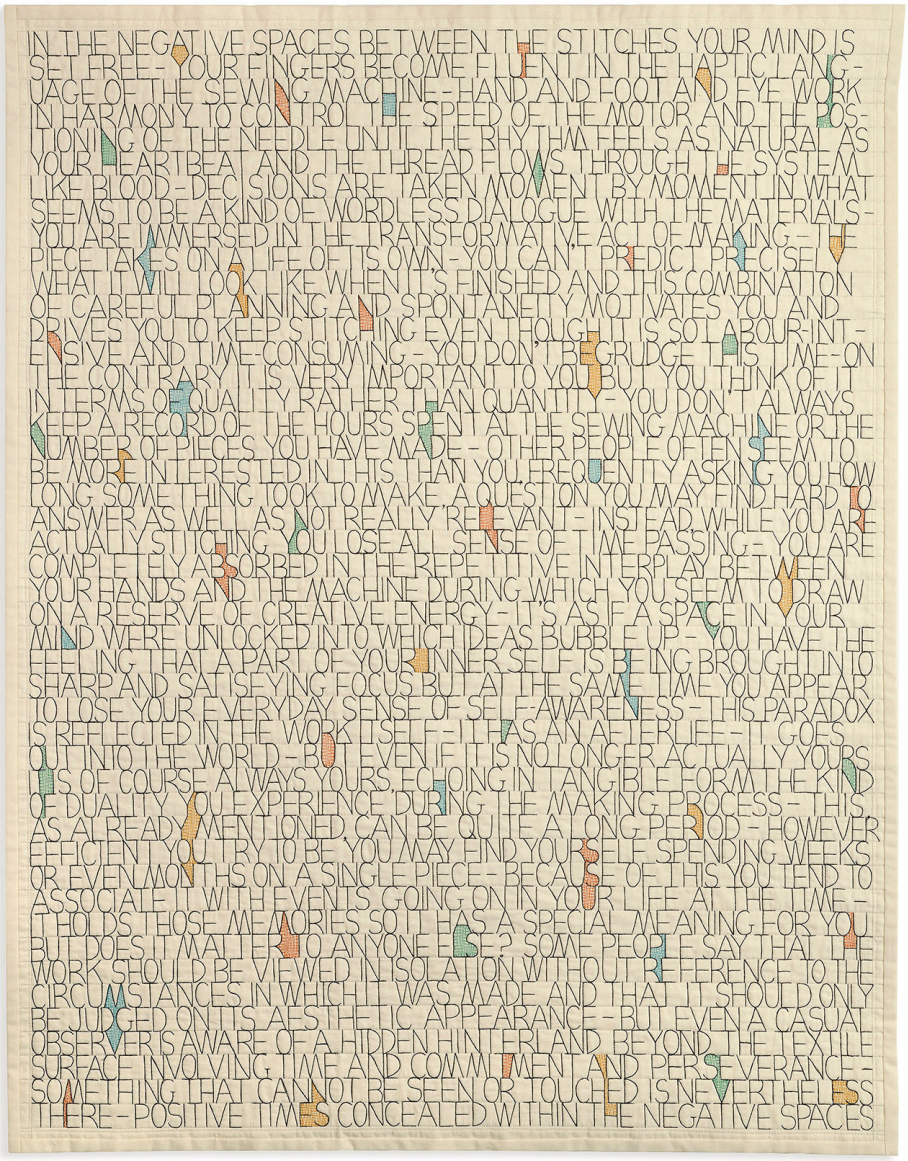
the
signal house
edition

#7

december 2020 | the signal house edition



negative spaces, positive times
94 x 120, 2018
Calico, wholecloth, felt wadding, polyester and nylon (invisible) thread.
Free-motion machine stitched text and motifs, machine quilted.

sara impey

issue seven | december 2020

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contents

welcome

How do we codify experience into memory? And when we have, where does it reside? Art is one answer, and the pieces in December's issue in their own ways take up this task of building a house for memory. The collective memory threaded into Sara Impey's quilts; the tangled family history that unfurls in Verity Laughton's Captivities; the interplay of lineages in Erica Gillingham's poetry; the vivid aftermaths depicted in James Tye's photographs; the new histories born from discarded objects in Melissa Chambers' Object lessons – all these pieces find human beings wrestling with experience, seeking out the point at which that experience can be transfigured into something that can be shared.

In the first issue of The Signal House Edition we wrote that we wanted the journal to be a heddle on the world's loom, where stories small and large can change, and change, and keep changing. By any measure, 2020 has been a strange year, and it's still got a way to run. We're still finding its softest parts, the points where it might stretch into something we can hold at enough distance to get to know.

Thank you for joining us here over the past seven months. We look forward to meeting you here again in a new year.

The Editors

still standing

ESSAY

james tye

I managed to navigate my school years without getting into any serious fights. I was a skinny kid with no obvious fighting ability, and though my school was an averagely rough Surrey comp, I largely (luckily) seemed to go unnoticed by the school bullies. I did reasonably well in my subjects, with the exception of my maths class which, being the lowest set, felt more like a jail holding pen than a classroom. I never put my hand up, failed maths, and have relied on a calculator ever since.

Like many boys growing up in the 70s and 80s I had a fascination for boxing and karate, and dreamed of one day being able to do one or both. I ended up doing neither, but the fascination remained, especially for boxing which, as I got older, seemed to me to be increasingly inconsistent with modern life. As a kid, I'd been taught to solve arguments with words and not violence. People didn't hit each other in my world, at least not at art school. So when I returned to college to study for an MA in Fine Art Photography a decade ago and needed a subject to get my teeth into for a couple of years, I chose boxing. It was a chance to finally see it up close without getting hurt.

I began by making contacts at boxing gyms in and around London. First I'd take reportage shots of the boxers training and in action to get to know them and for them to get used to me. It was a subculture I'd never been exposed to, they seemed to accept me as a curiosity. The person who helped me the most was Kellie Maloney, who I met before she transitioned. I remember her mother was always the one on the ticket desk, a ferocious, tiny lady with a broad Irish accent. The aim was to eventually have the boxers pose for individual

portraits, to photograph them immediately after their professional fights.

I discovered a number of things. Firstly, that boxers are incredibly disciplined; what may appear to be uncontrolled violence is, for the most part, measured and skilful and full of respect for their opponent. The pros train extremely hard, don't drink or smoke, and follow their trainer's instructions without question. So, when the trainer said they were having their photo taken, they did it. Secondly, they're not shy; they're perhaps even a little vain. Boxing photography is almost as old as photography itself, predating the Queensbury rules*, and there's a long tradition of boxers showing off for the camera. The boxers I met were happy to be part of that tradition.

So began months of attending training sessions and following the fighters to professional fights around the UK. My friend and assistant Lucy and I would sit hidden from the audience in a little portable studio set up between the ring and the dressing rooms. At the end of the matches, and as the cheering echoed around the auditorium, the boxers would come past and give us a few minutes. The exchange would follow a familiar pattern: I'd peer down into my big Mamiya film camera and ask them about the fight. Sweaty and breathless, they would hold their head lowered and arms up in traditional boxing pose. Then, gradually, their arms and shoulders dropped as the exhaustion took hold and the adrenalin ebbed. That was when the more interesting shots were taken, when they were unguarded, a little vulnerable.


SUGAR
EVERLAST
TITLE
adidas

In the darkroom I noticed a common expression in these photos, a weariness that bordered on a look of despair; mouth ajar, eyes often looking into the distance at no fixed point. It was an expression I'd seen before: in the Icons rooms of the National Gallery in London, the saints in their torment, fatigued but joyous, transcendental. It might be simply that the boxers were replaying the fight in their head, and there was no way of telling if they'd won or lost from their expressions. Often it was the Romanian who'd been flown in with a few days' notice to fight a local guy on his way up who was the more cheerful. The local guy had a win to his name, but the Romanian had £300 in his pocket and his flights paid.

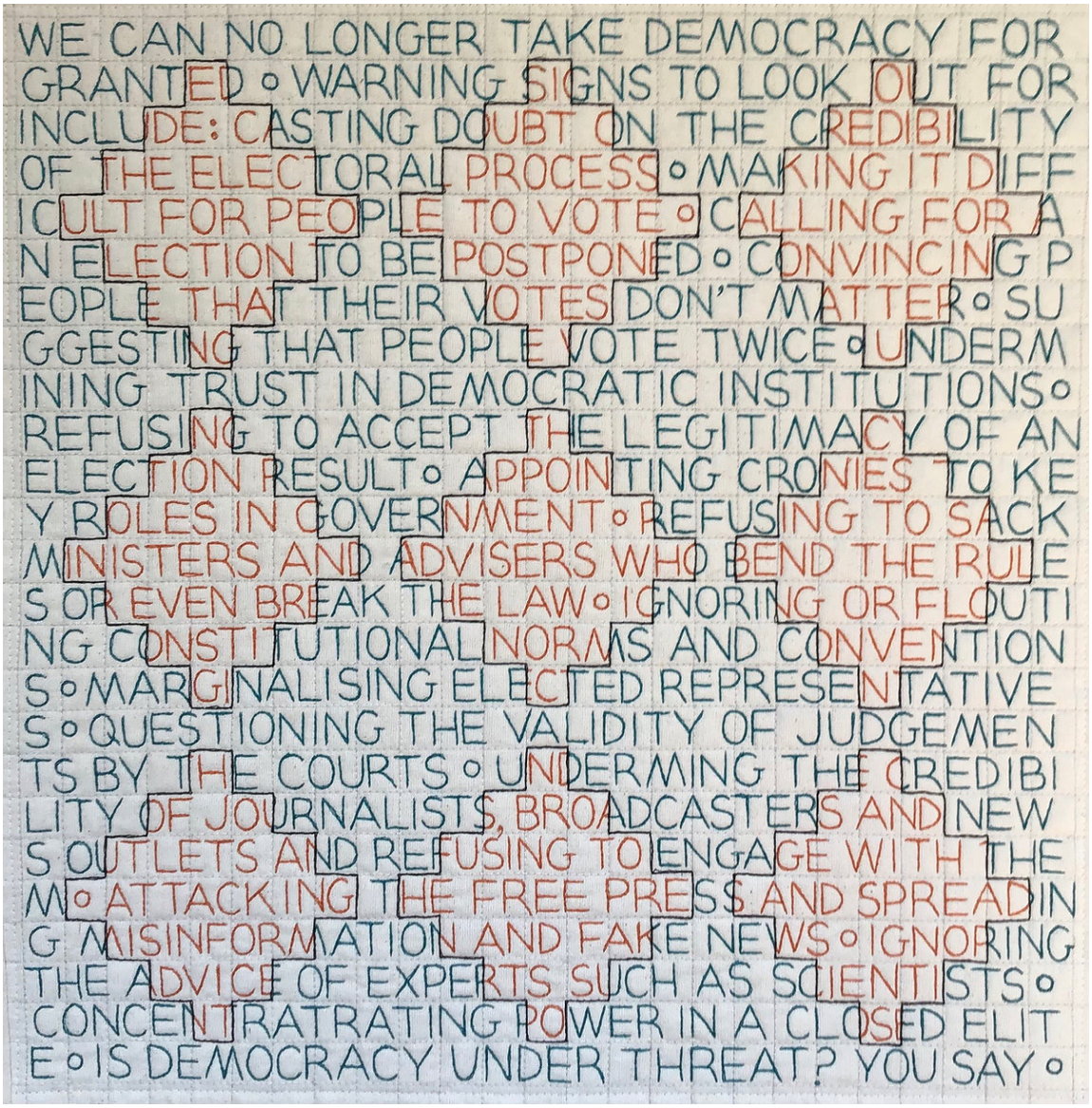
The image of wounded masculinity predates Christianity to Classical times and has been a recurring theme throughout recorded history. From a blinded Samson through to Saint Sebastian shot with arrows, to contemporary movie characters, Rocky Balboa, Die Hard's John McClane. The idea of the powerful warrior brought low still holds power and has become a boxing movie staple. There's joy and tragedy in all sports but never as poignant as they are in boxing, and they're lent an extra pathos after the fights when the boxers pack up their things and leave the building.

For all the adoration the boxers receive in the ring, they still have the practicalities of getting to and from the event and, at this level, there is no limo waiting for them.

One evening, on our way back to London, we encountered a bruised but victorious young David Hayes eating alone at a motorway service station. When I saw him he was quietly staring into space. We joined him for dinner that night. Lucy and I didn't imagine he would one day reach the top of the sport, and if *he* did, he wasn't letting on.

[Images (top down, L-R) Munyai, Vladimir, Harding, Pacy, Sugar, Al, Twin, Nikita, Dezzie]

*the Queensbury rules (1865) denote the start of modern boxing, and the end of bare knuckle brawls.



sara impey in conversation with erica gillingham

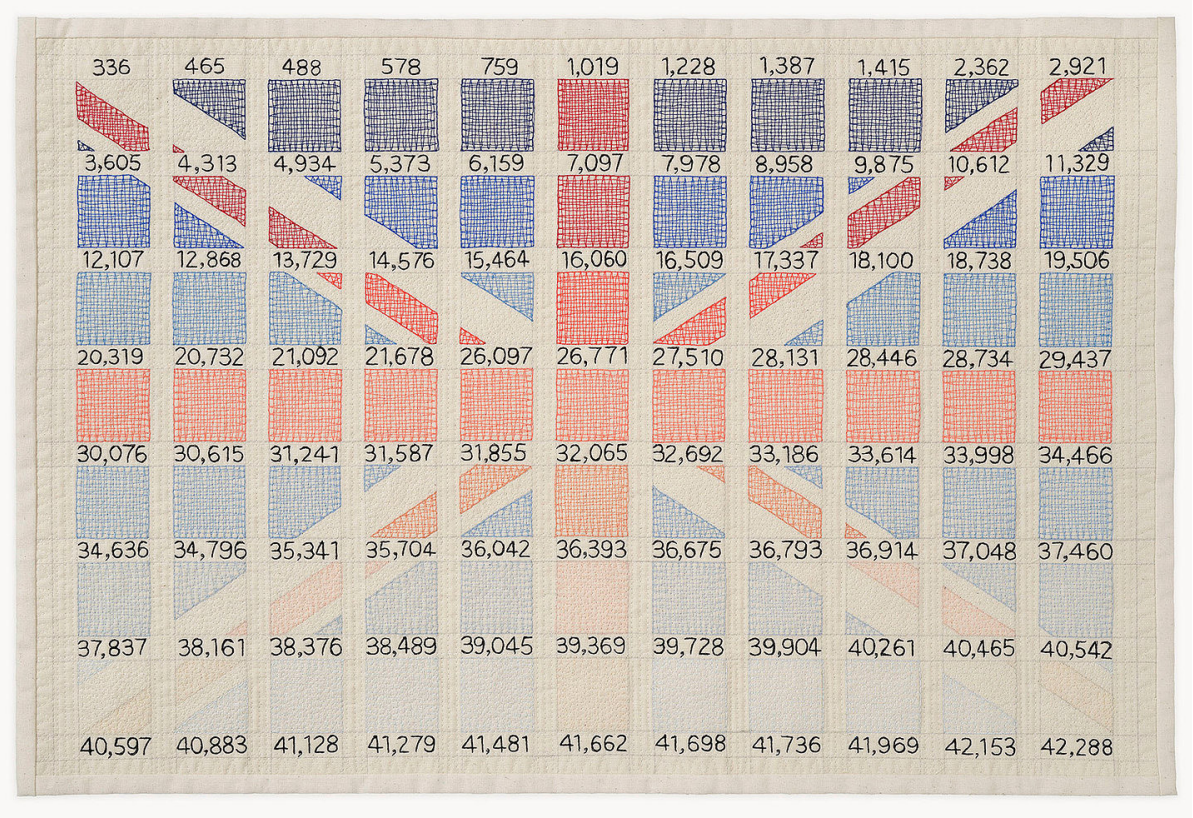
Sara Impey is a British quilt artist specialising in free motion machine-stitched lettering based in Essex, England. She is the author of 'Text and Textile Art' (2013), and for 20 years has been a member of the pan-European group Quilt Art, the oldest group of its kind in Europe.

Erica Gillingham for The Signal House Edition: Sara, you've been quilting since the early 1970s, but your work this year has taken on a different focus with the pandemic. Can you tell us more about how this series of small quilts came about and what they've been focusing on?

Sara Impey: Like many people I suddenly found myself with time on my hands during the lockdown – I realise I'm very fortunate. But museums and galleries were closed, and the yearly round of exhibition opportunities came to a halt. In my exhibiting group we normally plan ahead at least a couple of years, but now everything was in abeyance. My wall-hangings are usually quite large – up to four feet square – and labour intensive so I can only make a few a year. At the start of the lockdown I embarked on a time-consuming piece (a stitched diary, of which more later) and after that I decided to make a series of small quilts specifically for Instagram on the subject of Covid. This enabled me to work through ideas more quickly than usual. They were highly topical, so it was satisfying to be able to reach an instant audience. I also thought they might turn into a body of work which could be shown together one day.

From the beginning of the lockdown I had logged the daily cumulative death toll from the virus in the UK and this series of numbers featured on these little quilts. The first was a colour chart showing the colours of spring in small rectangles with the numbers underneath. We all remember what a beautiful spring it was, and how it seemed to throw the pandemic into sharp relief. I then made Flying the Flag, a Union Jack design, which also included the death toll in that first few weeks. The colours fade towards the bottom as the country seemed to be fading out as a player on the world stage. The UK had the highest number of deaths in Europe and scandals like the shortage of PPE were further tarnishing our reputation overseas.

previous page: ***courthouse steps: democracy on trial,*** *2020. (43cm square) calico, whole-cloth, free-motion machine stictched, machine quilted.*



flying the flag, *2020. (60 x 40cm) calico, wholecloth, free-motion machine stiched, machine quilted.*

Is Anybody Listening? put these numbers in speech bubbles. This quilt coincided with the easing of restrictions, but as I have a son with a learning disability and other medical conditions who is vulnerable, we had personal reasons for being concerned that the daily death toll seemed to have dropped down the news agenda. Although much of my work could be described as social commentary, I don't usually choose subjects that are so raw, immediate and emotionally-laden. I was very aware that each death was a tragedy and didn't want to make light of it. I kept this piece very plain, as the numbers spoke for themselves.

is anybody listening?*, 2020. (42 x 44 cm) commerical cotton, felt wadding, free-motion machine stictched numbers and bubbles, machine quilted*

EG: One of the things I admire so much about your quilts is the way in which you pair traditional elements of quilting with current events and ideas. An example of this is your *Courthouse Steps* series, which uses a traditional quilt block to make visible many of the headline themes we've seen in the US and the UK in recent years. What, for you, is the interplay between traditional quilt patterns and your text-based textile art?

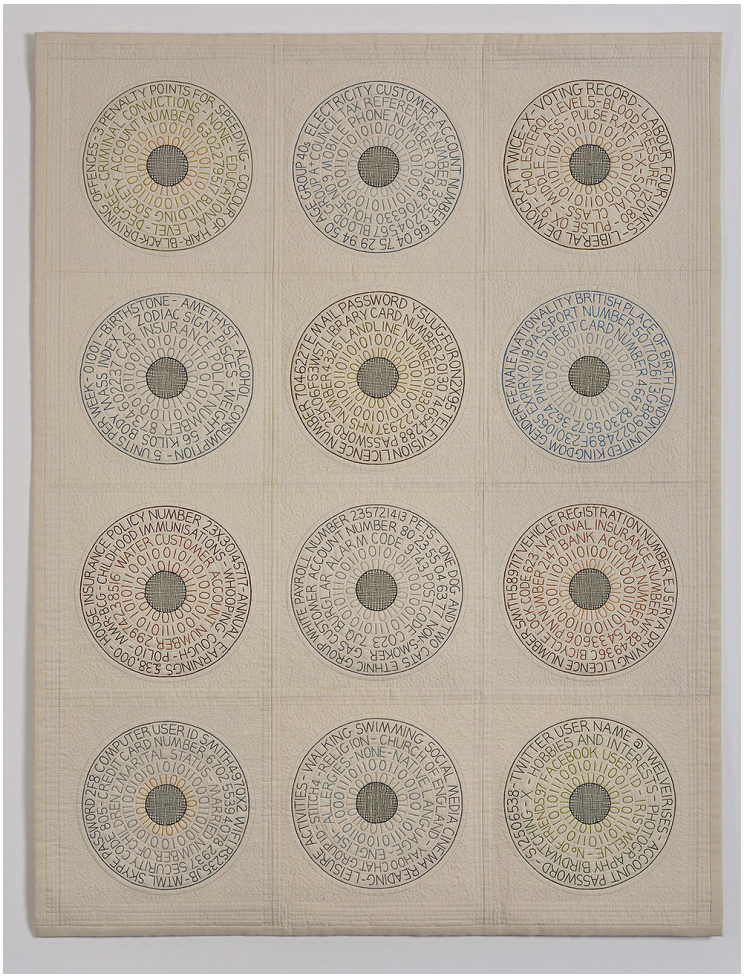
SI: I had been casting around for a design to illustrate the current concerns about the threat to democracy and the *Courthouse Steps* idea was a gift, as it's such a well-known quilt pattern and the name suggested the notion of putting democracy on trial. I had never interpreted a quilt pattern so literally before, but much of my work is nevertheless based on traditional designs since I often use repeated patterns and simple geometric outlines. And, even if my quilts are an unusual shape or three-dimensional, they are all defined as quilts – that is, two or more layers of fabric held together with stitch.

Most of my work is based on a grid. The first thing I do is draw a grid on a piece of fabric, layer it up to make a quilt, pin the layers all over with safety pins (tedious and sometimes painful, but we have to suffer for our art!) and stitch along the drawn lines in a thread colour that matches the fabric. I then have a surface of empty squares and my 'canvas' is ready. So whether I end up with a design of large concentric circles or small speech bubbles or even the national flag, they all start with a grid, in the same way that many well-known American quilt patterns are based on a block.

I should add that I'm quite a purist when it comes to textile art. I confine myself to working just with fabric and thread. Many artists today experiment with all sorts of different processes such as fabric treatments, digital techniques, found objects and photography, but I find enough creative potential in the domestic sewing machine and what it can do.

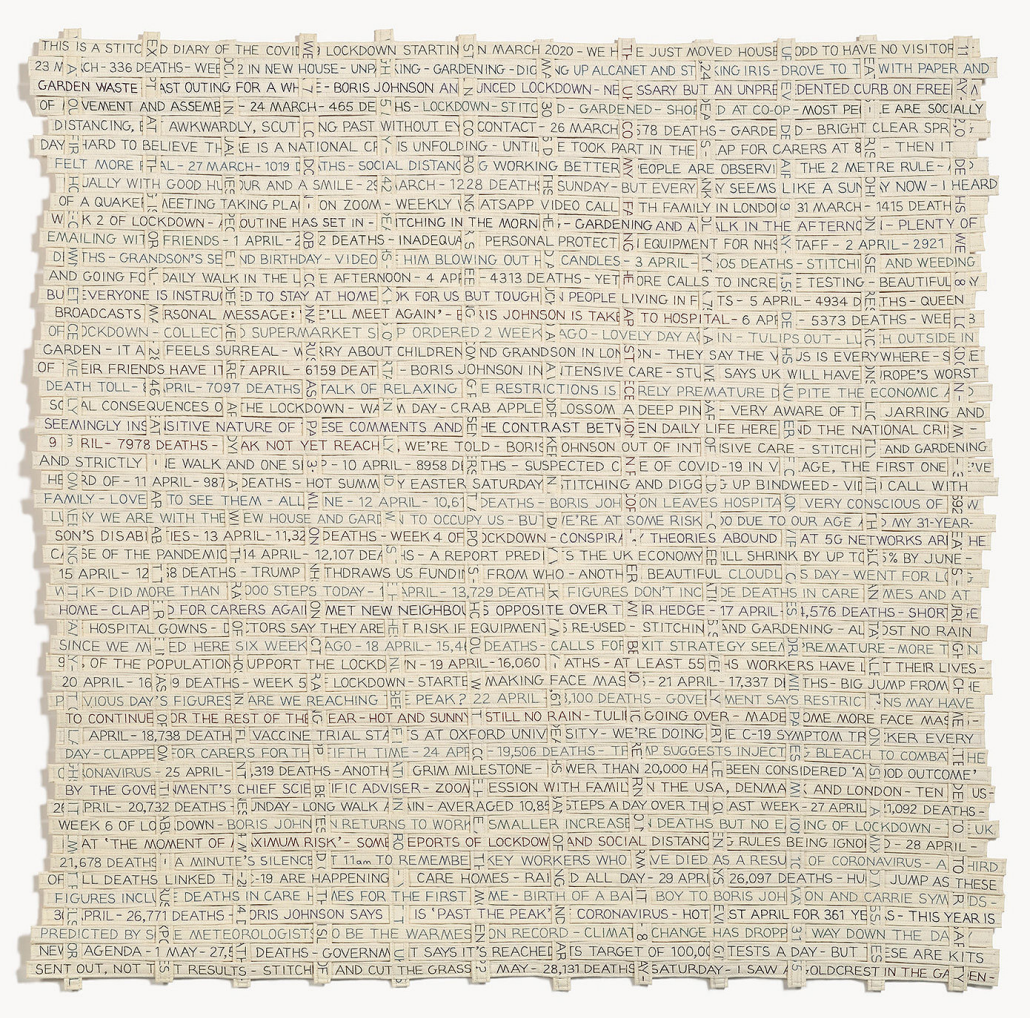
following page: ***iris recognition****, 2016. (82 x 107 cm) calico, free-motion machine stitched text and circles, machine pieced, machine quilted.*

EG: During the pandemic, you've also been keeping a daily diary on 1-metre quilted strips of calico and you've now woven them into a large quilt piece entitled *Interlockdown*. What has that process been like? What has surprised or delighted you in keeping this diary?



SI: I really enjoyed making *Interlockdown*. I made two or three of these strips per day and they are a record of personal and national events in the first few weeks of the lockdown. There was a kind of comfort and therapy in the daily ritual of cutting out, layering and stitching the strips and then thinking of what I wanted to say in thread about the previous 24 hours.

I decided to make strips rather than one big piece because I wanted the process to be open-ended. Nobody knew what was going to happen and there was a lot of fear around. Who knows – I might have caught the virus myself and never finished it, so it felt like a leap into the unknown. I didn't know how I was going to assemble them or how many I would eventually make. But as I went along, I formed the idea of weaving them in and out like a basket so that the verticals interrupt the text on the horizontals. Because of this the text is not immediately legible but can be puzzled out with effort. I hope this reflects the disruption to everybody's lives during this period. It was a confusing and disorientating time when, confined at home, we felt both connected to and disconnected from one another. When I finished it in mid-May some of the restrictions were starting to lift so it seemed an appropriate place to stop. The text is over 1200 words and there are more than sixty strips.



interlockdown, *2020. (100cm square approx) calico, free-motion machine stiched text*

EG: You have been quilting since 1971, but in your book Text in Textile Art (2013) you talk about seeing A Few Words About Sewing (1990) by Mary Fogg as a turning point in your own work, especially when witnessing viewers' responses to it. You write: 'Words draw people in. They engage people's whole attention. They make an impact, or, as here, demand a deeply thoughtful and analytic response.' How did that experience change the quilts you were making?

SI: Introducing text into my work was, as you say, a pivotal moment. It felt as though I had finally found my creative 'voice' after 30 years of quiltmaking, so it was a long apprenticeship! It's important to me that I write my own material. I studied languages at Oxford University and then trained as a newspaper journalist, eventually working for a few years as a reporter on the parliamentary staff of The Times. So I had always been drawn to

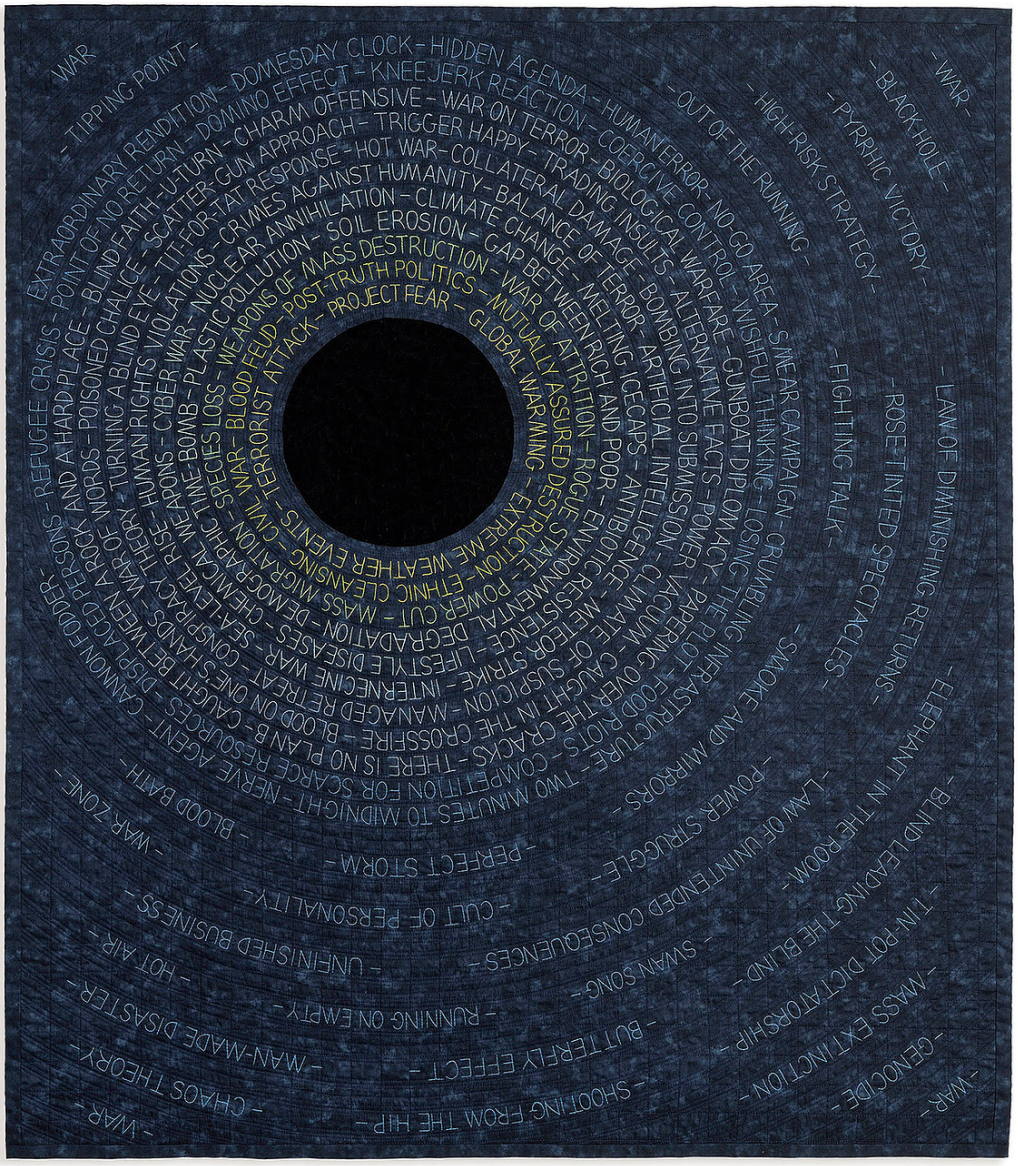
working with words both in my real and quilting life, but it was not until 2004 that I found a way of incorporating text into my quilts.

I use the 'free-motion' machine embroidery method, where the teeth that usually feed the fabric under the needle are disengaged, so the stitcher is in control of the direction of the stitched line; you can go any way you like without turning the fabric. I stitch each letter individually. I've done so much of this that I can do it by eye and don't need to mark the fabric first and I've developed my own stitched 'handwriting'. The text has to fit into the space available, so this is where the writing and stitching really come together. I'm sometimes making up the text as I go along to achieve this, so the words travel straight from my brain to the needle. I don't want to over-dramatize, since quilting is not known for its roller-coaster thrills, but at these moments my heart rate goes up and I feel that I'm living on the edge!

You're right that introducing text changed the quilts I was making. In my earlier text pieces I stitched one letter per square like a crossword puzzle, making paper stencils for the letter outlines, and they looked similar to my previous geometric-style quilts. These were quite visually pleasing and I sometimes had fun with wordplay, making them read down as well as across, for example, which was a challenge. But the technique had its limitations, and after a few years I abandoned it and now stitch smaller letters so that the text has more in common with printed or written lettering. This enables me to be more discursive, sometimes writing an essay of several hundred words which covers the whole surface.

If you produce letters, you have to have a subject and this, of course, opened up a new area of expressive possibilities. Many of my pieces are concerned with contemporary issues, often from the point of view of the absurd language they generate. Brexit was, and no doubt will continue to be, a rich seam to mine. One of my Brexit quilts is constructed like a portcullis, whereby I made a series of black tapes and joined them together in a trellis, and stitched on it some of the outlandish expressions that have emerged in the last couple of years: Canada plus plus, Henry VIII powers, Brexodus, Remoaners – that kind of thing. I called it *Fortress Britain*. I was trying to use the language and the visual metaphor of the

portcullis to highlight how our stance on Europe must have been viewed from abroad.



project fear: black hole, *2018. (106 x 123cm) commerical cotton, cotton valvet, calico backing, felt wadding. free-motion machine stitched text, reverse appliqued by hand, hand and machine quilted.*

Words do draw people in, but while I want the text to be legible, I don't expect everyone to stand in front of one of my quilts and not move till they've read the entire thing. Some people do and a lot of people just get the gist and that's fine – I've made my point.

EG: There is also a lot of humour and word play in your quilts. Is this an element of self-expression or is there also an engagement with the expected 'seriousness' of art?

SI: Yes, I do like humour and wordplay. While I'm serious about my work from a technical point of view and want the quilts to be properly constructed and neatly finished, I prefer the content to be quite light, though I hope there's a thought-provoking element lying behind it. I don't want to be didactic. I like to think I'm poking gentle fun, rather as a cartoonist might. Like a cartoonist I have to think visually, and I like it when the design or structure of my pieces reflects the text (like the portcullis), so that there is a kind of double meaning going on. Ideas that incorporate both elements don't come along every day, so I often work in a series, exploring the possibilities of an idea over a number of quilts. When an idea occurs, it's hard to know which comes first – the design or the text – as they are both interlinked.

Stitched lettering, rather like letters carved in wood or stone, has in the past tended to be meaningful and portentous and I enjoy subverting this. There's also something inherently ludicrous about spending so much time stitching, and this is heightened when the subject-matter is unexpected in a textile context, like the stitched blood splats and crosshairs in War of Words. I'm interested in language itself and the way political clichés are used unthinkingly, even lazily, to avoid thinking deeply about subjects or, worse, to obfuscate or manipulate. War of Words is full of military metaphors which are commonly used in everyday speech but could ratchet up the tension in a situation of confrontation and brinkmanship.

The one area I want to avoid is over-sentimentality, and there's always a danger one can stray into this territory when working with textiles with their associations of warmth, comfort and memory.

EG: For this issue, we've featured your quilt entitled *Negative Spaces, Positive Times*. Can you tell us more about this piece?

SI: *Negative Spaces, Positive Times* is all about the stitching process from the stitcher's point of view. This is one of my favourite subjects,

though I appreciate such navel-gazing won't appeal to everyone. It's one of a series prompted by the first question that almost everyone asks when they see a quilt (or a tapestry or some other labour-intensive piece of needlework) which is: How Long Did it Take to Make?

The question is simple and obvious to the questioner, who is evaluating the work purely on time and effort, but often unanswerable, except in vague terms, by the maker. This is because to many makers the time taken is the least important aspect of the work. Unless you're being paid for a commission you're unlikely to bother logging the hours spent at the sewing machine, any more than you know how many pieces of work you've made. What's important is the process – the exercising of a skill, the problem solving, the overcoming of challenges, the pleasure of handling fabric and thread, and of watching the finished piece gradually take shape – and also, in a more abstract way, the sense of being part of a continuum of women's art and of a connection with stitchers, usually women, from the past.

For this quilt I experimented with not leaving a gap between the rows of lettering. Where the letters touch they sometimes randomly create intriguing negative spaces. I have no control over this process as I make up the text as I go along and the letters, being free-machined, are not predictable and 'perfect' in shape and size. I made a small sample in which I coloured in some of these shapes rather like a child might, except I used thread instead of crayons. That gave me the idea of the negative spaces filled, as it were, by positive times.

If I can quote from the piece:

In the negative spaces between the stitches your mind is set free. Your fingers become fluent in the haptic language of the sewing machine. Hand and foot and eye work in harmony to control the speed of the motor and the positioning of the needle until the rhythm feels as natural as your heartbeat and the thread flows through the system like blood. Decisions are taken moment by moment in what seems to be a kind of wordless dialogue with the materials. You are immersed in the transformative act of making. The piece takes on a life of its own... But even a casual observer is aware of a hidden hinterland beyond the textile surface involving time

and commitment and perseverance. Something that cannot be seen or touched is nevertheless there – positive times concealed within the negative spaces.

thrall, *2017, 10 links, total diameter when joined 92cm (approx). commercial fabric, free-motion machinbe stitched text, machine quilted, felt and pelmet vilene wadding.*

EG: You are a member of the pan-European group Quilt Art and your work is part of an international conversation in textile art. Who or what is exciting you in contemporary quilting and textiles right now?

SI: Yes, I've been a member of Quilt Art for 20 years and I would choose all the other members as producers of ground-breaking work. It's a small pan-European group which started back in 1985, so it's the oldest group of its kind in Europe. We've exhibited all over Europe and in Japan, Russia, Canada and the United States. Most of us came to textile art through making quilts, though some have other textile backgrounds. We don't insist that the work has to conform to the traditional definition of a quilt, and we are very diverse as individual makers.

The art quilting scene is burgeoning in many countries, some with their own quilting traditions and some with none. I'm sticking my neck out here, but a few countries are evolving their own styles: I can often

covid misinformation help point, *2020, 62cm square, calico, wholecloth, free-moition machine stitched, machine quilted*

recognise a Japanese or an Australian quilt, for example. The US is interesting, because their 'quilt revival' of the 1970s grew out of feminism and protest with makers such as Faith Ringgold, Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro leading the way. Even today American art quilts tend to be more pictorial and poster-like with a greater use of primary colours than European art quilts, which are on the whole more minimalist and restrained.

Of course, quilting is only one branch of the textile arts, interest in which has exploded in recent years. When I made my first quilts for the home

in the 1970s I didn't know a single other quilter, and there were very few books, groups, classes and exhibitions and no internet. Today there's lots of exciting, challenging and thought-provoking work happening based on traditional textile techniques. I'm thinking of Freddie Robins in knitting, Celia Pym in mending and darning, and Caren Garfen in hand embroidery, but there are many others. There's also highly creative work coming out of university textile departments which have the equipment for the new digital processes. The public profile of the textile arts has risen with the work of Tracey Emin and Grayson Perry. And international artists such as Joana Vasconcelos from Portugal and Tatiana Trouvé who is based in Paris have disconnected stitching from its domestic origins and make works on a monumental scale that can only be shown in enormous spaces. And yet, what unites us all are textile processes that haven't changed in essence for millennia.

EG: Finally, every quilter has their stash of favourite and (temporarily) forgotten fabrics. What's in yours?

SI: Well, I hate to disappoint but I don't have a huge stash because most of my work these days is done on plain fabric so that the text is legible. However, I'm still coming to terms with the fact that about 15 years ago I gave away to a fellow quilter my lovely hoard of floral printed Liberty Tana lawns – the fabrics I used extensively in the 80s and early 90s – which I would dearly love to have now, if only to get them out and admire them from time to time. We quilters have long memories!

minor english goddesses

POETRY
erica gillingham

There was Mildred, goddess
of the moors, mizzle, and mist, the
blooming gorse bush and
the thistle, mistress of the manor,
long lost daughter of Daphne

sister of Margot, who was goddess
of the hedgerow, protector
of brambles and field mice,
nettles, pebbles, and footpaths,
who was once the lover of

Beatrice, goddess of the streams,
allotments, and small animals—
rabbits, badgers, rats & moles—
who carried a scythe and gave birth
under the deep blue moon

to Martha, goddess of the bracken,
heathers, lichens, and mosses,
guardian of the ridge tops, striding from
dusk to daybreak, wind whipping
fervently to the coastline where

Lerryn kept watch over the waves,
goddess of rock pools and tide pools,
seaweeds, fossils, and limestone,
who once threatened a gale to ruin
the most experienced of sailors.

(Image credit: Autumn Day Porthtowan, woodblock print
on Echizen Kizuki paper by Adrian Holmes, 2020).

go to ‘the muslin moth’

the
signal house
edition

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We are an artist-run, independent and unfunded publication. Our issues represent hundreds of hours of research, creation and refinement by our contributors and editors.

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We encourage submissions from individuals from backgrounds and identities underrepresented in art and writing, particularly with regard to race, gender, sexuality, class, and disability. We welcome works translated from other languages into English where both writer and translator hold rights. Contributors retain copyright of their work. Please note, we are currently unable to pay contributors.

We read all the work sent to us and aim to respond within two months if we feel there is a place for it in the journal. As we are a small team, we do not respond to each individual submission.

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Hangover Day on Costinela's Balcony in Bucharest,
Vicktor Hübner, 2014

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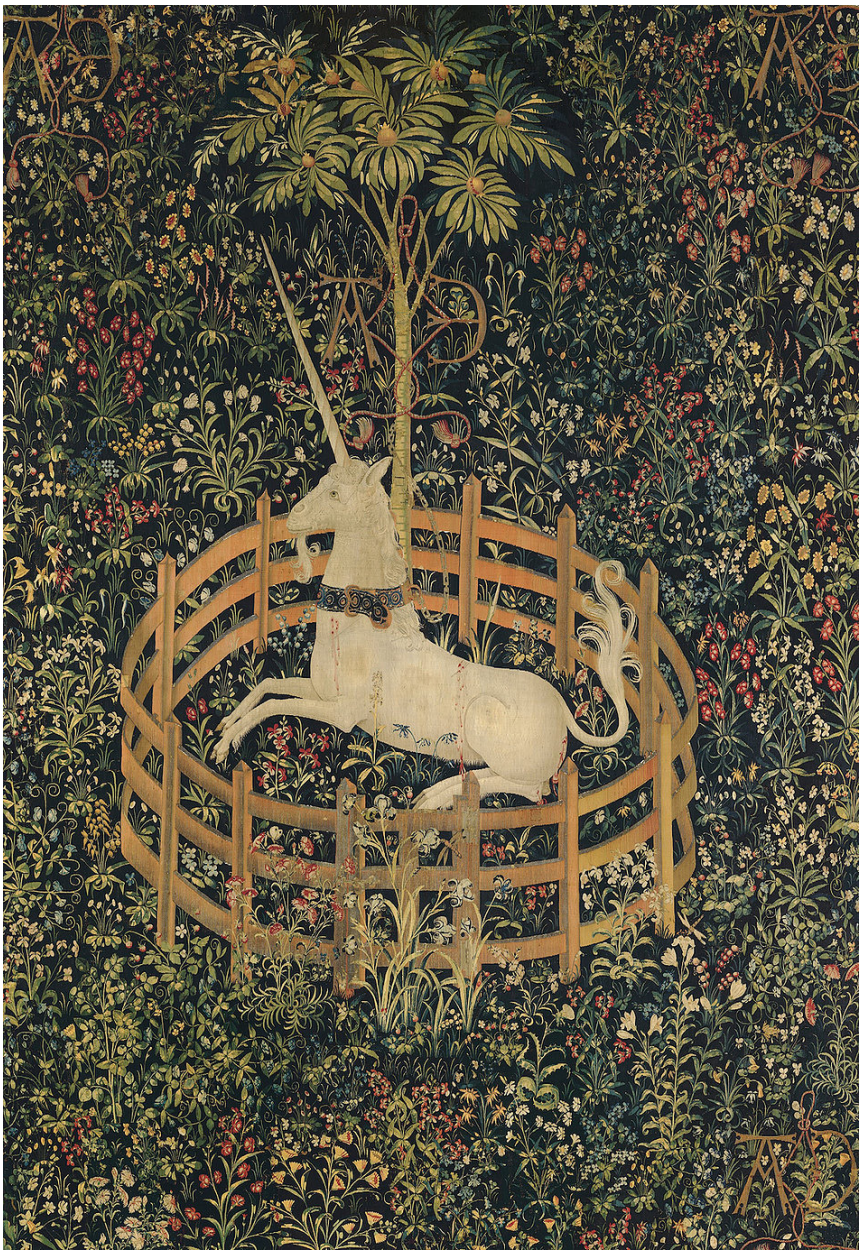


MEMOIR
verity laughton

captivities

Chapter One

It is April, in 2004, in Adelaide.

I want, she says, a new mosaic to go on my garden wall.

At present there is an image of a friendly Father Sunshine of reasonable if cheerfully commercial taste. It was there when she bought the house and she's never liked it. She wants to replace it. Her sister, Vivienne, has made

a mosaic of a woodland image, rather fine, for the garden of her cottage in Gilberton. We are talking sibling rivalry here, at the ages of seventy-eight and eighty-two respectively. I feel a dull ache somewhere between the back of my throat and my breastbone. 'Yes?' I say.

Jeanette has silver hair that has suddenly gone white. It's always been curly, framing a small triangular face with large hazel eyes, a bumpy nose she has forever lamented, and a thin-lipped mouth that seems unfair because she's not a prude, nor unforgiving. As a young woman she was very thin, she thought too thin. Even now, she has slim, shapely legs, a neat bust, and wide soft hips. She's of medium height, taller than my short, stocky Dad and her first two daughters. My youngest sister, Sally, is about her height, so Ma got one out of three.

Ma knows the image she wants.

It's *The Unicorn in Captivity*: a detail from the 7th tapestry in the series known as *The Hunt of the Unicorn as Lover*.

The Unicorn in Captivity is well known. The original image is held at The Cloisters, the uptown annexe of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. You see copies of it here and there. In fact, I have a large framed poster of it in our front hall, though I'm not sure if Ma remembers this because she's only visited our house in Sydney twice and – an ongoing failing – she may well not have paid attention.

The background of the picture is a forest feathered into a profusion of scattered berries, buds and opened red, blue, white and yellow flowers encircled by tendrils of curling leaves. The unicorn itself is white with slender, muscular limbs. It wears a collar and kneels within a flimsy circular fence. It has a sweet, serious face and a tufted beard like a gentle elongated goat. The thin spike of its horn seems both inevitable and surprising where it spears up from the centre of its forehead. This combination of shock and completion, together with the skill of the weaving, has to be the source of the image's power.

My Ma looks at me over the rim of her china teacup. The ache in my breastbone throbs. I understand she wants me to offer to make her

mosaic. For my part, I think the image is more than beautiful and I cannot imagine acquiring the skill to render anything other than a bastard schoolgirl imitation of such artistry. I don't want to do it. I also understand, in a convolution of communication that is commonplace in my birth family, that she, in her turn, is picking up my reluctance. Perhaps she guesses that my response is fuelled not just by a sense of incapacity. This request is a digression, another common practice, an inessential inserted into the state of play when the essential task ahead is overwhelming. But the cards are all in her bridge-playing hands at this moment, so I smile and trust that she'll go with my surface behaviour. She usually does. I hedge. 'All right', I say, 'I'll see if I can find someone to make it'.

Her phone – a landline in 2004 – rings. She leans back in her pale green brocade chair. She shakes her head a little. I go to answer the incoming call.

*

For some time, I had been keeping a notebook. The entries from that period are multiple, and disorganised. In no particular order they range from hospital procedures, Ma's business affairs, the psychology of dying from the point of view of both sufferer and carers, and other items such as the details of her will and funeral requests. These last – stuck between a recipe for a quiche she'll eat and the address of a woman who likes her dog – are not recent. They date from a dream – also recorded – from a year still further back, in February 2003, after which I sat up in bed in the cold morning in Sydney with a dry throat, my ears hot and the skin on my chest pricking and tingling and said out loud, 'She's going to die.'

This was the dream:

'I was in this house, in Greenwich, with Rob. There were some birds trilling very loudly under a staircase. I called this to Rob's attention. Then we went into the long, bright sitting room. I'd been worried because we were having Nick (a friend who was very ill with cancer at the time) to dinner and I didn't want to get the day wrong. But it was the right day, and the birds and the clean morning light might have been reminding us of that…'

Then, in the hit-and-run manner of dreams – it was five o'clock of the previous day, though quite how I knew the precise time I am unsure, and now I was in a room that both was and was not the dark, over-crowded dining room at Whistler Avenue, in Adelaide in South Australia, where my parents lived for most of their married life and where my sisters and I had grown up. I was with Ma and my older sister, Pip. And my father, who had died twenty-three years before, was sitting at the chair in front of a desk pressed up against the western wall. And I said to Ma, 'See – Dad's there. He always comes to sit there'.

She was very pleased. It seemed as if I had known that he did this, but she had not. Then, in another convolution, he was sitting in front of the piano that was also kept in that room, except that now – in the dream – the piano had been placed against a wall where in reality French doors led out of the house, and into a portico that Ma had had built between the house and the back garden in the year after Dad had died. I don't know why he was sitting at the piano. He didn't play. She did.

Then I saw there was a large plate on the top ledge of the piano/desk. Maybe of dark Moroccan leather? Maybe embossed in filigrees of gold? As we looked, the plate lifted up seemingly of its own accord and rose off the ledge, hovering in the air. In the dream this felt scary, but nevertheless a good thing because it meant that Dad was present as himself, not as some wished-for hallucination, since it must been him who had caused the displacement of the plate in the first place.

Then I looked over at Ma, and I saw she'd split somehow into two, and I knew that both her heart and a hard shell had broken. But I also knew that the essential fact was that it was her beautiful spirit self that was there, and that she was very happy. I could see her smiling with a gentle neutrality as the plate mysteriously and mildly returned to its previous resting place.

Then Ma seemed to stiffen. Suddenly, she was all hard shell, and she fell. Pip said, 'Vee, you've killed her', But I said, 'No, I haven't, it just happened'. As I held Ma's heavy body on the floor, I told Pip to ring an ambulance. Yet I knew that in fact Ma was okay. Because it was her spirit that was somehow causing all of this and they – she and Dad – were happy.

Do I believe in spirits? I don't know. In my dream I did, and I do believe in dreams. I stared into the cool, black night. The wooded inner-city suburb of Greenwich is thick with creatures. You hear mopokes in the nearby forest. Rob slept on beside me.

My mother has an imperious streak. She likes things just so. At the same time, she's also like a fawn – a fine-boned, skitter-minded thing who startles easily and, whilst not clever, she possesses an emotional intuition second to none. In the dark night, hungover with the dream, wanting to take action to push against its shock, I did know there was no way I could do anything at all with regard to a death as yet unimagined on anyone else's part, let alone hers. But in the spacy dark it seemed right to ensure that, if death did arrive unexpectedly, I would be in a position to fulfil her desires with regard to her funeral. I know this isn't logical. But it felt Useful. So, I made my decision and, bit by bit, on successive visits to Adelaide, always mindful of the necessity to be discreet in my efforts to avoid provoking that familiar febrile response, I gathered what details I could.

This is what I recorded in my notebook:

**Andante Spinato*. (Chopin. I can remember her playing this piece in the downstairs dining room, me lying in bed in my bedroom directly above, the heavy thump of her foot on the pedal, the runs of notes.)

**Be Thou My Vision* – a schoolgirl hymn. There was an aspect of my mother that was irredeemably girlish, so this fitted nicely.

**The Lord's My Shepherd* – ubiquitous in any Australian colonial Non-Conformist hymnbook.

* '*The Bruckner Pip left the church to on her wedding'*. This was more problematic. Which part of which of Bruckner's many works might this be? Was it an imposed choice, in which case Pip might not remember it now? Philippa, my oldest sister, was the only one of the three of us to marry in a church. My mother was not one to forego an opportunity, and Pip was and is an obliging woman, so I bet the music was Ma's choice.

**Brahms Tragic Overture*. Why on earth had this re-surfaced? The overture, as I remember my mother pointing out at the time, was what had echoed through the house as my father brought my eighteen-year-old self back home from the Adelaide Police Station holding cells at one o'clock in the morning, following my arrest in an anti-Vietnam War demonstration in 1971.

* *Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata*. Fair enough.

* *Autumn of Vivaldi's Four Seasons*. Ditto

* *Schumann's Piano Concerto in A Minor*. Oh. Good.

I didn't need to ask whether she'd like flowers or not. She has a gift for flowers. It's one of her true talents, growing them, arranging them, the making of posies, the right time, even the right way to give them. She'd want masses.

'*Will is in the study in the second drawer of Great-Aunt Flo's desk*'. This felt ugly, but money is a difficult dragon. Best to meet it head on.

But then, as time passed, she continued in averagely good health, and the dream, as dreams do, faded. I decided I'd been foolish, despite another, similar dream. Thus, when, a year and a bit later in March 2004 her illness came, despite my morbid preparations, it was as much a shock to me as to her and my sisters.

Ma had been due to have an operation to remove a large (unambiguously benign) growth from her thyroid gland. I was to fly to Adelaide on the morning of the operation, the day after the opening of my adaptation of *The Snow Queen* in Sydney, to help her through it as much as I could. Sally, my younger sister, would fly from Perth some days after that to help with her convalescence. Pip, who did live in Adelaide but at quite some distance from Ma, had been having a difficult time at work so in the way of my family where everyone was always compensating for whichever of us was the temporary victim, we younger two – working off a little of the guilt of distance – were trying to step up.

The Snow Queen had not been an easy gig. The brief had required naturalistic action combined with virtual reality in a folk/contemporary mix. The complexity and difficult psychology of the making and then remaking for a second season in Sydney after the first rather problematic showing in Adelaide the previous year had finally caught up with almost all of us working on the show. In our minds we'd reserved the Sydney season as the one in which to 'get it right' but there had been technical problems with the sound, which remained unresolved as we went into the opening night. Everyone was antsy, me included. Some shows ask too much of their makers and this show had – in the end, though only then – been one of those for me. So, unhappy and distracted, I'd put Ma's vague complaints of digestive and eliminative problems down to nervous tension about her upcoming operation plus a tendency to hypochondria. Then she rang on the morning of my opening.

'No. Yes. I'm not having it. You can cancel the flight'.

'Uh...More? Mum? Why?'

'My doctor –'. Yet another new doctor. Set that aside. 'My doctor says I have hepatitis'.

I looked out of the long window in the sitting room into the neatly patched front garden in Greenwich. There was a small bird dotting from iron rail to tree. How does an ageing lady of finicky habits contract hepatitis? Is it even hepatitis? Has she got the diagnosis right? In shock after his sudden death, she'd told my father's somewhat estranged remaining best friend he'd died of a brain tumour when in fact it was an aneurysm. But. Brown-black urine, it seems. Okay. That's not good. Okay. But treatable. So, I cancelled my flight with, I confess, relief. Sally rang soon after. 'I think I'll go over, anyway, I just think I will'. So she was there, bless her, in the specialist's rooms with Ma when the diagnosis came.

'Abdominal ultrasound. There is an impression of a 2.9 x 2.3 centimetre mass in the pancreatic head, which is hypochoric. There is also intra and extrahepatic duct dilation as a result, the common bile duct measures 1.4 centimetres in its maximal diameter. There was no evidence of gallstones, it was somewhat contracted in appearance. No focal liver abnormality was

otherwise identified. The right and the left kidney show no pelvocalyceal dilation. The spleen is not enlarged. There is no evidence of ascites scar. Impression: high suspicion of a pancreatic head mass with resultant intra and extrahepatic duct dilation. ACT recommended. Appearances are highly suspicious of a pancreatic head carcinoma'.

*

I come back from the phone to my mother, whose head is resting on the back of the chair, her lightly-tinged yellow skin – that will be the liver – soft with powder. Her eyes are shut.

'Who was it?'

'Jan'. An ancient and faithful friend. Ma nods. Her large hazel eyes open. We share a look.

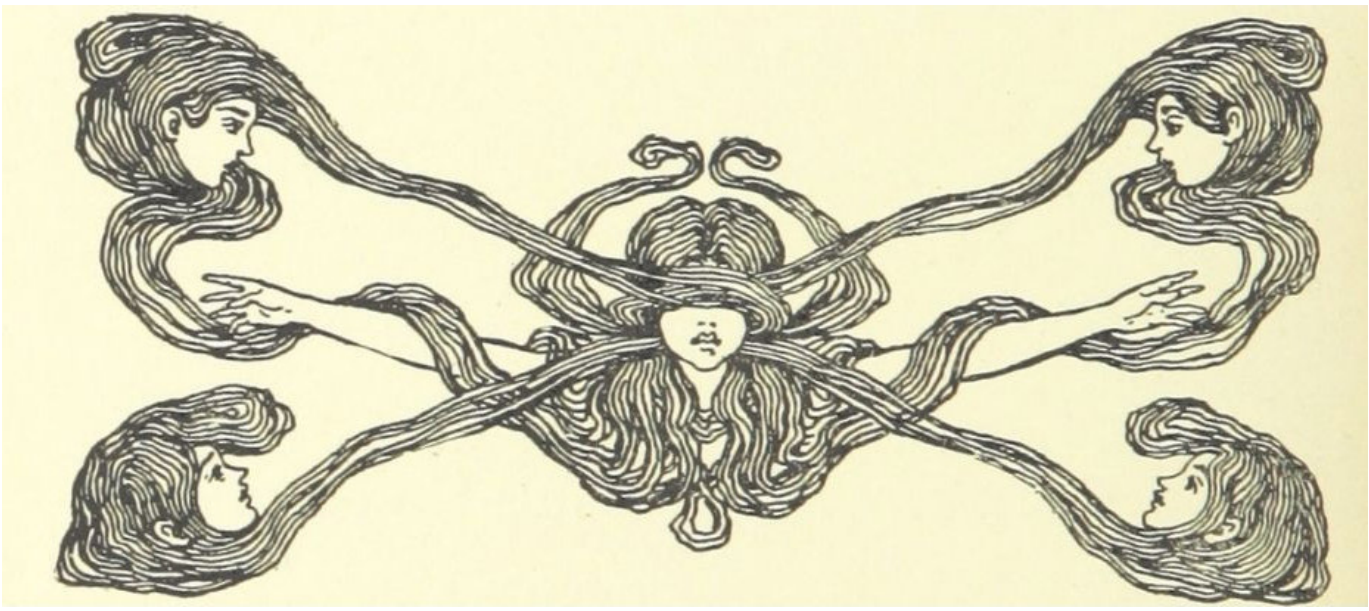
'I could get someone to make the mosaic for you. It might not cost too much'. Who cares, frankly, what it costs? She shuts her eyes again.

I feel myself sliding back into the world of my childhood. When I was young my Depression-childhood, World War II-young-adulthood parents did not expect to buy what they wanted or needed. They usually made it. My mother's sister had made her own mosaic. My mother would probably have done the same if she had ever quite organised herself for the task. Now, she waits, quietly breathing in the pale afternoon.

'All right,' I say, 'I'll make it for you'.

She opens her eyes once more. Her face warms, that lovely, open, child-like innocence. 'Will you?'

(image credit: The Unicorn Rests in a Garden [from the Unicorn Tapestries] 1495–1505, the Metropolitan Museum of Art)



the muslin moth

POETRY
erica gillingham

(Diaphora mendica,
female)

The white moth emerged
in the soft light of the morning,
almost camouflaged against
the pearly bathroom wall.

Full of sleep and wonder, startled
by its fresh presence, I nodded in
acknowledgment, a kinship with its
perching.

Next morning, three red drops:
a vertical line, like dried blood.
Unaware of life cycles, I worried
about potential causes of illness

while my love began to panic;
her fear of moths, forgotten.
Quickly, then, I balanced on a corner
of the bathtub with my tools—
a pint glass and a postcard—
to save them both.

(image credit: British Library digitised image from page 78 of "Songs for Little People [With illustrations by H. Stratton.])

NON FICTION
melissa chambers

object lessons

In 1964 Joan Didion left New York City. She recorded the event much later in *Goodbye to All That*, the modern gospel on leaving New York, and also on leaving.

It is easy to see the beginnings of things, she writes, and harder to see the ends.

Exactly 50 years after Joan Didion left New York, so did I.

The summer beforehand, itchy, half in and half out, caught in the Didion-ian moment where *the heroine was no longer as optimistic as she once was*, I took a job with the client of a yoga teacher friend to work as her personal assistant in a penthouse in the West 50s.

I'd done a lot of this kind of work in the City. It was one of the few jobs that you could command $25 an hour for; the other one was catering. Interestingly this was seen as a controversial rate for babysitting though. Carrying a plate of expensive food would routinely earn you 7 dollars more than carrying someone's toddler.

Personal assistant work encompassed most things not involving food or toddlers. Filling out healthcare forms, searching by phone the country's Bed Bath and Beyonds (and beyond) for a matching sham cover for a newborn's crib, waiting to let the art handlers in, and on one occasion helping an Hawaiian ex-body builder sort through her competition outfits in her cat-filled brownstone in Cobble Hill.

You moved things, listened to stories, were offered coffee and, in some cases, takeout.

The first conversation I had with Anthea Baxter was across a square table in a sunlit breakfast room uptown. Inside, the apartments in that part of the city have the muffled sound signature of a cardboard box. They're near the park but nearer the Time Warner building in spirit. The bodegas are different up there; there are salad bars and sports bars. Inside, the air is manufactured. These homes are suspended in the secondary sound strata above the baseline of traffic. You get to them via cramped elevators or Gilliam-esque stairways traversed by delivery persons.

Anthea was white, in her 50s, large eyes, somewhat bulbous. She was heavy set, though with the air of having been voluptuous once, and with a crown of thin, short, red hair that seemed to have come to rest on her head rather than grown out of it. Over weak coffee she asked me if I knew who she was. I didn't. I opted to shake my head, but with a cultivated enthusiasm that I hoped would give me the look of an eager ingenue rather than an idiot in case she was in fact famous, and therefore safeguard my likability. In these jobs likability was secret magic. Early in my assistant career I shed the guilt of invoicing for time I fully acknowledge was spent snacking in someone's kitchen. Most things are billable in New York City, easy company among them.

I'm a famous feminist, she said, cutting to the chase and flapping both hands in front of her. *This apartment belongs to my ex-husband, he still lives here*. She paused and I wondered if this referenced her famous feminism, but she carried on: *technically we're still married; I'm on his health insurance, that's why. I have lupus so I need it*. She conveyed this information with the plainness that New Yorkers deploy on the topic of health insurance and marriage. *He has a nurse; I don't talk to him. He was an awful brute.*

We ate muffins (you were often given muffins) while she delivered a treatise on her ex-husband, detailing the cheating, brutalising newsman he'd once been. Her hatred was complete and entirely mundane. She also had a marvellous ability to talk about her ex-husband as if he was both dead and gone (and good riddance) and alive and breathing in the next room. As it turned out, all of these things were true. We left the breakfast room and I followed her through a kitchen where a Latina woman in a uniform was preparing something viscous and bland and through a door into a large sitting room.

The walls were covered with books. Sitting in a chair in the corner near a window was an inert man of roughly 70 years. I had mostly combed the room before I noticed him. He had the look of a car, a late model Buick, that had until lately been cruising at comfortable speed only to have swerved for no reason off the road and into a deserted landscape where it had come to a sudden, inexplicable stop, the only sound the click and fleck of retracting metal and, distantly, the wind tormenting something not quite torn from its moorings.

His hair had been seen to; he wore corduroy trousers. A woollen sweater over a collared shirt. His gaze turned on us as we entered but he observed us vacantly. Like a man watching pigeons.

Anthea ignored him and turned to the shelves. She started removing volumes and stacked them on the lacquered Chinese long table running the length of the sofa. *These can all go*, she said. I nodded and said hello to the man, he turned and faced the window. My gaze strayed past him to a nook in the bookshelf where two carved wooden foxes dressed as butlers stood on their hind legs, candle holders in their forepaws. On the

wall above them was a framed edition of 50 stamps bearing identical likenesses of Edward R. Murrow.

Later, Anthea showed me the rest of her apartment and indicated with impish cunning how the division had been made. The wall that ran on the South side of the kitchen had been put there to effect two separate apartments. On her side was the kitchen, the breakfast room, a terrace, her bedroom, bathroom and entrance hall. And on the other, the library, another bathroom, his room and another utility exit, a back door of sorts. The Latina woman was her housekeeper, and also his nurse.

My task over the next two weeks was to sort and throw away (donate, dispose of, register for auction) objects from the apartment, both sides. This was to coincide with the imminent occupancy one floor down, in a studio apartment used by Anthea as a writing space, of Jack, her agent, also former newsman, stage acting enthusiast and, for many years, her lover. Looking back, it stands to reason that throwing things away upstairs was to do with making room downstairs. Sometimes reason is a thing of retrospection though. Then, there seemed a rounder, redder, more expanding thing behind it. Like Alice blowing up in a room full of china, it felt urgent. As if certain things, if not conveyed safely out, would instead be pushed. Would jettison untethered through windows, harpooning pedestrians below.

So, that day, I began to carry things out of their lives, and continued for two weeks without stopping. Dispersing them by hand into the city below. Each morning I arrived to a list of things to be sorted and dispatched, and sometimes to boxes and piles prepared in my absence. On the piles rested brown cardboard gift labels with instructions from Anthea in scrawling cursive.

It would have been one thing if the belongings, objects, books I was dispatching were simply rubbish. Detritus, things outgrown, ill-used, supplementary, worn or dropped in the bath. But in most cases they weren't; they were vivid and seemingly current articles of a life. In many cases they were beautiful. And as I worked, and the piles of things to be taken away grew, so did the dawning realisation that a great quantity of the things I was discarding, weren't hers.

The sorting took place south of the wall, a room Anthea treated like a frozen tundra, empty of life, but in which on most days her ex-husband still sat. Each day I would greet him and each day introduce myself. Sometimes he replied. Just as the piles of things would replenish overnight though, like fluid in the heart of a cactus flower, so a nothingness would restore inside the old man between these occasions, and I was reborn a pigeon each time.

The objects flowed without cease. A treasure box made of chestnut, Folio editions of Henry James, the end of a Wedgewood stationary set, plaintive empty sheets huddled with matching envelopes.

One morning I was sent with an original framed snapshot of Gertrude Stein to Swann's Auction House. There was handwriting on the back of it, her name and the date, but no trace of the photographer. *The value goes up with these sorts of things when we know who took it*, the registrar told me, *if this was taken by Alice Toklas for instance, then that would be one thing... But with this*, he said, turning it over in his hands, *that person has disappeared.* I left it with him and journeyed back uptown, traversing 5th Avenue like the River Styx.

At the end of another day, it was a handful of diamonds. Stones set into tarnished antique rings. *Old things*, Anthea told me over her shoulder, *take them down to 47th street. I don't care. See what they'll give you for them*. It isn't a thing one expects to learn, but from that day on, I knew myself to be the kind of person to whom someone would give a handful of diamonds, show them the door, and fully expect them to return with their value the next day. It was a compliment of sorts but an awkward task, and not because it meant being at large in Manhattan with a cat burglar's booty, but because I had elected that day to carry home an object I'd intercepted for myself on its journey to the underworld: a magnificent carved hippopotamus.

Made of solid walnut wood and roughly the size of a daschund, this object had stood on the periphery of my labour near the utility exit for days. Arriving one morning, I discovered Anthea had moved it to a table in her bedroom and was looking at it strangely. By this time I could intuit the tides governing the expulsion of objects from her life, but on this object she was eerily becalmed. We talked about its provenance, she wondered if it was worth anything. Uncharacteristically, this object confused her. She seemed unable to prescribe its exit from the apartment. So in the end, it was left up to me, and consequently was carried underarm that evening into the diamond district downtown.

New York's diamond district is between 5th and 6th Avenues along 47th street. Its exterior is a line of window displays. Beyond, through small doors, is an unimaginable glistening warren that sprawls a city block. Here, approximately 400 million dollars of precious stones are bought and sold every day. The merchants are mostly Orthodox Jews and Russians perched in dusty booths passed down through generations from as far back as the 1920s, when the stones trade moved north from the ports.

One after another, these men assessed my haul. First they eyed my diamonds, and then my hippo. The value of the diamonds differed wildly between dealers (flawed); their attitude to the hippo though was the same.

How much do you want for it.

One after the other, they all asked me this.

Back in the West 50s I continued my toil, on most days under the gaze of Anthea's ex-husband. *Good morning. My name is Melissa.*

Having moved on to clothing by this point, a cache of silk business ties struck me as particularly poignant. By this time it was plain that what I was packing and dispatching were pieces of his life. Pieces that he did not remember, and that did not remember him. Unlike Anthea, for whom every flung object was sent on its way with a triumphant anecdote, her ex-husband watched without tremor or purchase the departure of the things he had collected in his life and, with only passing curiosity, the woman in the corner who was taking them.

In Jainism, the ancient Indian religion, possessions are thought to insult the gods. Their most devout monks own no possessions, and also wear no clothes. I saw one once, in the street in New Delhi. Tall and completely naked, he was followed by a novice in a long white robe. He held a fan made of peacock feathers which he used to brush the street in front of him, wisping creatures from underfoot in order to harm no living thing. They call them the Digambara, these Jains, the 'sky clad.'

*

My relationship with Anthea ended unceremoniously. One morning there was simply nothing else to do and so I, like the countless objects flung from East 57th street, was dispensed into the city below.

From the following August onwards I started giving away my own things. For weeks there was a pile of objects on the hallway landing in my home in Brooklyn Heights. This time my own ferryman, I carried them in bags through Brooklyn to the Housing Works; friends looted the landing like a sunken galleon.

Joan is right - it's hard to see the end of things. In life, ends of some threads blend into the pattern, ungraspable. There is a last time when

you lift your child up, before they become too big. A last person did tell someone exactly what Stonehenge was for, but that person forgot, or died before they told someone else. The last Great Auk feasted on by sailors was, in and of itself, an unremarkable bird.

But things – objects – do end. And tangibly so. We fill them with our histories, then we lose them or give them away. In the letting go, memory is logged for a moment. It's possible to see the end of things if you look for it, you can see it in the things themselves.

I left New York City with barely more than I'd come with, hurtling sky clad through the airlock between two lives. Six months later some things caught up with me. In the possessions of a friend I had lived with, whose company had moved him from New York to London (and thus paid for his cargo) were a few heavy things of mine he generously shipped. Among them, two foxes dressed as butlers with candle holders in their forepaws, some stamps with identical likenesses of Edward R Murrow, and a carved wooden hippo the breadth of whose histories I will never fully know, and who today as I work at my desk in the corner, still stands quietly near the window, like a parked wooden car. Watching.

---

note: all names in this story have been changed.

contributors

ESSAY I ***JAMES TYE***
is a British photographer specialising in travel and portraits. His work spans shooting travel stories and guidebooks around the world, to snapping colourful characters in his own East London neighbourhood. He has photographed Colombian wrestlers and Indian martial artists and was once deported from Cuba. He is never happier than when riding a rental scooter at dawn with a camera around his neck. Recent travel and street photography can be found on James's here: website | instagram

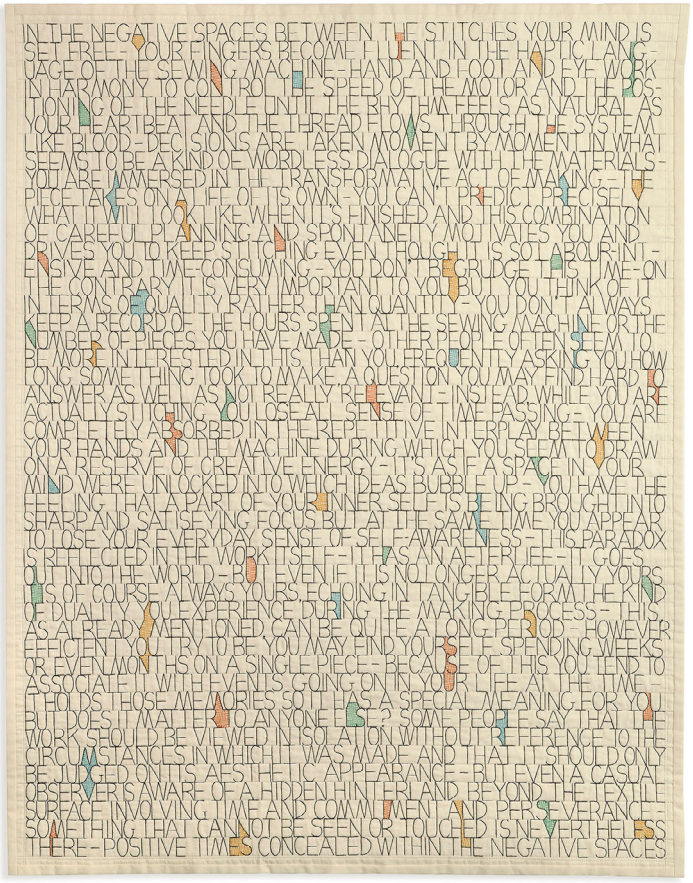
INTERVIEW I ***ERICA GILLINGHAM*** *[interviewer] grew up in Birmingham and now lives in London. Her poetry has been published in Oxford Poetry and The Poetry Review. She was longlisted for the 2015 Plough Poetry Prize and the 2020 National Poetry Competition. Her debut pamphlet I told you everything is forthcoming from Verve Poetry Press in September 2021.* website | instagram

MEMOIR I ***VERITY LAUGHTON*** *is an award-winning playwright and poet. Her more than 30 produced works have been seen in Australia, New Zealand, Korea, Japan, the UK and the USA. They include main-stage adult dramas, adaptations, plays for children and families, radio plays, a promenade community event, and a musical. Most recent productions are Long Tan (published by Currency Press), and The Red Cross Letters. She has just completed a PhD in political theatre at Flinders University and is a member of the 7-ON group of playwrights.* website

contributors

NON FICTION I ***MELISSA CHAMBERS***
is an Australian theatre artist who lives in South East London. She is co-founder of The Signal House and The Signal House Edition. She has created shows for companies in Melbourne, New York (where she lived from 2008–2014), and for The Signal House in London. She teaches theatre-making at conservatories around London, and her original work has toured to festivals in New York, Amsterdam, Norway and Australia. website

ARTIST I ***ADRIAN HOLMES*** *is a printmaker devoted to Japanese printmaking and Sosaku-hanga, He graduated from the University of Plymouth with a degree in Visual Arts. Adrian is based at Krowji studios in Cornwall and teaches Japanese woodblock printmaking at both St Ives School of Painting and the West Dean College of Arts.* website | instagram



COVER ART | ***SARA IMPEY*** *is our featured artist this month, and is also interviewed by our poetry editor Erica Gillingham. Sara is an Essex based textile artist specialising in machine-stitched lettering. With a background in quilt making, she uses the textile surface to comment on social and political issues, sometimes with a dash of humour.* website | instagram

(Image credits: artwork photographed by Douglas Atfield)

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