

THE POWER OF YEARNING: RAQUEL ORMELLA'S 'I HOPE YOU GET THIS'

Angus McGrath, Canberra



'I hope you get this' is a touring survey of recent work by Raquel Ormella. Although activism and politics are key concerns of the show, Ormella's individual experience is an ever-present force, equally driving and doubting the art on display. The personal is an unavoidable framing context, and although her practice is about real-world problems, Ormella is mapping her individual relationships to these issues: the personal is political, but the political is equally personal. Canberra's iteration of 'I hope you get this', which I saw at the Drill Hall Gallery in April, featured some drawings and video, but focused primarily on Ormella's textiles, nearly all of which are text-based.

On entering the space, audiences were faced with *New constellation #1* (2013): two sliced-up Australian flags against the stark white gallery walls. Both were torn so extremely that all remained were the words of the work's title and a dangling collection of stars, among them the Southern Cross in a moment of recontextualisation, freed from conservative and bigoted implications. This is a hope for a new and caring country, but the violent tearing acknowledges the scars in Australian identity, and this better future is not an easy political destination to reach. Several other works throughout the show used torn, cut, burnt and restructured flags in a process of challenging and re-establishing conceptions of 'Australia' through physical action.

Near *New constellation #1* was an embroidery next to the gallery entrance which read 'I HOPE YOU GET THIS' – so small it could have been missed. It was the exhibition's eponymous 2018 work, and its personal perspective seemed meek next to the confidence of its neighbour. It was an intimate acknowledgement of nervousness – that maybe this wasn't enough – which was a theme that ran throughout the show. *I hope you get this* might have been modest, but its capitalised words echoed far. This self-doubt continued with a wall of little embroideries, each expressing tiny moments of reflection on Ormella's practice, life experiences or personal concerns. The denseness of repeated stitching personified this internal process of obsessing – poking a needle through fabric like remembering or picking at a wound.

The exhibition featured several works which explored Ormella's continuing interest in issues around labour and a critique of the construction of borders. Each investigation of these ideas could have its own long-form analysis. I was particularly drawn to *Golden soil #3* (2016), *Settler economies #1* and *Settler economies #2* (both 2017), which use the process of piecing to directly acknowledge the legal and colonial establishment of boundaries. Some of these works created borders through map-like depictions while others used an overlay of settled nation names

Opposite:

I hope you get this: Raquel Ormella, exhibition installation view, Drill Hall Gallery, Canberra, 2019; image courtesy Drill Hall Gallery, Canberra; photo: Rob Little, RLDI

Raquel Ormella, *I hope you get this*, 2018, silk and cotton embroidery thread on linen, 8 x 10cm; image courtesy the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane; photo: David Paterson; © the artist





stacked thickly over each other. Here Ormella has decided to demarcate area, and the stitching of each fabric/state amounts to its own quilt country.

At the back of the Drill Hall was a room featuring Ormella's ongoing work about birds. Its museological-style set-up and lack of textiles felt different to the rest of the show, with the space highlighting her video and drawing work alongside a collection of books about birdwatching. Moving through the room, three drawings at the back made it all click. They were rendered in a similar colour palette to her textiles and read 'BORDERS FOR BIRDS', 'BORDERS CONSTRUCTED TO TALK ABOUT BIRDS' and 'BORDERS BIRDS DON'T ACKNOWLEDGE'. Although there was a concern here for birds as casualties of colonial projects and ecological destruction, there was also an aspirational power identified in them as creatures that don't acknowledge governmental boundaries but, rather, soar over the controlling and destructive people below.

The 'hope' in the exhibition title expresses a sadness and longing for Ormella's political concerns and personal experiences to be heard (or at least considered). But that's not to deny that it also acknowledges her hopefulness in striving towards a better future – a new constellation, golden promises, the 'Australia' many of us have dreamt about. This is a process that requires a great amount of energy, how-

ever, and there are always individuals behind political plights and projects.

Among the works in the middle space between the entry area and the back 'bird room' were *I'm worried this will become a slogan* (Paul Kelleher) and *I'm worried this will become a slogan* (Xanana Gusmao) (both 1999–2009). These were large sheets of felt and wool supported by wooden poles, leant against the wall and emblazoned with statements as though they were ready to be carried straight into protest. Beyond the visibility of these sewn words, though, there was a ghosting of text on the opposite side; personal concerns whose stitched outlines could be read in reverse: 'I'M WORRIED I'M NOT RADICAL ENOUGH' and 'I'M WORRIED I'M NOT POLITICAL ENOUGH'. It was in this hovering handmade space, between text and subtext, and between protest and doubt, that the artist's voice rang loudest and strongest.

A NETS Victoria and Shepparton Art Museum touring show curated by Rebecca Coates and Anna Briers, 'I hope you get this' was exhibited at Canberra's Drill Hall Gallery from 20 April until 9 June 2019; it is currently in its final iteration at the Penrith Regional Gallery and the Lewers Bequest, Emu Plains, until 22 March 2020; Angus McGrath has been a 2019 Critic-in-Residence at ANCA, Canberra, in a special project partnership with *Art Monthly Australasia*.

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