Index

Contemporary Culture
Fashion Art Life Design

Issue N°04
SELF-CARE
NZ$15/AU$20/£14

- Inside the minds of ANTWAUN SARGENT and EMILY BODE, photographed by SHANIQWA JARVIS
- Self-care meets fashion at the salon with CLÉMENT PASCAL, JESSICA WILLIS and ALICIA SCIBERRAS

Alessandro Furchino Capria's step-by-step photographic guide to better living

Under the sun: a **Derek Henderson** fashion story

- In Conversation: Artist CASSI NAMODA and writer ZEBA BLAY on spiritualism, symbolism and social uprisings

The art of self-expression with **TUNG WALSH** and **FLORA HUDDART**

Craft prodigy **Shin Okuda** of **WAKA WAKA**

- OMA (OFFICE FOR METROPOLITAN ARCHITECTURE) and the power of connection through collaboration

THE THREADS THAT BIND US

WORDS CHLOE BORICH

In conversation with textile artists Celia Pym and Julia Gutman.

Thread is vital in acts of repair. Lithe yet mighty, its strength and subtlety is defined by whose hand wields the needle. We encounter it in all forms every day: on our skin and underfoot, bound within book spines and bus seats. Although when used in the context of art, when stitches become imbued with intention in folds of cloth, and edges are brought together to meet and meet again, it is also fundamentally emotional. Celia Pym and Julia Gutman are two artists who both illuminate the reparative potential of textiles and thread — which is used liberally in their respective practices. For Pym and Gutman, thread is the connection point between them and cloth, a means with which to mark holes and render figures, but also to navigate themes of memory, intimacy and grief. While their work is deeply personal, the clothing items that form the base of their works are often sourced from friends and members of their community; tethering them to more stories than solely their own. Through their sewing, mending and darning, they eschew self-care as an individualist notion. But perhaps more than anything, they show us how slow, tactile practices like these can invite in time and space when it's needed most.

The holes in our clothes are visible signs of life lived. Self-made voids that our knees, elbows and toes are prone to wearing through. Pym is somewhat a conservationist of these soft punctures. The London-based artist is dedicated to mending them especially in intimate garments like cardigans, sweaters and socks. Her brightly coloured darning often contrasts against the existing cloth; a celebration of worn experiences and small acts of repair. "I'm excited by the power of a needle," says Pym, "I like that these things are within my physical control, I construct and make them and stitch them and weave them with these fantastically portable tools. I do have a loom, but most of the time I'm

Above Celia Pym, *Hope's Sweater, 1951*, 2010. Photography by Michele Panzeri. Following spread Julia Gutman, *No One Told Me the Shadows Could Be So Bright*, 2020, installation view. Photography courtesy of Artspace.

working with small, close to the body, hand-based things." Coming from a family of artists and makers, Pym has long possessed an instinctive DIY attitude, although her discovery of textiles was one made largely on her own. First studying weaving at school when she was 16, trying on other people's cardigans left on the backs of chairs at the weaving studio prompted a realisation of the emotional qualities of clothing. "I remember thinking that I really liked sort of inhabiting someone else's skin. This idea that the cloth was the shape of them, it smelt like them… I think there's that emotional capacity that clothing has to feel like someone else, feel like the other person, or remind you of the other person," explains Pym, "I think that the quality of cloth is that it's your whole body, sometimes". Going on to study a BA in sculpture at Harvard, she began to knit as a warm-up activity in her studio before commencing work, which then led to a project to measure out a journey around Japan for nine months in a piece of knitting during 2001. Ultimately, this new affinity with wool led her to an MA in textiles at The Royal College of Art back in London by 2006.

Although the catalyst for her interest in mending came in 2007 after the passing of her great-uncle Roly, when she inherited his worn-out sweater. Damaged at the forearms where he would lean forward in his armchair to draw, it was heavy with both evidence of his life and patches of mending made previously by her aunt, who had passed away before him. Pym noticed the holes that had appeared since that had yet to be tended to and so set about repairing them. Where signs of damage had occurred, she let her needle roam wildly. But this was not about erasure, rather, it was a way of remembering. This process sparked a curiosity about the patterning of damage and has seen Pym go on to repair countless garments, which are too often tied to stories of loss. "There's the practicalities of grief, there's cleaning out houses and stuff and people's lives. And then there's thinking about them in moments you're not expecting, coming to terms with the feeling of their missing body, or just missing them. And clothes can be this very powerful reminder of them, of a person that you've loved, because they're so evocative," explains Pym. From opening the doors to her personal studio to holding a live exhibit at the Victoria & Albert Museum, Pym has encouraged the public to bring her things to be mended on a number of occasions. "I'm very nosy, I'm always delighted if someone will talk to me and tell me about themselves," she smiles, "...with other people's objects, a lot of the time it can be easier to talk about a particular problem or a particular object, than to talk specifically about loss. If I ask someone if they have a hole in their garment and they show me a sweater that belonged to someone they cared about — even though that wasn't the invitation, the invitation was to show me something with a hole in — we can talk about the nuts and bolts of what the sweater's made of, how we might do the mend... The mending is just this practical act, and that's quite significant. Because I think it is more straightforward sometimes to talk about practicalities, and that there is a kind of care in the practical and the purposeful."

For Gutman, the notion that clothing and memory are intrinsically linked is ever-present. While this isn't a new idea, the way the Sydney-based artist draws attention to garments as tactile repositories of our lived experiences once we are gone is profound in its sensitivity. "…you can analyse a pair of old jeans like an archeologist, looking for lines of how someone walked, sat, spilled; where they went, what they kept in their pockets," echoes Gutman. Her recent body of large-scale textile works *No One Told Me the Shadows Could Be So Bright*, 2020 incorporates such garments in textile collages, rigorously machine sewn and hand-stitched together to form elaborately embroidered tapestries. Compositions are planned out on calico where faces and limbs emerge in light and shadow, loose threads fray, edges grow rough, lines are sewn and then again. Their quality of depth and meticulous detail is owed to her formal training as a painter at UNSW Art & Design and an MA in sculpture at Rhode Island School of Design, experiences that eventually led to pursuing her intuitive, labour-intensive textile practice. "Sewing, at least the way that I do it, is at once incredibly tender and inarguably aggressive," describes Gutman. "I am bringing together disparate things, mending, but violently puncturing the disparate parts in order to do so. Louise Bourgeois said that 'the beauty of sewing is precisely in the fact that things can be done and undone without damaging the fabric … it is a prevention against things being separated'… At a certain point the image is so thick it breaks my needle, which is sometimes the only indicator that it's done. I think that there is something kind of beautiful about that finality."

While dense layers render the tapestries virtually indestructible, they simultaneously possess an openness and softness; a poignant vulnerability. While Gutman was creating them she was grieving the tragic and unexpected loss of a close friend, "I had a few pieces of clothing from her that felt really charged. The moment I decided to incorporate them, the images took on a new lifeforce." From that point on collecting garments from friends and the conversations around those interactions became integral, enabling the works to tell a multitude of stories at once, signalling both a personal and collective restoration underway. "My process offers a really simple gesture to the people in my life: give me your old crap, take some time to remember

who you were when you wore it, let me hold some space for that memory in the studio and to reflect on our relationship more broadly. I don't repair the clothes to suit their original function — the moment they are in the studio they cease to be clothing and become material, both literally and conceptually," explains Gutman. The scenes she depicts elicit a gentle kindness, a connectedness that speaks to art's historical references, everyday moments and the power of coming together. Stitched and sewn during a period of isolation, they evoke a longing and appreciation for connection and community, further secured by the chains that bind and suspend them when installed. "The biggest irony of my work is how solitary the process of making it is when the content is so focused on intimacy and relationships," recognises Gutman. "This body of work definitely mirrors the reality of my past year, particularly as a means to process grief. Having this slow, meditative, solitary practice has been such a privilege: I have had time and space to reflect and process — it's therapy. It's helped me to show up for the people in my life the rest of the time. Art-making, for me, is not really about the production of objects, but a more holistic approach to life: it's about how the thinking and reading and labour involved in producing those objects helps me become a more present, connected and open person. Compassion is the core value I'm trying to cultivate."

Harnessing the reparative qualities of thread and cloth, Pym and Gutman show how burdens of loss may be eased by approaching memory as a tool to reconnect to self and to connect with others. Their thoughtful stitching represents the joy found in acts of care; a poetic reimagining of the outside edges and innards of grief. As Pym mends, she invites strangers to engage in pragmatic conversations. Damage is recorded and the reality of someone's absence is suddenly less ambiguous. "It's not that mending is this incredible work to move forward or something," deduces Pym, "but the way I think about mending is that it sort of creates a space where you pay attention to the thing. It's like a focus, you have a job to do on the piece of work... you're working with your hands, you're touching this thing, looking at this thing and it just makes space and time for you with this object. In a way that's helpful." This call for time and space is also motioned in by Gutman, who believes the strength of her tapestries lie in encouraging others to reflect on their own emotional landscapes and relationships; slowly and mindfully. "I think the work is very joyful, and I hope that the delight I take in the process translates to a delight of experience for the viewer. I was reading the book of delights by Ross Gay when I was producing this series. It's such a wonderful book. There is a lot of reflection on the nature of delight, and in particular, the relationship between joy and grief. He writes 'what if we joined our sorrows? What if that is joy?'" ●