

# Shelley Engwirda

# 1 April – 20 May 2023



*Domesticity, Shelley Engwirda, 2021*  
*Fusible glass*

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# We Rise

Shelley Engwirda

Mackay artist Shelley Engwirda examines the success and failures of the Women's Movement in *We Rise*. Drawing on her experience as a new grandmother, Engwirda explores the way female artists have been regarded historically through her multidisciplinary practice. The artist's large scale patchwork quilts alongside glass work respond to what she considers major moments in the Women's Movement from the 1970s to present.



**Shelley Engwirda**

***Portrait Without a Face***

Glass

500mm x 400mm

This piece is a tribute to Grace Crowley, an Australian artist working in a new method of art production (abstraction) at the same time Rauschenberg was, but of whom, not much is known.

“1927, 1928, 1929 were the happiest years of my life. Why? Because they were productive. A good staunch courageous pal, Anne [Dangar], and the feeling I was really getting somewhere with my painting. The ‘woman’s role’ was reduced to a minimum. I could work every day at my painting and there was the joy of discovering Paris in our own way.”, Grace Crowley

In 1926 Crowley and Dangar left Sydney for Paris. Crowley was introduced to cubism and abstraction during her studies with André Lhote at his academy in Montparnasse and in several private lessons with Albert Gleizes. In 1928 she travelled to the south of France with Dangar and their friend Dorrit Black to study at Lhote’s summer school in Mirmande. In France, Crowley learnt a style of geometric cubism that she introduced to Australian artists when she returned to Sydney in 1930.

Just as she was becoming well-known in art circles in Europe, her mother took ill in Australia. Her family insisted she return to care for her mother. Grace returned to Glen Riddle in February 1930 to find her easel thrown upon a rubbish tip. She established an art school in Australia and her male student, Ralph Balson, became more well-known than her. Crowley made her own way to abstraction, and her carefully orchestrated arrangements of colours and forms are uniquely her own.



**Shelley Engwirda**

***Portrait Without a Face***

Cotton, quilt

1600mm x 1600mm

My quilt is a reaction to Robert Rauschenberg's work *Bed* 1955. *Bed* was one of Rauschenberg's first 'combines', a term he gave to his technique of attaching found objects to a traditional canvas support. He took a well-worn quilt and pillow, scribbled on them, splashed them with paint and then hung the 'combine'.

The story goes that Rauschenberg used his own bedding because he couldn't afford a new canvas. Critics have said that hung on the wall, *Bed* becomes an intimate self-portrait and when you consider that Rauschenberg was a gay artist living and working during a very closeted period in American history, *Bed* makes quite a statement. But what about the quilt? Who was the quilter? Why were women of the 1950s missing from the art scene?

In the 1950s married women weren't considered suitable for employment. In the public service, women were required to resign when they married. It was a "crime" for women to speak up. Women were supposed to be silent and demure, to be the object not the subject. Researchers for the ABC program *Back in Time for Dinner* concluded that the average 1950s housewife spent more time doing housework in one day than her modern counterpart would do in a week, typically in excess of 75 hours per week.

Society's expectations meant that there was less time and limited opportunities for female artists. So while there has definitely been a shift toward more women engaging in the arts, there are still critics who hold on to the old adage of "No body... No crime", that is to say, no crime exists without proof that a crime has been committed. These critics would have us believe that there simply have not been any great women artists.





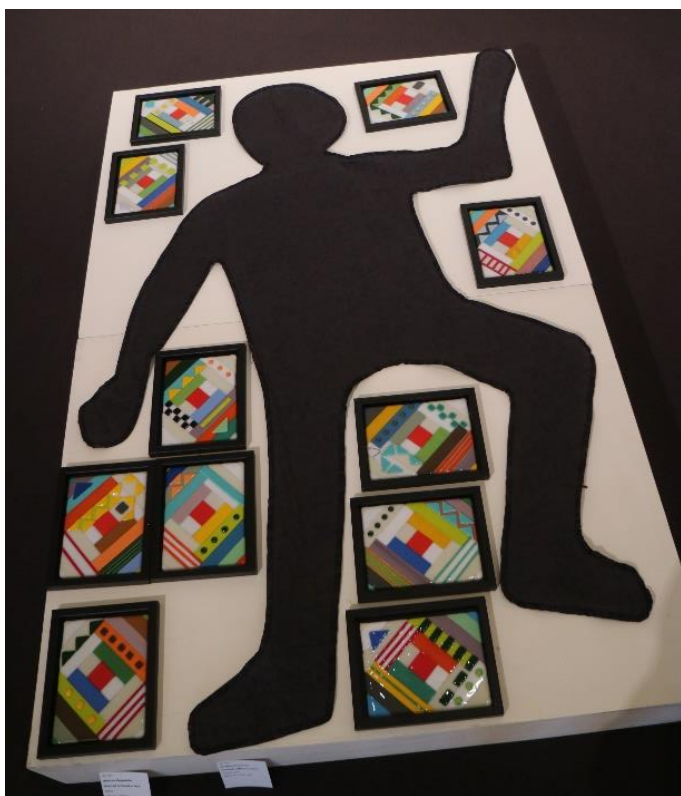
**Shelley Engwirda**

***Private Crimescenes***

Glass

Diameter 1100mm

The rise of Second Wave Feminism made possible the Pattern and Decoration (P and D) movement which tried to elevate women's work. Artists looked for inspiration from mosaics, embroidery and carpets. The designs of these glass tiles are inspired by traditional patchwork patterns.



**Shelley Engwirda**

***Private Crimescenes***

Cotton, quilt, glass

1600mm x 2600mm

The mythical Greek King Sisyphus was condemned by the gods to push a rock up a hill every day, only to have it roll back down before he reached the summit.

Feminist Simone de Beauvoir is quoted as to saying "Few tasks are more like the torture of Sisyphus than housework, with its endless repetition, the clean house becomes soiled, the soiled is made clean, over and over. The housewife wears herself out marking time. She makes nothing, simply perpetuates the present. Eating, sleeping, cleaning; the years no longer rise up to Heaven, they lie spread out ahead, grey and identical. The battle against dust and dirt is never won." Women are made invisible by their caring responsibilities and home duties. As a consequence of having little time and opportunities in the art sector, creative women gravitated to 'domestic arts'. Despite decades of feminism, the gentle arts of crochet, knitting, and cake decorating have virtually no place in the arts community.



**Shelley Engwirda**

## ***Domesticity***

Glass

500mm x 400mm

I began this work during the week that Ruth Bader Ginsburg died. I have been a long-time devotee of hers, a trailblazing attorney who fought for equality with incredible determination and grit.

My favourite Ruth Bader Ginsburg quotes:

"I don't say women's rights, I say the constitutional principle of the equal citizenship stature of men and women."

"I ask no favour for my sex. All I ask of our brethren is that they take their feet off our necks."

I made this glass panel thinking of the good changes in women's lives.

### **Feminism**

"A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle" is a feminist slogan, humorously expressing the view that a woman can live her life perfectly well without a man. The slogan has often been attributed to Gloria Steinem but was in fact coined by Irina Dunn, an Australian activist in 1970.

### **Electrical appliances**

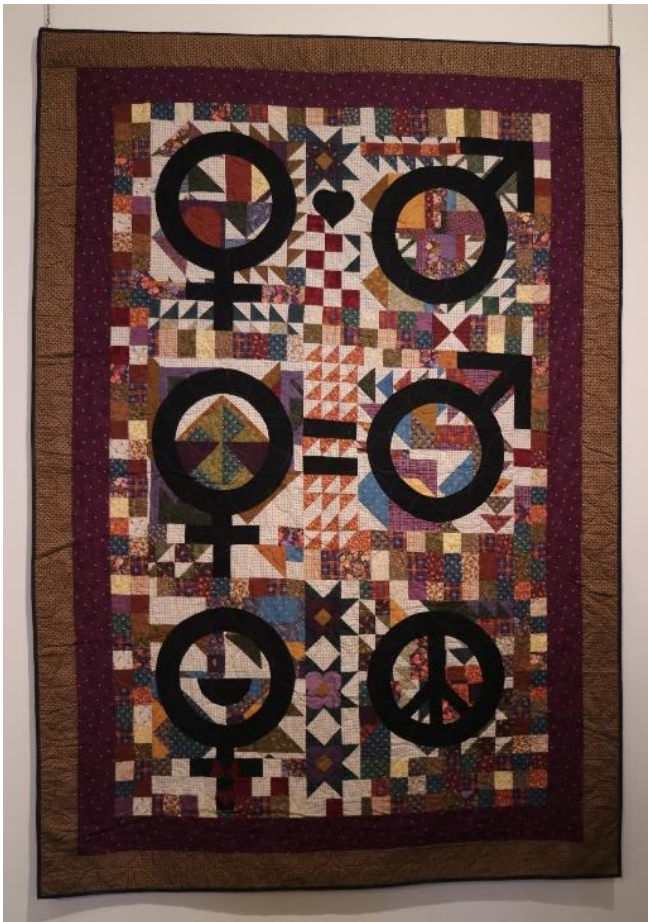
Women are no longer slaves in the kitchen. Fridges, freezers, washing machines, driers all have allowed women more time to get an education, more employment.... more freedoms.

### **Contraceptive Pill**

The Pill gave women highly effective, and at an affordable cost, control over their fertility. Sexuality could be separated from child bearing. Women could plan fertility independently of their partner. With control over their bodies, fewer unwanted pregnancies lifted the 'obligation' to marry young.

### **Improved menstrual management**

Gone are the days when *if* a woman could afford it, she placed money in the box on the chemist's counter before taking a box of pads so that she didn't have to speak to the shop assistant about the "unspeakable". Sanitary products mean that women can do what they want on whatever day of the month.



**Shelley Engwirda**

***Manhatters and  
Homebreakers***

Cotton, quilt

1600mm x 2300mm

I am intrigued as to the reasons many people, women in particular, don't identify as Feminists.

I grew up on a dairy farm with three sisters. There were no gendered roles, and only one type of work, i.e., hard physical work. So, it was a bit of a shock when I got my first job in the sugar industry to find it so male-dominated. In the early 1980s I was only the second woman to be promoted to the position of Shift Chemist in a Sugar Mill. I remember the wives of my co-workers giving me the cold shoulder, not sure of the concept of a female boss. I also remember that I didn't qualify for study bonuses, free housing and job security offered to my male colleagues because, as I was often told, I was "going to leave and have babies". Thirteen years later I did leave, not to have family, but to take a much better position with a less discriminatory company.

For years, I have been a "fence-sitter". I thought it was as the saying goes "not my circus - not my monkeys". I preferred to just get on with life, but now I have 7 little people in my life, 6 of which are female, one being our granddaughter, so now "It is my circus. They are my monkeys".

I am well past ready to openly declare that I am unashamedly a Feminist. I hope that none of my "monkeys" experience the gender bias that I have during my lifetime. I hope viewers of this exhibition can see that there is no going back.

I've taken an unfinished patchwork quilt I started in the 1970s and rearranged its "thinking" to dispel the myths and misconceptions of feminism. When making this work, I was reflecting on the work of Barbara Kruger, who came to prominence in the 1980s when she began making boldly graphic art juxtaposing striking images with provocative statements.





## Shelley Engwirda

### *Rise*

Cotton, quilt

1600mm x 2000mm

I heard Amanda Gorman, American poet, recite her poem *Rise* at the inauguration of President Joe Biden.

This reminded me of another favourite poem *And Still I Rise* by Maya Angelou. "We rise together, Together we rise" is a slogan that came out of the *Black Lives Matter* Movement.

And so many court hearings as the Judge enters the court, Harvey Weinstein, George Floyd, refugees.... we "All Rise" for court judges as a sign of respect for the figure personifying the Law and I hope for the day when this sentiment is afforded to all women.



## Shelley Engwirda

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Glass

500mm x 400mm

When I googled 'contemporary art, artist, bed, quilt', the first image that appears is that of Rauschenberg's *Bed*. The second is that of Tracey Emin's *My Bed*.

Tracey Emin ignores society's expectation of women. After a long bedridden bender following a bad break-up, Emin decided her bed was an art installation complete with vodka bottles, pregnancy tests and condoms. Darren Pih, Tate Liverpool Curator, described the work as "a self-portrait that doesn't veer from the messiness of depression and heartbreak".

My glass panel is very much Tracey Emin inspired and the title says it all.





**Shelley Engwirda**

***Through the Flowers***

Glass

600mm x 600mm x 500mm

I was thinking that if I could turn back time, I would add another setting to Chicago's *The Dinner Party* to recognize the contribution of Judy Chicago to the feminist movement. It would be triangular, so it fitted centrally in the work with a triangular shape rising from the centre pointing women to follow on with her legacy even if to others it appears to be "flowery vaginas". Artist Cornelia Parker nominated *The Dinner Party* as a work she would like to see "binned", saying, "Too many vaginas for my liking."



## Shelley Engwirda

### *Outsiders*

Cotton, quilt

2400mm x 2500mm

Judy Chicago is probably in my top-five-artists-of-all-time list. Her monumental work *The Dinner Party*, 1974-1979, celebrated the lives of over 1000 women. Critics at the time disparagingly reviewed her work. Robert Hughes called it “mainly cliché... with the colours of a Taiwanese souvenir factory...” Kramer from the New York Times called it “very bad art... failed art”.

History now tells a different story. Chicago is now celebrated as one of the pioneers of feminist art. She began her career in the 1960s and describes those early years as very lonely. She decided early on that it was not possible for a woman to have children and an arts career. She says, “I didn’t make myself an outsider, the art world made me an outsider.”

Chicago has made a point of making art outside the ‘male gaze’. She continues to make art in her 80s; doing exactly whatever the hell she wants. Her career has seen her use many mediums other than the traditional, e.g., auto spray paint, smoke, and more recently glass.

Known for her large collaborative art installation pieces about birth and creation, she has tried to acknowledge the people who work with her saying collaboration is a whole unexamined and hidden area of the art world.

Her series of work *Through the Flower*, 1973 was a merge of her “in your face” style and her love of craft. She didn’t want to make genderless art. She wanted to tell the hidden and neglected stories of women.

*Outsiders* acknowledges Chicago’s collaboration with Miriam Schapiro, another textile/quilt artist regarded as the founding mother of the Pattern and Decoration movement. *Womanhouse* was the first public exhibition of art centered upon female empowerment. It was during these years that the humble quilt was first hung as an art object.

My quilt uses simple hexagons in a complex pattern leaving the viewer to decide if it is art or craft. I’ve used the same colour palette that Chicago used in her smokescares, her attempts to feminize environment art.





**Shelley Engwirda**

***Portrait of a Female Artist***

Glass

530mm x 650mm

This work was inspired by the life of Australian artist Pat Larter. Working in the seventies through to the nineties, Pat Larter struggled to be taken seriously as an artist in the then male dominated art sector. Her work made fun of sexual stereotypes in a way that challenged ideas of 'good taste' and was often credited to her husband, Richard Larter. Pat Larter rejected mainstream art practises preferring instead to use materials often associated with women's craft. As well as painting, she worked across video, photography, and performance art and is credited in coining the term 'femail' art as her feminist response to 'mail art'. Pat Larter died in 1996.



**Shelley Engwirda**

***Women Can Be Strong***

Glass

500mm x 400mm

This is my very feeble attempt to channel feminist artist, Barbara Kruger, known for her black-and-white photographs, overlaid with declarative captions, for example, "Your body is a Battleground".





**Shelley Engwirda**

***Then***

Glass

760mm x 1000mm



**Shelley Engwirda**

***Now***

Glass

760mm x 1000mm

These two works are really the end of the Exhibition. I hope they engage people to think about the outcomes of feminism from the 1960s.

In the 1960s, the feminist movement was very divisive. It revolved around sexuality and reproductive rights. It largely catered to 'white' viewpoints.

Now feminism aims to be more inclusive. The term "intersectionality" recognises that "all the aspects of identity enrich women's lived experiences and compound and complicate the various oppressions and marginalisation women face".

To truly bring about change that is meaningful for all, everyone's voice needs to be at the table.