



7 days



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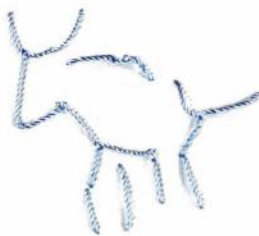
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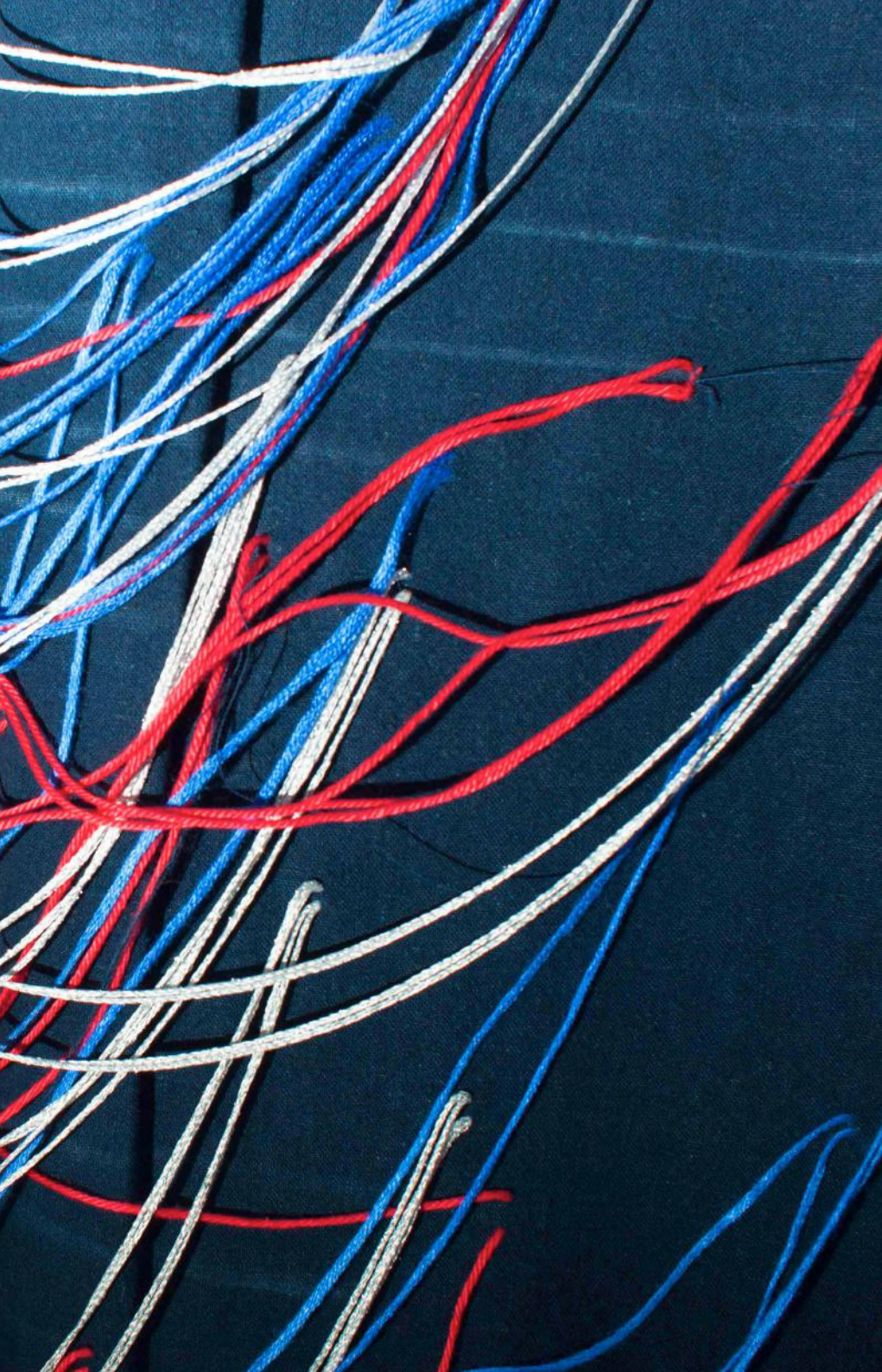
## 7 days

An installation of  
collaborative fabric works











# 7 DAYS

KATHY ACKERMAN ROBINS

This collaboration began with a conversation around some old Torah covers dating back to the deep Apartheid era. Rabbi Greg Alexander brought a black disposal bag to my Woodstock studio filled with these discarded dark red and blue covers, each embroidered in gold cord with lion symbols and the names of long-passed original donors of the covers. We discussed how to include these discarded relics in an artwork that might do justice to their weighty history. Imbued in their fibres is the privileged world of white reform South African Jews, some of whom came from families surviving the Holocaust and previous pogroms. The covers are still sitting in a bag, for another day.

After many further conversations, Rabbi Greg and I found further inspiration in and settled on the seven-day Judeo-Christian Creation story as our point of conceptual departure. This project loosely explores themes emerging from the story and picks up on the practical techniques employed in an earlier indigo-dyed silkscreen work I created in collaboration with the Keiskamma Art Project embroiders, titled *Fabric of the Universe* (2018).

While the Creation constitutes a historical and theological jumping-off point for this project, I also consider this work as a response to some of our most pressing contemporary crises,

most notably the social and environmental impact of climate change and the universal urgency this crisis requires. In its materiality and form, *7 days* is intended to prompt a reflection on human questions of home, transience, creation and connectedness, that transcend social, religious, economic and other divisions.

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For example, the form of the rolled fabrics echo the rolling up of tents as temporary living spaces that have been used throughout history by migratory peoples and are still used today by many who live lives of forced nomadism due to environmental, social and political conflict. This form also reiterates the rolling up of the Torah scrolls to contain and protect that which is of cultural and spiritual significance and enable it to lightly travel from place to place. The movement implied in the form of the work is evocative of the historical movement of the Jewish people, as is so eloquently described by the visuals in the opening credits of Simon Schama's series *The Story of the Jews* (2013).

The seventh fabric, namely the day of rest, is the visual manifestation of the soundwaves of the core prayers of three major religions: Judaism (The Shema), Islam (Adhan - The Call to Prayer) and Christianity (The Lord's Prayer). Sound clips of recitations of these three prayers were layered and the visual sound wave that was produced was embroidered onto the fabric. In playing the sound clips on my visit to Keiskamma while the fabrics were being stitched, the power of the prayers stopped all of the people in the room, creating an environment of reverence that bound together an otherwise diverse group. The stitched soundwaves are intermingled in the fabric of the piece, as in the air we breathe. As the world seems to become more polarised through nationalistic tendencies, this interfaith work whispers of the unifying, healing potential of tolerance and compassion across boundaries.

True collaboration requires letting go of the ownership of the outcome. In this project, this happened in an organic way as the embroiderers interpreted my sketches and those of Keiskamma coordinator and artist Cathy Stanley. For example, in attempting to recycle and include shiny bits in the

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embroideries, I collected a bag of cut-off lids of metal coffee pods used for convenience in my home. These lids travelled 15 hours by car from Cape Town, where I am based, to the embroiderers in Hamburg, Eastern Cape. However, after some experimentation and consideration embroiderer Siya, and his fellow embroiders, discarded those tops and rather included torn-off bits of 'pap sak', the shiny material from the inside of wine boxes. Still a recycled material, though imbued with the reality of a very different context, these new shiny bits cast light on the issue of alcoholism in the embroiderers' community, an important message that would not have emerged without a collaborative approach.

This collaboration would not have been possible without the participation, skills, expertise and imagination of Rabbi Greg Alexander, Carol Hofmeyer (Founder of the Keiskamma Art Project), Cathy Stanley (long-time friend and coordinator between Keiskamma and myself), the exhibition curators and the Keiskamma Art Project embroiderers: Nosiphiwe Magoswana, Nozolile Gedze, Nombulelo Jack, Nombulelo Mtshonisi, Nozbele Nxadi, Esethu Makubalo Ncameka Gedze, Thembisa Gusha, Sanela Maxenaga, Qama Dayimani, Vuyelwa Nxadi, Mkhanyisi Manjezi, Lisa Nyongo, Siya Maswana, Ndileka Mapuma, Nombuyi Malumbezo, Zaziwe Nyongo, Noluvo Makubalo, Velelwa Peyi, Nomabhelu Nyongo, Vuyiswa Nyongo, Nandipha Yonah, Anelisa Maswana, Ntombovuyo Deliwe, Nontyatyambo Nompunga, Sinazo Deliwe.

Special thanks also go to those who have shared their insights and reflections on the project for this catalogue: Olga Speakes (MA Art History) and Gcotyelwa Mashiqa (Hon. Curatorship, currently completing an MA in Museum and Heritage Studies and Visual History).





## BIOGRAPHY

South African visual artist Kathy Ackerman Robins investigates how sustainable, bio-sensitive materials and forms can be used to explore contemporary crises of human displacement and environmental entropy through an imaginative lens. Robins has worked in community development, art, design and social activism throughout her working life. She founded and developed a Corporate Social Responsibility Programme in 1999 and continues to work in development initiatives, such as sustainable community garden and entrepreneurship programmes. Robins completed her Masters in Fine Art at the Michaelis School of Art, University of Cape Town in 2015. Prior to that she completed the PG Diploma in 2012 and a B.Soc. Sci degree in 1983, both at the University of Cape Town. Robins also has a textile and product design degree from the Parsons School of Design in New York (1989). She has participated in residencies and exhibitions both locally and internationally.





# SEVEN LESSONS FROM SEVEN DAYS

BY RABBI GREG ALEXANDER

The creation story lays a powerful foundation for our understanding of the world, a consciousness that is shared not only by today's great religious traditions but also most of the social and moral principles that underpin society. I have considered just seven of them for the purpose of this commentary.

## CHAOS IS NECESSARY AND NOT TO BE FEARED

The first day sees a universe of "*tohu va-vohu*," chaos and turmoil, "and there was darkness on the face of the abyss". This is a glimpse into time before time, the world as it existed pre-Creation, when G-d decided to shape and form this chaos into order. And so the world begins to take shape, day by day, step by step, order from chaos. From this we learn that chaos is not a state to be feared, but a necessary disorder that precedes formation. It is the creative matter, the messy desk, the blank page or the artist's studio from which emerges greatness.

## LANGUAGE IS POWERFUL

When G-d creates, She does not choose to use bricks and mortar, neither does She use hammer and chisel, but rather language, words. The first act of creation in Genesis is the famous instruction, "G-d said, "Let there be light", and there was light." G-d does not build the world so much as He speaks the world into being. And so too, we who are made in Her image speak our world into being each time we speak, each time we think. When we describe what we see or feel, we are shaping the reality of our universe, we are co-creators with G-d of the world we live in. And we have the power to use that language for building or destroying.

## TIME IS SACRED

As the world takes its shape day by day, the structure of time emerges neither as random nor a human concept, but as divinely built into Creation. The notion of the week as six days of creative work and one day of instituted rest is a blueprint of our world, modelled by the Creator. Work is required, for six days we labour to make this world into the one that we want to live in, and on the seventh day we rest, reboot ourselves, renew our body and soul for the work to continue afresh. The Sabbath is the most powerful way that we can declare our mastery over irrelevance by, in the words of Abraham Joshua Heschel, creating a “palace in time”, one that we step into each week.

## ALL OF CREATION IS DIVINE

The description of the seven days is terse and poetic, sparse on detail and yet remarkable in its scope and feel. There is a sense that there is nothing, not a mountain or a mosquito that is not placed intentionally into the order of being of the cosmos. Rather than a ‘creation story’ the beginning of Genesis is a blueprint for understanding our world, where each and every person, creature, inanimate object and even word is divinely created and has potential for holiness.

## ELEMENTAL WATER

Living in Cape Town, we are reminded constantly of the blessing and scarcity of water. Water in Judaism is a symbol of renewal and learning. Water permeates Creation. On Day One, water is everywhere, on Day Two there is a separation into upper and lower waters and on Day Three to land and sea. 60% of our bodies is water and 70% of the Earth’s surface is water. We are dust and water, and yet look! What a miracle we are. May we honour that creation in conserving our water supply and our oceans.

## HOLINESS AND BLESSING

Running through the Creation story are the repeated phrases that G-d saw the works of creation and that “they were good” and that He “blessed them”, calling for us to see our world as G-d does, as holy, sacred space and time that can be elevated and blessed by us too. When we take a moment to say a blessing, when we stop and wonder at the majesty of a cloud over Table Mountain, a bird in flight, an apricot or the sunset, we stand in awe of Creation and our place in it. We are reminded of our smallness, but also of the great fortune that we have of the gift of this life on the Earth, the daily opportunity to choose to celebrate life.

## WE ARE HERE FOR A PURPOSE

The last creation that is recounted in the seven days is humanity. “Let us make human beings in our image and in our likeness”. We are photocopies of the Creator, made as the pinnacle of Creation, placed last and most purposefully into the shaped and ordered world to “till it and to guard it”. It is our responsibility to take this imperfect and fractured world and to shape it, build it, heal it. The reason we exist is to fulfil our purpose in this world and our life is the adventure of finding what that purpose is.

To conclude, when we read Genesis, we not only read the story of Creation but the story of ourselves, who we are and what we value. We read that our world and our lives are nothing short of miraculous, chaos is not to be feared and that we should never “kill time” but see each moment as a sacred opportunity.







# 7 DAYS

GCOTYELWA MASHIQA

*7 days* is a collaborative work comprising of embroidered indigo-dyed cotton fabrics, which question the impact of climate change on the environment. This body of work sheds light on the disruption of relationship between humans and our environment and calls us back to our origins, when there was a greater sense of connectedness with our land and natural home. Due to increased ecological change and other social and political crises, we have witnessed human migration on a large scale. That is, who we are and what we do, is profoundly influenced by our physical and social environment.<sup>1</sup>

Each tie-dyed panel of fabric depicts different motifs and symbols that are hand-stitched or resultant from the tie-dye process. The fabrics can be read individually or as a collective; they can be juxtaposed, and installed in various arrangements to reveal new associations and avenues of seeing and contemplation. For instance, the fabrics can be suspended from the ceiling or pinned to the wall.

To unpack the thought and creative process involved in this body of work, I refer to George Didi-Huberman's (2018) writings on the form, function and conceptual relevance of atlases. The atlas as a visual tool dates back many centuries as "a visual form of knowledge, a knowledgeable form of seeing."<sup>2</sup> Didi-Huberman argues that:

*[the] atlas is not made up of 'papers' in the usual sense of the term, but rather of tables, or plates [in Robins' case, panels of fabrics] on which images are arranged, plates that we consult with particular aim, or that we leaf through at leisure, letting our 'will to knowledge' wander from image to image and from plate to plate.*<sup>3</sup>

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Atlases reject fixity and the confines of linear time, instead allowing heterogeneous elements to be juxtaposed and their correspondences to be revealed, all the while retaining their singular features.<sup>4</sup> From Didi-Huberman's perspective, the *atlas* is *not* only a collection of images, but a "form of visual knowledge", an infinite archive that gains meaning through the concept of montage.<sup>5</sup>

Considered as a montage, *7 days* prompts the viewer to imagine the fabrics in different ways, using cut-out fabric to determine the layout and the form in which this artwork can be read, while rejecting the inscription of a fixed, static vision of the work. However, when examining each fabric individually, one can make out details, for instance a pictorial map, constellations and animal motifs.

Considering the collection of fabrics as an atlas of sorts broadens our imaginative reading of the work as it becomes a contemporary astrology or cosmology that tells a narrative about the future of human relationships with the environment. Like the atlas, the work does not aim to present a form of complete knowledge or a total picture. The collaborative assembly and reassembly of the body of work marks it as a work in progress that seeks to establish visual and conceptual

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connections that can be read anew, rendering it constantly open to new interpretations. Thus, as an atlas, *7 days* is an "object of knowledge and contemplation, evoking an act of reading what was never written."<sup>6</sup> According to Didi-Huberman, this form of reading is the "most ancient way of reading that precedes all languages."<sup>7</sup> The ancient reading is imagination: imagining new concepts and new ways of thinking about our world. This posture of imaginative reading provides an inexhaust-

ible resource for re-reading the world.<sup>8</sup> It is Didi-Huberman's concept of the atlas that I believe proves helpful in situating *7 days* outside of the linearity of time and history and highlighting the significance of the relationship between humans and their environment in the contemporary moment.









# KEISKAMMA ART PROJECT

CAROL HOFMEYER

The Keiskamma Art Project is a poverty alleviation project in Hamburg, a rural village in the Eastern Cape that was formerly part of the homeland, Ciskei. Part of the Keiskamma Trust, the project seeks to provide income and build self-esteem and community in a village where apartheid, poor governance and disadvantage have prevented the community from freeing itself from the cycle of poverty.

The project was started in 2000 and has been remarkably successful in that it has employed over 100 women and a few men monthly for 20 years. The income the art project brings to the Hamburg and Bodiam community has allowed the women to provide food and education for their children and to regain their self-esteem. The youth who are trained and employed in the project either use the exposure as a stepping stone for other opportunities, or become artists or embroiderers themselves and continue working in the project.

The income the Keiskamma Art Project brings to the Hamburg and Bodiam community has allowed the women to provide food and education for their children and to regain their self-esteem.

The project works holistically in the community. It expanded to include a music program, which works in local schools exposing disadvantaged children to music training. Many of these children have gone on to tertiary study because of the support and discipline they received in the Keiskamma Music Academy. When the HIV epidemic started to affect our artists and embroiders, the Keiskamma Health Program was initiated and successfully delivered antiretroviral treatment to over

1000 people before the South African Department of Health began its antiretroviral program in 2010. The Keiskamma Health Program still works on a community level in several villages in the Ngqushwa Municipality.

The Keiskamma Art Project is known nationally and internationally for its large embroidered artworks. It has been



instrumental in placing both the village and its artists in the foreground of the South African art world. The Keiskamma Art Project is best known for *Keiskamma Tapestry*, now in the South African Legislature in Cape Town, and *Keiskamma Altar-piece*, which has toured North America and been exhibited in London and Hamburg, Germany. *Keiskamma Guernica* is part of the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Museum's collection and is currently exhibited at the Javett Art Centre at the University of Pretoria.

A fundamental principle of the art project is learning through connection and collaboration. Many South African and international artists and craft experts have spent time teaching the community and offering unique ideas and skills to expand the Keiskamma Art Project's range of work. These collaborations also allow the visiting artists to develop new ideas and methods of working.

Cebo Mvubu is the Artistic Director of the Keiskamma Art Project and supervises all artwork production. For this work, Mvubu and his team collaborated with Kathy Ackerman Robins and Cathy Stanley on the production of the creation piece. Robins' conceptualisation of the work was stitched into reality by the Keiskamma artists and embroiderers, under the direction of Mvubu and Cathy Stanley. The Keiskamma Art Project is very proud to have participated in this collaboration and is grateful for the income it provided to our community.

A fundamental principle of the Keiskamma Art Project is learning through connection and collaboration between fellow artists.



# ANCIENT THREADS

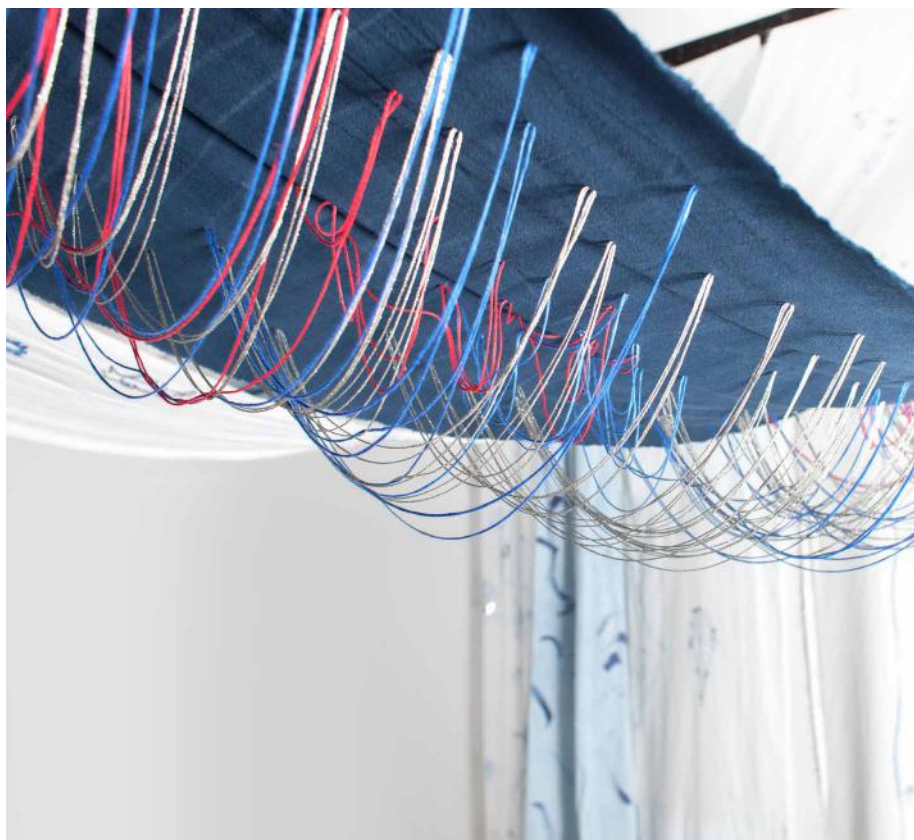
OLGA SPEAKES

Distinctions between art and craft, which have been established and maintained by the European art academies for several centuries, contain an underlying value system defined not only by the materials being used but also by the intentions behind the work: where the work is created, who it is for, and for what purpose it is intended. Within the art market, where the original and the individual has come to be valued more highly than the collective, works associated with collective craft practices continue to be marginalised.

The association of textile and fabric-based arts (e.g., tapestries and embroideries) with craft and, consequently, their relegation to the margins of the art market and western art historical scholarship, is recent relative to the historical lifespan of these ancient traditions. In the Middle Ages, during the European Renaissance and even later in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, tapestries were exemplary in this regard. They were often valued as highly if not more so than paintings, with leading artists of the times (for example, Raphael and Rubens) being commissioned to provide designs for tapestries called 'cartoons' by their royal patrons. Moreover, tex-

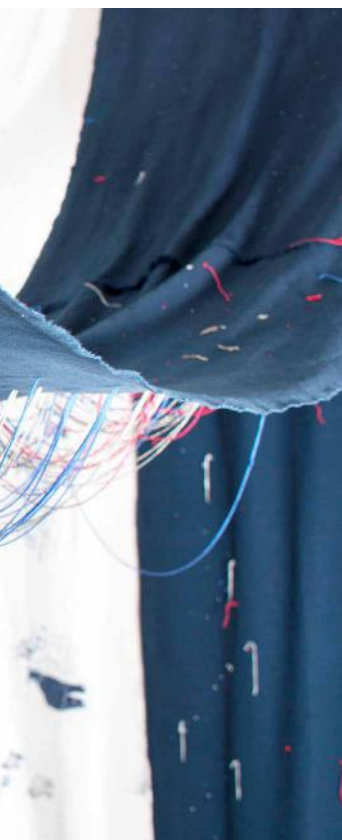
tile arts often served as the repositories of important cultural histories, one of the most famous examples from medieval Europe being the so called Bayeux tapestry (technically, an embroidery) depicting the Norman conquest of England in 1066. The recorded reports of the pilgrimage of Mansa Musa, the famed king of the Mali Empire, in the early fifteenth century contain numerous references to his incredible riches, which included precious foreign and locally-made fabrics, as well as his army of weavers who worked at his court.

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Fabrics and textiles have long been used as cultural archives of peoples. They encode histories of struggles, triumphs, peace and conflict. More subtly, they record relationships with nature, neighbours and the spiritual world, embodying networks of trade and kin.

Above: Interfaith piece.  
Embroidery on dyed  
cotton.



Despite its decline in status, in recent years, there has been a noticeable revival in interest in textile-based artistic practice from both the academy and the art market. This may seem like just another phase of the never-ending market-driven race for the next big thing that regularly captures popular attention with a new name (which is hardly new, just overlooked) or a re-discovered art movement.

In the case of textile and fiber art practices, this seemingly new focus on artists and collectives, as well as historical traditions associated with fabric making and design, is putting a spotlight on a tradition that is millennia old and that, in fact, has never lost its vitality or ability to reach wide and diverse audiences and elicit genuine admiration and deeply felt responses from both art experts and the general public. Even if the current market and media fascination fades, distracted by the next profit-promising ‘discovery’, the power to connect that is deeply woven into the history of textile-based arts will not fade with it. It is the kind of sustainability that has helped our human communities to survive through hardship as well as profound technological, political and social changes.

Fabrics and textiles have long been used as cultural archives of peoples. They encode histories of struggles, triumphs, peace and conflict. More subtly, they record relationships with nature, neighbours and the spiritual world, embodying networks of trade and kin. The epic *Keiskamma Tapestry* (also technically an embroidery) by the Keiskamma Art Project is one such example of visual storytelling and historical record-keeping through collective textile art practice. The 120 meter long frieze-like embroidery records the story of the land and its people in meticulous and exquisite detail. Created by the group of embroiderers from Hamburg in the Eastern Cape, organised by the Keiskamma Trust to assist the local community ravaged by poverty and lack of job opportu-



nities, it adorns the hallowed chambers of the South African Parliament in Cape Town – the space where the laws of the land are laid down. Laws are often not enough to build communities and ensure their survival and wellbeing; togetherness and community consciousness must be practiced and nourished with opportunities and a shared sense of growth to stay alive. Like textile art traditions, only when practiced can they evolve to keep up with the task of bonding our communities, with their diverse traditions and aspirations, and reflecting our greatest and saddest moments. In so doing, they provide a record and outlet for our collective consciousness. It is not enough to enshrine tolerance, understanding and acceptance in law; they must be written into everyday practices: communal, social and religious. They have been woven and stitched, both literally and symbolically, into the *Keiskamma Tapestry*.

*7 days*, the current collaboration between Kathy Robins and the Keiskamma embroiderers, is a project that builds on the rich traditions of textile-based arts and their role in community building across religious, social, economic and other divides. Contemporary artists working with fabric and thread draw inspiration not only from ancient traditional practices but also build on the role that textile-based arts played in the work of the twentieth century avant-garde artists. Beyond the radical experiments of the Russian Constructivists who threw themselves into the design of the ‘new life’ for the ‘new citizen’, literally through the design of new functional objects (textiles and clothes among them) following the Russian revolution of 1917, and their Bauhaus colleagues who treated textile design with equal respect, painting masters of the European avant-garde like Henry Matisse (1869–1954) were inspired and influenced by textiles he collected from all over the world. This inspiration and influence (which was rooted in his family’s personal history of textile making) carried through into all of his projects and culminated in his work on the Cath-

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olic Chapel of the Rosary (1947-1951) in Vence in southern France. Not only did Matisse design the architectural and decorative scheme for the chapel, including the magnificent stained glass windows and ceramic panels, the venerated master of colour also worked meticulously on the designs of the priest's robes (chasubles) and the various textiles used in the religious rituals performed there.

In addition to the revitalising role that the Robins-Keiskamma collaboration plays in the Keiskamma community itself, it also builds on the peace-making and community-binding role that is manifest in the often traditional collectivity of textile art. Their intention is to bring the tradition of embroidery and textile design from Keiskamma into a space of religious worship in a way that both honours and transcends specific religious affiliations and acts as a basis of religious harmony and acceptance for the sake of shared humanity, mutual respect and much needed peace. The seven-part textile installation was conceptualised by Robins as a close collaboration between herself and the Keiskamma artists, who translated and adapted her ideas into embroideries. This lively back-and-forth resulted in seven magnificent embroidered fabric scrolls that reflect the seven days of creation described in the book of Genesis, the story that is shared by Christianity and Judaism. The seventh day, which sanctifies the day of rest and celebration, is reflected through the seventh textile piece in which a sound recording of the interfaith prayer sung by representatives of Judaism, Islam and Christianity is embroidered. This last piece is executed as an edition of three, with the intention of passing each of the three copies on to the different faith communities in Cape Town, as an effort in community building.

The process of textile-making, whether it is tapestry, embroidery or printed fabric, can often be slow and laborious, but the results have long been seen as worth the effort, their worth extending far beyond their material or economic value. Binding the community together, preserving its history and ensuring its future is the true essence of textile arts, which *7 days* builds on and embodies.











