

"The Lines of History"

"Evanescence (noun): The condition of lasting for only a short time, then disappearing quickly and being forgotten: Fleeting, transitory, here today and gone tomorrow"

My family history initiated the concept for this body of work. My maternal grandmother (Nan) is a highly skilled dressmaker, as was her mother, my great-grandmother (Great Nana). Prior to this year, my knowledge of this aspect of family history was limited. I have learnt so much by talking with Nan, my mother, and aunts, and by having access to photographs, fabrics, buttons, and garments made by Nan and Great Nana. These resources contributed positively to my success.

What really interested me was that dressmaking provided an income for Nan and Great Nana, in times when women lacked employment opportunities. Both were well known for their crafting of beautiful wedding and formal dresses. I discovered that Great Nana had a reputation as South Australia's best wedding dressmaker. She made her own wedding dress and dresses for hundreds of South Australian brides. Family memories shared about Great Nana are interwoven closely with her craft as a seamstress and her strong opinions on bridal fashion trends. Learning this was bittersweet. While I never meet her, I discovered much more about her life through this investigation.

In Folio, I considered multiple options for subject matter inspired by my extensive resources including garments, family photographs and access to family members. Of significance were five wedding dresses made by my grandmothers representing four generations. I also had access to the family christening gown in which all maternal family members were christened. The bottom of the gown featured hand sewn initials of every child. This was started by Great Nana and Nan has continued the tradition. My first Folio drawing of this gown referenced Emma Hasse's oil painting, *Green Dress*; a subject with great personal significance. In a further pastel drawing, I recorded the gown's folds, referencing Ruth Phipps' exaggerated colour palette in her Fabric Series. I connected conceptually with fabric's personal significance for both artists. Phipps states that fabric is 'intensely personal in its ability to suggest human presence or absence. It explores different aspects of fragility, memory, and the transience of time' (Phipps, R 2014). In both drawings, I wanted to communicate the garments' historical, family significance and fine craftsmanship.

The craft of sewing in my family became my conceptual focus. My first painting, *"The Lines of History"* is an oil painting of Nan at her sewing machine. The image resulted from two sessions of photographing Nan to capture her personal connection to every garment she makes. Lighting was crucial to highlight the hands and fabric. I tried multiple light sources such as windows, lamps, the sewing machine light, overhead lights, and phone lights. Nan's jumper colour was selected to create a strong tonal contrast with the fabric's sheen. My painting contrasts with the traditional artistic interpretations of women sewing as it focuses on skill and emphasises the sewing machine. Unlike Asai Chū's 1902 painting, *Woman Sewing* or Jean-Francois Millet's 1853–54 painting, *Women sewing by Lamplight (La Veillée)* in which women's bodies are central to the composition, my intention was to focus closely on the hands and their action. I chose a realist, painterly aesthetic, referencing artist Lauren Pretorius, to capture the detail and tonal contrasts in the hands, fabric, and Nan's trusted Janome. I wanted to highlight the delicacy and skill she devotes to her craft. It is an ordinary activity for her, completed mostly from muscle memory, but for me, this painting is a precious glimpse into her life, a history-connecting moment I cherish. This painting represents Nan's strength as a woman working in a time when women's and seamstresses' skills were undervalued. Her hands show her past, and her present and reveal her dedication to family, tradition, and her craft. She is a woman I admire greatly.

My second painting, *"Evanescence (noun): The condition of lasting for only a short time, then disappearing quickly and being forgotten: Fleeting, transitory, here today and gone tomorrow"*, is a painting of Nan's

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wedding dress. It references Ewa Bathelier's paintings of ballet tutus in which the 'garments conspicuously lack the bodies that are meant to inhabit them' (Bathelier, E 2014). Showcasing the dress on a dressmaker's mannequin was sparked by the discovery of Judith Pond Kudlow's oil painting *Great Expectations*. I had considered painting myself wearing the dress, but the mannequin allowed for a strong conceptual link with my grandmothers as highly skilled dressmakers. Influenced by Bathelier, the wedding dress's bodice is 'thrown into relief by the dark monochrome background' while the body of the dress blends into it (Bathelier, E 2014). The white dress fading into the background represents the disappearance of dressmaking skills. It is an evanescent skill, rarely practised by current generations. Photographing the back of the dress with a bow and exposed mannequin powerfully communicated my concept of dressmaking skills disappearing over time as the dress' train flowed into the monochrome background. Whilst Nan's wedding dress symbolises important societal changes for women, the discontinuation of this skill in my family is poignantly felt.

My preparation for this painting focussed on diverse stylistic and media exploration. I created drawings with crayons, graphite, charcoal, and pastels, before moving onto painting. Referencing the techniques of Emma Hasse, Ruth Phipps, Megan Eckman and Jim Dine developed my ability to capture the intrinsic detail in my subject in both delicate and expressive styles. My Visual Study investigation into texture impacted my personal aesthetic which favours a contrast between flatness and thick impasto paint. However, because of the gown's delicate craftsmanship, I opted for a realist aesthetic to emphasise the significance of the fabric in both paintings. In "*The Lines of History*", the fabric Nan is sewing was passed onto her by Great Nana. Ruth Phillips' fabric series influenced my decision to select fabric linking both grandparents, "*fabric is at the same time personal and universal. We are inextricably tied to it from our first cry to our last breath. [Its] dual ability to convey both the practical and symbolic attests to its integral role in the human condition*" (Phipps, R 2014). This beautiful quote by Phillips captures fabric's symbolism in both paintings.

Words: 995

References:

- Phipps, R 2014, *Ruth Phipps*, viewed 8 November 2022, <<https://ruthhipps.co.nz/about>>.
- Bathelier, E 2014, *Vanishing Tutu (2014)*, Artsy, viewed 9 November 2022, <<https://www.artsy.net/artwork/ewa-bathelier-vanishing-tutu>>.