.

Summation

This creative practice-based exploration presents an insight into how visual artists conduct research conversation with items of material culture. It explores specific examples where each artist has used a particular object of textile material culture as a tool-to-think-with. For Hadlow, Lugg and Markes-Young, this investigation is both organic and cyclic – operating as an ongoing dialogue or conversation between themselves as thinkers-conceptual-makers and these significant textile items. This research suggests that objects of material culture can be seen in a new light based upon their role as co-investigators in creative research.

“It [creative practice] is not purely language-based or image-based or artefact-based or material-based...”²³

¹⁸ Paul Carter, *Material Thinking: The Theory and Practice of Creative Research* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, 2004), 19.

¹⁹ Paul Carter, *Material Thinking: The Theory and Practice of Creative Research* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, 2004), 19.

²⁰ Paul Carter, *Material Thinking: The Theory and Practice of Creative Research* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, 2004), 19.

²¹ Paul Carter, *Material Thinking: The Theory and Practice of Creative Research* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, 2004), 19.

²² Claire Pajaczkowska, “On Stuff and Nonsense: The Complexity of Cloth”, *Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture* v. 3, no. 3 (2005), 222.

²³ Paul Carter, *Material Thinking: The Theory and Practice of Creative Research* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, 2004).