

Teelah George

interview by Jessica Douglas



Teelah George is a Perth-based artist who fashions paint, sculpture, objects, sewing, embroidery and textiles together into lusciously tactile and sensile works. Her practice tackles the fractures of memory, using visual art to unpack the ambiguities and 'glitches' that come with oral records. I was lucky enough to catch up with Teelah, where we chatted about her practice and the works in her solo show at OREXART, Lovers' Ponytails.

JESSICA DOUGLAS: I can feel a sense of narrative to these Lovers' Ponytails works, in the way colours pull and drag along them. Would you agree, or do you consider each work to stand-alone and be its own conversation?

TEELAH GEORGE: That is exactly what they are supposed to be doing, I am so happy with that reading. There is a sense of narrative, albeit broken, and the materiality of the work is a loose binder. It's almost like [the works] have personalities, in that some respond to each other in certain ways, and others are more independent. Some of the works are pairs and others need more space, but they are all tied together. Ultimately, the works are responsive. I have no plan for them when I start and I work on them all at the same time, working with one until it needs to pause for a while, then sometimes coming in the next day, and other times starting again. The Night Sky Corner work was a struggle. It was so many things before it rested. It's one of my favourites now, but it was hard to pin down.

JD: In terms of the nature of your work, you use historical recordings or memories as a platform to make images. This show in particular deals with Dorris Barber's oral history, which you found in the library at the University of Western Australia. Why this recording in particular, what was it that drew you to it?

TG: I was working on a painting for a show in Sydney and listening to this oral history in the background, and it became a kind of catalyst and more of a focus for this Auckland show, and there was something charming about it. I became interested in the nature of it as a portal into history. It was recorded in the late 1970s, so it had a particular quality to it that struck me personally. The woman who was being interviewed, Dorris Barber, was in her eighties and had a prolific memory. She started the story with her great-grandparents' arrival in Australia as free settlers. Her memory was incredible, and she gave so many details – describing objects or things, like how she did the washing. From that, the oral history conjured up ideas and images in my mind. During that process, characters would come to manifest in paint.

JD: I can see the faces in these works, but what about the work that shares the title with this exhibition, Lovers' Ponytails? There's something poetic and curious to this title that's rather intriguing.

TG: It plays on plurality, too. This title is something that I misheard in the oral history. I enjoy the misremembering and glitches that are inherent in memory and the relationship it has to visual art, so it seemed particularly appropriate. It's sort of like a game of Chinese whispers. Recently my partner and I drove from Perth to Sydney. He had just cut off his ponytail and so I had this extra connection to hair and ponytails, which was playing on my mind and it seemed to fit. It's nice to have that added dimension that makes it personal and inherently my own.

JD: In this work, the lovers' ponytails look a bit like curtains that have been pulled back and tied, which speaks to textiles a lot – and that ties in really nicely to your background in textiles. What was it that drew you to this medium, and to the practice of sewing?

TG: The idea of a curtain being pulled back is kind of like uncovering a space through something, or unveiling an element, which is something I'm really interested in as well. But yes, in terms of texture and tactility, that's definitely a reading that I've been introduced to by the painting as well. That material relationship is very much something I'm aware of in painting and the way I work. I never wanted to be a painter, I thought it was too loaded and I didn't have the confidence to work with such abstract stuff as paint. I was in to the tactility of textiles and my practice has slowly brought both together in a way that makes sense to me. The mediums are at once antidotes to each other and tools to respond and learn. Textiles have an inherent familiarity whereas paint is really weird when you think about it. I love them both and have come to accept my process as often clumsy and time consuming – but part of the work itself. At the moment I have been incorporating a lot of embroidery into my practice, too. Embroideries are like slowed down paintings, I don't plan them and I respond as I go. [Teelah's embroidery work is currently on show at the Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide as part of the Ramsay Art Prize, and will be showing later this year at the Primavera exhibition at Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney.]

JD: Colour is also something that elicits interesting responses. I read that following your return to Perth from Ireland, you began to see colour again. The colour in these works is anything but subtle. In what way did this trip open you up to that intensely bright and sharp colour?

TG: I bolted after art school [Curtin University of Technology, Perth] and met up with a friend living in Belfast. I wasn't sure about the whole artist thing and I wanted to go overseas, so I just worked and travelled. After about three years I just wasn't happy thinking about the world without the outlet of making, and the more I realised I was unhappy in not making something, the more response to everything I had, particularly in terms of colour. So I came back to Perth in late 2012, where I was lucky enough to do a residency with Richard Lewer, who became an informal mentor and made me obsessed. [Lewer] taught me so much about endurance and obsession – about being an artist. He was really the first person that I had met with that intense drive and it completely rubbed off.

JD: That drive to not only make work, but to tell stories – that's something I really see at the heart of your practice. How do you find yourself telling stories? – I guess this begins in the studio. Where else does that inspiration come from?

TG: When I'm in my studio, I'm interested in presenting different ways to think about stories and storytelling. I like the way visual art doesn't explicitly tell you something, it pulls on what you remember and everyone's response is different. It's such a wonderful way to communicate – with the material, with the curators and installation team, with the viewer, with history and this constant and cyclical nature. I feel like there's something wonderful about the will to keep, and that is part of it too. I live by the beach in Cottesloe, and love it. A couple of days a week I teach at the University of Western Australia, which offers me a break from being in my head and I can start to talk to the students. It's easy to relate to the issues that they're having – it's all about making decisions and getting good at that. It's nice being able to understand where [the students] are coming from and suggest things in a subtle way, and then they light up and they make those connections for themselves. It's the same if someone is responding to your work and you see that happen and make connections that you hadn't necessarily seen yourself. Unpacking that complicated communication.

Jessica Douglas recently completed her MA in art history at the University of Auckland. She is a freelance writer who works at Gus Fisher Gallery and Art News New Zealand.