

ROBERT BRAIN

ROBERT BRAIN was born in Tasmania in 1933 and studied history there and anthropology in London. He has lectured in both English and Italian universities, and worked and studied in the Congo Republic, Cameroun and Mali. He has written a dozen books, including *Friends and Lovers* (1976) and *The Decorated Body* (1979), and translated many works, including the Maigret series [by Belgian writer, Georges Simenon].

Robert lived in Italy for many years, where he and his then partner, Adam, restored a sixteenth century Augustine monastery, which became the venue for a summer opera festival, *Musica nel Chiostro*. He now lives in Australia, in the Blue Mountains near Sydney, NSW, with partner Neal Blewett, and spends most of his time making tapestries, many of which are based on his varied life experiences.

Robert Brain: An Autobiographical Tapestry is a Bathurst Regional Art Gallery touring exhibiton

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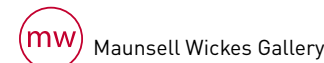


IMAGE ABOVE: ROBERT BRAIN, *Mardi Gras* (detail), 120 x 90 cm. Courtesy the artist.
COVER IMAGE: *Renaissance ladies in Australian Fancy Dress*, 80 x 60 cm. Private collection. Photography: Michael Wee

ARTIST STATEMENT

I have made dozens, perhaps hundreds of tapestries, using an embroidery running stitch – not a cross stitch in sight. My first attempt (fifty years ago) was a simple Union Jack, which I sewed according to the directions accompanying the design.

Since then I have not once embroidered by numbers, nor bought a shop pattern. Starting with a straightforward geometric design, I found that there was no longer any need for painstaking stitch counting; I just worked the canvas according to my own preordained conception, either drawn on to the canvas or from an idea in my head.

After a while I found I could branch out into less simple designs, which I sewed onto the canvas using the needle as a pencil, an exercise which was much easier than I imagined. Only extremely intricate sections of a canvas needed the technique of a muralist, where the original was transferred, again with the needle and

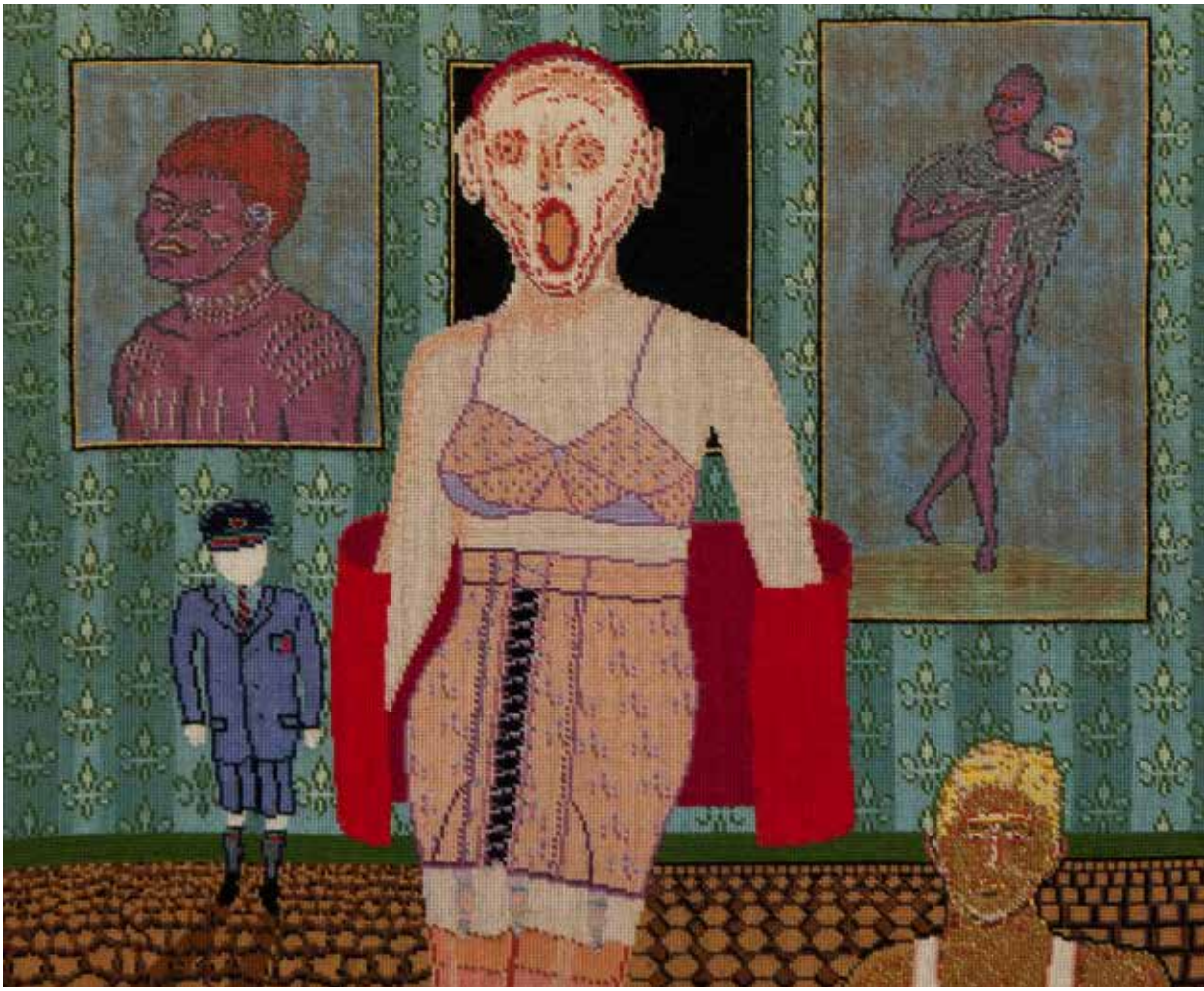
thread, from a small grid paper to the larger canvas. If you unpick my very large tapestries you will never find a fully-drawn design, perhaps just some pentimento marks where I have unpicked a section.

Later on I began by merely having a vague conception of what I wanted to do and building up the whole tapestry gradually. I advise every enthusiast embroiderer to try these methods, in order to avoid the tiring, blinding counting of the stitches using a stranger's design. In this way we can rescue embroidery's glum reputation, and move it from the world of fussy, old maids' pretty-pretty patterns to a genuine, gender-free art form. It may also help if, instead of roses, puppies and pretty bridges, our themes reveal surprises, unexpected juxtapositions and, of course, good old erotica.

Robert Brain
Needleman

IMAGE ABOVE: ROBERT BRAIN, *Robert in Sydney* (detail), 80 x 80 cm. Courtesy the artist. IMAGE OPPOSITE: *Tempesta (The Tempest)*, 110 x 90 cm. Private collection. Photography: Michael Wee

ROBERT BRAIN
An Autobiographical Tapestry



IMAGES LEFT TO RIGHT: ROBERT BRAIN, *Robert with Mother and Brother* (detail), 90 x 100 cm. *Robert with Girlfriend, Anne Padavani, Dancing in the Belvedere Ballroom, Hobart* (detail), 80 x 75 cm. *Robert in Bangwa Greeting the Chief* (detail), 80 x 95 cm. *Grotesque portrait of Neal with his assistant Pamela Catty*, 90 x 70 cm. All courtesy the artist. Photography: Michael Wee

LIVING EVENTFULLY

Recently I was watching *Antiques Roadshow*. Again. Anything I've wanted to know about art, or might not have thought I needed to know, has eventually been revealed on the *Roadshow*.

This afternoon, a little old lady from Scotland came on with a large handmade tapestry that detailed stitch by stitch every record released by English classic rock band Status Quo. It had been made by her son – both an unhinged Status Quo fan and quadriplegic – with his teeth. Needless to say, the presenter was visibly moved and declined to value it. This signifies real 'importance' on the *Roadshow* usually reserved for war memorabilia. In a later show the presenter took the tapestry in a crazy pop art crusade to Status Quo. The two key members of the band, Francis Rossi and Rick Parfitt, took a break from rehearsing to sign the holy document.

The last entry on the tapestry was also the only one to be repeated: 'So Ends Another Life'. You can't make this stuff up. Amazing.

There is something about that collision between the obsessive and perverse maker, popular culture and the genteel art of tapestry that also runs through the work of Robert Brain.

Tapestry is a strange medium to be using in the early part of the 21st century; there is definitely something old-fashioned about it. Its process carries a sense of slowing down – especially when used in the rather old fashioned way of one person working by hand – which still bears the taint of having "a glum reputation of fussy, old maids' pretty-pretty patterns"¹.

While maintaining its old fashioned aura, at the other end of the spectrum there are artists like Chuck Close, whose work with Magnolia Press has pushed towards a mechanised, digital use of the medium in quite dynamic ways, bringing to it a contemporary realm of production and ethos.

Brain's work fits into a contemporary condition of making that has seen obsolete crafts come back into fashion, and what may have been lost has been re-invigorated by bearded hipsters and their tattooed girlfriends, all gathering together for a bit of making-in-workshops across the country. This is also connected to the heightened visibility of art forms such as ceramics. Textiles have also been given a boost in the contemporary context – exhibitions such as the current *Fabrik: conceptual, minimalist and performative approaches to textiles* at the Ian Potter Museum

of Art, University of Melbourne, are indicative of textile arts' increasing visibility and every biennale has at least one artist ripping off Judith Scott, the textile artist du jour whose work has the kind of abject intensity suitable for contemporary audiences.

Brain's tapestries fit within this context but also outside of it. His aesthetic is far from minimalist and is rather maximalist in its mélange of images and meanings. It is hot rather than cool and far too sexy for its own good. It conflates the personal and the political in ways that could be seen as cunningly 'politically incorrect' – a terrible term, but one I use here because we know what I'm talking about.

The artist Tom Carment had told me about Brain's work and I remember being impressed by what he had to show me. Later in the Maunsell Wickes Gallery at Barry Stern I remember seeing them for

the first time and rightfully being knocked out by the strange, grotesque intensity and flagrant collision of genres – from architectural plans, patterning and decoration, renaissance masterpieces, Aboriginal art, and graffiti and its mild mannered progeny street art, to zombie movie aesthetics.

Brain's portrait of his partner Neal Blewett, *Grotesque Portrait of Neal with his assistant Pamela Catty*, seems to demonstrate the fine line between love and distaste. In it, Blewett's head is lopped from his body, pierced and held up by a pole resting upon a pedestal. Nearby, Blewett's personal assistant Pamela Catty looks on as if waiting for a curator to articulate and make sense of this enormous bust. Installed in a double-loaded hall receding into the distance where entrances to other rooms and galleries are visible, perhaps filled with more of Brain's fanciful imaginings.

Brain began making works during a boat trip to 'the Southern Camerouns' in the early 1960s. The genesis of his eclecticism comes perhaps from the formative attempts at tapestry he would have during his time in Africa. His first tapestry, which depicts the Union Jack (and is his only piece using a commercial pattern), was made whilst on a ship between Europe and Africa. Shipboard crafts are an important touchstone in Brain's work since they are mainly done by men, using techniques and skills usually associated with women's work. This is something that Brain would witness later in the markets of Bangwa, where old men who had been working as babysitters would use recycled wool to make all manner of garments.

This memorable meeting of tapestry and culture is also mixed with a fanciful form of 'cargo cult economics'

that Brain took to his research post. Laden with "crates of gin for the tribal chiefs, tinned food for myself, stacks of contemporary knick-knacks for the natives"², this mnemonic mélange played into the eventual aesthetic and conceptual style of Brain's work.

The fabrics being produced by African artists themselves were also an influence for Brain. One need only see the photograph of Bangwa Chief Fobellah surrounded by his children to understand Brain's use of geometric patterns and bright colours³.

Chief Fobellah became the recipient of Brain's first tapestry and their initial meeting is celebrated in *Robert in Bangwa Greeting the Chief (made in later years)* a typical work of Brain's where space, perspective and memory are mixed up

¹ Op Cit, p.15
² Op Cit, p.16

and the rules of polite picture-making are disregarded. Spaces are compressed; figures are elongated and distorted whilst others are cut out and then woven into the flat surface.

As we can see, Brain's biography is deeply sewn into his work. From his time in Africa, Brain wanders gypsy-like through the late beautiful ruins of the twentieth century and into the present.

Brain's work, like his meandering funny book *The Life and Tapestries*, unravels across time and space; finding love in Italy; cooking for nuns in Sydney; living a charmed life in Adelaide; traversing back to London as the companion of the Ambassador; and through his time spent in Woop Woop.

It is sometimes too easy to fall back on to the tropes of biography in an artist work. Finding a mix of relationships between

the maker and the object can be a bit of a tightrope act. But I think with Brains work it's a mistake not to consider both. Knowing a little bit about his life informs the work in profound ways. And tapestry and art is the thing that binds all the parts of Brain's remarkable life together.

Thankfully it is also an easily portable art form – roll and fold it and pop it in a bag ready for a life on the move. Subsequently it's always there reflecting back his thinking and adventures.

All these experiences, plus a sharp wit and fast roving eye, feed into a body of work which is a remarkable and singular achievement.

Glenn Barkley
Artist and Co-Director
The Curators' Department
May 2016