

I SEND MIXED MESSAGES

MICHELLE HAMER



Counihan Gallery
Sydney Road, Brunswick

12 April – 5 May 2013



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All works are hand-stitched tapestry on perforated plastic

COVER

Know your enemy
53x81cm (LOS ANGELES)

RIGHT PANEL TOP

My hurt hurts (front)
51x68cm (LOS ANGELES)

CENTRE PANEL LEFT

I send mixed messages (front)
100x65cm (LOS ANGELES)

RIGHT PANEL MIDDLE

Exit Only (front)
48x67cm (LOS ANGELES)

CENTRE PANEL RIGHT

I send mixed messages (back)
100x65cm (LOS ANGELES)

RIGHT PANEL BOTTOM

Work what you got (front)
51x68cm (LOS ANGELES)

CENTRE PANEL BOTTOM

We're all gonna die (front)
51x68cm (LOS ANGELES)

ABOVE

Triumph (front)
68x52cm (NEW YORK)

Michelle Hamer's latest series of tapestries reflect on the social geography of America and, more particularly, on what signage and graffiti reveals about the national psyche. Hamer's finely observed fragments form a narrative of sorts – a cacophony of messages that reflect the mood of the times. Viewing her work brought to mind one of my favourite films, *The Truman Show* (1998), in which the lead character discovers his utopian world, is, in fact, a reality show constructed as a platform for advertising. As the perfect American Dream that Truman inhabits starts to unravel the fictions spun by advertising are revealed as illusions.

Whereas *The Truman Show* began in an idealised world, in Hamer's tapestries the fracture lines are already clearly manifest. Hamer's travels in America took place as the GFC took hold and reflect the economic and social anxieties of the times. Her choice of signs suggests a national crisis of confidence as many people's conviction in the power of capitalism to create a better world faltered. Hamer often shows the dominant dialogue of advertising and social signage being undermined by subversive voices which alter the original messages or add their own commentary. One tapestry, for instance, shows a stop sign that now reads, 'STOP the Madness'; another features a billboard which bleakly declares 'We're all gonna die, girls'.

Hamer's eye has been particularly drawn to portents of doom that appear on the pavements or walls of cities. *Death is free* and *The End* signal an urban angst to all who pass by and reflect the depressing outlook that many experienced as America's place in the global economy wavered and people lost their jobs and homes.

Hamer's use of photography as her source material reflects her complex engagement with time. She is concerned with the specific and the momentary – her tapestries are based on photographs that capture the bustle and visual confusion of the streets – but, through the process of stitching, she extends our engagement with what is shown. A clear relationship to photography remains, however, as Hamer's stitches approximate the appearance of the original pixelated digital images. In the process of creating her works, Hamer invests the trace of the original event with a painstakingly careful awareness, transforming fleetingly glimpsed messages into contemporary haikus.

One potent example is her tapestry of a billboard glimpsed across a street in Chicago. In between the everyday urban jumble of signage underneath a train line, the letters of a billboard are partially visible. 'Know your Enemy' the words declare: a sign of times that seems particularly apt in Hamer's astute and often darkly humorous images of contemporary life.

Isobel Crombie

Assistant Director, Curatorial and Collection Management
NATIONAL GALLERY OF VICTORIA



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TOP LEFT
Laser guided democracy
 26.5x34cm (NEW YORK)

TOP RIGHT
STOP the madness (front)
 26.5x34cm (LOS ANGELES)

MIDDLE LEFT
No Babies (front)
 26.5x34cm (NEW YORK)

MIDDLE RIGHT
Get her (front)
 26.5x34cm (NEW YORK)

BOTTOM LEFT
Buy Black Staff (front)
 26.5x34cm (LOS ANGELES)

BOTTOM RIGHT
The end (front)
 26.5x34cm (NEW YORK)

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