

A MIXED MEDIA INSTALLATION BY HELEN SCHAMROTH

NEW WORLD
OLD SKY

PREFACE

The Fisher Gallery is pleased to present *New World Old Story*, an installation by Helen Schamroth. It is a timely exhibition that extends the discussion about craft practices in New Zealand while demonstrating the skill of this artist of successfully balancing concept and technique.

Schamroth's work has developed from craft skills she learnt as a child, through personal, professional and artistic experiences gained in a world seemingly changing and expanding at an explosive rate. This work weaves the experiences of the artist as a person seeking a place, into a new art form, a shimmering steel fibre art sculpture, a fusion of traditional craft practices and new technology, a development of the childhood exercises in applied arts into a strong artistic statement.

The growth of her work and the developing wealth of experience are intertwined in *New World Old Story* - a work as much about the changing nature of craft as a personal and social commentary on cultural issues.

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Tim Renner

Director/Curator, Fisher Gallery

NEW WORLD OLD STORY

Between 1892 and 1895, the Czech composer and viola-player Antonin Dvorak was Director of the National Conservatory in New York. During this time, he composed his Symphony No. 9 in E Minor - 'From the New World' - as well as the American Spring Quartet (1893) which was partly prompted by (in the parlance of the time) Negro melodies. In his many other works, a Czech 'national' style appears; he incorporated into his music the sounds of the places he was associated with, including the 'New World' of America.

Helen Schamroth has found, in the *New World Symphony*, a profound means of telling her own life's story. Listening to it, transcribing it into a personal hieroglyphic language, has enabled her to initiate and bring to fruition an installation which expresses her own struggles with identity and search for completeness.

Music and visual art are often good bedfellows; many are the examples of synthesis (take opera). One can inspire the other - together they can create a rich sensory experience, and make it possible to articulate ideas more fully than if one medium were employed alone.

Just as the symphony is in four parts, so is Schamroth's installation, each part representing one significant period of time in her life. They take the form of spirals, continuous paths. The post-war years in Europe, drab and dreary, have a grey-brown hue, the colour of foggy anxiety; subsequent years in Australia and New Zealand are represented by equally self-explanatory colours.

Each is layered with patterns: old lace is a symbol for Europe, gum leaves for Australia, fern leaves for New Zealand - readily identifiable, non-controversial, generic signifiers. Over all, dancing and winding their ways down the spiral paths, are silver hieroglyphs, the music made manifest through the artist's hand. Lacquered copper wire, knotted and laced through, enhances and enriches the visual language.

Her roots are Jewish, the one solid constant in her life and one of the factors which binds her to her community. Hence the Star of David firmly at the base of each spiral. Another constant element, since early childhood, is needlework. She recounts stitching buttons onto cloth as a two-year old in Belgium. Stitched on during the day, they were cut off in the evening so she could start again. (A child's version of the Myth of Sisyphus?)

From the outset, her work has been concerned with the values and processes of needlework and textile practice - knit, knot, weave, stitch. At the same time, layering and raising, to give dimension and sculptural form, has characterised work involving yarns, together with wrapping and knotting, and employment of armatures. Silk has been wrapped, layered in multitudes of little squares, stiffened to hold shape, anchored by metal and other solid elements: curled wire, painted acetate.

The introduction of metal, first as wire, and later as mesh, was in aid of this desire to fill space while retaining the softness of cloth. Later, and especially in this installation, the softness is more by way of reference. Knitted wire sculptures, and assemblages incorporating fine wire mesh, were precursors of works in which perforated aluminium or mild steel stand as a metaphor for a woven textile: to simulate a sail, or a banner, to provide a vehicle, as cloth does, for applying thread by various means, especially those common to needlework.

In this marriage of soft and malleable with firm and strong, thus enabling the development of spatial concepts, we see a joining of two strands of her professional life: first, in architecture, and next as a textile artist.

Perhaps, to carry the conjecture further, we could consider the possibility of a search for stability and substance, some way to stand in the place where she is (to paraphrase a popular song).

To be able to stand in the place where you are is the immigrant's challenge and dilemma. To have to cope with the experience of being 'the other'. For Helen, a double challenge - first, to learn to stand, as a little French-speaking Polish-born Jewish girl, in Australia, and then, as a newly-wed, in New Zealand. The immigrant never quite knows where 'home' is, and as a consequence never feels sure what is, or is not, theirs to identify with, or to use as their own. This could be a reason why one of Helen's major concerns throughout her artistic career has been the question of cultural appropriation. Her response to Dvorak's music is connected with his taking up the music of other nationalities.

Feminist ideology plays a part, too, in informing her life and work; while devoting her creative energies to the 'feminine arts' of needlework and textiles, she consciously extends the possibilities of these as structural

frameworks for exploring ideas, by employing the 'masculine' substance of metal. While it is true to say that these demarcations have not always existed - knitting was first done by men, and at the height of the fashion for embroidered garments in 18th century Europe, women embroiderers were not considered good enough to have important positions in French workshops - nevertheless it is the contemporary perception. Metal, in the form of gold and silver thread, has an ancient association with embroidery, and in other forms with garment-making (consider chain mail, steel corsets, bustles and hoops) but its handling even so was probably by male hands.

However, only in recent years has metal been seriously reckoned with as a textile. It takes a small leap of the imagination to see the logic in exploiting this malleable and relatively durable material in the service of a textile-based concept. For one thing, it enables such a work to be exhibited out-of-doors, and for another, it makes possible large-scale pieces which can stand alone.

In Europe, this is not so unusual - for several years now, prestigious textile events have included work which is entirely or partly metal. In New Zealand, fewer fibre/textile artists have begun to embrace the notion. Here, as in the use of laser and computer technology, Helen is a fore-runner.

The mild steel spirals in this installation have been cut by laser in order to achieve their smoothly curved edges. The musical transcriptions, spontaneous marks generated by hand with pencil and paper were reproduced on computer, where they underwent such shifts and tweaks as necessary to fit them into the curves. Interestingly, the end result has a thread-like quality, and the whole project has a soft, colourful, layered and embellished appearance.

This is one woman's story, a personal narrative we are invited to share. It is, as well, a story which will strike a chord in the hearts of the many others who, like her, have experienced the discomfort of displacement and alienation. It is her most ambitious project to date, a sort of magnum opus: a coming together of ideas, emotion, skills, accumulated over the years of her life - as child, adult, daughter, mother, writer, artist.



Adagio, Allegro molto 1944 - 49

Poland ... World War II
she loses her father
searches under the house
'stay where you are'
is the last thing
she hears her mother say

She loses her widowed mother
her husband ... everyone
she lives on her wit
good looks ... diams
false papers

He loses parents ... sisters
brothers ... wife ... everyone
he escapes
from Janowska concentration camp
survives on snow and grass
on optimism ... a twinkle in his eyes
'every day is a gift'

1944
they find each other
in an office where she works
he wants work
she tries to send him away

He becomes her boss
they marry ... on his birthday ... quickly
his (black market) wedding gift
a ham sandwich
such luxury

1945
Passes at last ... no need to run
but who is left ... where to go

September ... a baby girl
born to Martha and Feliks Ash
named for their late mothers
'my only possession' she whispers

Times are still hard
he is called up to the army
new papers ... new birth dates
a new life
they leave Crakow

He trades in cardboard boxes
boxes from bedroom to bathroom
boxes become pots
pots become money
money is worthless:
so money becomes diamonds

1946
crossing borders ... eleven adults
and me wearing diamonds
covered with false threads
in the centre of each flower
save on my bonnet
sleep silver cake forks
in my mother's bag
we travel to Prague

Went on to juice
squeezed from grated carrots
on to spinach water
thickened with flour
a scrap of dark chocolate
anything tasty
'eat up everything
who knows when you will eat again'

Paris
paper money
rolled inside my gran's hands
down into the park and
back up four flights of stairs
every day

Two years in Brussels ... we speak French
he has cousins ... a business together

Kindergarten
and at home I saw buttons
the same ones every day

The cousins gossip
my mother speaks five languages
but not Polish
'such a blue-eyed blonde is Jewish?'
she seasons the gefilte fish
like her mother did
and they are ashamed

A holiday ... in Monte Carlo
to play ... to win ... to lose
Feliks is a gambler

No citizenship ... no prospects
he applies for papers
to go as far away as possible

Abroad Rescue:
crossing the timeline
my earliest memory ... towar
King Neptune is drowning my mother
the Great Australian Bight
my mother is seavick
'we must live in Melbourne'

LIMITED EDITION
OFFSET PRINT



Largo 1949 - 68

Melbourne 1949
 new country ... new culture ... new language
 the rag trade ... his own business
 she works with him

A new house in a new suburb
 no maid called Maria here
 unmade road ... too cheap ... long drop
 she points the ceiling red
 the neighbours talk

Buses to kindergarten
 embarrassment
 'push me pull me but don't talk to me
 everyone looks at us'
 the rules are kind

We all learn to speak English
 from an English woman
 who has lived in India
 it's not Shire ... I still sound different

A Baptist school
 the girls laugh ... 'Frankie Frawchie'
 I hide my thick sandwiches
 and hate my glasses

New opportunities ... 'the lucky country'
 he gives work to other immigrants
 she learns Italian
 so she can talk to them

1951
 she falls while pregnant but is all right
 a new baby sister
 named for his late sisters
 we share a room
 and love each other for ever

At school I hide in the library
 draw Aboriginal patterns for art
 and hands that look like flowers
 according to my mother

I teach the teacher French pronunciation
 must do scripture ... top the class
 but they don't want to give me the prize
 my mother protests in broken English

Box of the school ... the English prize
 trying to be an Australian

Make model stage sets for Hebrew school
 music ... dancing ... cabarets ... swimming
 endless Scribble ... to improve our English
 every moment full

They give us love and guilt
 and everything they haven't had
 never smack me ... never talk about the war
 except I know about his headaches
 and her stomach aches
 and I miss not having relatives

He gambles ... first poker
 my mother hates it ... flirts and threatens
 he stops ... then gambles with his business

Australia is kind ... business grows
 they help create a Jewish community
 one naturalized but
 will be New Australians till they die

Holidays ... Seafers Paradise
 Water skiing in the cold river
 Decades, Disney and Orange Pacific cruises
 an older girl saves me from drowning
 I don't tell my parents until I am adult

She loves being a good mother
 takes up pottery ... loves being an artist
 learns yoga and stands on her head
 loves giving parties and presents
 loves good looking well educated people
 glamorous clothes and jewellery
 drives to Dromedary ... Maria Minor full of kids
 who get stung by ballants

I pass an exam ... MorRobertson Girls' High School
 music ... French ... science class
 I never meet Aboriginals
 croquet ... basket ball ... tennis under sufferance
 table tennis ... debating ... drama ... library rep
 and some school friends of lost

Britnitsvah ... first in the new synagogue building
 hundreds of thank you letters to write

We move house
 dog ... cat ... named life ... room of my own
 phonographs ... television ... dating ... parties
 boys who drive ... we neck and pet

She gives up smoking
 I get hepatitis ... home for three months
 my mother sits with me ... makes her first mosaic

University ... 'such a long course you chose
 why not physiotherapy'
 an older boyfriend with a car
 'on overseas trip with us darling' ... loved every
 loved local ... a sense of home
 I start architecture again next year

Happy years
 discover non-Jewish boys and alcohol
 drawing boards ... art history ... sloppy jeans
 a social life ... deadlines ... working all night
 holidays ... not writing home enough

Don't want a 21st party ... a trip instead
 Canberra to Europe summer of '66-'67
 learn some Italian ... remember some french
 freedom ... and my mother gets sick

Get engaged in London ... to a New Zealander
 a nice Jewish professional
 hundreds of thank you letters to write

Marriage in Melbourne ... a Jewish affair
 more thank you letters to write
 he takes me away



Scherzo, molto vivace 1968 - 83

Auckland 1968

(my parents had hated my going
I wanted to go ... on the one hand
didn't want to go ... on the other hand
he had insisted)

Young and naive

"you are so far away"
try to study
iron shirts at two in the morning
the doctor says of my migraines
"you must give up something"
"the marriage is too new" I say
and give up my studies instead

I work at a drawing board
little joy
my father-in-law gets sick
so I help in his fur shop
and drive my mother-in-law
around Palmerston North

Father-in-law dies ... not old
mother-in-law comes to Auckland
to see home
soon I want the room
for the new baby

It is a girl
a good baby a bright baby
hundreds of photos
my parents rush to visit

Husband insists
on buying the first house
to make me settle
to be a New Zealander

Next time

I choose the site
we choose an architect
I don't want to be blamed if it's wrong)
stainproof shower curtains
and wallpaper
enjoy creating a home

My mother keeps getting sick
ulcerative colitis ... has an operation
I don't rush home to her

A second daughter
I rejoice and love her
as much as her sister
he says he wanted a boy
and to have dinner guests
I have never been so close to depression

Discover playcentre
find feminism and art
around the script
make friends

A third daughter to love ... I had insisted
care for the girls
kiss and kiss the first commissions
go to the races ... drive in my race book
give endless dinner parties
he travels
we all travel ... when he lets us

Parenthood ... such joy from our girls
cuts ... giggles ... music ... lights
acrylic paint on rocks
helps in the kitchen
doctor's waiting rooms
boundless energy

Their 25th wedding anniversary
we all go over ... celebrate
his birthday as well
she remains coy
"you don't ask a woman about her age"

Edith and stitch ... mix politics with art
in the middle of the night

We fight with my parents
he dislikes them protecting me
"the grandchildren are so far away"
I resent the pressures
from them ... from him
I fight with them all
my sister splits up with her husband

My mother visits for a child's birthday
gets sick ... rushed into hospital
he is busy at work

Heartache
happily talk to each other
content
can't bring myself to leave
bury ourselves
he is work and travel
I in children and art
we each find solace
we seem such a good couple

He goes away
over and over
we go as a family for 4 months
I go once ... alone
to be an artist
find courage ... hands to hold
the marriage web



Allegro con fuoco 1983 - 95

1983 ... the break-up is traumatic
I can never look back
pour my heart out to my parents
who listen ... offer help
I replace my missing Australian passport
and Polish birth certificate

I can't leave New Zealand ... the girls' home
life is joint custody ... work ... on
twelve years out of the workforce
take what I can ... care for my girls
bait for extra money at night
set up a business ... learn how on the way
learn about management
from the videos I sell (and my sister makes)
discover arts writing

There are men ... to one side of my life
until one comes into my life and stays
forever he says ... I continuously believe again
commitment ... sharing life apart and together
my children ... his three
a passion for the creative ... and each other
we fit well ... through good times and bad

1985 my father gets sick
another heart attack (others were secret)
I visit more often
'you should come' ... sit by him in hospital
make chicken soup for him
and flustered mother
cry at how frail he looks
have uncomplaining he is
I return to Auckland
'quickly ... come back' ... too late

'The ecology was beautiful
you girls are so brave' his many friends say
hold our mother's hand
'do you want us to help'
'how can you' she asks ... rhetorically
as always ... so we get on with our lives

She sells the business
nobody knows how ... least of all she
and lives alone in the huge apartment
with her memories ... her art ... friends visit
we are an odd ... sometimes

She gets sick ... breast cancer
we sit at her bedside ... helpless
please her by shopping together for clothes

The marker finds new energy
creates her largest mural for the synagogue
'my own song' ... and it is

She is proud of her daughters
the younger a video producer
winning international awards
a daughter and a son

'The only man in my life' she says
she telephones her friends ... often
talks about me ... 'exhibitions ... writing
... curating ... consulting ... arts management
good life ... beautiful daughters ... nice man
not here enough ... but she is happy'

She calls the grandchildren 'the percentage'
loves them ... agonizes for them
wonders when they are sick ... 'bad'
or away from home
tells everyone of their successes
showers them with gifts ... they love her
for her love and idiosyncrasies

I become more politically active
does this make me a New Zealander?
feminism (of the moderate kind)
homosexual law reform
Jewish identity ... the environment
Maori sovereignty ... bi-culturalism
some of it is my art

'Time for a degree' ... my mother is pleased
'unfitted business' I say

Her cough has persisted for years
she drags sadly ... it's hard to breathe
her trachea is closing
she suffers ... we agonise

'Inexplicable' the doctors say ... finally
a tracheotomy 'or she will die'
pneumonia ... many trips across the Tasman
drop everything ... go to our mother's side
over and over ... and weep for her
frustrated and angry

It is never enough ... daily or every few weeks
depending where we live
we talk to her often
she struggles to talk back
frustrated and angry ... says she is lonely
and sick ... and she is

She is struggling to live
struggling to breathe
struggling to remember
'cancer' says one doctor
'couldn't be' says another
but we don't tell her ... she knows
and finally accepts the morphine

August 28 1996
Marta gives up her struggle
and on a beautiful sunny day
we bid her farewell
and feel her approval
of the Rabbi's fond words
and the large crowd
who buried her beside Feliks
in the country they had learnt to call home

Now
I want to pick up the phone
'Warm there are these sculptures
and this story
they are for you'

NEW WORLD OLD STORY

a mixed media artwork:

Perforated mild steel, laser cut and epoxy powder coated. Images created on Aldus Freehand 4 converted to computer cut vinyl stencils and applied in automotive acrylic lacquer. Off-loom wovens, lacquer coated copper wire.

Dvorak's New World Symphony No. 9 in E minor, op. 95 "From the New World" is played by the London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Iván Kertész.

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Daji Panelboarders

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HELEN SCHAMBOH

Solo, Collaborative and 3-Person Exhibitions

- 1994 Pacific Impulse - Café Khadija, Caversham, Auckland
- 1992 Kluge - with Ruth Baird & Lois Perry, Masterworks, Auckland
- 1991 Isoscapes - collaborative with Robin Paul, Peto of Ponoroby, Auckland
- 1990 Frameworks for Survival - installation at Masterworks, Auckland
- 1988 Life Threads - solo exhibition, Auckland Society of Arts
Life Threads II - Villa Gallery, Wellington
- 1986 Craftsperson of the Month - installation at Crafts Council Gallery, Wellington
Endangered Treasures - with Robin Paul, Peto of Ponoroby, Auckland
- 1984 Earth, Fibre, Water - Sponsorshow, Gallery Art Supplies, North Shore City

Invited and Selected Exhibitions

International

- 1993 - 94 The Book Project River Sky (Stack) - Canberra Library
- 1992 Australian Contemporary Design in Jewish Ceremony - Jewish Museum of Australia (travelling exhibition)
- 1991 6th Asia Assembly of WCC and Asia Pacific Conference Exhibition - Kyoto '91
- 1989 International Women Artists Exhibition - The Broad Perspective - Plezantine Gallery, Brisbane
- 1987 Miniatures - Del Bello Gallery, Toronto

New Zealand

- 1996 Swept - Association of Women Artists International Portland Project, Lopdell House, Waiakare City
- 1995 Bookworks 1995 - Lopdell House, Waiakare City
Staff of the School of Art and Design III - Morgan Street Gallery, Auckland
- 1994 Of a Certain Age - Masterworks Gallery, Auckland
Roofing Room '94 - Lopdell House, Waiakare City
Combined Textile Guide - Royal Easter Show, Auckland
Self Structures - Association of Women Artists, George Fraser Gallery, Auckland
- 1993 Contemporary Fibre Art - Hawkes Bay Gallery and Museum, Hastings
Temple of Fibre - Association of Women Artists, George Fraser Gallery, Auckland
- 1992 Ngā Kōwhiri Hei Hei - Fibre Interplay, Te Taumata Gallery, Auckland
Threelevels - Robert McDougall Gallery, Christchurch
Works and Miscellany - Association of Women Artists, Outranch, Auckland
- 1991 Skin / Skin - Lopdell House, Waiakare City
United Building Society / Suter Craft Awards in Fibre - Suter Gallery, Nelson
Art in Wood - Waikato Museum of Art and History, Hamilton
Beyond the Frame - Association of Women Artists, Outranch, Auckland
Craft for the Decade Spoor - Crafts Council, Wellington
Creative Dyeing III - Craft Dyers' Guild, Waikato Museum of Art and History, Hamilton
- 1990 The Humor Touch - The Bathhouse Museum of Art and History, Rotorua
Cover to Cover - Association of Women Artists, Outranch, Auckland
Autumn Exhibition (Working Members), Auckland Society of Arts
Textures in Miniature Compendium Gallery, North Shore City
- 1989 Still Life - Association of Women Artists, Outranch, Auckland
Nemereux Art Award - Waiapukana
- 1988 New Embroidery - Suter Gallery, Nelson
The Arts of Fibre & Glass - Academy of Fine Arts, Wellington
Women's Work and Play - Association of Women Artists, Outranch, Auckland
Connections - Crafts Council of NZ, Wellington
- 1987 Knitting - Compendium Gallery, Devonport
Second National Exhibition Craft Dyers' Guild - CSA Gallery, Christchurch
Collaborations - Association of Women Artists, Outranch, Auckland
- 1986 Focus on Fibre - Fisher Gallery, Manukau City
United Building Society / Suter Craft Awards in Fibre, Suter Gallery, Nelson
Beyond Craft - NZ Academy of Fine Arts, Wellington
No Fibre Awards - Fisher Gallery, Manukau City
- 1985 Wharene Tāi tātā tātā - City Gallery, Wellington (travelling exhibition)
Creative Dyeing - Craft Dyers' Guild, Auckland Museum
- 1984 Rear Collingwood and Invited Members - Fisher Gallery, Manukau City
- 1983 New Work by Women III - Association of Women Artists, Caversham, Auckland
- 1982 Three Dimensional Fibrewort - Forum North, Whangarei
Table Talk - Trappings Textile Art Gallery, Auckland
Craft in Architecture - Auckland Museum, Auckland
Invited Members 1982 - Auckland Museum, Auckland