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sisters

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The Future is Female: Cigdem Aydemir, Yevgeniya Baras, Bonita Ely, Emma Freeman, Michelle Hamer, Yuki Kihara, Wangechi Mutu, Glenda Nicholls, Rose Nolan, Izabela Pluta, Bhenji Ra, Marikit Santiago, Collier Schorr, Kaylene Whiskey, Anne Zahalka & more



AUS \$19.95 NZ \$25.00

REVIEW

THE NON-THREAT THREAT: MICHELLE HAMER

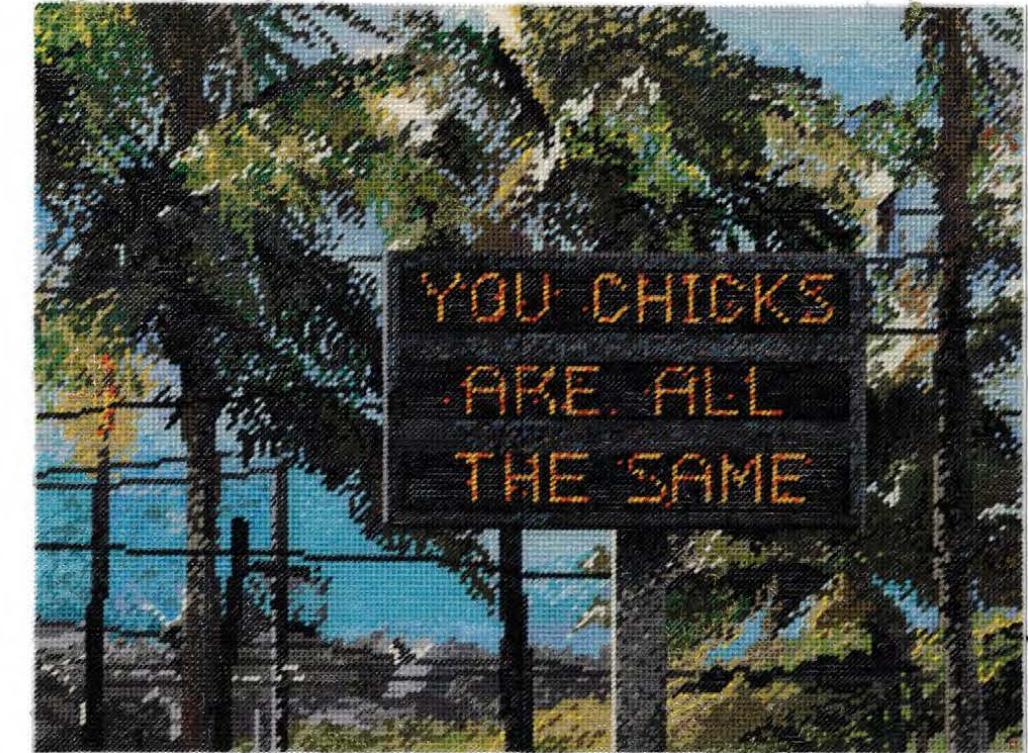
REVIEW by HESTER LYON

For more than 15 years, Melbourne-based artist Michelle Hamer has used signage and language as a means to interpret and disrupt relationships to urban environments – both her own and her audiences. Working predominantly with hand-stitching on perforated plastic grids, Hamer is an artist who meticulously observes the city as she moves through it. *Are You Having a Good Night?*, currently on show at Fremantle Arts Centre, is Hamer's 23rd solo exhibition. In it, she draws attention to the covert and often threatening language women are confronted by every day. And for her latest exhibition *2020 is Cancelled*, at Warrnambool Art Gallery, Hamer presents a new series produced entirely during Melbourne's COVID-19 lockdown that both historicises and interrogates the language that has come to define this year.

There is a pervasive sense of familiarity in your current exhibition at Fremantle Arts Centre. What is your process for collecting source material?

Most of my work is based on my own photographs of signage and language in the environments around us. I also keep lists of text – I note things down that are said to me or I hear said to others, and instances that people recall. While preparing for my survey show at Wagga

Wagga Art Gallery in 2018, I had the opportunity to reflect on my practice. And I realised just how much of the language in my work contained embedded threats, and that I needed to step into that. With that framework, I increasingly noticed the threatening language that was said to me in the street – people stepping out in front of me, things being shouted from cars. I knew it wasn't personal because it happens all the time, every woman that I know is exposed to this language. But I realised that I hadn't addressed it overtly in my work. Of course, there are increasing and important campaigns addressing violence against women in domestic spaces and physical violence on the streets. But we are not talking about the pervasiveness of this problematic everyday language and how it impacts the way we walk around cities and navigate space – we are absorbing it all the time. Also in 2018, I was struck by the signage that was populating the media in the wake of a false ballistic missile crisis in Hawaii. There was this one photo of a sign announcing the government's retraction that read: 'THERE IS NO THREAT'. This non-threat threat summed up the language I was needing to explore, a type of gaslighting that occurs: the threats can't be real because our safety is being declared.



Top to bottom
MICHELLE HAMER
Are you having a good night?, 2019
51 x 198 cm
MICHELLE HAMER
Not Sorry, 2020
hand-stitching, mixed yarn
on perforated plastic
26.5 x 33 cm

MICHELLE HAMER
Caution, 2020
hand-stitching, mixed yarn
on perforated plastic
26.5 x 33 cm

What comes through in all of your work is the opening up of paradoxes. Do you think that your previous work as an architect continues to influence your practice?

I think so. One of the privileges of my architectural education is that it enables me to really think about space, and urban design in particular. That understanding of how we traverse the city and what that means is very architectural. I'm very interested in where public and private spaces overlap, and particularly where and how signage and language sit within public space. It's often in interstitial spaces/in-between zones. Often, we just glimpse signage moving between places. I'm also interested in that time of absorption – I capture an instantaneous moment and then, by rendering it slowly into art, I actually have to be present.

Then how do you feel the process of art making is, both for you and for your audience?

That is a great question – so much of it is very personal. Even though I have the audience in mind, there's something particular about the intimacy of hand stitching and making for myself – I'm processing that language. But the hope

is that the slowness of the process allows people to be present with the work as well. Especially in these new works at Fremantle and Warrnambool, it's familiar language; it's not just my language, it's something that people have passed and know. I've always considered my work both personal and political and I'm very happy for the work to raise questions and to be challenged – this is not going to be everybody's experience. But the work is hopefully part of a trajectory, an ongoing conversation – art is not a static thing for me. I think we've got to be open to evolving, being wrong and being part of a dialogue.

And the exhibition is such an incredible analysis of the cumulative impacts of casualised language on lived experience.

I've become increasingly aware of the nature of repetition in my practice. *2020 is Cancelled* is the perfect example, in that I had so much language to deal with it was actually overwhelming. I didn't think that it was going to be a series of 50 plus works, but I also didn't think – six months on – that we'd still be in lockdown. I was definitely aware right from the beginning that there was so much language I needed to get my head around and that it felt really important *right now* and I needed to



"I CAPTURE A SPECIFIC MOMENT THAT IS KNOWN AND FAMILIAR, BECAUSE WE ABSORB VERSIONS OF IT DAILY, BUT THEN PERHAPS IN NOTICING IT, THAT MOMENT, THAT LANGUAGE, IS NO LONGER NEUTRAL."

just make. A lot of the language, strangely, felt more fleeting because it was changing all the time. So, I guess it was a sense of ordering but at the same time a sense of panic. People were sending me photos of signs from all around the world and I felt like they were really noticing the language and feeling overwhelmed by the messaging. There was so much confusion, it felt chaotic. I think this ties into how I see my role politically. I capture a specific moment that is known and familiar, because we absorb versions of it daily, but then perhaps in noticing it, that moment, that language, is no longer neutral. The recording and recontextualising become a type of historic documentation.

You become a sort of translator for other people's experiences ...
... Yes, that's interesting.

How do you feel about that responsibility?
It is a bit of a responsibility but it's also a massive compliment. It means that people have taken something from my practice and that's maybe changed what they are noticing. I'm very open to people contributing in that way, particularly

during this time. Whenever someone sends me material, I do treat it as an active engagement with my practice. I really treasure that.

I think so many artists go their entire careers without knowing how the work is received by the audience, so to have that kind of feedback loop must be very rewarding.

It's incredibly rewarding. It really has felt like a privilege that people are engaging and participating because then it actually becomes a dialogue. And if the work is to be discussed politically, given that it is about the nuance of language, my word can't be the final word. **V**

Are You Having a Good Night? is on at Fremantle Arts Centre until November 22, 2020, before touring to multiple locations including Noosa Regional Art Gallery, Queensland, Logan Art Gallery, Queensland, and Schoolhouse Gallery, Hobart.

2020 is Cancelled at Warrnambool Art Gallery opens on November 23, 2020 and will conclude February 21, 2021.

Nothing is Promised is on at Stockroom Kyneton from November 7 to December 20, 2020.

michellehamer.com

fac.org.au

thewag.com.au

stockroomspace.com