



CONSTELLATION: FORMING THE FLAG

EUREKA CENTRE BALLARAT

1 April – 20 August 2023

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Curated by Sara Lindsay, *Constellation: forming the flag* presents new textile and fibre works by Donna Blackall, Amanda Ho, Sara Lindsay, David Pearce and Gosia Wlodarczak, made in response to *'The Flag of the Southern Cross'*, also known as the Eureka Flag.

The Eureka Flag is a monumental textile object and a national icon. It was first flown at mass meetings at Bakery Hill in Ballarat to encapsulate the ideals of those fighting for miners' rights and democratic reform. It was then famously raised in bold defiance as the rebels barricaded themselves in the Eureka Stockade. This flag of protest features a stylised representation of the Crux constellation, commonly known as the Southern Cross, positioned on a white cross against a blue field. It is alternately considered an inclusive or divisive symbol, depending on the context of its appropriation and reception.

The Eureka Flag is a compelling and contested part of the history of the 1854 Eureka Stockade uprising. Some people believe three women sewed it, others claim professional tent makers made it, and some think it was a joint effort. Speculation continues about its origins, what it first symbolised, and what it should represent today. In making new work in response to the flag, the participating artists were asked to limit their engagement with the flag's heavy cultural, political, and historical baggage, and instead focus on its formal and material qualities. Through knitting, stitching, and weaving, the artists have given voice to this unintended battle flag, recuperating its embedded materiality, and silencing the dogma and discord that popularly define it.

In *Constellation*, the work that most closely recalls the design of the Eureka Flag is Donna Blackall's *'The Ageing Flag'*. A Yorta Yorta woman living and working on Wadawurrung Country, Donna's simulation of the Eureka Flag speaks equally of cultural adaptation and resistance. Against a field of woven, blue-coloured raffia she presents the flag's familiar cross and five stars. But rather than replicating the white stars, she has woven them in raffia which retains its natural pale-yellow colour, thereby referencing the aged condition of the flag's woollen fabric.

The Eureka Flag is a colonial-era flag raised in 1854 on the unceded lands of the Wadawurrung People to claim geographic space, in this case, the barricaded confines of the Eureka Stockade. Here the rebels found sanctuary until they were attacked, their fortress dismantled, and their flag torn to the ground, trampled and souvenired. Protocols dictate that a flag should never touch the ground. But *'The Ageing Flag'* does not fly overhead as a grand, hallowed symbol, it dwells amongst us, close to the earth. Instead of a standard rectangular flag, Donna offers a small elliptical woven mat that layers and grounds the colonial story of Eureka in Aboriginal culture. She redeems and transforms the flag to highlight its historical association with radical action and 'holding one's ground' against tyranny.

Flags are mostly raised at a height, above the collective, to embody its values and ideals. Through transferring the Eureka Flag's iconography from flag to mat, Donna embeds Eureka in community rather than ideology. This is achieved through a form of weaving that has deep roots in Aboriginal material culture, and especially the lives and cultural expression of women. This small woven mat speaks of a meeting place where communitarian, non-hierarchical dialogue



David Pearce, *All Hands* 2023, 109 x 40 cm (variable), Wool and cotton.

occurs. In this way, *'The Ageing Flag'* recuperates the ideologically smeared Eureka Flag and subverts it as a symbol for Aboriginal sovereignty and resistance.

Artists working with textiles have perhaps the most intimate relationship with their materials and processes. The pace of production is largely determined by the techniques employed. Textiles can be made with varying degrees of precision, but a stitch is a stitch, and the process is time-bound. The notion of the maker's hand and the embedded social character of craft practices are often key concerns explored by artists working in textiles, including throughout *Constellation*.

With respect for tradition, David Pearce celebrates his kinship with makers of the past. Writing about his work, *'All Hands'*, he states, ***'The hand is present. It is present in both the construction of the Eureka Flag, as well as its destruction. The glove signifies***

these hands. The five fingers of the right glove represent the five stars of the Southern Cross and the eight fingers on the left glove represent the eight points on each of the stars'. Rather than deferring to the venerated artefact, David quietly brings our focus to the people who made the flag in humble circumstances at a time when 'all hands' were called upon to contribute to a pressing social cause.

The Eureka Flag rests in quiet dignity in its museum display case in a darkened room. Through a screen of protective glass, the flag's battered beauty is admired, and the marvel of its endurance profoundly experienced. It has a commanding presence, and most visitors are in awe of its scale and historical significance, but do not dwell on its subtle materiality. The glass barrier mediates our engagement, and when gazing upon the flag, it's as if our reflective visage is a complicit gatekeeper denying our tactile engagement. David breaches this barrier, communing with his own reflection to honour the universal maker within.

David embodies the Eureka Flag's symbolism and the story of its survival in a poignant representation of the makers' hands. The gloves are hand knitted from a hand spun and hand dyed wool and the hanging components are hand chained from a denim blue coloured cotton. *'All Hands'* honours the cultural power of textiles while highlighting its material vulnerability. Here textiles are both a cover for, and imitation of, the human body - a metaphorical wavering between human frailty and resilience.

In *Constellation* the most explicit allusions to the Eureka Flag are made through references to its intense Prussian blue cotton background and deteriorating white woollen cross and stars. Sara Lindsay strongly responds to the materiality of the flag and especially

the relationship between the contrasting blue and faded off-white fabrics. Sara writes, *'On seeing the flag for the first time, I was drawn to the beauty of its colour and the frayed, worn quality of the fabric. I was also intrigued by the missing parts, in particular the neatly cut, rectangular sections'*.

When sorting out her studio, Sara came across a piece of double weave denim and a torn silk shirt worn by her in the early 1980s. It felt like these fabrics spoke to each other, forming *'a silent narrative'*. *'Patched with Gold: the miner's shirt'* came into being. The reference to tailored construction acknowledges the distinct scissor cuts throughout the flag. Unbeknown to her, this was caused by past keepers who had cut strips of blue fabric from the flag to present as souvenirs. This shocking legacy of defilement defines the diminished appearance of the flag we see today.

A related work from Sara continues this material dialogue. *'The Miner's Shirt'* presents a stark blue section of woven tapestry flanked at the border by the frayed collar of the artist's shirt. This minimalist field of tapestry is the quintessence of Eureka, amplifying the colour blue and its symbolic association with democracy and liberty. But the tapestry's cool formalism is disturbed by a decorative flourish of pleated white-cream edging. The intersection of these contrasting textile elements parallels the tension between the philosophical ideas underpinning the Eureka Rebellion and the raw human experience of those who risked their lives in the struggle for freedom.

The Eureka Flag's bold white cross against a blue field reflects the nineteenth century flag design language of Northern Europe. The inclusion of the stars is possibly an American revolutionary reference, but most

certainly speaks of a diverse community united under a Southern sky. In *'The Hole'*, Gosia Wlodarczak puts herself in the position of the makers of the Eureka Flag, focusing on their decision to feature a stylised representation of the Southern Cross. Gosia writes, *'I realised that the star formation represented in the textile object was not in fact true to the actual arrangement of the stars we can view in the night sky. There is no dominant central star'*.

To unravel these aesthetic determinations, Gosia extracts the flag's rectangular blue field and places it on a wall at the angle of the axis of the Crux constellation. The central eight-pointed star is removed and isolated on the wall to represent its correct place in the constellation. This material deconstruction undermines the flag's utility and subverts its design integrity. The hole left behind underscores both the tenuous symbolic status of the faint fifth star in the constellation and its aberrant positioning at the centre of the Eureka Flag. The white cross that steadfastly scaffolds the stars within the flag construction is also made malleable, collapsing into four flaps to conceal the hole once occupied by the fifth star.

'The Hole' presents a dialogue between what is concealed or revealed, true or false, and present or absent. Gosia's extraction of the star and the pulling apart of the flag's material and design elements reminds us to look at everything carefully and with circumspection. This provocation challenges us to reflect on what is unduly privileged or literally 'cut out' from our perceptions of art, life, and the natural world.

In the context of *Constellation*, Amanda Ho's *'Fragments'* can be read as a compositional disentanglement of the competing stories about the Eureka Flag's creation, ruin, and redemption. Amanda



Amanda Ho, *Fragments* 2023, 93 x 52 cm (variable), Cotton and wool.

writes, *'Since viewing the flag, I have been thinking of the pieces that are missing... The following descriptions come to mind: negative space, cut outs, disintegration'*. Through weaving and embroidery, she presents a compelling exchange between the polarities of fragility and strength, the geometric and the organic, and structure versus disorder. Acknowledging the visual tension in the flag between creation and destruction, she approaches the creative process in a non-linear way. *'It is a bit like an incomplete jigsaw puzzle, the pieces lined up in their position before being placed in their allocated space'*, she writes.

An architect by training, Amanda challenges the idea of emptiness as the ground in which a creator's inspirational vision is performed. A plane of woven white cotton acts a site for the incremental imaging of the Eureka Flag. This ethereal piece of fabric benevolently accommodates seemingly incidental blue and cream embroidered clusters. These threaded

cicatrices anchor to the gridded certainty of warp and weft, cumulatively striving for precision and order. This process confronts the bias that privileges presence over absence, and accumulation over loss. Removing any trace of symbolism, this austere, enciphered distillation of the flag's material and design elements could be perceived as a deromanticizing of the revered artefact and its origin story.

The artists in *Constellation* connect through an intimate process of making that is unique to textile and fibre traditions. The modest scale, form and materiality of the resulting works evoke gendered textile craft traditions from a range of cultural contexts, punctuated with dissonant traces of utilitarian textile aesthetics. This incidentally echoes the competing theories about the Eureka Flag's origin and highlights the wider historical demarcation and intersection between individual/domestic and collective/industrial modes of textile production.

Working in conceptually different, the artists expose the Eureka Flag as an object equipped between stasis and flux. Denied its practical purpose as a flag, it is encased, distorted, and overwhelmed by an anthropic burden. In different ways, the artists engage in an intimate dialogue through making that liberates the flag, claims it as purely a textile object, and subverts essentialist claims that compete for primacy in Australia's collective memory.

Anthony Camm
Eureka Centre Ballarat



Donna Blackall, *The Ageing Flag* 2023, 19.5 x 39 cm (variable), Natural and dyed raffia.



Sara Lindsay, *Patched with Gold (the miner's shirt)* 2023, 85 x 75 cm (variable), Cotton and silk.



Gosia Włodarczak, *The Hole* 2023, 98.5 x 73 cm (variable), Cotton.



Sara Lindsay, *The Miner's Shirt* 2023, 52 x 37 cm (variable), Cotton and silk.

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Cover image: Sara Lindsay, *Patched with Gold (the miner's shirt)* 2023,
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Eureka Centre is a cultural facility of the City of Ballarat



Eureka Centre respectfully acknowledges the Wadawurrung People as the Traditional Owners of the land on which the Eureka Centre stands. We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging. We acknowledge their continuing connections to Country and Culture.

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