

Jeanette Stok: Point of Reference

Shoalhaven Regional Gallery, 10 July–28 August 2021

Jeanette Stok's first solo exhibition shares her enticing engagement with sculpture, needlework, history, and politics, and her curious preference for finding art materials among Bunnings' home hardware.

At the metaphorical heart of Stok's exhibition is *Vault* (2021). The sculptural installation is a materially fascinating form, comprised of large geometric panels and embellished with small decorative stitches. Its twisted geometry proposes a state of anthropomorphic metamorphosis: hinged panels hint at the possibility of movement, as though its panels might walk, while its intricate and shiny surface alternately conjures an arachnid's body and its web.

Vault points to an earlier sculpture with the same name. Ron Robertson-Swann's maligned *Vault* (1978), originally conceived for Melbourne City Square, is a towering, dandelion-yellow public artwork made with prefabricated steel.¹ Stok mimics the earlier work's geometrically-hinged structure; both deny any impulse to neatly rearrange their polygonal planes into a compact rectangle or cohesive and closed form. Similarly, Stok continues one of Minimalism's fundamental concerns with the physical encounter between artworks as objects and our bodies. *Always Hopes* (2021) draws us to the gallery wall, *Transposition* (2016) beckons us to move through the space, and where the yellow *Vault* presents a parkour challenge for scrambling over its large smooth surface, Stok's smaller black sculpture entices us down and toward its interior, where we might imagine ourselves, safe or trapped. *Protection* (2018) presents an equally ambivalent security. Despite the safety promised in its title, it's unclear what the floating form might protect us from. Meanwhile its tightly wired structure threatens tiny painful scratches.

Stok complicates Minimalism's industrial aesthetic with new materials, methods and textures. In lieu of the outsourced construction and slick surfaces of Modernism, Stok embroiders her works by hand. They conjure herstories of domestic needlework. And they reference traditional European patterns and techniques, such as Hardanger, a Norwegian embroidery, with roots in Ancient Persia and Asia, especially suited to Stok's monochromatic palette. All of Stok's pieces are records of her labour and her skill. In *Reflection* (2016) she makes this labour the subject of her work, revealing an artistic "behind-the-scenes". The film captures Stok working from an aerial perspective. We watch as her two gloved hands appear, above and below a wire mesh, pulling a long wire thread with dexterity.

¹ Robertson-Swann's *Vault* currently sits outside Melbourne's Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA).

Needlework was part of the artist's childhood home. Her grandmother was a seamstress, and her mother is a prodigious craftswoman. Stok spent her teenage years embroidering alongside her sisters and her Mum. *Transposition* is informed by this rich maternal history. The small stitches act as a meditation on repetition and heritage. Yet Stok replaces the traditional needle, thread and cloth of embroidery with gutter guard, wire mesh, galvanised wire and soft plastic garden tie. The unusual materials encourage her to experiment, requiring her to develop stitches that suit the varied holes and shapes of home hardware. This is especially true of *Denature* (2019). Diamonds and rhomboids zig-zag across the gutter guard, producing a pattern that is part fractal and part virus, both constrained and free. Through her use of new materials, Stok makes the familiar strange. The soft furnishings of embroidered placemats and table runners become hard and cold in her art, while materials intended for roofs and gardens are domesticated through her craft. In *To Hold* (2019) Modernist abstraction collides with garden tie made strangely sexy by Stok's hand. The sculpture's "cinched waist" stimulates allusions to little black dresses, lingerie and latex. Working at the intersections of industry and craft, modernism and decoration, Stok draws attention to art history's preference for the former, and writes women into the lineage of contemporary art.

Central to all of Stok's work is a decorative dissidence, a quiet yet undeniable tension. This is especially perceptible in *Vault*'s mesmerising shadows. Their delicate patterning highlights the permeability of the sculpture (letting light through) despite the use of materials designed for impermeability (trapping leaves and vermin). Consequently, *Vault* points to other im/permeable borders: of state and nation, marked variously by walls, roadblocks and checkpoints. This connection to borders is heightened if one knows their Australian art history. Robertson-Swann's *Vault* is more famously known as *Yellow Peril*. The unfortunate nickname signals the city's rejection of the public artwork while also pointing to Australia's xenophobic history. The phrase describes an Anglocentric fear of the Asian Other, with roots in Australia's Gold Rush and contemporary manifestations in anti-Asian hate crimes. Stok's reworking of *Vault* engages with this complex history. Despite the alluring surface of her works, which beckon touch, their undersides ripple with threatening little points. In turn, they are a metaphor for the fraught nature of borders and the illusion of protecting ourselves through distancing others.

Stok's exhibition title—Point of Reference—is an invitation to revel in the endless connotations of her work. It speaks to the multiple meanings of *point*, from pointing fingers and pointing needles, to pointy tips and pointed words, and onto points on a map and points of difference. And it indulges us in thinking through her menagerie of *references*, to art history, to old methods and new textures, to childhood memories and contemporary realities. Stok's plastic

work shimmers and her wire work sparkles, inviting us to wonder, and reminding us to move with care.

Words by Louise R Mayhew

www.louisermayhew.com | l.mayhew@live.com.au