



## TEXTILE POETRY

Ailie Snow's work displays a lifetime of travel through landscapes of geography, memory, mind and spirit. JEANNETTE DENICOLIS MEYER explains

Ailie Snow is in her studio, hard at work, but she is not alone. She shares her work space with *The Ladies*, who are coming alive as she sews their stories in layers of contemplation and discovery. Snow hand stitches the small, page-like pieces in meditative running stitches, marks she uses often on her textile constructions. The layers include silk that itself has a story, as the blotches and rust stains on them will attest. Sometimes the layers encase used tea bags, translucent and shiboried with serendipitous lines. In this series, affectionately dubbed *The Ladies* by the artist

as she visits with them and receives their stories, small raw edged quilt squares stand alone and gather in groups to impart their narratives.

Snow is a versatile fibre artist who works in several media and teaches classes on subjects ranging from fabric manipulation (a class titled *Textile Tantrums*) to book arts, from design to creativity. She has been a primary school teacher in Australia and Britain, a wife and mother back in her native New Zealand, a student at Unitec, where she received her Diploma in Design, an international tutor and lecturer, a knitter, quiltmaker, feltmaker, and

book designer. Her work has won the National Creative Fibre award in 1992, 1995, and 1999, and the Combined Textile Guild's WEL Trust Award in 2000. Her latest two person show, with Devonport artist Freda Brierley (*NZ Quilter #42*), *True Lies*, garnered critical praise and an invitation to be part of the *New Zealand on Show* exhibit which traveled in Great Britain in 2002 and 2003.

With twenty years of experience working with textiles, Snow continues to enter her studio with a sense of discovery. She lets one thing lead to another, and if the process "stops working, I've got to do something to it. I ask, what would happen if I did this to it? Or that?" She finds the different media she employs support each other. Snow considers the making of her intensely collaged and layered books a way of journaling and exploring. But they can also simply be a way to play with materials and experiment with processes. Often a fascination with a new process can add a sensory component to her work she didn't know she was searching for. Some of her latest books have pages made of plaster, an innovation that

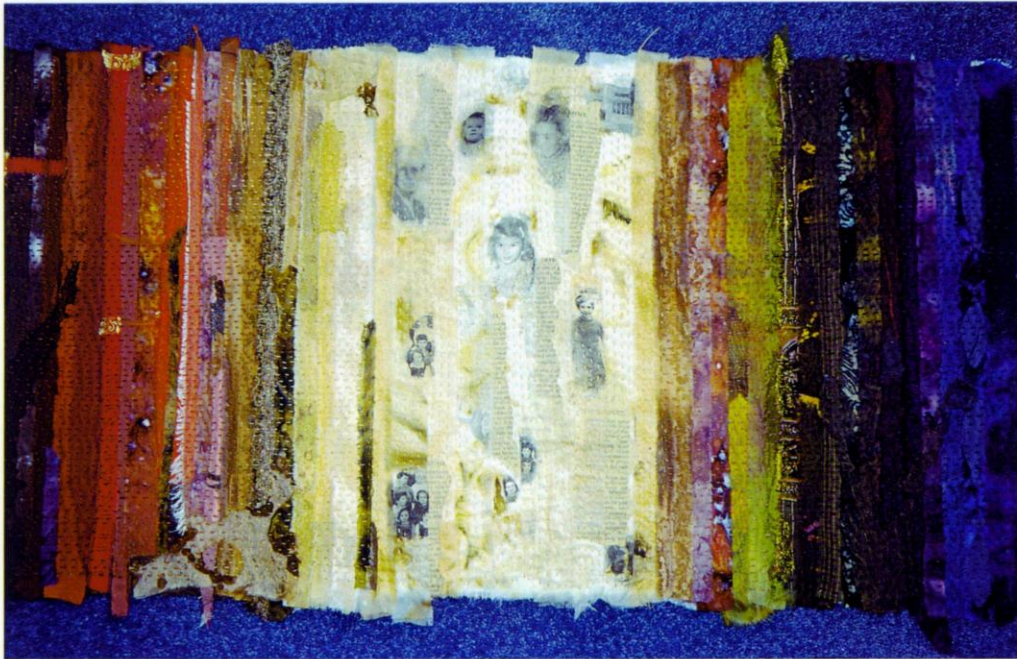


ABOVE LEFT TO RIGHT: *Lady Just Holding On*; *Landlady*; *Lady Facing the Unknown* 20 x 25cm each

PHOTOGRAPHS: HELEN MITCHELL

LEFT: *Stone in My Throat* 38 x 27cm

OPPOSITE TOP: *Uncertain Edge* 70 x 37cm  
PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



adds tactile and visual weight to the finished volume along with an aural component, as the reader finds herself listening to the evocative clacking of the pages as they are turned.

In her studio, her art is visible in various stages of completion: a piece here, framed and ready for its next gallery showing; another there, not quite alive in its current incarnation but waiting for its new chance. For in Snow's studio, not much artwork ends up swept into the bin. "If I end up with something I don't like," she comments, "I think, where else can its elements go? When I look around my studio, I see pieces that have been deconstructed and reassigned to something else."

Snow's artwork shares studio space with treasures collected in a lifetime of travel in India, North America, and Europe, and a childhood spent absorbing her beloved New Zealand landscape. There is evidence of her interior and spiritual journeys as well, through the topography of childhood memories and the winding paths of Zen Buddhism. The souvenirs serve as decoration and inspiration.

Like her studio, her work displays a lifetime of travel through landscapes of geography, memory, mind, and spirit. Barry Lopez, in his book of essays, *Crossing Open Ground*, could be describing Snow's work when he states, "I think of two land-

scapes – one outside the self, the other within." In her artwork Snow has decided, consciously or not, what stories to stitch into her horizons and which to leave by the wayside. A recent series, *The Blood and the Bones*, is concerned with stitching a story to keep from the layers of her childhood memories, family attachments, and sense of place.

"The stories we tell ourselves," Snow says, "make us what we are. But memory, and story, are unreliable. Every moment in the present retains a stain of the past." Snow's use of silk that has been stained by dirt, age, and organic pigments supports this idea of reclamation and reinvention. By the time the silk enters her studio, it has its own history. Snow explains her affinity for the marked silk in a way that also explains the themes of her work: "This cloth evokes a consideration of the passage of time and memory, fragility and decay, an acceptance of the natural unfolding of change and evolution."

She works intuitively on the stitched constructions, tucking printed text and transferred imagery into the layers of used silk. Her design process parallels the message she stitches into her work, a message recognized by Dr. Bill Cooke, Senior Lecturer of Visual Arts at the University of Auckland at Manukau, in the catalogue accompanying *True Lies*: "Snow is reminding us that much of what we

tell ourselves about ourselves is made up as we go along." When she assembles the layers of silk and paper and thread, she is using the stories that cling to them to tell her own. She is making up the process and distilling the message as she goes.

Asked what direction she sees herself going in, she answers, "I'm just going to keep mucking around and playing about letting the work lead me on." She is continuing to work on *The Ladies*. "It takes me a while to get *The Ladies* right, to get the sense. I really try to follow their stories," Snow comments. "Working small is good discipline. It's quite tight to get the feelings I want in there along with the image." The series is developing as other stitches (which Snow calls "sutures") become more important and obvious. The latest in the series have become autobiographical, a discovery Snow made only after she completed the pieces and noticed how the series was changing under her eyes and fingers. Perhaps she recognizes herself as she quotes poet Stanley Kunitz' claim that poetry is a "particular form of paying attention."

Ailie Snow is a textile poet, paying attention to the story told as her flawed and fragmentary memories are stitched together with her "imperfect, impermanent and incomplete" materials to describe the mutable horizon where inner and outer landscapes merge. ❖