

From the very beginning, *The Arrival of the Rajah* was a project riddled with coincidence- moments so serendipitous that at times the work seemed like, for want of better words, a journey of fate. Working with over 60 collaborators from all over Australia, Melbourne artist Eva Abbinga has created a seven-meter wide sculpture that queries our sense of national identity, providing us with a feminist revision of our colonial past. Abbinga uses material investigations and social practice to examine connectivity and invoke a collective catharsis.

Created in response to a quilt made by female convicts on their voyage to Van Diemen's Land in 1841, Abbinga's project connects with the past on a deep and emotive level. -Her investigation of the convicts' lives transcends a mere archival or empirical investigation. *The Arrival of the Rajah* resurrects this history of a minority, and in doing so, helps us to understand more fully the country in which we reside. When thinking of iconic colonial artifacts, textiles in particular, the Eureka Stockade flag is renowned: its vast expanse of Yves Klein Blue and carefully constructed cross a symbol of liberty that has since inspired legions of Australians. *The Arrival of the Raja* combats ubiquitous legends of Australian history: privileged narrative of the 'heroic' Anglo-Celtic working man- instead drawing our attention to Australia's female history, a history which even now we know frustratingly little about. As an art object, Abbinga feels that ultimately the quilt "must have equal weight to an [Arthur] Streeton or [Arthur] Boyd." Abbinga goes on to declare: "This is something that is pivotal to Australian art history, and the fact that I hadn't learnt about it in four years of art school seemed like a huge oversight."

Abbinga sees the narrative of the Rajah quilt and the women who made it as not only fundamentally important to our understanding of art history, but also as integral to feminist revisions of colonial history. In a time when too few women were educated, particularly amongst the working classes, women's voices were severely constricted. While we now have letters and diaries of wealthy, well-educated Australian women, we have almost nothing that directly communicates a working class women's experience. Abbinga was drawn to descriptions of the convicts' tattoos, information that was subsequently woven into the quilt through interactive barcodes. Tattoos and quilts may seem to be an odd pairing but in Abbinga's eyes they both hold great historical significance. -For the women on board the Rajah and many others, the acts of quilt-making and searing an image into their skin were some of their only means of communicating visually, reclaiming their own representation in a world that constricted their voices so severely.

Abbinga became fascinated and touched by the stories of the women who were carried to Van Diemen's Land by the Rajah; some tragic, some uplifting and some completely unexpected. Take the story of Eliza Deans, being of African-American descent, Deans was one of two women of colour who boarded the Rajah. Trained as a needlewoman and a nurse, Deans passed away in the Abbotsford Asylum. Fortuitously, the sculpture's exhibition in the Abbotsford Convent became a way for Abbinga to bring the project full circle, paying homage to Deans specifically, but also to the many other anonymous female convicts whose lives may have ended there.

Quilting, a traditionally collective activity, became a project the women on board the *Raja* could cling to, to take their mind off all that plagued them: the harsh reality of their lowly place in a society that dismissed and ostracized them. It is so very poignant that these women who had lived through unknown horrors, could then create such an object of beauty. Through making, the convicts of the Rajah were able find the solace they so desperately needed. A complex piece of engineering, the quilt took on the form of the square, which is utopian, perhaps symbolizing the liberty the women hoped their new life in Australia would bring.

During the *Arrival of the Rajah* the divide between the archivist, facilitator and artist is broken down. A broad call-out over several years, allowed for a community to come together, joined by an engagement with the Rajah quilt. Abbinga's project has many spheres of engagement: from her own deeply personal connection to these women, to the friends and artists that assisted her, to the broader members of the community who directly engage with the work, and those that are touched by the growing ripple of awareness the project invokes. Nothing can reverse the suffering and inequity that this new community was built upon, but perhaps through projects such as this a current collective healing of past traumas can occur.

For Abbinga, the project aimed to really integrate the history of the quilt, the story of the women of the Rajah, with our present day society, educating the broader Australian public about a history that had for so long slipped through the cracks. An interactive and participatory project, *The Arrival of the Rajah* aimed to use relational practice as a means of public education. The discursive nature of the project, with its interactive projects and focus on sharing oral histories, created a ripple effect, informing not just those directly involved, but any who interact with it. By performing this project at the convent, another site of sorrow for the colonial woman, Abbinga's project focuses on awareness and remembrance.

What is particularly poetic about Abbinga's project is its ability to communicate sensitive and complex array of issues. Abbinga's performative, process-based and interactive practices bring communities together to further understand issues of race, heritage and gender politics in a way that is not didactic or overtly pedagogical, but open and emotive.

Much like the original Rajah Quilt, which would most likely have had one designer, Abbinga completed the design of the quilt, and then created 36 kits for the people involved- each quilt 'kit' named after a convict, Abbinga provided each participant with overview of each woman's story, so that the maker could have their own response to their history whilst creating the quilt. This informative process elicited emotional or empathetic response, and initiated further research. Abbinga explains: "When one participant returned her quilt, she also gave me five pages of further research that she had done. She had really connected with the story of the Rajah-she had tears in her eyes. Through time she'd bonded with this woman and created this work specifically for her."

A response to 'the raw history of sorrow' she felt emanating from this quilt, and her subsequent research, Abbinga examined the act of making as an act of recovery. Abbinga's work deals with heightened emotion in an unapologetically direct way. While some might dismiss the emotionally charged nature of the project as

sentimental, perhaps in confronting this ‘history of sorrow’ Abbinga is able to challenge our national complacency, our reluctance to revise the narrative of our colonial history. Artist and writer Honor Eastly champions the emotive response, or ‘radical softness’, a term that refers to a school of thought that insists on “unapologetically sharing emotions as a political reaction to the idea that feelings are a sign of weakness.” In a manner of speaking, *Arrival of the Raja* is a public protest against the suppression of emotion, but also an embrace of the personal, the sentimental but in a way that is not sensationalized, edifying or fetishized.

Abbinga’s project finds new processes and resolutions for research, challenging our ideas of historiography and the accepted notion of the archive. *The Arrival of the Rajah* creates a slippery intertwinement of two communities. A temporal bond is created with the convicts and a community trying to come to terms with its fraught history, opening up a public dialogue about gender, place and heritage, Abbinga’s quilt becoming a centre point for both future engagement and dialogues with the past.