

Silk, linen, leather, denim, grass, cotton, felt.

Natural materials keep the integrity of their shape yet hold an impression of the figure that has worn them. *Fit-out for Olivia Spencer Bower* speaks to the fabrics and forms that we live in. An assortment of garment patterns, building plans and the lifestyles of art heroines provide templates or underlying structures for Emma Fitts' installation at the Ilam School of Fine Arts gallery. Adopting the layout of a modernist home and featuring a series of fabric hangings and clothing cutouts, Fitts' work acutely relates to our situated knowledge, the proportions of the body and our experience of space, while also implying much less measurable qualities. Alternative histories that reveal the social relationships and values of a bygone era are incorporated to form a homage of sorts, though these references are evoked to shed light on the present—what it means to live and make work as an artist today.

The gallery is physically divided by four large textile works, hung from the ceiling according to the walls shown in architectural plans for 15A Leinster Avenue, Christchurch—the former home of artist Olivia Spencer Bower (1905-82). These soft walls enable visitors to occupy the space as though wandering through her actual house: living room, kitchen, sunroom, bedroom and studio. Designed in 1969 by architects Cowey and McGregor in the Christchurch style of neo-brutalism, the house was commissioned to accommodate the needs of a female artist living alone. There is an emphasis on form developed in relation to function and it is both refined and compact, manifesting these ideals. In 1975 architects Hall and McKenzie designed the Ilam School of Fine Arts gallery in a comparative style, so the translation of home to gallery is germane. Similarly, *Fit-out for Olivia Spencer Bower* has a focus on appropriate materials and rigorously applies the architectural plan as spatial model. Entering the gallery, we are thus displaced, transposed to another time and place.

Utilising the fabric works to delineate the space also displays both sides so the method of their construction is apparent. These colourful banners are crafted from a selection of fabrics sewn together in layers, such as lengths of linen or denim, silk scarves and sheepskin offcuts. On three of the four works, garment patterns have been stitched to the top. The cutout pieces are still interconnected, so it is difficult to discern exactly what each finished item of clothing might be without reference to the title. However, these unusual shapes can be recognised as two-dimensional representations of three-dimensional objects, intended to fold into height, width and depth, akin to the adaptation of architectural plans.

The banners bring to mind the aerial images of Canterbury farms, a patchwork of fields, or the large unstretched canvas works that are common to New Zealand art history. Anne Kirker wrote that Bower infused “a topographical standpoint with personal insight.”¹ In this installation Fitts also

¹ Anne Kirker, *New Zealand Women Artists*, Auckland: Reed Methuen, 1986, p. 106.

brings a new perspective to flat planes, and incorporates her personal, experiential understanding of the region, its people and history.

Japanese-style grass mats have been hung to obscure the 'front' of the fabric works, and presented in this way they take on another role, one that supports and frames the parts that are forward facing. Thinking of this as a material history, or how a version of history sits behind every image, Fitts disrupts the notion of a single viewpoint. The 'open home' style of the installation offers multiple vantages and can be aligned with our current understanding of historiography. It offers alternative histories of women from the mid-twentieth century, Rowena Cade (1893-1983), Marilyn Waring (1952-), Bower and her contemporaries. To experience the work in its entirety requires moving through, between and around it. One cannot grasp the whole work at once as aspects are obscured from every viewpoint, in the same way that history often presents a fixed representation but this is partial, and there are many other sightlines to consider.

The grass mats are more commonly placed as a ground surface and by using them as supports for the garment patterns, Fitts brings a subjective position, an embodied presence, to the making and viewing of the work. There is the scent of bergamot in the living room, sandalwood in the sunroom, oud in the bedroom and vitiver in the studio. Objects are presented on busy backgrounds, the contrast seems to flatten them together and the figure ground relationship becomes blurred.

Fabrics used in the banners were specifically sourced from the surrounding area, mainly gleaned from secondhand or opportunity shops. Cultural theorist Walter Benjamin claimed that our history is to be found in the junk shops, for there, among the many discarded objects, are obsolete fragments that can disrupt the hegemonic versions of history and provide access to our cultural memory.² The numerous silk scarves Fitts has repurposed in the work are an example of such outmoded items, revealing a forgotten aspect or colour palette of everyday life. Once considered fashionable and fastened with a flourish to a ladies neck, they are no longer in vogue and plentiful for the ragpicker—a small yet perceptible shift that could encapsulate some broader change in social attitude.

As much as *Fit-out for Olivia Spencer Bower* is based on the spatial design of a home, it also offers an apt spoonerism, that of an *outfit* for Olivia Spencer Bower. Three of the fabric hangings feature garment patterns of potentially useful items to be worn on the body: bomber jacket, anorak, blouse and trousers. Fitts offers an outfit to shelter and accommodate—a soft and wearable architecture.

These remnants, of fabric and history, are ghosts that survive through the work, fragments that tell of a specific event or detail but are no more or less

² Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, [1927-40], Rolf Tiedemann (ed.), Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002.

consequential than others. Instead they provide multiple voices and parallel versions of events.³ Jan Verwoert has claimed that the difference between appropriation in the 1980s and the use of history in contemporary practice lies in a decisive shift in terms of the object of appropriation: 'from the re-use of a dead commodity fetish to the invocation of something that lives through time'; a radical transformation of the experience of history.

Just outside the gallery, Fitts has replanted a small garden with native grasses—again following the design of Bower's home—and a sculpture reminiscent of one that existed in hers has been nestled within this. The exactness of the replication is less important here than evoking the spirit of her friends, ideals and lifestyle, the pursuits and sociable collective that Bower was a part of. It acts as acknowledgment of the importance of conversation and collaboration for the production and reception of art.

From Bower's oeuvre, 'The Spinners' paintings from the 1960s and '70s are often discussed as a series that addresses the nature of women working together. Bower was one of several women who participated in The Group, an important collective of artists who exhibited in Christchurch from 1927 to 1977. The women involved played an active part: they were independent, opinionated, successful artists, and examples of their work are held in our museum collections: paintings, sketches, landscapes and portraits.

More significantly, a musky perfume of their bold attitude lingers on. It is a fragrant woody scent, strong and rebellious, that blends single notes of bergamot, sandalwood, oud or vitiver; Rata, Rhona, Ngaio, Louise and Olivia. They are an aromatic moment to sensually recollect, a subtle redolence in the air to accompany *Fit-out for Olivia Spencer Bower*.

- Melanie Oliver

³ Jan Verwoert, 'Living with Ghosts: From Appropriation to Invocation in Contemporary Art', *Art & Research: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Summer 2007.