

# Six Tayf Fi Baytina THOUSAND Hands

(The ghosts in our home)

Maryanne Taouk

## Dyeing the thread

Thousands of hands have tendered, watered, and created in these gardens. Threads have been pulled together, dyed green and red, striking and stained, like the *hamra3* of a safflower or Tyrian purple plucked from the ocean. Each one of those bodies that have run through the grounds of Penrith Regional Gallery claim a piece of the space as their own.

Its ownership is as fluid as the *Yandhai*, as the Darug say, flowing metres from its front fence. On the land of the Darug people, the gallery has become a refuge and ammunition. Who belongs and what was taken is a battle that many galleries must face: the British Museum and its Pantheon marbles, the Art Gallery of New South Wales and its stolen Indian idols and the colonist looting of Benin's Abomey Treasures at the Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac.

Penrith Regional Gallery stands on a separate plain. It is a colony of drunken love and fraying Modernism, conjured by late artists Margo and Gerald Lewers. Displaced Indigenous rocks,

rough fabrics printed with black and green ink, jade ornaments and hollowed bowls. Returning marigold lined footpaths, sun cracked mosaics and rooms with echoing laughter. For 35 years it has been a source of vitality for Lynda Henderson. "I feel as though I am part of a family here," she says. "I feel at peace, and I just feel in the right place."

Lynda is the president of the Friends of the Penrith Regional Gallery, Home of the Lewers Bequest, a mouthful of a title that she says has changed in importance over the three decades of her association. "It's like we've opened up something personal and private to have people look through it and for more hands to touch, but that's not always bad," she says. "The people I used to see here, who felt like family, they're all dead now."

Lynda is one of few people that can place a person behind the works in the collection. She would ride to work with Futurist painter Frank Hinder in his Citroen station wagon. "He wouldn't drive me home, because that would be awkward," she says.

Her art teachers were John Olsen, whose muddy gouache works are also buried in the collections archive, and ceramist Peter Rushforth.

The inner circle of the Lewers would meet in the now gallery space and hold parties, brimming with cocktails and arguments with a growing cohort of Australian artists, and Mrs Henderson has always wanted her invite. "I'm one-degree from those parties," she says. "When I talk at an event or meet with an artist, I feel like I'm connected. I've seen people gravitating to one place and find these connections that I would have never imagined."

A walk through the succulent garden adjacent to Lewers House has the echo of the clinking of martini glasses, a sound that the Lynda of today says pulls her back and forth between her two worlds. *In Between* (1976), Margo's earth-toned work on cotton gabardine, a durable and practical tailoring fabric, is as much a representation of those time leaps. The sun kissed ambers and browns, as deep as dried clay, push the works back to an idealised romanticism, but the sharp shapes in blocks thrust it forward.

*In Between* represents what Margo had hoped for her bequeathed work; visionary and organic. But it is the spaces between these time leaps that the ghosts of artists denied, and art styles appropriated appear. The ghosts of buying and selling culture. Those whose hands have been coveted and the others that have been erased.

The gallery itself grapples with colonialism in its collection. Materials printed with First Nations symbols stolen in concept, but part of a broader artistic collection of Margo Lewers. Rock carvings lifted by her husband Gerald from where they were created thousands of years ago and *rescued* to the front gardens. Mrs Henderson says the benefits of the space outweighs its problematic side.

For me, the daughter of an Arab migrant, more of a foreigner to the gallery than anywhere else, my claim to the space feels irrelevant and lost among Lynda's favourite ghosts. In my home gallery in regional NSW, I felt unwelcome below the towering white walls and whiter women in turtlenecks and

pearl earrings. Pushed outside to the unmown spinifex grass and under the single tree whose conkers I'd use to throw against the library next door.

"A lot of people think this is too high-brow, they would say to me 'I would never set foot in a place like that'," she says. "They don't see it the way I do." Lynda's version of this collection usually leads to "her spot", staring at the rust-weathered bold steelwork of Margel Hinder's sculpture "Six Day War I". She takes so much from the gallery: her pride, her strength, and her memories are all formed within its walls. "I'm lapping it up. I've touched works that nobody has ever touched, and I have got my own bits of history."



## Mantoura

A white gillyflower represents long life. For those in the mountains of Lebanon it's a marker that you are returning home. Once the *mantoura* appears along the road or clings to a hillside, it means you have climbed high enough from the coast away from the crises of the city.

For the Lewers, it was violets and jacarandas that signalled their return. In their practice, the garden brought a second element of inspiration and heritage gardener Shayne Roberts sees it as another artwork to be tended to with delicate hands. "We have to use gloves for work safety reasons, but sometimes it's impossible, you have to get in there and be so gentle and precise," he says.

Like the collection, the garden's inspiration lies outside of the Lewers. In Margo's dyed fabric works she uses patterns and shapes taken from First Nations styles, the shapes of her designs in pottery and timber draw on German Bauhaus, the garden's source is in Southeast Asia.

The sacred bamboo 'nandina', the dry-stone beds, and sprinklings of holmskioldia or Chinese Hat Plants. "This is very rooted in Southeast Asia and Japan. And when you see the art it's there as well," Shayne says.

Those connections are not just within the physical space of the gallery, but also with Margo’s artworks. The cotton painting *Mounting Green* (1976), decorated like a canvas, blends still blues and tumbling moss green, a Modernist take on French Impressionist Claude Monet’s *Water Lilies* series. The fabric is as much a reflection of Mrs Lewers’ home, as Monet’s work became for him more than 100 years earlier. *For Attached* (1976), painted dye on linen, there is a softness to Margo’s bold shapes, as if the work is lounging under the shade of her Bunya Pine.

There is a similarity between the feelings Shayne experiences by digging in the Lewers garden and the freedom cultivation gives. My uncle, a weather-hardened farmer from the North of Lebanon, who continues goat herding with his farad tucked into his waistband in case of a wolf attack, says the orchards of apples and plums lined on steep steps of the *Wadi Qanoubine* cliff face give him purpose in a world collapsing around him. A universal calmness, mixed with the terror of nurturing. “It’s anyone’s guess how it will work out, and what will thrive, but each season gives something new,” Shayne says.

Intrigue it what led Shayne to the garden. “I was trying to see this garden through Margo’s eyes and try to keep this garden alive. Other gardeners have never really understood that, and why I’ve stayed here so long.”

Over 13 years, he has broken up his time into the garden’s distinct seasons. Each day, he says, begins new preparations for the incoming season. “It’s never the same, because there’s always a new season to think about,” he says. “To see the daffodils in their winter bloom, or the colours of the silky oak in spring, it’s pretty magic.”

The story of the village’s *mantoura* in Mont-Liban was told to me by my tayta. She said the flowers, which change from white to purple the higher you climb, did so because they were watered with the blood of invaders, who were stopped with boulders by villagers living on the mountain’s steep ledges.

Many of the stories passed down from my tayta have not been recorded. Shayne, like myself, has become a librarian of memories. “Other people are very assertive in how the garden should be portrayed,” he says. “In a way I am a verbal archive of the people who saw the garden throughout the decades and I have to make sure their ideas of how it should be and how it is remembered are in line with what’s best for the garden itself.”

Shayne says the passion for the garden from others is as common as the cabbage white butterfly that flits from each twig in the space. But, with those vested interests, simple tasks like weeding the noxious and wild ruella from the grounds has become a difficult task for the gardener, as the eyes of visitors followed his khurpi. “They thought the ruella should stay and I didn’t want it in our garden beds, but the argument was ‘did it belong?’ and ‘was it what the artists wanted?’” Some of the plants were removed, others remain, sprinkled under the bamboo partitions – a balance the entire collection faces between the past and present.



## The shadows

A wet paper towel in hand; painter and photographer Harold David wipes dirt from the glass frame of Margo’s mural work, *Untitled* (1970). Like so much of Margo’s artwork, it is embedded in the site itself, and impossible to separate. In 2009, Harold was commissioned by Penrith Regional Gallery to produce a series of photographs, titled *Tracksuits of St Marys*, which function as a time capsule of everyday life in the suburbs that surround the gallery. Losing a piece of himself in the collection, Harold’s own work sits alongside the Lewers in the Collection storeroom.

Away from the gardens, there is a wind in the room, that Harold says is akin to a spirit of artistry, I ask him if it is the ‘*shabah el hawa*’, a mystery breeze. “I feel like it’s my own energy, there’s a part of me that stays here when I leave, to leave and know that I am still among them in the collection, like I’m lying beside them.”

Harold says he struggled to feel like an artist before he studied the works of Margo. “It makes me feel special now, to know I am one of the artists in this collection. My work, like theirs, will live there always.” The bold colours of Mrs Lewers wall hangings, created in the early 1970s, do more to represent Harold’s feelings.

In *Lines* (1973), the arching sunset reds and rolling hills in moss green printed by hand on poplin retell Margo’s own multilayered personality. Those patterns are seen repeated in her bolder *Wall Hanging* (Unknown) and *Sails* (1975) tapestry works, playing with colour and tone. “I imagine what was she feeling when she held the brush, what was she thinking when she chose this colour?” Harold says.

Those choices have become drivers for Harold to grow his idea of art, from figurative to abstract works, taking inspiration from his life and from those around him. His photographic series, *Tracksuits of St Marys* is like many things within the collection, is voyeuristic and explorative. The tracksuit, he said, is symbolic to people in western Sydney, shown in moments of joy and in the mundane in his series of black and white photographs.

*End To End* (1950), by Margo, carries a tumultuous and uneasy presence that Mr David reckoned with as an artist. Throwing greys and blues into a hurricane of expression.

There is, in his eyes, no better place for those bold and inventive pieces. “It’s the home of abstraction in this part of the country. There’s more of a connection to the people of the area than to the land itself.”

The constant presence of the artist gives David confidence to expand his ideas of Modernism. “My intention as an artist is bridging that divide. There is no one type of audience or one type of person that can take something from the art,” he says.

The audiences that walk through the gallery has changed, moving away from the upper-class guests invited to a Lewers’ dinner party, driving in from Mosman for a day of social seclusion on the Nepean River.

Recognition of the owners has given the collection of artworks new voices. Harold hopes those diverse faces, who, like me, were forced outside, would have been welcomed, eventually. “I think Gerald and Margo would have evolved, they would be loving the evolution of art, of the collection, and the people that visit their home.”

It is through Margo’s work that Lynda Henderson, Harold David and Shayne Roberts are anchored. Each one sees their own *tayf* in the rooms and gardens of her former home and are buoyed by them. For me, their passion, and connection brings forth every iteration of Margo Lewers; as voyager, hostess, gardener, provocateur. I see each of her artworks through those that love and are inspired by her.

I happily stare at her fabrics, knowing Shayne uses these as his muse for the wondrously alive garden, and admire her shapely pottery, remembering Lynda’s own stories of artistry. A bold work that is splashed with textures that explode from the canvas carries more weight when I recall that it changed Harold’s idea of himself and what kind of artist he could become.

While the ghosts remain in the sunlit rooms and courtyards of Margo and Gerald Lewers’ home, it is the people that have spun the stories that keep them alive.

