

Heide
Museum of
Modern Art
Heide

Louise Saxton
Sanctuary

24 MARCH - 29 JULY 2012



Biography

Louise Saxton is a Melbourne-based artist who was born in Walcha NSW, in 1958. She trained in painting and printmaking, completing a Post-graduate Diploma at the Victorian College of the Arts in 1994 and a Masters of Art through the University of Ballarat in 2003.

Over the past decade Louise's practice has centred on the reconstruction of detritus from the home, which has included the re-use of everyday business envelopes (for her installation *envelop* at the Linden Centre for Contemporary Arts, 2001) and vintage wallpapers (for *Gardenesque*, a Ballarat Fine Art Gallery touring exhibition with Carole Wilson in 2004–05).

In 2006 Louise was given a Sir Ian Potter Cultural Trust travel grant to attend a month-long residency in the garden estate of Rimbun Dahan, Malaysia. Since that time her practice has engaged solely with the reconstruction of discarded needlework, which she regards as a 'silent collaboration with the anonymous original makers'. In 2008 her work *reCollection: Specimens 1–67* was included in the 18th Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial which toured Australia until 2010. The joint exhibition *dot-net-dot-au* with Tim Craker toured to Malaysia and Singapore in 2008 and in 2009 she was represented in *Paysage/Voyage*, the 3rd Pfaff International Art Embroidery Award, which toured to England, France and Holland.

Louise was awarded a grant from the Victorian Government through Arts Victoria for the development of Sanctuary. Her work is held in regional and state collections in Australia and private collections in Australia, Malaysia and India.

Louise Saxton's interest in reclaiming materials from the home coincides with her 'increasing concern for our diminishing resources, both in the domestic realm and in the natural world'.



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Heide and Sanctuary

Sanctuary reveals Louise Saxton as an artist attuned to the beauty in humble domestic craft traditions, to the wonder and instability of non-human species and the natural environment, to the memorialising visions of historical artists, and to the painstaking valuable work of often unknown human hands.

Sanctuary is an apt exhibition for Heide. John and Sunday Reed committed their daily lives to the cultivation of the park and gardens that form the idyllic setting for the Museum today, and the gardens were designed to attract and sustain diverse species of flora and fauna as much as they sustained the Reeds physically, emotionally and intellectually. Heide was the Reeds' sanctuary, and John's intense love of birds and bird watching saw his researches extend far beyond the grounds of Heide to many other parts of Australia.

Saxton's art of reclamation and recollection pays homage to art-historical ancestors and anonymous domestic needleworkers. This homage finds form in alluring, politically charged, and sometimes melancholic renditions of birds and insects that define Saxton's converging interests in nature, loss, the home and the intersecting visual and craft cultures, traditions and histories in which she participates.

The results of painstaking research and technique, Saxton's reclaimed textile works remind us of the necessity of constantly observing and reevaluating the world around us—from the minute textile remnant to the fragile forest.

Jason Smith
Director & CEO



Sanctuary

*Within the vastly complex, yet vulnerable sanctuary of the world's rainforests, 'the intricate embroideries of nature exist.'*¹

Sanctuary reinterprets a selection of historical bird and insect paintings. Substituting pencil, paint and paper it is constructed solely from discarded needle-work, pinned precariously to nylon tulle.

Everyday textiles, made in and for the home, are on the brink of extinction and many of the plants and animals which inspired them are today also vulnerable. Sanctuary seeks to address this imminent sense of loss—of domestic art traditions and of species within the natural world, and to re-evaluate the home as a point of reference for, and inspiration in contemporary art.

For the past decade my art practice has engaged with reconstructing the detritus of home, including the re-use of everyday business envelopes and vintage wallpapers. Since 2007 I have collected, extracted and reconfigured the discarded needlework of others, into large shallow-space installations. The works in Sanctuary are also made from the textiles of bygone eras: doilies, tablecloths and bed linen. Gleaned on regular visits to opportunity shops and second-hand markets, or donated by friends and family, the painstakingly produced domestic objects have become part of our throw-away culture. While discarded by others, for me they have come to represent a silent collaboration between myself as the one who salvages and reconstructs; the original historical artists (some of whom are largely unknown or forgotten); and countless anonymous needleworkers.

The act of needlework once provided its maker with temporary refuge from the drudgery of domestic duties, but these once loved and utilitarian forms are becoming increasingly obsolete. In this body of work, the materials themselves are given sanctuary from cultural redundancy, the new objects creating an 'unusual type of archaeology'.² The needlework is reconfigured to painterly effect. Textile fragments and fine lace-pins structure feather and scales, branch and bark, layer by layer, creating a delicate balance between fragility and strength, loss and salvage.

The practice of collecting, both for the home and for natural science, is also explored in Sanctuary – through needlework which reflects the lives and times of the original makers, and through a selection of historical paintings and the library and museum collections which house them. Many natural history paintings were composed using taxidermy specimens commissioned by professional or amateur collectors and, being highly decorative in their arrangement, seem well suited



to re-interpretation in needlework. Several such specimens reinterpreted in Sanctuary are from historical paintings in the collection of the National Library of Australia.³ Among them is *Queen Billie* 2010, from a King parrot illustrated by British colonial-era artist Sarah Stone (1760–1844).⁴ Stone painted hundreds of birds and other specimens for the British collector Sir Ashton Lever and a number of her paintings remain as the only example of some now extinct birds, as Lever's collection was disbursed and many specimens lost.

A fascination with natural history and collecting often begins in childhood and in making Sanctuary I have reflected on engagements with nature in my early life: of Gang-gang cockatoos noisily devouring pine cones in the front garden; of 'Black Prince' and 'Green Grocer' cicadas clinging temporarily to hand-knitted cardigans, like pieces of iridescent jewellery. If childhood memories form part of the fabric of an artist's life and work, so too can the repetitive processes of everyday life. Through daily walks in local parklands around one of the Yarra's billabongs not far from Heide, I have become a keen watcher of birds and insects and through regular excursions to local op-shops I have become an avid collector of disinherited needlework.

These repetitive encounters with nature and handcrafted 'relics' have intensified my awareness and appreciation of both bird life and past human lives. Rare encounters with a laughing kookaburra, an azure kingfisher or eastern-spinebill honeyeater are counted, along with more common sightings of lorikeets and rosellas, cockatoos and galahs, native ducks and magpies. Antique Brussels lace from a flea market in Paris, intricate button-hole embroidery on a vintage doily, or minutely blanket-stitched appliqué from China, brings into focus the labours of the unknown lives of countless needleworkers.

Unlike the many stories of adventure, risk and commitment behind natural history collecting and painting, the stories of needleworkers' painstaking production remain largely unknown and untold. As Virginia Woolf said "... all the dinners are cooked; the plates and cups washed; the children sent to school and gone out into the world. Nothing remains of it. All has vanished. No biography or history has a word to say about it ... All these infinitely obscure lives remain to be recorded".⁵

In Sanctuary I have tried to give the obscure lives of unknown needleworkers a new voice and through serendipitous encounters actual stories of needle-work have been gleaned:

When I was a child, if I was 'good' my parents would buy me a needlework kit as a reward.⁶

When we visited my Grandmother's house we were made to do our needlework. It was a way of keeping us quiet, but if we were lucky, there would be a nice afternoon tea in it.⁷

The importance of needlework to family history is also occasionally shared:

My father learnt needlework during the war and on his return he gave my mother a black silk Kimono on which he had embroidered a very beautiful Lyrebird.⁸

In Sanctuary a mass of luminous textile fragments from around the world is gathered—a kind of cabinet of curiosities that will, I hope, cause viewers to recall the disappearing traditions of the 'hand-made and bespoke',⁹ and to reflect upon the precious and precarious resources of our natural world.

Louise Saxton 2012

- 1 David Attenborough, *Life on Earth, The Living Planet and The Private Life of Plants*, BBC television series
- 2 Diane Savona reconstructs old textiles and is referred to as 'an unusual sort of archaeologist ... connects with a past that is quickly passing away ... her domestic artifacts—fossilized in cloth instead of stone...' Rachel B Cochran *FiberARTS* magazine, April/May 2010 pp. 52–55.
- 3 *A Brush with Birds – Australian Bird Art from the National Library of Australia*, introduction by Penny Olsen, 2008, National Library of Australia, pp. 34–39.
- 4 Sarah Stone, London artist working c.1777–1802 was commissioned to paint watercolours of Australian birds, reptiles and mammals from specimens brought back to England by the First Fleet surgeon, John White, *Beyond the Picket Fence: Australian women's art in the National Library Australia Collection*.
- 5 Quote taken from the website of the Jessie Street National Women's Library, Sydney, www.nationalwomenslibrary.org
- 6 Encounter in Brotherhood of St Laurence Opportunity Shop, Malvern, 2010
- 7 Encounter in Mental Illness Fellowship Opportunity Shop, Kew East, 2011
- 8 Story shared after an artist talk at the Port Macquarie Regional Art Gallery, 2010
- 9 Inga Walton, 'All that was Old is New Again' in *Textile: Fibre Forum*, Vol 29, Issue 1, No. 97, 2010, p. 28

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The project is dedicated to the Ruth Saxton and Florence May Boyton and to the natural history artists and anonymous needleworkers whose painstaking work has inspired *Sanctuary*.

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List of works

1. *Halcyone & Ceyx* 2010
 Little kingfishers (*Alcedo pusilla*), from Lilian Medland, *Syma torotoro and other birds*, c.1930, watercolour, National Library of Australia, Canberra
 reclaimed needlework, lace pins, nylon tulle
 59 x 76 cm
2. *Madeira's Lyre* 2010
 Superb lyrebird (*Menura novaehollandiae*), from John William Lewin, *Lyrebird of Australia*, watercolour, c.1815, Rex Nan Kivell Collection, National Library of Australia, Canberra
 reclaimed needlework, lace pins, nylon tulle
 135 x 100 cm
3. *Major Tom* 2010
 Major Mitchell's cockatoo (*Cacatua leadbeateri*), from John and Elizabeth Gould, *Cacatua leadbeateri, Major Mitchell's cockatoo*, hand coloured lithograph, Gould, John, *The Birds of Australia* : in seven volumes by John Gould, John Gould, London, 1848, Plate 2, Vol. 5
 reclaimed needlework, lace pins, nylon tulle
 103 x 48.5 cm
4. *Queen Billie* 2010
 King parrot (*Alisterus scapularis*), from Sarah Stone, *Tabuan Parrot (King Parrot Alisterus scapularis)*, watercolour, 1790, National Library of Australia, Canberra
 reclaimed needlework, lace pins, nylon tulle
 125 x 84 cm
5. *Black Prince* 2011
 Red-eye cicada (*Psaltoda moerens*), from Louisa Anne Meredith, *Study for gum-flowers and 'love'*, watercolour, 1850, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
 reclaimed needlework, lace pins, nylon tulle
 77 x 53 cm
6. *Carolina on My Mind* 2011
 Carolina parakeet (*Conuropsis carolinensis*)—now extinct, from John James Audubon, *Carolina Parakeet (Conuropsis carolinensis)*, 1825, watercolor, graphite, pastel, gouache, and black ink with scraping and selective glazing on paper, laid on card, New-York Historical Society, New York, NY, USA
 reclaimed needlework, lace pins, nylon tulle
 54 x 32 cm
7. *Ellis' Paradise* 2011 *
 Count Raggi's bird of paradise (*Paradisaea raggiana*), from Ellis Rowan, *Red Bird-of-Paradise (Paradisaea raggiana)*, 1917, watercolour, National Library of Australia, Canberra
 reclaimed needlework, lace pins, nylon tulle
 122 x 78.5 cm
8. *Elvis* 2011
 Rhinoceros hornbill skull (*Buceros rhinoceros*), from a skull in the Sir Hans Sloane collection, Natural History Museum, London, UK
 reclaimed needlework, lace pins, nylon tulle
 32 x 46 cm
9. *Flaming Flamingo* 2011
 American flamingo (*Phoenicopterus ruber*), from John James Audubon, *American Flamingo (Phoenicopterus ruber)*, watercolor, graphite, gouache, black ink, and pastel with glazes on paper, laid on card, 1838, New-York Historical Society, New York, NY, USA
 reclaimed needlework, lace pins, nylon tulle
 96 x 78 cm
10. *Lucy's Kite* 2011
 Swallow-tailed kite (*Elanoides forficatus*), from John James Audubon, *Swallow-tailed Kite (Elanoides forficatus)*, carrying Common Garter Snake (*Thamnophis sirtalis*), watercolor, graphite, pastel, black chalk, and black ink with selective glazing on paper, laid on card, 1829, New-York Historical Society, New York, NY, USA
 reclaimed needlework, lace pins, nylon tulle
 96.5 x 119 cm
11. *Maria's Saturn* 2011
 Saturniid caterpillar (*Automeris arminia*), from Maria Sybilla Merian, *nightsshade (Solanum spec.)*, *Surinamese night peacock eye (Automeris surinamensis)*, *India glazchatki (Automeris spec.)*, watercolour and gouache on parchment, 1700–02, Archives of the Russian Academy of Sciences, St Petersburg, RU
 reclaimed needlework, lace pins, nylon tulle
 39 x 57 cm
12. *Queen Billie #2* 2011
 from an Australian king parrot skull (*Alisterus scapularis*), contemporary specimen, www.skullsite.com
 reclaimed needlework, lace pins, nylon tulle
 21.5 x 31.5 cm
13. *Right Place Wrong Time* 2011
 Pink-toed trantula (*Avicularia avicularia*) and Ruby-topaz hummingbird (*Chrysolampis mosquitos*) from Maria Sybilla Merian, *Branch of guava tree with leafcutter ants, army ants, pink-toed tarantulas, huntsman spiders, and ruby topaz hummingbird*, watercolour and bodycolour over lightly etched outlines on vellum, c.1701–05, The Royal Collection, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, London, UK
 reclaimed needlework, lace pins, nylon tulle
 32 x 68.5 cm

* Cover image

All works courtesy of the artist.

Louise Saxton has credited the original artworks, dates and the collections which house them, to the best of her ability. She welcomes corrections.

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