

# UNRAVEL

Patsy Hely, Senior Lecturer, Honours Convenor, Australian National University School of Art

*Someone sits pulling at a thread on a jumper, someone stares down a microscope at a speck on a slide, someone starts yelling on a bus; all are unravelling: their jumper, a scientific mystery, themselves.*



Some words, some dates too, leap off the page and have a particular power to affect. Not long ago I came across a beautiful porcelain plate, ringed in gold, with the place name 'Ypres' – nothing else – sitting solemnly over a small section of its rim. As a memorial to the suffering and waste of human life that took place around Ypres it is a modest, economical object, but still incredibly affecting; a dreadful history compressed into a small short word.

The date 9/11 now does something similar, setting loose from the page a whole troubling concert of action and reaction. It seems to bring with it the possibility that the normal progression of things – always a brighter future ahead – could be inverted. And the way the date is written, so natural looking now, might be a graphic signal of the turnabout. Possibly every generation sees its own times as fraught but in the post 9/11 world the certainties do look less sure, much has been thrown up for questioning. So much intellectual effort and energy has been put into making the modern world, so much sense has been made, yet relations between cultures remains on an autistic level, so senseless.

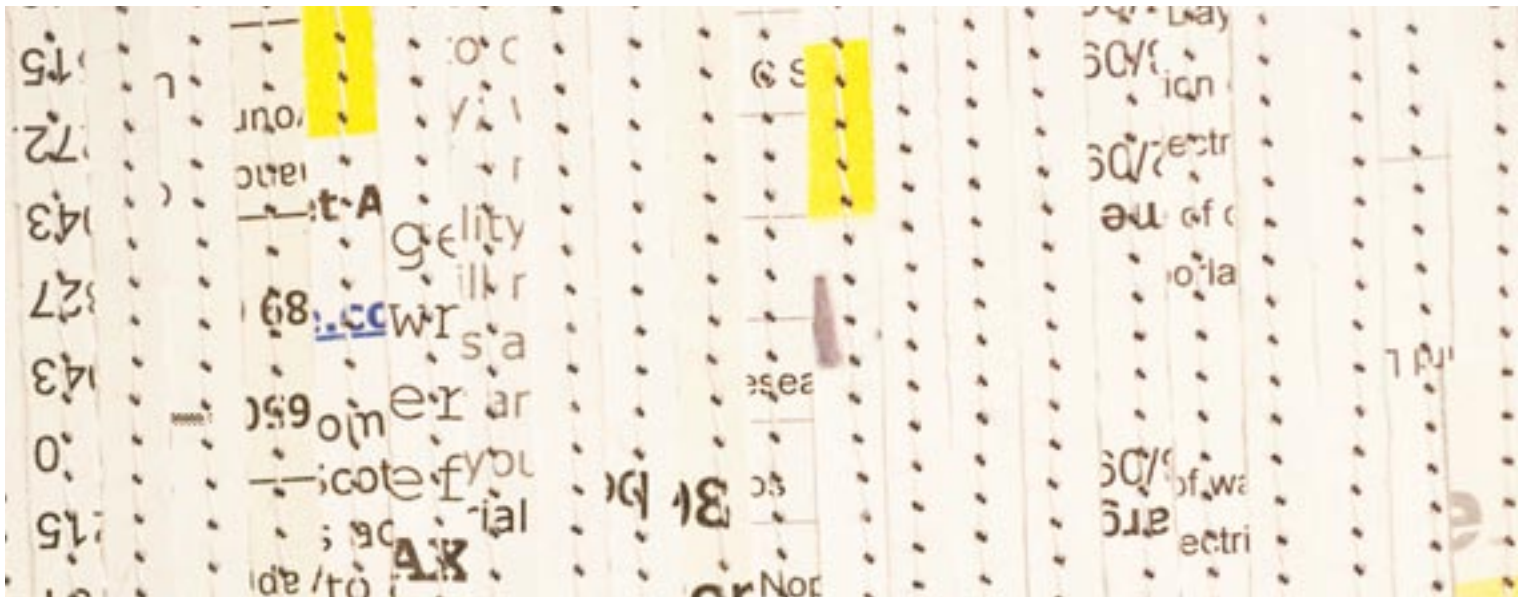
Ideas of inversion, and of sense being both made and/or unmade formed the premise for the annual Accredited Professional Members (APM's) exhibition. The APM program was developed by Craft ACT to further awareness of local contemporary craft artists and designers. Members apply for membership of the program and entry is via peer assessment. The aim of the program is to promote

professionalism, excellence and innovation in craft and design while recognising respected artists, designer/makers and younger professionals who demonstrate a high standard of artistic and technical skill.

Each year a curatorial premise is set and, as in past years, members have responded in a variety of ways. Some have identified ideas of unraveling in their usual production and here made this more explicit, some have used their regular materials and processes but responded in uncharacteristic ways, while others have used the exhibition to develop work totally outside their normal practice. The responses to the theme have been individual though some common themes are discernable, with an interest in investigating histories of place or family, and eco-political concerns perhaps the most apparent.

Ruth Hingston darns and embroiders an old worn jumper seeing it as metaphoric of 'darning and mending the land'. But the jumper is not remade in its original form – not returned to its natural state – a reminder perhaps that sitting lightly on the land in the first place might be the only answer to current ecological dilemmas.

Catherine Reid's wall form, an assemblage of lustrous ceramic cylinders illustrates what seems to be a very gentle deviation from a known state. The work, beautifully executed, suggests a gradual falling out of order through organic process; an inexorable project governed by time and material.



Linda Davy sees sleep as the time when our body makes sense of the world. Her large gentle sleeping figure made from sections of pre-loved jumpers sorts the day and refashions it, much as Davy herself has done with her materials.

Morgan James, over a casual coffee during the curatorial process, spoke of shredding documents—a very Canberra conversation. Over the pre-exhibition period the work underwent major changes but the shredding remained in the final iteration. With a nod to Rosalie Gascoigne's road sign works, but safely sewn down and behind glass, the careful placement and skilled stitching of the paper ribbons – once Commonwealth Bank statements - is at odds with the now-misaligned text: haphazard, random, code-like.

A friend gave Nancy Tingey two balls of hand spun hemp string and she made a knotted net. She bought another ball, made another net but it unravelled so she made it anew. The action of handspinning, the spin and zing, seems present still and in each work both order and disorder are discernable.

Bev Hogg, a committed environmental art-activist, diverges from her recent concentration on the porous border at the heart of the Mt Majura/urban Hackett ecosystem. Here, where the animals seek the sustenance of the suburb's lawns and the residents: the sustenance

of the mountain's bushland, cohabitation naturally is up for question. For the work in *Unravel*, Hogg turns instead to inland river systems and to problems associated with the cyclic and selective release of water into those systems in relation to the breeding cycles of resident fish, questioning again, 'how do we cohabit with another species?'

The Middle-East is everywhere in Sarit Cohen's pieces – central painted images on two wall-mounted white (sun bleached) porcelain sheet/tablets, similar in size and shape – but - not quite the same. Her artist's statement is in the form of a recipe and to blend its ingredients, honey, cardamom, cinnamon, olive oil, it instructs: 'Poaching - not allowed. . . , Straining - will be necessary, Mix – carefully'. Her aim here is not to unravel but to ravel, to make sense.

Dianne Firth's work, a small quilted textile suggests a similar energy and a material not easily restrained. Captivated by the spring of her daughter's hair she sought to draw/quilt its characteristic qualities in thread using a strongly banded edge to tightly control the work, a reminder of the strictures and annoyances hair is often accompanied by.

A trip back to her Dutch homeland and a search of her Mother's attic was the catalyst for Lucie Verhelst's work. On a mat-like construction of postcards sits a vase of tulips, their petals embroidered with text.



Avi Amesbury has exhibited a group of small bowls accompanied by a set of wall tiles showing imagery from Cockatoo Island in Sydney Harbour. This place – a focal point of last year's Sydney Biennale - has a long history of institutional and industrial presence. Amesbury's work suggests a more personal perspective though and conjures up those whose lives were intertwined with the place. This includes her own; the purchase of tools once used for tinsmithing there link her to the island as well.

Kaye Pemberton has also been sorting through her past and thinking about belongings. Why do we keep certain things? How do you throw out a plate, cup, vase associated with a loved one yet never used and so no longer useful? A forebear's blacksmithing tools are less problematic because they indicate the making of things has a family lineage. Kaye's autobiographical work - an old wooden cabinet in and around which sit tools, a selection of her own ceramic work and other collected objects, tins used by a china painting relative to store ceramic pigment - lays out her own artistic provenance.

The use of naturally derived dyes, 'eucalyptus, dirt, rust and mould' has been a part of Belinda Jessup's working process for some time. Here she dyes a long thin roll of silk arranged partly unravelled puckered and folded. Paull McKee unpicks old money bags and with other recycled materials forms them into a wagga, cheekily connecting the role of banks with the great depression and now the current global financial crisis. The make-do ethos his work derives from is the flipside of the excesses suggested in the current monetary calamity, but his quilt is elegant, ingenious, useful still.

Monique van Nieuwland's work draws on that traditional symbol of stability, the anchor. Handwoven from monofilament nylon, rust-tinted and with threads coming apart the work is barely there, a diaphanous length of cloth suspended in the air. More solid at certain angles, the work might be a metaphor for the feelings of insecurity that are coming to be associated with the current times. Deborah Boyd Goggin's ceramic bowl sits placidly on its plinth. Thickly handbuilt, the organic bowl section is contrasted with the rim, a sharply defined concertina, sitting frill-like around the top with the edge having an almost mechanical look.

And, finally, Joy McDonald's work looks not to have a care in the world though in fact it is a carefully considered narrative about her community. Her work plays with the word unravel and, in a fashion much like an old school game or a newspaper problem, she makes from it as many words as she can. In these she sees the characters of her friends and so each word becomes a person with their own biography. The names, fashioned in mixed media, scrawl across the wall – 'work me out', they ask, who am I? A mystery, it seems, to be unravelled.

Images: **Kaye Pemberton**, *Provenance (detail)*, 2009, found objects and porcelain pieces; **Morgan James**, *Shreds (detail)*, 2009, shredded paper and thread; **Lucie Verhelst**, *Goodbye (detail)*, 2009, plastic tulips, postcards, stamps, thread, paper, glue, glass; **Avi Amesbury**, *Unravel – a history, Cockatoo Island series (detail)*, 2009, porcelain, decal. All Photos: Creative Image Photography.



## UNRAVEL

11 September - 17 October 2009

Level 1 North Building, 180 London Circuit, Canberra ACT, PO Box 992, Civic Square, ACT, 2608, Tel (02) 6262 9333 [www.craftact.org.au](http://www.craftact.org.au) GALLERY HOURS Tues - Fri 10am - 4pm and Sat 12noon - 4pm



Supported by the ACT Government