

SUNDARI CARMODY // THE BLACK SWAN: SUITE

The starting point of The Black Swan project is a memoir I came across recently. In 1910 a Western Australian nurse working in the slums of Glasgow visited London to train for her certificate at the Central Midwifery board of England. During her stay, Elizabeth Grover witnessed the coronation of King George V and Queen Mary and then was recruited for a 'monster march' of the suffragettes in London. "We were delighted and found about ten women from WA with rods carrying the Black Swan. The march was five miles long, four abreast. What a sight."

Elizabeth later volunteered for duty in the First World War. She cared for wounded Australian Gallipoli troops, worked in tent-hospitals in Egypt, and battled extreme conditions while caring for English troops in Salonica. She never married and died in Western Australia in 1973, she was 98. I am her brother's great, great granddaughter.

This project is responding to the feelings generated by Elizabeth's epic story. There are many gaps in the story and for me this is where the poignancy resides. Central to this project is a recreation of the black swan flag and performances of myself marching the flag while imagining the emotional experiences of her journey. The embellished navy canvas flag features a sequined black velveteen swan and is supported by a wooden structure like those carried by the suffragettes.

Alongside the flag work is a star chart and a sewing workspace installation. The connections between Elizabeth and I in the work are loose and many things about the world have changed over the last century but when looking at the stars overhead I think this is one view we both have shared. I am making a star chart of the Southern skies, embroidering white cotton thread onto navy felt. This piece hangs on the South wall of the gallery. It is a map of sorts, of the real positions of stars in the Southern skies, but also of invisible projected constellations of dreams, aspirations and emotions.

Stitching on the star chart records and measures my presence within the artwork, within the installation and it mirrors my actual drifting through space. This drifting turns into marching - marching the flag in the video work 'March of the Black Swan', and then marching becomes stitching. I made the dress (the 'factory dress') I'm wearing in the video and I will continue to sew dresses as a performance work for the duration of the exhibition. The dress designs are selected for a utilitarian purpose: to wear for work. There are correlations between marching and stitching. Stitching and stepping; one seems to give rise to the other or rely on the other. The work uniform is fundamentally connected to my ability to create a functional reality, a reality within which I feel thoroughly embedded and affective.

There are many associations to be made between physical elements of the work (stitching, maps, dressmaking) and the themes found within the story, but I hope the tactile, the sensory, and the physical presence of the work ultimately overwhelm any language-based meaning. I'm attempting not to relate Elizabeth's experiences as a series of important dates and facts but to share the imagined sensations. I am interested in art-making being a sensual experience. The primary concern being the potential for this experience to be retained as a trace in the material of the artworks placed in the gallery, and remain as an extension of the material or physical experience of being in the world.