

# CROWNINGS

Larissa Linnell and Eva Abbinga





## CROWNINGS

*We would like to thank the many volunteers  
who generously offered their time, skills  
and stories that make up this work.*

We respectfully acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land,  
the Boon Wurrung and Woiwurrung (Wurundjeri) people of  
the Kulin Nation and pay respect to their Elders, past and present.  
We also extend an apology for the Stolen Generation, whom have been  
affected by past policies implemented at the Royal Women's Hospital.

During March, collaborative artistic duo Eva Abbinga and Larissa Linnell (EA/LL) commenced an interview discussion with curator, Natalie King (NK) following on from a studio visit to Abbotsford Convent. Their dialogue unfurled over several weeks as they discussed Abbinga and Linnell's large-scale knitted soft sculpture composed of hundreds of squares rendered by numerous contributors to form an expansive hanging.

*Crownings* is a seven-metre wide textile reminiscent of bricks and fleshy hues, dyed and stained with tea, alluding to the conviviality of sharing a cup of tea and its association with pausing, conversing and even coming to terms with tragedy. The abstract geometry of *Crownings* is laboriously and arduously constructed by human hands with wonky lines and tiny imperfections. Moreover, the textile alludes to swaddling, baby blankets and knitting circles. For Abbinga and Linnell, yarns and yarning are intertwined in a collective enduring effort spanning over one year. The term "labour" with its dual definition of effort and birthing is at the core of this monumental work.

Both artists reflect on their personal birthing experiences at the former Women's Hospital in

Carlton and the hospital as emblematic of the history of women – "...as mothers, as lovers, as citizens, as victims, as nurses and medical staff, even as prostitutes and drug addicts." Their collaborative practice has a research dimension as they conducted interviews with doctors, nurses, midwives and patients to assemble audio recordings and archive narratives of place and people. By collecting histories, conducting community workshops and shared artmaking processes, Abbinga and Linnell are sensitively attuned to the histories of domesticity, labour and femininity bound to fibres and knitting.

**NK. Can you elaborate on the genesis of your new exhibition *Crownings* and its association with obstetrics, birth and women's labour?**

LL/EA. As mothers of young children, the process of planning for birth, and the experience of the institutions around birth and early infant care, are still recent in memory. New steps into the medical system are established, and as to-be parents our ideals, values and preferences were defined. In today's systems, we have some choice around the character of medical intervention in birth plans, which may ultimately be eclipsed by the needs

of the medical system to minimise risk and service the needs of hospital operations to provide care to a vast number of new parents.

Both of us have recent experiences in these systems that attempt, at least somewhat, to reconcile the needs of the machine with the desires of parents. As artists that engage with place, and the histories and experiences of place, these interactions came immediately to mind when considering a site that we were both familiar with, in the former Royal Women's Hospital.

What are the many personal histories of this place? How has the system dealt with the personal? What insights can we discover about the experience of new mothers of times-past, and how does this reconcile with our own lives? Birth stories are potent and highly varied in a current context, and the potency of stories past would be no less, even with the passage of time.

In this project, we focused on storytelling, through the social experience of knitting with its rich potential to play out the personal and institutional perspectives of a structure and system that has been a part in so many women's lives. In particular, we hoped to find a way to sensitively engage with the

brutal and traumatic aspects of childbirth, of loss, of heartbreak - as well as that of joy - from an era of different guiding principles, of frames of 'morality' and of interests and motivations that would be alien and anachronistic today.

**Can you discuss your relationship with the histories of domesticity, labour and femininity bound to stitching and yarn, especially recalling *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (1984) book by Rozsika Parker?**

We have come to this project each with histories in the development of artworks in studio, exercising the flexibility of time and space to test concepts and elaborate in paper, print and textile. These processes are often very personal, dedicated and introspective; and now in reality often unobtainable, when much of life is in service of children and the home. This 'division of the heart' is an inherent experience for female artists, and with this, the innate *pragmatism* of needlework presents itself. For us, whether working together to develop the final work, or in knitting circles at the Abbotsford Convent, the tie of the act of stitching to conversation, has a salient

connection with domestic reality, and the way that women have built social experience across time.

Stitching is a simple gesture, repeated, in aid of larger forms and structures, but very accessible and possible. It also reflects a certain status and importance, in the usefulness of the woman of the household, in a pragmatic and utilitarian sense, as well as artistic expression in needlework, within constrained contexts. The setting of the Abbotsford Convent provided a sense of connection to this practice through closeness to the history of women's labour in laundry and lace-making.

For this work stitching has not been far removed from the medical. In making, it is casual, routine. So too, is the cut and repair in birth experiences, the concept of the caesarean or episiotomy - controlled traumas - systematic and integrated within the medical framework and presented to new mothers as a matter of fact.

**How did you mobilise a collective of volunteers to this project, each contributing a knitted panel? What are the social dimensions to knitting circles and convivial gatherings of *Crownings*?**

We aimed to include people through personal networks as well as broader organisations associated with craft and knitting, and care for new mothers. Volunteers were drawn to the project through our network of friends and family, the Spinners and Weavers Guild, the Hand Knitters Guild and the University of the Third Age. Initially we started with workshops, focused around shared storytelling, which then extended into structured knitting circles. These included weekly meetings at the Convent rotunda, and as it became cooler inside at the golden couches, with the Convent setting providing an accessible venue as well as a starting point for reflection and discussion. While contributions were significantly associated with our workshops and knitting circles, we also received pieces through post and women working alone.

Within the knitting circles, there was a shared space of exchange. We began discussing our birth stories and our relationships to the hospital. This shared environment provided a safe place to talk about the breadth of experiences associated with childbirth, medical treatment, and broader social settings.

**How have you researched the history of the former Royal Women's Hospital (RWH) where you both met after childbirth and its association with forced adoption, isolation and "septic abortion"? How has the hospital foregrounded your new work**

The development of this project has involved parallel strands of community-led practice and research. The experiences of sharing stories with mothers during knitting, of interviewing medical practitioners, and of reviewing texts, have helped to iteratively inform our practice and research focus. These elements have been in dialogue: experiences, from both storytelling and medical records, have guided our choice of research, in terms of the choice of timeframes to investigate in the history of the hospital and medical system of Victoria, and of the elements of birth experience to connect with. For instance, the experiences and stresses of midwives and nurses, and the treatment of birth complications and medical failure, were important narratives in our interviews that seeded ideas for research around the hospital and our discussions in making the work.

Janet McCalman's book *Sex and Suffering: Women's Health and a Women's Hospital* (1998) is an historical text about the Royal Women's Hospital. Reading about the old hospital, mainly focussing on the 20th Century period enabled us to discuss histories and artefacts with former staff of the hospital. When developing the assembled knitted work, we discussed how this might reflect or represent aspects of experience of mothers and the institution itself.

One attribute of the work that history has guided is the use of tea dying. Using tea has been a way to reflect on storytelling and sharing of experience, but the staining of the work has also been a process through which we have reflected on, and attempted to allude to, the very serious experiences of medical failure, trauma, and loss, and the marks left and systematically dealt with through the medical process - a record within the system of the very real.

Visits to the hospital also, including its basements and operating structures, even in decommissioned forms (before its demolition), have given us a certain grounding in the institutional - the machinery of care, of meals, of laundry, of a basement of services, pipes, processes, systems, and people

running, and running within these systems. This has been an interesting point of reflection during the art-making process. The brutality, failure of long past times is potent in texts on the hospital, and stories from mothers and practitioners have given us a small window into the human machinery of the hospital in recent decades; but the bowels of the structure - its operational architecture - have given us additional insight into the running's of a building, machine and medical process that processes women in the tens of thousands. This coldness and essential functionality of the RWH as a structure, juxtaposes against those snippets of lives we have gathered in the art making process, and has informed the approach to design of the art project and work.

**What are some of the artistic references and antecedents in your work with its soft palette reminiscent of Agnes Martin and gridded form?**

The progenitors of this work include formal, process and narrative influences. While artistic practitioners have shaped our thinking, it is important for us to emphasise that the grounding of this piece is in the process of community participation and at its most evident, the stories of

women. Two parallel strands were incorporated as we refined the approach to specifying, dying and assembling the knitted components. Tonally, we considered the practice of knitting baby blankets: the act of contribution and gift often experienced by new mothers, whether by their own family or community contributions such as from the Hospital Knitters Axillary. The act of assemblage references the Australian heritage of waggie quilts made during the 1930's; typically, from offcuts and mixed pieces of fabric such as used wool jackets, old clothes, sacks or bags.

These foregroundings relate to both formal and narrative influences in artists such as Doris Salcedo, with her work expressing trauma, violence, and the labour of stitching to bear witness to injury and the process of healing. The palette and form of Eva Hesse's work, particularly the emergent properties of her fabric sculptural works, have challenged our engagement with the knitted material. Considering other formal influences, Sheila Hicks' textile works evoke blankets through gridded forms, as well as the potential of wool as a medium with diverse, irregular shape and colour; and the intensity of Berinde de Bruyckere's work with compiled,

distresses and enveloping woollen blankets has indirectly spoken to the medical and traumatic themes, and the place of the body in our shared narratives around childbirth.



# **Eva Abbinga**

Eva Abbinga is a cross-disciplinary visual artist motivated by the complexities of place, identity and sustainability. Abbinga's artistic practice is shaped by her Ukrainian and Dutch ancestry, studies in urban planning and her interest in needlework.

Through large scale soft sculpture Abbinga explores issues of social, environmental and historic concern. Abbinga was a participant of the 2016 Next Wave Kickstart program and has exhibited both locally and internationally.

# **Larissa Linnell**

Larissa Linnell's practice engages with the fabric and history of place. Her processes and focus on community participation seek to elicit the cumulative histories and impressions formed in how people relate to structures, locations and institutions.

Her work integrates sound recording, drawing and sculpture,

to bring attention to the largely unobserved aspects of experiencing a place, such as sound, touch and texture. Larissa leads interdisciplinary projects and has participated in residencies and solo exhibitions across Australia and Asia. She has been the recipient of grants including Australia Council, Arts Tasmania; Japan Foundation; Asialink; and Ian Potter Foundation.



# CREDIT

Crownings has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council for the Arts, its arts funding and advisory body.

This project is also supported through the City of Melbourne's Arts Grants Program and the Abbotsford Convent Foundation.



