



MEND

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MEND

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NDRREG001

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for the award of the degree of Master of Fine Arts*

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Compulsory Declaration

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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Acknowledgments

A journey has a beginning and an end. My healing journey started probably about seventeen years ago when I entered the practice of Dr. Sheila Cowburn, clinical psychologist. She was the first to help me untangle my threads and show me where they all came from.

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Introduction

The motivation for this body of work stems from my firm belief that art can heal - that it is indeed one of art's functions to provide us with a mirror in which we can find ourselves and reflect on what we see. Through art-making I am trying to explain my life to myself. This search had its beginnings in my undergraduate years and finds its culmination in the final exhibition that forms part of the requirements of my Masters degree. It offers a glimpse into my private healing journey.

The following text engages with the means by which objects, needlework methodology and my own memories interconnect in my art making process, and together serve as a way of attending to what needs to be adjusted and repaired in my personal history. In an attempt to unravel my past, I have uncovered buried memories through objects that 'trigger' something in me and, by following these 'threads' through time-intensive needlework processes, have come to understand their relevance to my story. The surfacing emotions have provided the impulse for the body of work which, in turn, has manifested in my own internal transformation. Needlework has proven an especially apt tool for this process, as it offers ample quiet time for reflection while sitting bent over a time-consuming project. It also offers a cathartic method of mending on an interpsychic level that relates to the physicality of the work itself; which pins, pierces and binds, one's thoughts into the cloth in hand, changing its appearance as it orders and mends the gaps between the torn and frayed edges in one's self. It is important to note that while at a first glance my work may read solely as personal memoir, it is made with the intention of providing valuable points of reflection that extend beyond my own healing process. Through my own in-depth engagement with the materiality of fabric, thread and objects, I aim to inspire, in the viewer, a process of meditation on human experiences of trauma, memory, healing and repair in an individual, social, cultural and global sense.

Mend

While the term 'repair' could imply the restoration of any material or object, the word 'mend' has a strong and specific association to sewing and repairing clothes. In past generations, before mass production and cheap imports saturated the textile industry, attitudes towards everyday objects were more intimate and personal. 'Mend and make do' was more of a necessity in the average home than it is today. To mend, working with needle and thread, was part of everyday life. Where the ravages of daily use left their marks on household linen and clothes, new pieces of fabric would be integrated into the original cloth using various skillfully inlaid techniques. In other instances, a piece of fabric would be stitched to the back of a more utilitarian cloth and then, in minute precise stitches, 'darned' in place to cover a tear in the cloth. While the word 'mend' usually describes such processes of repairing cloth that is physically damaged, it can also imply healing and recovery in a more abstract, emotional or ideological sense (Collins Dictionary, 2015). It is in this conjunction that my inquiry lies: where needle and thread become the tool kit and the work process becomes the remedy in a personal healing journey of addressing the past and, by extension, engaging with issues of trauma and healing in a broader, more philosophical, sense.

In this paper, I refer to needlework as a term that encompasses a wide range of techniques I employ that all use needle and thread, including all forms of stitching, sewing, quilting, applique, crocheting and embroidery. While I use needlework techniques as a method to tell my story, I also make reference to the history of practicing needlework in my family through stitched texts and images. In my family, needlework is a way of communication; discussing various patterns, methods, yarns and fabrics creates a common interest, while the giving and receiving of gifts made with needle and thread, bypasses language and enables us to express ourselves in ways that words can not. With so much of our shared history being silenced, needlework provides my family and me with a context, as well as a 'language', that connects us again.

I come from a family of women embroiders in Austria - and have left them to come to South Africa - for what was to be just one year - in 1980. Ever since I have tried to understand why, in spite of wanting to live here, I felt at times an intense sense of abandonment and loss that I could not rationally explain. This sense of loss propelled my search to look behind those seemingly oversized emotions. While the aim of my work is to transform an inner conflict within me, it also strives to honour all parties involved. I am hoping to find a way of understanding the larger family situation that impacted on my early years. By searching for the missing pieces in my story and telling it from my perspective I hope to find what has trapped me all those years and free myself from the hold it has had over me for most of my adult life.

Textile as Metaphor

Textile production has a long legacy in the development of human history. It has been found from the study of Paleolithic hunter-gathers, that early humans wove plant fibres up to 12000 years ago (Jolie et al, 2011). While spinning, weaving and the production of cloth have served utilitarian and economic functions throughout the history of human development, they have also been referenced in myth, literature and spiritual writings from various cultural and geographic contexts as metaphors for the experience of life itself. Greek mythology recounts the story of Penelope, who, during the day, weaves a wedding shroud and then unpicks the day's work each night to gain time, warding off her suitors while she awaits Odysseus return (Pope, 1891: 42). This reference to weaving and thread as a symbol for the human lifespan, is echoed in the Three Fates of Greek mythology, according to which, three goddesses are said to preside over a person's destiny. Clotho spins the 'thread of life', Lachesis measures the length and breadth of it, and Antropos decides when to cut it down and end the lifespan ('Fates', 2013).

In addition to the association of weaving and thread-based processes with human life, these physical processes also serve to visualise the more abstract systems of language and text construction. The interconnectedness between the production of textiles and communication is closely linked through the common Latin root for the words 'textile' and 'text', which translates into 'to weave' or to 'fabricate' (Collier, 2012: 22). Traces of these linguistic links are still found in our daily use of idioms such as: 'the fabric of our lives', 'the world wide web', 'hanging by a thread', being 'tied in a knot' or someone is 'wearing thin', to name a few (Collier 2012: 18-23). It may be argued that, in a sense, to engage in a discourse about textiles is to talk about human existence and life itself. However, in order to discuss needlework as a means by which to consider ideas of human trauma and healing, it is necessary to consider more closely the relationship between cloth, needlework and memory.

Cloth: A carrier of passion

It has been noted in anecdotal and academic texts alike, that textiles and the processes that bring them forth are not merely utilitarian, but are imbued with cultural and personal meaning that is often tied up in the reciprocal processes of loss and memory. Cloth is a readily available receptacle for human emotions: tears, sweat, blood can be soaked up in it, turning any such piece of fabric into a silent witness and carrier of our stories. For instance, early American pioneers preserved their memories of 'home' through quilts made from fabric remnants saved from the clothes they arrived in. In this instance, cloth constitutes a record, a receptacle that speaks always of the history and heritage of its maker. Stories are imbedded in textiles. 'Who' made what, for whom, and how it was handed down through the family is part of the story. As such, in addition to the provenance of a piece, textiles also hold the traces of the people who used them, or wore them and can provide 'comfort' through physical contact with the invisible 'memory' in the cloth (Marks, 2000: 79).

The well-documented Kentucky Graveyard Quilt (1843) (Figure 1) made by Elizabeth Roseberry Mitchell, may be considered as an example of cloth as a carrier of memory. The quilt is made up of star patchwork blocks made from different shades of brown and calico fabrics, which are alternated with plain blocks in darker brown floral fabric. The center of the quilt depicts numerous coffins that form a graveyard and are enclosed by an appliquéd picket fence. A second border is lined with an additional 21 appliquéd coffins. Mitchell began stitching the quilt in 1836 after the death of her two year old son. Seven years later when she lost another son, she appliquéd another coffin to the center of the quilt with the son's name on it (Roberts, 2007: 135). In addition to spending time in a process that might receive and hold her heartache, the quilt itself was a way of commemorating and recording the deaths and burial places of her dead children, as well as other family members (Roberts, 2007: 134-136). It is in such an example that textile may be seen as not only a vessel in which memory and personal narrative, particular trauma and grief, are contained, but also a therapeutic means by which to externalise and 'tell' one's story. Engaging the idea of the embroidered textile as a type of text that has a documentary or narrative function, it is interesting to consider the integration of literal text in embroidery work, as opposed to or in addition to symbols and images, as a means by which to engage with psychological trauma and illness.



Figure 1. Elizabeth Roseberry Mitchell. *Kentucky Graveyard Quilt*. 1843. Fabric, thread, patchwork, applique, hand embroidery. 215.90 x 205.70 cm.

Needlework as Psychological Self-preservation (Robinson 2012: 132)

In 1922, art historian and psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn prescribed art as medicine for the suffering soul and saw art-making as the soul's attempt to redeem itself (McNiff, 1992: 16-17). Included in the large collection of works made by patients in his care at the Psychiatric University Hospital in Heidelberg, is an embroidered jacket made by Agnes Richter (Figure 2). The work comprises of a rough linen jacket covered in minutely stitched layered texts, out of the obscurity of which, single words and numbers are discernible. While her text might simply convey unclear emanations from her disturbed mind, the employment of her needlework skills may be argued to have enabled her to visualise her mental machinations, giving her some measure of control and protection against her loss of identity in the environment of the asylum (Michely, n.d.). Similar to Mitchell's quilt, the decorative and skillful quality of the embroidery work in Richter's jacket is nearly insignificant in relation to the process of psychological stabilization and recovery that the stitching enabled.

In her novel *From Man to Man* (1926), Olive Schreiner highlights this sentiment, when she wrote "... in that bit of white rag with the invisible stitching [...] lies all the passion of some woman's soul finding voiceless expression" and asks if the "the pen or pencil [had ever] dipped so deep in the blood of the human race as the needle?" (in Parker, 2010: 15). Tooke (2014) echoes Schreiner, questioning "how [...] the act of sewing [is] different from writing on paper, drawing or painting." In response to her own query, she highlights the stitch as enabling a deeper relationship with the surface with which it interacts, than paint or pencil. She states: "the needle and thread penetrates and changes the material, binds them together. More than a canvas, the words become part of the textile, reaching beyond the surface" (Tooke, 2014: 69). Embroidery as stitched text, has something confessional about it. Piercing the cloth with words that express strong emotions seems to exert some power over them by pinning them down. If stitching is indeed imbued with a sense of binding and transformation of a physical material on a level that reaches beyond the surface, then it is interesting to consider this process of



Figure 2. Agnes Richter. 1890's. Embroidered jacket.

deep transformation as mirrored, to some extent, in the psyche of the embroiderer. There is a sense that this must have been the case for Elizabeth Roseberry Mitchell and Agnes Richter as their works allowed them to sew their emotional despair into the textile in their hands, binding the sorrow they felt into the surface of the cloth.

Considering such examples, it may be argued that in addition to the realm of household beautification and utility to which textiles are usually assigned, there is a deeply psychological and experiential aspect of needlework that deserves further investigation. In her text *Women and Needlework in Great Britain 1920-1970* (2012: 132), Elizabeth Robinson notes that during personally and historically difficult times, needlework has offered makers a diversion from heavy thoughts, transforming the skill of stitching into an act of “psychological self-preservation.” It is noted that the propensity of needlework to calm the mind while the hands are busy makes it suitable for physical and psychological processes which require time, such as grieving or recuperating from illness (Reynolds, 2004). However, in addition to requiring significant time, the needlework process may be argued to be future oriented. It provides a temporary goal that can be aimed towards; a metaphorical safety rope and distraction from oppressive thoughts that hinges on a sense of investment in a future moment at which the work will be complete. It may also be important to note that needlework is a generative process, as opposed to a degenerative one, in which the act of creating an object of value to the maker may counter experiences of psychological or physical disintegration and unravelling. However, a discussion on the psychological value of needlework processes would be lacking if it did not recognise historical and ideological associations with needlework that have more to do with personal and social oppression than release.

Traditional needlework in Western history is rich in appendages and associations, linking it to a multitude of feminist theories and ‘art/craft’ and gender debates. Needlework was considered ‘decorative’ and ‘feminine’; something women made at home for their families rather than works made for a gallery where it would be displayed as ‘high art’ (Parker & Pollock 1981: 70). A case in point was the production of Patchwork quilts. A tradition, with a long history in social cultural activity, which is still largely practiced by women. A Patchwork quilt was usually seen as functional object that demonstrated

Growing up in Austria in the 1960s, where needlework has a long tradition, all the women in my family made some form of Handarbeit¹. There was always someone knitting, crocheting or embroidering. Besides being taught at school, it was also an activity that helped to pass the time during the long winter afternoons when the weather was too bad to be outside.

I fondly remember the times sitting in my grandmother’s kitchen, between the grown up women of the house... the light being drawn low over the

1 *Handarbeit*, a German word that translates to ‘handwork’ but is used especially for textile related handwork (Langenscheid Online Dictionaries, 2016).

the needlepoint skills of its maker rather than being seen as an autonomous artwork that required the intellect and thought processes of the artist (Parker & Pollock 1981: 71).

In her seminal book *The Subversive Stitch* (2010), Rozsika Parker paints a somewhat gloomy picture regarding women's needlework practice of the past, considering it largely as contributing to women's constricted role in social orders. While subtle mechanisms of oppression are, undoubtedly, tied up in practices which have historically, in a Western context, been considered to be 'women's work', one may argue that these discussions entirely disregard the pleasurable and therapeutic nature of needlework (Robinson, 2012: 11). Robinson notes not only a psychological benefit to such craft processes, but also considers the ways in which needlework impacted women's lives during times of war, providing an activity which fused aspects of economy, social duty, obligation and patriotism into an activity that was also pleasurable (Robinson 2012). In her response to the exhibition *Frayed: Textiles on the Edge*, which showed historical and contemporary textiles and explored the link between individual self expression and mental health issues through stitch, Ruth Battersby Tooke (2014: 69) remarks on this paradox of needlework as being simultaneously submissive and enjoyable. She states that "the act of sewing, head bent over diligently, quietly, can be viewed as a submissive act [...] however the drive to create, to express and look back at a day's work...gives the maker a sense of achievement, of regaining control of emotions and events" (Tooke, 2014: 69).

While needlework is indeed historically linked to ideologies of gender-based oppression, in many cultures, working with needle and thread has also served as a means to 'escape' oppressive circumstances and has been personally socially and economically uplifting to practitioners regardless of gender. The work done by sailors on long voyages and individuals held in institutions or internment camps during the war, not only kept the makers 'going', but also provided them with a form of subversive resistance against oppressive social norms and structures. For instance, Arthur Bispo do Rosaio's abundant embroidered banners and military jackets (Figure 3) were made during his later years while living with schizophrenia in a mental asylum. The garments draw on his experiences as a sailor in the Brazilian Navy and their creation is noted as being directed by the voices in his head (Barlow, 2011: 30-35). One might argue that in Bispo do Ro-

table...the soft hum of voices...the sighs, and silence that followed... while someone would be darning or knitting.

Living with my grandmother in the same house as my cousins, 'needlework' was just another thing we 'played'. Every now and then some of the grownups tried to show us how it was 'really' done; unpicking the offending stitches and starting us off again. This way we learned to 'sew' before we could read and write.

Nostalgia for those days lets me romanticise these times spent together bent over our needlework in convivial sociability, I am aware of that, but considering all the separations in our family over the years, it is this bond through needle and thread that connects me to the women in my family that I value most deeply. It winds itself through my life here in South Africa while it also ties me to Austria and the past. It is where I learned my stitching vocabulary, which I use now in my own work. Not in the traditional manner through following a prescribed pattern, but in a deliberate way of bending the rules to suit my own purpose.

My grandmother, having lived through two wars, was thrifty and practical in her use of yarn and thread, and would unpick old garments to turn them into something new. My mother on the other hand, having grown up with this frugality preferred new things.

She made her passion for traditional cross-stitch her life's work and embroiders only on pure linen. Over the years, she has immersed herself deeply into her needlework. She is a master in her skill and her works, quietly adorn many private homes around the world. It is a great skill that might almost be considered an obsession. While I greatly admire my mother's embroidery and have the deepest respect for her level of achievement, I do wonder about the excessive time she spends with it. One could speculate that it serves another purpose, besides the love for her cross-stitch.

A few years ago on one of my visits 'home', I asked her what she is thinking while she is looking at her embroidery all day. Her reply intrigued me... she said she only thinks about the next stitch. Perhaps she has attained such a level of stillness that enables her to switch off all the noise in her head... perhaps it is also a way of having control over unbidden thoughts that roam the mind. By retreating for the last forty years into her world of intense cross-stitching, I cannot help but wonder if this is not her way of escaping something.



Figure 3. Arthur Bispo do Rosario.
1984. *Manto do apresentafao*
(*Presentation Mantle*).

saio's case, stitching enabled the artist's understanding and experience of the world that was continuously silenced by the constraints of social norms and the mental institution, to be externalised and heard.

Another similar example of needlework as a means of self-preservation, is the bedspread (Figure 4) that World War II prisoner Day Joyce embroidered and kept hidden between the rugs on her camp bed, during her stay at the Stanley Internment Camp in Hong Kong. The sheet is densely embroidered and appliquéd, with the names of over 1100 fellow female internees, and relates stories about happenings in the camp in coded symbolism (Imperial War Museum, 2015). A cross-stitch sampler (Figure 5) made by Major Alexis Casdagli during his time as a German prisoner of war, provides a similar example of needlework as a means of expression in the constricting and silencing contexts of war. In addition to the artist's name and date it was made, the cross-stitched sampler consists of a border of swastica's, outside of which lines of morescode read "God save the King" and "Fuck Hitler" (Parkham, 2011). Having made many cross-stitch samplers during his internment, and continuing after his release, Casdagli is recorded as saying that "the Red Cross saved his life, but his embroidery saved his sanity" (Parkham, 2011). While not denying the strong associations of women's oppression that are tied up in embroidery processes, what these examples underscore is an approach to needlework as a mechanism of liberation, not restriction. Through needlework practice, the artists discussed find release from their own mental and physical constraints.

It is on this idea of needlework as a liberatory and therapeutic process that my project relies most heavily. Needlework is the technique through which I pin down my story. The cathartic process of externalizing and recording my personal narrative by employing and distorting the tradition of my familiar and familial sewing techniques, is what defines my art practice. By making art from my personal story through various forms of stitching with the aim to heal something inside me, I consider my work as traversing the seemingly distinct disciplines of Fine Art, therapeutic healing, and needlework traditions in order to consider experiences of trauma and healing in both a personal and a philosophical context. In order to more deeply understand the textile as a bearer of memory, as well as to investigate my own use of found objects in my body of work, it is necessary to more closely examine the links between objects and memory.



Figure 4. Day Joyce. 1942-45.
The Day Joyce Sheet

Working with fabric and thread ties me to my mother through the shared practice of needlework, even though our aims might be different. Hers is a 'silencing' of the mind while she works towards the completion of each project, while my work 'voices' that which twists and winds itself through my mind; making the process and the thoughts visible in stitches, and texts.



Figure 5. Alexis Casdagli. 1941.
Cross-Stitch Sampler

Objects and Memory: In search of the hidden story

Memories are tied up in the objects with which we surround ourselves. Professor of material culture Susan Pearce (1994: 20) speaks of the object as a "message-bearing entity," preserving the past in sensory fragmented details. She argues that an object acquires individual meaning through the person who used it, wore it, or treasured it, that it is tied up in the events that took place during its use and that the object as the 'real' thing validates the story that is being told (Pearce 1994: 20). Based on this, one may consider objects as silent witnesses to events in our lives. They are part of what Christian Boltanski describes as the "small memory", the undocumented stories that seem to get lost within the "big memories" that are recorded in history books (Semin et al, 1997: 17-19). In the search for the past, objects are clues about time and place, providing the setting and context for prior moments in our lives. As such, by coming in contact with objects we are, in some sense, 'transported' back to certain events. According to Marks (2000: 120), this is not necessarily dependent on the 'auratic' presence of 'the real thing' but it could be that an object stands in for the original one by its likeness. For instance, an object may be encountered that reminds one of another different object from the past, to which one ascribes a certain memory or emotion. It is noted that the function of such an object "is not the restoration of context of origin but rather the creation of a new context..."(Stewart, 1993: 151-152). Based on these ideas, my own use of textiles and found objects in my work may be considered to serve as agents in a process of memory recovery, regardless of whether or not the objects at hand are indeed the 'real' or 'original' objects to which my emotional response or memory is linked. Primary to this investigation of memory in the context of family narrative and relations, is the layeredness of the memory for which the objects in my work serve as vessels.

In my art-making, objects play an important role. They either act as triggers for some thought processes behind the making of a work, or in other instances they are physically included into the work. Sometimes it is their tactility or smell that bring forth flashes of moments from my past. For instance, last year I bought an old black umbrella in a second-hand shop in the little Karoo town of Barrydale. When I saw it, it was like finding an old friend. In my grandmother's house, next to the attic door, was a coat rack full of old jackets and outdoor apparel, and within this collection was an old black cloth umbrella. As children we used to play hide and seek, and I often hid behind those coats. Finding this old umbrella transported me back to my childhood in an instant. I remembered the smell of cooking in the house, the cold emanating from the attic door, the scratchiness of the coats against my face...it was all there with me in that second-hand shop. Through experiences such as this, I have become interested in the capacity of objects to unleash memories and experiences of the past in their beholder. In conjunction with an engagement with my family heritage of needlework, this concern for the object as a vessel or trigger for the process of memory has become a cornerstone around which my practical and conceptual enquiry into the nature of trauma, memory and healing has been structured.

During my visits back to Austria, I am often searching flea-markets and 'junk stores'...for nothing particular. Sometimes I find old needlework, which I feel I need to 'rescue' if I see them offered up for sale. It is an urge to protect them from being 'lost'...unremembered in their up-rootedness "from the places they used to belong to and the people whose lives they were part of", a paradox in itself, as I am reminded that I do not know 'who' made them or where they have been (Pamuk, 2012: 52). It is their 'abandonedness' that moves me. Seeing an old embroidered cloth, I have to think of the maker. If there are mended patches, I can imagine the person sitting bent over the piece and repairing it, imprinting it with a visible sign that someone's hands have worked on this spot.

I am not sure why I feel so strongly for certain old things when I see them at a flea-market. There is often an uncanny familiarity about them, as if I know them. I imagine it is because they remind me of my grandmother, and the time during which I lived with her. She had an old house that belonged to the family for over two hundred years, and her attic – a source of spookiness as well as fascination for me as a child - in the dark, what one could not 'identify' with the eyes, the mind readily filled the gaps with the vast images of Grimm's fairy tales - harboured many generations of discarded furniture, objects and clothing. She kept those old things orderly and tidy under lock and key, and I always had the feeling that she was 'safe guarding' them...preserving remnants of other people's lives as part of remembering them.

On the rare occasion that she would part with an object, it came with strict instructions to look after it well. When I returned to South Africa after a year back home, we both 'sort of knew' that this could be for longer. She gave me my grandfather's early 1900s glass plate camera that required a firm promise from me to "never give it away"... I had become the lifelong custodian of something she valued and, even though I never knew my grandfather, I treasure it because I loved her. This sense of not only connection, but also duty towards objects and their wellbeing as metonyms for the people with which they are associated, is significant in the conceptualisation of my project. I am interested in objects as physical markers of human and familial relationship, a type of vocabulary that when sorted, arranged and studied may disclose stories remembered and forgotten, actual and imagined.

While some of those objects that I have collected bring forth treasured memories, others open a door – a Pandora's box- that was shut tight for most of my adult life. When the capacity to remember clearly or fully fails, these objects act as prompts that recall lost or evasive moments of the past and the emotions that are linked to them. In my own search for understanding the connections between what I remember and what is 'common' knowledge in the family I consider these objects as valuable guides that help me to locate half-buried memories. This process of engaging with objects as a means to unearth fragments of a past, helps in a sense, to write one's own history. Walter Benjamin differentiates between what happened and what is remembered. He

states: "...an experienced event is finite [...] confined to one sphere of experience; a remembered event is infinite, because it is merely a key to everything that happened before and after it" (cited in Rossington & Whitehead 2007: 120). I have found this distinction between that which is experienced and that which is remembered to be of primary importance in my own process of recalling and inscribing my past.

I am intrigued to notice, that after documenting my collection of objects at the beginning of my masters project, I found common themes in my search of which I was previously unaware. Apart from the old textiles and needlework samplers that I have consciously sought out, I have a sizable amount of mountain postcards, and devotional cards picturing Madonna and child. In retrospect, after working with these objects for the past two years, I have come to see these cards as suggesting a link to my mother as the mountain climber and my longing for the maternal connection of the Madonna and child, a longing to again be a child in my mother's arms.

The connection I feel towards other objects is less clear as they only provoke an obscure residue of some unnamed emotion in me. Perhaps their time, in which I may fully understand my attraction towards them, is still to come. In the story *Austerlitz* (2013), W. G. Sebald's main character wonders if it were not possible to meet with people and things from the past that have some connection to our life in the here and now. He wonders if they are, perhaps, "waiting in this timelessness they inhabit, for us to eventually arrive" (Sebald, 2013: 367). Following the associations my objects bring forth, I often arrive at points in my work, where something becomes clear; where the reason behind a deep emotional connection to an object is revealed. Arriving at these junctions always brings some relief and acceptance, which in turn lessens the hold that the 'unspoken' past has over me. It is through a process of speaking or writing this past through found objects and the practice of embroidery – a gesture which implies a process of recording, generating, and connecting – that I aim to better understand both my personal relationship to the past, and, in a broader sense, engage with the capacity of art-making as a means by which to move through moments of trauma.

Memory and Family Narrative

The narrative of any family's story is made up of many facets, and while every member will have a different memory of an event, all may be considered valid. In the context of family relations, we easily talk about some of our shared stories, but keep others locked away, as whichever way one looks at some past events, there is a discomfort that time does not seem to ameliorate. In her text *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*, Annette Kuhn (2002: 7) notes that by not talking about these stories, they

become shadows, and although they are located in the past their reverberations are felt in the present. She stresses the fact that these shadows are

“a proper part of life, and must not - indeed they cannot - be split off from what is more agreeable or acceptable... [f]or the repressed will always return. Bringing the...shadows into the open allows the deeper meanings of the family drama's mythic aspects to be reflected upon, confronted and understood at all levels. This in turn helps in coming to terms with the feelings of the present, and so in living more fully in the present” (2002: 7).

Sifting through the family narrative in search of the shadows that hide in the recesses of a shared past, involves careful removing of layers of what is remembered by whom, and what is left unsaid. Kuhn compares re-construction of memory to detective work. She states: “the past is like the scene of a crime [...] if the deed itself is unrecoverable, its traces may still remain [and] as the veils of forgetfulness are drawn aside, layer upon layer of meaning and association are peeled away, revealing not ultimate truth, but greater knowledge” (cited in Rossington & Whitehead 2007: 232-233). Even though there are parts in my childhood that are not talked about in my family, they are part of my story. Through working intensively with my collected objects, which often trigger some half-buried memories, I follow these threads of memory in search of a better understanding of the relationship between the ‘actual’ event and my own recollection of it. Following this thread through the objects is an intuitive process and an integral part of my search towards a better understanding of my family narrative.

In my own needlework practice I use memories as raw ingredients. Similarly to a quilter approaching the design of a patchwork blanket, I use fragments of the past and rearrange them in a new pattern. The aim for myself is to gain a different perspective on an old issue. Sometimes these ‘fragments’ are beautiful brightly colored ones, at other times they are torn and frayed, desolate pieces beyond recognition. Nevertheless, each is a part of my story and together these pieces represent the ‘fabric of my life’.

While some memories are anecdotal and readily shared with the family, others are my own, and private. I am aware that time and distance distorts our view of the past and covers it in a patina that makes us remember things as better or worse than they were. Kuhn (2002: 7) notes that while memories are not hard and fast facts, ‘what’ is remembered and ‘how’ and ‘why’ it is remembered has to be relevant in the understanding of one’s personal story.

Phantom Pain: The return of the repressed (Wollheim 1986: 130-131)

In his early work with the nature of the unconscious and memory, Sigmund Freud wrote of all events as recorded and stored in the mind. He spoke of an imprint in our consciousness which he compared to a "mystic writing pad" (Gibbons, 2007: 130). In her book Contemporary Art and Memory: Images of Recollection and Remembrance, Joan Gibbons (2007: 130) draws on Freud, noting that there is a "... topographical separation between the conscious mind and the reservoir of the unconscious..." that may be compared to a "...child's wax covered writing pad on which thoughts are inscribed and then erased in favor of new thought, while always leaving a vestige below the surface." In other words, there is a layeredness to memory and while shards of experience may not be consciously accessible, they are deeply imprinted on one's psyche and have an influence over one's present experience. Considering memories that have been repressed, either because the child was not able to understand it or 'deal' with the consequences of it, Richard Wollheim (1986: 130-131) explains that following a traumatic event, specific mnemonic patterns are established in the mind. When "given the right trigger, [these patterns] recreate the feelings around the [original] event. He notes that "even if the event is not consciously remembered [...] the links to the original event are made conscious [and] the past will assert itself in a recurring pattern which operates to its own phenomenology". In other words, although these patterns are ingrained in one's unconscious memory, they may be triggered by a cue in the present moment, such as a sensory experience, an object or a relationship which calls to mind, and body, the trauma of the past. In an interesting reference to these patterns as occurring not only within the individual but across generations, psychologist Alice Miller (1991: 74) notes that mothers who had repressed their own traumas often become "blind and deaf" to the plight of their own offspring thus passing the pain onto the next generation. In other words, trauma and memory may be understood as not only existing within the fibre of the individual psyche, but through relationships and across generations. Wollheim (1986: 130-131) aptly notes that "only once these links are understood, will the past trauma lessen its grip on the present."

*It has been argued that art-making can help one to retrieve those unconscious parts of one's being and allow one to come to know them again and integrate them into one's story. In his book *The Creative Soul: Art and the Quest for Wholeness*, Lawrence Staples (2009: 4) states that "art is a projection of ourselves, and by learning to interpret it, we can find ourselves in it" and access pieces of ourselves that were shut off for much of our lives. It is this process of filling in the gaps in my story and negotiating the hold of my own past trauma on my present experience that I aim to convey in and through this body of work. It is important to note that I do not merely see this as a project in personal art therapy (although it has in many ways provided personal healing), but an earnest attempt to consider how visual objects and process-based practice may be implicated in the psychological mechanisms behind trauma and repair. As such, it is important to more closely consider the idea of art as inspiring transformation and healing.*

Art-Making as Personal Transformation

It has been argued by artists, viewers and health-care practitioners alike that art and healing are intimately connected. Examples of such works are as varied and diverse as the individual stories of the art-makers behind them. Whether the work embodies the hopes of traumatised refugee children who reclaim their identity by pasting a suitcase with drawings and found objects (Glacherty 2006: 5) or takes the shape of a remembrance quilt for a lost loved one (Roberts 2007: 133-143) art-making can be medicine for a person in emotional distress. Through the process of engaging deeply with a particular activity (be it making or viewing a work of art) one's thoughts are taken out of their immediate surroundings, offering a momentary reprieve from outside pressures.

*In her book entitled *The Soul's Palette: Drawing on Art's Transformative Powers for Health and Well-Being*, Cath Malchiodi (2002: 19) establishes an important distinction between the concepts of 'cure' and 'healing'. She notes that "in contrast to a medical 'cure' which involves treatment to remove an illness, 'healing' is an inner process", one that takes time until a person's balance is restored. It is because of the time during which to safely and non-verbally externalise trauma and stress that art-making affords, that creative activities are frequently implemented in contemporary health-care. Malchiodi (2002: 19) notes that the use of "one's own creativity" as the activation key to an inner healing process, is "similar to the practice of homeopathy, which stimulates the body's own resources to treat an illness." Apart from the need to ease an inner conflict, making art from wounded places, offers the possibility to deactivate something potentially harmful and private and transform it into something that can be looked at publicly. To use Annette Kuhn's (2002: 120) words, the resulting work is*

powered by a desire not just to understand my own past and come to terms with the divided and alienated consciousness that comes from it; but also to put together...a body of knowledge and a way of knowing that spring not from something imposed from the outside but from what is rooted within.

The awareness of the presence of the viewer that is implied in art-making is significant in this project in that it shifts the work from a purely personal process of art therapy to one that can more broadly engage with human experiences of trauma and healing; concerns that, while stemming from a personal place in myself, may also be reconsidered through the work by the viewer. It is important to note that while this project is one of writing my own personal story, that story demands the engagement of the viewer in order to both be heard and, to a greater extent, serve as a catalyst for considering trauma and healing as unifying human experiences.

I am keenly aware of that part in my shared family history that is not spoken about. It lies like a thin blanket of ice between my mother and me...ever afraid that it could break, I don't venture far out on it. If it were not for the recurring homesickness that holds me captive somewhere in my childhood past, I might do the same as my mother...and just think about the next stitch.

When the soul is in distress, says Nietzsche "...art approaches as a saving sorceress, expert at healing. She alone knows how to turn these nauseous thoughts...or absurdity of existence into notions which one can live with" (McNiff, 1992: 48).

This statement reflects my conviction that through making art from those "torn and frayed" places in me, I can address and repair the old wounds in me. By processing my past through making art, I hope to restore some equilibrium, which the silence surrounding the untold parts of my childhood denied. I am aware that the loss of parents in each generation had an effect on their offspring, which was handed down like a phantom pain – not seen but felt – through the family line. Acknowledging these connections to cause and effect, I process my past by stitching, appliqueing, and attaching fragmented pieces of fabric in symbolic gestures of making something 'whole' again.

Trauma in Contemporary Fabric Works

This process of drawing on personal experiences of trauma and textile-based processes as a means by which to engage with questions of healing and transformation is central to the practices of contemporary artists Louise Bourgeois and Tracey Emin. In a poetic description of her practice, Bourgeois refers to her unresolved emotions as “demons,” the intensity of which is too much and may only be controlled by “transferring” their energy into sculpture (Bernadac & Obrist 2007: 133, 376). While Bourgeois’ works comprise of a variety of media, her concerns most often center around the female body, pain and the complexities of her upbringing in a family home with complicated relationships. In her later stages of work towards the end of her life, she turned increasingly to textile as a means by which to visualise and engage with her childhood memories. Among the many textile sculptures that Bourgeois produced during this time that make reference to her upbringing, are two fabric books. One refers to the Bievre River that flowed through her childhood garden, the other one is an ode to forgetting (Celant, 2010: 324). *Ode à l’oubli* (2002) a fabric book of 34 pages in various abstract designs which include fabrics from the artist’s own clothes and napkins from her trousseau, seem to speak about the years of memories imbedded in those textiles (Costello, 2013). Bourgeois described clothes as an “exercise of memory” through which she explored the past (Celant, 2010: 254). In typical Bourgeois fashion though, while working towards forgetting, she is also aware that some things never can be forgotten, as her lithograph page inscribed with the text ‘The return of the repressed’ suggests (Costello, 2013). Driven by a need to have control over her emotions Bourgeois worked with a tireless obsessiveness at re-configuring her past in order to live with it’s consequences in the present (Celant, 2010: 306). Expressing the unspeakable is the “reason [for] the work; the motivation [for] the work is to destroy the unspeakable” (Celant, 2010: 254).



Figure 6. Louise Bourgeois. 2002. *Ode à l’oubli*. Fabric illustrated book with 35 compositions: 32 fabric collages, 2 with ink additions, and 3 lithographs (including cover), page (each approx.): 11 3/4 x 13” (29.8 x 33 cm); overall: 11 x 12 3/16 x 1 3/4” (28 x 31 x 4.5cm).



Figure 7. Louise Bourgeois. 2002. *Return of the Repressed*, no. 28 of 34, from the fabric illustrated book, *Ode à l’oubli*. 2002. Lithograph, page: 11 3/4 x 13” (29.8 x 33 cm).

Bourgeois' use of her own clothes as "signposts in the search of the past" (Celant, 2010: 254) is similar to my own use of old textiles that hold memories of the people who made them or used them. Working into dishtowels belonging to my grandmother or using cross-stitch fragments of my mother's work, allows me – although physically separated by distance and time – to meet with them in that piece of cloth, where our hands worked on the same spot. As I work with those old textiles I imagine how they were made and used and as I dwell on its history and absorb the past that seems to emanate from the fabric, half-buried memories, triggered by the touch or smell or the pattern in the cloth, rise to the surface of consciousness bringing further awareness with them.

Similar to Bourgeois, British artist Tracey Emin employs textiles and embroidery in order to engage with issues of personal trauma and memory. Emin and her twin brother grew up in Margate where her parents ran a hotel. Her father led a double life; spending half of the week with Tracey's mother and the twins, and the rest of the week with his other wife and children in London (Elliot 2009: 30). Emin's blankets, on which large bold letters, slang words and symbolic imagery are appliqued onto colourful backgrounds, bear testimony to her difficult upbringing and to her resulting rage and frustration. An uncomfortable juxtaposition between the repellent messages which are inscribed and the blankets themselves as denoting comfort and security, engenders a sense of trauma and loss of a most personal kind.



Figure 8. Louise Bourgeois. 2002. *Untitled*, no. 19 of 34, from the fabric book, *Ode à l'oubli*.



Figure 9. Tracey Emin. 2004. *Hate and Power can be a Terrible Thing*. Dimensions: 2700 x 2060 x 3 mm. Collection of the Tate Modern.

It has been suggested that Emin's use of cheerful 'girlish' fabrics and patchwork techniques might appear reminiscent of 1960s and 1970s second wave feminism, however, while it is impossible to not consider the works' feminist underpinnings, her use of floral fabric and embroidery serves as a medium by which to engage with her own private life (Parker, 2010: xv). It is important to note that, while evidence of Emin's troubled upbringing is literally inscribed on the surface of her works, the works themselves are not meant to be understood as a display of suffering, but rather as an effort "to make something good out of something bad" (Emin cited in Bühler, 2009: 165). The 'bad' would refer to certain events in her childhood which had lasting consequences and provide the impetus for much of her work. While Emin's material choices seem to deliberately conjure notions of the feminine and the decorative, the language that she employs ruptures any initial sense of softness or prettiness to the work. In doing so, Emin manages to show in her blankets the vulnerable 'girl' and the 'angry' woman at the same time. While this appropriation of typically feminine fabrics seems at odds with what she embroiders and appliques onto her blankets, it does claim its space within what is largely associated with 'womens work' and 'home-making', which, one may argue, renders the work as both a feminist action, as well as a tool of catharsis for the artist herself.

Psychoanalyst Margot Waddell, describes this process of externalizing the 'bad', raw emotion and transforming it into something 'good' that can be looked at and talked about, as "containment" (cited in Parker, 2010: xix). This idea follows a term borrowed from W.R. Bion who describes the process that occurs between parent and child, or between patient and analyst, which takes "the formless fears and raw experience of the child and patient, [and] makes sense of them, and return[s] them in a form that can be thought about" (Parker, 2010: xix). One might argue that this is the same process that occurs in the art-making practice of *Bourgeois, Emin and myself*, and that, inherent in this process, is the knowledge that the therapeutic action of the artist, may inspire some type of affective or cognitive meditation on the part of the viewer. In this way, even if the viewer has not experienced similar trauma or may not be able to conceptualise the pain or loss represented in the work, they may still consider concepts of trauma and healing in a broader sense, as unifying human experiences.

Drawing on the theoretical, historical and contemporary fine art references discussed here, my body of work presented for my masters degree expresses my in-depth engagement with ideas of trauma and healing: the role of memory in searching for the larger family narrative, and the place of needlework as a point of re-negotiating the past and an apparatus of healing. The works listed below show the unfolding of my process in order of appearance and the accompanying artist's book gives a more detailed insight into my process and individual works.

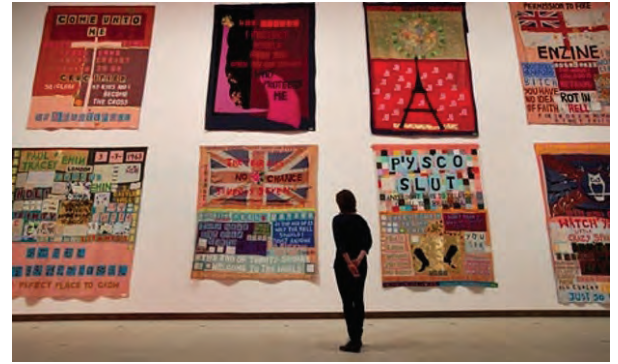


Figure 10. Tracey Emin. Collection of blankets installed in the show *Love Is What You Want* at London's Hayward Gallery.

Looking back on the work of the last two years, certain stages in the process become apparent. It begins with the search for the cause of the ailment. This is then followed by the *Auseinandersetzung*² with it, in order to work towards a transformation of the issue. In the last phase a certain relief is felt which allows the issue to be laid to rest.

The first phase describes my intuitive search guided by selected found objects, and what they trigger, which was often followed by intense writing. Everything that surfaced during this time was looked at closely and any resonance noted and used as the starting point for an artwork.

2 *Auseinandersetzung*, a German word that encapsulates all these terms: to argue, discuss, dispute, confront, clash, debate, examine, analyse and come to terms with (Langenscheid Online Dictionaries, 2015).

Catalogue of Works



1. *Documenting my Collection* (2014).
20.5 x 14 cm. Fabric, paper,
glue, ink, thread, found objects.
Four notebooks which contain photocopies
of postcards, letters, and photographs of
objects. The titles of the books are: *Objects*
(blue note book), *Textiles + Other Objects*
(red note book), *Photographs + Postcards:*
Christmas + Snow + Devotional Cards (black
note book), *Postcards: Snow + Mountain +*
Christmas (black note book).



2. *Story Board* (2014). 800 x 122 x 6 cm. The work consists of a mood board covered in soft white cotton fabric to which objects are pinned. Objects include: 8 black and white postcards of winter scenes, 4 black and white photographs, one shard of blue and white ceramic, covered in mosquito netting, tied with red thread; a small plastic toy giraffe, two devotional cards, two fabric amulets, of which one has a keyhole embroidered in button hole stitch and the other a heat transfer image of a cloud and a embroidered outline of a woman, a third amulet with a plastic toy stag has a grey felt background. The board further includes, two stitched figurines, five cloth fragments of various sizes with machine and hand embroidered texts, three bare twigs of thyme, one round ornamental keyhole cover, one photograph with embroidered stitches, two white snails with red threads hanging from their interior, and one small assemblage entitled *Kindl* (2012), which includes, a scanned photograph and found objects, mounted on wallpapered foam core board.



3. *I am not Tracey Emin* (2014). Fabric and thread. 187 x 136 cm. This work is an appliquéd and embroidered blanket in bright colours, similar to the style of Tracey Emin's work. In a tongue and cheek way it points to the similarities between Emin's process of stitching personal text onto fabric and my own. However, this is where the resemblance ends. While Emin's blankets are bold shocking statements about her life, mine are rather 'windows' into my thoughts. In appliquéd texts I point out the differences between Emin's work and process and my own. I believe there is a tendency to group female artists working with needlework and fabric as working with "craft" or "emotion", and as such the work is intended to suggest that the stories that are told through works by artists such as Emin, Bourgeois, and myself cannot be conflated.

The works 'I am not Tracey Emin' and 'I am also not Louise Bourgeois' are part of a triptych, that I originally called, Essay in Three Panels which was intended as a stitched text exploring my position in relation to artists working with related themes and materiality. In the third of these hangings 'Cobwebs in the Corners of my Mind' I 'opened' the door to my 'own' work.

Where the first two quilts show the similarities between my work and the work of Emin and Bourgeois, the third work in the series, 'Cobwebs in the Corners of my Mind' shows where my work is different from theirs. The fragments of text-cloths, both hold my thoughts and questions in embroidered stitches, and also show my own fragmentation. By stitching all the little pieces onto one cloth, I acknowledge this 'torn-apartness' that I am trying to mend through all these different fragmentseirs. The fragmentsto hat seems forever divided through the distancedces with in me. ood.st, Emin or Bourgeois that seem to represent a search for wholeness within me.



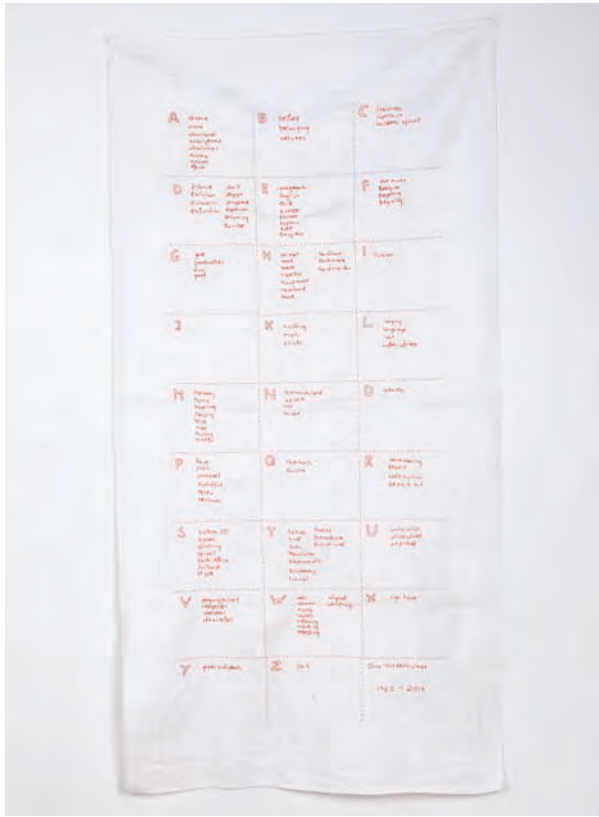
4. *I am also not Louise Bourgeois* (2014). Found object, fabric, thread, hand embroidered and appliquéd. 145 x 100 cm. In this work I continued the theme of comparing certain working techniques, as well as thematic concerns, between the artist and myself. On ecru coloured flannel fabric, I have stitched four fabric 'pages' - two in a row - reminiscent of Bourgeois' fabric books and in similar shapes and sizes. One of the pages has bold red appliquéd letters declaring that 'I am also not Louise Bourgeois'. The design of the two lower fabric pages resemble spider webs and one of them has a porcelain dolls leg attached to the centre of the 'web' which is both a link to one of Bourgeois' works *Untitled (Leg and Jewelry)* 1996, (cited in Celant 2010: 82) as well as our shared connection of a 'broken' childhood. A large black spider is machine appliquéd over the lower half of the blanket, where it seems to float over the rectangular cream coloured text pages, which state, in hand stitched letters, further similarities and dissimilarities between my own work and that of other artists.



5. *Cobwebs in the Corners of my Mind* (2014). Found objects, thread, photocopies, mull cloth. 230 x 127cm. This 'hanging' follows on directly from the works *I am not Tracey Emin* and *I am also not Louise Bourgeois*, where I suggested that there are similarities between these artists themes and working methods, *Cobwebs in the Corners of my Mind* represents the entry into my own style of work. Hand and machine embroidered texts, found objects as well as photocopies of mountain and winter scenes, are stitched in red and grey thread onto fabric fragments, which are then attached to mull cloth. The open weave of the mull cloth is suggestive of a veil, or a net. The artwork hangs from four suspender clips. On the lower half of the work are two further suspender clips attached to the background, from which two red threads lead diagonally outwards towards two stones on the floor that are covered in red crochet stitches.

Hand and machine embroidered texts from my journals are stitched in red and grey thread onto fabric fragments and these are then sewn onto mull cloth, together with photocopies of winter mountain landscapes and found objects. Some of these objects are from my grandmother's home, such as buttons, collars, lace, and suspender clips. The open weave of the mull cloth is suggestive of a veil, or a net, which could be read as something that is being hidden behind a veil, or caught in a net, implying either a safety net or a trap. This ambiguity echoes the initial uncertainty within my search, in which I tried to find the cause for my Zerrissenheit³ while at the same time trying to shield it from being aired to the outside world. Within the objects attached, are tightly wrapped bundles of white cloth and stitched figurines hinting at past events over which I have no control. The photocopies of winter landscapes represented a longing in me, which I initially thought had to do with living far away from Austria and her snow-covered mountains. However, now that I am near the end of my two year 'art - and healing process' I see it as a longing for the mother; my mother and the alignment with what she holds dear ...her memories of her mountain climbing days and the white wintery snow landscapes which she loves so much. My intuitive collecting of these postcards has led me to uncover much hidden material between my mother and myself.

3 *Zerrissenheit* is a very descriptive German word, which would translate into 'torn-aparntness'. The closest English translation is 'inner conflict' (Langenscheid Online Dictionaries, 2015).



6. *Emotive Alphabet* (2014). Found object, thread, hand embroidered. 103 x 52 cm. Red letters are hand embroidered in alphabetical order onto an old white damask dishcloth. The letters are divided by a grid made of red running stitches. Each rubric shows the capital letter as it appears in the alphabet, with words starting in this letter in lowercase font. While the dishcloth suggests 'domesticity' it is also reminiscent of souvenir kitchen tea-towels with printed recipes on it. By extension it also resembles a needlework alphabet sampler, but instead of listing the individual letters only, it shows also examples of words beginning with the letter. The choice of words, suggests an emotional state.



7. *None Members Club* (2014). Found objects, fabric, thread, metal, chalk, hand/machine embroidered. 130 x 45 x 8 cm. This work consists of a wooden board that is divided by wooden strips into rows. On the top row, chalk letters in capital font read: 'NONE MEMBERS CLUB'. Each row has rusted metal hooks drilled into it at regular intervals. Some of the hooks are missing. 46 rectangular fabric pieces in various sizes, textures and shades of cream and grey are suspended from these hooks. Each fabric piece is either hand or machine embroidered and is hanging from a fine linen thread that runs through a brass eyelet; the string is knotted in a loop on either end. The embroidered words, are in English and German, and some are invented word combinations.

If one is to accept the claim that intuition is "the royal road to hidden wisdom" (Palmer, 1998: 4) then my seemingly 'random' collection of gathered objects was led by the intuitive search for understanding of the 'unspoken past' that stands between myself and my mother, as well as for the elements of our combined story. The intensive writing that usually follows my response to finding these objects brings connections to the surface that I did not see or anticipate when I bought the piece. Each time an object grasped my attention enough to work with it, the writing and meditation that ensued led to a deeper understanding, of how all the events in my story are connected.



8. *Mother/Child Pods* (2014). Found objects, thread, wire, cement, porcelain, paper, seeds. Dimensions variable. The work *Mother/Child pods* consists of a series of 33 figurines, made of different materials, such as textiles, thread, ribbon, cement, polyester batting, bandage, cotton wool, handmade paper, slip-clay, algae, grass and wire. They loosely resemble body shapes. Apart from the figurines made from cement, wire, algae and grass, they are all various shades of white. Some are densely embroidered, following the pattern in the cloth, others are tied with red cotton thread or ribbon. One has red hair and two have smaller pod shapes stitched and tied to them. Filled with various materials, such as seeds, paper, cement, wool and textile off-cuts, their weight differs, and some are hollow.

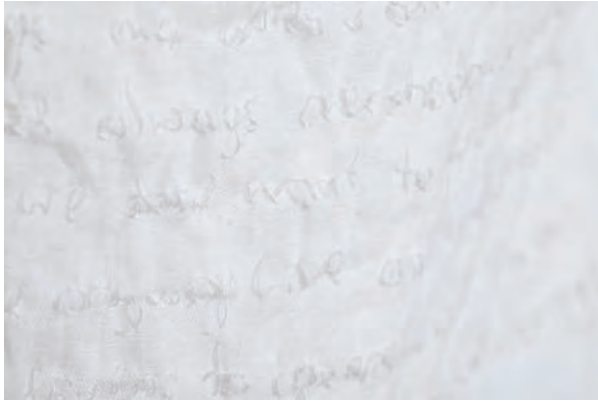
As I peeled away layer after layer of meaning behind the objects and the relevance they had to my woundedness, I became aware of how powerful this complex really is. The closer I came to unraveling what lay at the heart of the matter, the stronger my longing for home, mother and safety became. This was serious 'shadow' work. Jung, amongst others, stressed the importance of integrating the shadow into ones life in order to take its powerful negative influence away (Pincola-Estés, 1993). As I plunged deeper and deeper into an uncontrollable longing for my mother - which my intellect felt was completely irrational, as I had just recently visited her - I started to make my first 'Mother/Child Pods'.

The first pods were made following a drawing in which I tried to express that unity between mother and child, like being part of the mother in a tight embrace. Not wanting to be too literal and create a 'Madonna and Child' image, I aimed more for a shape that could be both an expression of that longing, and also a vessel for my intense emotions. Initially I used old white cotton dishcloths from my grandmother, and either tied the bean-like shape with red thread, or followed the jacquard pattern of the textile in small embroidered stitches. This work was especially important in my two year process, as it proved once again in my moment of greatest despair that I had the key in my hand that could unlock that door behind which I was trapped: my needle and thread. I worked on the first series of pods until I felt an easing of my homesickness.

At a later stage, after the homesickness had passed, I made more pods, purely to explore the possibilities of combining different materials with this shape that, for me, symbolised vulnerability. These pods were made from diverse materials such as sea-grass, handmade paper, algae, cotton wool, porcelain, cement and chicken wire - bringing the total number of figurines to 33. By using materials from my surroundings here in the Cape, my thoughts 'travelled' to the places where I gathered them from, and provided me with a sense of the 'here and now', which was both grounding and reassuring.



9. *Umbrella - my entangled Family life* (2014). Found object, red thread, linen thread. 100 x 100 x 100 cm. This work consists of an old black cotton cloth umbrella, which has a wooden handle through which a piece of rope is threaded into a loop with a knot at the end. A multitude of red cotton threads are embroidered into the cloth which hang in various lengths downwards, some reaching the vicinity of the umbrella handle. The work is suspended from the ceiling by a fine linen thread, which is threaded through the wooden spike that protrudes from the top of the umbrella.



- 10.** *Fare Well Cloth* (2014). Found objects, cotton thread, hand embroidered. 27 x 26 cm. In the center of a thin white handkerchief, lower case letters are hand embroidered in white thread. The white letters are almost invisible on the white background. The text is from a journal entry from 2014, written a few days before I left my mother again, to return to South Africa.



- 11.** *Unwinding in Stitches* (2014 - 2015). 13 fabric works, individual works ca. 12 x 9 cm. Fabric, heat transfers, silk screen, thread, found objects, hand embroidered. Dimensions variable. This series of fabric works consist of small fragmented raw edge textile pieces which are overlaid with various coloured fabrics and heavily stitched in red or white thread. They are mostly in running stitch and some have text embroidered into them. Some have lace fragments, heat transfer pictures or silk-screened words as part of their composition. Each complete textile work is mounted on a balsa-wood backing.

As I came closer to this deep-seated wound in me, the complex reared its head and defended its territory vehemently, causing great anxiety. As a 'letting-go' ritual, every evening I made a little fabric swatch, 'Unwinding in Stitches' in an attempt to metaphorically 'close' the door behind the day's work.



- 12.** *The Heart of the Mat(t)er* (2014). Found objects, heat transfers, paper, pins and needles, hand embroidery and appliqué. 223 x 133 cm. An old mended bed sheet provides the background for this work. Large outlined red embroidered letters in a semi circle at the top center of the work read: "THE HEART OF ". Nestled into this curve is a red fabric heart surrounded by thread 'rays' underneath the words "THE MAT(T)ER", that conclude the phrase. The second letter "T" is crossed out with two red threads that are pinned over it. Loosely arranged in a chronological sequence, photographs on heat transfers are stitched or pinned in place. Texts appliquéd or embroidered give clues to the photographs. Some texts are left incomplete with the pin in place where it was last used, and other texts are written in pencil on paper and pinned to the sheet. Red fabric crosses are stitched over certain images, giving clues to the history behind the photograph. Certain fabric pieces show the marks where they have been unpicked, which further adds to the ambiguity and the incompleteness of the work.

Following the intense Auseinandersetzung with my childhood, and the cathartic release after the 'Mother/Child Pods', I made the work 'The Heart of the Mat(t)er'. With embroidered and appliquéd texts and photo transfers stitched onto an old bed-sheet, I tried to make visual connections between events that happened in my mother's and my grandmother's lives which still made themselves felt in my own childhood. Seeing those connections, as if for the first time, I understood my own story as part of consequences that happened in previous generations. This particular work was a threshold experience for me. By 'seeing' the wounds of the others, I could accept my own. This process calls to mind how aptly Louise Bourgeois speaks of the needle as a tool for forgiveness stating that it "is used to repair damage" metaphorically and physically⁴ (Parker, 2010: xix).

⁴ Bourgeois is referring to her Mother's repair work on old tapestries - which was the families business - but also to her own metaphorical reparation through working her emotions into her fabric works (Bernadac & Obrist 2007: 117-121, 367).



- 13.** *Amulets* (2012 - 2014). Found objects, thread, heat transfers, embroidery. Dimensions variable. Eight little textile works resembling devotional cards. Stitched to a felt background are heat transfers of scanned sepia or black and white vintage postcards of winter scenes. Three amulets also have buttons or beads stitched onto them. The predominant colours of the little works are black, red, blue and white. Embroidery stitches vary between running stitches and ornamental stitches.

Through the 'The Heart of the Mat(t)er', an inner transformation occurred... it felt as if 'something' had let go of me. Working with a photograph that shows my mother as a young woman standing in the snow and looking directly at the photographer, I felt her youth and all the possibilities lying in front of her - while at the same time being aware - as she was not in that picture - of what was to follow. Seeing her from the distance of my own years, I felt a motherly empathy for her, which allowed me to 'see' her with different eyes.



- 14.** *Three Sisters* (2014). Found objects, 7 x 10 x 10 cm. This three dimensional work is an assemblage of found objects. On a vintage dishcloth, a round ornamental wooden stand showcases a birds nest. Inside the nest are two porcelain doll heads, one smaller than the other. A third doll head lies outside the nest.



- 15.** *In Best Hands* (2014). Found objects, fabric, wire, photograph, silkscreen, heat transfer. 38 x 24 x 12 cm. An old clock case houses various objects, amongst them are: buttons, a packet of sewing needles, fragments of an old measuring tape, a monogram letter 'L', a wristwatch clockface, ribbons, red thread and an old sepia photograph. On a bleached branch of a thorn bush hangs a small rodent skull, tied with red thread. In the upper middle of the clock case is a black and white printed image of a woman looking down, embroidered onto a backing which has the shape of a devotional card. The assemblage is dominated by two porcelain doll hands, fastened on the floor of the clock case reaching upwards toward the image of the woman.



- 16.** *Seven Years We Don't Talk About* (2014). Glass bottles, labels, ink. 6.5 x 18 x 8 cm. Seven empty, identical, clear glass bottles with metal screw lids are positioned next to each other, each bearing a sticker with hand written numbers on it. The numbers represent the years I did not live with my mother: 1962, 1963, 1964, 1965, 1966, 1967, 1968 - 1969.



- 17.** *Embraces* (2014). Wood, fabric, metal. Dimensions variable. This work consists of three wooden crosses made of curved bare tree branches. Each cross is tied with red cotton jersey ties and stands upright in a rusted metal base.



- 18.** *Mountain* (2014). Fabric, thread, stones, hand stitched and crocheted. 3000 x 5500 x 60 cm. Spanning over a width of five and a half meters, this work is made of textile fragments from jackets, trousers and shirts. The cloth pieces are stitched onto a linen backing and are divided to form a cream coloured, flannel 'sky' and a multi-layered predominantly grey 'rock face' in the shape of a mountain. The work is divided into three areas: sky, mountain, and empty linen background. The cloth fragments are either held in place with pins or stitched to the background in rough stitches of red and pale grey cotton thread; embroidered crosses mark certain 'peaks'. Thick red cotton threads span across specific areas in the lower half of the work which are tied on either end to 10 red, crochet-covered stones. The stones lie between 30 and 60 cm in front of the hanging work.

On my yearly visit, when I sit in my mother's living room and we both do our needlework, we talk of many things, but never about those seven years during which I lived with my grandmother. Although I edge myself in that direction occasionally, I fear the silence that follows when I have probed too far. She puts down her embroidery then and looks out the window for a while...eventually she starts to talk about her mountain climbing days...and we are on 'safe' ground again.

Last year after my return from Austria, I started to stitch a Mountain . On a 5.3 meter long and 3.5 meter wide linen fabric, I have outlined my mother's first mountain - the Traunstein, surrounded by an imaginary mountain range. Textile fragments cut from jackets, coats and trousers; attached in rough grey and red embroidered stitches, fill the space. The attached cloth pieces spill over the edges at the side and continue downwards in a seemingly never ending array of fragments.

The 'Mountain' is forever in progress and will never be completed. It has become a symbol of my personal "Aufarbeitung"⁵ - a processing of my past - but it also represents some aspects of a period in my mother's life...a time before I was born...a time when everything was still alright. I would like to belong to this world of hers in which she was happy. The stitched mountain momentarily includes me and ties me to her. As my mother 'weaves' those stories, I receive them and pin them down, we produced something together - the mountain-cloth. In a way the mountain signifies a union between us, a coming together... a meeting place.

⁵ *Aufarbeitung* is a German term for the struggle to come to terms with the past (Langenscheid Online Dictionaries, 2015).



- 19.** *Crossing the Mountain* (2014). Found objects, cotton thread, felt, hand stitched. 45 x 86 cm. On a vintage dishcloth, red stitches in cross shapes of various sizes, depict a mountain. Some of the larger crosses are made of red felt and suggest markers rather than cross stitches. The crosses refer to my mother as the cross-stitch embroiderer, but as 'markers' they also suggest that 'something' happened here.



- 20.** *Five Years of Her Life...1952 - 1957* (2014). Found object, thread, heat transfer, silkscreen, hand embroidered. 49 x 90 cm. In the centre of a vintage dishcloth, various embroidery stitches of different colours mark the outlines of twelve mountains. On the right side of the cloth, next to small lines of the corresponding stitched line, embroidered numbers represent the height of each of the mountains. In the lower right side is a heat-transferred sepia photograph of a woman embroidered to the background. Below a screen printed text fragment, is a signature and numbers reading "1952 - 1957." Both are embroidered on a background fabric and then appliquéd to the dishcloth.



- 21.** *Memories of a Mountain Climber* (2014 - 2015). Photocopies, fabric, pins, thread. Dimensions variable. This work is made up of 29 fabric cushions ranging in size between 15 x 17 cm and 19 x 15 cm. Each cushion has one or two scanned photocopied images of snow-covered mountains stitched to a cream flannel background. In various stitches, text and symbols are embroidered over image and fabric. Each work is slightly puffed up and supported from the back with mull cloth covered cardboard to which a hanging loop is attached.

As a final gesture of laying something to rest that has been worked through and has changed forever, I am wrapping my thoughts into white fabric fragments and stitching them onto an old white tablecloth. As part of an interactive work during the final exhibition, I offer participants the opportunity to wrap up some of their own thoughts and mental images they would like to let go of. I will provide thread, cloth and needles and a quiet place for reflection. At the end of the exhibition, I plan to take the cloth with all the attached 'Wrapplings' with me to the river that runs through our garden in Barrydale, and wash all those heavy thoughts away, in a final act of catharsis.



- 22.** *Mummy* (2015). Found objects, thread, fabric waste, hand/machine stitched. 30 x 2000 x 500 cm. The *Mummy* is a fabric sculpture made from white and red embroidered textiles and dishcloth's. Her shape resembles a body. The sculpture is filled with waste material from a textile factory, adding weight and volume to its physicality.



- 23.** *42 Views of my Mountain* (2014 - 2015). Found objects, heat transfers, thread, hand/ machine embroidered. Dimensions variable. This series of works consists of 42 small embroidered, appliqué pictures, most of which refer to mountains in one form or another; either through an embroidered silhouette, a text, a water stain, or heat-transfer images. Some include found objects. The predominant colours are: white, grey, red and pale blue.



- 24.** *Mutti* (2015). Dried grass seeds, cotton wool. 47 x 105 x 10 cm (framed). Inside a beechwood box-frame, dry yellowed grass is sprouting from wheat kernels which are glued to a cotton wool background inscribed with the letters 'MUTTI'. The shriveled dried grass blades emanating from the letters in an upward motion, resembles hair and is perhaps even nest-like.



25. *The Room* (2015). Installation. The installation consists of a room that is demarcated by a lace curtain that hangs from a thick red rope which is attached to the wall and runs diagonally across the room. A long loose end of the rope hangs to the floor where it is tied around an old wooden sewing box. A thin red crochet string runs diagonally from one wall to the other creating an artificial ceiling. The curtain is half way drawn and behind it, on eye level, hangs a black and white picture of a winter scene. The center focus inside the 'room' is a table draped with a thick burgundy cloth that reaches to the floor. In the middle of it stands a white plate over which a low ceiling light shines, highlighting the marks on the plate. Leaning against the wall behind the table, are two narrow wood framed mirrors, one tall and one small, and above hangs an old porcelain kitchen clock. On the right side is a high wooden stand with an enamel washbasin. On the left side behind the table, a rusted key and a green patinated spoon hang suspended on the wall by red thread. Next to it in the corner of the room and on eye level height, hangs a white lace-filled papoose with a brown furry animal collar half hanging from it.



26. *Sutures* (2015). Assemblage of found objects. 7 x 45 x 28 cm. This assemblage consists of an old white kidney-shaped enamel bowl in which two wooden cotton reels lie, as well as a pair of scissors and a rolled up embroidered fabric ribbon with two rusted needles stuck in it. Draped over the rim of the bowl are two stained white fabric gloves, one of which has a dark red felt cross stitched on it. The work reflects on the connection between 'needlework' and 'healing'.



- 27.** *Blanket of Silence* (2015). Quilt, paint, thread. 210 x 152 cm. An old, damaged, red and white traditional patchwork quilt in a log cabin pattern forms the background to this work. Most of its surface is covered in white paint. In some areas the pattern of the fabrics underneath has been rendered invisible through the paint. Damaged areas are stitched with red thread, and, in places, have fabric bundles stuffed inside the openings. The paint stiffens the texture and hardens the appearance of the blanket. The painted quilt becomes a symbol for the uncomfortableness of living with this silence, that tried to covered up the 'damaged' parts of our family story.



28. *Mutti* (2015). Stop-frame animation, i-Pad, embroidered cushion. 14 x 48 x 35 cm. Inside a cross-stitched cushion a stop-frame animation is playing. The cushion is made of unbleached linen and the stag and mountain scene is embroidered in green cotton thread. In the middle of the cushion, a window shows an i-pad screen on which the animation flickers, showing the gradual growth of wheat kernels that spell the work 'MUTTI'.



29. *Mutti Talks About her Love for Embroidery* (2015). Video, colour, sound. 58 minutes. This film shows the hands of my mother as she embroiders the cushion for the 'MUTTI' stop-frame animation. Four different voice recordings are repeatedly overlaid, resulting in a multi-layered sound background from which certain sentences appear more clearly while others retreat and are barely audible.



- 30.** *Wrappings* (2015). Interactive Installation, found objects, fabric, red thread. 130 x 130 cm. On a white damask tablecloth, white fabric bundles, wrapped in red threads or ribbon are attached without obvious placing patterns. The bundles are made up of different textured fabrics in various shades of white and pale grey. Some bundles are scrunched up and others are just rolled up. All are attached in an upright position.

Conclusion

It seems an overlooked fact that autobiographical art has the ability to restore and repair a person's emotional well-being. I am not talking about art therapy, whereby a therapist helps to interpret a patient's psychic life through the spontaneous images the patient has drawn. I am also not talking about the therapeutic quality of needlework: sitting still, retreating from the demands of family life and other responsibilities. No, I am talking about using one's own biography to reveal the broken threads that run through one's life, examine them and restore them through engaging with them in the art-making process. Applying needlework in this process has the added benefit of providing copious amounts of time to think and reflect on the internal processes that take place while 'digging' for the personal story. Sitting bent over the work, alone with one's thoughts, the rhythmic in and out of the needle spreads calmness over the embroiderer that helps to order one's thoughts.

Having worked exclusively for the last seven years with my personal story in an attempt to explain my life to myself, the rifts, the longing and the 'torn-apartness' within me, I am aware of how powerfully healing this process can be. By peeling away layer by layer, I uncovered significant hidden personal and familial matter.

As the essence of my work centres around some shared history between myself and my mother, which is, paradoxically, filled with more absences than togetherness, I felt at once protective of my mother as well as being aware of the importance of my own personal healing journey.

During my last visit, while we were both bent over our stitching, I said to my mother "I hope you don't mind that I am digging around in our past. She put her embroidery down for a moment, looked at me and said: "Do whatever you need that helps you." It was the biggest gift she could give me, because, even though she cannot talk about the past and those years I did not live with her, she acknowledged that she knows that they are the source of my woundedness. In that acknowledgement I had her blessing to mend what I could. We continued our stitching.

Making art from this stripped-down vulnerable place in me was, at times, heart wrenching as well as cathartic.

It was a journey that took me through different stages that I have since been able to identify:

- 1. The search for the source of the conflict.*
- 2. Identifying and understanding what this inter-psychic dig brought to the surface.*
- 3. The transforming of the raw emotion into a shape that existed outside my head, into something that could be touched and looked at.*
- 4. Letting go.*

Each stage is characterised through certain artworks. While the process of 'mending' the residues of past stories around frayed and torn emotions will continue as a life long pursuit in search of well-being, working with that particular time in my childhood, has freed me from an internal space that has held me captive for most of my adult life.

As a journey of healing through art-making, this process has been successful. Not only have I generated a body of works that may speak to others about this dynamics of trauma and healing, I feel also that something inside of me has let go. As I ruminate on the conclusion of this project, I consider the possibility that this might be the beginning of my life 'unbound'.

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