



white on white

Melbourne textile designer Ilka White laces together elements of past and present in her ethereal art. Her recent body of 'whitework' explores her own history, celebrates traditional skill and employs modern digital techniques to create pieces that are both raw and ornate.

Family ties. PREVIOUS PAGE: *Within* was created by machine-embroidering lyrics to a song by White's mother's onto satin ribbon. In the foreground is a bandalier made from combined collected seagrass, mixed cotton linen yarns and sterling silver. THIS PAGE, RIGHT: White applies the finishing touch to a cotton banner at her recent exhibition, *Whitework*. BELOW: knitting patterns, origami, photography, poetry, and personal memorabilia inspire White's *Sampler Wall*. BOTTOM: felted wool, silk and mother of pearl buttons are woven together to create garments of rare beauty. White's textiles typically rejoice in their natural fibres, and imperfect textures.



'ART COMES FROM the mind, craft comes from the hand' is a typical definition of the art-craft divide, but textiles artist, Ilka White, fuses the two traditions.

As a child White learned to love sewing from her grandmother; and as an adult she studied fashion at the Melbourne Institute of Textiles (now RMIT Textiles). Today as a 30-something "designer-maker", her work is stocked at boutiques such as the exclusive Le Louvre in Melbourne. She also undertakes commissions for designers such as Scanlan & Theodore. White's work is both raw and ornate; as one reviewer wrote: "Each piece celebrates the imperfect nature of the handcrafted object."

Her most recent exhibition, *Whitework*, at Craft Victoria's gallery in Melbourne, illustrates a diverse range of techniques and lays bare the processes of textile work. It explores the central theme of a glory box.

It is a symbol that inadvertently mirrors White's own life path. The exhibition celebrates her coming of age as a designer and marks a point in time as she moves towards more "non-functional" work.

"It's a reinterpretation of the trousseau," says White, "historically they were made by the owner who learned to stitch, honed their skills, and made each piece with love. It was put carefully away and preciously guarded, like chastity, in wait for that glorious day when life begins - marriage."

White's trousseau melds traditional crafts, such as hand-weaving, with contemporary methods, such as digital design software; using her newly acquired skills with those she inherited from her grandmother.

This can make for some interesting contrasts. One work has an embroidered image of Ilka riding a bike followed by a protective, totem-like heron overhead. >

PROFILE



Suspended in natural light, *Shag Collar*, LEFT, made from hand-woven felted wool, transcends the fashion arena. The work is a slightly subversive interpretation of White's grandmother's aprons of the 1950s which were decidedly more crisp, practical and upright. BELOW: a hanging banner, *Memory of Light Through Leaves*, is made of hand-cut wool felt, leather, cocktail feathers and cotton thread. The piece is an expression of White's love for a tree's natural beauty, strength and rest-giving qualities. BOTTOM: filled with beads, thread, buttons and treasured minute collected from nature, White's workbox is an old recycled doctor's travelling bag.



< The design was created digitally and emailed to a studio in Montreal, the only place in the world White could find that could hand-loom her digital designs.

In another unusual collaboration, Ilka worked with Melbourne's Tiger Angel Leathers to apply cutting techniques used for motorcycle leather to create delicate leather cut-outs of words and images that were then attached to White's ethereal collection of pieces of whitework.

'Whitework' is the technique of using white thread on white material. This approach occurs throughout the world, but is most common in Europe and is usually firmly grounded in place and tradition.

White explains that this is a "domestic tradition, linked to the family and the home, not for exhibition or display". But here, White exposes the personal in the public domain: an embroidered sampler

contains not a traditional biblical text, but her singer-songwriter mother's lyrics. The lyrics celebrate the wholeness of being a single individual – rather than the myth of a handsome prince in shining armour. "My mother taught me to hear and to love words, dad taught me to see," says White.

This exhibition was all about "paring back and going out to search for me, what I was born with and what I can make with it, what I've inherited; my sensibilities, expectations, habits, my traits and gifts. Seeking the integrity of what is mine."

The result is a beautiful body of work that reconciles the past with the present while leading the artist herself toward a new beginning. **RACHAEL ANTONY**
Ilka White will be exhibiting until 12 August at Übergallery, 52 Fitzroy Street, St Kilda, Vic, (03) 8598 9915; www.ubergallery.com. For commissions call (03) 9654 8659.

