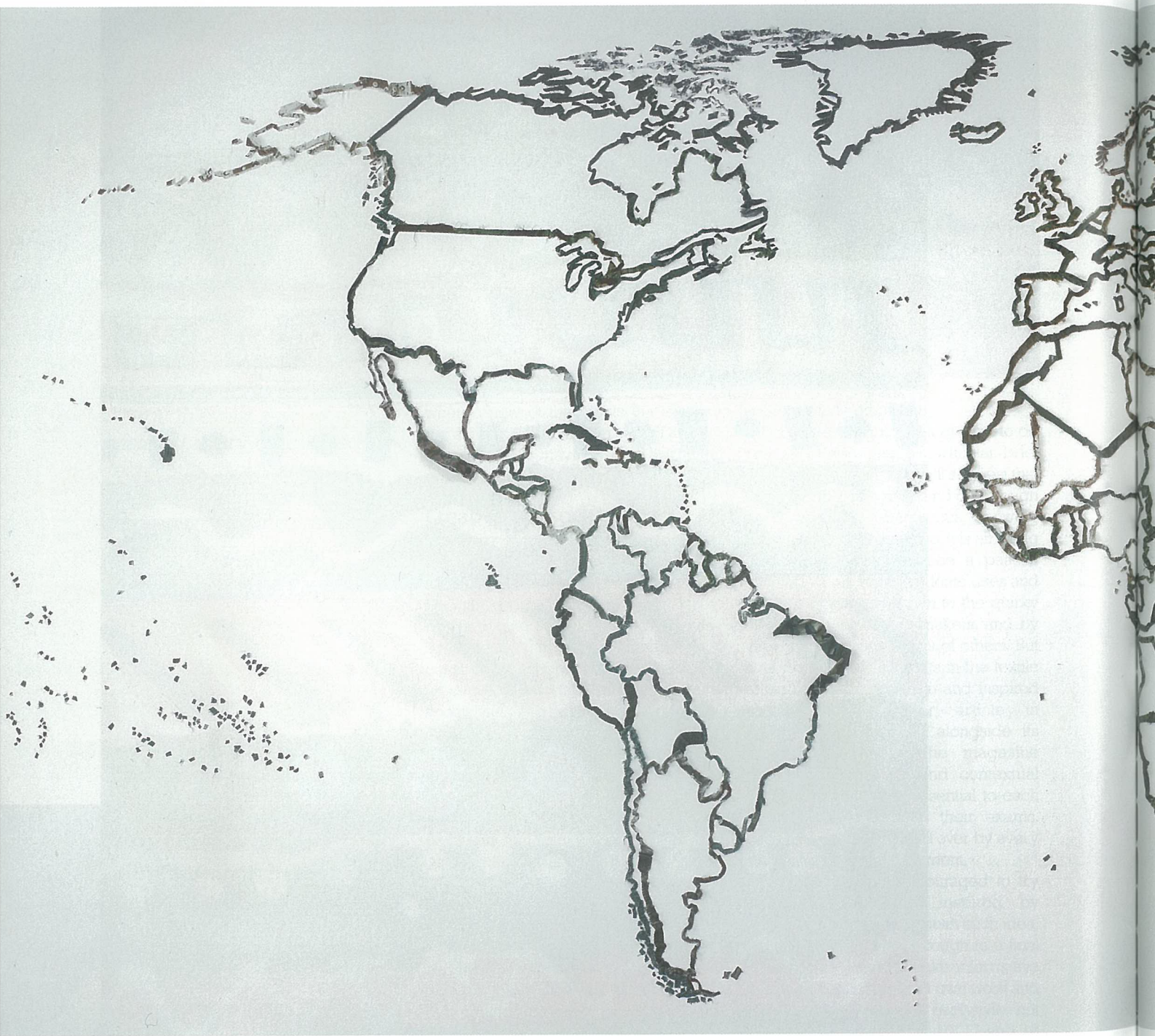


insight



A heartfelt art

The unnerving combination of materials in the work of Barb Hunt questions our relationship with armed conflict



The Old Lie, 2007. Seams from old used army fatigues, 3.5 x 8m

Three larger than life 'little black dresses' lean against the long white gallery wall as part of a contemporary textile art exhibit. These dresses, however, have been fashioned not from cloth but from single sheets of cold-rolled steel. The artist, Barb Hunt, using a plasma-arc cutter, has cut into each one specific all-over designs which, while visually suggesting textiles, clearly draw from the natural world such as flower and leaf forms.

The simultaneously powerful and poetic results of what Hunt calls 'sewing with fire' are evident in *Root Dress* (1994) in which the sartorial icon of the 1950s has been transformed into a complex network of small tree roots surrounding a large one that makes up the front of the dress. Using a material associated with both industrial goods and modernist sculpture to turn the garment hailed as a wardrobe classic into the 'woman as nature metaphor'

Hunt's aim is to rehabilitate the feminine domain long considered unimportant

and a beautiful piece of contemporary art reveals Hunt's predilection for speaking through irony and uncanny combinations. The Steel Dress series, without a doubt a comment on the social construction of gender, underscores the centrality of sexual



politics to Hunt's now extensive body of work.

The work, *Irish Lace* (1999-2002), a series of plasma-arc cut steel replicas of found pieces of lace, displays the same strategy by which a material and a medium associated with modernity are used to reframe traditional female craft forms as art. Hunt's aim is to rehabilitate the feminine domain long considered unimportant and not the 'stuff' of art. This explains why she often leaves the arc cutter aside and makes art with actual artefacts associated with domesticity and the anonymous women who once crafted and used them.

For example, *Doilies* (2002), although

visually and conceptually similar to *Irish Lace*, is made up of over one hundred real lace doilies of different shapes and sizes. The artist has dyed them in various shades of pink and installed them on the wall to form a large oblong shaped piece. Encountered in their usual setting, family members or guests rarely pay much attention to these endlessly, often lovingly, crafted decorative objects whereas in the gallery or museum context, they inevitably become art with a capital 'A'.

Presented like a painting or other art object, the doilies move from invisibility to visibility. The installation draws attention to the beauty of the designs

whose overall crystalline nature evokes the natural world whether a vast stellar landscape or the mysterious world of microscopic sea creatures.

Women's work

In addition, the wide array of motifs seen in the pieces of lace expresses the individuality of their now anonymous female makers. *Aprons* (2002) is, as the title indicates, an installation of aprons. It works in the same way as *Doilies* and produces the same effect. The artefacts made or bought by women – most probably in the 20th century – reveal, through their different styles, colours, and embellishments, the range of personalities that they come to represent as lone fragments of personal narratives lost to history.

Hunt turns the humble, the discarded, and the abandoned object into works of art one would even characterise as beautiful. By so doing, she legitimises what has been traditionally considered women's work and the everydayness in which it took place. In fact, her own daily life forms an integral part of her practice, which involves finding and



This page: *Incarinate*, 2001-2004. Used army fatigues, embroidery thread. 155 x 70cm

Opposite: *Target*

acquiring from thrift shops, garage sales or family and friends such household artefacts on days spent outside of the studio.

The artist is, however, even more radical as she actually appropriates the processes associated with women's work in the domestic sphere as the very method of her artistic practice. She not only collects aprons, doilies, and other such items but also washes, sorts, mends, and often alters them in some way through stitching, sewing or dyeing. These acts continue to be considered mundane and insignificant because they are prosaic, necessary, and repetitive. But in Hunt's hands, they become ritual and perhaps sometimes even sacred.

Her reinstatement of ritual as central to both life and art is most evident in her Mourning series, a reflection on memory, death and the rites of mourning, particularly in Newfoundland on the east coast of Canada where she now lives, teaches, and works. In fact, the series was inspired by the constant flow of fabric flowers the wind would sweep onto her path from the

nearby cemetery. Respecting the sentiments of those who had placed them and the dead they sought to honour, Hunt would pick them up, carefully take them apart, clean them and once again, going against the grain, make contemporary art using artificial flowers not generally associated with the highbrow world of art.

These acts continue to be considered mundane and insignificant because they are prosaic, necessary, and repetitive. But in Hunt's hands, they become ritual and perhaps sometimes even sacred

In most of the works that make up Mourning, the flowers are simply, albeit ritualistically and mindfully, placed in a space or on an object the artist has made. If works like *Requiem* (2000) are indeed quiet and contemplative, others convey the peace or ease that comes from having worked through the death of a loved one: for example, the two site-

specific installations, *Transience* exhibited at the ICIA, University of Bath in 2005, and *Heart's Ease* shown at the Exeter-Phoenix Gallery in 2007.

In the first, fabric flowers adorn the gallery walls to which they are affixed, while in the second, the flowers, strewn several at a time on strings, stream down from the ceiling. The almost childlike simplicity of the works makes them no less effective. On the contrary, it seems to render the compassion underwriting them all the more palpable.

Hunt's preoccupation with death encompasses a deep concern for the loss of life or limb in the context of conflict and war. *Antipersonnel* is a body of work that was triggered by experiencing an anti-land mine demonstration in Paris in 1998. Dismayed by her sudden awareness of the prevalence of landmines and the maiming and death they cause, the artist began knitting replicas in varying shades of pink wool. Hunt here reveals her textile skills as she meticulously imitates the sizes and myriad complex shapes such weapons take; in this sense the ongoing series is encyclopaedic or



Fallen, (detail) 2006. Used army fatigues, veil material, thread. 300 x 105cm. Also shown right



at least documentary in nature. Turning the lethal weapons into soft textile sculptures reveals how a soft technology like knitting can make a potent political statement. Drawing attention to the innate impotence of war, antipersonnel also neutralizes its violence by feminising it. It should, however, be noted that for Hunt the colour pink, rightly or wrongly associated with girls and women, signifies not only femininity but also wider notions such as life, rebirth, and physical vulnerability as pink indicates the parts of the body where, as the artist, paraphrasing British colour specialist Roy Osborne, states, 'the flesh is the most tender'.

The most recent series, *Camouflage*, is dedicated in its entirety to the destruction brought about by war. The whole series uses as sole materials camouflage cloth and army fatigues. Recently exhibited at The Rooms' Gallery in St John's, Newfoundland, it clearly pushes the feminist political dimension of her work even further. Some pieces are unequivocally anti-militaristic. *Fodder* (2004) consists of military jackets hanging flush in a row from hooks across a small gallery wall. That they are in fact tattered fragments and seams does not bode well for those men and women who once wore them.

The Old Lie (2007) is a powerful postcolonial work. The artist has drawn with the seams of old fatigues nailed to the wall a very large world map. The work is about the violence of history, clearly articulating how the world and the countries that compose it have been

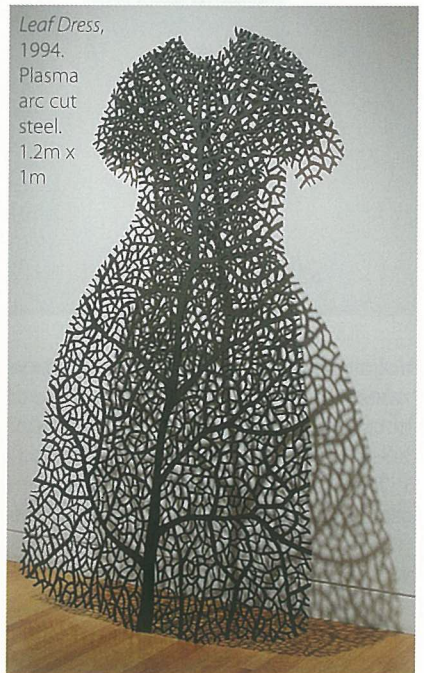
fashioned from war and conflict.

However, if *Camouflage* clearly condemns war, it, akin to all of Hunt's work, shows an unwavering respect for all human life, including that of soldiers. *Incarnate* (2001-2004) is a military uniform suspended in the gallery whose camouflage motifs the artist has outlined in fine chain stitch in shades of pink. The coloured stitching acts as an offering and reminder that inside each uniform is a real person and that each soldier has a sister, a mother, and more generally people that care for him or her. The delicate world evoked by the embroidery is clearly at odds with the

Hunt's art mirrors human life in its constant evolution, its subject matter, and the material it uses

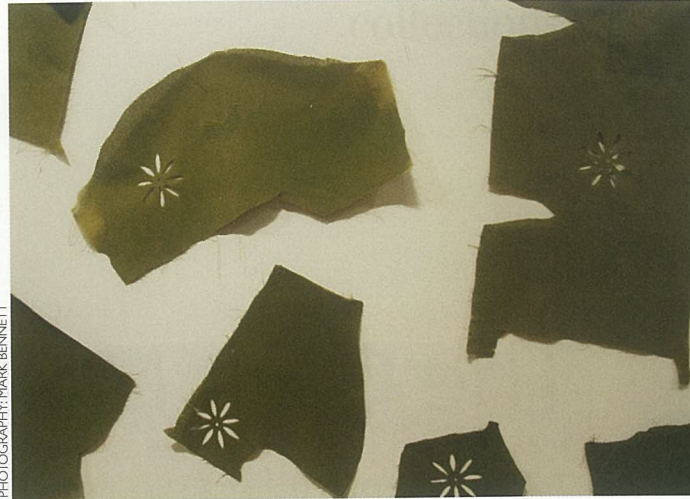
horrific one of war signalled by the outfit. By feminizing the latter, the obsessive stitching seems to be trying to change the frenzied course to war through the magic of its rhythm, beauty and adornment.

The long banner, *Fallen* (2006), is a patchwork of military cloth to which Hunt has appliquéd at the bottom the motif of a falling large leaf or leafy branch. When I asked the artist if the symbol had a particular meaning, she thought for a minute before replying that she may have once seen something similar on a war memorial, adding that 'the motion of falling is a big metaphor in my work for death'.



Leaf Dress, 1994. Plasma arc cut steel. 1.2m x 1m

The subject of war is evidently not a pleasant or easy one. If in Hunt's case, it emerged as a heartfelt reaction to the current geopolitical state of the world, some of the recent pieces nonetheless offer hope by summoning up nature whose strength and time cycles reassuringly surpass a human scale. *Constellation* (2011) is made up of the smaller and larger pieces of disassembled fatigues numbering one hundred and fifty four, one for each Canadian soldier who has died in Afghanistan. In each one the artist has cut out a small eight-petal flower motif echoing traditional Newfoundland shrouds fashioned from bed sheets.



PHOTOGRAPHY: MARK BENNETT

Above: *Constellation*. Fabric from Canadian army uniforms worn in Bosnia. Approx 3m x 10m

Left and below: *Rain*, 2007. Camouflage fabric from worn army fatigues



Constellation commemorates death and the fallen and yet the overall impression of a starry night suggests regeneration and redemption, the celestial skyscape pointing to both an unknown underlying order and a cosmic, rather than human, sense of time.

Hunt's art mirrors human life in its constant evolution, its subject matter,

and the material it uses. A true journeywoman, the artist gives expression to the moral concerns that preoccupy her most: respect for women and womanhood, the sanctity of all human life, and the need to devise new ways to resolve conflict. Of British and Irish ancestry, Hunt learned traditional textile arts from her mother

and grandmother. If she often integrates these into her artistic practice in a literal manner, they are, more significantly, always present figuratively. Hunt builds each work of art through a process of domestic ritual and repetition in an attempt to change and beautify the world one metaphorical stitch at a time. ©

Valerie Behiery