

# DANGLING CARROTS

Michelle Hamer

## No Road

*Nella Themelios*

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In a series of video works entitled *A Ritual for Elephant & Castle* (2010) UK artist Marcus Coates adopts a mix of performance art and shamanism to administer solutions to planning issues currently facing the residents of the depressed inner city London suburb of Elephant & Castle. What is significant in this work is Coates's ability to make tangible the lived experience of a site; his manipulation of time-based media to render visible the conventions governing the inhabitation of particular urban environments.

This too is the profundity to be found in Michelle Hamer's new series of needlepoint tapestries. Although her medium is far removed from performance-based practice, Hamer's work nonetheless functions in and with the unfurling of time. In the period following the GFC, Hamer took to regularly photographing housing developments on the outskirts of Melbourne, tracking changes in urban edges and capturing discrete moments in a continuously evolving landscape. This private archive forms the basis of the imagery in *Dangling Carrots*, each tapestry arising from and reinterpreting its photographic referent. Combined with the real-time flow of two new video works in collaboration with Cat Wilson (an important progression in Hamer's practice), *Dangling Carrots* is the outcome of a compellingly idiosyncratic approach to issues revolving around urban sprawl.

Particularly notable in this body of work is Hamer's foregrounding of the wayfaring systems used to demarcate the edges of new developments; the forms of text-based street signage that map and publicly communicate changes in urban peripheries. The bulk of the new works feature the same, singular signage repeated across a number of sites: 'No Road'. We know that the appearance of this signage is temporary; that in a few months time it is highly probable that a road could indeed be in operation here. Repeated en masse and out of context, the words assume an ironic humour, highlighting the latent relationship between language and our experience of the built environment. These works speak of the itinerant nature of borders, as well as the culture of car-based transportation often privileged by such developments.

Three further large-scale tapestries complete the body of work in Dangling Carrots. *Is this your new home* depicts a partially erected house, the foregrounded signage directly appealing to the viewer's assumed desire for a patch of land. *Two grants are better than 1* and *Put yourself in a better place* bring the exhibition full circle, reminding us that our aspirations and the expansion of urban boundaries cannot help but be fuelled by government infrastructure (those who build new homes in Victoria, as opposed to purchasing existing ones may be entitled to further grant bonuses under the current First Home Buyer's Grant scheme).

Trained in architecture, Hamer is acutely aware of the visual 'tropes' that form the vocabulary of urban design - the boulevard, the street, the road, the avenue converge to create a lived 'language' of boundaries. Hamer's acute observations of planning trends raise important questions about the impact of continuous expansion as well as the desire fuelling such initiatives. But the significance of Hamer's work lies in her manipulation of the medium of tapestry to function beyond its means as it were: to reveal through the visual as well as the gestural, an aesthetics of urban development.

*Nella Themelios is the Coordinating Curator at Craft Victoria*

## Being present in those interstitial spaces that make up everyday lives

*Esther Anatolitis*

Moments can pass you by. A moment can fail to connect with you, even when it's trying as hard as a billboard on a highway. You can miss it entirely, and then you have nothing to show for it; the moment has gone, and you've made nothing of it.

Michelle Hamer's work is about the moment. The moment in time: as an event, as something we experience, as duration. The moment in space: as the familiar, as something we inhabit, as presence. The moment as the smallest unit of meaning.

Pixellated, the moment is analysed into its smallest distinguishable unit, and then hand-crafted, inscribing duration into the pin-pointed element. Pixilation, or stop-motion animation made up of individual images, turns still moments into stuttered movement. We see this in Cat Wilson's time-lapse account of Hamer's work, whose doing and undoing is animated yet remains interpretable as a series of successive moments. Pixelation, or the loss of image quality when a digital image is enlarged, turns a clear image into blocks of blurred colour. We see this in the resolution of Hamer's pieces; we experience different qualities of each image depending on our position in relation to the work. Pixel art, on the other hand, works at the pixel level – sometimes isometrically, when it's carefully creating three-dimensional space from that 120° view from nowhere; sometimes non-isometrically, when it's playing with what pixel-constraints make possible. Hamer creates pixels by hand, redigitalising her digital documentary photographs using her own five digits: the tools of craft.

Crafting the moment is essential to craft itself, both as practice and as artform. The hands carry memory through technique and into the object. The physical trace remains; the object presents itself as something crafted. For Hamer, this body of work is more akin to photography and sculpture than to the tapestry traditions of the accomplished lady or the housewife's well-kept home. There is a documentary practice in the research and framing of the images; there is slowness and repetition in each stitch. We call such finely detailed work painstaking – that multiplicity of individual moments, each given the weight of the whole by the work, and each one so much more than their sum.

Not every moment is one of lightness and joy. Pain creates its own duration, its own interstices marked by moments of potentiality amidst time lost. Chronic illness has long been a part of Hamer's life, and having something to show for lost time was the motivating passion that led to her artistic practice. For the convalescing body, Nietzsche's Zarathustra promises the eternal recurrence: the burdensome thought that each contingent moment of life will be experienced again and again and in its same form. Convalescence for Nietzsche is a process of experiencing singularity, a transformative process of experimentation and care for the self. "My whole art practice has been accidental and out of necessity," Hamer reflects – a joy to Nietzschean ears.

The sustainability of practice is a challenge whose contingencies are multiple: the body, passion, engagement, time – and, of course, money. The work *2 grants are better than 1* is telling here. Hamer photographed the LED pixel sign from her usual vantage point behind the driver's seat of her car, touring the city limits with its series of NO ROAD signs juxtaposed with new homes in large, repeated shapes. While securing both a state and federal home buyer's grant is something that's commonly valued, Hamer's having been awarded two rare and competitive arts grants was pilloried by the *Herald Sun* last year. The limits of what's acceptable, what's of value and what society rejects are depicted in billboards, magazines, on the sides of moving vehicles – any space advertising can find. For Hamer, a documentary approach to billboards offers a means for recording and re-evaluating our social norms. Rejecting the traditional pre-printed tapestry kits through which her mother had handed down her techniques, Hamer looks instead at our contemporary culture's ready-mades and the values they communicate with ever-increasing blare. *Is this your New Home?* and *Put yourself in a better place* dangle the carrot explicitly, promising the good life while urban sprawl challenges the sustainability of the city as a whole – the city whose edges these developments define only temporarily.

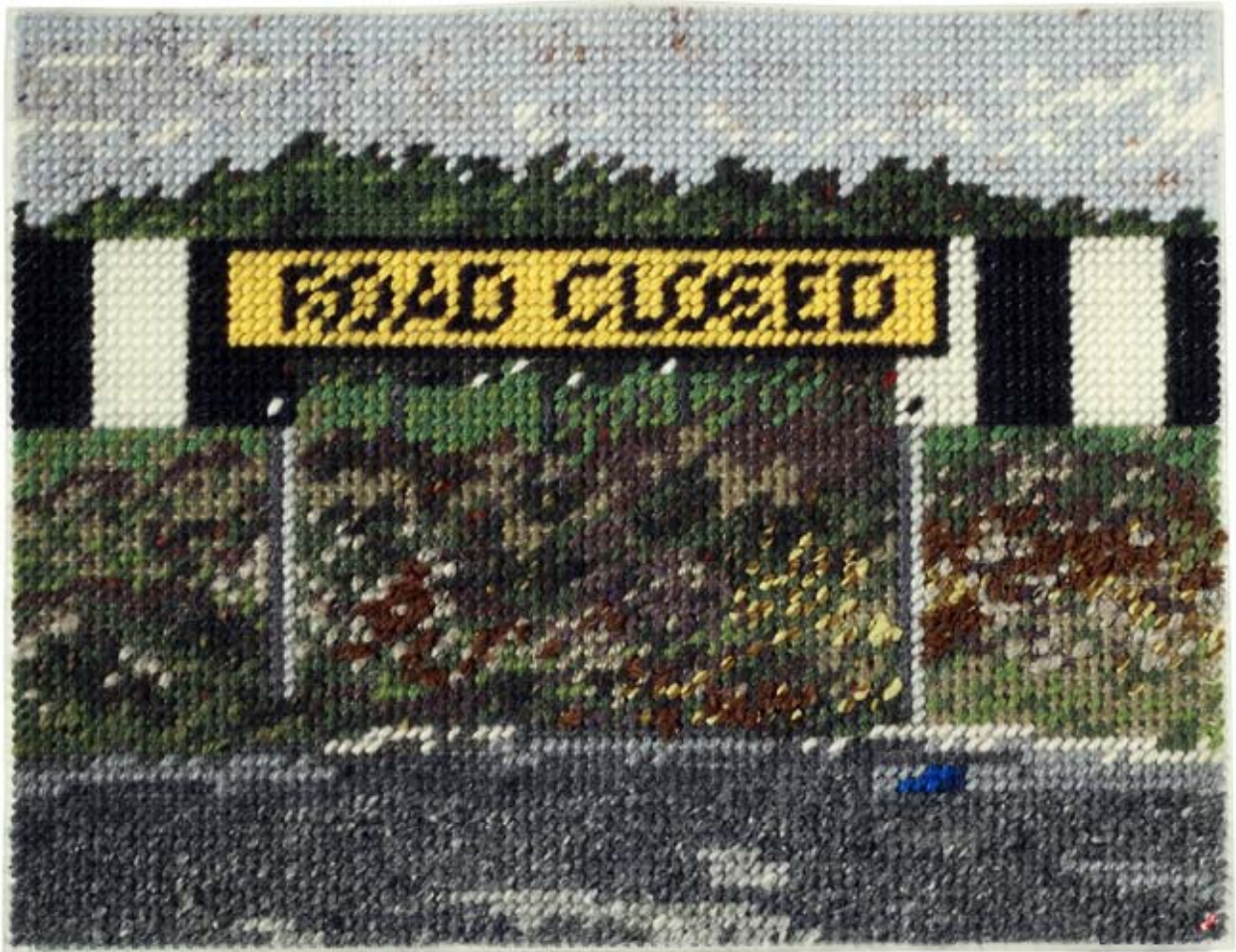
Edges and limits are essential to Hamer's work, and constraints are key to her choice of materials. She chooses her colours from the available range of wools, and the scale of her work is constrained by the brittle properties of available plastics. Having trained and practiced in architecture, she negotiates constraints like an architect, but crafts with documentary precision. The ultimate constraint, of course, is the moment, distilled into a woollen interval: the hand-made pixel, the interstitial, the duration of every stitch.

Many of the moments depicted in Hamer's work no longer exist; the interstices they'd marked have since been stitched together into outer-suburban fabric. Perhaps the city will not extend indefinitely; perhaps the carrot will not keep moving away from us; perhaps there are absolutes. Hamer's work crafts the city edge condition into finite component parts, each with its own duration and presence. Her redigitalisation of her own digital photography shifts pixel art beyond ones and zeroes. Her tenth solo show, *Dangling Carrots* offers something to show for the shifting boundaries of our everyday.

*Esther Anatolitis is CEO of Melbourne Fringe and co-curator of Architecture+Philosophy.*



Projections by Cat Wilson















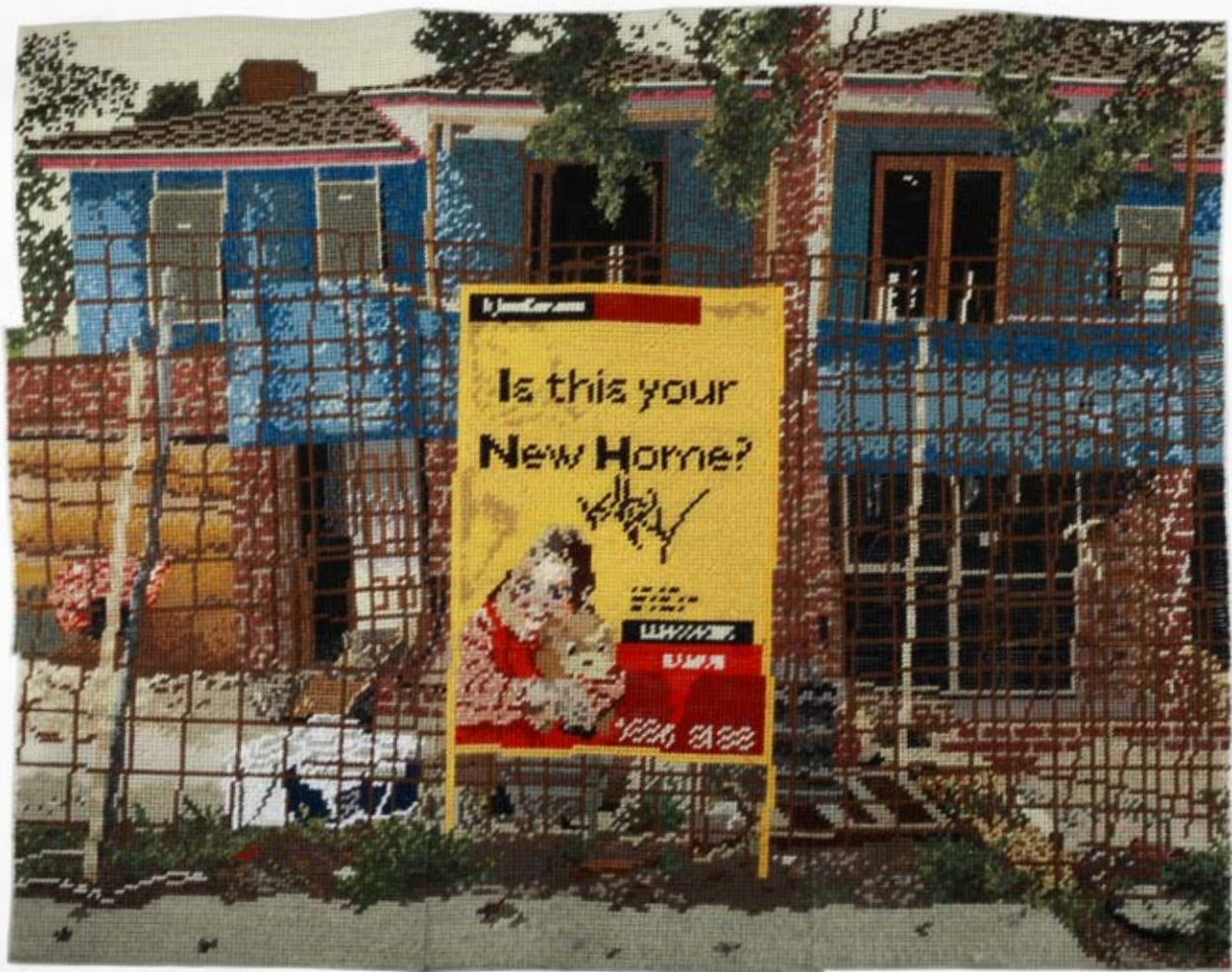


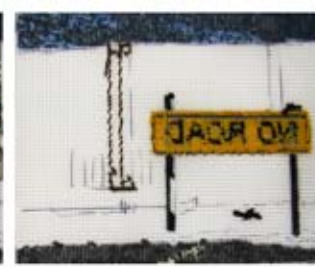




















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**Artwork Photography** Marc Morel

**Catalogue Design** Letterbox

#### ARTWORK

- PG 6** *Road closed – Cows ahead*  
Hand-stitched tapestry on perforated plastic, 2011. 28.5 x 36 cm
- PG 8** *2 grants are better than 1* (framed)  
Hand-stitched tapestry on perforated plastic, 2011. 71 x 103.5cm
- PG 10** *Put yourself in a better place?* (framed)  
Hand-stitched tapestry on perforated plastic, 2011. 82 x 104.5cm
- PG 12** *Is this your new home?* (framed)  
Hand-stitched tapestry on perforated plastic, 2011. 82 x 104.5cm
- PG 14** *No road – Tree*  
Hand-stitched tapestry on perforated plastic, 2011. 28.5 x 36 cm
- No road x 2*  
Hand-stitched tapestry on perforated plastic, 2011. 28.5 x 36 cm
- INSIDE** *No road – Cyclone*
- BACK** Hand-stitched tapestry on perforated plastic, 2011. 28.5 x 36 cm
- COVER** Hand-stitched tapestry on perforated plastic, 2011. 28.5 x 36 cm

#### PROJECTIONS

- PG 6-7** *Edges – Still, 1*
- PG 10-11** *Edges – Shifting, 1*
- PG 12-13** *Edges – Still, 2*
- PG 14-15** *Edges – Shifting, 1*

