

A circle.

A square.

An arc here.

A series of lines there.

A series of lines there.

A series of lines there.

Vita Cochran's new series of embroideries draw upon modernist forms, and the often marginalised histories of avant garde women of the early 20th Century. Made with wool hand-stitched on linen, these works are *samplers* of modernism. With examples dating back as early as the 16th Century, the sampler is both a demonstration of skill and a personal reference guide, an embroidery toolbox or — as Cochran herself refers to it — 'stitch directory'. While a dictionary of embroidery terms might offer up an esoteric lexicon — french knots, running stitch, bullion stitch, satin stitch, herringbone stitch, feather stitch — the abstract geometries of Cochran's designs are immediately familiar. In bringing together modernism — a movement characterised by its rejection of the past and its traditions — in the distinctly traditional form of embroidery, Cochran weaves together an engaging amalgam of social and visual histories. Embroidery speaks (as it no doubt spoke to those who preceded Cochran) to modernism's emphasis on process and materials, and to a desire to make art present in every aspect of life. Artists such as Sonia Delaunay (1885-1979) and Sophie Taeuber-Arp (1889-1943) worked across painting, textiles, and design, and looking back at their work it seems remarkable that we continue to talk, albeit less often, about a divide between craft and fine art. Even as I write, I wonder why I'm compelled to mention it at all, like I'm returning to a lover's quarrel that would be best left alone. Afterall, as early as 1918, German Dada artist Hannah Höch called for recognition of craft practices in a manifesto published in *Embroidery and Lace*:

Embroidery is very closely related to painting. It is constantly changing with every new style each epoch brings. It is an art and ought to be treated like one... you, craftswomen, modern women, who feel that your spirit is in your work, who are determined to lay claim to your rights (economic and moral), who believe your feet are firmly planted in reality, at least Y-O-U should know that your embroidery work is a documentation of your own era.

Of course there are other reference points that come to mind when considering Cochran's work, and some that are much closer to home. I think of weavers such as Margery Blackman and the lines of her tapestry *From Aramoana* (1981-1982), created in protest against the attempted establishment of an aluminium smelter in the small coastal village of Aramoana, at the mouth of the Otago Harbour. I think of the Judy Patience wall-hanging above my own bed at home — an abstracted skyline woven in dark blue, ochre, and grey — though admittedly, it reminds me of looking out across the rooftops and chimneys of terraced houses in London, more so than any view here in Aotearoa.

The titles of Cochran's samplers are taken from titles of books within the artist's own library. *With Art of Embroidery* and *Persistence of Craft*, Cochran asserts embroidery's status as artform, drawing attention to the fact that today an increasing number of artists and designers are turning to textiles and fibre. *Practical Home Mending* appears more as a repetitive exercise designed to improve technique and form. This particular work — with its satisfying lines of immaculate stitches — exemplifies embroidery as a potentially meditative gesture. Indeed, embroidery has long been thought to possess a kind of transformative quality. In 1914 Emmy Zweybrück established an embroidery workshop and school for girls in Vienna, with a focus on embroidery as therapy for children, and similarly, many hospitals used embroidery as a therapeutic activity for wounded soldiers following the First World War. Cochran's *Bauhaus Women* speaks to the Bauhaus weaving workshop and the work of Anni Albers, Otti Berger, Gunta Stolz, and Lilly Reich. Established in 1919, the workshop experimented with traditional and industrialised weaving techniques and eventually created what became known as the Bauhaus fabrics.

In *New Times call for New Visions* and *New Visions Clutch*, a sampler is displayed alongside one of Cochran's bags, which the artist has been making since the early 2000s. With this pairing, our understanding of Cochran's work is complicated and somewhat playfully unravelled. As both sampler and bag are embroidered with the same design, the framed work now appears not as a discrete entity but as a pattern or work-in-progress for the bag. Considering these works together, I can't help but contemplate the strange significance inherent in the act of framing; the assumed accumulation of value and transmutation that occurs when we place an object within a frame or behind glass. But what of those objects we carry with us every day, flung over a shoulder, or tucked inside a coat pocket?

With a background in fashion, Cochran is best known for her distinctive handmade bags: there are the Flora bags with their delicate blooms, the Venn Diagram bags, the Trapeziums, the Pocket Abstracts, and the Wabi bags that fold in on themselves just so. Some bags are more academic, their designs inspired by historic examples such as the *chateleine*, a bag suspended from the waistband by cord or chain and popularised in the mid-late 19th Century.



All photography: Sam Hartnett



There are the bags that have gone a little wild. They don't even know they're bags — not really. One is made almost entirely of gloves; another of buttons; one of zips. Collector Sandy Callister writes of her obsession with Cochran's handbags, and her words capture something of the character and life of these objects: "My nine-handed handbag is something a Surrealist would love. Imagine a coterie of black embroidered gloves held together with red beading and Edwardian buttons destined to live in the 'after dark' hours."

Anni Albers' theory of 'tactile sensibility' looks to our relationship with the material as a means of connectivity and assurance. In *On Weaving* (1965) she wrote, "We touch things to assure ourselves of reality. We touch the objects of our love. We touch the things we form. Our tactile experiences are elemental." You take a bag with you; loop it over your arm and hold it close to your body. Sitting on the bus or train, or in a taxi at the end of the night, you look out the window and run your fingers over the stitching in a distracted way.

There is an acute awareness that comes with Cochran's studied and skilful appropriation of motifs and materials. Much like her sampling of modernist geometries and feminist histories, she is similarly drawn to repurposing vintage objects, fabric, buttons, and toggles. She disassembles and reassembles components to make them into something that is entirely and delightfully other. There is a certain economy at work here, and an assurance that runs throughout her practice. Each piece of material, every thread is chosen carefully. Cochran passes the needle through the fabric, pulls the thread tight. She looks ahead to the next stitch, and back at those that have come before.

She ties a knot there.

Swaps out one coloured thread for another.

And begins again.

Lily Hacking

*Lily Hacking is a Wellington-based arts writer with a special interest in contemporary ceramics, textiles, and design*