

The Embroiderers Guild, Victoria. Members Annual Exhibition

Earth, Wind, Fire, Water Opening speech by artist Bob Message

I am delighted to open *Earth, Wind, Fire and Water*, the exhibition of traditional and contemporary needle arts.

What an evocative title, invoking a sense of gales, floods and fire unleashing forces of rain, salt, smoke and grit to indelibly etch this ancient continent. I am pleased to respond to this wonderful exhibition with a number of observations and comments.

1. My first observation is that this display graphically exemplifies the evolution of the modern needle arts from their specialised craft forbears.

1.1 The Middle Ages was the era of master craftsmen.

Medieval European textiles artisans were trained as apprentices over many years by individual masters. As craftsmen their work was highly skilled, regulated and specialised. Their styles and their output were strictly regimented by the guilds. Their freedom to experiment and create as individuals was strictly limited.

1.2 The 18th and 19th centuries were the era of the machine.

With the Industrial Revolution, textile production became mechanised. The role of textile workers was to manage the machines producing textiles for the expanding world market. This reached its zenith by the 20th century with vast factories producing goods of a nature and standard previously produced by the craftsmen. In the factories mass production, computers, chemically produced fibres and dyes subsumed the role of the individual craftsman.

1.3 The 20th century brought the emergence of the textile arts.

The liberation of the wealthy new middle classes from medieval social and economic constraints provided a capacity for engagement in a whole new realm of creative arts. The focus and scope of textile artists broadened as they explored new ideas, techniques and mediums.

1.4 The 21st century - the exciting new age of the needle artist.

Evidence of this freer age of needle arts is provided by the amazing list of techniques supported by the Embroiderer's Guild, Victoria. On display in this exhibition is an extensive mix of the new and old, the traditional and the experimental.

2. My second observation is that this display strongly resonates with my own personal interests as a creative artist.

2.1 Individual creativity.

Creativity has been defined as: “... *the ability to use different modes of thought to generate new and dynamic ideas and solutions*” and “... *imagining familiar things in a new light, digging below the surface to find previously undetected patterns, and finding connections among unrelated phenomena.*”

Creative expression involves intellectual and technical problem solving. It is not simply a pleasant way of passing the time. Artistic development requires continuing exploration, experimentation analysis and review. It is a never-ending challenge through which we seek to extend our own unique qualities and skills.

Creative expression is a personally fulfilling activity. All of us have experienced the extreme satisfaction and even the euphoria attained from the successful completion of a creative exercise.

Creative expression is also about effectively communicating with an audience. I do not believe artists who claim not to be interested in an audience. I guess you would agree, given the large number of works on display here today.

One has to applaud the evidence of creativity and creative problem solving displayed in this exhibition. Particular reference is made to the following:

- 164 – Lizard of Legend
- 140 – Eucalyptus Caesia
- 61 – Dome Earth
- 3 – Earth Jacket
- 38 – Flaming Embers

2.2 Emphasis on texture.

While all visual arts involve the qualities of line, form, colour and tone only some manage to encompass the dimension of texture. Texture introduces a sculptural and sometimes sensual third dimension, which can strongly involve the viewer. By its very nature, artistic expression through the medium of needle arts inherently emphasises texture.

In particular, the incorporation of unrelated or naturally occurring materials such as pigments, organic materials and minerals is a strong feature of some works in this exhibition, such as:

- 124 – Lake Eyre
- 13 – Earth, Water, Fire, Wind
- 17 – On Show
- 82 – Thinking Kelmscott
- 122 – Winter Coat

2.3 Emotive personal interpretation.

Personal emotive interpretation is an essential element of creative expression. An overt personal response to the grandeur, mystery and challenges of the Australian landscape is evident in this exhibition in works such as:

- 150 – From the Ashes
- 10 – Earth Flowers
- 32 – Angophora
- 141 – Rust 1

2.4 Use of colour, tone and shape.

Unfettered colour, subtle tones and organic shapes are fundamental characteristics of the Australian landscape. Works in this exhibition which display confidence in the use of colour, tone and shape include:

- 102 – Crazy by Susan
- 55 – Cobalt Over Ochre
- 127 – Earth Woman
- 152 – Plancius 1 & 2

2.5 Technical expertise and experience

A willingness to experiment and blur disciplines can be a fundamental strategy for creative expression. However, it is essential that it is based upon sound technical expertise. The high degree of technical expertise exhibited across this exhibition is well demonstrated in the following works:

- Retrospective by Lorna Law
- 99 – Tiny Acacia
- 23 – The Colour of Water
- 19 – Aire
- 42 – Blue Poppy

3. **My third observation concerns** the linkages that can be made between the work on display here and other creative interpretations of the Australian landscape.

The first people to document their responses were of course the Australian aborigines. Their paintings and carvings are didactic, communicating spiritual and secular beliefs and teachings relating to survival in the harsh land. They are aesthetic, providing lyrical and often colourful reflections on primitive adaptation to the constraints of the environment. They are meaningful and relevant to the lives of the people they represent.

Examples for discussion:

- Dr Mary McLean, Kalgoorlie (*Children Chasing a Crow in the Bush with their Dingo*- a joyous and lyrical rendition of life in an aboriginal community in North Western Australia)....
- Judy Watson, Yuendumu (*Journey of local woman custodians of the Dreaming through Warlpiri country* – a more serious comment on the role of women attempting to maintain and preserve a remote and threatened community)....

It is informative and inspirational to observe how the Australian aborigines adapted the by-products of the interaction of the forces of earth, wind, fire, and water for use as materials in their artwork. Charcoal, animal fats, resins and bones from campfires were adapted for body decoration and cave paintings. Similarly, ochre pits were exploited as a valuable source of red, orange, mauve, brown, yellow and white pigments for body, bark and cave paintings and as a valuable material for trading with other people. It is evident that some contemporary needle artists have been influenced by these techniques.

Artists from a European background in Australia have been inspired and influenced by the seemingly primitive techniques of aboriginal artists. The

expressive and emotive work of artists such as Arthur Boyd, Sydney Nolan, Fred Williams and John Olson seems to share with aboriginal artists an emphasis on survival in the harsh Australian environment. Their often unique and dramatic work also can convey a similar naivety and simplicity.

More recent artists responding directly to the extremities of the Australian environment include two visitors from Britain whose work is featured in our public galleries.

One is John Wolesely, whose paintings incorporate materials including natural pigments and organic matter gathered when traversing the outback on foot. Acknowledging the essence of the environment in his work, he sometimes buries his paintings under the desert sands to allow a more literal environmental impact.

Another is Antony Gormley, the English sculptor who journeyed to a remote salt lake north of Kalgoorlie to create sculptures, using local minerals, of the entire population of the nearby town of Menzies. In a tribute to the heroic survival of aboriginal and other communities in the harsh desert, the figures of the 69 residents of Menzies, cast in black metal, are dramatically strewn in a permanent installation across the shimmering white salt lake. Examples of this work may be seen behind the waterwall at the NGV.

I reflect on the work of these artists because they provide us with inspiration and permission to freely document our own unique observations: intellectually, emotionally, sensually and aesthetically. This approach is, of course, the basis of *creativity*.

I recently organised a trip with friends up to Tibooburra in the northwest corner of NSW. Unbeknownst to them, I took along simple drawing and painting materials. In an appropriate place I brought out the materials and all friends enthusiastically began to record their responses to the spectacular desert scenery. Interestingly, techniques varied significantly from person to person, one even wrote poetry. What was important was the openness and trust displayed by everybody, regardless of skill. All ultimately contributed their work for printing in a small booklet. At work here was an enthusiastic commitment to creative expression. Styles, skills and approaches varied but all benefited from expressing their individual responses to the landscape. It is the same passionate commitment to creative expression that is evident in today's exhibition.

4. I will conclude with comments from the writer Graham Greene in his autobiographical work *Ways of Escape*. He believed that creative expression is a form of therapy and wrote, "*I wonder how all those who do not write, compose or paint can manage to escape the madness, the melancholia, the panic and fear which is inherent in the human situation. Audin noted: "Man needs escape as he needs food and deep sleep" "*".

With those criteria in mind, this exhibition demonstrates the supreme well being of the many members of the Embroider's Guild of Victoria.