

Whitework

A contemporary trousseau, textiles by Ilka White
Craft Victoria March - April 2004

I wish that before entering "Whitework" you could somehow, as I did, walk into the studio where the work was created. I wish you could see the timber looms threaded with lines of cotton, and linen, silk and rayon, and the shelves of yarn cones, sitting like different coloured ice-creams waiting to be chosen.

I wish you could see the notice board, with its array of images and words, its calendar loaded with an intricate but planned chaos, a small plastic bag of sterling silver twigs fixed to the board with a pin, white goose feathers poked into a square of silk organza. I wish you could see the weaving tools hanging there, looking like ancient secretive things whose names you'd never know.

The reason I wish you could see all this is that it seems so much to belong to the work, and in this sense it is difficult to know where in fact the work starts.

"Whitework is a broad term, covering many textile techniques, given to the use of white thread on a white ground. For me, this work is associated with the traditional making of a woman's trousseau."

In Ilka White's textiles, we find evidence of the quiet labour that we see in traditional white work. In these works the time and process of making is as valued as the pieces themselves. Here the process and the work are one. The back of the cloth is no longer hidden, it is displayed; the sampler stands on its own, the painstaking attention to detail not only reveals but demands a quiet consideration. Here the work expands beyond the domestic function to include a spiritual function. The work asks its viewers to stop, to see the subtle whisper that white makes upon white, to witness the time given to it and to wonder at its hushed beauty.

"White is my family name. In Whitework, I am looking at what I have inherited from my mother and grandmother (habits, expectations, sensibilities, gifts) and asking - what do I now make with this inheritance? Here is the work of receiving and culling one's inheritance. Especially the inheritance in the heart and mind. Old patterns and the work of cutting new ones."

There is in this work a sense that a familiar form has been taken, the shape of a tree, a plant, a sewing pattern, a husk, and that in its repetition, in the subtle variation of pattern, the form is reclaimed. Just as those of each generation both inherit and give shape to their own identity.

"The trousseau is a proving ground, a space for self expression, a vessel for hope and aspirations, sometimes called a hope chest, also like a dowry, a measure of a woman's worth. A vessel to hold all you might need in the future."

Ilka has inherited not only her Nannies sewing patterns and her mother's songs but also perhaps an ability to make something out of what she finds. What is palpable and undeniable in "Whitework" is a sense of process; a gentle, fine and truly responsive process that is quietly, patiently, thoroughly inhabited. I am reminded of one of the notes I had seen scribbled on the notice board,

"...things happen over time that can't happen instantaneously."

Ilka's willingness to slow down, to go within and to stay with developing ideas, allows them and the felt sense of them become, moment by moment, stitch by stitch, an image.

We find a fragile almost ethereal beauty in this collection of images and objects. There exists within them an ineffable sense of process and time. The time it takes to gather, to gestate, to transform and bring forth. To weave, embroider, stitch, thread and live through the cloth.

Whitework speaks not only to our minds but also to our spirit. It speaks to the part of us that lets a moment touch us without asking that moment for an explanation. The part of us that is uplifted when a white faced heron flies over us, that enables us to wear a prayer as we would wear a locket, that remembers what a tree told, what a husk holds or how our mother sang.

Martine Murray