

Toowoomba Regional Art Gallery, Queensland

The International Art Textile Biennale 2023

An exhibition of selected works from the International Art Textile Biennale 2023 is touring regional galleries in eastern Australia and recently was welcomed to the Toowoomba Regional Art Gallery in Queensland. The exhibition design was spacious, encouraging the appreciation of individual objects, yet not compromising the “snap, crackle, and pop” of proximity so essential to a visual dialogue between the pieces.

Textiles have a long and memorable history, and like ceramics, textiles are integrated into the history of civilization itself. From necessity to fine art, textiles have pursued a path from providing humble warmth and protection, to plush decoration and the robes of ceremony and ritual. For years textiles languished as a collection of practical skills providing functional accoutrements. Once dismissed as ‘domestic craft,’ textiles, and the use of fibre in its various forms, are now embraced as a challenging, yet accessible medium to explore cultural, environmental, political, and social issues interpreted through unique and expressive gallery-welcomed artworks.

The International Art Textile Biennale exhibition does this with panache.

Recycled materials honour former lives and innate in this patchwork of remaking and repair is a sense of survival. Art making has many motivations: it can be cathartic, it can make a statement, express opinion, wave a banner for righteousness, and take a political stand. Most significantly, art is about telling stories. It speaks of the artists, the makers who are compelled by need and experience to share a vision, engage the viewer, and challenge complacencies.

The exhibition has the dynamic visual impact of the “Wow” factor. But it is so much more, it is about identity, vulnerability, strength, wisdom, and humour. It has a conscience, it is about people who care, who are concerned for the state of the world, who are driven to express this in the best way they know, through their creativity and material skills.

Works that particularly draw attention include Lithuanian Gintare Joudele’s toy truck of knitting, metal, and mohair- as brittle as childhood itself. The crowd of colourful bystanders by June Lee from South Korea is united in the solidarity of their uninvolvement. There is Irene Manion’s fragile statement of concern for endangered butterflies, and the elegance of Sayaka Ono’s felted spiral. Tamara Russell’s vessels of broken pottery held together in their patched jackets of stitched silk have a tactile quality echoed by American Stefanie Zito’s twisted ladder linking heaven and earth in the journey of life.

The winner of the major prize in this year’s Biennale was Josephine Jakobi. Her work, “The Huntsman and I” is a delicate, almost doyley-like piece ingeniously mounted on carefully balanced shards of Perspex that enable it to tremble nervously. Jakobi shows us that Mother Nature also has her natural weavers by incorporating discarded spider egg cases within the centres of her crocheted snowflakes.

The International Excellence Award was won by German artist, Katherina Sommer for “Mug Women II.” This large triptych is based on the “mug shots” of convicted women, each with her own moving story. Their fierce and stoic gazes dare the viewer to judge them. The images have been printed on to fabric then stitched and hand painted. The Australian Excellence Award went to Brenda Livermore for “Firebrand,” a pendular threesome based on the Gymea lily, known for its resilience and regeneration in the wake of bushfires. Utilizing basketry techniques and paper string, the bright red work is a celebration of life. The Glenys Mann Award of Excellence was won by Australian artist, Claudia Mazzotta for “Stitching as Registration: Labouring over Maternal Care.” Re-purposed old pillowcases are embroidered with an almost calligraphic mark making that recalls the geometry of sound patterns traversed by random red threads. In a time-poor life of compromise between the roles of artist and mother, order and chaos sit erratically together creating a coherent template for survival.

The Award winners are firsts among equals as every piece selected for exhibition has something special that is both personal and universal. It is an inclusive body of work that welcomes close scrutiny. The viewer becomes part of the exhibition experience. The artists’ stories may not be ours, yet there are parts that we recognize, relate to, even own. It is about art that illuminates our world, opening doors to new ways of perceiving, and encouraging resilience in the face of life’s realities.

Sandy Pottinger, August 2023

Sandy Pottinger is a Toowoomba based artist and writer. She is a retired lecturer in Visual Arts from the University of Southern Queensland and was art critic for the Toowoomba Chronicle, writing the Around the Galleries column for twenty-five years. She is a past patron of the Darling Downs Textile Art Group.