

Take Care

Cara van Niekerk

2021



Index:

1. Fabric and Needlework

Looking After: Quilt Work

Holding Space: Wax Series

2. Embroidered Works

Memorialising the Feminine: Clothing Series

Down the Garden Path: Embroidered Canvases

3. Theoretical Evidence

On: Feminism and femininity

Take Care/Looking After, 2021

Exhibition by Cara van Niekerk

“The needle is used to repair damage. It’s a claim to forgiveness. It is never aggressive, it is not a pin.”¹ - Louise Bourgeois

There is an imaginary narrative that follows my work which describes a special room, found in an old museum, where lost and discarded things from the past have been collected and gathered in order to be studied at a later stage. These samples and specimens once had a purpose, but no one knows or remembers what their original uses were, so they remain in their display cases, sandwiched in glass, forever eternalised, waiting to be studied and dated (an act that will inevitably never take place).

I bring value to these fleeting objects that I have created by memorialising the samplers, field notes, blankets, tapestries and clothing that has been stored away for many, many years. My interests lie in looking into the psychoanalysis of the self through various forms of mark making such as embroidery and needlework, while exploring various traditional craft mediums as a means of self expression, documentation, preservation and protection. I draw from personal memories and moments as way of capturing these somewhat mundane experiences onto materials such as cotton, silk and wax paper. The relationship between the fragility of the fabric and the choice of puncture and disruption becomes an act of subversion towards the expectations of femininity and the intersectionalities that ultimately encompass women, race and class. I am concerned with analysing and disrupting the boundaries surrounding traditional craft work, domestic art and femininity, while practicing techniques such as embroidery, quilting, weaving, collage and stitching as a way of protecting and documenting the self..

¹ Parker, R. 1984, *The Subversive Stitch*. 3rd ed. Pp 2



Fabric and Needlework

Looking After

Handmade quilt, mixed media, collage, cotton, organza

200 x 90 cm

For my largest body of work I have stitched together 91 fabric squares into a quilt, I have disrupted each individual 200 x 200mm patch with various mediums such as collage, mark-making, text, embroidery, needlework and found-photographs. In this particular work I have chosen to conceal the artwork and display the reverse side, revealing a withered, messy and untraditional display of a quilt. By concealing the front side of the work, it becomes more private, allowing me a certain degree of agency concerning the display of the reversed artwork. I chose to bind the quilt with pins instead of thread in order to reinforce the tension between the tenderness of the batting and the sharpness of the pins. Alongside the quilt there is a book containing documentation of each square before it was covered up.



Untitled Cyanotype 1, 2021
Cyanotype, embroidery thread



Untitled Cyanotype 2, 2021
Cyanotype, embroidery thread

Collage becomes a form of cathartic release, with a special emphasis on care. Collage often crosses boundaries between fine arts and the craft, originating from scrapbooking as a means of documenting current events with the use of text and cut out images. Collage has become a reoccurring method in my work, starting in 2018, I began experimenting with forms of mark-making, ink, impressions, textures, found images and collage cut-outs. Working with collage and mixed media produces work at a much faster rate than other traditional fine art methods such as sculpture or painting. This process revealed interesting and satisfying results, as I am prone to overworking longer planned out projects, I find smaller quicker reveal more of my subconscious, making it somewhat intimate for the artist and the viewer.





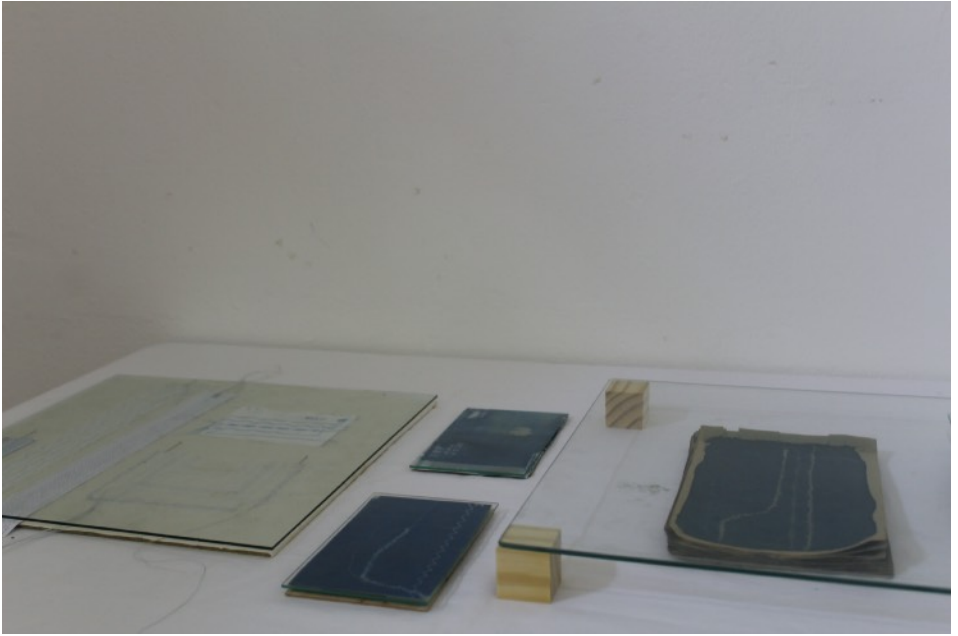
Holding Space, 2021

Wax Paper series

Household wax paper, found paper, cyanotypes, thread, glass

This work includes studies and tests of various needlework and stitching techniques, transferred onto unconventional mediums such as found photo paper and household wax paper, including a test booklet made entirely out of cyanotypes. The textures and delicacy of wax paper reflect the ideals from my larger body of work; bringing value and preserving these somewhat mundane items, while drawing on the sensitive colour palette and delicacy of the mediums, the contrast of fragility of the surface and the history of the act of puncture on the page. In this case the wax paper is placed through the sewing machine, allowing the machine to create the lines and stitches out of my control. This work concerns the intimate unseen tests, the backside of artworks as they become vulnerable, the practices, the failures, the samples, the rejects.







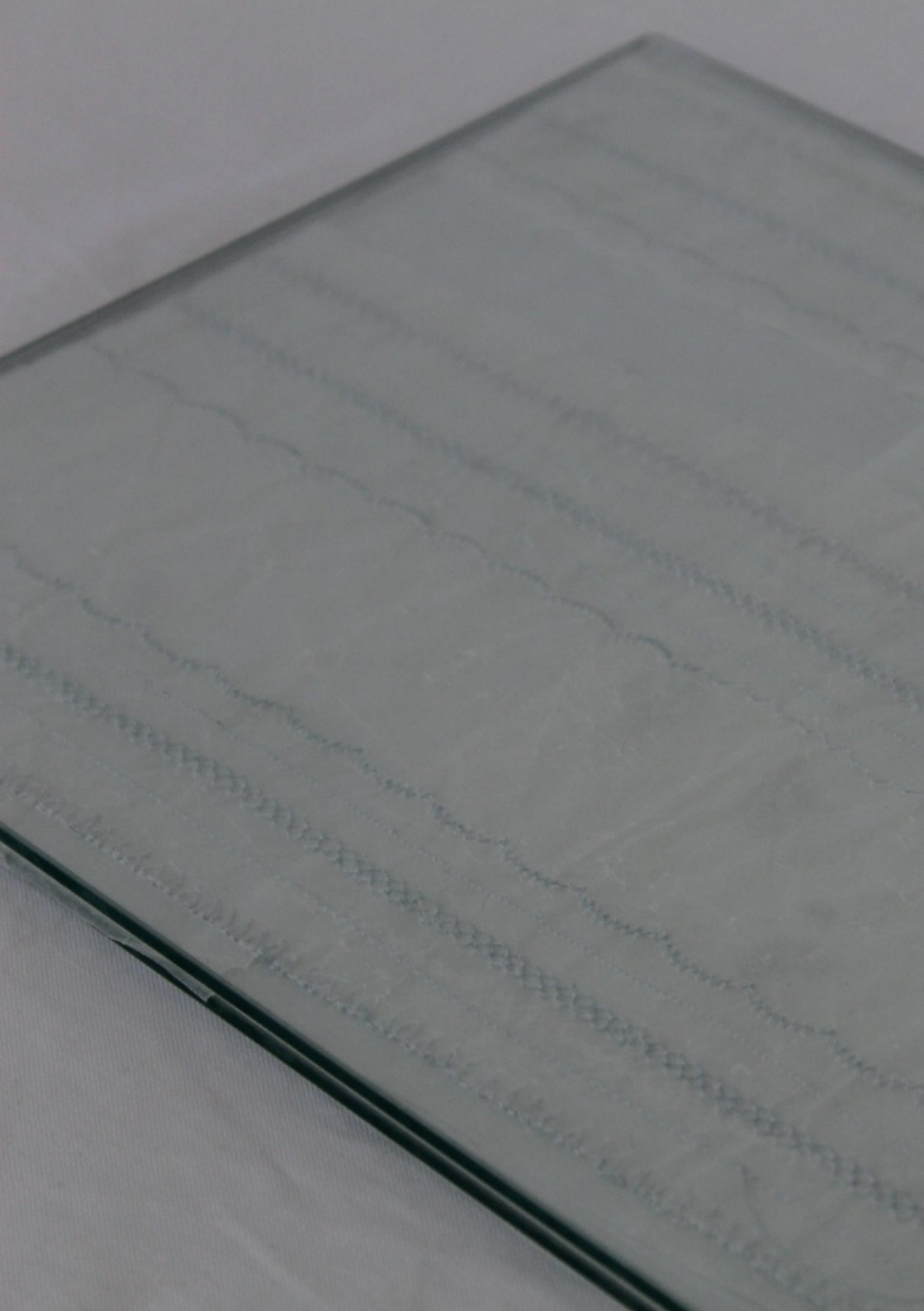
Cyanotype Test Booklet, 2021

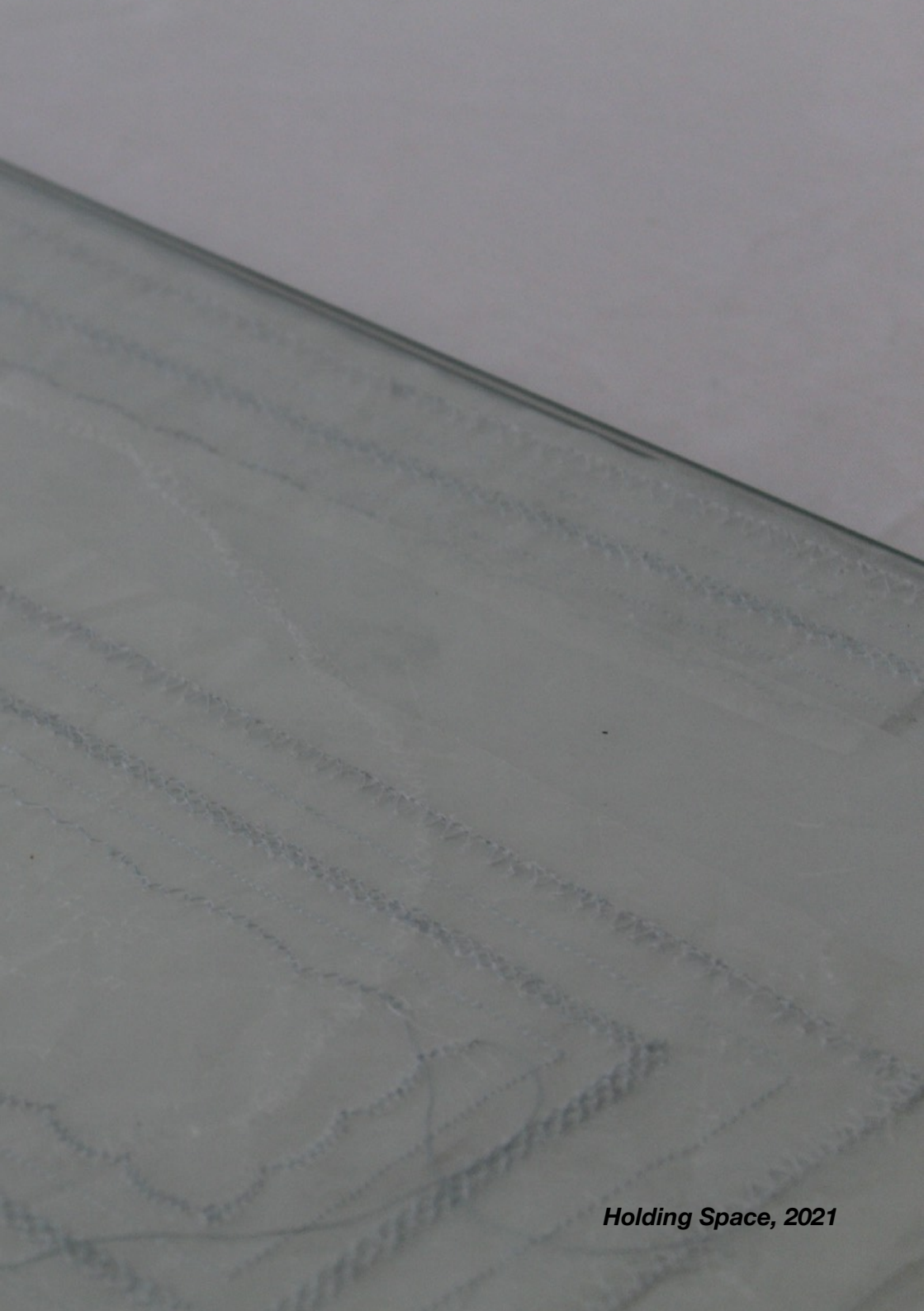
Found photography paper, cyanotype, wax paper negatives



Cyanotype Test Booklet, 2021

Found photography paper, cyanotype, wax paper negatives





Holding Space, 2021

Embroidery Works: Clothing series, Embroidered canvases

“Embroidery represents the beauty of the female imagination, its spiritual clarity in contrast to male pedestrian rationalism.”

-The Beth Book, 1897

Within my own studies, embroidery and needlework have become an abundant and rewarding way of working as it becomes a visual and physical result of time passing, as the process of traditional craftwork is particularly laboursome and time consuming. This type of endless work appeals to my need for a type of control in my artistic practice. Documentation, my own lived femininity and feelings plays a role in the way I approach my art practice, my work aims to disrupt and analyse these spaces in subversive ways, while making use of text and collage as a way to explore my interests involving feminist humour that is satirical, bitter and outspoken yet vague. Collage becomes a means to comment on socio-political matters, highlighting the conversations and relationships between the images and the text.



The Kiss, 2021

Cyanotype, silver needle, cotton thread

Memorialising the Feminine, 2021

fabric, plant dye, embroidery thread, needlework, glass display cases

This body of work includes various garments that I have hand-dyed with various herbs and plants I have foraged and found. Throughout the period of the year, I continued to sew into and distress the clothing in an attempt to achieve an aged and withered look. These somewhat unassuming garments have been encased in glass to hold the form of scientific specimens, as they were made to be seen as artefacts, to be preserved and protected. Furthermore, lingerie and undergarments have been in constant association with femininity and the male gaze; the undergarments presented contain aspects of a poem by Margaret Atwood named “Male Fantasies”. The use of this poem becomes a way to disrupt attempts to sexualise femininity and its private aspects, thus creating an uneasy display of beauty and discomfort as the words stitched on the garments greatly contradict the traditionally charged subject matter.







Hibiscus Dress, 2021

hand dyed with foraged plants and ferns from table mountain

Early development works



Close up of Hibiscus dress



Plant Dress, 2021

Mesh cotton pockets stuffed with seeds

Early development works



Close up of plant Dress



Down the Garden Path, 2021

Embroidery thread, bleach, plywood, silk

15 x 21 cm

These delicate canvases represent an overflow of my own embraced femininity in the form of layers and layers of pastel pinks and blues, flowers building up, scrambling across the canvas in an arbitrary and abstract garden. This work is titled *Down the Garden Path*, which nods to a nickname often associated with pubic hairs. Rozsika Parker notes how associations of femininity like purity and innocence enforced women to maintain a clean, shaven body; a toxic ideology that became apparent in the early 60's in order to govern women's lives. This aids to the subjectivity of this piece as women who deliberately chose to not shave were rejected as not upholding the idealised feminine that was expected of them at the time. These works were originally experimentation based, but ended up revealing visually appealing imagery, holding the format of an old fashioned sampler. A sampler can be described as a piece of work embroidered or sewn, encompassing various stitch patterns and often containing a saying or a motto. I really enjoyed this association and decided to work into the canvases more by distressing the fabric and attempting to mute the colours as a form of subversion. In an attempt to whither these canvases, I began bleaching the canvases as a daily routine in my life. Little by little, colours became lighter, threads began to unravel, and its intentions became blurry. I think this process of bleaching everyday reinforces the type of tedious labour that encompasses traditional craft work, extending into domestic life and ultimately womanhood and ideals of femininity.



Down the Garden Path, 2021

Embroidery thread, bleach, plywood, silk



Down the Garden Path, 2021

Embroidery thread, bleach, plywood, silk

Theoretical Evidence

On: Feminism and Femininity

For many feminists, the art of embroidery and traditional women's craftwork can be seen as quite a controversial medium. Rozsika Parker notes in her book *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (1984) how 1970s feminists were represented as satirical and craft-hating, rejecting traditional crafts in an attempt to move their way into the male-dominated fine art sector. While on the contrary, many feminist artists employed embroidery as a means of empowering themselves with a heritage in woman's hands.²

Parker discusses femininity and its relations to the subconscious, the body, the home and domesticity in relation to embroidery and traditional craftwork. Parker notes how the segregation of the arts contributed greatly to the marginalisation and oppression of women in the craft field.³ The arts were ultimately divided into fine art and the craft or 'women's work'. This label became greatly apparent in the emerging 1960s, separating the female artists from the 'note-worthy' male artists, as embroidery and craftwork were associated with domesticity and the home, thus reducing women's agency in the fine art world.

In her essay *Why Have there Been No Great Women Artists?* Linda Nochlin explains how men failed to uphold equal values in the institution and were reluctant to give up the assumed "natural" order of things as they were in favour of the current social hierarchy.⁴ There were ultimately only a few areas that were "denied" to men, men who chose to explore "feminine" artistic interests were seen as painters or sculptors, unlike their female counterparts who were labelled as part-time ceramicists, men who took interest in the

² Parker, 1984:1

³ Ibid, 2

⁴ Nochlin, 1988:152

fashion industry were seen as fashion designers, while their female opposites held the title seamstress.

Nochlin notably states how those who have privileges will inevitably hold very tightly onto them, no matter how marginal the advantage, and due to this women are often weakened by the internalised demands of the male-dominated society itself. ⁵

References:

- Nochlin, L. 1988, pp:145-178. *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?*
- Parker, R. 2010. *The Subversive Stitch*. 3rd ed. London: Bloomsbury.

⁵ Ibid, 152