



Seamstress: Artist Statement

Penelope Bartlau, Installation Designer

Seamstress was first created as a response to the 2018 City of Glen Eira Gallery exhibition: *The New Look: 1960's fashion in Melbourne*. For this installation *Seamstress* was created as an interpretation of clothing before it comes into being, and an observation of some of the under-recognised, yet essential "back-stage" objects that go into making fashion.

While still retaining this founding theme, *Seamstress* is re-interpreted and re-imagined here at RRRTAG: This 2019 installation is a response to this site and space.

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Sewing patterns hang, like a theatrical curtain waiting to open. Behind the paper-pattern curtain, barely-visible gold foil ribbons flutter: these hint at a desire for drama. At the curtain's base, footlights can be glimpsed.

The space is ready for spectacle.

Facing us, group of vintage dress maker's dummies populate the space – they appear to be waiting. At the opposite end of the room, one dummy is dressed – unlike the others. She wears a handmade, fading-silk, rusted, and unkempt wedding dress. She stands on high, despite her waning glory. She faces the silent, peculiar population, and stares down the curtain and the stained-glass windows of the once-was church. She is perhaps an echo of the past, reflecting the building's history as a place of worship and of community gathering for christenings, funerals and weddings.

As she Lords over a contemporary art installation, she bears witness to the church's future-present, while being herself, a remnant reflection of the church's past:

Perhaps she's a ghost bride waiting to wed.

About the wedding dress

The wedding dress was my mothers. My grandmother was a fashion designer and created this dress for the 1961 wedding. My mother describes herself as something of a fusspot with regard to the wedding dress. My grandmother had made another, but my mother refused it, and insisted my grandmother design and sew another - this dress you see here. The wire in the flowers at the dress's base have rusted because I soaked the dress in a bath of salt-water for 6 weeks, trying to grow salt crystals through and over the dress (for our installation SALT at WINDOESPACE BEEAC last year). The salt crystal-wedding dress experiment was a bit of an epic fail, but the rust staining that resulted - the flowers and rust-colour bleeding up the dress - is beautiful. My grandmother hand-made these flowers. Knowing her, she'd think this a great reinvention of her own artwork, expressing her handiwork anew.

About the sewing patterns

The sewing patterns were sourced from op-shops across Melbourne, Colac and Alice Springs. All of the patterns are from the 1960s and 1970s. If you look closely you can see some residual notes – jotted thoughts or measurements – handwriting from the women who used these patterns in the past. This adds an intimacy, something deeply human, to the work. Unexpected half-musings from the sewers of yesteryear.

Dress ups

The dress up room is there for you. This room is designed for visitors to play: to become part of the theatricality, art and magic of RRRTAG.

This room is a transition space from theatre to gallery and around again. For the duration of *Seamstress*, this is a transformation room for you too – an invitation to dress up and become something other, for a moment. The building's use has transformed over years, events now change over months and days. Dress ups allow us, the fleeting inhabitants of the space, ourselves transform, if just for a moment.

About the Artist

Penelope Bartlau is the Artistic Director of Barking Spider Visual Theatre. She is a visual creator and director with a background puppetry and performance, as well as being award-winning creative writer.

Thank you

Carol Redlich for the generous loan of her mannequins and Jason Lehane for installation assistance. Thanks most of all for the leap of faith from the RRRTAG team for programming this work – with a special thanks to Andrew and to Eliza for being such champs on installation day.

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