

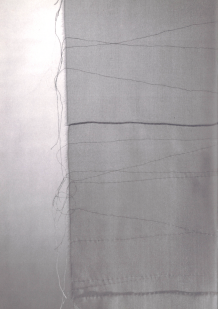
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connecting a  
common thread



connecting a common thread

Jenny Bain



## veiled lands: textile histories

Colonial and colonial countries announce their epic narratives with the arrival of a small group of servants whose individual character traits progressively slip into among their descendants. The latter frequently find that they appear to be standing on the shoulders of giants. Stories involve travel through immense distances to lands at the ends of the earth. Yet those lands and the areas left often contain uncanny similarities, or come to do so, when the settlers have finished with them.

Scottish settlers, arriving in Otago and Southland felt at home with the scrublands and the forms of the coastal hills. They cleared away the inconvenient bush for the bright green fields they had come to make for themselves. Now they felt they used no one anything, unbelongers in the promised land.

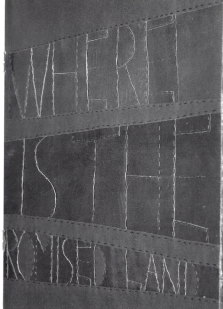
Army Bairs comes from Otago; her grandparents left Dunf in Northern Scotland for Southland nearly a century ago. The south of New Zealand, like the north of Scotland, is a windswept land of sudden swirling transformations. They couldn't tell about the quest, and walked in several fields of mustard yellow or bright new grass. Then, water lakes, they return. Such land-lured people of few words and privately nurtured visions, E. Anne Perch would suggest, in *The Shipping News*, that Newfoundland is such a country. Here, too, death is drowning more often. Farming is tough and chancey; good seasons are succeeded by bad in unpredictable order. At the moment the area is rich: as Britain's cattle died New Zealand's grew in value. Nonetheless, in the days when a person could survive by the labour of her own hand, relations between land, life and the rewards of virtue were clear-cut. Today the equation is less certain.

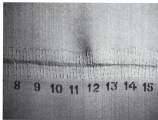
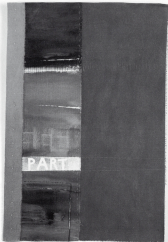
Jerry Bain's family arrived in the early 1900s and quickly established themselves in the infrastructure of the farming community. They spoke little of their past and handed on their economy of living and speech to their descendants. Instead of stories, Bain remembers learning stitching at her mother's knee. In this other language, she now speaks of the silences of those lives, the work addresses and signs for the femininity that gave structure to the lives of generations of women. These pieces avoid domestic detail while regarding daily work as a veil that offers both privacy and security. Threaded paths mark the long journeys of sea travel with calendars that notch each day with secret writing. Like family quilts they know stories they do not tell. Balances and equations lie behind the formal languages of growth and pain.

Bain's work merges disciplines, bridging traditional needlework and installation art. Her practice has grown through a lifetime of stitching, ranging through that early instruction to military, the Embroideries' Guild

and a degree in textile arts. During these years, textile art has been appropriated less the fine arts for its transitional position, for its ability to recuperate the marginalized practices of women and of crafts simultaneously. Textile artists find their work is taken up into arenas they may or may not have chosen; simple statements become complicated by their reception into different fields. Yet, as Bain's imagery references a McCulloch-like stolon of tangled diaspora imposing their own goals upon a new land, its technical elements also indicate the minutely accounted travels of passage that brought them there.

Stitch by stitch, these works mark time. They do not tell the details of ship life, the tolls and the births and deaths, the maintenance of class and faith on such voyages. Instead they recall simply the handwork that is the trace of such labor. Much has been written of women's work as silenced resistance; in such, indeed, that to indicate that sometimes it expressed obedience and submission seems to be going against the grain. Yet for people schooled in obedience and the rewards of it, submission and faith were synonymous.





Bale's work moves between the genres of ecclesiastical embroidery, domestic stitchcraft and the newer textile arts. Its interest lies precisely in that uncertain yet compelling space. The viewer might remember that in the church the word is simple and its message clear; it proclaims itself and it instructs. In these works the textile made offers a resistance to "The Word" that is not the resistance of rebellion, but that of the "truth", the obstinate incidence of time and place. Two realities collide: the life that is lived and that of faith. Neither is easy; both hold enormous promise.

Bridie Lamb

**Jenny Bain** was born in Dunedin in 1961. In 1989 she graduated with a diploma in craft design from Otago Polytechnic and in 1994 completed a BFA from Otago Polytechnic School of Art.

Bain has exhibited widely in group and solo shows in both New Zealand and the United States. Her work has received a number of awards and is featured in various publications.

### Selected Recent Exhibitions

- 2004 Hērakawa Art Award, Māngakāhia (National Selection)
- 2000 'On Show in New Zealand', The Pumphouse Gallery, Takapuna, Auckland (Curator)
- 2000 'EBC: Transformative Practices', Suter Gallery, Nelson (Curator)
- 2000 'EBC: Domestic Public Art Gallery' (Curator)
- 1999 'Parahiki' Selwynsley Gallery, Christchurch (Shared Textile Meet)
- 1999 'Voices' Centre of Contemporary Art, Christchurch
- 1999 'The Body in Question' (Solo Show), Printmakers' Gallery, Dunedin
- 1999 'Multiple Threads', (Sharing) Ray Arts Centre, Auckland

### Acknowledgements

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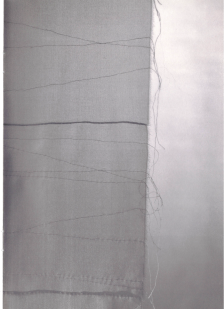
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