

S E R A W A T E R S

The work of Sera Waters combines a scholarly respect for the traditions of needle-work with an almost transgressive approach to imagery. Her embroidered and tapestried invocations of drama, disaster, crime and victimisation bring these dark forces into a domestic context in a manner that is at once humorous and unsettling. While at first glance the motifs, images and objects that make up Waters' work seem wildly eclectic, even incongruous, these seemingly disparate elements are carefully organised into idiosyncratic taxonomies of danger and threat. Indeed, Waters' output engages with a full spectrum of possible dangers facing human beings, from the perils of frontier wilderness to the more modest threats of urban petty crime, as well as peculiar intermediates like being swooped upon by magpies in suburbia. The curious collision of worlds that such an encounter represents is in many ways emblematic of Waters' work.

By employing a craft tradition generally preoccupied with decoration and the niceties of the home, Waters engenders an apparent sense of safety and gentility that she is quick to undermine. The domestic settings suggested by her use of the so-called feminine arts are subject to various incursions from the outside world which, in the artist's words, leave behind "embroidered impressions upon the home's fabric witnesses". Just as the portrait of Dorian Gray soaks up its subject's reprehensible doings and is corrupted accordingly, the linens, doilies and tea towels of Waters' world retain a kind of psychic residue from traumatic events. These events might be real or fictional, although they are more commonly something in between – a kind of fictionalised reality as mediated by television, film and literature.

As well as imprinting household objects with such traces, Waters also teases out a latent sense of menace from seemingly innocuous aspects of suburban life and Australian culture. In referencing items of Australiana kitsch, Waters reminds us that the outback sites commemorated therein are not only places of natural beauty but also backdrops to harrowing stories of both survival and grisly death. Similarly, in her explorations of barbeque culture the artist points out that at the centre of this familial get-together is the ceremonial charring of flesh – an act that is primal, visceral and perhaps even frightening. In making us rethink the barbeque ritual in these terms, Waters is not trying to rob this activity of pleasure but rather to encourage a healthy ambivalence about that which we take for granted.

While these recurrent juxtaposition of danger and domesticity are central to Waters' practice, her work never relies on the simplistic or formulaic pairing of binaries. The relationships between images, objects and modes of needlework that the artist sets up are carefully considered and delicately nuanced; the resulting works are emotionally complex and fraught with ambiguity. Consider a baroquely sequined red splatter on a wall which might initially seem to be the bloody evidence of a violent crime. This assumption is immediately undercut by a tapestried bottle of tomato sauce hanging nearby. Elsewhere, the artist might borrow such televisual tropes as the glint of a knife (signalling imminent danger to the viewing audience) knowing full well that come the ad break this same gleam might equally be the visual code for a sparkling clean kitchen following the lusty application of Spray 'n Wipe.

In addition to historical and pop-culture narratives, Waters also draws heavily on autobiographical sources, in the form of firsthand experience and family history. Recent genealogical researches into her early Australian ancestors have unearthed madness and infidelities that have fuelled the artist's imagination and in turn stand in for the skeletons in every suburban closet. Experiences of burglary have recorded themselves in exhibitions such as *Crooks & Nannies* (Downtown Art Space, 2006) in which delicate blackwork embroideries gently vented the artist's frustration at being so unceremoniously ripped off. While the notion of needlework as therapeutic might seem quaint or even laughable, there is an undeniably cathartic element to Waters' work. In fixating so fully on disaster and misdeeds, the artist sees her work as, in part, an attempt to overcome fearful thoughts. The time-consuming processes she employs involve a kind of forced meditation on her subjects and the resulting works could be read either as talismans against such threats or as something more in the vein of a *memento mori*, reminding us of our fragility and susceptibility to danger.

Wearing the dual mantle of innovator and traditionalist, Waters displays an utter devotion to her chosen craft while at the same time taking great delight in subverting its conventions. The artist seems to combine an anthropological imperative to keep older craft traditions alive with a restless intelligence, intent on testing the boundaries of said traditions. In an increasingly articulate voice, Waters calls into question assumptions about key aspects of Australian culture and contemporary life as well as expanding the possibilities of needlework as a poetic and critical language of making.

R o y A n a n d a

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Sera Waters is an Adelaide-based artist and current studio member of The Incinerator, Thebarton. Waters was selected for *Hatched*, the National Graduate Exhibition at PICA (Perth Institute of Contemporary Art) in 2001 after graduating from the South Australian School of Art with a Bachelor of Visual Arts (Honours) (1997-2000). She also holds a Master of Arts (studies in Art History), Adelaide University (2003-2006) and currently lectures in art history and theory. In 2006, Waters was awarded the Ruth Tuck Scholarship to attend the Royal School of Needlework (Surrey, UK) to study hand embroidery. She shows her art, which is often stitched with dark meticulousness, in exhibitions nationally and beyond.

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