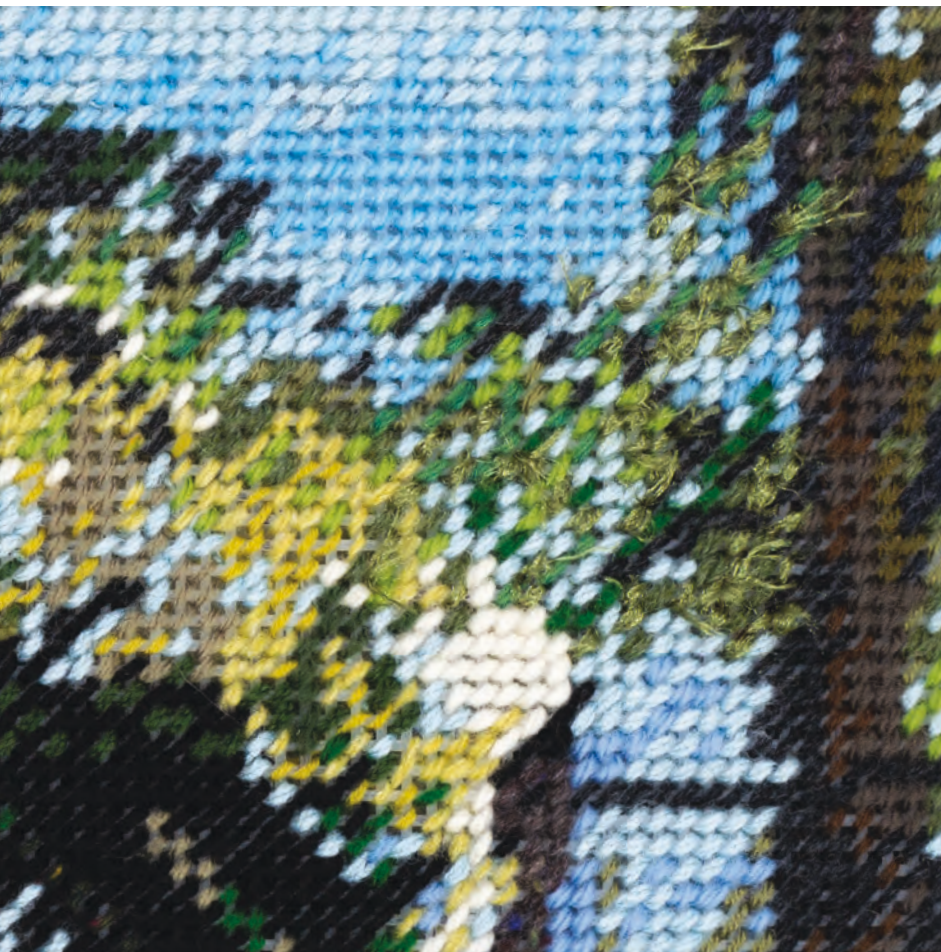

ARE YOU HAVING A GOOD NIGHT?

MICHELLE HAMER



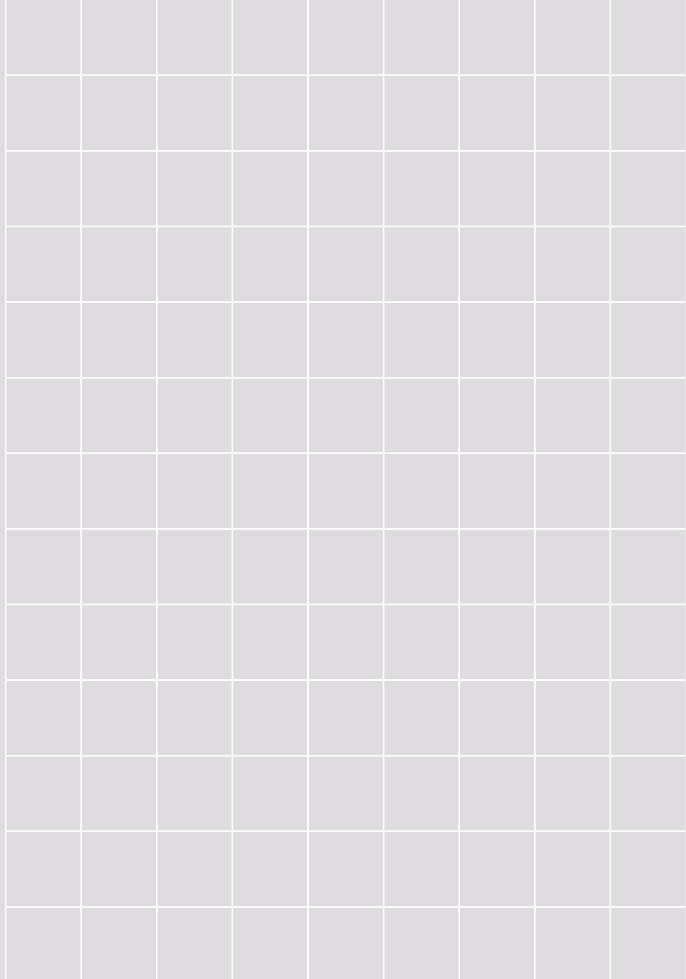
26 SEPTEMBER – 22 NOVEMBER 2020

FREMANTLE ARTS CENTRE

COVER IMAGE:

**ARE YOU HAVING A GOOD
NIGHT? (DETAIL), 2019**

HAND-STITCHING, MIXED YARN
ON PERFORATED PLASTIC
51 X 198CM



**FREMANTLE
ARTS CENTRE**



Department of
**Local Government, Sport
and Cultural Industries**



FAC would like to acknowledge it operates on the traditional lands of the Whadjuk people and that we respect their spiritual relationship with their country. We also acknowledge the Whadjuk people as the Traditional Owners of the greater Walyalup area and that their cultural and heritage beliefs are still important to the living Whadjuk people today. Fremantle Arts Centre is supported by the State Government through the Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries.

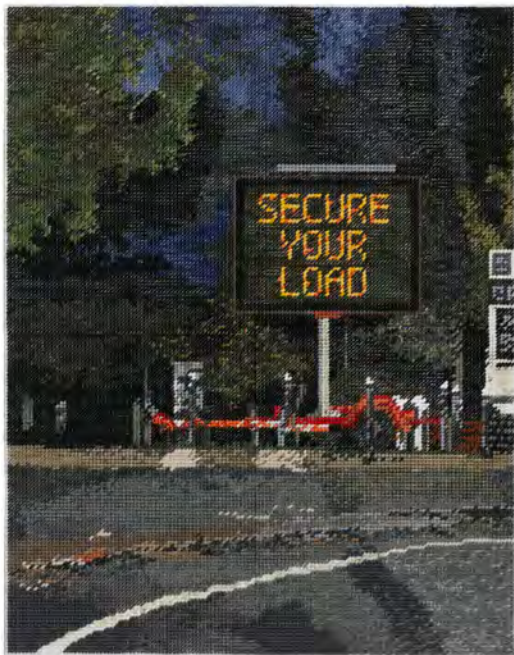
ARE
YOU
HAVING
A
GOOD
NIGHT?

26 SEPTEMBER – 22 NOVEMBER 2020

MICHELLE HAMER



FRIDAY NIGHT, 2020
HAND-STITCHING, MIXED YARN
ON PERFORATED PLASTIC
66 X 153CM



SPECIAL THANKS TO:

PAUL BECKER

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CLARENCE CITY COUNCIL

LOGAN ART GALLERY

MILLAY COLONY FOR THE ARTS

NOOSA REGIONAL GALLERY

EMMA BUSWELL

THESE MOMENTS OF ALARM AND CAUTION

An early episode of the cult television program *The X-Files*, titled *Blood*, narrates the tale of a people besieged by home office technology and domestic digital devices (an emerging reality at time of airing). After encountering a series of murders seemingly linked by the destruction of personal digital devices, intrepid duo Mulder and Scully conclude that several townsfolk had been driven to kill after being exposed to subliminal prompts in digital readouts.

Echoes of that fictional middle American town ring as I encounter the familiar environments of Michelle Hamer's works, and the similarly ominous warnings they contain.

The camera roll of my phone is filled with unfocused images of Variable Electronic Message Boards, like those usually reserved for encouraging safe usage of roads and imminent works ahead. This archive of pictures marks the time I've worked on *Are You Having A Good Night?* Rendered in the fuzzy darkness of

night-time amateur photography, flash-illuminated dust, drizzle and a granulated dancing static that fills the darkening gaps unseen by rudimentary phone photography, each image chronicles an increasingly anxious state of emergency: blinking messages, warnings, instructions.

I've never met Michelle. We've messaged, called and emailed. Yet, I feel as though I now know her. Whenever I see an LED street sign, she's with me.

The works in *Are You Having A Good Night?* map the built-up setting, forming an analog street-view, a physiographic topography of the language that can be found, interpreted and received in the inner city. Michelle is a flaneur, a keen observer of the nuances, junctures and border zones of everyday communication. Armed with a phone camera and a documentarian's zeal she captures examples of advertising text and the smattering of words splashed across road signs and traffic warnings in their native street landscape. Later, as these observations are filtered within

the confines of her home, pixels become stitches and stitches become the record of action, and the frame for a reinterpretation of that discovered language.

Michelle talks about presence, about people being present in a moment and in their surroundings. The process these works undergo begins with the instantaneity of a photograph and ends with laborious fabrication; from digital to analog. Each stitch renders a pixel onto a perforated plastic sheet, in a series of stepped lines and hatched forms. Working with uniform-sized sheets, a commercially available product used predominantly by DIY crafters, larger works are patched together from smaller pieces, quilting skyscrapers and dingy corners, gravel, billboards and street signs into a whole. To see these works is to know the labour they contain. The slowness of this image translation in turn asks us to slow down, to be present, to take in and question the scenes depicted, to give more consideration to what is being presented.

I'm reminded of first-person role-playing games when I see these works, perhaps by the pixelated nature of each scene. I'm conscious of the unseen body behind the lens; the person capturing these moments. Then, when the stitches contained in these works fill my own field of vision, I become that person, and those moments are experienced by me. The sensitivity of these renderings acts as a soft pulling into focus, a slow sharpening and a frame for highlighting language recorded and received.

Are You Having a Good Night? Borrows its primary image from global news articles about the 2018 Hawaiian false missile

threat: a traffic message board set against lush and tropical greenery. The work's message alternates (left to right); "There Is No Threat", "I'm Just Being Friendly", "You Chicks Are All the Same". This shift in language, from population-sized warning, to the personal, and back out to the 'specific general', deftly realigns and reaffirms the experiences of fear and apprehension many of us have felt when approached on the street by a stranger. I can think of a handful of near misses when, with bated breath, I've shrunk myself down into my smallest possible aspect and crept past men walking past me in the street.

The non-threat is pervasive. It perforates the fabric of life in ever-increasing ways. Weeks ago, carrying my coffee between café and workplace, two men, both older, genial looking, lunged out at me from the footpath as we crossed ways. "Oi luv, where's ours?!" A few years ago, I'd have thought nothing of this, noting it down as a harmless interaction, forgotten in the moment between one step and the next. Post-2016 and #metoo, I know better. Whether or not it was intended harmfully, this instance, like so many similar occurrences, acts as a subtle 'putting into place', a hierarchical reassertion of normative gender roles. This abrupt moment, revealed to me that the regular encounters these men have with young women are ones where those women are providing a service, and have to be nice whilst they do it. This is a simplistic fantasy portrait of what women are and can be, and fetishizes women's bodies as providers and carers to the exclusion of all other occupations. Moments like these are too many to count, reading like just another

dot in an endless ellipses of similarly infuriating experiences and interactions.

The instances of 'non-threat' archived in Michelle's works, and couched in the visual language of the street, connect a disparate host of similar moments. Each work is a data point, a case study writ large in glowing luminescent LED street signage. I think of a work documenting an advertisement for Indi garage band GIRLS: The sign reads "*We're all Gonna Die*" with "*GIRLS*" discreetly annotated below. Removed from the context of moving graphic and recast into the permanency of stitch, this language has darker implications, with broader, sinister appeal. These words are chameleon-like in their constantly-shifting relevance, adapting to the circumstances under which they are viewed.

"Sticks and stones can break my bones but words can never hurt me." it's a rhyme I was taught as a child, one intended as a defence against bullying. Out of the school yard and in the real world, words and language are weaponised, and do hold greater potential for harm. They have the power to instil fear, to change the way you move through the world. It is this potential that abounds in Michelle's works. Each example of language found on the street or reinterpreted back into the everyday vernacular is another instance where language has held power over the artist and the women who entrust her with their own experiences.

In 2020, the warning message isn't one of inter-continental ballistic missiles but rather of a subtler, unseen foe. Where usually these message boards demarcate space around roadworks, detours and

advertise flash sales outside big industrial furniture stores, they now read "Go Home", "Observe Social Distancing", "Community Safety Alert". Michelle told me that when the experience of the COVID19 pandemic first became global, she started to receive messages and submissions from artists, colleagues and friends from all over the world. They would send her hastily-captured images of signs as they drove past in their cars, or on public transport, or on their government-mandated one-hour exercise routes. She became a filter, transmuting data, cataloguing warning messages in a multitude of languages, broadcasting back into the world with a prolific fury the language of a crisis now so familiar to all of us.

Continuing in a long tradition of tactical craftivism, Michelle's works are a call to arms. In the Second World War, Belgian grandmothers, in league with the allied anti-German resistance, embedded covert messages with stenographic precision into the stitches of their knitting, tracking and reporting on the movements and logistics of their enemies. From coded lace and 'yarn-bombing' to the punk performance activism of Pussy Riot; stitch, embroidery, knitting and craft have been co-opted for political aims. Today, Hamer's works politicise through stitch and tapestry the language of encounter and the violence of the non-threat as it is experienced by herself and other women.

The language of non-threat is pervasive; online, physically, socially. When I see these words, I know the world that inspired them. I feel each warning like a punch. The ache that follows this instant and gut-wrenching recognition is of

memories from my own experiences. Michelle's work continues to resonate, to hold space for these moments of alarm and caution and to provide a space for reflective questioning. Stitch by stitch, Hamer is building a world and richly decorating it at each intersection of road, up high on billboards and on street signs, with an evolving record of the understated violence of language (and language of violence).

Emma Buswell is an artist, curator and arts writer based in Fremantle, Western Australia. She is interested in the relationships between economy, culture and place, with a particular view to examine kitsch and traditional craft knowledges as passed down through the maternal lines of her family. She is currently the Fremantle Arts Centre Print Award Coordinator.

WE'RE ALL GONNA DIE, 2013
HAND-STITCHING ON
PERFORATED PLASTIC
51 X 68CM







ARE YOU HAVING A GOOD NIGHT?, 2019
HAND-STITCHING, MIXED YARN
ON PERFORATED PLASTIC
51 X 198CM

SOPHIA CAI

READING BETWEEN THE LINES

I am no stranger to receiving messages coded in threatening language. Over time, I have learnt to take a deep breath before opening any unsolicited ‘message requests’ from strangers on Instagram. Most of the time it’s someone asking me a question about something I shared, or cooing over the latest pictures of my two dogs, but sometimes when I least expect it, when I have allowed myself to finally breathe out, I am reminded of what it feels like to exist as a visible women of colour on the Internet who has opinions.

“I hope you get Corona, bitch.”

“If you don’t like it here go back.”

“Do you eat dog?”

There was a time when I used to save these messages to my phone, as if their digital remnants made my experiences of racism and sexism more ‘real’. When I heard such remarks spoken in person (“Speak better English”, “ni hao” – always from men) there was no doubt of their underlying threat, but in the murky territory of online

interactions and through the medium of written words, I doubted myself. I asked myself if I was too sensitive, that I shouldn’t let it affect me, that I should just carry on. Ignore. Block. Repeat.

Does a woman ever feel safe walking home alone?

Does a woman of colour feel safe in a room of white faces?

Walking into Michelle Hamer’s studio in early 2020 (before COVID-19 prevented such interactions) and previewing the works she made

for this exhibition reminded me of these experiences. This body of work continues Hamer’s interest in the meaning of text found in urban spaces, but marks a new direction for the artist in her deliberation of subject matter. For *Are You Having a Good Night?* Hamer has collected the thinly veiled language of threats that women experience everyday; the words we hear, see, and read around us. There is something ominous and unsettling about

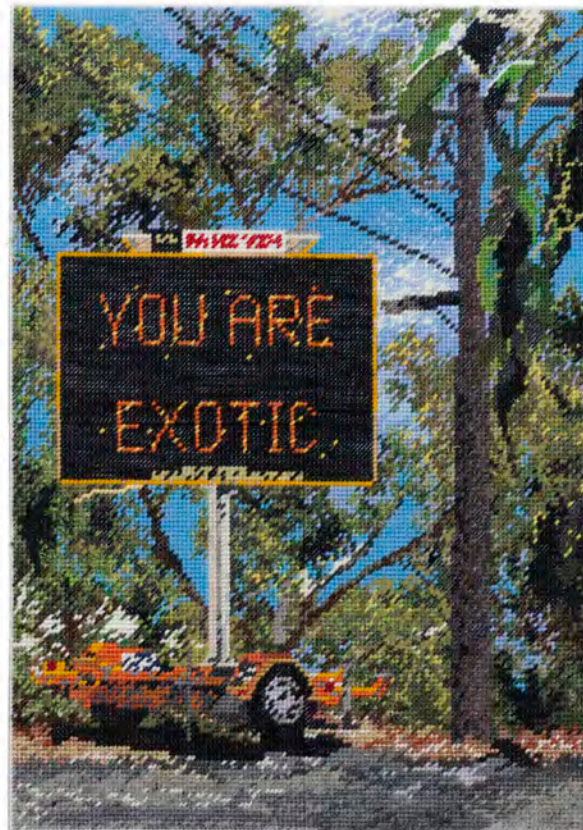
the casualness of these phrases – an eerie familiarity as we view these works with a sense of recognition.

“You are exotic.”

“Smile luv.”

“Yellow bitch road.”

This sense of familiarity is aided by Hamer’s choice of materiality. Working from a combination of found images and her own photographs of different places, Hamer translates the scenes into drawings and hand-stitched works. Both her wool embroideries and works on paper are guided by an overarching grid structure – one that invites audiences to view the scenes through a critical lens as constructions. The handcrafted aspect of Hamer’s textile works also challenges stereotypical reading along stereotypical gendered lines, which has typically regarded needlecraft as ‘women’s work’ connected to the domestic sphere. This reading of gendered labour adds an element of contestation within Hamer’s practice, particularly within the context of





this exhibition that is centrally about the experience of women in public spaces.

One should not mistake the material ‘softness’ of Hamer’s materials for compliance. Starting from the first work that Hamer completed for the show that reads “There Is No Threat” it is clear that the declaration of ‘safety’ only reinforces the precariousness of this position. This work is based on a photograph that Hamer found in an online newspaper taken by Jihune Liwanag in Hawaii following the false ballistic missile scare in 2018. The initial message, intended to calm and offer relief, instead reads as an unsettling

confirmation of fear. To say that there is no threat is to imply that there was or *will be* one. When considered alongside the two other scenes that make up the triptych (“I’m Just Being Friendly,” “You Chicks Are All the Same”), this becomes a message of intimidation rather than comfort.

For Hamer, this is an exhibition about microaggressions and gaslighting, about the accumulation of everyday interactions that over time populate and dictate a lived experience. It poses a question of what it means to exist in the world as someone who is ‘othered’, whose body and existence are a matter

CAUTION, 2020

HAND-STITCHING, MIXED YARN
ON PERFORATED PLASTIC
26 X 33.5CM

for uninvited solicitations, commentary, and violence, and how frequently these might occur. Hamer tells me that the original inspiration for this body of work was the immediate aftermath of the numerous public reports of women in Melbourne killed in public spaces, heading home from the pub, returning from work, otherwise just *existing*. It also follows the artist's reflection on the use of text in her own practice, and a realisation of how threatening language is at times so deeply embedded in our social fabric that we may not even fully see it for what it is.

Language is power, after all. There is what is said explicitly, then what is implied by reading between the lines. A man telling a woman to "smile more," a manager telling their employee they "should calm down," and a white person asking a person of colour "where are you really from?" are never statements without further implications. Rather, in all these instances there is an unequal power dynamic, and the use of language is a means of retaining power – a way of saying "this is how you should exist in my estimation of the world." These small acts of dehumanisation maintain hierarchies of power and we are gaslit into accepting less than we deserve, normalised to believe that a reaction is an overreaction, that we should not be so 'sensitive.'

Microaggressions are not called 'micro' because they are small, but because of how commonplace they are. When Chester M. Pierce first developed the

term microaggression to describe the everyday slights he witnessed against black people, he wrote about the "incessant and cumulative" effects of these behaviours on members of the black community. Writing more than 40 years after Pierce, Cathy Park Hong identified what she called "minor feelings" living as an Asian-American, "from the sediments of everyday racial experience and the irritant of having one's perception of reality constantly questioned or dismissed." I can't help but think about all the ways I've similarly experienced such 'minor' feelings in my years living in Australia as a migrant and a woman.

I no longer screen cap the unsolicited messages I receive. I no longer want to keep track of these words as 'evidence' to the harm that words can cause. Instead, like in Hamer's exhibition, I want to use words and language as my own power, to reclaim what has long been thrown against me. To stand in front of these signs and say "I am here and I see your words. And I resist."

Sophia Cai is a curator and arts writer based in Melbourne, Australia. She is particularly interested in Asian art history, the intersection between contemporary art and craft, as well as feminist methodologies and community-based practices.

NAT THOMAS

HAND STITCHED DISSENT AT 36 DOTS PER INCH

“Language is power, life and the instrument of culture, the instrument of domination and liberation.”

– Angela Carter

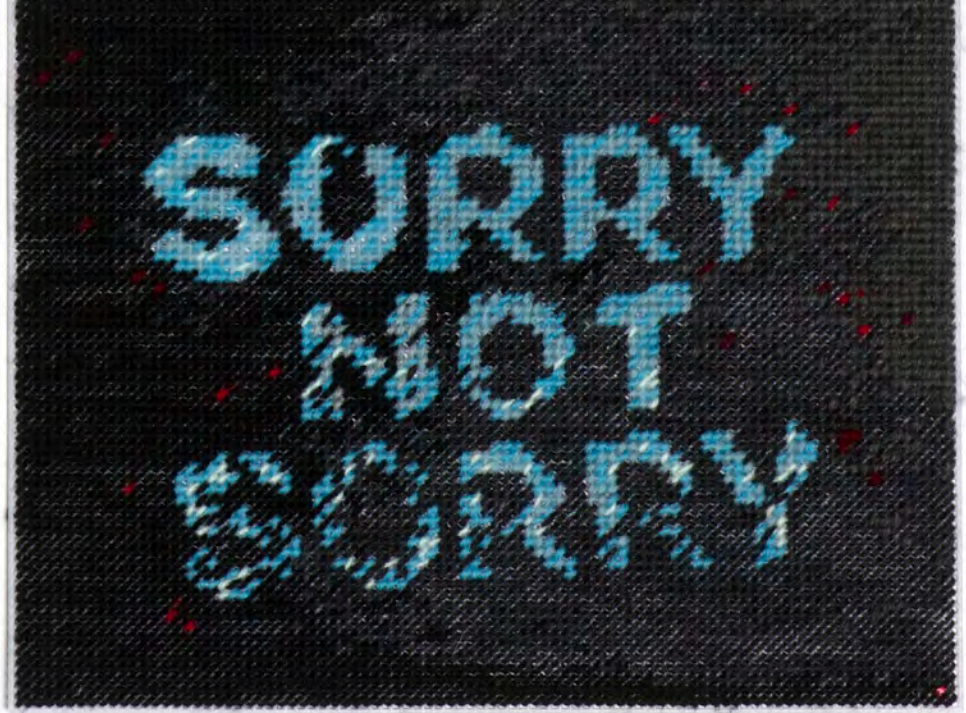
Not since the 1960s, have we witnessed a global uprising of people united in the fight for social justice and equity.

The battle lines span across environmental rights and the rights of people as determined by race, gender, generation and class. The social movements Black Lives Matter; Greta Thunberg’s School Strike for Climate; Extinction Rebellion and #metoo are exploding, the urgency of these platforms increasing by the day. It is into this activist terrain that Michelle Hamer wades. Hamer produces art that draws attention to that which is so easily overlooked: who is speaking? Who is being spoken to and how should we interpret the language that surrounds us, as we move through life?

Such is the complexity of language, that words can indeed simultaneously hold many meanings, dependent on their tone,

timing and delivery. Depending on who spoke the words or who wrote the words.

The paradox of language and text is the work of Michelle Hamer. Mixing analogue and digital, Hamer usually works from her own photographs, but for the triptych *Are You Having a Good Night?* (2019) Hamer was granted permission by artist Jihune Liwanag to base work on Liwanag’s photograph of the Hawaiian ballistic missile warning. *There Is No Threat* is a breakthrough work for Hamer, who realised how many of the signs that are around us are indeed warnings. Flickering LED signs caution us with the language of fear, words punctuate our experiences with an uncanny repetition. Words meant to reassure can just as easily double down on the very real sense of threat. If someone says “I’m just being friendly,” it can mean the exact opposite, especially if the interaction concludes with “You



NOT SORRY, 2020

HAND-STITCHING, MIXED YARN
ON PERFORATED PLASTIC
26 X 33.5CM

chicks are all the same.” The titles and their connections encapsulate the menace Hamer is portraying:

The triptych *Power Trip* (2020) reads: “Power works”, “Smile luv”, and “You are exotic”.

The triptych *Friday Night* (2020) reads: “Friday night”, “Obey signs”, “Secure your load”.

A close friend of artist Michelle Hamer’s (one familiar with her creative process) wonders if Michelle sees the world in 36 dots per inch, such is her uncanny ability

to translate photos into pixelated images. This is the perfect skill for a practice that leans heavily into the overlooked and under-represented scenes of urban mundanity with an unsettling, undeniable threat of toxic masculinity. Low resolution images are methodically stitched into high resolution, elevated through a slow-craft based process, stitch after stitch drawing attention towards that which is so easily either taken for granted, or overlooked. Each stitch becomes a pixel and each pixel into a word, which flickers between the manual and digital experiences that make up all of our days.

Elsewhere in the show “Caution”, “Play your part”, “Fear”, “Sorry not sorry”, “Girls” and “Now in force” are methodically recorded in wool. Cross stitch is not a creative genre one usually associates with political activism, but Hamer’s work is part of a broader Craftivism movement, works that blend political urgency with traditional craft skills one might more readily associate with a Country Women’s Association than with art museum exhibitions. Craftivism subverts and realigns traditional skill sets that may so easily have become stereotyped as conservative, with progressive activist strategies. Silk thread in floral and largely decorative motifs on linen is replaced by hand stitching in cheap, readily available and generic wool into perforated plastic. Hamer has studied and worked in architecture and urban design, her interests focusing on the built environment of cities. It is through this urban lens that Hamer subverts a traditional hand stitched language.

Hamer has stitched herself through hard times before. Housebound during a health crisis in 2005, her first project came about through this period of enforced convalescence, a time when Hamer missed engaging and creating, but through this new project, was able to do both. These earliest works were exhibited soon after completion, and from here Hamer has continued her practice with a determined discipline. The work becomes both a distraction (stitching while waiting for doctor’s appointment) and a focus (working towards an exhibition), a compulsion that simultaneously passes the time while also marking it.

The perspectives of women within society are being considered with renewed vigor. Inequality always presents in a variety of ways. Wage inequality is an empirical measure, just as gendered language is.

In Australia, we still live in a society where in 2020:

“the full time average weekly ordinary earnings for women, are 14% less than for men.”

Women work an extra 59 days a year to earn the same as men.¹

In the arts sector of Australia: “Australia has a roughly equal number of female and male artists, but that women earn 44% less than their male counterparts. This is three times the gender pay gap in the broader Australian workforce.”²

The context of language is everything, the tone with which words are delivered can shift in meaning. Hamer focuses in on the language of the street with a consistent, enduring focus.

¹ Workplace Gender Equality Agency, wgea.gov.au 2020

² Throsby and Petaskaya, *Making Art Work: An Economic Study of Professional Artists in Australia*, Australia Council, Sydney 2017

Natalie Thomas is a Melbourne-based artist and writer. Thomas maintains a diverse and independent practice that considers storytelling as the basis of culture. Her work engages with the mass media and its role in how we see each other and the world.



GIRLS, 2020
HAND-STITCHING, MIXED YARN
ON PERFORATED PLASTIC
26 X 33.5CM



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