

The accidental artist

A love of architecture and textiles form the backbone of Michelle Hamer's practice. Using hand-pixelation, she maps the small in-between moments that characterise everyday life in the urban landscape

AUSTRALIA'S MICHELLE HAMER DID NOT set out to be an embroiderer; indeed she did not intend to position herself as an artist.

Her vocational passion has always been for architecture, which she studied at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in Victoria where she now teaches Architectural History, Design and Communication. She is included in the 2014 publication *Imagine Architecture: Artistic Visions of the Urban Realm* and together with Kristin Green (KGA Architecture), she was a joint first prize winner in the inaugural Tapestry Design Prize for Architects conceived by the Australian Tapestry Workshop in 2015.

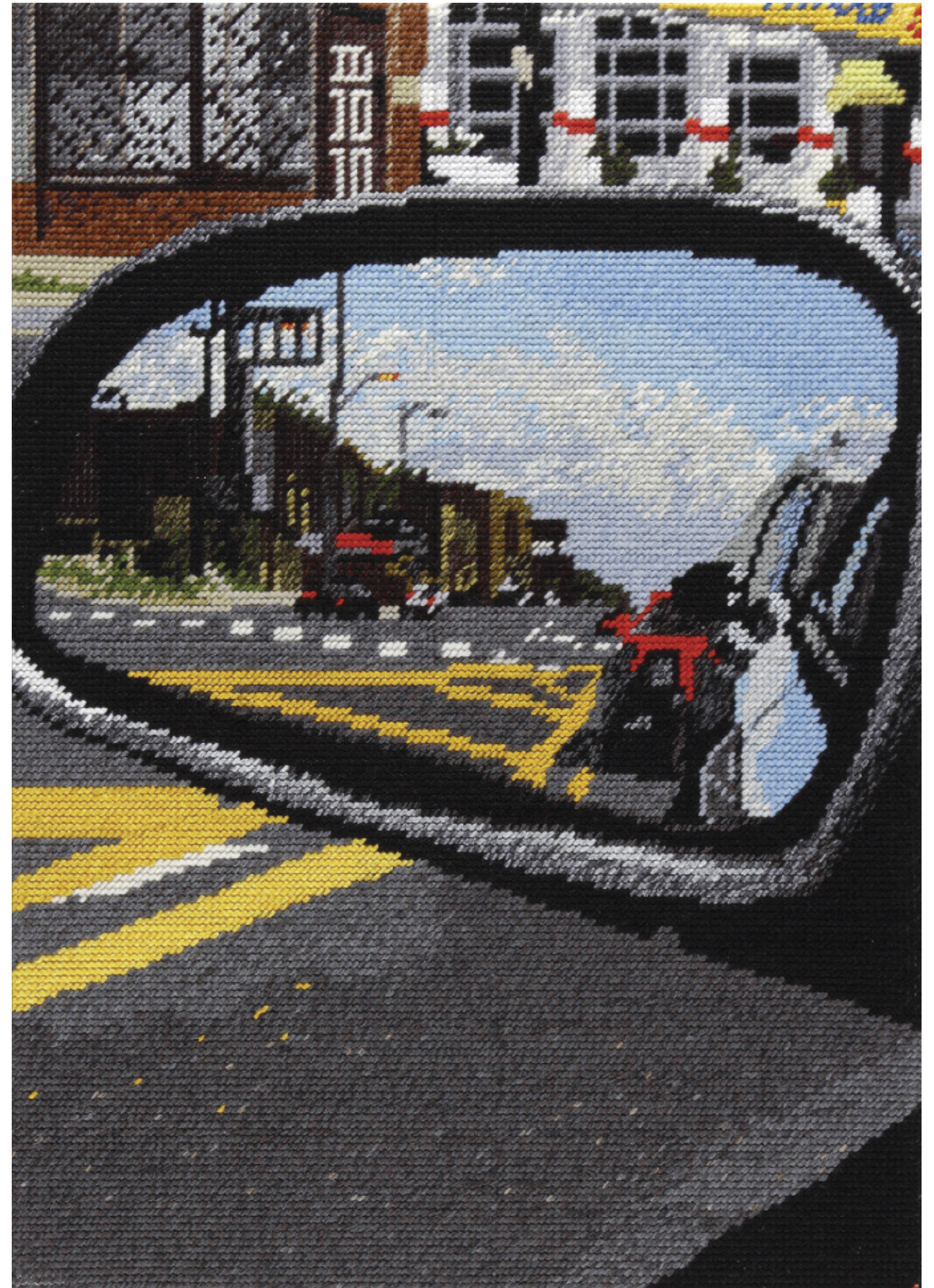
Hamer's needlepoint tapestries, created with yarn on a grid of plastic mesh, have an architectural sensibility that she is well aware of, logically extending her interest in perforated materials and her awareness of the strength found in plastic along with the pixelated quality of the grid. Her photographs document the urban landscape, capturing messages from what she describes as the 'in-between spaces' – messages that are slowed down both for her and for the viewer through stitching, so they can be interpreted and reappraised. These often disconcerting photographs of the everyday have for years been the main source of imagery for what she terms her 'hand-stitched pixelations'.

In an online interview with Michael K Corbin, Hamer says that after choosing a photograph to work from: 'I then print out the image at A4 size and use a CD marker to roughly draw the outline of the major areas of the image onto the perforated plastic. I then match colours by eye from the original image with the wools I have. . . I think of each stitch as a pixel although I work in a somewhat painterly way. I work across the entire piece as I build up the image rather than in a linear fashion.'

In tracking Hamer's career, a false but easily drawn assumption, based on



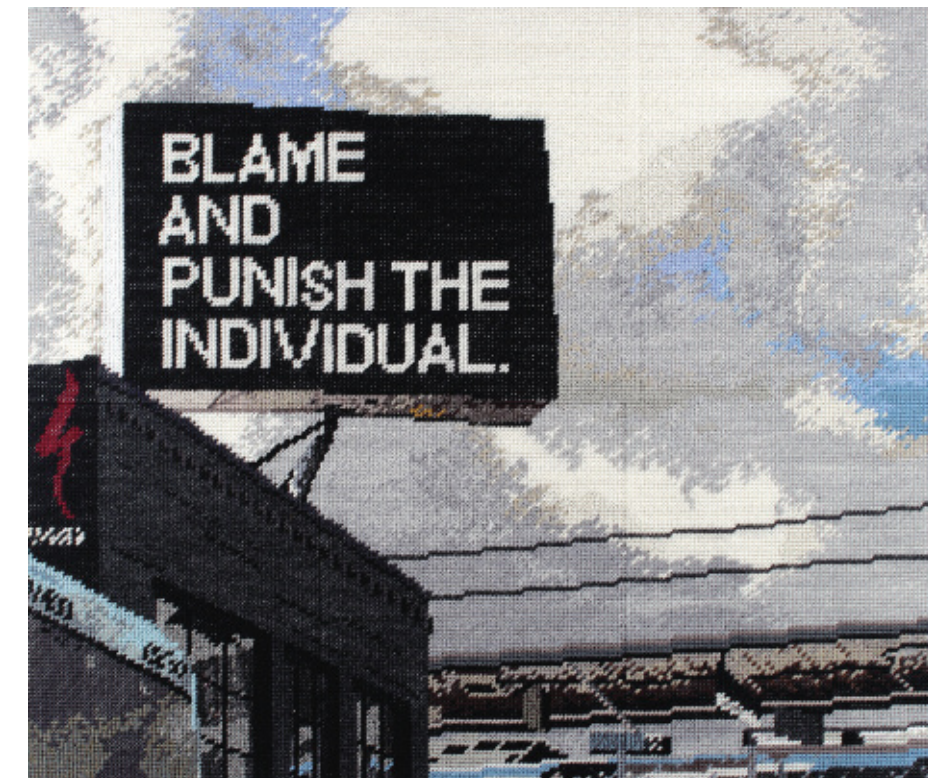
Michelle Hamer,
Look Both Ways
(detail), 2015
50 x 68cm



her successes, is that the journey to the gallery wall happened with relative ease. Initially friends urged her to exhibit what she had basically been creating for her own relaxation, painstaking though the process was. She began to make enquiries: 'I knew one artist vaguely and got in touch and asked what I was supposed to do to exhibit... It's been an amazing learning curve.' Her first solo exhibition, 'Life in the Fast Lane' was held in 2005 and she readily admits the process terrified her. Since then she has shown continually, in both solo and group shows and is represented by the gallery Fehily Contemporary in Melbourne. The titles for her solo exhibitions are as enticing as the works: 'I Get Good Advice from the Advertising World'; 'Warning if you are reading this, this warning is for you'; 'Dangling Carrots'; and the latest 'You are my past, I am your future'. Pixelation – the small dots that make up

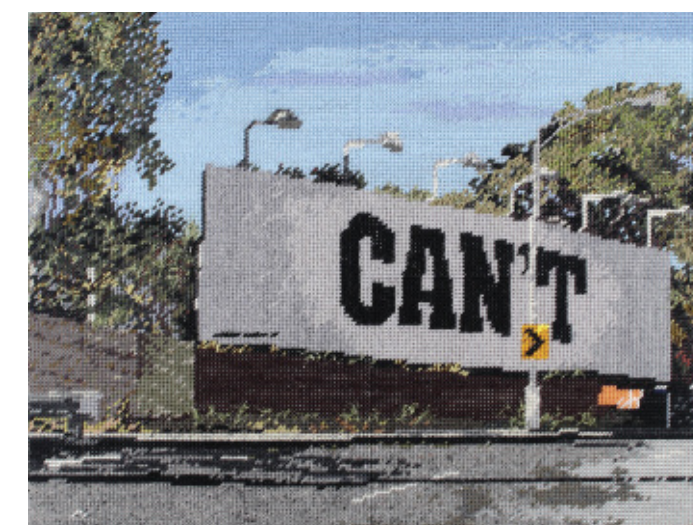
images and the realm of the digital have a relationship with both stitch and woven tapestry, which is obvious and effectively exploited by artists. The Australian Tapestry Workshop, with whom Hamer had a residency in 2015, describes how she 'maps the small in-between moments of apparent nothingness that characterise everyday life. Her work... highlights contemporary social beliefs, ideals and ironies as witnessed in both impermanent and interstitial spaces.' When selecting photographs that allow her to both convey and subvert meaning, Hamer has a lot of material to work with in responding to urban environments. The notion of the suburban dream was powerfully questioned in works such as *Is This Your New Home?* shown in her 10th solo show; 'Dangling Carrots' at Craft Victoria gallery, Melbourne in 2011. She also collaborated with Cat Wilson to create time-lapse videos of her hand-stitched tapestry construction process

thus directly exploiting the juxtaposition of manual and digital pixelation. The public was able to move through the projections – the pixels of light – creating a tapestry of new digital images on the wall. An Australia Council grant then saw her spending three months in the USA in 2011 researching the impact of the Global Financial Crisis, with its inevitable anxiety and the way social issues affect signage in some of America's largest cities. Her USA experiences and photographs would subsequently inform her 11th solo show 'I Send Mixed Messages' at Counihan Gallery in Melbourne in 2013. The National Gallery of Victoria included Hamer in the groundbreaking 'Melbourne Now' exhibition held in 2014 for which she was asked to create two new works that were Melbourne based (*Blame and Punish*, and *Can't*) to accompany three USA-based works. It was at this time that she began testing her new project of involving the audience in stitching and



Left: *Changed Priorities Ahead* (detail), 2015. 51 x 67cm

- Clockwise from top left:
Is This Your New Home? (detail), 2011 82 x 104.5cm
Know Your Enemy (detail), 2013. 53 x 81cm
Blame & Punish the Individual (detail), 2013. 67 x 77cm
Can't, 2013. 52 x 67cm
Exit Only (detail), 2013. 48 x 67cm
Detour 1 (detail), 2015. 50 x 71cm





playing with stitched language during two public programs at the NGV. Participants could stitch on or be photographed with their favourite piece of the hand-stitched text pieces thus fulfilling an urge Hamer has noted where people frequently seem to want to touch her work. Michelle Hamer consistently seeks to reinvent herself, influenced by the way social issues are forever in flux and require new interventions. In 2015 she had two major solo shows: 'This is what it isn't meant to be' was held at Fehily Contemporary, and she was invited to exhibit at Ararat Regional Art Gallery (ARAG) in Victoria for which she created the show 'There are No Words'. The Ararat project was accompanied by the launch of a newly commissioned artwork for the gallery's collection, The Australian Challenge, which was her response to Ararat's built environment and local community. 'The opportunity to work so directly with a gallery and town towards making a piece and also a major new and different type of solo show for me was a real privilege,' she says. *There are No Words* is a public participation project designed to have an exhibition outcome. The project is built around 240 hand-stitched flashcards that feature fragments of text collected via 'found statements, email subject lines, sticky notes and conversation grabs.' This was an ambitious undertaking as Hamer spent over four years creating these modules. Participants were invited to play with the flashcards to construct new phrases and meanings, with the process documented from above via time-lapse photography, 'designed to capture the creative process

of sorting and selecting meaning'. This video was then projected onto a large, floor-based stitched screen alongside the actually stitched pieces used during the workshop. Iterations of this project are continuing in 2016 in other regional art galleries in Victoria in Ballarat and Swan Hill. When asked about her response to the material she uses, Hamer confirms her attraction to the grid along with enjoying the opportunity to match colours by eye, juggling them to get the desired effect. She feels her time at the Australian Tapestry Workshop helped her improve her crafting as she was shown their sophisticated methods of colour mixing. She says she likes 'beautiful materials' being currently seduced by construction mesh and stitching with barrier tape. Her latest exhibition 'You are my past, I am your future' opened at the Nicholas Artspace Melbourne in January 2016 and was curated, with the emphasis on more minimal pieces. Alongside hand-stitched and paper works, *Love Knows all Barriers* is her first created from text-based barrier tape on polypropylene debris mesh. Hamer is currently looking forward to creating new works in response to an Australia Council funded research trip to Israel/Palestine and the USA/Mexico from which she has recently returned. The trip involved exploring language around border zones, in itself a challenging premise. In using her art to highlight serious issues Hamer has certainly moved from the accidental to the intentional while leaving space for individual interpretation. 📍

Janet de Boer AOM

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Left: *There are No Words* (installation) 2015-

Right: *We're all Gonna Die*, 2013. 51 x 68cm

What Makes You Happy, 2009. 78 x 59.5cm

