

THIS IS
WHAT
IT ISN'T
MEANT
TO BE.

MICHELLE HAMER

TALIA LINZ | ‘...the materiality of her chosen subject is as crucial to the work as its semiotic function. And it extends from one hole, to the next, and the next; a series of side-by-side apertures working together to let an image in.’

The association between hand stitching and the variable message signs found alongside roads and highways is not an obvious or immediate one, and yet it is a relationship that has preoccupied Michelle Hamer throughout her artistic practice.

Stemming from a curious obsession with the Transport Accident Commission’s signage on Melbourne’s Eastern Freeway, Hamer mines the readymade field of the urban environment for text to incorporate into her work. Appearing in a range of guises, from the ubiquitous form of the LED display to road signs and graffiti scrawls, the artist is somewhat of a contemporary flâneur with camera always at the ready.

From the photographic Hamer deploys a one-size perforated plastic sheet as a visual grid to mark up an image and stitch into. Her background as an architect has perhaps influenced this adoption of the grid as a central axis for creation. The grid has been employed by numerous and varied artists to map a two-dimensional surface in order that it may be infused with a third dimension. Considering the perspective system used by artists in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, in her iconic text on the subject Rosalind Krauss writes that ‘the perspective lattice is inscribed on the depicted world as the armature of its organization’.¹

In the early 20th century, however, Malevich and the Suprematists, and later, Mondrian and other members of De Stijl, explored the grid in and of itself, securing its position as a core Modernist structure adopted by the Minimalists, various Pop artists and others.

Today it is impossible to disassociate from the grid’s constant and implicit presence in our contemporary screen-infused lives. Whether LCD or CRT, each and every screen we come into contact with consists of rows and columns of individual dots of colour – pixels aligned on a grid.

Hamer’s work is cognisant of this subtle yet ever-present layer – indeed she describes her work as ‘hand-stitched pixilation’. As viewers we likely first encounter the text in her work and its associations, reflecting as it does the language that marks our environment, from the perfunctory vocabulary of municipalities to personal, poetic interventions on laneway walls and unassuming footpaths. But the materiality of her chosen subject is as crucial to the work as its semiotic function. And it extends from one hole, to the next, and the next; a series of side-by-side apertures working together to let an image in.

This new body of work expands to include pixelated mark-making with ink. Graduating the level of ink applied to each square, Hamer creates a sense of gradient across each piece, effected with a muted palette and focused hints of colour. Despite their lengthy process of construction, building on the sensibility of Hamer’s practice the works in *This is what it isn’t meant to be* give a sense of an impression, a moment of engagement with the world that seems to be fading even as we encounter it.

1. Rosalind Krauss, *Grids*, October, vol. 9, 1979, MIT Press, Cambridge, pp. 50-64

Talia Linz is a curator at Artspace, Sydney. The 2013–14 Nick Waterlow OAM Curatorial Fellow at the Biennale of Sydney, she is the former Executive Producer of Arts and Culture at FBi Radio 94.5FM and former Assistant Editor of the quarterly magazine *Art & Australia*.

ELINA SPILIA | DETOUR | *A man stands alone on an underground platform, waiting for a train. A wing mirror reflects a fragment of streetscape. A traffic sign informs us we are in a “controlled zone”. Footpath scrawl reveals that “As lovers we did not fail.”*

Hamer trained in architecture, and her work is attuned to the ways that the built environment frames and informs our socialisation. Our public spaces overtly position us through the directives in traffic signs, the spatial language of architecture, and the visual coding of advertising. In response, we write ourselves into these spaces. We read the world as we please and inscribe our own meaning: manipulating signification, writing on walls, marking our territory.

This new body of work emphasises the kinks and glitches in the apparatus of socialisation and the agency we assert within those gaps. Hamer’s works are replete with examples of malfunctions in language and interventions in text, of spaces rewritten and signs deliberately misread. They also speak to the public expression of our politics and personal lives, and to the performance of identity. Do we choose “our side / their side”? Are we “who we are when no one is looking” or “who we choose to be when everyone is looking”?

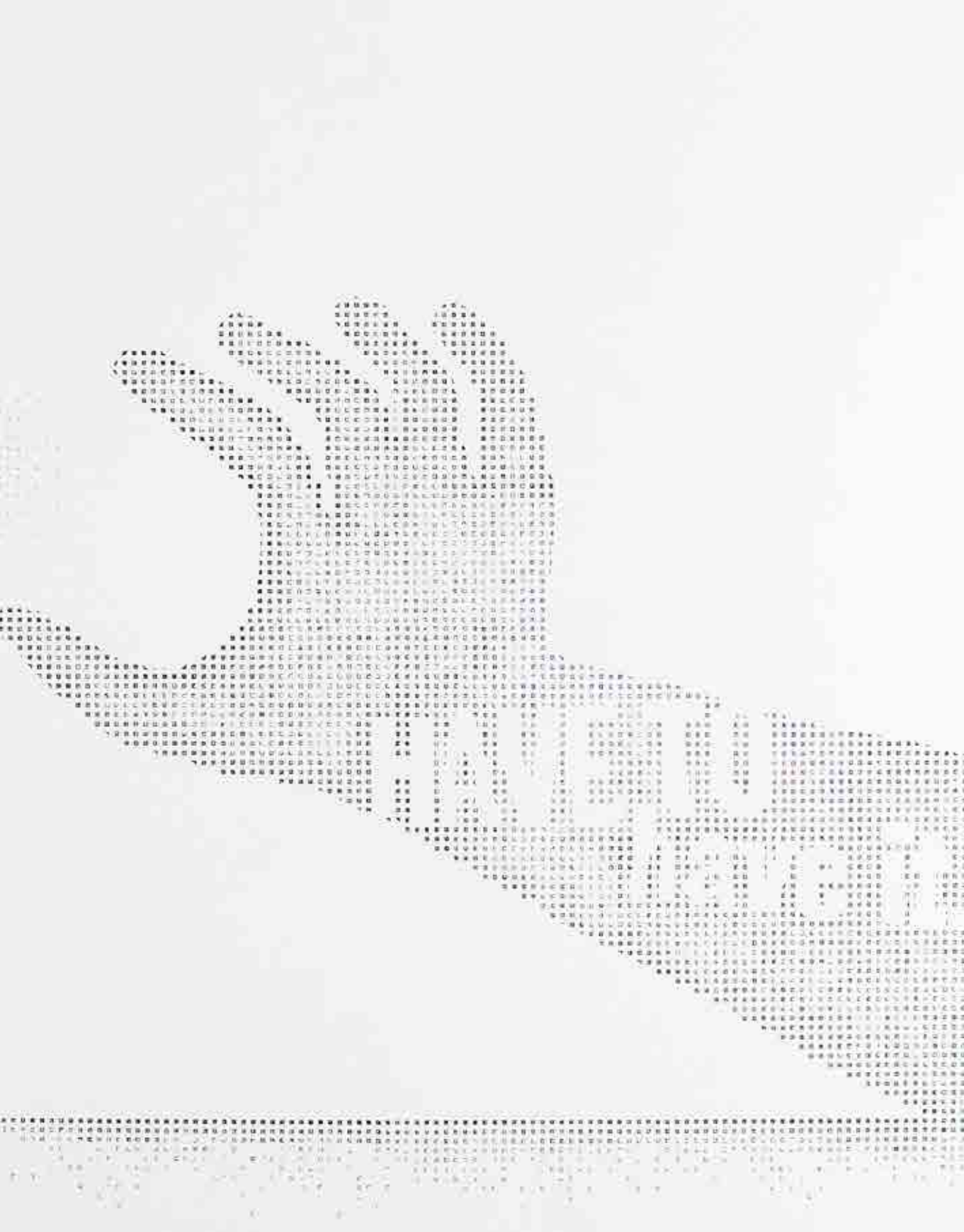
Hamer is interested in life at a granular level and depicts moments and places discarded by memory that make up most of our lives: taking a detour; waiting for a train; negotiating parking signs; sifting through the messages of advertising and graffiti. In one sense, Hamer’s practice is documentary – each work depicts a real space. But while her process begins with a digital photograph, photography alone is too instantaneous and transparent a medium for Hamer’s ends. She uses manual pixilation techniques (stitching and mark making) to loosen semiotic relationships and question how this shapes our social relations.

The ink pixilation in this exhibition is entirely new, created by a painstaking process of marking paper through the negative spaces of plastic grids (usually used for stitching). The resulting images appear to have been printed, and they mimic the effect of a dot matrix printer or an image degraded by repeated photocopying. The clarity and resolution of some of these works is reduced almost to the point of abstraction, leaving only the ghost of an image that points back to the fallibility of signification.

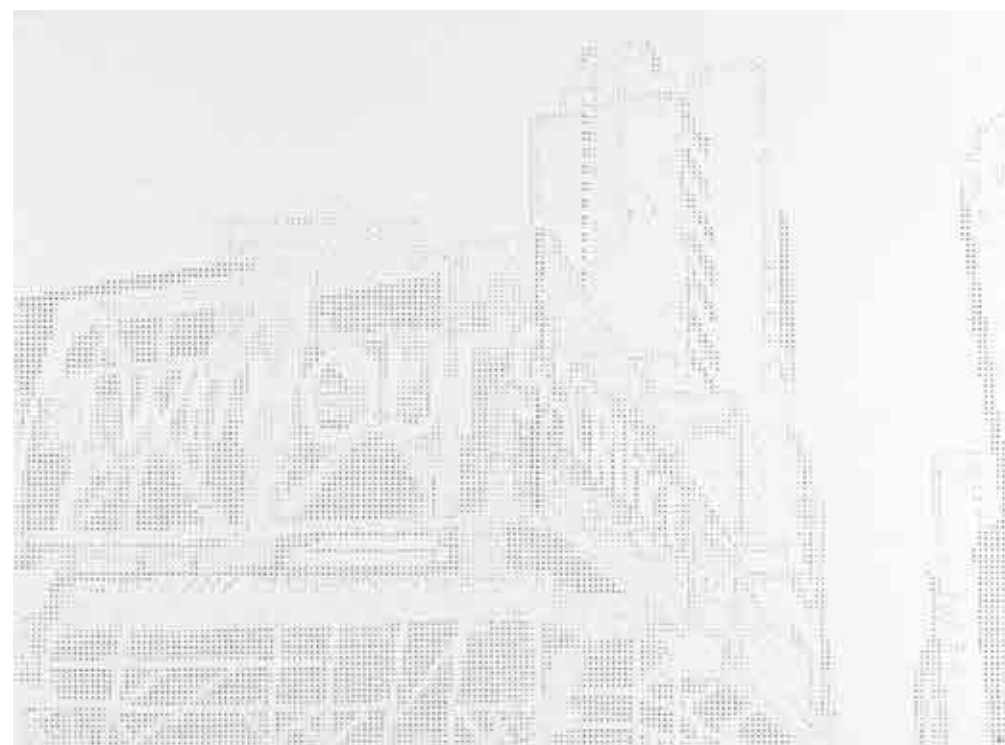
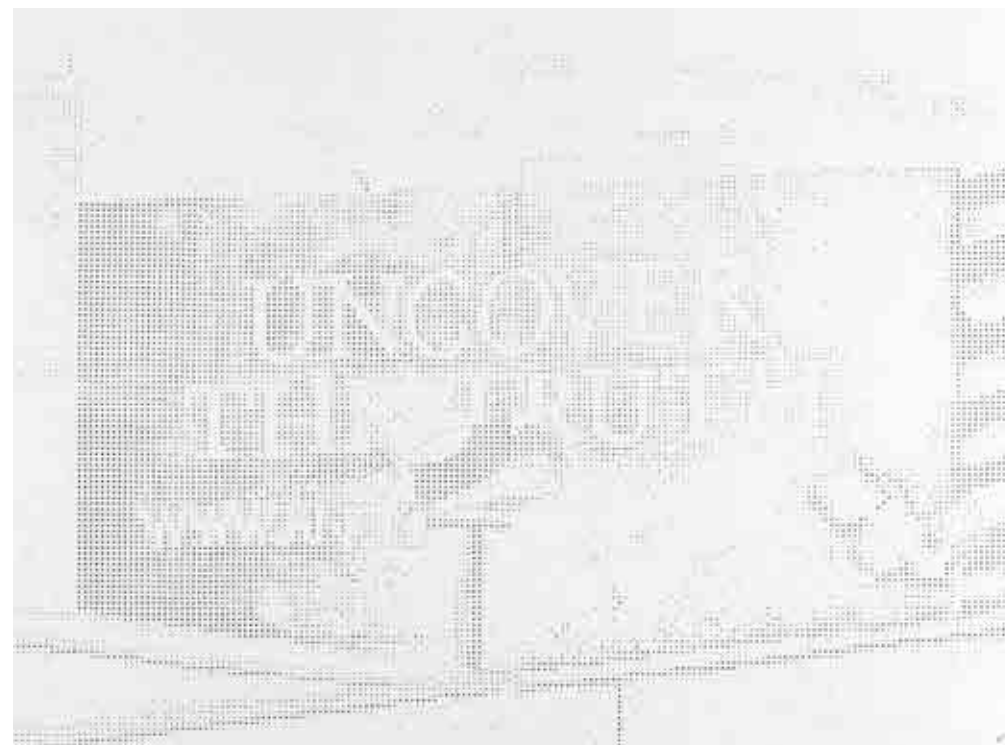
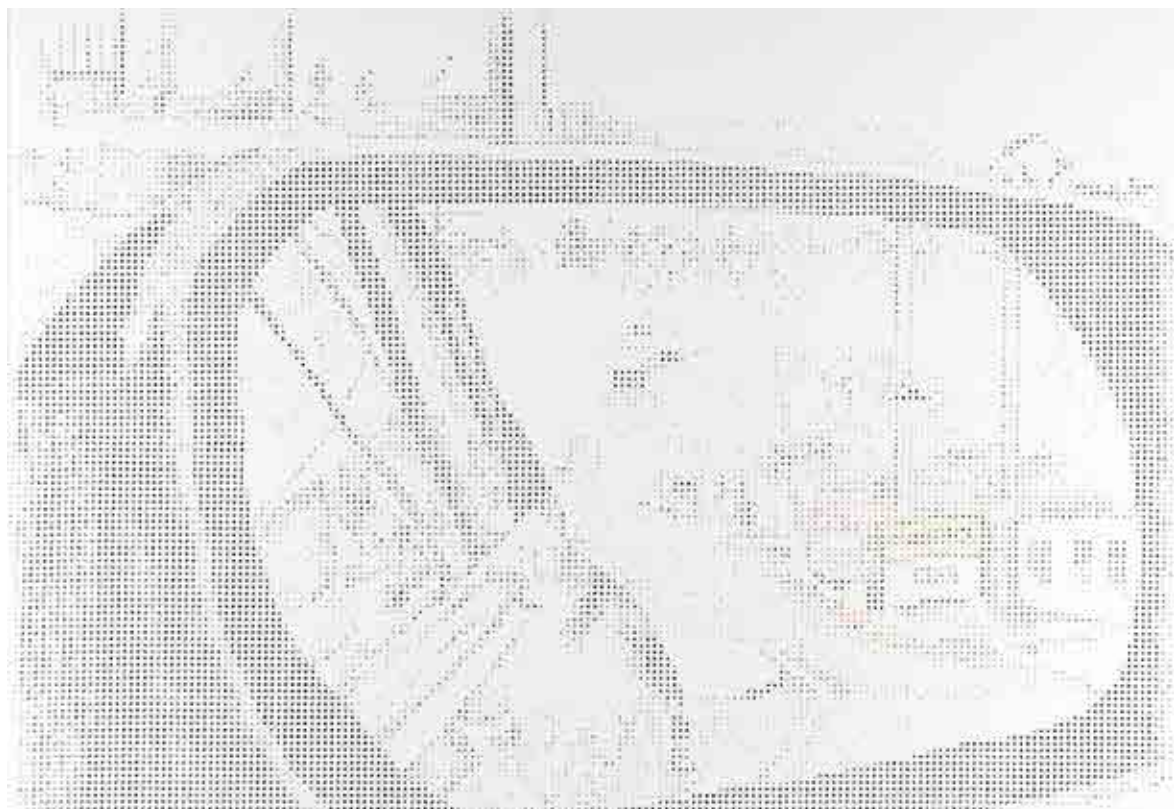
The spaces that Hamer depicts are shaped by warnings, instructions, promises and confessions that have lost their context. We can no longer locate their meaning, and the disassociation becomes unnerving. Although these messages are not sinister, they are never neutral. In the subway, someone has torn wet paint signs to read “Ain’t we in pain”. A Manhattan skyscraper bears the slogan “Knowledge to act”.

In Times Square, it is the cacophony of digital advertising that stitches together the built environment and we flock here to take part in it, hypnotised by the light. A digital advertisement cycles through the phrases “Without sacrifice” (“No paradise). Elsewhere, a billboard promises, “A change is coming”, but it is unclear whether we should feel apprehension or excitement. A sign urges us to “uncover the truth”. We no longer believe in truth. “Empathy closed”. “This is what it isn’t meant to be.”

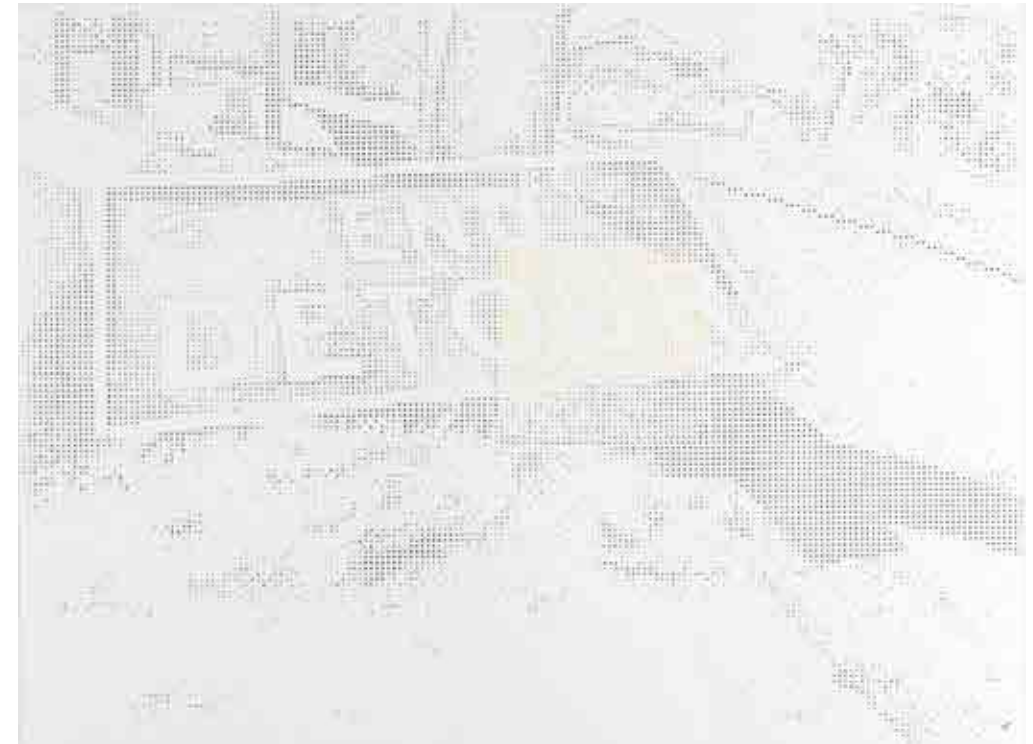
Elina Spilia is an independent arts writer, presenter, consultant and lawyer. Her writing is published in leading art journals and she has delivered lectures for both Australian and international art institutions and universities. Awarded the NGVs inaugural NAIDOC week lecture (2014), her research includes indigenous art and human rights.

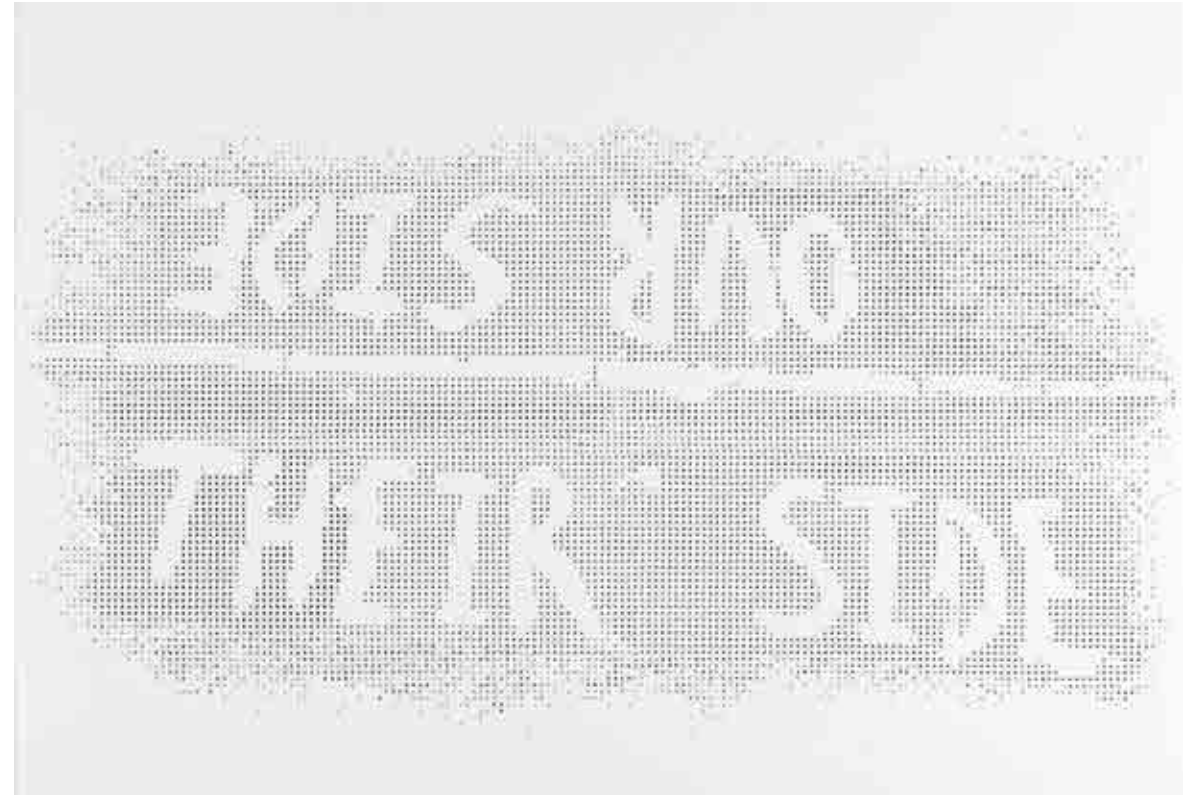


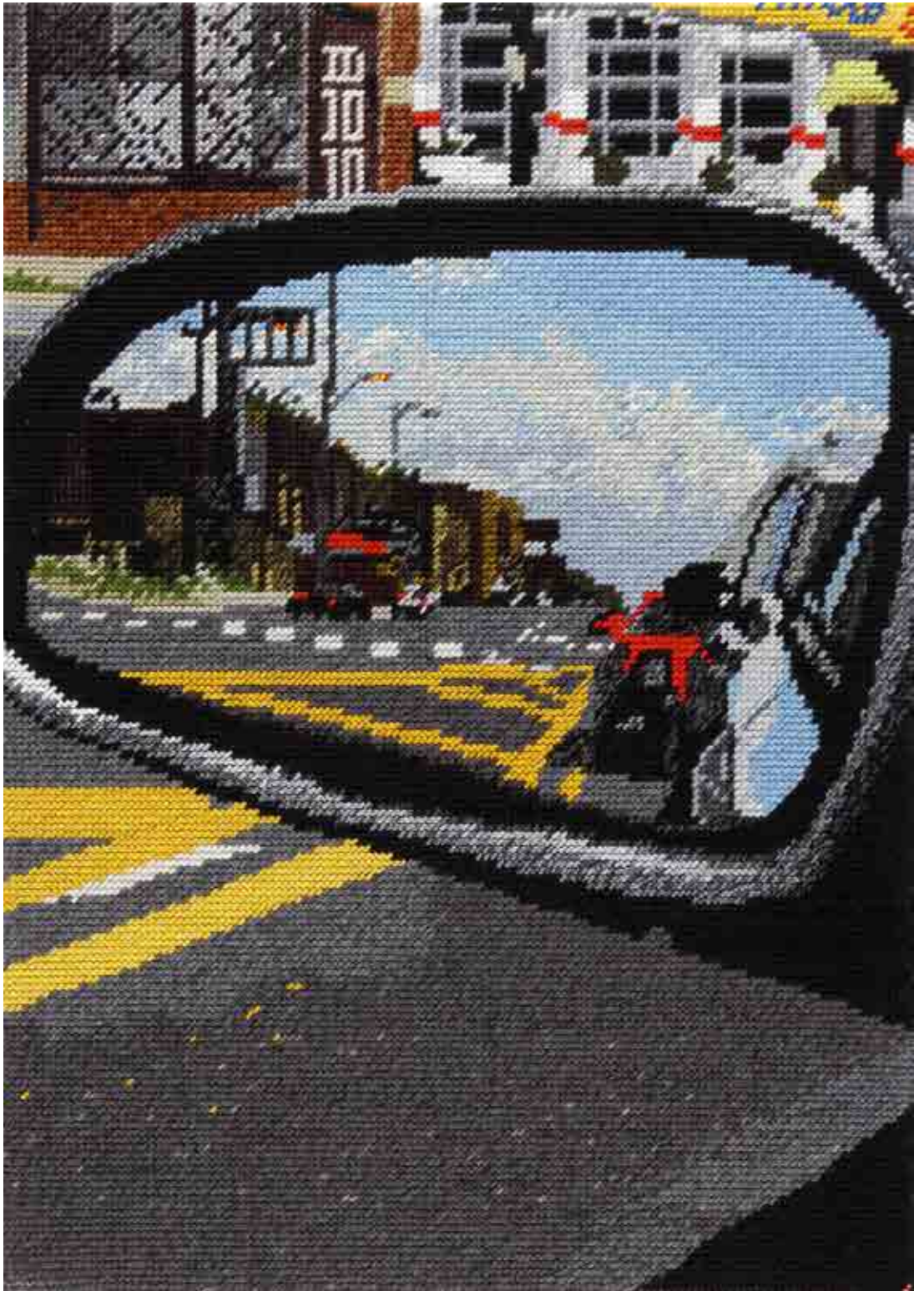












Michelle Hamer holds a Bachelor of Architecture with first class honours from RMIT University and has been an exhibiting artist since 2005.

Recent shows include *Melbourne Now* (National Gallery of Victoria, 2014), *I send mixed messages* (Counihan Gallery, 2013), *Boundary Line* (TarraWarra Museum of Art, 2011) and *Dangling Carrots* (Craft Victoria, 2011).

She has been awarded four grants from the Australia Council for the arts, one from Arts Victoria and two from the City of Melbourne. Placing as a finalist in numerous Australian and international awards, she won a 2008 Toyota Community Spirit Prize and has undertaken two residencies.

Hamer's work is included in permanent collections at the National Gallery of Victoria, City of Melbourne, Ararat Regional Gallery and Artbank, as well as in private collections across Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, New York, Chicago, Beijing, Los Angeles, London and Auckland .

Acknowledgements

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FEHILY CONTEMPORARY
Ph: +61 (0) 3 9017 0660
Mob: +61 (0) 413 877 401
3a Glasshouse Rd
Collingwood 3066 Australia

Open: 11.00am–5.30pm
Wednesday to Sunday or by appointment
ask@fehilycontemporary.com.au
www.fehilycontemporary.com.au

List of works

A change is coming
50x71cm, hand-stitching,
mixed yarn on perforated plastic, 2015

Changed Priorities Ahead
51x67cm, hand-stitching,
mixed yarn on perforated plastic, 2014

Connecting you now
50x71cm, hand-stitching,
mixed yarn on perforated plastic, 2015

Detour 1
50x71cm, hand-stitching,
mixed yarn on perforated plastic, 2015

Detour 2
50x71cm, hand-stitching,
mixed yarn on perforated plastic, 2015

Look both ways
50x68cm, hand-stitching,
mixed yarn on perforated plastic, 2015

Ain't we in pain
100x70cm, hand-marking, ink on paper, 2015

Control zone
100x70cm, hand-marking, ink on paper, 2015

Diverted
50x65cm, hand-marking, ink on paper, 2015

Fuck fate
50x65cm, hand-marking, ink on paper, 2015

Knowledge to Act
100x70cm, hand-marking, ink on paper, 2015

Losing empathy
70x100cm, hand-marking, ink on paper, 2015

Our Detour
50x65cm, hand-marking, ink on paper, 2015

Over the truth
50x65cm, hand-marking, ink on paper, 2015

Picking sides
50x65cm, hand-marking, ink on paper, 2015

Side detour
50x65cm, hand-marking, ink on paper, 2015

Stranded on the moon
50x65cm, hand-marking, ink on paper, 2015

Strike today
50x65cm, hand-marking, ink on paper, 2015

This is what it isn't meant to be
70x100cm, hand-marking, ink on paper, 2015

Veto
50x65cm, hand-marking, ink on paper, 2015

Wait until you are useful
50x65cm, hand-marking, ink on paper, 2015

We did not fail
70x100cm, hand-marking, ink on paper, 2015

Who I chose
70x100cm, hand-marking, ink on paper, 2015

Who you are
70x100cm, hand-marking, ink on paper, 2015

Without sacrifice
50x65cm, hand-marking, ink on paper, 2015

