

The semiotics of the flag



shot yourself in the heart from the *Dear Feminism* series, 2021, acrylic artist's paint, oil stick, graphite, fabrics (gifted, vintage, found and new), women's clothing, heading tape, thread, 4 banners each 71 x 142 x 0.5cm approximately (*dear feminism; so let down; I can't escape you*)

As I move through my visual art practice, I realise more and more how much I am fascinated by signs and their connections to established and accepted ways of thinking. Everything in a historical, cultural, or social context functions as a sign, whether we realise it or not – this includes clothing, household objects, furniture, technological devices, and even art.¹ However, objects don't function as singular signs – when placed in a historical, cultural or social context, they become complex systems of signs.² For those of us who choose to work as artists in sculpture, assemblage, installation, or expanded practice, the concept that objects are complex systems of signs capable of multiple meanings is especially relevant, for two reasons.

Firstly, all artworks additionally have their own systems of signs and their own place in historical, cultural and social contexts, which means that these types of artworks are capable of multiple readings. Secondly, by choosing a particular sign to work with, say the Australian flag, the viewer's reading of the artwork will also be influenced by the viewer's reading of that sign. In other words, when deliberately choosing to work with powerful signs such as the flag, the artist takes a chance in hoping that the viewer will interpret the finished artwork the way the artist intended it to be

¹ Arthur Asa Berger, *What Objects Mean: An Introduction to Material Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 53.

² Berger, *What Objects Mean*, 51.

interpreted. This risk of potential semiotic miscommunication is what I believe makes effective political art much more challenging to produce than non-political art – anyone working in political art needs a lot of courage and must be willing to accept this risk. A case in point is Australian political artist Abdul Abdullah, whose work in the *Violent Salt exhibition* (2019) at Artspace Mackay offended certain viewers and was consequently taken down by the gallery.³

I chose to use the sign of the Australian flag for my *Dear Feminism* series (2021) because I wanted to make artwork about persistent gender inequality for Australian women in a paradoxical climate of awareness and denial of the issue. This topic is ‘out’ in the Australian art world and university sector, but very much ‘in’ with everyday Australians who live with the realities of the problem and who are supported in their desire for change by the media, statistics-based institutions such as the Australian Human Rights Commission, and social movements such as March 4 Justice.⁴ Work made in the lead up to the *Dear Feminism* series focussed on the sign of the dress. I chose this sign as I believed it to be potentially less confrontational for the viewer than other signs, and it was ubiquitous, which would allow for multiple readings. It was a ‘soft’ entry for the work and the concept of gender inequality for women. Therefore, my decision this year to use the highly potent sign of the flag was not taken lightly, requiring much courage of conviction and faith in my concept.

The *Dear Feminism* series appropriates the 1:2 ratio and design of the official Australian flag and translates these elements into textile banners suggestive of a patched tablecloth or tea towel. The open weave and neutral colour of the linen substrate are suggestive of flesh and skin, of clothing on a body. There is a deliberate engagement with the feminist art tropes of the domestic, women’s work, the subversive stitch, and the decorative, to convey the idea of the double bind I find myself in as an egalitarian (not feminist) artist making work about persistent gender inequality for women. The first bind is that my work will potentially be rejected by the art world and university sector because third wave (intersectional) feminism holds that talking about women as a group assumes ‘sameness of experience’. The second bind is that any work I make about women as a group will therefore be assumed to be second wave feminist, which is anachronistic.

Because of my keen awareness of the semiotic power of the sign of the flag, I made strategic formal decisions to dilute its strength and to make the work less confronting for the viewer – I replaced the Union Jack with personal, confessional-style text; I abstracted the six stars to square and rectangular shapes which I scattered unevenly over the fabric; I adopted my usual pastel palette which contrasts strongly with the primary colours of the real flag; I chose a flesh-toned, transparent substrate as a metaphor for the paradoxical visibility and invisibility of Australian women’s gender inequality, and also as a reference to women’s bodies; and I played heavily on the codes and conventions of textile art and domestic textiles, which contrast with the codes and conventions of the official flag.

The *Dear Feminism* series will be exhibited as part of my solo show and rolling project *The semiotics of the dress* at Side Gallery in the Salamanca Arts Centre, Nipaluna/Hobart, in January 2022.

Genevieve Memory
July 2021

³ Holly Richardson, “Violent Salt artist Abdul Abdullah enrages RSL, George Christensen with depictions of soldiers,” December 9, 2019, ABC News, accessed July 28, 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-12-09/outrage-soldier-artwork-violent-salt-mackay/11746680>.

⁴ “Face the Facts: Gender Equality 2018,” Australian Human Rights Commission, accessed July 28, 2021, <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/education/fact-facts/face-facts/gender-equality-2018>.