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Paper Title: Subversive Threads

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Abstract

This paper offers a critical reflection on *Subversive Threads,* a new body of creative research that mobilises textile-based practices as acts of disobedience and genderqueer activism in response to current corrosive politics and cultural uncertainty. Presented in the context of a solo exhibition at Outer Space Contemporary Art, Magadjin and the MELT Festival of Queer Arts and Culture in 2025, the project re-examines embroidery and stitching samplers, appliqué and protest banners — as urgent, resistant gestures for the future. Through genderqueer methodologies of making-as-doing, the work engages with the politics of materiality, language, and gesture to provoke, reveal, and contest cultural values in relation to gender diversity, equity and inclusion. The title of this project expands on the seminal text by Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch* (1984), 40 years after its publication. *Subversive Threads* reclaims the form of the needlework sampler as a contemporary site of resistance and protest. With its historical associations of obedience, the stitching sampler is ripe for creative acts of disobedience - unpicking, unravelling, undoing. These material disruptions of normative gender codes transform 'sampling' into an act of both refusal and reclamation. In *Subversive Threads* disobedience becomes a generative force for reclaiming genderqueer politics and reimagining collective futures.
Keywords: Art and Activism, Genderqueer Methods, Feminist Art, The Subversive Stitch, Textiles Art Practice

Introduction

This paper offers a critical reflection on *Subversive Threads,* a new body of creative research that mobilises textile-based practices as acts of disobedience and genderqueer activism. *Subversive Threads* was presented as a solo exhibition at Outer Space Contemporary Gallery, located in Magandjin (Brisbane), as part of the 2025 *MELT Festival of Queer Arts and Culture* (https://www.melt.org.au). This new body of work comprised over 30 embroidered, hybrid works, installed in an open formation across a large-scale gallery wall, creating a visual archive that reimagines the historical Embroidery Sampler as a site of genderqueer resistance. The project also incorporated two participatory public workshops, foregrounding the relational and pedagogical dimensions of embroidery as an act of making and transforming the gallery into spaces for dialogue and potential shared resistance.

Figure 1: Rae Haynes, *Subversive Threads,* 2025.

In my investigation of the legacies of Rozsika Parker's seminal text *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (1984), I discovered compelling genealogical threads linking me to the British textile artist Mary Linwood (1755-1845). Linwood's innovative 'needle painting' technique, which blurred the boundaries between fine art and domestic craft, was showcased in a long-running exhibition of over 100 works in London during the early 19th century (Parker, 1984, pp.144 – 146).

In researching my family's émigré and colonial history, I found that in the 1890s, sisters Claudia and Ada Hull founded Linwood College (named in Mary's honour) in Bulanaming/Marrickville, NSW. *Subversive Threads* draws together these personal narratives and genealogical threads - from Mary Linwood in the social context of British art and textiles, women's work and education, with the colonial story of the Hull sisters, establishing Linwood college for the 'training of ladies' in 1890s Australia. This research project investigates these genealogical threads through genderqueer, feminist and decolonial lenses.

Contemporary art has witnessed a resurgence of textile-based practices that operate as critical interventions into systems of gender and power. In an Australian context, this includes recent exhibitions such as *Radical Textiles* (Art Gallery of South Australia, 2024) and internationally, projects such as *Unravel: The Power and Politics of Textiles in Art* (Barbican Art Gallery, London, 2024). These exhibitions explore the political potential of textiles in contemporary art, highlighting practices in which the needle emerges as a tool of resistance. The curators of *Unravel* directly reference the *Subversive Stitch*, employing this approach as key theme that "brings together a group of artists who - in multivalent ways - confront how textiles and the act of stitching have been valued as 'craft' and understood as women's

domestic practices and therefore deemed subordinate" (Fray-Smith, et al. 2024, p.14). These exhibitions evidence the current significance of textile practices, as well as their subversive potential for disrupting and subverting gender norms and structures.

This practice-based research foregrounds subversion as a method for genderqueer perspectives in contemporary art. The work utilised processes of stitching and *un*stitching to destabilize binary logics and heteronormative assumptions embedded in art history. The works subvert binary oppositions between gender and its associations with craft/ fine art and textiles/ painting. *Subversive Threads* re-examines the potential for embroidery and stitching samplers, appliqué and protest banners as urgent, resistant gestures for the future. Through genderqueer, feminist methodologies, this creative work engages with the politics of materiality, language, and gesture to provoke, reveal, and contest cultural values in relation to gender.

Subversive Threads

In my contemporary art practice, textiles have emerged as a predominant material strategy to explore feminist and genderqueer perspectives. Building on previous projects such as *Threads of Resistance* (Museum of Brisbane)) and *Patterns for Future Living* (The Brisbane Festival), *Subversive Threads* takes as its starting point the rich legacy of feminist art practice, text and textile art. This visualization of the project (see Figure 1) shows the interconnections between the threads of feminist art history and family history, with my contemporary art practice. *Subversive Threads* traces these encounters through archival and genealogical research, revealing knots, tangles and ruptures in the process.

Figure 2: Subversive Threads Research Poster, presented at *Re-Evaluation in Feminism and Contemporary Art*, Middlesex University, UK (13th September, 2024).

My first encounter with Mary Linwood was through Rozsika Parker's *The Subversive Stitch*, in

the chapter “Milkmaids to Mothers,” where Parker identifies Linwood as the “best known needle painter” (Parker, 1984, pp.144 – 146). I then encountered her portrait by John Hoppner, *Miss Mary Linwood (1755–1845), Artist in Needlework* (c.1800) in the Victoria and Albert (V&A) collection, in London. This substantial oil painting, measuring 91.4 x 71.1 cm, was commissioned by Linwood. It shows her clasping a small landscape needle-painting in one hand, with a bundle of threads and a clamp tool used in her embroidery process sitting in her lap. The painting frames Linwood within the visual codes of gentility (Strobel 2025, p.54) yet her career disrupts these codes by asserting embroidery as a public, professional, and entrepreneurial practice.

Mary Linwood was a textile artist, educator, entrepreneur, and gallerist whose pioneering technique of ‘needle painting’ transformed embroidery into a medium capable of rivalling oil painting. Her meticulous use of long and short stitches to replicate the tonal subtleties of brushwork elevated needlework beyond the domestic sphere, challenging prevailing hierarchies that positioned craft as inferior to fine art. In early 19th-century London, Linwood established a public gallery dedicated exclusively to textile art, a radical gesture within a male-dominated art world.

Situated among the amusements of Leicester Square, her gallery attracted widespread attention and critical acclaim, enabling Linwood to negotiate spaces of visibility and authority typically denied to women. She never married, instead forging an independent life that oscillated between her role as headmistress at the Priory School in Leicester and her London gallery and apartment. This mobility and autonomy underscore her resistance to normative gender expectations of Georgian England. In keeping with the show culture of nineteenth-century Leicester Square, Linwood’s Gallery sought to create an immersive and edifying experience. Works were staged with sumptuous ornamentation, including scarlet broadcloth, gold bullion tassels, green silk coverings and gilded frames (Strobel, 2024, p.73).

The recent resurgence of interest in textile practices has brought Linwood’s oeuvre back to light. Her works were included in the major exhibition *Now You See Us: Women Artists in Britain 1520 – 1920* (2024), staged at Tate Britain. My research has therefore been supported by the growing institutional recognition of overlooked women artists and the political dimensions of textile art. In 2024, I was able to examine significant ‘needle paintings’ housed in the collection of The Leicester Museum and Art Gallery, and research primary documents related to Mary Linwood, held in the V&A Museum collections and National Art Library, including catalogues from Linwood’s Picture Gallery.

Mary Linwood’s legacy becomes a critical lens through which to interrogate genealogical, gendered, and colonial histories. In the Australian context, embroidery was imported as part of settler-colonial aesthetics, a cultural marker of refinement and civility that reinforced imperial ideals of femininity. This dynamic is reflected in the founding of Linwood College by my ancestors, Ada and Claudia Hull, in the 1890s in Bulanaming/Marrickville, NSW.

Ada Hull was born on 4 August 1863 in Molong, NSW, on unceded Wiradjuri lands. One of eleven children of James and Jemima Hull – who had followed gold fever from London, arriving in 1856 – Ada’s life reflects the entanglement of migration, aspiration, and colonial

expansion. At just 16 years old, Ada was driven to establish a school with the purpose of "training girls to be women," including the requisite skills of needlework and embroidery. With her younger sister Claudia, she co-founded Linwood College in 1892, naming it after their ancestor, British textile artist Mary Linwood. Ada served as Principal until ill health forced her retirement; she died of consumption in 1910. Her obituary read poignantly: *"Made perfect through suffering."*

This stitch painting (Figure 3) in the exhibition is based on my only photographic record of Ada taken when she was about 18 years old, posed and composed, reading a book. Drawn from family histories and public archives, photographs and documents were incorporated into the exhibition. These images were translated through an embroidery program to generate cross-stitch patterns, resulting in pixelated images. These documents were then abstracted further through the painting process, as watercolour stains and hand stitching on Aida cloth, at traditional embroidery cloth, mounted in an embroidery hoop.

Figure 3: Rae Haynes, *A is for Ada (Subversive Threads),* 2025.

Claudia Hull, born in 1867, is remembered as "the creative sister," and through her, a lineage of women artists descends, a thread that continues in my own practice. In the 1890s, Claudia studied drawing and painting at Sydney Technical College under French master Lucien Henry (1850–1896), whose fascination with Australian flora, such as the waratah, shaped his decorative design philosophy (Stephen, 2001). Claudia excelled in her studies, winning several prizes in disciplines including Model Drawing, Freehand Drawing,

Practical Geometry, and Perspective, and was later noted in a 1935 *Art in Australia* article on successful women at the college. Claudia's own love of native flora, particularly 'Rock Lilies', is recorded in the Hull family history, alongside mention of a particularly well-executed painting displayed at her home (Towrie homestead, located at Bloodtree Road, Mangrove Mountain, NSW) depicting 'Two Horses at Play'. These details illuminate Claudia's negotiation of gendered expectations through artistic practice, situating her within a lineage of women who mobilized creative labour as a means of agency and expression.

Figure 4: Rae Haynes, *C is for Claudia (Subversive Threads),* 2025.

Linwood College was established by the Hull sisters in the 1892 on Livingstone Road, Marrickville, NSW. A newspaper advertisement of the time promises to, "impart a thorough, practical and high-class education, which will give girls every confidence either in private or commercial life" (1917). In *Subversive Threads*, these genealogical fragments are reimagined through stitch paintings and archival interventions, including works inspired by photographs of the Linwood College grounds, populated with the spectral figures of teachers and pupils, each adorned with oversized bows, overt signifiers of propriety and femininity (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Rae Haynes, *L is for Linwood College (Subversive Threads),* 2025.

Subversive Stitches

The title of this project expands on the seminal text by Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch* (1984), 40 years after its publication. Parker's work critically examines embroidery as a cultural signifier of femininity, noting how by the nineteenth century, its associations with leisure and gentility had become naturalized within Western societies. Embroidery inscribed femininity in terms of "docility, obedience, love of home, and a life without work," such that, as Parker observes, "Women embroidered because they were naturally feminine and were feminine because they naturally embroidered" (Parker, 1984, p.11). This tautological logic positioned embroidery as both evidence and instrument of gendered social conditioning. However, Parker also identifies a paradox at the heart of this relationship: while embroidery was employed to inculcate femininity, it simultaneously offered women a means to negotiate and resist its constraints. She writes, "Embroidery has provided a source of pleasure and power for women, while being indissolubly linked to their powerlessness" (Parker, 1984, p.11). This duality, submission and subversion, renders embroidery a complex site of feminist critique and creative agency.

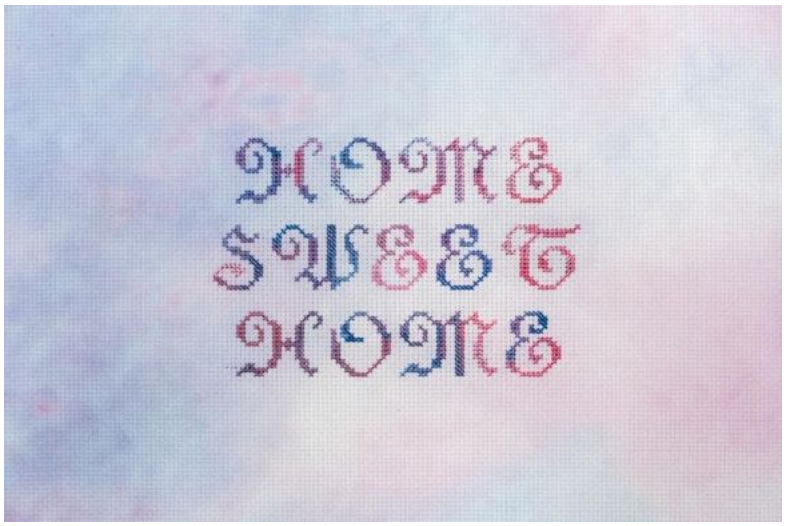

Figure 6: Rae Haynes, *Home Sweet Home (Subversive Threads),* detail, 2025.

Subversive Threads reclaims the form of the needlework sampler as a contemporary site of resistance and protest. The sampler developed in the late 16th century as a way of recording an archive of embroidery stitches - and gained popularity as a tool to learn and practice embroidery stitches in education. Key motifs included letters and numbers, framed by decorative borders and by the 18th century religious and moral verses (Isaacs, 1987, pp.114-115). With its historical associations of obedience, the stitching sampler is ripe for creative acts of disobedience - unpicking, unravelling, undoing. Within Western and colonial contexts, textile labour was positioned as an extension of the domestic sphere, reinforcing ideals of femininity grounded in patience, obedience, and moral virtue. The embroidery sampler, for instance, operated as a pedagogical device, training girls not only in technical skill but in the disciplined comportment expected of “proper” womanhood. Through such practices, handicraft became synonymous with “women’s work,” naturalizing the association between gender, domesticity, and material labour.

Figure 7: Rae Haynes, *Good Girl (Subversive Threads),* 2025.

These material disruptions of normative gender codes transform 'sampling' into an act of both refusal and reclamation. The concept of sampling, long associated with remix culture in music and digital media, offers a powerful framework for understanding how *Subversive Threads* mobilizes historical forms as sites of queer and feminist intervention. Just as musical sampling extracts fragments of existing compositions to create new arrangements, this project appropriates and reconfigures archival materials, including samplers, banners, and suffragette songs, into hybrid forms that speak to contemporary struggles for gender equity and inclusion. In addition to the samplers, the exhibition featured two large-scale banners, strategically positioned near the street-facing windows to activate the public realm and extend the work's critical discourse beyond the gallery interior. These banners (Figure 8 and Figure 9) operated as declarative gestures, amplifying the project's commitment to visibility and feminist, queer activism.

Suffrage movements in the early 20th century strategically deployed embroidery and appliqué in banners for demonstrations, transforming "womanly skills" into instruments of dissent. These banners exemplify what Lisa Tickner describes as the paradox of suffrage aesthetics: they "dignified womanly skills while making unwomanly demands," (Tickner, 1988) asserting political agency through forms coded as feminine. Contemporary feminist and genderqueer practices extend this legacy by reclaiming embroidery as a critical tool for dismantling binaries, between public and private, masculine and feminine, art and craft. One example in the exhibition is the phrase **"**The Banner Over Us is Love," drawn from suffragette songs archived in my ongoing research. By quoting and recontextualizing this lyric within contemporary textile works, the project performs a queer remix: it dislodges the phrase from its original temporal and ideological frame, opening it to new meanings in relation to gender diversity, care ethics, and collective solidarity.

Figure 8: Rae Haynes, *Banner over us is Love (Subversive Threads),* 2025.

Conclusion

Central to this creative research is an ethic of attention, slowness, and relationality, which resists the extractive logics of heteronormative, colonial and patriarchal knowledge systems. This ethic manifests through hybrid forms that combine stitching, appliqué, and acts of unmaking, positioning embroidery not as static tradition but as a dynamic, critical language. Stitching operates both as method and metaphor: a tactile, embodied practice that holds space for repair, resistance, and reimagining. Its repetitive gestures enact a politics of persistence, where each thread becomes a mark of refusal against normative structures. In this sense, stitching is not merely decorative but epistemological, it is a way of knowing that unravels as much as it constructs. Through acts of making and unmaking, the work destabilizes fixed meanings, opening possibilities for non-binary futures and decolonial imaginaries.

In *Subversive Threads* disobedience becomes a generative force for reclaiming genderqueer politics and re-imagining collective futures. In my own work, this dual aspect of subversion and reclamation informs a methodology that uses embroidery not only to critique normative gender frameworks but to propose alternative, non-binary futures. Here, the needle becomes both weapon and thread, unravelling the ideological fabric of gender while interweaving new possibilities for identity and belonging.

Figure 9: Rae Haynes, *Future is Fluid (Subversive Threads),* 2025.

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Dr Rae Haynes (she/they) is an artist and educator based in Magandjin/ Brisbane. Their practice-based research explores genderqueer ethics across painting, drawing, textiles and installation. Rae is a Senior Lecturer in Visual Arts, at QUT.