

By positioning memories, understandings, assumptions, skills and usage alongside contemporary practices, the blanket acts as a metaphor for the transition from traditional cultural references (and economic purposes) to contemporary investigations, approaches and understandings about issues of re-interpretation and materiality. As ideas emerge, the history of art shows that many cultures have prized organic materials that transmit an object's message and that a material such as cloth, in all its myriad of emotionally charged forms, and the blanket that can never be deemed a neutral object, has opened up new creative territory at the same time as dismantling hierarchies.

I wish to thank Paula Coulthard, Hannah Howes, Susan Jowsey, Katherine Morrison, Rona Ngahuia Osbourne, Beverley Rhodes, Suzanne Tamaki and Sue Weston who all responded so positively to the invitation to participate in Blanket Stitch. I'd also like to acknowledge the contribution of Louise Porter & Kay Howard of Quilt Auckland, Louis Le Vaillant and Philip Clarke Director of Objectspace to the project. My thanks also go to those friends, colleagues and peers who share the belief that by 'conscious' actions fresh conversations will occur and new and unexpected understandings will be reached.

Carole Shephard
December 2004



List of Works

Paula Coulthard

Blanket Cloak
Woollen blanket with printed cotton back
2004
Courtesy of the artist

Hannah Howes

Hunter
Woollen blanket, possum skins, found objects
2004
Courtesy of the artist

Gatherer
Woollen blanket, silk, found objects
2004
Courtesy of the artist

Aniwaniwa
Woollen blanket, possum skins, found objects
2004
Courtesy of the artist

Susan Jowsey
Scout
Woollen blanket, mixed media
2004
Courtesy of the artist

Katherine Morrison
'Red Cross' Quilt
Woollen blankets, wool batting, cotton back
2004
Courtesy of the artist

'Blanket Kiss' Quilt
Woollen blankets, wool batting, yarn, cotton back
2004
Courtesy of the artist

'Power on High' Quilt
Wool blanket, wool batting, yarn, cotton back
2003
Courtesy of the artist

Rona Ngahuia Osbourne
A Well Made Bed
Cotton embroidery, thread, felt, hemp, silk appliqué & recycled woollen blankets
2004
Courtesy of the artist

Beverly Rhodes
Stoffbilder
Recycled blankets (undyed), canvas
2003
Courtesy of the artist

Stoffbilder
Recycled blankets (dyed), canvas
2003
Courtesy of the artist

Stoffbilder
Recycled blankets (dyed and undyed), canvas
2003
Courtesy of the artist

Blinky 1
Recycled blankets (dyed), canvas
2003

Nga Whare Roa
Recycled blankets (dyed), plywood
2003
Courtesy of the artist

Suzanne Tamaki
Bi-cultural Rap
Recycled woollen blankets, wool stitching, feather, shell, tapa & buttons
2004
Courtesy of the artist

Sue Weston
Utility Quilt with Bush Shirt
Recycled woollen fabrics
1998
Courtesy of the artist

Red Rug with Lines
Recycled woollen fabrics
2000
Courtesy of the artist

Published on the occasion of *Blanket Stitch* at Objectspace December 2004 - January 2005
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Objectspace acknowledges its major supporters:
Creative NZ and Carbans Wines and The Cube
and the assistance of Auckland War Memorial Museum with *Blanket Stitch*

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BLANKET STITCH

"Whole cloth" wrote John Ruskin, "is wool of sheep, thread of flax, bark of tree - there exists no matrix. It can be shaped beyond the boundaries of origin. It shifts from the potential of actuality that has a myriad of shapes and a myriad of ways of moving, responding to the action of the individual who manipulates it. It possesses the mysterious sense of unaccountable life in things themselves." ¹

BLANKET STITCH

In today's culture of 'use and discard' the blanket has been discovered and utilised by many contemporary artists as a challenging material for a range of art making. While acts of recycling, re-use, retrieval and revitalisation are part of the creative process, what has become apparent is how this material triggers past memories and recollections.

Is memory simply a flickering suggestion? What is this urge to reconstruct from simply a trace? How can we ever know if the glances at an unremarkable object reveal the secrets of an individual or an institution? And why, might experiencing only the echo of something never be enough?

"The object thus begins to dematerialise, to reference the event and the narrative, to move away from the material to the experiential. Another way to say it is that the material becomes the means by which the immaterial of the past is recovered."²

In her study of private collections theorist Susan M. Pearce discusses how people tend to attach memory to rare or aesthetically pleasing objects. But can we be this selective about our memories? She sees collections, be they loved objects or aids to memory, as being a mixture of memory value and intrinsic value, but one can respond to this by suggesting there is a deliberate echo to do more with the exchange value and usage.

When European settlers arrived in New Zealand the first objects they brought with them were items of necessity, trade and exchange. This colonial baggage included blankets. For example the basic contents of a whaler's house were "food, clothing, blankets and cooking pots."³ Whaling ships supplied trading stations and trading posts exchanged goods with Maori. "The New Zealanders preferred blankets and tobacco and tools helpful to daily life in peace and war."⁴ Michael King also observed that, "Traditional Maori clothing had gone out of general use by the 1850s... though it would be donned, especially cloaks, for ceremonial occasions as cultural performances. As the European settler population began to swell in the 1840s, so European clothes, new and second hand, had become

widely available along with blankets, which had the advantage of being useable as clothing and/or bedding. These items were sold by travelling merchants and store keeper who sometimes exploited the Maori market for excessive reward".⁵

With industrialisation, the ubiquitous New Zealand woven woollen blanket became part of every home. Produced in mills throughout the country, blankets were associated with specific localities and makers, for example, the Onehunga and Kaiapoi Woollen Mills. Blankets have now become collectable items.

When I was a child I used to travel by train to visit my maternal grandmother in Ohura, my birthplace. The train would arrive in the early hours of the morning and this solitary figure would be waiting on the platform carrying two blankets – one a grey woollen blanket with a single red stripe with red silken blanket-stitched edging and the other a crochet blanket made from recycled woollen clothing. We would walk through the dense fog to her small house and she would put me to bed and cover me with more softly woven woollen blankets and an eiderdown. The memory of this childhood experience remains deeply embedded in me and I can still see, smell and feel the blankets that were wrapped around me and imagine the hand of my grandmother.



- 1 Mildred Constantine & Laurel Reuter, *Whole Cloth*, 1997.
- 2 Rebecca Solnit
- 3 Michael King
- 4 Ibid
- 5 Ibid
- 6 Constantine & Reuter

meaning through stitch, thread and format to the blanket. Embellishment, embroidery, darning, labelling, and naming have all been used by artists and many have recycled original forms into new opportunities. Certainly this is the situation for many contemporary artists who work with cloth as their primary material. Some continue to work in autobiographical ways while others make sociological and political observations.

Without doubt the making of art from existing objects has become an important practice for over a century.

The re-evaluation of everyday materials and objects such as the blanket has seen an expansion of the usage and approaches to cloth but also to shifts in contemporary art practice. Some artists working within the mainstream have used materials such blankets because of their malleability, strength, volume and symbolic significance. Others have used blankets because of their texture and varying degrees of opacity. And others have used blankets for what they painfully and silently represent, sometimes loss, pain and sickness.

While the pre-1920's industrial world was producing cloth for general use, artists were experiment-

ing with it in a variety of ways. The early Dadaists including Kurt Schwitters, Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp used cloth for collage, sculpture and installation. Women artists such as Kay Sage, Leonore Fini and Dorothea Tanning used cloth to explore the notion of masquerade. In the works of German artist Joseph Beuys, felt became a language for "warmth, the harbour of energy."⁶ His experiences as a combat pilot and prisoner-of-war are clearly significant in his early work. For him felt became an insulator and protector from outside influences and a material for the proletariat. Similarly the woollen blanket can encompass similar social, political and metaphoric readings.

Blanket Stitch will coincide with Quilt Auckland an International Symposium to be held in Auckland 9 to 14 January 2005. While many New Zealand quilt makers will be represented in exhibitions created especially for this conference, this selected show concentrates specifically on the use of the blanket as a vehicle for imaginative expression and the diversity of approaches to use of the material. The mix of participants and their work represents those whose primary interests are with the nature of materiality and the inter-relationship of idea and making.

Is there a benign side with the 'make do' actions of the domestic crafter? What might stitching badges or labels onto a blanket mean? How might tears, stains, fraying and repairs be poignant mementos of the past? Is the blanket a comfort or a curse? Why does this simple form have such historical and cultural significance?