



Louise Saxton: Fantasias of Form

AUSTRALIAN ARTIST Louise Saxton creates her vividly realized textile collages, or textile mosaics, from vintage hand-embroidered elements, including doilies, table linens and runners, handkerchiefs, clothing, and remnants of lace. She extracts the motifs from their now-redundant original supports and either pins or stitches each unique feature in place to compose harmonious and delicate swirling fantasias. These works have a somewhat arcane quality, imbued with a subtle, yet indefinable resonance of the past. The finished formations act as an anathema to disposable culture and the type of mass-produced items that dominate commerce.

Saxton's undergraduate background is in printmaking and painting, but her varied interest in decorative-art traditions extends to embossing, furniture and wallpaper patterns, and quilting. Saxton is intrigued by the long and largely unheralded history of anonymous women, whose talent and creative abilities were channeled into such detailed and whimsical domestic needlework. "There is a sense of wondering about the maker," Saxton ponders, "Who was she? How did she have the

patience to develop such time-consuming and beautiful objects for her home? What was life like when embroidery passed the time of day or night rather than television?" Saxton is also cognizant of the increasing rarity of such items: "I have for a long time been aware of the history of these objects through the women in my family who made and used similar [ones], and also of their diminishing 'value' in everyday life. As

ABOVE: Home Tree (with detail), 2008; reclaimed embroidery and lace, nylon tulle; pinned; about 118" x 94½". Photos: Andrew Wuttkke. BELOW: Travel Bug & Travel Sickness Bug, 2009; reclaimed embroidery and lace, machine sewn to muslin and silk; pinned to nylon tulle; 47" x 72". Photo: Gavin Hansford.

I continue to work with the volume of materials, I've become more aware of them as a finite resource."



The scale of Saxton's work initially comes as quite a surprise, given the relatively small size of the component parts. Suspended on swaths of sheer bridal netting, they seem to float cloudlike within a shallow confine, the shadow cast behind forming a three-dimensional sculpture. Also intrinsic to her work is the use of the "negative motif" inside the highly decorative "outer motif," whereby it becomes abundantly clear how deftly Saxton must place the materials within a space. *Home-Tree* (2008), a finalist in this year's Inaugural Wangarratta Contemporary Textile Award (Victoria, Australia), is based on a Tree of Life image, a template prevalent across many cultures, but which Saxton found in a book on the symbolism of Yoga. The outline of a koala can be seen settled in the canopy, its "absence" conveying both the vulnerability of the species and its iconic stature. Saxton's creations have been highly visible this year with her September solo show, *Salvage*, at Elsie Gallery, Malmsbury, Australia, and

the inclusion of a suite of her *Re-collection: specimen* (2007–08) works in the touring exhibition *Momentum: The Eighteenth Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial*. Saxton is also a finalist in the prestigious 2009 PFAFF Art Embroidery Challenge, with the theme of *Landscape: Let Us Travel*, exhibiting in London this fall and France next year.

Saxton's work serves as a creative reincarnation for these discarded treasures, perpetuating the intent and legacy of their original makers. "I feel a sense of commitment to continuing to rescue these objects from obscurity. In reconstructing the handiwork of others, which have really been cast off . . . I am keeping their work alive in another form," she notes. "There is also a sense of taking something small and seemingly insignificant from the past and amplifying it in the present—making a collective statement about the genre of everyday needlework, how wonderful it was and still is." 26



ABOVE: Louise Saxton pinning *Home Tree* (2008) in her studio in Victoria, Australia, 2009. Photo: Gavin Hansford.

The artist's website is www.visualarts.net.au/gallery/louisesaxton. Louise Saxton's work can be seen in the touring exhibition *Momentum: The Eighteenth Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial* October 21–November 29 at Mornington Peninsular Regional Gallery, Victoria, Australia (mprg.mornpen.vic.gov.au) and December 11–January 22, 2010, at the Geraldton-Greenough Regional Art Gallery, Western Australia (www.cgg.wa.gov.au/artgallery). For additional 2010 venues, visit www.tamworthregionalgallery.com.au/biennial.php.