



The Linen Project has been generously supported by the St Vincent's Artist in Residence Program located at Caritas Christi Hospice, Kew.



Cover, front and back:

SAXTON, Louise, detail from *Linen Draw* (2018), vintage cotton and linen doilies, cotton embroidery thread, pins, nylon tulle, acrylic rods, floor plinths, 482 x 307 cm.

SAXTON, Louise, detail from *Wall Garden* (2017), reclaimed needlework, pins, nylon tulle, acrylic batons, 300 x 192 cm.

Above:

SAXTON, Louise, *Studio view of works in progress for The Linen Project* (2018).

SAXTON, Louise, *Studio view with heirloom sewing machine and works in progress for The Linen Project* (2018).

Centre spread, left to right:

SAXTON, Louise, detail from *Wall Garden* (2017), reclaimed needlework, pins, nylon tulle, acrylic batons, 300 x 192 cm.

SAXTON, Louise, installation view *Linen Draw* (2018), vintage cotton and linen doilies, cotton embroidery thread, pins, nylon tulle, acrylic rods, floor plinths, 482 x 307 cm.



SAXTON, Louise, *Shroud 2: Crazy Beautiful* (2016), studio view, vintage table linen, cotton thread, pins, butter-muslin, acrylic rod, 307 x 90 cm.

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Louise Saxton: The Linen Project

27 October – 16 December

Reassembling history through *The Linen Project*

Paying homage to past lives and labour, Louise Saxton's *The Linen Project* is a collection of unique assemblages created from discarded and disinherited linens. Although originally trained in painting and printmaking, Saxton has been collecting domestic linens since 1988, and over the past eighteen years her practice has centred on the reclamation and reconstruction of detritus from the home. Vintage wallpapers, domestic needlework, keepsake ceramics and wild flower illustrations have all become the most frequented paints on her palette. For more than a decade, Saxton has extracted and reconstructed the embroidery and lace from linens to build several major bodies of work. Flora is the most common motif of domestic embroidery and lace, and Saxton masterfully assembles embroidery in the same way that a painter lays down colour, shifting tonally from subtle whites through to intense shades.

The Linen Project, Saxton's most recent body of work, began with the simple act of stitching together a handful of fabric scraps which had fallen to the floor of her studio as she extracted embroidery and lace. Many of the works in this exhibition were created in a decommissioned palliative care bedroom while Saxton was on a residency at the Caritas Christi Hospice in Kew. During her time there, Saxton experienced not only the sadness and grief, which can pervade the environment of the hospice, but also a sense of peace and stillness held within the walls of her temporary studio and the gardens beyond. This exhibition continues Saxton's interest in elevating everyday needlework, while also celebrating the materiality of linen and reflecting on its role in caring for family and community.

Linens have an important role in both domestic and clinical settings, so it was befitting that many of these works were created within the confines of the hospice. Much of the domestic needlework of the twentieth century is now discarded and disinherited, with Saxton collecting this textile detritus from opportunity shops and flea markets. She regards her labour-intensive practice of using reconstructed domestic needlework as a 'silent collaboration with past makers, most of whom are anonymous.'¹ Her hope is that the original makers will be brought to mind while audiences observe and experience *The Linen Project*.



Over time, Saxton has been gifted a number of family heirloom collections, with her work honouring the people she has come to know through their generous donations. Numerous people from within Australia and overseas have sought Saxton out to bequeath their mother's, grandmother's, aunt's or sister's embroidery and lace for her to reclaim, reimagine and repurpose. A stirring example



of this is evident in her work *Linen Draw* – a large memorial wall installation, comprising approximately 200 doilies. Many of the doilies are embroidered with the names of Saxton's family textile lineage, as well as others who have donated works. *Linen Draw* showcases how the humble and almost-forgotten doily can stir memories of the past, but can also be transformed into a contemporary installation where line, form and colour read graphically like a drawing.

Running parallel to the notion of recognising past makers is Saxton's desire to elevate domestic needlework and the women who laboured over them. Saxton comes from a family of women crafters and a generation of women for whom making, using and valuing textiles was part of their everyday lived experience. Before she learned to make art, Saxton learned to sew and make clothes and has since maintained a strong interest in the home as a place in which creativity can flourish through the craft of hand-making. By shedding light on the anonymous and

unacknowledged hand of makers within the home, Saxton situates her art practice in relation to the second-wave feminist re-evaluation of so-called "women's work" within the hierarchy of the fine arts. *The Linen Project* embodies the history – or, more aptly, the *herstory* – embedded in everyday needlework and the traces of the many original hands that made it.

Installation is an integral element of *The Linen Project*, making it a departure from Saxton's standard practice. The ambitious work *Swathe* commands almost an entire gallery space. Imitating the swags of a ceiling tent, it creates an immersive installation that acts like a welcoming entrance to this world of linen and lace. Threaded throughout the exhibition is evidence of Saxton's love of vintage and antique objects, as well as references to her residency at the Caritas Christi Hospice. The striking work *Rest* acts somewhat like a bridge between the kind of embroidery assemblages Saxton has become known for and her recent foray into the art of installation.

Countless fragments of blue embroidery have been assembled to hold the shape of a sleeping Hermaphrodite figure (after Anon and Bernini), held in place on nylon tulle by brass and stainless steel lace pins. The assemblage is laid over an antique hospital bed, another nod to Saxton's time spent at the hospice.

There are strong references within *The Linen Project* to past lives, the end of life and our need for care during that process. The work *Hello I Goodbye* embodies this beautifully, an assemblage made with leftover linens that originally supported exquisite embroidery and lace. The shape of a child in foetal repose is contrasted with pillow shapes filled with discarded vintage table linens, antique dress fabrics and lace, clearly bearing the marks of a previous existence. The five *Shroud* pieces each feature the shape of a life-size shrouded figure, concealed in discarded table linens, floating in the space and evoking a sense of ethereal guardians keeping watch. Despite these sombre references, Saxton's aim is that *The Linen Project* draws our attention to the 'humanity embodied within the materiality of everyday linens'.²

This exhibition continues Saxton's interest in elevating everyday needlework, while also celebrating the materiality of linen and reflecting on its role in caring for family and community.

The Linen Project is a new and experimental body of work, that displays Saxton's enduring interest in elevating everyday needlework, whilst also celebrating the materiality of linen and reflecting on its role – its humble ability to care for family and community. For many years Saxton has used the innate fragility of her pinned assemblages to reference the vulnerability of her subject matter, and she continues to do this with *The Linen Project*.



Her deliberate choice to work with delicate lace-pins and textile fragments creates a sense of precariousness, which speaks to the fragility and impermanence of all things – in particular, the materials themselves, which are gradually disappearing. Taken out from the privacy of the linen cupboard, dissected and reassembled into three-dimensional objects, this largely unacknowledged history of domestic textiles is brought into the public sphere, inhabiting our gallery spaces and drawing our attention to the patience and talent of the creators behind everyday linens.

¹ Louise Saxton, Artist Statement for *The Linen Project*, 2018

² Louise Saxton, Artist Statement for *The Linen Project*, 2018