

# ARTICULATEUPSTAIRS

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## ***Making : memory***

Rox De Luca, Michele Elliot, Laurie Paine

Friday 5<sup>th</sup> October until Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> October, 2018

*In a Copenhagen museum there lies a peat bog-mummified body of a woman, over two thousand years old.<sup>i</sup> She was found in 1879 lying curled up and fully clothed, just a metre below ground level. Unaware of her great age, she was brought to the local doctor at Ørum who had her body undressed, and all her clothing washed and dried in his yard. Her name, her identity, any memories, all lost. Now known only as the Huldremose Woman, for the place she was found, the Huldre Fen. She had lived, loved and died in the Bronze Age, between 160 and 340 BCE. The textiles and objects found with her, so extraordinarily well preserved, poignantly, though not fluently narrate enough to evoke so much about this woman - her body, her life, her self.*

*She wore a woollen dress woven in a checked pattern. Made in 2 parts, the skirt was fastened around her waist with a leather strap held in a woven waistband. A scarf, made on a tubular loom, was pulled over her head and held in place under her arm with a needle fashioned from a bird's bone. The skirt was probably blue/green and the scarf red. Over this she had on two sheepskin capes, an inner one worn with the sheep fur facing her body and the outer one with the fur turned out. The inner cape was a patchwork, assembled from 11 small dark brown lamb skins stitched together. It was well worn, bearing 22 sewn patches. Stitched inside one patch were a collection of objects; a fine bone comb, a narrow blue hair band and a leather strap. As these objects were contained in a bladder and stitched in, they must have been significant to her; amulets or charms perhaps. Around her neck were 2 amber pearls strung on to a piece of wool thread and on one of her fingers, the impression of a ring remains, worn at the time of her death. She was about forty years old. Under her woollen dress she wore underwear, a plant-based fabric of linen, nettle or hemp in a plain weave, because as we know, wool, while warm, itches the skin.*

*'I am a gift.'<sup>ii</sup>*

There is something very touching about these antique textiles, and their capacity to hold and convey such intimate details of the woman who wore and perhaps made and mended them. In many ways, the three artists of *Making : Memory* carry on the legacy of this unknown woman from Huldremose; their works in the exhibition not only exploring the powerful bodily attributes of cloth, particularly as worn clothing, but also continuing even through disruption, a human legacy of textile traditions. For artists working with cloth, clothing and textiles, weaving, collecting, sewing or assembling, whether well or badly, for function or not, is to access knowledge and techniques that have formed a collective, generational endeavour. Touching cloth is an evocative and haptic experience; bringing forth deeply embedded memories of self, family and community. Rituals around textiles recur in our lives; we are wrapped and clothed and wrapped again between birth and death. *'Cloth sheathes our bodies in a second skin: swaddling us in cultural belonging.'<sup>iii</sup>*

Open Friday – Sunday 11am – 5pm or by appointment please contact Rox De Luca 0414 170 037.

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In terms of making, the crafting and labour apparent are at once learnt skills as well as meditative methods. And so, it is with a keen sense of their maker's hands on and in the material; holding, dying, gifting, stitching, keeping and weaving cloth, collecting, sorting and assembling objects that pervades the reading of these artworks as made memories, a comingling of collective as much as individual histories.

*'I am given as a thank you for all good received.'*<sup>AV</sup>

Rox De Luca's works bring together a self-reflective exploration of a personal, familial and cultural past through a site of intersection with the contemporary moment of consumer-driven globalism. Tangible childhood memories hang from the walls in physical form. Suspended from simple wire hangers is a collection of worn but clearly cherished articles of clothing. Plaintive, evocative, innocent, the clothes tell of a particular time – a Melbourne childhood of the 60s and 70s and more; of sisters, sharing clothes, thrift, motherhood, and a father's work. Accompanying the kept clothes, affectionately named *Baby Dress*, *Cossie*, *Mama's dress*, *The smock* and *MTA Coat* are De Luca's distinctive garlands of weathered plastics, which she collects from Bondi Beach, later sifting and threading them on to wire or string. These could be interpreted playfully, as colourful wreaths given by the sea or with sinister menace, as manacles of waste products disgorged by a polluted ocean. Either way, their careful arrangement and display gives rise to a tension in the indexation of things. Here, discarded rubbish found on the beach has been made lovely; collected and carefully arranged by colour and size. There, lovingly cherished objects have been worn and dulled by time, their seams fraying, colour fading, and age spots staining. The value of the object and the action of art has caused it to sit on a sliding scale, somewhere between fetishizing and aestheticizing.

While De Luca's colour palette appears at first glance to be an exercise in contrast, in the context of her oeuvre, many of the pieces evoke the migrant diaspora experience. Growing up as an Italian Australian, the red green and white flag was for her a constant template for memories made in the new country. On another reading, there is a wider diaspora of ocean crossings undertaken by mass-manufactured plastics – and paired with the regulation green uniform of the *MTA (Metropolitan Transit Authority) Coat* the tendrils of red soya sauce caps sets up a dialogue about migration and between ephemerality and permanence.

Michele Elliot's work, *the lovers*, is a series of 7 separate textile pieces. Elliot works from the starting point of discarded clothing, the everyday familiar of low-tech and commonplace things. A critical distinction in the work though is their humble reception by Elliot as gifts, rather than merely as found objects. Taking her needle and thread, she stitches with awareness of the person whose body inhabited the garment. The work is repetitive and time consuming; long lines of monochrome thread pierce and run over the surface, the action of sewing transforming the object from a utilitarian shirt into an undulating textile body. Pinned to the wall in a row, their visual weight and verticality strongly suggest the moving body yet curiously, equally resemble a hang of abstract paintings. It is as if painterly gestures of colour, form and void have left the constraints of frame and support in order to twist and writhe upon the white gallery walls. Somehow, the process of hand sewing seems to have made the clothing more closely resemble the bodies that wore them, as if they were indeed *that second skin*, that *swaddling in belonging*.

While the series references Magritte's painting of the same title, in which a textile barrier impedes an embrace between anonymous lovers, these lovers are differentiated bodily ac-

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tions, and the embrace is contained in the way they embody the action of making. After all to mend a cloth is to love it. Indeed, tender attributes are gently ascribed to each work in the naming - *riviera, M, mountain, painter, meadow, Protector, Poet*, in quiet acts of homage to the givers; among them a goddaughter, a mother and a close friend.

At her loom, Laurie Paine captures vignettes of everyday life, weaving slices of her own history alongside observations on contemporaneity into the structure and composition of her works. Made with wry humour the *Social Security Suite* is a suit of clothing - a hairshirt, flagellating whip and crown of thorns woven out of letters from Centrelink. Rather than a community of belonging, these missives depict the artist's struggle to fit within a 'one size fits all' collectivisation, her memory made physical by this studied fashioning of a torture costume fringed with thorns and nails. In another series, *R.I.P.*, obsolete train tickets are woven in to the fabric with fine silver threads over a black ground cloth. Viewed from a distance, the everyday journeys fall into a larger reference, of a cross or crossing, referencing the ongoing allure of travel. This technique is repeated, but on a much more personal level with an *Untitled* series on pale linen. One in particular holds a discreet memory; waxed paper straws from Paine's grandparents' milk bar in Balmoral. The attempt to pin down these otherwise disposable or transitory objects is haptic memory making; by embedding them into the textile they become permanent memorials.

Some of Paine's most recent works are exhibited in the elegant *Untitled* trio of weavings on black silk with gold thread. She recounts how these are a continuation of an earlier body of work in which she, unknown even to herself, was able to draw from early memories and associations with textiles (her mother's collection of cushions). Without consciousness or deliberation she had figured her weaving with Palestinian embroidery motifs, '*stylized, and yet still recognizable: a language that we recall but can no longer read.*'<sup>4</sup>Years later, she still uses this figuring and invents upon it, but now with consciousness and deliberation. One of the weavings is an elegiac poem, made in memory of her mother and culture.

*'Can't you see, I curl up, while I become too small for my skin, while  
I become too small, my voice becomes broader, taller, deeper, my  
prayer will fill everything.  
I am a gift, know me by the light, I am a gift.  
I am a star.'*<sup>4i</sup>

*Making : Memory* is an exhibition that gives voice to the innate human activity of making as a means of accessing and exploring memory. Rox De Luca, Michele Elliot and Laurie Paine are artists who have an eye to the larger significance hidden in the everyday rituals, to the cycle of days where we wake up, wash, clothe ourselves, eat, touch, cherish, love and lose. Taking worn clothes and handled objects out of and back into the everyday through their making (and re-making) as artworks in a gallery is a reverent and transformative gesture. It is a gesture that enables not only a commentary on pressing contemporary issues of migration, mass manufacture and the value of a human life but also connects to a shared human memory of the warmth and beauty of textiles. Alongside the Huldremose woman we still live in a time where these cloths not only hold our bodies, they warm us and they identify us.

Lisa Sharp  
5 October 2018

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<sup>i</sup> The Huldremose woman, The National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen

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<sup>ii</sup> Ursula Andkjaer Olsen, '*I Am a Gift*' (extract), a contemporary Danish poem written in response to and shown alongside the Huldremose Woman.

<sup>iii</sup> Anthony Camm, 'some kind of longing: textile works 1995-2015' Michele Elliot, Exhibition Catalogue Essay, Ararat Regional Gallery, 2 April – 22 May 2016

<sup>iv</sup> Ursula Andkjaer Olsen, Op.Cit

<sup>v</sup> '*The last 50 years: an example of Palestinian culture in the Diaspora – Palestinian embroidery and heritage material in Australia*', <http://palestinecostumearchive.com/oz.htm>

<sup>vi</sup> Ursula Andkjaer Olsen, Op.Cit